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Critical Literacy in Literature Instruction:
Canonical vs. Young Adult Literature

by

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A thesis submitted to the Department of Education of The College
at Brockport, State University of New York, in partial
fulfillment of the requirements for the degree of
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Abstract

Student populations are increasing in all forms of diversity: race, ethnicity, religion, socio-economics, gender, sexuality, ability, and more. They are becoming increasingly heterogenous. However, ELA literature curriculums remain largely homogenous. This is due to the fact that ELA classrooms typically teach from the traditional literary canon and text exemplars that contain mainly white, male, heterosexual, Christian, and physically- and mentally-abled authors and narratives. To counter the dominant narrative, educators can and should adapt a pedagogical approach to contemporary literature instruction that promotes critical literacy with paired canonical and young adult literature text sets and essential questions.

Keywords: critical literacy, young adult literature, canonical texts, essential questions, paired text sets

Critical Literacy in Literature Instruction:

Canonical vs. Young Adult Literature

Critical literacy, also known as critical literary theory, is “an essential mode of thinking for making sense of the world” (Ribay, 2019). In the ELA classroom, it is a mode of thinking that requires teachers and students to pose questions and seek understandings about multiple meanings and perspectives. It also requires teachers and students to make and create connections between personal experiences, prior knowledge, and newly learned content. Through the questioning process, teachers and students are able to enhance their senses of agency as they attempt to foster change and address problems in the status quo of their community (Beach, Thein, & Webb, 2016, p. 5).

Critical literacy isn't only a mode of thinking, but also a “pedagogical approach to reading that takes into account the various aspects of students' lives, such as race, cultural identity, language, and economics” (Stringfellow, 2019). Critical literacy requires a culturally responsive mindset that respects and validates the lives students live outside of school. Critical literacy is about “teaching students to ask piercing questions ... examine characters, ... [and] examine the overall text itself to gain a deeper [understanding] of how stories shape and are shaped by systems” (Ribay, 2019). Essentially, how experiences shape and are shaped by social systems.

There are three reasons I am drawn to the topic of critical literacy in ELA classrooms. First, I am drawn to the topic because, too often, students are not exposed to sufficient perspectives that either reflect their own identities or introduce them to new experiences and histories. The American literary canon notoriously presents a white, heteronormative, male patriarchal narrative that excludes more voices and identities than it includes. Its stories have

often been “convincing or confirming the superiority of one group over another, sometimes subconsciously, sometimes consciously” (Ribay, 2019). This is problematic because “seeing characters and experiences in literature that reflect their own personal lives can validate for children their worth and value at school and in society” (Stringfellow, 2019). If students are bombarded with texts that portray their identities as inferior, or their voices are purposefully excluded from classroom texts and discourse, they will not feel valued as contributing members of their classroom community, and the cycle of power and oppression will continue. To counteract this, I want to explore how educators can develop “a critical stance in opposition to the texts we teach” and “make viewing literature through a critical literacy stance a visible part of [our classrooms]” (Stringfellow, 2019). I believe ELA teachers should model and encourage questioning each and every text in the classroom when traditional canonical texts are required.

One way to develop a critical stance in opposition to canonical texts is to pair them with young adult literature. This brings me to my second point. I am also drawn to the topic of critical literacy because of its potential to bridge the gap between the older, seemingly irrelevant, canonical texts taught in ELA classrooms, and the genre of young adult literature that students and adults alike engage with. There are meaningful connections to be made by using critical literacy and critical literary lenses to analyze stories and social systems present in texts. Tying canonical texts with young adult literature allows educators to “not only provide access to books that celebrate diverse voices and varied identities, ... [but] also question how we interact with those texts and teach our students to do the same” (Stringfellow, 2019). Young adult literature provides opportunities for using critical literacy with texts that reflect the identities and lives students have outside of school.

Lastly, I am drawn to critical literacy in ELA classrooms because of how it encourages critical literacy outside of the classroom. It encourages it in local communities and through civic participation and action. Critical literacy helps students “gain greater awareness of issues of power and oppression and make connections to areas in their daily lives where they can make a difference” (Stringfellow, 2019). Educators should encourage and foster these connections by “[considering] how students could synthesize what they learned and take action to promote social justice” (Stringfellow, 2019). Essential questions can provide opportunities for framing paired text sets around issues of social justice and civic action relevant to the identities and interests of adolescent students. This values student interest and agency, while also creating opportunities for educators to develop authentic assessments and lessons because of the real-world engagement with civic action and invoking change.

In my own experiences, I have seen students question why they are reading canonical texts. They don't relate to them or they don't find their analysis engaging or purposeful. In actuality, they are not being given the opportunities to make meaningful connections to texts that a critical literacy lens can provide. For example, while I was completing observation hours in a 9th grade ELA setting, students were reading and discussing Ray Bradbury's short story “The Pedestrian.” One student raised his hand to ask the teacher, “Why don't we read *real* books in class?” to which she replied, “We do read real books.” To clarify, I asked the student, “Do you mean young adult books? Books you find relatable?” The student replied, “Yes!” The students were reading “The Pedestrian” and practicing literary analysis through the lens of the teacher. They couldn't find meaning in that. Although the story didn't present teenagers in a coming-of-age narrative, there were opportunities present to make meaningful connections that the teacher didn't take. Interestingly, the audio recording the teacher chose of “The Pedestrian” for the

students to listen to included music and a brief audio clip of Donald Trump swearing in as President of the United States. This was never used during analysis or discussion of the text. Students could have used the opportunity to question systems of power and oppression. They could have used the opportunity to discuss how Black people are arrested, or killed, for walking down the street, similarly to how the pedestrian was arrested for walking down the street for seeming out of place. Using the critical literary theory lenses of feminism, postcolonialism, and Marxism, students could have found meaning and significance in reading and studying the canonical text of “The Pedestrian” by examining the “counternarrative of equality that stands in moral contrast to the destructive dominant ideologies that have, unfortunately, historically shaped much of our world: patriarchy, racism, capitalism” (Ribay, 2019).

For the student interested in the young adult literature genre, this would have been a great opportunity to introduce and make connections to the young adult novel *The Hate U Give* by Angie Thomas. Connecting the “The Pedestrian” to *The Hate U Give* and social justice issues “allows students to generalize their learning across topics and teaches them to look at all [texts] with a critical stance” (Stringfellow, 2019). Whether *The Hate U Give* was read in class or outside of school, the students in the class would have had the essential opportunity to foster their critical literacy skills in a meaningful context that invites them to question systems of power and oppression, make connections between texts and lived experiences, and foster civic engagement.

I want to examine how critical literacy invites students to explore identities and stories in texts, how it bridges the gap between canonical texts and young adult literature, and its potential to foster social justice inquiry through the use of essential questions. Together, these examinations can contribute to a contemporary perspective on literature instruction in today’s

ELA classrooms. Critical literacy ultimately helps to foster meaningful connections between lived experiences, prior knowledge, and newly learned content, and will give students a mode of thinking that helps them to make sense of the world in a time when nothing seems to make sense. 2020 has not been an easy year. The COVID-19 pandemic, the Black Lives Matter movement, and a new election year are all topics that invite a critical literacy mindset that will not only benefit students in ELA class, but also their lives after graduating.

Literature Review

Critical Literacy

Critical literacy is a lens through which readers analyze different texts from perspectives that look at issues of power, privilege, oppression, and identity (Borsheim-Black, Macaluso, & Patrone, 2014, p. 123; Schieble, 2014, p. 156-7). Critical literacy invites readers to practice critical inquiry, and to quote Steven Wolk, “the root word of *inquiry* is inquire, which means to question and investigate and explore,” and “democratic participation, at its best, involves daily inquiry” (Wolk, 2013, p. 48). Using critical inquiry to foster a critical literacy lens facilitates opportunities for social and civic action, which makes it a perspective-taking skill that all democratic participants should possess (Borsheim-Black, et al., 2014, p. 123; Ribay, 2019).

Critical Social Theory. Similarly to the relationship between critical literacy and critical inquiry, critical literacy has “roots in critical social theory” (Borsheim-Black, et al., 2014, p. 123). Essentially, critical social theory is a broad approach to critiquing society that aims to progress social change. It works to question representation and social norms because it “posits that all knowledge is constructed and ideological” (Borsheim-Black, et al., 2014, p. 123-4).

Critical literacy uses a critical social theory approach to analyze representation and social norms within and surrounding texts in order to advance equity and social action.

Importance During Adolescence. Critical literacy is especially important to learn and develop during adolescence. This is due to the fact that middle and high school “represent a pivotal time in an [adolescent’s] development as they struggle to define the many facets of their identity and discover where they belong in the world” (National Middle School Association, 2010; as cited in Boback Eisenbach, Corrieri, Moniz, & Forrester, 2018, p. 34). During this pivotal adolescent time period, “...it may not occur to us to ask critical questions of most stories when we are young,” (Thomas, 2018, p. 15) as adolescents “often approach the classroom with the idea that what they *believe* to be true, is in *fact* true” (Boback Eisenbach, et al., 2018, p. 35). Critical literacy encourages adolescents to ask critical questions not only of the literature they study in their classes, but also in the context of their own lives as they consider “how much of their own identity has already been forged according to societal norms” (Boback Eisenbach, et al., 2018, p. 36). Adolescents can learn that because social norms are socially constructed, they can deconstruct what identity means and how it is developed and portrayed in the texts they encounter.

Critical Literacy Instruction. As critical literacy works to advance equity in representation and social norms, “...creating critical consumers and functioning citizens is an essential task for all 6-12 classroom teachers” (Rybakova & Roccanti, 2016, p. 33). All classroom teachers should teach critical literacy to students so that they may read deeply and question purposefully as they become democratic participants in society. It will benefit both students and teachers because “...reading from a critical perspective offers readers a highly complex, interpretive experience and is aligned with CCSS goals” (Schieble, 2014, p. 157).

Critical literacy practice meets aspects of the Common Core State Standards because it “promotes textual engagement that emphasizes consuming (reading, listening, viewing), producing (writing, speaking, designing), and distributing texts for real-life purposes and audiences” (Borsheim-Black, et al., 2014, p. 124). Therefore, critical literacy’s multimodal capacities invite complexity and higher-order thinking that is valued by the CCSS.

Critical Literary Theory. There are many approaches to literature instruction. However, many familiar approaches fall short by leaving “dominant ideologies unexamined and unquestioned, thereby potentially perpetuating ideologies that privilege some and marginalize others” (Borsheim-Black, et al., 2014, p. 123). A critical literacy approach to instruction will teach students to examine and question ideologies and issues that are related to power, privilege, and oppression. Critical literary theory, which uses critical literacy, teaches students to ask these “piercing questions” and “examine [texts] to gain a deeper [understanding] of how stories shape and are shaped by systems” (Ribay, 2019). Randy Ribay believes that critical literary theory offers endless opportunities for engaging and assessing students. For example, students can participate in debates and discussions, or create podcasts and creative nonfiction (Ribay, 2019). Ribay also advocates for the use of critical literary theory with any text from the “dead white guy canon, [middle grade] or [young adult literature], poetry, history, movies and TV shows,” to “one’s own life” (Ribay, 2019). Critical literary theory, and thus critical literacy, is a frame of reading that students will use throughout the rest of their lives.

Reading Against Texts. In order to recognize and examine lenses of power, oppression, privilege, and identity in literary texts, educators need to develop “a critical stance in opposition to the texts [they] teach” (Stringfellow, 2019). When educators develop a critical stance in opposition to classroom texts, they are critically examining the texts for issues of power,

oppression, privilege, and identity. They are practicing critical literacy. In addition, “a critical literacy approach also teaches students to read and write *against* texts: to identify and understand that language and texts are not neutral and always ideological” (Borsheim-Black, et al., 2014, p. 123). Standing in opposition to taught texts, and teaching students to read against taught texts, are essentially the same thing. They both ask questions to develop in students “critical thinking skills and an awareness of bias” (Stringfellow, 2019). Some of these questions may be “Who holds power and who doesn’t? Whose voices are included?” and “Whose voices are left out?” (Stringfellow, 2019). As students attempt to answer these questions, they’ll begin to see the answers as “intentional choices by the author,” and begin to develop understandings of the societal constructs and concepts that have shaped them (Stringfellow, 2019).

Perspective-Taking. As previously referenced, critical literacy requires readers to analyze texts from different perspectives that look at issues related to power, oppression, privilege, and identity. Perspectives are an integral aspect of critical literacy, especially “when examining and discussing lived experiences” (Boback Eisenbach, et al., 2018, p. 36). When students are able to consider “conflicting or contrasting viewpoints and experiences,” they are able to practice and develop “critical thinking and the recognition that no cultural community is homogenous” (Durand, 2016). Though it may be difficult to identify which perspective to take with a literature text, educators can “consider how *metaphor* shifts the lenses by which we read,” (Thomas, 2018, p. 14), and begin to see that “every text presents or engages with one or more perspectives and suppresses others” (Schieble, 2012, p. 219). When in doubt, issues surrounding identity always provide opportunities for critical perspective-taking. Oftentimes, identity is intertwined with power, oppression, and privilege.

Identity. Students can examine their own identities in relation to the identities in the texts they read because “critical literacy often looks for ways to empower students to overcome oppression...being ‘critical’ means not only learning how one is oppressed but also acknowledging how one is privileged” (Borsheim-Black, et al., 2014, p. 130). This contributes to the “social-emotional development” of our students “through critical lenses of race, gender, religion, and privilege” (Boback Eisenbach, et al., 2018, p. 34). Students will gain empathy for identities and experiences different from their own as educators “lead [them] to understand how identity markers like race, class, gender, sexual orientation, and ability intersect in complex ways to limit or promote an individual’s access to institutions such as education, health care, and employment” (Morrell, 2007; Patel Stevens & Bean, 2007; as cited in Schieble, 2012, p. 212). Again, critical literacy teaches students to adopt a frame of reading texts, and the world, that they will use throughout the rest of their lives. The best way to teach critical literacy in the literature classroom is through engaging and relevant literature.

Canonical Literature

Most people may not think of canonical literature when they think of texts that are “engaging and relevant.” They may think of canonical literature as “static” and “monolithic” due to its history (Thein & Beach, 2013, p. 10). The best way to describe canonical literature is as a collection of texts distinguished by its merit, lasting influence, and surrounding culture that is predominantly deemed well-worth studying (Cole, 2008; as cited in Rybakova & Roccanti, 2016, p. 32; Borsheim-Black, et al., 2014, p. 124). The tradition surrounding canonical literature is so great it continues to be taught and studied in secondary classrooms everywhere.

Arguments For the Canon. Canonical literature can be a divisive topic because there are strong arguments both for and against its instruction. Supporters of canonical literature often

argue that it is classic and timeless. They say that there is “value” in classic literature and that it is required to develop “cultural literacy” (Iowa State University, 2019). Others support canonical literature because they are classics “that have stood the test of time, represent high quality, and contain universal truths” (Moss, 2013, p. 49). What is interesting about the support for canonical literature is that the arguments *for* it are often used in arguments *against* it.

Arguments Against the Canon. Opponents of canonical literature argue that the text-sets are outdated, not relevant to youth, and contain truths that represent a dominant social power.

Youth Relevancy. Those that argue against canonical literature say that the “works may lack appeal to children or young adults, address traditional themes that are viewed as outdated in today’s world, or don’t represent authors of color or topics that have a multicultural focus” (Moss, 2019, p. 49). Student populations are becoming increasingly diverse, including racial, ethnic, religious, economic, gender, and sexual diversity, and yet the canonical literature taught in schools isn’t diversifying with them. This makes it difficult for students to find the texts appealing or relevant to their lives because “the authors—typically white European men—do not reflect the diversity of students in the classroom” (Iowa State University, 2019). Oftentimes, these texts are assigned without inviting a critical literacy perspective to analyze and examine whose voices are heard and whose are not. This “may exclude students who do not see themselves in the text, and make them feel their voices are not valued... [which] also normalizes the experiences of students who belong to dominant groups” (Iowa State University, 2019). If the canon doesn’t change with student populations, neither does the social narrative.

Powers at Large. Students who belong to dominant groups are typically white students. The narratives of canonical literature serve their culture and experiences. Opponents of canonical

literature argue that this is not a mistake because it “has been and continues to be constructed by certain interest groups or critics who judge texts based on their own agendas or critical perspectives” (Thein & Beach, 2013, p. 10). Oftentimes, these agendas and critical perspectives advocate for canonical texts that “perpetuate ideologies that are also dominant—about Whiteness, masculinity, heterosexuality, Christianity, and physical and mental ability” (Borsheim-Black, et al., 2014, p. 123). Critical literacy becomes important in these cases as singular, dominant, identities are the ones being pushed into classrooms. Some of these dominant “canonizing forces” that push for and choose the canonical literature taught in secondary classrooms are “textbook and testing companies” and “the College Board through its AP (Advanced Placement) English Literature and Composition exam prompts” (Thein & Beach, 2013, p. 10-11). The decisions about which texts are tested or taught is often based on “financial reasons” and “teacher familiarity with certain texts” (Thein & Beach, 2013, p. 11). Teacher familiarity may be due to the fact that they learned the canonical texts in school and have now been teaching them. This aligns with support for the canon because it stands the test of time. However, the “canon is socially constructed,” and there are potentially new canonizing forces (Ebarvia, Germán, Parker & Torres, 2020, p. 100).

Text Exemplars. Some believe that “the list of exemplar texts offered by the Common Core State Standards has the potential to become a canonizing force in language arts classrooms” (Thein & Beach, 2013, p. 11). The list of exemplar texts is called Appendix B and is “a list of books...arranged in grade-level bands for classroom use” (Moss, 2013, p. 48). Critiques of the traditional canon of literature argue that Appendix B similarly contains an “overrepresentation of European male authors, and themes that represent a dominant, heterosexual and able-bodied perspective” (Schieble, 2014, p. 158). With Appendix B, critical literacy skills and perspectives

will be necessary to determine whose voices are heard and whose are not. In addition, some argue that “a diverse, young readership will find little within the text exemplar list that speaks to contemporary youth concerns and identities, including race and class segregation” (Schieble, 2014, p. 159). Although Appendix B was written in “an attempt to create a more culturally inclusive list” of texts, the list contains many of the same critiques and concerns that are argued against the traditional set of canonical literature (Schieble, 2014, pp. 158-9).

Critical Literacy Instruction. Canonical literature offers the “apposite opportunity to engage students in critical literacy” (Borsheim-Black, et al., 2014, p. 124). Because canonical texts often present a dominant narrative, a critical literacy approach to instruction “interrupts dominant ideologies that are so often taken for granted, promoting inquiry rooted in questions” (Borsheim-Black, et al., 2014, p. 124). Critical inquiry prevents students from viewing texts through a “single interpretive lens,” as they “practice intentional perspective-taking stances” (Ebarvia, et al., 2020, p. 101). There are many different lenses through which students can view canonical texts, some of which include social justice, gender, postcolonial, and historical (Rybakova & Roccanti, 2016, p. 33). These lenses allow students to form and construct “textual meaning” without having meaning constructed, or pointed out, for them (Rybakova & Roccanti, 2016, p. 33).

Critical Literature Pedagogy. Critical Literature Pedagogy (CLP) is a critical literacy approach to teaching canonical literature through the incorporation of two reading strategies. These strategies are “reading *with* and reading *against* a text” (Borsheim-Black, et al., 2014, p. 124). Reading with a text requires students to comprehend storylines, analyze literary devices, make personal connections, understand historical contexts, and develop thematic interpretations (Borsheim-Black, et al., 2014, p. 124). This is a common approach to literary instruction;

however, it “does not call into question ideologies of texts—those values or beliefs that help to frame and form the text and our reading and teaching of it” (Borsheim-Black, et al., 2014, p. 124). This is where critical literacy, and reading *against* the text become important. When students read *against* canonical literature, they are “reading between the lines to expose and interrupt embedded, dominant narratives, power dynamics, and perceived normalcy espoused by and hidden in the text, including its inclusion in school curricula” (Borsheim-Black, et al., 2014, p. 125). As students practice reading *with* and *against* canonical texts using critical literacy, they are able to identify “‘canonical’ messages around them,” and practice reading *against* everyday texts and messages throughout their lives (Borsheim-Black, et al., 2014, p. 132).

Where Critical Literacy Can't Help. Though canonical texts are primarily taught in secondary classrooms, a critical literacy approach to their instruction won't always work to dismantle dominant narratives. This is because “texts written by women and authors of color are highly underrepresented” (Schieble, 2014, p. 161). In addition, there is a “complete absence of texts that feature characters who are openly gay, lesbian, bisexual, or transgender; are questioning heterosexual norms; or who have same-sex parents” (Schieble, 2014, p. 162). This shows how dominant identities, like heterosexuality, are normalized while non-dominant identities, such as those on the LGBTQIA+ spectrum, are disregarded and excluded. There is a privileged literary canon that overlooks “significant literary works” because “intentional inclusion and a wider net are not considered” (Rodriguez, 2018). Often overlooked in the dominant and privileged literary canon are young adult novels.

Young Adult Literature

Over the last few decades, young adult literature has become increasingly popular among young people and adults alike. Young adult literature (YAL) can best be described as literature

with a teenage protagonist in a coming-of-age plot that doesn't necessarily provide a happy ending (Cole, 2008, p. 49; as cited in Rybakova & Roccanti, 2016, p. 32). Most people can identify with teenage strife. Similarly to canonical literature, the inclusion of young adult literature in secondary school curriculum is considerably debated based on its relevancy to literature study and relevancy to youth.

Arguments Against YAL. The strongest argument critiquing young adult literature is that it is too controversial to be taught in schools. Though "YAL is often the go-to reading for teenagers," it often contains "coming-of-age content" that focuses on "experimentation and emotional distress as well as ... eating disorders and drug use" (Rybakova & Roccanti, 2016, p. 32). Though topics like exploring sexuality, mental illness, eating disorders, and drug use are relevant to teenage experiences, they are considered too taboo and provocative to be worthy of study. The lack of "texts with adolescent protagonists on the 9-12 [Grade band of Appendix B] trivializes issues important to adolescents and further promotes the myth that selecting YA literature results in 'dumbing down' the curriculum" (Schieble, 2014, p. 162). Some believe that texts that focus on the lives of teenagers are not complex enough to meet the demands of developing critical and cultural literacy skills.

Arguments For YAL. There are many arguments for teaching YAL in the classroom, including its relevancy and diversity that make it accessible to a wide variety of students.

Diverse Identities. As opposed to the traditional literary canon that primarily presents a dominant and singular narrative, young adult literature offers diverse experiences and identities with which more diverse student populations can relate. The genre offers racial, ethnic, religious, economic, gender, and sexually diverse authorship and narratives. Though some of the taught literature in middle schools "is starting to include mirrors, windows, and doors of many different

children’s lives,” most of the books taught to students “do not yet feature the rich diversity of their experiences and lives, those of their friends, or those of children around the country” (Thomas, 2018). YAL can provide the necessary rich diversity that would make ELA more accessible and inclusive for all students.

Youth Relevancy. With rich diversity and inclusivity in classroom texts comes more relevancy to the lives and experiences of secondary students. This is because “young adult books give youth the opportunity to see their lived experiences reflected in literature” (Durand, 2016). When the narrative surrounding YAL switches from controversial to worthy of study, students’ lives outside of school are validated and reflected not only in the literature, but in the classroom. This will benefit students because “...character and identity portrayals can support adolescent readers and their abilities when they meet a strong, believable character with whom they can relate” (Rodriguez, 2018). When students see themselves reflected in classroom literature, they will gain confidence in their abilities as students and readers, as well as individuals that are important in society.

Critical Literacy Instruction. When it comes to using critical literacy with young adult literature texts, it is important to emphasize “student voices in constructing meaning and [provide] space for students to become active learners rather than passive receivers of information” (Rybakova & Roccanti, 2016, p. 32). This is because YAL is about the teenage experience, and who better to provide expertise on the teenage experience than teenagers themselves. With good YAL books, educators can “engage students in open exploration and investigation of life, their own lives, the human condition, our society and democracy, and the world” (Wolk, 2013, p. 48). This shows that there are “...endless opportunities for teachers to have their students inquire into topics and issues that redefine the aims of school and cultivate

reading as a truly purposeful and social experience” (Wolk, 2013, p. 45). What students learn using a critical literacy lens to analyze YAL are skills and perspectives that will benefit them as democratic participants in society. Two ways to instruct and engage students in critical literacy practice using YAL in the ELA classroom are to increase and encourage student agency, and ask essential questions.

Student Agency. When students are given choice of the texts they interact with, as well as the questions they ask those texts, they are better able to see their knowledge and experiences as useful and important contributions to the classroom. Specifically, “young adult literature in and of itself offers implications for reader agency” (Glenn & Ginsburg, 2019). Reader agency means students are able to see themselves as readers and are able to identify their own interests in reading. Students will actively seek out books, most likely young adult books, to read. In YAL elective courses studied by Wendy J. Glenn and Ricki Ginsberg, students “built new conceptions of their reading selves in the classroom setting of the YAL course, and in the process, assumed greater agency in shaping their individual reader identities” (Glenn & Ginsberg, 2019). Students were able to choose the texts they read, that related to and validated their experiences as teenagers, and as a result, were able to develop confident reader identities related to their interest and ability. This increases their willingness to engage in critical literacy of issues related to identity because they feel their own identity has been validated.

Essential Questions. Another way to engage students in practicing critical literacy with young adult literature is to ask piercing, essential questions that drive the conversation surrounding a specific text. Essential questions allow students who are reading YAL “to inquire into important ideas that matter to adolescents, society, and the world” (Wolk, 2013, p. 45). Oftentimes, essential questions are applicable to a greater context than a YA text alone, which

helps students to learn how to apply critical literacy to scenarios outside of the ELA classroom. Some essential questions to ask while reading YAL include “Who am I? How can I belong or be me? What’s next? When does change happen? Why did this happen to me or us? Where am I meant to be?” (Rodriguez, 2018). These questions all pertain to the critical aspect of critical literacy that is having a perspective on identity. In addition, these questions are all existential in nature. The questions are broad enough to apply to any novel and any student’s identity, but can also be made more specific to YA novels being read in class. Although these questions were written to be applied to young adult literature, they can be applied to canonical literature, and to both YAL and canon texts simultaneously.

Canonical & YAL Literature Pairings

Critical literacy can benefit both canonical literature and young adult literature when the two are brought together in text sets or pairings. Canonical and YAL pairings involve two texts that are put into conversation with each other surrounding similar perspectives and themes. The pairing should offer opportunities to compare and contrast the texts and spark interesting conversations (Ebarvia, et al., 2020, p. 101).

Compare & Contrast. Most secondary ELA classrooms focus on canonical literature; however, “it is important to recognize the value in contemporary middle level and YA literature” and how it can aid in canonical literature instruction (Boback-Eisenbach, et al., 2018, p. 24). Many see canonical and young adult literature as opposing options for literary instruction. For example, “advocates of canonical texts point out their cultural and literary importance, their contribution to a common knowledge base, and the accolades they have long received from literary experts” (Connors & Shepherd, 2013; as cited in Rybakova & Roccanti, 2016, p. 31). Canonical texts are challenging, universal, and culturally significant. On the other hand,

“advocates for YAL ... argue that adolescents can more easily relate to such works and that they provide easier access for struggling readers” (Connors & Shepherd, 2013; as cited in Rybakova & Roccanti, 2016, p. 31). YAL is more relevant and accessible to young readers. Some canonical texts “may also be categorized as young adult literature;” though, not many, partially due to the fact that “YAL as a category was only separated from children’s literature in 1957” (Rybakova & Roccanti, 2016, p. 32). Most of the traditional literary canon has existed much longer than the genre of young adult literature itself. Though YAL is much younger than most canonical literature, it “addresses content such as cultural norms revolving around technology that is simply not applicable to canonical texts” (Rybakova & Roccanti, 2016, p. 32). This shows that YAL address contemporary issues that did not exist when most canonical literature was written and published.

Critical Literacy Instruction. As previously stated, critical literacy can benefit both canonical literature and young adult literature when they are paired together. When educators can “combine the aesthetic pleasure of reading YAL with the more analytical reading of canonical texts, [they] can instruct students on both how to enjoy a novel and how to get more out of it” (Rybakova & Roccanti, 2016, p. 34). Some ways to do this include using YAL as a scaffold for canonical literature, or creating texts sets to compare and contrast the texts in no specific order.

Scaffolds. Scaffolds provide supports for all students so that they can practice skills they will eventually need to succeed on their own, and “pairing the canon with YAL is an example of scaffolding” (Rybakova & Roccanti, 2016, p. 34). This “takes advantage of the strengths of both categories and benefits readers of all types as they navigate what it means to construct literary meaning” through critical literacy (Rybakova & Roccanti, 2016, p. 31-2). However, “to be a proper scaffold, the YA book should be read before the paired canonical text” (Rybakova &

Roccanti, 2016, p. 41). Its relatability and accessibility will prepare students for what is considered to be a much more complex and challenging text. Students may read YAL outside of school before reading the canonical text together in class, or students may read YAL in class before reading selected passages from the canonical text together as well. Scaffolding can also provide more detailed instructional time for examining perspectives surrounding power, privilege, and oppression.

Text Sets. A text set includes a core text and a supplementary text, either of which position could be a YA or canonical book. However, text sets should “[address] the stereotype or narrative” that will be the focus of the literature unit, “and [guide] students to make observations throughout the reading” (Ebarvia, et al., 2020, p. 101). In instructing critical literacy using text sets, teachers may use essential questions to analyze stereotypes and perspectives surrounding identity, power, privilege and/or oppression. Teachers may have students read a core canonical text as a class, and provide multiple options for supplementary YA texts using book clubs to give students opportunities for agency. There are many ways to instruct text sets; however, as teachers attempt to construct and instruct text sets and pairings, they may discover that time is limited.

Instructional Time. When pairing young adult and canonical literature, teachers may discover that “the practicality of doing so can be questioned due to time constraints, a full curriculum, and hesitation from parents and/or administration” (Rybakova & Roccanti, 2016, p. 41). The full curriculum probably requires the instruction of canonical texts, and hesitation from parents and/or administration may be due to the controversy surrounding YAL. However, there are many solutions to time constraints inhibiting YAL and canonical text pairings. Some suggestions include “asking students to read one or several YA texts over the summer,” or “using book clubs in which students read a YA text with a small group of students while the class reads

a canonical text” or its excerpt(s) (Rybakova & Roccanti, 2016, p. 41). This shows that it is entirely possible to include young adult literature in the ELA classroom alongside canonical literature.

Contemporary Literature Instruction. Critical literacy instruction invites the use of scaffolding, paired text sets, and essential questions. Together, they provide hope that students will develop positive reader identities and choose to read (Elish-Piper, Wold, Schwingendorf, 2014, p. 573). To encourage students to read, the pairing of canonical and young adult literature texts present opportunities for students to “think critically about the significance of the ideas presented in the texts” (Elish-Piper, et al., 2014, p. 567). And to accomplish this, educators should formulate essential questions that “consider adolescent problems and resolutions, similar to protagonists’ experiences in the texts they read” (Elish-Piper, et al., 2014, p. 567). The incorporation of critical literacy instruction, paired young adult literature and canonical text sets, and adolescent-oriented essential questions contribute to contemporary literature instruction (see Figure 1).

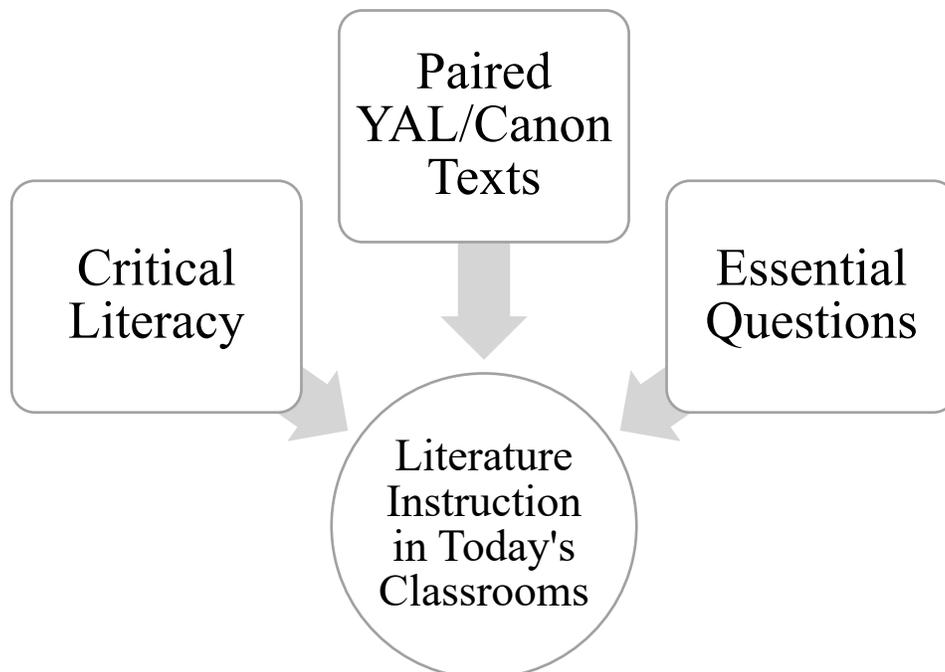


Figure 1. Graphic depicting how critical literacy, paired young adult literature and canonical text sets, and essential questions contribute to literature instruction in today's ELA classrooms.

It is integral that all three elements – critical literacy, paired text sets, and essential questions – all contribute to literature in today's classrooms because the three can be accomplished independently, but work best interconnectedly. Paired text sets don't require the incorporation of critical literacy or essential questions, but will engage students by encouraging “students to explore texts for connections to their lives” (Elish-Piper, 2014, p. 567). In addition, critical literacy doesn't require the use of essential questions, and essential questions don't need to promote critical literacy. However, when implemented purposefully and intentionally, with student identities in mind, critical literacy, paired canonical and young adult literature texts, and essential questions can improve and expand literature instruction in today's ELA classrooms.

Using Canonical and YA Text Pairings to Promote Critical Literacy Development

Today's ELA classrooms are not the same as they were in the 20th century. In reality, they are not the same as they were 10 years ago. This is, in part, due to the increasingly diverse student populations we teach. This includes all forms of diversity, including but not limited to, racial, ethnic, religious, economic, gender, and sexually diverse student groups. It is also, in part, due to the growing need to promote and teach civic engagement and action. However, because the taught literature is not adapting to the diversifying student populations, today's literature instruction needs to adapt to it through creative and intentional efforts. One of the best ways to

do this is through promoting critical literacy through canonical and young adult literature text pairings.

The following literature instructional guides are inspired by Antero Garcia's and Cindy O'Donnell-Allen's "hacking" framework for teaching canonical and AP literature texts. However, these guides are intended to aid in pairing canonical and YAL literature, as well as promote critical literacy through essential questions centered around issues and topics related to identity, power, oppression, and privilege. Each guide includes categories for reading, writing, speaking and listening, and language development that align with prospective activities and standards, which is similar to the formatting used by Garcia and O'Donnell-Allen. In addition, the texts have been carefully curated to promote representation and inclusivity in the texts we teach. The young adult literature authors and stories include representation for people of color, those on the LGBTQ+ spectrum, women, and those of non-Christian faiths. This is in order to push back against the predominantly white, heteronormative, Christian, male perspective, and instead promote non-dominant voices as worthy of study. The goal is for these guides to inspire educators to move beyond simply teaching the canon and its literary elements to teaching text pairings that are relevant and purposeful, and prepare students for democratic participation after high school.

Instructional Guide 1**Essential Question:** *What causes prejudice, and how does it lead to injustices?***Canonical Text:** *Night* by Elie Wiesel**YAL Text:** *They Called Us Enemy* by George Takei

<i>Category</i>	<i>Sample Activities</i>	<i>Standards</i>
Reading	Reading nonfiction memoirs about religious and racial persecution and examining how and why prejudice leads to injustices.	3. Analyze how and why individuals, events, and ideas develop and interact over the course of a text.
	Watching YouTube Clips of Elie Wiesel and George Takei revisiting the concentration and internment camps they lived in as children and wrote about in their memoirs.	7. Integrate and evaluate content presented in diverse media and formats.
Writing	Writing a 1-2 page fictional memoir from the perspective of a teenager in an immigrant detention center and their experiences with prejudice and injustice. Can be in either written or graphic form.	3. Write narratives to develop real or imagined experiences or events using effective techniques, well-chosen details, and well-structured event sequences.
	Writing an essay answering the essential question using evidence from both the canonical and YAL texts.	5. Draw evidence from literary or informational texts to support analysis, reflection, and research.
Speaking and Listening	Partner and group discussions about the texts in relation to the additional texts presented.	2. Integrate and evaluate information presented in diverse media and formats (including visual, quantitative, and oral).

	Listening to and watching a radio interview and news clips about the immigration detention centers on the US-Mexican border, and how they are compared and contrasted to internment and concentration camps.	4. Present information, findings, and supporting evidence so that listeners can follow the line of reasoning. Ensure that the organization, development, and style are appropriate to task, purpose, and audience.
Language	Discussing AOC’s language choice of ‘concentration camp’ for immigrant detention centers and the effect this has on her audience considering the different contexts in which it has been used before.	3. Apply knowledge of language to understand how language functions in different contexts, to make effective choices for meaning or style, and to comprehend more fully when reading or listening.
	Completing entry tickets that ask students to use context clues from <i>Night</i> and <i>They Called Us Enemy</i> passages to determine the meaning of unknown or Tier 2+ vocabulary.	4. Determine or clarify the meaning of unknown and multiple-meaning words and phrases by using context clues, analyzing meaningful word parts, and consulting general and specialized reference materials, as appropriate.

Additional Texts

Reading

[Auschwitz with Nobel Laureate and Holocaust Survivor Elie Wiesel - The Oprah Winfrey Show \(OWN, 2015\).](#)

[George Takei on World War II Internment Camps \(CBS Sunday Morning, 2019\).](#)

Speaking and Listening

[Alexandra Ocasio-Cortez Calls Out U.S. ‘Concentration Camps’ \(NowThis News, 2019\).](#)

[Massive Protests Erupt Over Conditions at Detention Centers \(ABC News, 2019\).](#)

[Former Japanese Internment Camp to Shelter Migrant Children \(NBC News, 2019\).](#)

[KNX In-Depth: George Takei Compares Childhood in Japanese Internment Camps to Today's Migrant Detention Centers \(Sager, 2019\).](#)

Contextualization

Night by Elie Wiesel and *They Called Us Enemy* by George Takei were selected for one of the five literature instructional guides because they address the need for students to study nonfiction texts and the need for students to question persecution and prejudice. *Night* is a memoir about Wiesel's experience as a young boy in a concentration camp, and *They Called Us Enemy* is a memoir about Takei's experience as a young boy in a Japanese internment camp. Both take place during World War II. Takei's memoir was also selected because it is a graphic novel and can be more accessible to English language learners and students who struggle with decoding and reading comprehension.

The sample activities meet the Next Generation ELA Standards, and were developed with critical literacy in mind. While reading the memoirs and completing the activities, students will be attempting to answer the question, "What causes prejudice, and how does it lead to injustices?" It is important for students to grapple with this question because prejudice and injustices are prevalent in the world today. A few of the sample activities ask students to critically examine texts about the immigration detention centers on the US-Mexico border, and consider its similarities to the injustices that occurred during World War II.

Instructional Guide 2

Essential Question: *Whose responsibility is it to advocate for social justice, and what does that responsibility entail?*

Canonical Text: *To Kill a Mockingbird* by Harper Lee

YAL Text: *The Hate U Give* by Angie Thomas

<i>Category</i>	<i>Sample Activities</i>	<i>Standards</i>
Reading	Reading and analyzing two fiction novels and their main characters’ points of view, and how their different identities and approaches to social justice attempt to answer the essential question.	6. Assess how point of view or purpose shapes the content and style of a text, drawing on a wide range of global and diverse texts.
	Reading and analyzing two fiction novels with unique perspectives on racism, classism, and social justice through the analysis of their themes and motifs.	9. Analyze and evaluate texts using knowledge of literary forms, elements, and devices through a variety of lenses and perspectives.
Writing	Creating an infographic or graphic organizer that gives reasons individuals advocate for social justice, and actions social justice advocates take to promote change.	2. Write informative/explanatory texts to examine and convey complex ideas and information clearly and accurately through the effective selection, organization, and analysis of content.
	Researching and writing a paper on a teenage social justice activist of students’ choice (e.g., Malala Yousafzai, Emma González, Greta Thunberg, etc.), and	7. Gather relevant information from multiple sources, assess the credibility and accuracy of each source, and integrate the information

relating this information with the novels to answer the essential question. in writing while avoiding plagiarism.

Speaking and Listening	Watching and listening to Baratunde Thurston’s Ted Talk on racism and discussing it as a class.	3. Evaluate a speaker’s point of view, reasoning, and use of evidence and rhetoric.
	Watching and listening to clip from <i>The Fresh Prince of Bel Air</i> . Finding and presenting clips from tv shows or movies that discuss discrimination and racism.	5. Make strategic use of digital media and visual displays to express information and enhance understanding of presentations.
Language	Analyzing Lee’s and Thomas’s use of dialect versus academic English in their novels, and watching a video that discusses code-switching which is referenced in Thomas’s novel.	1. Demonstrate command of the convention of academic English grammar and usage when writing or speaking.
	Analyzing Lee’s and Thomas’s use of figurative language to create meaning.	5. Demonstrate understanding of figurative language, word relationships and nuances in word meanings.

Additional Texts

Speaking and Listening

[How to Deconstruct Racism, One Headline at a Time by Baratunde Thurston \(Thurston, 2019\).](#)

[Will & Carlton Talk About Police Brutality - The Fresh Prince of Bel Air \(Broadberry, 2020\).](#)

Language

[What is Code-Switching? \(HuffPost, 2018\).](#)

Contextualization

To Kill a Mockingbird by Harper Lee and *The Hate U Give* by Angie Thomas were selected because they address systemic racism, classism, and the importance of perspective. *To Kill a Mockingbird* is about a young white girl whose father takes on the case of a Black man accused of raping a poor white girl. *The Hate U Give* is about a young Black girl who witnesses the fatal shooting of her friend at the hands of a white police officer, and the justice movement that follows. Both texts question faith in the criminal justice system; however, *To Kill a Mockingbird* teaches racism from a white child's perspective, while *The Hate U Give* teaches racism from a Black teenager's perspective. In addition, *To Kill a Mockingbird* was written by a white woman, while *The Hate U Give* was written by a Black woman. Together, they address the importance of representation and perspective when it comes to gaining empathy and participating in civic action.

The sample activities meet the Next Generation ELA Standards, and were developed to encourage and promote critical literacy through the study of racism and advocacy. While reading the novels and completing the activities, students will be attempting to answer the question, "Whose responsibility is it to advocate for social justice, and what does that responsibility entail?" In order to become active democratic participants in society, it is important for students to grapple with and attempt to understand this question. As students research youth social justice advocates, and begin to understand the importance of empathizing with those who experience discrimination and prejudice on a near daily basis through the video clips and TedTalks, students will begin to see the reality and importance behind stepping up and making change.

Instructional Guide 3

Essential Question: *What influences identity, and how can one push back against the ‘status quo’ to be their authentic self?*

Canonical Text: *The Color Purple* by Alice Walker

YAL Text: *Aristotle and Dante Discover the Secrets of the Universe* by Benjamin Alire Sáenz

<i>Category</i>	<i>Sample Activities</i>	<i>Standards</i>
Reading	<p>Reading two fiction texts and examining word choices to see how they shape characters and ultimately the characters’ identities and choices.</p> <p>Analyzing the film adaptation of <i>The Color Purple</i>.</p>	<p>4. Interpret words and phrases as they are used in a text, including determining technical, connotative, and figurative meanings, and analyze how specific word choices shape meaning or tone.</p> <p>7. Integrate and evaluate content presented in diverse media and formats.</p>
Writing	<p>Writing short personal narratives/journal entries on experiences with clarifying one’s own identity or pushing back against the status quo to define one’s own identity.</p> <p>Creating identity webs for a character from each of the fictional texts. Students creating identity webs for themselves to compare and contrast with the characters.</p>	<p>3. Write narratives to develop real or imagined experiences or events using effective techniques, well-chosen details, and well-structured event sequences.</p> <p>4. Develop personal, cultural, textural, and thematic connections within and across genres through written responses to texts and personal experiences.</p>
Speaking and Listening		

	<p>Participating in partner or group discussions about identity themes such as masculinity, femininity, homosexuality, race, ethnicity, as it relates to the novels, personal experiences, and pushing back against dominant identity narratives.</p>	<p>1. Prepare for and participate effectively in a range of conversations and collaborations with diverse partners; express ideas clearly and persuasively, and build on those of others.</p>
	<p>Creating storyboards, posters, or Spotify playlists to accompany either of the two fiction novels (not including music from the musical adaptation).</p>	<p>5. Make strategic use of digital media and visual displays to express information and enhance understanding of presentations.</p>

Language

Composing poems about students’ own identities using figurative language and intentional spelling and punctuation.

2. Demonstrate command of the conventions of academic English capitalization, punctuation, and spelling when writing.

Analyzing the use of figurative language in “The Color Purple (Reprise)” from the musical adaptation, and “I Still Haven’t Found What I’m Looking For” by U2, which is referenced in Alire Sáenz’s novel, and how they contribute to character identity in the novels.

5. Demonstrate understanding of figurative language, word relationships and nuances in word meanings.

Additional Texts

Reading

The Color Purple Film (Spielberg, 1985).

Writing

Ahmed, S. K. (2018). Chapter 1: Exploring Our Identities. In *Being the Change: Lessons and Strategies to Teach Social Comprehension* (pp. 1-29). Portsmouth, NH: Heinemann.

Language

U2 - I Still Haven't Found What I'm Looking For (U2 Mexican Soul, 2020).

The Color Purple (Reprise) (Cynthia Erivo – Topic, 2020).

Contextualization

The Color Purple by Alice Walker and *Aristotle and Dante Discover the Secrets of the Universe* by Benjamin Alire Sáenz were selected because they question identity and promote LGBTQ+ voices. *The Color Purple* is about the life of a Black woman who is mistreated by men her whole life, and longs to be reunited with her sister while she develops feelings for a promiscuous woman. *Aristotle and Dante Discover the Secrets of the Universe* is about two Mexican-American teenage boys in the 1980s and their journey to self-discovery and accepting their identities as young gay men. Both texts address identities being thrust upon an individual, and eventually pushing back against that label to be one's authentic self despite their fears and struggles.

The sample activities meet the Next Generation ELA Standards, and were developed to encourage self-reflection and empathy. While reading the novels and completing the activities, students will be attempting to answer the question, "What influences identity, and how can one push back against the 'status quo' to be their authentic self?" Adolescence is about self-discovery and attempting to understand one's identity, so high school students will be able to find paths to relate to the characters, regardless of their sexual orientation. Some of the activities are multi-modal in that they incorporate music to promote comprehension as well as creativity.

Instructional Guide 4

Essential Question: *In what ways can revenge hold power and take over the identity of an individual, and what are the consequences of this?*

Canonical Text: *Hamlet* by William Shakespeare

YAL Text: *Long Way Down* by Jason Reynolds

<i>Category</i>	<i>Sample Activities</i>	<i>Standards</i>
Reading	Reading a play and a narrative verse novel, and completing ice burg activities for specific passages to identify what the characters say versus what their words mean, specifically in regards to identity and revenge.	1. Read closely to determine what the text says explicitly/implicitly and make logical inferences from it; cite specific textual evidence when writing or speaking to support conclusions drawn from the text.
	Reading a play and a narrative verse novel and analyzing how Reynolds' word placement enhances the poetry and the plot, and how Shakespeare's choice of monologue, soliloquy, blank verse, etc., do the same.	5. Analyze the structure of texts, including how specific sentences, paragraphs, and larger portions of the text (e.g., section, chapter, scene, or stanza) relate to each other and the whole.
Writing	Completing exit tickets in which students make a claim relating to the essential question using evidence from either text.	1. Write arguments to support claims in an analysis of substantive topics or texts, using valid reasoning and relevant and sufficient evidence.
	Writing an essay answering the essential question using evidence from both texts.	5. Draw evidence from literary or informational texts to support analysis, reflection, and research.

Speaking and Listening	<p>Watching and listening to different performances of Hamlet's soliloquy, and examining the similarities and differences</p> <p>Reading the play and assigning parts as a class, and reading the narrative poem in small groups out loud to each other.</p>	<p>2. Integrate and evaluate information presented in diverse media and formats (including visual, quantitative, and oral).</p> <p>6. Adapt speech to a variety of contexts and communicative tasks, demonstrating command of academic English when indicated or appropriate.</p>
Language	<p>Discussing the effectiveness or word choice in and placement in Shakespeare's and Reynolds' poetic styles, and examining how language reveals details about characters' identities.</p> <p>Reading examples of different poetic styles by Reynolds (e.g., blank verse) and Shakespeare (e.g., blank verse, prose, iambic pentameter) and writing poems in similar poetic styles.</p>	<p>3. Apply knowledge of language to understand how language functions in different contexts, to make effective choices for meaning or style, and to comprehend more fully when reading or listening.</p> <p>6. Acquire and accurately use general academic and content-specific words and phrases sufficient for reading, writing, speaking, and listening; demonstrate independence in gathering and applying vocabulary knowledge when considering a word or phrase important to comprehension or expression.</p>

Additional Texts

Speaking and Listening

[Adrian Lester as Hamlet: 'To be or not to be' \(Guardian Culture, 2016\).](#)

[To be or not to be - Kenneth Branagh \(Bonaiuti, 2013\).](#)

[Hamlet - To Be or Not to Be \(2000\) \(Movieclips, 2015\).](#)

Contextualization

Hamlet by William Shakespeare and *Long Way Down* by Jason Reynolds were selected because they also question identity, and the effect negative feelings and actions, such as revenge, can have on a person's identity. *Hamlet* is a play about a prince's revenge on his father's killer and successor, his uncle, and the price that pays. *Long Way Down* is a narrative poem about a teenage boy who seeks revenge on his brother's killer, and the elevator ride that introduces him to the ghosts who try to influence his decision. Shakespeare plays and poetry can be difficult for teenage students to comprehend. Together, teaching the texts while attempting to answer the essential question about identity and revenge will engage students in difficult study.

The sample activities meet the Next Generation ELA Standards, and were created to make studying Shakespeare and poetry more cooperative through group and class readings. While reading the texts and completing the activities, students will be attempting to answer the question, "In what ways can revenge hold power and take over the identity of an individual, and what are the consequences of this?" Through studying the choices made by the characters in the texts, and the analysis of word emphasis by actors and the authors, students will be able to better engage with difficult texts while reflecting on the effects of their own choices.

Instructional Guide 5

Essential Question: *What causes some people to oppress, and what causes the oppressed to fight back?*

Canonical Text: *Nineteen Eighty-Four* by George Orwell

YAL Text: *The Hunger Game* by Suzanne Collins

<i>Category</i>	<i>Sample Activities</i>	<i>Standards</i>
Reading	Reading two fiction dystopian novels and analyzing the characters’ journeys from oppressed to fighting back with evidence from the texts.	2. Determine central ideas or themes of a text and analyze their development; summarize the key supporting details and ideas.
	Reading two fiction dystopian novels and determining the authors’ claims about society, power, and oppression using evidence from the texts.	8. Delineate and evaluate the argument and specific claims in a text, including the validity of the reasoning as well as the relevance and sufficiency of the evidence.
Writing	Creating story maps with each character from each book that attempts to fight back against oppression using evidence from the texts.	1. Write arguments to support claims in an analysis of substantive topics or texts, using valid reasoning and relevant and sufficient evidence.
	Researching and writing about countries, cultures, and/or religions who attempted to make perfect societies, how or if they oppressed individuals, and if those individuals fought back.	6. Conduct research based on focused questions to demonstrate understanding of the subject under investigation.
Speaking and Listening		

	<p>Participating in partner or group discussions about oppression in the novels about the causes and effects of oppression.</p>	<p>1. Prepare for and participate effectively in a range of conversations and collaborations with diverse partners; express ideas clearly and persuasively, and build on those of others.</p>
	<p>Presenting student research to the class on real dystopian societies in history or present day.</p>	<p>4. Present information, findings, and supporting evidence so that listeners can follow the line of reasoning. Ensure that organization, development, and style are appropriate to task, purpose, and audience.</p>

<p>Language</p>	<p>Writing summaries of original dystopian story ideas.</p> <p>Watching videos about the difference between dystopia and utopia, and identifying what aspects of the novels make them dystopian or utopian.</p>	<p>1. Demonstrate command of the conventions of academic English grammar and usage when writing or speaking.</p> <p>4. Determine or clarify the meaning of unknown and multiple-meaning words and phrases by using context clues, analyzing meaningful word parts, and consulting general and specialized reference materials, as appropriate.</p>
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Additional Texts

Language

[How to Recognize a Dystopia \(TED-Ed, 2016\).](#)

["Model Citizen" - Dystopian Animated Short Film \(Dead Sound, 2020\).](#)

[Dystopias - Terrible Writing Advice \(Terrible Writing Advice, 2016\).](#)

Contextualization

Nineteen Eighty-Four by George Orwell and *The Hunger Games* by Suzanne Collins were selected because they look at power and oppression, and how one fights back against it. *Nineteen Eighty-Four* is about a man who is constantly watched by “Big Brother,” and is a cog in the wheel of an oppressive government power until he meets a woman and develops feelings for her—feelings the government has not permitted him to have. *The Hunger Games* is about a teenage girl who takes the place of her sister in the government’s annual Hunger Games tournament, in which 24 teenagers fight to the death in an arena for the capitol’s amusement. In both texts, individuality is frowned upon, and obedience is required. And in both texts, people suffer under oppressive regimes.

The sample activities meet the Next Generation ELA Standards, and were made to engage students in the study of dystopian societies while attempting to understand how oppressive regimes rise and fall. While reading the texts and completing the activities, students will be attempting to answer the question, “What causes some people to oppress, and what causes the oppressed to fight back?” Some of the activities require students to research historical or present-day oppressive and dystopian governments. In doing so, students will better be able to attempt answering the essential question, while also understanding the importance of advocating for those who cannot fight back against oppressive governments because they are powerless.

Conclusion

Critical literacy, and its instruction on perspectives relating to identity, power, privilege, and oppression, make both canonical and YA texts more engaging and accessible for secondary students. As it is unlikely that traditional canonical texts will be removed from ELA classrooms

and replaced with YAL due to its cultural standing and influence by systems of power, educators can incorporate young adult literature alongside it. The instructional guides were carefully curated and constructed to include: relevant, adolescent-oriented essential questions; texts with diverse racial, ethnic, religious, economic, and LGBTQIA+ authors and narratives; and activities that align with the New York State Next Generation English Language Arts Learning Standards. Together, critical literacy, essential questions, canonical texts, and young adult literature can transform literature instruction in today's classrooms. This will benefit students as readers and as future democratic participants in society.

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