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Decentering the Book(room) and (Re)Centering Students' Interest in Contemporary Issues: Theories, Questions, and Relevance

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Robin walks into the bookroom. Looking over piles of old, dog-eared books proves more discouraging than inspiring.

Robin wonders why the same books always have to be taught - why do the books, rather than the relevant and timely social issues, dictate the curriculum? Could it be possible to trouble the pedagogic practice of having dated novels hold sway? Is it possible to decenter the canon or at least the bookroom's books?

Preservice teachers (PSTs) are “betwixt and between” (Cook-Sather, 2006). Torn between embodying the identity of a student or embodying the identity of a teacher, they often feel torn between the two (Covino, 2019). They are also vulnerable in ways that more veteran teachers are not. Teacher preparation programs are designed specifically to educate and mentor PSTs into the practices and knowledges of professional educators. Meaningfully engaging with literature in a 21st-century, secondary classroom can be challenging. Considering factors such as diverse content, cultural sustenance, and the inclusion of modern authorial voices, it may seem near-impossible to authentically engage students when teaching classic texts. Often, curriculum is rigidly set and book-

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centric in ways that constrain teachers' autonomy over the core material taught, limit student voices, and perpetuate a rigid paradigm around the teaching of literature. One way that preservice and novice teachers can meet this challenge is by centering generative and important questions when using classic or canonical texts paired with more modern, alternative perspectives in order to diversify curriculum, engage a wide range of students, and teach relevant topics rather than just teaching novels.

Our purpose in writing this article is to encourage teacher educators to lend their efforts to preservice and novice teachers in secondary contexts, who may be reluctant to step outside traditional methods of teaching canonical texts. Studies point to the need and desire of youth to see themselves in texts (Brooks, 2006), to find relevance to their own lives in texts (Ivey & Johnston, 2015), and to articulate social issues about which they can exercise agency on a personal or community level (Moje et al., 2008). At stake are the literate lives of students. Those studying to be English teachers often take a literary theory course that serves as a survey or introduction to lenses that include, for example, gender theory, structuralism, psychoanalytic theory, New Historicism, Marxism, New Criticism, Reader Response theory, and others. At the very least, they encounter literary lenses in their literature and writing courses. Though we know that teacher candidates engage in coursework that often challenges the status quo, many times, when they begin their careers, they find themselves eager to apply what they have learned but unable to find space and support to read old books in new ways.

Here, we offer a pathway toward opening up spaces for those novice (and experienced) teachers to find new ways to work with literature. We developed a six-step process to guide and empower Robin, and other teachers, who find themselves in a similar conundrum. The process is meant to be open and flexible enough to enable teachers to work within the constraints of their given context. Steps one and two (see Figure 1) are iterative and may switch primacy until both a bookroom book and a hospitable literary theory are selected. Step three asks that the educator develops generative or essential questions that are open and can easily connect to contemporary issues which align with those of interest to youth. Then, the literary theory is explained, modeled, and explored with students. At this point, with the youth having a grasp on the lens, the work begins of reading excerpts or the whole text with which to address those big questions driving the unit. Steps five and six are iterative as well: teachers can invite continuous reflection and

connection among the texts of the book, other media, and students' lives and interests using the theory to help set discussion parameters.

Figure 1

Decentering the Canon

I.	Review choices available in the bookroom. Select one.
II.	Recall a variety of literary theories. Select one that aligns with the book chosen.
III.	Draw from the selected literary theory and develop open-ended, generative questions that can apply to the theory, the book, and back to students' own lives.
IV.	Teach the literary theory to students, and explore real-life examples.
V.	Read the text, and consider and address the essential questions in light of the theory.
VI.	Reflect: In a recursive manner, consider whether and how the "looking through the lens" informs understandings of self, texts, and the world.

Note: The figure outlines six steps to decenter the canon

To illustrate this process, by way of example, we present one possible iteration.

Here, we use gender theory to interrogate and unpack the gendered performances of masculinity, including toxic masculinity, in Golding's (1954) *Lord of the Flies* (see Covino et al., 2021). The guiding essential questions can include: How can the lens of gender theory contribute to a more finely grained understanding of the novel? How and why are divergent performances of masculinity critical to the shaping of character depth and development? How can the study of gender theory contribute to reflection of self, of texts, and of the world? We maintain that this process can be applied to the moldering book-room stacks in innumerable ways. What follows is one possible route of many. We share a taste of what is possible when teachers (even young teachers) are empowered to put questions first, and to decenter the canon.

Teaching Gender Theory

Having established essential questions to guide the unit of study, teachers are now able to move forward in new and challenging directions. First, however, they need to help students understand gender theory. To support teachers in this work, we offer here our own working definition of gender. First, we understand gender as an innately fluid and dynamic concept. Further, gender constitutes a social performance that both reflects and depends upon various contextual factors. Gender is not a stable trait that people possess as much as it is an on-going play enacted with and for others. Gender is not what people are, but rather, “what they do” (Giraldo & Colyar, 2012, p. 26). We suggest, first, a real-world example of the theory. When teacher educators are offering examples to novice teachers of what we mean by gender, they can offer a snapshot, like the one below, in any mode.

Imagine a high school girl standing at her locker, getting ready for class after lunch. In the blink of an eye, she can embody and portray various aspects of gender - the prismatic spectrum of femininity and masculinity. First, she checks her lip gloss in her tiny mirror. Then, seconds later, she reaches into her gym bag, feeling for her shin guards and soccer cleats. Finally, she slings her backpack over her shoulder and slams her locker shut, revealing her dark frayed clothes, severe eyeliner, and a spiked, studded necklace.

If teachers offer their students a relatable and accessible way of connecting the idea of gender to their own lives and experiences, it can help them begin to concretize and apply the theory. Asking students to imagine such a scene can help them begin to process the ways in which all people offer, convey, and embody multi-shaded intersections of masculinity and femininity.

Then, with a growing understanding of gender theory, students can begin to move beyond their own lives and apply gender as a lens to literature more broadly. An example of a more gradual, progressive discussion of gender is outlined below (see Table 2). The first box, “Brainstorm ‘Gender,’” asks students to think about their own experiences related to gender; the second paired set of boxes, “Literature” and “Here and Now,” prompt the students to try to make connections between their own experiences and those they have read about in literary texts. A key benefit to such an entry point is that it empowers students to begin with their personal

experience, and then to broaden the scope of their thinking by including text-to-self connections.

Figure 2

Gender Theory and Literature Exploration

Take a moment to think about gender. What is gender? How would you define it? What has your experience of gender been? What do you think are some gender roles that have been created over time by society?

Brainstorm 'Gender'

Let us now consider gender roles in literature versus our lives (here and now)...

Literature	Here and Now

Note: The figure illustrates a model of a scaffolded support to discuss gender theory and literature.

Reflecting on the connections between gender theory and literature in this way primes students for the next step. Engaging with the novel and using it to answer the open-ended unit questions. Here, again, are the generative questions shaping the unit: How can the lens of gender theory contribute a more finely grained understanding of the novel? How are divergent performances of masculinity critical to the shaping of character depth and development? How can the study of gender theory contribute to reflection of self, of texts, and of the world? With these

questions always at the fore, teachers can help students use their growing knowledge of gender theory as a means of penetrating and exploring the staid novel.

In Light of the Theory: Teaching and Reflecting on Masculinities in ‘Lord of the Flies’

Having explored gender theory with students through a close and critical examination of their own lives and experiences with literature, the stage is set to look more closely at performances of masculinity. This refocus on masculinity enables teachers to move the second and third essential questions for the unit. The text is there as it serves to answer and address the generative questions. The questions, however, command center stage. This tightened focus on masculinity may require that teachers do a bit of direct teaching, and share with students a conceptual definition of toxic masculinity. We agree with Ashlee et al.’s (2018) definition of toxic masculinity as centered on dominance, violence, and abrogation of empathy (p. 73). Berdahl et al.’s (2018) description underscores the necessity of domination and “complete control of those deemed weaker” (p. 423). Golding’s (1954) *Lord of the Flies* demonstrates a deep (and deeply troubling) association between power, domination, and the characters’ enactments of toxic masculinity. The focus on male characters, however, does not mean that characters are all alike; far from it. Further, it does not mean that the male characters are static and unchanging. Many of the characters develop and change throughout the course of the texts. For some, the change is clear. For others, the change is more subtle. But nearly all character evolution trends in the direction of toxic masculinity -- either embodying it or noting its growing power within the group.

Teachers interested in forefronting questions related to the performances of masculinity in the novel can lead their students in exploring each of the central characters, and mapping how/if those characters change over time. Comparison to other characters is another tool for teachers. Using a spectrum of masculinities developed by Herrera & Prosnitz (2016) (see Figure 3) teachers can locate where characters fall in relation to each other. Placement of key characters’ on a continuum can invite students to examine masculinities and their expressions by degree, through comparison and contrast, for which they provide textual evidence. Beginning at the far left in the most “exploitative” or toxic zone, the line of the continuum extends to the right, encountering, secondly, the “accommodating” area. Then, thirdly, on to a “sensitive” region, and, finally, to “transformative” or humanistic zone (Herrera & Prosnitz, 2016, p. 11).

Figure 3

Characters' Performances of Masculinity

Villainous	Enforcer	Protagonists	Companions	Pacifists
Jack	Roger	Ralph	Piggy	Simon
Exploitative → Accommodating → Sensitive → Transformative				

Note: The figure provides a spectrum of masculinities, based on Herrera and Prosnitz's (2016) work, overlaid with character traits from Golding's (1954) *Lord of the Flies*

The teacher can demonstrate and model the process of considering the spectrum of masculinities and applying it to the growing understanding of the characters as the text unfolds. In this way, they can help students appreciate how the plot, vivid imagery, symbolism, and allegory all serve to highlight and reflect the characters' positionality on the spectrum of masculinities. By creating a visual organizer, teachers can offer students scaffolding by which to take stock of characters' portrayals of behaviors. Building off of the teacher-crafted exemplar, students can continue to provide their own annotations as well as textual evidence to support their assessments. In this way, teachers can empower students to compare and contrast moments in the text with the characters in order to categorize them based on performances of masculinity. While moving through the text, teachers can guide students in self-reflection--asking them to consider connections to other texts, to their own lives and the ways in which prismatic performances of gender exist in the real world. As an extension activity for the unit, teachers can ask students to turn their critical gaze upon themselves. One idea for such a self-reflective summative activity that asks students to demonstrate their knowledge and awareness of gender theory is to ask the students to create and share masks that reveal and reflect the different aspects of their gendered identities.

Conclusion

The framework offered here presents English teachers with another way forward when faced with the tired piles of dog-eared books. Instead of being bound by limiting choices, teachers can exercise their own power and prerogative, and focus on cogent and timely social issues using literary theory as a guiding lens. We hope that the example shared, of decentering the book(room), using the lenses of

gender theory and toxic masculinity to investigate *Lord of the Flies* will help teacher-educators (and the next generation of teachers) to see the study of literature in new and dynamic ways. What is teaching if not the chance to help students connect with texts in ways that disquiet the status quo and inspire critical thinking? While all teachers, and particularly those in their early careers, may feel hesitant to approach traditional texts from an unconventional angle, we believe that this framework is one that can grow with the teacher as they build confidence in the work of (de)centering bookroom books. In a time of changing (and challenging) norms, we offer this work to support early-career teachers' agency toward focusing less on narrow conceptions of what counts as 'doing it right' and more on helping students critically read and think--to become thoughtful and engaged scholars--at once, compassionate and unafraid.

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