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USING YOUNG ADULT LITERATURE AS THE CORNERSTONE OF LITERACY:
PAIRING YOUNG ADULT NOVELS WITH THE CLASSICS

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Abstract

English classes are still relying on novels taught consistently since the eighties if not earlier. Though our students have changed drastically since that time, our teaching methods and texts have not. And now, only 20% of students are reading what is assigned to them. It's time to shift our curriculum to something more current and to find the book students will want to read. That solution is young adult literature. Thematically, there is nothing the classics teach that young adult literature cannot match, and students will be more likely to relate to their world using these novels in place of the classics. In this thesis, I suggest young adult novels to read full class in place of the most common novels taught in English classrooms, and provide corresponding activities. Excerpts from the classics would still be used for historical and cultural knowledge, but the bulk of the reading could come from YAL.

Chapter 1: Why read YAL

"Did you read chapter eleven of *Grendel* last night?" Parker dropped into his seat, the plastic back slapping hard against the metal supports.

Tapping the edge of her phone against the desk, Taya snorted. "Yeah right. I read maybe the first chapter then just Thug Notes'd it. Hate this book."

"Damn, I should've done that." Parker slapped the worn copy of *Grendel* against his thigh. "I used Thug Notes with *To Kill a Mockingbird*. Book was too slow for me. Oh, and *Great Gatsby*. Did you see that movie with Leo though? It was lit."

"You didn't read *To Kill a Mockingbird?* I tried for some of that, though I used the SparkNotes videos for the tests." Taya swiveled her phone, revealing the loaded Thug Notes video for *Grendel.* "This is one of his better videos. Oh, and *Animal Farm*—when did we read that? I remember loving that one."

The English Classroom

English class hasn't changed in decades. We're still sitting in rows of desks our parents and grandparents sat in reading novels our parents and grandparents read. And sometimes it looks as if we're quite literally reading the exact same books. Copies are torn and falling apart. Some have entire chunks missing. I graduated from high school ten years ago and the curriculum I was taught and what I'm teaching now are near identical. I was taught *The Great Gatsby* as a junior in high school and I am teaching it to my juniors now. I was taught *To Kill a Mockingbird, Hamlet, Julius Caesar, Romeo & Juliet,* and even *Speak* by Laurie Halse Anderson. And these novels are taught in classrooms still at my school. Even with thousands of new books to choose from, we

stay comfortably in the past. We continue to hold up these novels as exemplars of literature both of their time, and of the modern era. Veteran teachers also have units at the ready for these novels, and early career teachers like the support these veteran teachers – and the internet – offer, thus our classes remain stagnant.

Though our students are different, the language constantly evolves, and new works of fiction are published daily, the curriculum remains stagnant. Every decade or so, a new book is introduced into classrooms, like *The Things They Carried* by Tim O'Brien or *Speak* by Laurie Halse Anderson, but the other tried and true novels like *The Adventures of Huckleberry Finn*, *The Great Gatsby* and *To Kill a Mockingbird* continue to populate classrooms. The condition of those novels continue to deteriorate until students are reading broken copies of the novels.

Why do we keep rehashing the same content in much the same way as we did in the 60s and 70s when so much else has changed? When a new scientific theory emerges, we teach it. When a new way to solve math problems present itself, we teach it. Just a couple of months ago, two scientists put forth an idea that the Big Bang did not cause the universe. In fact, the universe never began and will never end. Though it's not widely accepted yet, it was still mentioned in science classrooms. With Harriet Tubman taking the $20 bill, every American History class spoke of the historic occasion, and I've even heard of a few using lyrics from the *Hamilton* musical to help teach about Alexander Hamilton. Whenever new books are published, we say they come nowhere near the classics and turn a blind eye. Everything has changed. Our students are different, the times are different and priorities are different. Students all have a smartphone in their hands, and social media has taken up most socializing time.

Students don't read the same way they did even a few years ago. They have constant access to media and short bursts of information. Yes, English class should teach students to read longer pieces and appreciate literature, but perhaps it's time for English curriculum to buck tradition and try something new.

The simple truth is students aren't reading what we assign. That's not to say they aren't reading. Many students often have young adult books in their hands or in their bags, but they can't be bothered to read for class. The library can't keep *Harry Potter* or *Divergent* or anything by Ellen Hopkins on the shelves when teachers can't give away copies of *Grendel* if they tried. They aren't connecting to the text, don't see the point in reading it until it's too late, or find it all online as seen in the dialogue above. I've caught students not paying attention to what's going on in class, while reading another book completely. So the question is: what if we built a curriculum based on young adult literature?

Young adult literature has long been used as a way to get struggling readers to reach the classics or give advanced readers something extra. Sarah Herz, Donald Gallo, Teri Lesesne, Donalyn Miller, and Joan Kaywell have all worked to improve the standing of young adult literature in the classroom. Herz, Gallo and Kaywell have suggested their own young adult novels to use in conjunction with the classics in their own works like *From Hinton To Hamlet* and *Adolescent Literature as a Complement to the Classics*. Both books have been republished with updated lists and concepts. Lesense works with the idea of reading ladders. In the reading ladders approach, students start with an easy book and work their way thematically up to a classic. Many of the middle rungs are young adult literature and Miller works with the idea of

disposing of the full class novel altogether. These authors all have books talking about how we can use young adult literature to get students reading more difficult books, and they hold YAL to the same standard they hold the classics, and find that YAL can stand on its own merit.

We keep teaching the classics because they offer students the ability to see real world problems reflected in literature of other times, and to get students to understand certain universal themes present throughout all literature. Young adult literature can reach the same goals. As one teacher told me, "some books are windows while others are mirrors." At this point, almost all the classics are windows, and with the egocentrism underlying teenagers, they need windows. Young adult literature can be the windows.

Thematically, there is nothing that the classics can teach that young adult literature can't match. Classics certainly offer historical insights that modern novels can't match, but strictly from a thematic standpoint, contemporary young adult literature novels can help students reach the same conclusions as the classics. In fact, retellings of classics seem to be a major trend right now. I can teach students the horrors of war along with the deep bonds of friendship it brings just as easily with *Front Lines* by Michael Grant as I can with Tim O'Brien's *The Things They Carried*, and I can add a discussion of feminism in *Front Lines*. And with the bill in Congress right now potentially forcing women to register for the draft just like men, *Front Lines* gives me a real world tie-in. I can delve into issues of social media in Sara Benincasa's *Great*, a retelling of Fitzgerald's *The Great Gatsby,* as well as discuss classism and decadence.

Our society is seeing the same divide in wealthy and poor that the people in the 20s saw.

Students also seem to get bogged down by the amount of words per page of the classic novels. Schools often pick mass-market paperback novels to keep costs down, but those novels cram words on a page. The mass-market edition of *To Kill a Mockingbird* has around 325-350 words per page and 284 pages. On the other hand, Michael Grant's *Front Lines* has around 200 words per page and 542 pages. Based on that math, *Front Lines* only has about 10,000 more words than *To Kill A Mockingbird* and 250 more pages. Because students will be able to turn pages more often in a novel like *Front Lines*, they feel more accomplished. It's hard for students to read a novel when they have to spend so long on one page. By the time they are ready to turn a page, they are exhausted. But because of the large margins and leading of YAL they can feel accomplished as they turn pages more quickly.

I am not suggesting that classics be removed completely. Rather, my curriculum would shift the focus of classroom reading to contemporary young adult literature. For the purposes of this paper, young adult literature began with Robert Cormier's *The Chocolate War* in 1974. This was the first major novel to be produced for teens with a teenage protagonist. Any novel I suggest as a possible replacement will feature a teenage protagonist telling the story as a teenager, published after 1974, and be published for teenage readers. That's not to say that teens weren't reading novels before or that books weren't published for their age level, but very few featured child or teen protagonists without a flashback. *To Kill a Mockingbird* is told as a flashback as is John Knowles' *A Separate Peace*. These stories are not told by teens experiencing these

events as a teen in the moment, but rather, with the addition of adult wisdom. Our students don't have adult wisdom, yet. Experiencing these problems as teens with teen characters will allow them to quickly relate to the novel and its characters.

Relating to novels allows students to know they aren't the only ones struggling with certain issues or going through the same successes and failures. When they see other people in their same situation, they begin to understand that they aren't alone in the world. In recent years, research has shown that reading and relating to literature helps increase empathy for others. In October 2013, a study published in Scientific American said reading "literary fiction, such as The Round House by Louise Erdrich, their test results improved markedly—and, by implication, so did their capacity for empathy," (Julianne Chiaet). At that time, researchers believed genre fiction didn't help increase empathy, but even more recent research has changed tune. The Guardian posted an article in late 2015 revising the idea. Instead of "literary fiction," The Guardian says just fiction. (Miranda McKearney and Sarah Mears). McKearney and Mears do say that readers need to find the right story to read, but that idea seems obvious.

Students need to be able to find themselves in novels, especially readers who may struggle with assigned reading, or those readers who tends to refuse to read assigned reading. Advanced readers can understand reading someone else's perspective, but struggling readers can't do that. They need to see teens struggling with issues they are struggling with. If students never see themselves in a novel, they won't find another novel to read. Why not validate students reading and show that we are aware of what they want to read and respect it as literature. My student bringing in manga every day is

reading as legitimate literature as my student last year who read *War and Peace* for pleasure.

Current young adult fiction shows many more identities than the classics we teach so frequently. Transgender teens have their own memoirs, agender characters star in novels, minority characters struggle with more than just racism, and the characters deal with their issues in the now. Two transgender teens Katie Rain Hill and Arin Andrews from Oklahoma each wrote their memoirs with the help of their parents and the memoirs have helped other students through their difficult times. The characters in *Aristotle and Dante Discover the Secrets of the Universe* struggle not only with their sexuality, but also with the implications that has in their Hispanic households.

The classics and the canon encompass those novels consistently found in high school English classrooms. We talk about these novels as if they are the paragons of great literature and everything else is mainstream trash. We devalue what our students are reading and make them feel that only the classics are worthy of liking. Meanwhile, we forget that the public hated *The Great Gatsby* and *Moby Dick* in their times. In 1960 Arthur Mizener wrote an article for the New York Times called "Gatsby, 35 years later" in which he describes the process by which Fitzgerald published his novel. In its first printing, *The Great Gatsby* had sold less than 20,000 copies. It wasn't so much that it was hated, but rather forgotten. It didn't have any sticking power with critics or readers. But by the time Mizener wrote his article, it was selling 50,000 copies per year (Mizener).

Meanwhile Charles Dickens was the height of mainstream and was paid by the word, and he milked it. Even Shakespeare wasn't meant to be read and seen by the

educated elite. He wrote for the masses. If we can study the popular literature of other times as examples of "great literature," surely our time has produced some great literature as well. What if we valued what our students are reading as worthy of study? How much more engagement would come from our students?

The idea of "great literature" comes from those novels typically included in the Western canon. These novels appear in classrooms all across the country as almost a rite of passage for students to read. *To Kill a Mockingbird* is typically read in sophomore year and *The Great Gatsby* is read as a junior. Essentially, if it appears on the AP test as a writing option, it's considered a piece of "great literature." These are the works the classroom focuses on and the ones students are led to believe are the only novels worthy of study. The discussion of the canon is also under constant debate, but I'll deal with that more later.

I understand the reluctance to make the shift to young adult literature. One, the classics are comfortable, and they are certainly great books. Second, with so many young adult novels produced all the time, it can be difficult to find the novels worth studying. In fact, it's become a stereotype that young adult literature is easy and "for kids." Some novels are. However, many authors are writing more and more complicated novels featuring teen protagonists. Andrew Smith's storytelling in *Grasshopper Jungle* is one of the most complex I've read in a long time. His use of time jumping and history makes the novel a challenging read in more ways than one. Even texts that appear simpler such as Soman Chainani's *School for Good and Evil* is more complex than it first appears. Though marketed for younger readers, the novel's complex take on good and evil as well a deep knowledge of fairy tales allows for deeper readings. This thesis

will feature some of the best young adult novels I've come across in my reading, but this list is certainly not exhaustive.

The classics bring important historical perspective, but in the age of the internet, no one is reading them. Everything they need to know, they can find on the internet. Shmoop and Cliff's Notes have all the major themes in detail, Wikipedia has detailed plot summaries for most of the novels we commonly read in the classroom, and YouTube has analysis videos that detail all the major plot points. *Thug Notes* does a better job teaching Beowulf than I could (see dialogue above). I've even used it to help me prepare for a novel or concept I'm struggling to help students understand. As an educator, sometimes it helps me to hear it from another perspective. It helps me learn other ways to explain the concepts to my students. Sometimes all a struggling needs is a different explanation. After just a few minutes, students are ready for discussion the next day and had to do no reading or thinking of their own.

That is not to say that classrooms aren't having great discussion. Students are able to be ready for discussion with the knowledge of the text. It seems that we, as teachers, tend to want our discussions to relate the classic novel to the world of today. We focus so intently on connecting these novels to the world of today, we lose the discussion of the novel. We don't spend time talking about why Montag might want to burn books or why he keeps the ones he does. Instead, we relate the burning of books to Nazi Germany and ask if we see this sort of situation in our lives. These types of discussions don't require students to have read every word of the novel, or really much at all. Looking up the themes on Shmoops or Cliff's Notes will be enough for students to form their own opinions. All it takes is one or two students who have fully read the

text to prepare the entire class. They can handle the text dependent questions while the other students add comments here and there and then fully chime in when the relation questions come in.

Perhaps the most convincing argument comes from the students. At the Assembly on Literature for Adolescents of the NCTE conference in November 2015, a panel of students discussed what made them readers. These students had an audience of about 500 English teachers of varying grade levels and groups of scholars and authors. They sat at a table at the front of the room and were asked questions about their reading lives. These students were not the students reading way above their grade levels, but rather the reluctant readers. One student said he reads novels where "the action starts quickly." Another said she wants characters she can relate to. Typically, our tried and true classroom novels don't do those things. Students can be taught to relate to the characters in the novels, but they don't get that on their first reading, and often won't finish the book to understand how they could relate to the characters. It was eye-opening as an early-career English teacher hearing what students truly want to read and solidified the idea that our focus as teachers needs to change.

For the sake of this thesis, I examined the approved reading list of a suburban high school with a 97.5% graduation rate as of 2014. The school has a higher than average minority population when compared with other schools in the district. The school also has a 17% special education population and 45% of the students on free and reduced lunch. With more than 20 AP classes offered, the school pushes its 2,000 students to college and career readiness.

I took those titles found most consistently and will suggest comparable young adult replacements. These replacements would be read in full in the English class where their respective classics were found on the reading list. I would use excerpts of the classics for comparison, for historical perspectives and cultural knowledge, but the bulk of the teaching and learning would come from the young adult literature. These young adult novels line up thematically with the classics. Some line up with plot, but some are completely different.

If students aren't reading and thinking about what they read, then we as English teachers aren't doing our jobs. We have to find ways to engage students with texts. If the classics aren't keeping students interest, then it's time to change the texts we use.

Chapter 2: Literature Review

Our curriculum is dominated by works published more than a century ago. Judith A. Hayn and Sarah M. Burns (2011) wrote in their chapter *Multicultural Adolescent Literature: Finding the Balance* that our reading lists have evolved "from university and college reading requirements that were mandated more than a century ago. Remnants of that curriculum unfortunately still remain entrenched in schools all over the country," (p. 135). Herz and Gallo (2005) reflect this idea in the beginning of the second edition of *From Hinton to Hamlet*. Herz cites the work of Arthur N. Applebee. In 1989, he conducted a survey to determine the top 10 novels taught in classrooms. He found they were "Shakespeare's *Macbeth, Julius Caesar, Hamlet* and *Romeo and Juliet; The Adventures of Huckleberry Finn* by Mark Twain; *The Scarlet Letter* by Nathaniel Hawthorne; *Of Mice and Men* by John Steinbeck; *The Great Gatsby* by F. Scott Fitzgerald; *Lord of the Flies* by William Golding' and *To Kill a Mockingbird* by Harper Lee," (12). My school still teacher at least eight of these novels full class. The survey was conducted almost 30 years ago and almost matched the survey Applebee conducted in the 60s (p. 12). Sandra Stotsky (2010) from the University of Arkansas conducted her own study, and found that all of these novels were still the most assigned novels across the country, (p. 17). How have we let our curriculum stay stagnant for so long?

Young teachers are coming into the classroom with old points-of-view and we get stuck in the rut of what's always worked before whether it actually has or not. Lisa A. Hazlett (2012) writes in her chapter *Updating YAL Reading Lists While Retaining Quality Titles* that our classics remain "due to politics, high-stakes testing...and the

hoary ‘it’s always been done this way’” (p. 156). In fact, most of the AP book list contains books published at least 50 years ago, and most even more than that.

Because of this reliance by high-stakes tests, it is difficult for new curriculum to take hold. Hazlett (2012) exposes some of the biases we have creating new curriculum. “As Iannacconne (1963) found; educators, regardless of schooling, teach as they were taught, and similarly to colleagues. Future educators study the classics in secondary school and then are employed where these texts are ELA staples; no wonder they are continually served (p. 156). but that hasn’t stopped researchers from trying. As Applebee noted, the top 10 novels taught in classrooms in 1989 were almost exclusively written by men and all exclusively white. “Let’s face it, the canon is largely straight, white and male” (Hayes, 2013, p. 231). I would venture an educated guess this hasn’t changed much. However, debates over the canon have been growing over the last decade with camps on both sides.

The canon as we know it does not include young adult literature (YAL), but more writers are starting to demand the inclusion of more types of books and more authors into what’s regarded as the canon. For the sake of this thesis, I’m using the canon to describe those novels most frequently taught in English classrooms across the country. This list would definitely include Applebee’s top 10 novels as well as others I won’t enumerate here. The idea of the canon in general falls under debate. According to Patrick Hayes in his article ‘*Calling a halt to your trivial thinking’: Philip Roth and the Canon Debate*, scholars can’t agree whether it’s supposed to be representative of the “best” literature regardless of race, sex, etc. or be inclusive to those ideas of race. The likes of Allan Bloom “deplored what they saw as the politicisation of the canon on

robustly transcendentalist grounds that it is representative of a ‘higher life’ than the student's immersion in convention would otherwise engage, such that ‘great mysteries might be revealed to him, that new and higher motives of action might be discovered within him, that a different and more human way of life can be harmoniously constructed” where others like Elizabeth Fox-Genovese believe “elite culture should be scrutinized with attention to issues of gender, race and class,” (230).

However other authors believe the idea of the canon itself it too limiting. The *World Policy Journal* (2010) asked authors and scholars about the idea of a canon. Miranda Kennedy responded “By its very nature, a canon cannot be inclusive. With its accompanying notions of genius and greatness, it implies a hierarchy, which has little relationship to the way most people experience art in today’s globalized, disparate, multicultural world.” She goes on to say, “More people would describe Leonardo da Vinci as a universal genius than they would Ibrahim El-Salahi, of Sudan, which has less to do with da Vinci’s inherent talent than that he is better known. The reason for this is the persistent belief in a single, objective canon” (p. 6). Others like Kayhan Irani were more indicting of the canon as Western by saying “there has always been a Global Canon of artists, although the established Western Canon does not recognize their names. More often than not, notions of worthy or unworthy in art refer back to the Western Canon” (p. 4).

This debate is healthy for society, but what classrooms forget is to show that the canon is man-made. Hayes mentions “the necessity of an ongoing canon debate for democratic reasons: it is not simply the health of the individual but the ‘health of the state’ that depends upon a continual rebalancing of the canon for reasons of equal

recognition of the expressive capacities of the people as a whole," (230). Despite the fact the we encourage our students to debate in class, we give students the idea that the canon is set in stone by some overbearing power figures and they can't do anything to change it. In the introduction to his book *Canon by Consensus*, Joseph Csicsilla suggests that what is included, or excluded in anthologies (or textbooks) dictates what authors and texts are taught in the classroom (xvi). And even though nearly every English teacher quotes Daniel Pennac's *Reader's Bill of Rights,* even the one about breaking up with a book, we never allow it in English class and the idea that a student might not like or appreciate the books in class seems preposterous. For instance, almost every teacher loves *To Kill a Mockingbird,* and we can't understand why students don't like it. We forget the first twelve chapters of the book do not pertain to the main thrust of the novel, but rather are an explanation of Scout's world. YAL starts quickly to grab young readers' attention. However, in the classroom, we project the idea *To Kill a Mockingbird* is objectively good and there's no argument.

That being said, some scholars are acknowledging the canon as something malleable. In her article *Students Creating Canons: Rethinking What (and Who) Constitutes the Canon*, Laura L. Aull takes comfort in the idea "there is a contemporary version of American literary study that acknowledges the canon as a made thing – a thing we construct and reconstruct as we teach it, read it, anthologize it," (p. 497-498). Approaching the canon as a changeable thing instead of a static concept makes it easier for students to see their own books in a canon instead of only these books published long before their parents were born. Teaching the canon as a 'made thing' can also ask students "to analyze these materials and ultimately create their own [canon] inviting

them to consider implications of constructing an American canon as well as the rhetorical challenge of defining and justifying it," (p. 498). Having students understand the process of creating an anthology will help them understand Csiscilla's point and force them to question the canon around them.

The shift to young adult literature

Changing our curriculum to include YAL will help students understand what they are reading might be great. The scope of American Lit or Brit Lit need not be only what's in the text book. This book is what these anthologizers thought were great texts. It may not be what other students think is great. No one is right. But we teach the canon as right. These are the greats and these are worthy of study. YAL's place in the canon isn't established yet, and getting to this point has been a long road for the authors and readers of YAL.

Though there's no official beginning to YAL, most scholars track it back to S.E. Hinton's *The Outsiders* in the 1960s (Herz, 2005, p. 10, Hill, 2014, p. 1). Others, like Judith A. Hayn and Jeffrey S. Kaplan track is even further back to *A Wrinkle In Time* published in 1962. Either way, the consensus is YAL started in the 1960s. That's not to say books weren't published for teens and younger readers before this time, but it didn't have a name. As Herz notices, most books published specifically for younger readers before this time were books like *Nancy Drew* or *The Hardy Boys*. These books only dealt with white kids and only middle class problems (Herz, 2005 p. 9). And, let's face it, these books are predictable. The plucky young heroes will always solve the mystery and there will be yet another book. Literature for teens didn't challenge or push

boundaries until authors like Hinton, Robert Cormier, Beverly Cleary, and Judy Blume came to the table.

Since then, the complexity of YAL has only increased, and since J.K. Rowling's *Harry Potter* series, YAL has exploded in popularity. Hundreds of books are published every year capitalizing on the new found teen audience and the adults who follow it. Teens read it because it starts quickly and adults follow it because many novels have deep questions for teen identities. (Herz, 2005, p. xvi).

Even with the increase in popularity and in complexity, classrooms have been slow to embrace YAL outside of the middle school classroom. As Crag Hill notes in his essay *Young Adult Literature and Scholarship Come of Age*, many scholars have claimed, starting with Monseau and Salvner in 1992 that young adult lit has been coming of age. Authors like Gallo (1992) and Hunt (1996) and Moore (1997) have all mentioned the same thing. (p. 2). Moore though "young adult literature can come of age, can lose its stepchild status, only if we treat it with the same respect as other literatures we teach," (p. 2). All of these ideas say YAL can lose its stepchild status, and these are written 25-30 years ago. When will we finally accept them as legitimate literature worthy of our time in high school classrooms?

Perceptions of Young Adult Literature

YAL doesn't have the best reputation in classrooms. Many teachers and professionals still hold on to this idea that young adult literature is "less than" the classics. Angela Beumer Johnson (2011) spoke of one of her pre-service teacher students "questioned whether future high school teachers should be in the YAL class,

implying that YAl is not appropriate material for high school students" (p. 216). Hazlett, Johnson and Hayn (2009) talk of "peers glancing dubiously at the titles...and commenting upon their use for remedial or younger children while expressing doubt about research appropriateness" (p. 48). The three sent out a survey to 617 teachers, but only 55 were returned. When they analyzed their data, they most the "most frequently stated reason for not using [YAL] in their teaching was that these titles did not exhibit the relevance or quality deemed worthy of classroom study" (p. 52). Why after years of young adult literature "coming of age" are we still arguing that YAL is less than other literatures.

Perhaps the biggest reason comes from Johnson. She analyzes Louise Rosenblatt's 1978 idea of reading stances. Johnson says readers take two stances toward reading: aesthetic and efferent

> From an aesthetic stance, readers are completely involved in the literary event – engrossed in that particular moment in time during reading. From an efferent stance, readers seek to gain information or knowledge to be used at a later time, and are not particularly living in the literary moment, swept along with characters and plot. (p. 217).

These two stances in reading might lead to the biggest reason why teacher dismiss young adult literature. When most people read YAL, they do so from the aesthetic stance, simply to lose themselves in the story. Johnson noticed in her surveys that their "perceptions of YAL related to their personal and school experiences of reading literature and the stances they take while reading" (p. 217). Works they read for fun were not "valid for classroom study in which literature is often approached from an efferent stance" (p. 217). Because we read the classics from the efferent stance, we continue to hold them to the standard. Perhaps if we read YAL with the same efferent

stance, we'd discover something different. Johnson says of one of her students "perhaps because her reading of YAL was not sanctioned in her previous English classes, she did not consider its potential benefits in a classroom setting" (p. 220).

Another reason teachers push young adult novels aside is a simple lack of understanding about the complexity of the style. They believe the writing is simpler than that of the classic novels and therefore is too simple to study in class. Hazlett, Johnson and Hayn (2009) talk about marketing as a potential problem. Bookstores feature "displays and advertisements of lower quality titles – gruesome horror titles with lurid, titillating covers, light romances with cloying covers that target younger females" (p. 48). Johnson (2013) said "sometime students as well as teachers, reject classroom material based on deeply held perceptions of their own superior identities and intellect" (p. 218). This means we forget that we didn't struggle with reading as students and don't understand why students don't love these classic novels as much as we do. We also bring in the hope that with enough front loading and passion, we can convince students to love these novels even when that might be in vain.

Common Core's list of exemplary literature for 11th grade and up contains only three novels published since 1970 and sixteen other novels (Appendix B). Granted, Oklahoma no longer uses Common Core standards, but the thinking remains the same. Marci Glaus (2009) published an article critiquing the idea of text complexity based simply on writing. According to the lexile level, Sherman Alexie's *The Absolutely True Diary of a Part-Time Indian* falls into the lexile range of an 8-year-old. She mentions that she could not expect her niece to "understand themes of racism, poverty, and the

main character's struggle with identity," (p. 408) On that same note, Ernest Hemingway's *A Farewell to Arms* falls under the Lexile level of a fifth grader.

Though we've largely moved on from the idea of having one determinant of text complexity, we do hold on to the idea that young adult literature is too simple to study even though we hold up novels like *A Farewell to Arms* as exemplary, so much in fact, it's one on the list of Common Core. Saying YAL isn't complex is hypocritical. Glaus goes on to say YAL "is an important tool for establishing reading lives of students and creating an appreciation for literature" (p. 414) but if we don't validate YAL, then our students come away from class believing that they aren't reading anything complex so why should they continue.

Teachers also dismiss young adult literature because they simply aren't familiar with many titles. Many teachers, including several at my school, reread the novels their students read every year. They talk about finding new things each time they read, and they seem to have forgotten what it was like to read the novel for the first time. Students don't have the luxury (or the desire) for multiple readings. Because teachers spend so much time rereading, they don't have time to read newly published novels, leading to an ignorance of new fiction both adult and young adult. Chris Crowe (1999) wrote an open letter to teachers asking them to "please help my kids become readers (p. 139). In it, he asks us to "read some of what they read" and goes on to say "too often YAL books are demeaned by English teachers, so your willingness to read – and to admit enjoying – a book read by one of my children would give them and me great pleasure" (p. 141). In my classes, my professors impressed upon me the importance of reading what our

students read to validate them as readers, but I'm not sure that is practiced as much as preached.

Nancie Atwell (1991) offers her own take on the problem:

> What if my teacher friend who is having such a difficult time with literature [instruction] became a reader too, not just of professional books, which she reads efferently in search of information about teaching and learning, but of novel, poetry, history, and essays, to which she might turn for the satisfaction of an aesthetic experience? (p. 69)

We as teachers, cannot ignore our own lives as readers. We need to be reading things we enjoy just for the sake of reading. This will help put us in our students shoes and give us deeper insight into what it's like to take in a novel for the first time again.

In my experience with a YAL fiction class, many had not read any YAL novels except those most popular (e.g. *Hunger Games, Harry Potter, Divergent* etc.). Staying in the safe zone doesn't expose us to the depths YAL has to offer. Johnson (2011) reports the same experiences. In her interviews of her students in her YAL class, she found that some cited classics such as "*Great Expectations, Catcher in the Rye,* and authors such as Toni Morrison, Mark Twain, Harper Lee, and even T.S. Eliot" as examples of young adult literature (p. 216). However, by the end of her course, many of her students' tones changed:

> Over half of the students (55%) used similar language to describe the change in their perceptions: They were *surprised at* or *impressed with* the depth, quality, and variety of YAL. When asked if YAL was what they'd expected, one student replied. '"No – I was happily surprised! I was not extremely familiar with YAL, and I was impressed with the way it addressed important issues…A few (14%) made comments reflecting a major shift in attitudes about YAL: They had, in essence, been won over. For instance, one student commented that YAL "never had an appeal, but now it does. (p. 216-217)

The lack of familiarity with YAL titles is a major barrier when bringing YAL into the classroom. Because it's popular, thousands of new novels are published each

year, and many of those novels aren't worth studying in the classroom, just as many novels published long ago aren't worth studying. It takes time and effort to find those novels, and with everything else on a teacher's plate, finding those novels gets pushed to the back burner or even off the stove completely.

Relating to literature

Many authors like Johnson (2011) and Hazlett, Johnson and Hayn (2009) speak of pre-service teachers and current teachers using YAL as outside reading, and I think most teachers will encourage students to read anything for pleasure that gives them enjoyment. However, it is the disconnect between outside the classroom reading and for class reading that becomes concerning. We, as teachers, spend so much time trying to convince students they can relate to the classic novel assigned to them that we never acknowledge we might have the solution in our hands.

Granted, not every YAL book is worth teaching in class, and the same is true for any type of literature. Don Gallo has a running list of qualities of a good novel for young adults, and though I won't list all fourteen points here, I will enumerate a few:

- The main characters are teenagers
- The narrator is most often the main character
- The story is usually told in the voice of a teenager, not the voice of an adult looking back as a young person (as it is in *To Kill a Mockingbird* or *A Separate Peace*).
- The language is typical of contemporary teenagers and the vocabulary, unlike that of adult classics, is manageable by readers of average ability.
- The books contain characters and issues to which teenagers can relate.
- The outcome of the story is usually dependent upon the decisions and actions of the main character.
- With the exception of complicated plotting, all the traditional literary elements typical of classical literature are present in most contemporary novels for young adults – well-rounded characters, flashbacks,

foreshadowing, allusions, irony, metaphorical language – though they are used less frequently and at less sophisticated levels to match the experiential levels of readers.

- The very best YA books can be as appealing to adult readers as they are to teens. (Herz, 2005 p. 10-11)

Granted, the number of books that can fulfill these requirements is high, but having these characteristics helps to narrow down some of the masses. I want to examine two points in more detail, but focusing on the characteristic that "the books contain characters and issues to which teenagers can relate," (p. 10).

We understand, as young readers, teens need to be able to relate to what they read. We know that to the point where we try to front load all this information so they can understand the book and hopefully find the relation we hope for. Henk, Marinak, & Melnick (2013) talk about the readers we see most commonly in our classrooms, the ones that don't like reading or struggle with it, or with the idea of school assigned reading. They acknowledge those types of students "tend to be inattentive, disengaged, and uncommitted" when faced with difficult texts, or with texts they perceive as having little relevance to their lives. (p. 311).

I'm struggling with this issue now. After handing out *The Great Gatsby* a few days ago, most of my students have barely cracked the book. They don't understand why they need to read about the lives of a bunch of rich 30-year-olds in the 1920s. They see no connection to their own lives or to their own struggles. And most got lost in the first few paragraphs of the first chapter despite our reading together. Students need to be able to relate to literature on their own instead of being told they should relate to this because it's great.

YAL allows students to connect immediately. Herz (2005) mentions this in the introduction to *Of Hinton to Hamlet*. She goes on to say "it deals with real problems and issues that are central to their lives," (p. xvi). YAL creates a space for them to discover who they are through the experience of another. "YAL offers teen readers a comfortable reading experience that provides them an opportunity to begin to perceive the complex nature of human relationships. By using a teenage narrator, most YAL creates an immediate and intimate contact between reader and author because the story is about a teenager's problem or relationship, and the reader is hooked," (p. xvi). Janet Alsup (2014) believes young adult novels

> depict identities that are multiple and ever-changing, influenced by media and consumer pressures, separated from the realities of their parents and elders, and replete with numerous, unpredictable electronic and real-life discourses. Adolescent life is a swarm of challenges and questions and uncertainties; daily decisions must be made about how to craft and enact identity in a world that is often inconsistent, untrustworthy and unclear. All of these challenges must be met by adolescent who are still maturing physically, emotionally, socially and cognitively within very different cultural and personal contexts. (p. 33)

Other researchers like Jeffrey S. Kaplan (2012) noticed that even novels that deal with "horrible but all-too-realistic truths – such as self-mutilation, laceration, and abuse...remain popular with teens who identify all too well with these brutal accounts of human existence. (p. 21). We have these students in our classrooms and analyzing literature dealing with these situations might help even one student move past their struggles and help them understand they aren't alone. The same goes for religious diversity. Judith A. Hayn and Sarah M. Burns (2012) note that young adult literature "can help all readers understand the implications faith has for adolescents who struggle to fit into the world around them, regardless of faith or the lack of it" (p. 146). YAL has

a deeper range of diversity than the bulk of the classics we teach on a day-to-day basis and using this literature will help students find their place in this world.

Students speak of their own experience with YAL and how it helps connect them to literature. Kelley, Wilson, and Koss (2012) interviewed students and found "a key aspect of what makes YAL realistic fiction appealing to students – the ability of a student to find a character he or she can relate to and can identify with some of the character's experiences" (p. 84). The students at the ALAN panel in Minneapolis talked about how they wanted characters they could relate to in situations they could understand. Even the characters in sci-fi and fantasy YAL novels tend to deal with the same issues as regular teenagers, just on a different stage. Finding a character to relate to is hard, and even harder for teenagers now trying to read a novel publishes almost a hundred years ago. Adults can keep reading characters they can't relate to, but teenagers often struggle with the idea. Now more than ever, teenagers' identities are in flux. We seem to be in an era of labels and if you don't have a label, then what do you have? The ever-changing identities of these characters and many characters in the novels I suggest confirm teenagers own struggles without belittling them or confirming them.

To wrap this back to Gallo, once students find a way to relate to the character and the events, they can begin to see how their life could be similar to the one they are reading about. And, if Gallo's characteristics are true, the "outcome of the story is usually dependent upon the decisions and actions of the main character" (p. 10). Students will then be able to understand they are also in control of their own destiny, and their choices will determine how the end of their story will play out, whether in high school or beyond.

As I mentioned before, recent studies from Scientific American and The Guardian show that reading fiction increases empathy. Once students understand they aren't alone and aren't struggling alone in the universe, they can start to recognize their problems in other characters and in their peers. And also as I've mentioned before, this does not mean the classics have no place in our classroom. Indeed, they need to have a presence to teach history, to teach legacy and to teach other types of writing styles and as Lesesne (2010) says "making literature relevant does not mean totally dismissing the classics, however. Just as Poe and Hawthorne and Dickens and other authors of what we consider classic literature wrote about the issues and concerns of their own time period, contemporary authors write about the societal issues of today's teens" (p. 8). To further that point, Alan Sitomer reminds us the "canon and classics are filled with books that were once contemporary," (Roberts, 2013, p. 90).

I've talked about relating to novels, but relating to a character/situation isn't the only thing YAL can do for adolescent readers. These novels will invite engaged reading as well as defined by Guthrie, Wigfield & You (2012) that says engaged readers are "motivated to read, strategic in their approaches to comprehending what they read, knowledgeable in their construction of meaning from text, and socially interactive while reading" (p. 602). As Ivey and Johnston (2013) point out, "contemporary selections in particular are inherently relevant in that, by design, they are responsive to the emotional and cultural challenges young people face in their everyday lives" (p. 257). Relating to the characters in young adult literature allows for this type of engaged reading, especially with a minimum of classroom guidance. And as YAL becomes even more complex Ivey and Johnston's (2012) observation that "issues of equity and identity and

the tensions between stability and growth" are not something that must be learned and memorized but rather "points of uncertainty, thus inviting readers to construct meanings in the world of the text and to seek potential meanings with others outside of the text," (p. 257) thus fulfilling Guthrie, Wigfield and You's definition of engaged reading.

Why students don't read

Penny Kittle (2012) suggests that roughly 20% of students read what is assigned to them (p. 15). Out of my class of thirty, that would mean 6 of my students read what I asked them to. I'm not sure the number is even that high. Broz (2011) called this the "800-pound mockingbird in the classroom" (p. 15). What is it about our students that keeps them from reading? Is it the time students spend at jobs and other commitments outside of the classroom, or is it the assignments themselves? How could YAL bridge that reading gap?

Herz (2005) has three types of students who don't read. First is the nonreader who "hate to read; reading is academic torture for them. In the early stages of reading, they could not find the 'magic' to unlock the mystery of reading, and they probably sensed that their teacher was disappointed in their weak performance," (p. xiii) Then she talks of the aliterate readers who are "capable readers who reading to complete the coursework, but who rarely read for pleasure[.] They resent control – the required number of pages for homework, the daily quizzes to check up on their reading , the required titles, the interpretation dictated by the teachers, the lack of student-shared discussion or response during class - but manage to pass the course" (p. xiii). Last she talks of the lost readers. These readers loved to read as young children, but something

happened along the way and they have since lost that love (p. xvi). All of these readers (and a few voracious readers) are in our classrooms every day, and reaching them all can be challenging, but perhaps the most challenging are the lost readers.

Anne McCrary Sullivan (1991) spoke about essays her students wrote on their reading life and how it had a common thread. Many students said "I loved reading when I was young' school made me hate it" (p. 40). Some of Herz's (2005) students said much the same thing One commented "In eighth grade I was introduced to the horrible world of quizzes practically every time we read a chapter. I hated quizzes" (p. 5) and another wrote "After a couple of grades, the teachers made me, forced me to read a certain amount in a time period. I usually found this frustrating and gave up on reading completely because their demands made me so angry." (p. 5)

As I reader, I experienced this in my own high school. I completed the assignments, but reading wasn't fun. After high school, I didn't read for several years because I was so disillusioned with the idea of being forced to read. It wasn't until much later when I started picking up more young adult novels that I rediscovered my love for reading. The classics simply aren't written to catch these types of students. The avid readers might push through a difficult classic novel, but the types of readers Herz mentions will not bother to read a book they feel has no interest or relevance to them. The issues aren't theirs, the writing is dense and daunting and the books themselves can be tough to get into.

Perhaps the most indicting statement comes from Hazlett (2012) as she cites other researchers. She says "some researchers (Christenbury, 2000; Herz & Gallo, 2005; Lesesne, 2006) particularly noted that educators commonly ignore or dismiss students'

reactions to classics, listening instead for predetermined textual interpretations and answer, producing reading distaste," (p. 157). I feel myself doing this. When my students say they are hating the book we are reading, I have nothing to say to them other than trying to explain they don't have to like every book to understand why it's important, and it's disheartening. Of course I would love them all to love the novel, but I know that can't happen. Still, to have an entire class turn against a novel while I still must teach the failure of the American dream and get students to get the "right answer" to life's big questions these classic novels hold is daunting.

I've talked at length of how it's easier to relate to YAL because the plot starts more quickly than in those classics, etc, but there's one point I haven't had the opportunity to make. In 2013, Mike Roberts invited several young adult authors to comment on why young adult literature belongs in the classroom and Susan Beth Pfeffer makes an interesting point. She says "unlike Shakespeare and Dickens etc, YA novels aren't worshipped for their perfection" (p. 89). What if we turned the focus not to study these "great" examples of literature students can't understand to instead focus on literature students can understand and actually critique the literature and the world it represents. How much further could we push students in their critical thinking with this method?

Perhaps Johnson (2013) says it best. "Teachers risk losing readers if stereotypes of YAL prevent them from introducing this fine literature to their students" (p. 216) And as Hazlett (2012) asks; "How do educators teach novels that the majority of their students dislike and cannot understand?" (p. 156). Part of our job is to create the future generation of readers. If we continue to refuse to acknowledge YAL as worthy of

analysis, the next generation of readers will be stunted, and they will place no stock in reading in the future.

Chapter 3: Results

Table 1: Book Replacement Recommendations (9th and 10th)

Table 1 - 9th & 10th Grade		
Classic & Suggested YAL Replacement	Themes	Other Titles
Animal Farm by George Orwell *Steelheart* by Brandon Sanderson	Leadership Control Class	*Little Brother* by Cory Doctorow *Matched* by Ally Condie *The Testing* by Joelle Charbonneau
Things Fall Apart by Chinua Achebe *Like Water on Stone* by Dana Walrath	Tradition vs. Change Fate Masculinity	*The Rithmatist* by Brandon Sanderson *Hero* by Perry Moore *Brave Story* by Miyuki Miyabe
Call of the Wild by Jack London *Dorothy Must Die* by Danielle Paige	Fate vs. Free Will Civilization Loyalty	*The Hunger Games* by Suzanne Collins *Magnus Chase* by Rick Riordan *The Fixer* by Jennifer Lynn Barnes
Speak by Laurie Halse Anderson *Tilt* by Ellen Hopkins	Peer Pressure Growth Trauma Speaking Out	*The Rest of Us Just Live Here* by Patrick Ness *Thirteen Reasons Why* by Jay Asher *Whale Talk* by Chris Crutcher
Brave New World by Aldous Huxley *The Uglies* by Scott Westerfeld	Class Free Will Identity Formation	*Cinder* by Marissa Meyes *Divergent* by Veronica Roth *Landry Park* by Bethany Hagen
A Separate Peace by John Knowles *The Absolutely...* by Sherman Alexie	Friendship Jealousy Memory	*Because You'll Never Meet Me* by Leah Thomas *The Alex Crow* by Andrew Smith *We Were Liars* by E. Lockhart
TKAM by Harper Lee *Spud* by John Van de Ruit	Race Justice Family	*How It Went Down* by Kekla Magoon *Between Shades of Gray* by Ruta Sepetys *Out of Darkness* by Ashley Hope Perez
Lord of the Flies by William Golding *Beauty Queens* by Libba Bray	Civilization Order Innocence	*A Long Way Gone* by Ishmael Beah *Miss Peregrine's...* by Ransom Riggs *Pendragon* by D.J. MacHale

Table 2: Book Replacement Recommendations (11th and 12th)

Table 2 - 11th & 12th Grade		
Classic & Suggested YAL Replacement	Themes	Other Titles
As I Lay Dying by William Faulkner *Dreamers Often Lie* by Jacqueline West	Mortality Family Versions of Reality	*Going Bovine* by Libba Bray *A Thousand Pieces of You* by Claudia Gray *The Love That Split The World* by Emily Henry
The Great Gatsby by F. Scott Fitzgerald *Great* by Sara Benincasa	Visions of America Class Dissatisfaction	*Dumplin* by Julie Murphy *We All Looked Up* by Tommy Wallach *Pig Park* by Claudia Martinez
The Scarlet Letter by Nathaniel Hawthorne *Fangirl* by Rainbow Rowell	Isolation Judgement Purpose	*Me, Earl and the Dying Girl* by Jesse Andrews *MARTians* by Blythe Woolston *Challenger Deep* by Neal Shusterman
Slaughterhouse-Five by Kurt Vonnegut *Grasshopper Jungle* by Andrew Smith	Time Masculinity Freedom	*Bone Gap* by Laura Ruby *The Girl From Everywhere* by Heidi Heilic *Stranger* by Sherwood Smith
The Things They Carried by Tim O'Brien *Front Lines* by Michael Grant	Truth Guilt Friendship	*Mosquitoland* by David Arnold *Wolf by Wolf* by Ryan Graudin *100 Sideways Miles* by Andrew Smith
The Awakening by Kate Chopin *Belzhar* by Meg Wolitzer	Love Identity Consciousness	*Cut Both Ways* by Carrie Mesrobian *Game of Love and Death* by Matha Brockenbrough *Hot Pterodactyl Boyfriend* by Alan Cumyn
Grendel by John Gardner *School for Good and Evil* by Soman Chainani	Good and Evil Consciousnes Communication	*Rise of Renegade X* by Chelsea Campbell *These Shallow Graves* by Jennifer Donnelly *BZRK* by Michael Grant
Their Eyes... by Zora Neale Hurston *The Serpent King* by Jeff Zentner	Innocence Love Society	*Aristotle & Dante...* by Benjamin Alire Saenz *Eleanor & Park* by Rainbow Rowell *A Fierce & Subtle Poison* by Samantha Mabry

9th Grade

Animal Farm by George Orwell – Steelheart by Brandon Sanderson

Themes in *Animal Farm*: Leadership, Control, Naïve working class.

Summary & Themes:

In *Animal Farm*, Napoleon and the pigs believed they were not properly represented by the farmer, so they took control of the farm and put forth an agenda of animal equality. All animals would be considered equal. They believed they could lead the farm to equality and prosperity. However, as soon as the pigs gain the power, they almost immediately begin to use their power for themselves. They start to believe that because they have power, they are better than the other animals.

Once the pigs begin to believe they are "more equal" than the other animals, they begin to use their power to control the other animals. With the help of Squealer, Napoleon takes complete control of the farm taking advantage of the uneducated populace. They use rhetoric that the other animals believe and go along with, not realizing that the rhetoric gives the pigs more power while draining their own. With words, Napoleon is able to keep the masses docile and down, while appearing a hero.

The pigs are only able to accomplish their goals because the animals blindly go along with their plans. The language they use goes over the heads of the other animals, but instead of questioning or developing their own opinions, they accept that the pigs must have their best interests at heart. A few educated animals try and voice their dissent, but those voices are quickly silenced, by bribes or other more nefarious means.

Soon the farm becomes a police state, where speaking out is dangerous, and the animals are trapped in the bed they created.

The naive working class led the pigs to be able to take control of the farm and install their own types of leadership. The themes in the novel lead to a thinly veiled allegory for the Russian revolution.

How *Steelheart* Fits:

After Calamity, some people discovered they had powers like the ability to control earthquakes, the ability to turn others into ash simply by pointing, and the ability to weird total darkness. These powers made them super, but not heroes. The powers turned their users, called Epics, evil. The protagonist David was there on the day Chicago changed. As a child, he was in a bank with his father when an Epic came to rob the bank. Then, a new Epic named Steelheart came. He fought the other Epic. David's father shot at the other Epic attempting to help Steelheart, but grazed Steelheart's cheek, causing him to bleed. In anger, Steelheart turns the bank into a crater, killing everyone but David, and turning the entire city of Chicago into steel. Now, years later, David vows revenge, and he is the only one who has seen Steelheart bleed.

Since Steelheart's takeover, he has established himself as Emperor of "Newcago." He rules with an iron fist. He's too strong for other Epics to challenge, and the general populace has no chance. His authority is unquestionable, but generally he stays out of the day to day existence of the population. The other Epics live a more luxurious life, but must guard their behavior at all times. If Steelheart suspects insubordination, the retaliation will be swift.

Steelheart keeps ultimate control over Newcago. He keeps the people just fed enough to not revolt. Hope is like a carrot on a stick for the populace. He allows illegal activities to continue, leaving the people to believe he doesn't know about them. The other Epics live in fear of Steelheart as well. That fear keeps the population in control, and the Epics even more.

The population isn't stupid. There's no propaganda convincing the population that Steelheart is wonderful. But they are complacent in their suffering. They think there's no way they can beat Steelheart and, even if they did, someone worse is waiting. They have food, power, shelter, and life. Other Epics might not grant them that. The Reckoners, who are trying to free the population from Epic control, are seen more as terrorists than heroes. The public is worried that Steelheart will come down hard on the people in retaliation. They would rather live in squalor than in nothing.

The naive working class only wanted to stay under the radar and stay alive while the powerful Epics were able to take control and install their own leadership. This leadership was not good, but it was a way to control the population.

Why Replace:

Admittedly, *Animal Farm* is a fairly easy read. The language isn't difficult, and there is a clear plot, but Orwell's rather dry writing style makes the book difficult to hold students' attention. *Steelheart* moves very quickly, with a plot students are used to seeing. Students know revenge stories and they've seen plenty of superhero movies at this point. They can see remnants of our modern society and can put themselves in the place of our main character hell bent on revenge. They can also talk about how the book

twists our concept of heroes, and whether or not this would be a possibility. What keeps Superman and Iron Man from doing this? They certainly could. Though students need to understand Orwell's influence on modern dystopias, we don't need to read the whole novel to discuss that. Students could read excerpts to discuss Orwell's use of language and compare it to *Steelheart*. Is one more effective? What is the author's purpose in each?

Things Fall Apart by Chinua Achebe – Like Water on Stone by Dana Walrath

Themes in *Things Fall Apart*: Tradition vs. Change, Fate, Masculinity and Family

Summary & Themes:

In *Things Fall Apart*, Okonkwo wants to restore his family's legacy. His father was considered weak, and Okonkwo must fight to change it. He must become the man his father was not. Okonkwo's specific ideas of masculinity may not be the best ideas in terms our of culture, but he maintains them with vigor. The discussion of what it means to be a man and how the family fits is one of the central ideas of the novel.

Fate comes into play in the second act. Put in charge of Ikemefuna as a peace settlement, Okonkwo begins to care for the boy. When the Oracle demands the boy's death, Okonkwo is warned against participating, but to maintain his masculinity, Okonkwo is the one who lands the fatal blow. By defying the warnings from the village elder, Okonkwo seals his fate.

Not long after this, Okonkwo and his family are banished for seven years, and when he returns, his finds that white men have settled on his land and converted many to Christianity. Okonkwo can't take the change and longs for his tribe's traditions. His warrior nature and masculinity demands that he retake his tribe for tradition. He tries to arrange meetings and get his people to fight, but they aren't willing. After killing a white man, Okonkwo hangs himself rather than be tried by a colonial court. This action bring the novel full circle, and Okonkwo's actions are seen as cowardly and feminine. His desire to change his fate and his ideals of masculinity brought about his downfall and left his family in the same position as they were before the novel began.

How *Like Water on Stone* fits:

Like Water on Stone focuses on a set of twins, Shahen and Sosi, and their younger sister Miriam. These children live with their Armenian family just before the Armenian genocide. Shahen wants to go to New York City where his uncle lives and forget the traditional life he leads, while Sosi loves tradition and can't imagine leaving their home, but when the Turks come marching, their world changes. Told in verse from the perspectives of Shahen, Sosi, Miriam and Ardziv, and eagle watching over the children, the novel explores a forgotten genocide, and ties to modern times in an accessible way.

Sosi and Shahen serve as the novel's juxtaposition between tradition and modernity. Both have valid points for leaving and staying. Shahen wants more opportunity to grow, and Sosi has found the man she wants to marry. Neither can

understand while the other believes what they do, and it's interesting to see who readers align with.

Ardziv serves as the agent of fate. He notices the family and keeps a watchful eye on them. While this seems to push this novel into fantasy, it's not handled in that manner. The eagle never swoops in and saves the day like the deux ex machina in *Lord of the Rings*. Instead, he watches and wishes, hoping the children walk to safety. Since each chapter is told from the perspective of one of the characters, Ardziv backs that perspective up, literally and figuratively. He is our eye from the sky, as if fate were personified so to speak.

The whole novel deals with masculinity and family. Shahen wants to leave his traditional family for a modern life in the United States. His father doesn't approve, and they butt heads at the beginning of the novel. Both have their views on what a man should be, and the two views don't always line up. When the children must leave and walk through the wilderness, Shahen's masculinity is tested, and he grows into a man he didn't expect, and one a child never should have to grow into.

Why replace:

Like Water on Stone deals with a genocide few remember, and ties nicely with the present day. These children become refugees. The Syrian refugee crisis has our country scared right now, and the fear of others has always run strong. This novel can access that fear in a way *Things Fall Apart* cannot.

Things Fall Apart deals with a life we can't relate to. We can understand the pulls of tradition vs. modern in the classic novel, but colonialism is hard to grasp. *Like*

Water on Stone deals with a family in crisis and growing up before childhood ends. Many students will be able to relate to the idea of the family in crisis, and the desire to defy parents.

Both novels deal with the ideas of masculinity. Okonkwo's desires to redeem his family's honor and Shahen wants to be his own man. Both live under the shadow of their fathers. Okonkwo's was considered feminine and a failure, where Shahen's father has specific ideas of what a man is, and how Shahen needs to fit that mold. Though the two main characters have different goals, both must navigate their paths carefully to create the life they want. Okonkwo wants to restore the past and Shahen wants to move into the future. And neither get what they expected.

Like Water on Stone also has designs on the edges of some pages. Students could discuss how this design helps them read, if it does at all. Students can also discuss why the publisher would want to have designs on the side of the pages and could discuss the purpose of what pages the designs appear on. YAL invites more than just thematic analysis. Because publishers are trying to sell these novels to teenagers, they have to market it correctly. This would be a great way to get students discussing marketing and making them more critical thinkers when it comes to media consumption.

Call of the Wild by Jack London – Dorothy Must Die by Danielle Paige

Themes in *Call of the Wild*: Fate vs. Free Will, Civilization vs. The Wild, Loyalty

Summary & Themes:

Buck lives happily in California as a pet. Stolen to support a gambling habit, Buck is shipped off to the Klondike region in Canada. There he faces many struggles and triumphs as a sled dog. Buck had no choice in any of these matters. His fate was in someone else's hands all along. In each situation, Buck rises to the top becoming the dominant animal. The wild keeps calling him closer and closer to his fate. When he first arrives in the Klondike, he rises to the top of a dog sled team, killing the current leader in the process. His final act in the novel is to kill a large number of a pack of wolves, and then assume command. The call is always strong in Buck, and fate it seems is on his side.

Throughout the novel, Buck must learn the new laws of his place. As he changes hands throughout the novel, his new owners have new laws. From his freedom as a pet, to learning the "law of the club" in Seattle, Buck finds himself in increasingly wild territory. But each of those wild situations have law and order to them. By the end, the line between civilization and nature is blurred. All life bends to the will of nature, anyway.

Loyalty is vital to *Call of the Wild*. Without loyalty both from and to Buck, he never would have survived. When he first arrives in the Klondike, Buck challenges the leader of his sled, Spitz, to a fight to the death. After defeating Spitz, the rest of the dogs kill Spitz. That action grants Buck the pack's loyalty. But Buck has to be careful who is worthy of loyalty. While Buck is off with a wild lady wolf, his final owner, Thornton is murdered by a group of natives. To show his loyalty, Buck kills the group, but then is attacked by the pack to which his lady wolf belongs. After killing most of the group,

Buck earns the loyalty of the pack, finally answering the call of the wild. Though, at the end of the novel, we see Buck's loyalty still remains with Thornton as he returns each year to mourn his master's death.

Why *Dorothy Must Die* fits:

Though it seems a stretch, these two novels have similar plots. Amy Gumm is stolen from her life in Kansas, albeit not a great life. She must learn the laws of the new groups that claim ownership of her and finally answer the call of Oz.

Like Buck, Amy has little choice in her story. Picked up from her trailer park in a tornado and landing in a desolated Oz, Amy is lost. Finally, a goth munchkin named Indigo comes along and explains that Dorothy has taken over and is siphoning the magic out of Oz with the help of Glinda and her companions from her original trip. Indigo explains the new laws of Oz until she falls victim to one herself. While captured, guards shoot bubbles at Indigo. They attach and begin to dissolve the munchkin until she is goo. The Law of Dorothy, like the law of the club, is absolute. Free will is what Dorothy says it is. She even controls when it's day and night. Like Buck, Amy changes hands multiple times, from maid, to confidant, to fugitive to wicked witches. All have plans for Amy, whether or not she wants to be part of them.

Dorothy lives lavishly in the Emerald City. She considers her halls to be the height of civilization. She declares the other witches to all be wicked and declares any who harbor them fugitives. Amy manages to escape to the wilds of Oz to find the Order of the Wicked and finds them to be much more civilized than she expected. They want

Amy to be their champion. Only this new girl from Kansas can take down the old one, but to do so, Amy will need to become Wicked.

As in *Call of the Wild*, loyalty is an integral part of the novel. Amy doesn't know who to trust. She knows she can't trust Dorothy, but she doesn't want to trust the Wicked Witches either. She knows they have their own plots, and she is merely a pawn. But when wicked is the lesser of two evils, one can't be too picky. Each time she comes close to trusting, it seems she is punished for it. Alone and surrounded by people, Amy must answer the calling deep within her and see just how Wicked she can be.

Why replace:

Call of the Wild is not a difficult read, and it is rather exciting, I think, but I think anthropomorphic animals are difficult for some students to take seriously. Granted, twisted Oz might also be difficult, but these students live in a world where fractured fairy tales are everywhere. Even Disney is remaking its own movies with an edge. With retelling upon retelling hitting theatres and bookshelves, this phenomenon is worth exploring in classroom. Why are we afraid to try something new? Why do we stay in these comfortable worlds even if they turn unfamiliar?

The two stories are fairly similar from afar. Both main characters are plucked from their lives and made to learn new rules in unfamiliar places and finally answer the primal calling deep within them. Using excerpts from *Call of the Wild* would help deepen the conversation in class. *Dorothy Must Die* will keep kids reading. It has adventure, a bit of romance and a bit of gore. There's even a bit of animal rights thrown in for good measure. The action description is vivid, and it opens up a new type of

conversation *Call of the Wild* can't offer. *Dorothy Must Die* lets us talk about pop culture and how we, as consumers, respond to it. In short, *Dorothy Must Die* allows us to have all of the conversations *Call of the Wild* allows with something extra.

Speak by Laurie Halse Anderson – Tilt by Ellen Hopkins

Themes in *Speak*: Peer Pressure & Bullying, Growth, Trauma, Speaking Out

Summary & Themes:

The summer before freshman year, Melinda attends a high school party. While at the party, Melinda drinks too much and is forced to have sex. Not knowing what else to do, Melinda calls the police, breaking up the party. Her best friend abandons her and the rest of the school knows her as the girl who called the cops.

The novels follows Melinda through her freshman year. The boy that raped her attends the school and terrorizes Melinda after a chance encounter midway through the novel. Her ex best friends have cut her out and Melinda finds herself alone. Melinda must navigate the bullying while trying to find her own identity.

Melinda's growth is apparent through the course of the novel. Through an assignment in her art class, Melinda manages to find her identity even as the school struggles to find its own. Through their constant changing of mascots, we see the school struggle with its own identity construction just as teens struggle to do. While the school attempts to find mascots that offend no one, Melinda, at the end of the novel, grows into a woman she can respect.

The novel starts with a traumatic event, and that event pushes the novel forward. Trauma made Melinda's growth possible. It's not an event anyone wants to experience, nor should they, but the novel shows growth is possible. That's the message readers leave with, and it's an important message.

How *Tilt* fits:

Ellen Hopkins' books almost always feature some sort of trauma. Her characters have either already been beaten down by life or find a way to do it themselves. In *Tilt*, we meet Mikayla, Harley, and Shane. All find new relationships, some healthy, some not, but all must face impossible decisions to find their growth.

Shane and Harley both face peer pressure and bullying. Shane has come out and faces bullying at school while Harley faces pressures to have sex with her older boyfriend. The pressures of life follow these characters around pushing them to either grow and persevere or crumble under the pressures. Both come close to crumbling.

Growth is also an important part of these characters' journey through the novel. Shane's sister was born with many health problems, both physical and mental. Part way through the novel, she passes away. From that point, Shane goes on a downward spiral. He becomes suicidal and starts doing hard drugs. Shane's boyfriend tries to pull him back, but Shane has to find his own way back. By the end of the novel, Shane is trying to pull himself back from the brink.

As the novel progresses, each character must face their own trauma whether it's personal trauma, family trauma, or relationship trauma. Like *Speak*, the trauma guides the novel and becomes the driving force in the character's lives leading to their growth.

Why Replace:

Speak is a good novel. In fact, in fulfills all of the requirements I set out in Chapter 1. It's told by a teen in the moment, published recently and was published for teens. However, it also fits with the other classics in that everything typically taught about the novel can easily be found online. Reading the book isn't necessary to be ready for discussion.

Many readers who can't find the right book find a home with Ellen Hopkins. I can't keep her books on my shelves, and often they never return. Hopkins has a way with realistic fiction that pulls in readers. And adding the fact that Hopkins writes in verse adds another level of discussion. Not only are students discussing the plot and dissecting the characters, they can discuss the specific word choice and line breaks, etc.

Honestly, the major reason for replacement is the ease of which students can access the plot summary, themes, and analysis of *Speak*. It has become canonized in our classrooms so the major ideas are all online. *Tilt* covers those same themes while exposing students to an author that many students love and relate to.

Students need to be exposed to other writing styles in modern fiction. We expose them to Shakespeare, and poetry here and there, but very little verse fiction. Exposure to other writing styles could help reluctant readers find that book that keeps them reading.

10th Grade

Brave New World by Aldous Huxley – The Uglies by Scott Westerfeld

Themes in *Brave New World*: Class, Free Will, Identity Formation

Summary & Themes:

In *Brave New World*, civilized society has forgone human birth and now citizens are bred into social classes, brainwashed into certain beliefs and forced into predetermined lives. On the surface, people seem happy, but the happy is literally drug fueled and superficial.

Class is the single most important element in *Brave New World*. Citizens are bred into predetermined classes and can never move up or down. From the time they are born, or more appropriately made, they are brainwashed into believing their class is the only class worth being in. The Alphas rule the world and are beautiful while the lowly Epsilons are deformed and work menial tasks.

The world appears free, at least for the Alphas and Betas. They have ample leisure time and free access to Soma and many other mood altering substances. But the people aren't really free. They are ruled by their brainwashing. They have no mobility and no real choices. The big choices are made for them and the Soma keeps them complicit. Even love has been eradicated. Sex is encouraged, but love is out. It's only when two of our main characters, Lenina and Bernard visit the reservations in savage New Mexico do we see what freedom might actually look like. Though Lenina and Bernard see the reservation as savage, they have control over their lives. Love is an

option, childbirth is still possible, but Huxley describes it all in a way that makes it sound savage.

Identity is the major driving force in the novel. Though people like Lenina and Bernard seem to want to find an identity, they are ultimately ruled by their biology. Lenina is a Beta with all the perks that come with it. She can't change that, nor would she want to. Ultimately, she's exactly what she's supposed to be. John, the savage brought back from New Mexico, doesn't have an identity either culture can respect. He was the son of the people like Lenina, left in New Mexico. He didn't fit with the "savages," but he has no way to relate to the civilized people either. Instead, he's left alone in the middle forced to try to carve out an identity in a world than doesn't understand or want him.

Why *The Uglies* Fits:

Hundreds of years in the future, society is divided into groups based on age. From 12-16, children are considered "uglies" as their bodies are changing so drastically. At 16, the government provides a surgery making them pretty. All imperfections inward and outward are removed. Our main character Tally is almost old enough to get the surgery.

Class is obvious in the novel. Young children are Littlies, then they become Uglies, then Pretties, then Middle Pretties, and finally Crumblies. The divisions are clear and one progresses from one to the other naturally. People must stay in their place or risk getting noticed.

Again, on the surface, people appear free. They are given the surgery and are basically left alone to live their lives within certain parameters. However, it's discovered near the end the surgery also bores holes in the brain essentially lobotomizing the population. They are made docile and controllable. The government keeps the population in check without anyone knowing anything.

The novel lends itself easily to identity formation. In this age, labels seem important to teens. With the expanding sexual orientation spectrum, teens are able to acknowledge their differences more easily and have a label to go with it. They strive for different labels hoping to find the one that fits them. In *Uglies*, the government removes the problem of identity. Appearance is determined by committee and the citizens are so sheltered, independence is never an issue. Students can easily see the problems in this society.

Why Replace:

Connection is the simplest reason for replacing *Brave New World*. *Brave New World* seems to be read with *1984* fairly frequently. The two novels play well together, but *1984* is a little more straightforward with the problems in the world. *Brave New World* has more complexity. This is a novel I didn't appreciate until college. I didn't like it in high school at all, and it is only because I'm a reader that I picked up the book again, and I'm glad I did. Our students aren't that tenacious.

Uglies allows students to easily connect to the novel. It starts quickly and moves quickly, both requirements according to the students at ALAN. In *Brave New World*, teachers either have to skip the first chapter entirely or walk through it with students

slowly. With so much exposition front loaded, students fall out of the novel and, as adolescent readers, have trouble ever getting back in.

Keeping excerpts of *Brave New World* will push advanced readers into the novel, and those students will be able to wade through the first chapter where many cannot. I know a student reading *Brave New World* and I've had to constantly push to get them through the first chapter. It's simply a matter of writing style. *Brave New World* was told in the writing of its time. Though Huxley was ahead of his time, his style is still difficult for students today. The first nearly 20 pages are all exposition. And though it does get the bulk of exposition out of the way, it's not a way to get a groups of teenagers excited about a novel. Writing styles have shifted and it's difficult to get students to connect to the writing style today.

A Separate Peace by John Knowles – The Absolutely True Diary of a Part-Time Indian by Sherman Alexie

Themes in *A Separate Peace*: Friendship, Jealousy, Memory

Summary & Themes:

Set in a boys boarding school, *A Separate Peace* focuses on the friendship of Gene and Phineas. Gene returns to the boarding school fifteen years after he graduated and visits two "fearful sites" and reminisces about his time and his friendship with Phineas (Finny).

The boys friendship is the crux of the novel. The two are complete opposites, but form a strong friendship. The two become inseparable. However, that friendship

becomes a dependence and a one-sided rivalry. Soon jealousy begins to take hold, especially of Gene.

Gene begins to believe that Finny is out to best him academically and physically. Finny has no intention of upstaging Gene, and truly enjoys their friendship. Gene begins a one-sided rivalry with Finny. He tries his best to outdo Finny in everything. One day, the two are set to jump out of a tree. Gene bounces the branch and sends Finny to the ground, shattering his leg. Finny finds out he can never play sports again.

Gene visits one other site, the marble staircase. After Gene admits his part in Finny's accident, he is accused of attempting to kill Finny. Finny leaves before he can hear the rest, falls down the stairs and re-breaks his leg. He dies the next day during surgery. Gene remembers all this at the staircase and the memories of the past haunt him. The memory of Finny helps Gene deal with some of his demons. Even though memories can't always be trusted to be "true," they can almost always be trusted to help illuminate the past even showing things we may not want to see.

Why *The Absolutely True Diary of a Part-Time Indian* Fits:

In *The Absolutely True Diary of a Part-Time Indian,* Junior chooses to leave his reservation school to a rich public school made up of mostly white students. There he has to navigate new forms of racism, try to make friends find his identity.

Junior has one friend, Rowdy, on the reservation. When Junior makes the basketball team at his new school, Junior and Rowdy's friendship is tested. Rowdy and the reservation feel Junior betrayed them by going to the white school. They turn their

backs on him during their first basketball game. By the end, the two reconcile their friendship. This fight for friendship is one of the driving forces of the novel.

Jealousy isn't as much of a force in the novel as much as *A Separate Peace*. For *Absolutely True Diary*, jealousy is replaced by racial issues. Junior spent most of his life on a reservation and when he goes to the white school, all those racial issues crop up. Students think Junior must be an alcoholic because he is Native American. The large white population can't understand his cultural differences, and Junior can't quite determine whether he should embrace his Native American culture or assimilate into the white school with their white problems.

The theme of memory is still present in *The Absolutely True Diary of a Part-Time Indian*, but more in the sense of cultural memory. As I mentioned earlier, Junior has to question whether or not to keep that cultural memory alive or leave it behind.

Why Replace:

Much like *To Kill a Mockingbird*, *A Separate Peace* is told with the wisdom of adulthood. Gene is remembering how things happened. Junior is experiencing them and writing as they happen. Teens are experiencing their lives right now, not with the wisdom of adulthood. They need to be able to see characters they can relate to, and in Oklahoma, *The Absolutely True Diary of a Part-Time Indian*, the characters are particularly relatable.

With a high Native American population in Oklahoma, the discussion of whether or not to embrace cultural memories and traditions or leave them behind is a real struggle for students. My cousin is a teacher in a school with an extremely high

Native American population. As a general rule, she says the families don't care about education and to care too much about education makes you white. Students need to be reading and discussing Native American issues more often in classrooms. We need to understand our own Native history and to understand the culture of a people. In our current curriculum, we teach little, if any, Native American literature, and this needs to change.

To Kill a Mockingbird by Harper Lee – Spud by John Van de Ruit

Themes in *To Kill a Mockingbird*: Race, Justice, Family

Summary & Themes:

To Kill a Mockingbird is quite possibly the quintessential high school novel. Sophomores across the country read this novel about Scout and her family. Mockingbird teaches lessons of race, justice, and what it means to be a family better than almost any other novel. It also examines an era of racial tension in the South.

Scout's father Atticus is a lawyer in their small town called to defend a black man accused of raping a white woman. Throughout the novel, the townspeople do not approve of Atticus defending a black man, and Jem and Scout must learn to navigate racism of the idyllic small town they've grown up in. Their world is never the same.

Jem and Scout also discover what justice means. Though it becomes clear that Mayella and Bob Ewell are lying about Tom Robinson raping Mayella, Tom is convicted and is shot while escaping from jail. Even as children, Scout and Jem can see through the lies of the Ewell's, but the deep seated racism in the town prevents the jury

from finding Tom innocent. And even though Atticus is a good man, the children learn that good doesn't always win, even when it should.

Finally, Jem and Scout come together as a family to weather the ire from the town against Atticus and to help each other process the events of the trial and the ensuing problems with the Ewell family. Jem and Scout even find a surprising chosen family member in Boo Radley after he rescues the two from a murderous Bob Ewell. The two learn that family is both who raised you and those who protect you.

How *Spud* Fits:

Spud is set at the end of apartheid in South Africa. Our main character John "Spud" Milton is on his way to a boys boarding school. The novel details his life in school and at home.

Spud's father is racist. During the novel, Nelson Mandela is released from prison and he goes on full paranoia. He stockpiles supplies and fears the black people will be coming to take over. Spud has always known this about his father, but didn't know another way to feel. At school, he joins a group advocating for equality and, at one point, mentions that he is ashamed to be white. Spud has to learn what it means to be white in this society and what he can do to love his father without supporting him.

Spud, like Scout and Jem, has to learn about justice. As a white person, he has known a life of luxury even though his family isn't as wealthy as some others. He has still never known what it is like to have barriers. He has to come to an understanding with himself and with the shortcomings of his country.

Most importantly, the novel is about family. Spud learns to love his family for who they are. His dad may be racist, but he loves his son. His mother might be crazy and his grandmother might be completely off her rocker, but they are his family. They will always love him. Spud also finds a family in his dorm. He and his roommates, nicknamed the Crazy Eight navigate the troubles of school as well as some roommates that have larger than life personalities. Through the year, the group bonds to the point of family.

Why Replace:

TKAM is amazing, and the messages it sends are brilliant, but *Spud* sends those same messages while exposing students to a different culture and lets students experience all of it through the eyes of a child instead of with the wisdom of adulthood. *Spud* captures the experience of a teenage boy where Scout feels like an adult looking back on her life. Everything is painted with the lens of wisdom in TKAM where *Spud* puts everything into the immediate. Every bad thing that happens to Spud is the worst thing ever until the next bad thing happens.

It is also worth noting that many teachers either show the movie or skip the first eight or nine chapters of *To Kill a Mockingbird* entirely. They add a nice background, but when students are used to action starting immediately, eight chapters of background lose them. And once they check out, they don't check back in. Part of the reason it might be good to replace reading the novel in full is because of this reason. If the first eight chapters are so irrelevant to their understanding of the novel, why can't we teach excerpts?

All of the lessons taught in TKAM come up again in *Spud*. Both Scout and Spud learn that biological family isn't always the best family, and, unfortunately, skin color does affect the way people see and react. The two novels are similar. Both focus on a child learning to come up through a world that is not as innocent as they thought, and both children are left with scars that will carry them into adulthood.

Spud also exposes students to a history we seem to forget. We glance over apartheid in history class, but the deep seated racism within the system is some of the worst in the world. Discussing those elements adds another level to classroom discussion. Using *Spud* instead of *TKAM* will expand students' knowledge of global events and allow them to connect events happening locally to those from another country.

Granted, *Spud* has more room for parent concern. Because it is set in a boys boarding school, there's quite a bit of talk about masturbation and other issues boys around puberty deal with. Though this does add a potential obstacle concerning parents, the honesty with which the novel deals with these issues is worth the risk. Also, the discussions of racial issues as well as bullying, identity formation, friendship, and family are far more important to the novel than a few discussions about masturbation. This novel is in classrooms all across South Africa and the release of the movie beat the final *Harry Potter* movie at the box office.

Lord of the Flies by William Golding – Beauty Queens by Libba Bray

Themes in *Lord of the Flies*: Civilization, Order, Innocence

Summary & Themes:

In *Lord of the Flies*, a group of choir boys crashes on a tropical island. The group must learn to survive on their own without the supervision of adults. Though they created a society based on order, civilization breaks down in a matter of days and the boys' innocence is lost forever when one of their own is taken by the island.

Right after the boys crash on the island, they create their own civilization based on rules and order. Ralph called the boys together with a conch shell so it becomes the symbol of order. Whoever has the conch is allowed to speak. Groups are formed for hunting and gathering, shelter building and medical services. All goes well for a time until Jack and his hunting party think they should be in charge. The boys split down the middle and Jack's wild and barbarous nature sways more and the two groups no longer can coexist. Once order is lost, the group is lost.

By the end of the novel, the boys are rescued. However, upon discovering the boys about to kill Ralph, the naval officer is disappointed in the savage nature of the boys. However, he chalks up their predicament with the age old "boys will be boys" adage. However, those boys are no longer boys. They watched some of their friends die, had a major hand in murdering Piggy and Simon and almost murdered Ralph. Once Piggy dies, the boys are no longer innocent. They have lost all remnant of civilization and have become island savages. Their innocence is gone, replaced by bloodlust and selfishness. Golding uses this to show how children grow to adults. Once the innocence of childhood is gone, all that's left is selfishness.

The whole novel focuses on civilization. The boys try to create their own based on their knowledge of adults and common decency. However, selfishness and brute

strength begin to overwhelm sense and reason leading to a destruction of society and dead children. Golding again uses this as an allegory to our modern world. He tries to show us that showing brute strength will not keep the world in order. We can't lose our reason or we will be faced with destruction.

How *Beauty Queens* fits:

Ultimately, this story is a retelling. *Beauty Queens* take the same idea of *Lord of the Flies* and twists it. Instead of a group of choir boys, it's a group of pageant girls heading to the most prestigious pageant in the world. Once the plane crashes, they try many of the same tactics as the boys and fare no better. However, *Beauty Queens* adds a sinister corporation to the mix, and not only comments on the political state of our world, but also the consumerist nature of our world.

Because the novel focuses on pageant girls, the idea of innocence immediately comes up. From *Miss Congeniality* to *Drop Dead Gorgeous* to *Toddlers and Tiaras*, pageant girls have always been portrayed with the idea of false innocence. Though they may appear unintelligent, they are more conniving than the public would believe. *Beauty Queens* plays on this dichotomy of innocence and scheming. On the plane the girls play nice, but as soon as the plane crashes, groups form and plans emerge. Though a few are the more traditionally ditzy, most have their own agendas to work out.

Pageant girls are also stereotypically trained in rules and order. They do things certain ways to get certain results. We see this in most popular media that represents pageants. Again, *Beauty Queens* plays on those stereotypes and subverts them. Once the girls land, they, like the boys in *Lord of the Flies,* try to maintain peace and order, but

the group breaks down faster than Jack and Ralph's groups. The ability to live wildly was a temptation for the girls and they fall for it. Bray uses this to show that groups that have rules forced upon them for too long will eventually fracture.

Like *Lord of the Flies*, *Beauty Queens* focuses on the idea of civilization. As the novel progresses, we discover that a shady government causes the crash in order to study the girls. This is quite the difference from the source material, but one that resonates more fully with our time and society than the one where Golding was writing.

Why Replace:

This is another where the modern novel is simply more relatable. Students will see our world more easily in *Beauty Queens*. Students can discuss our society's standards of beauty and the secrets kept from us while still having the discussions that *Lord of the Flies* allows.

Lord of the Flies is a good novel, but many students still struggle to get into it because of the way Golding writes. The vocabulary is advanced for the genre of novel *Lord of the Flies* fits into. For a novel that would seemingly be action packed, it's rather dense and philosophical. The book doesn't read like books today do. And it is important that students have exposure to books from other times, but in small doses students might be able to decode the text and then seek out the entire novel instead of being forced to read the entire novel when they are struggling to get into it.

11th Grade

As I Lay Dying by William Faulkner – Dreamers Often Lie by Jacqueline West

Themes in *As I Lay Dying*: Mortality, Family, Versions of Reality

Summary & Themes:

As I Lay Dying is about a family moving their deceased mother from their farm to Jefferson, Mississippi to be buried. The novel is told through fifteen different characters' perspectives and deals with issues surrounding mortality, family and reality.

At the beginning of the novel, the matriarch, Addie, is still living, but the family believes her about to die. She sits at her window watching her children and grandchildren and contemplating her life. As the novel progresses and the family moves Addie to Jefferson, other characters begin to question their own mortality and what life means.

The family is instrumental to *As I Lay Dying*. The entire family moves Addie from the farm to Jefferson and find out what it means to be a family along the way. Through fights, hugs and jokes, the family comes together and breaks apart.

Each character tells their own story and in doing so they bring their own perspective to the family and the events surrounding Addie's death. While each character has their own perspective, it's up to the reader to decide who is trustworthy and whose story should not be believed. As readers, we each bring our own perspective to events in our lives, but truth is harder to determine.

Why *Dreamers Often Lie* Fits:

Jaye has woken up from a skiing accident. She wants to get back to her normal life, including starring in her school's adaptation of *A Midsummer Night's Dream*, so she tells her family and her doctor's that everything is fine. It isn't. She hallucinates that Shakespeare and his characters are following her around, and even begins to associate real people in her life as other Shakespeare characters.

Mortality plays a large part in this novel. Jaye has a life-threatening skiing accident before the plot even starts and her grip on reality, sanity, and life start slipping from that point. Though she tries to hold on and make her life normal, that question of what will happen to her and will she survive her slips from reality become a major problem for Jaye. She feels bound by fate, even going as far as to associate herself with Ophelia from *Hamlet.* At the end of the novel, Jaye is involved in another accident and as her survival isn't guaranteed.

Jaye's family wants the best for her throughout the novel, and she has to determine whether or not she can rely on them. And as her family starts taking on more and more Shakespearean characteristics, she has to determine what's real and who's real.

Version of reality come into play from the very beginning, from the very first moment Jaye starts seeing Shakespeare and his characters following her around. She knows they are hallucinations, but as the novel goes on, it becomes more and more difficult for Jaye to truly determine which version of reality she's living in, and which one she wants to live in.

Why Replace:

As I Lay Dying still needs to be present as a way of teaching stream-of-consciousness writing and it's a great introduction to the style. *Dreamers Often Lie* fits *As I Lay Dying* so well because of the way both novels bring readers to question mortality and question which version of reality do we want to believe.

We can all say that we are alive, but are we living? Both novels bring that question to the forefront. Does going through life scraping by mean we are living? Does staying in an unhappy relationship make us feel alive? What pushes us over the line from alive to living? Through these novels, we can answer those questions.

Where *Dreamers Often Lie* steps above *As I Lay Dying* is simply in readability. Faulkner is a divisive author. His stream-of-consciousness style and his complicated use of language pushes even advanced adult readers away, and teenagers are nearly impossible to bring back once they have lost interest. If a novel doesn't hook them immediately, it's unlikely they will finish.

As I mentioned before, teenagers at the ALAN conference in Minneapolis said it themselves. The beginning is where students engage or exit. Faulkner requires dedication. Going Bovine allows students to access and answer the same questions that *As I Lay Dying* does while allowing them to get lost in a story that will keep their attention and keep them guessing.

On top of discussing ideas of mortality and reality, reading *Dreamers Often Lie* will also keep Shakespeare in the hands of students even in a course generally considered American literature. The characters that show up will both enforce the characters they have already experienced from *Romeo and Juliet* and *Julius Caesar*,

while also preparing them for senior year when they will read either *Macbeth* or *Hamlet*.

The Great Gatsby by F. Scott Fitzgerald – Great by Sara Benincasa

Themes in *The Great Gatsby*: Visions of America, Class, Dissatisfaction

Summary & Themes:

The Great Gatsby focuses on a group of wealthy people around New York City in the Roaring 20s. Most of the novel is centered around the towns of East Egg where the old money families live and West Egg where new money has staked its claim. Our narrator Nick has settled in West Egg in a tiny cottage somehow stuck in the middle of new money madness. Nick becomes embroiled in the lives of Jay Gatsby and Tom and Daisy Buchanan.

The Great Gatsby questions the "American Dream." While Jay Gatsby has truly accomplished the rags to riches story, he has done so through unscrupulous methods. By fixing sporting events and dealing with mob bosses, Gatsby has amassed a fortune. And he's done all this to impress Daisy Buchanan, a girl he fell in love with when he was penniless. She has since moved on and married Tom Buchanan, but though she loves Gatsby, the comfort of money keeps her firmly in Tom's arms. Gatsby's dream is shattered and with it, the ideals of the American Dream.

For other characters, the dream falters as well. Tom is seeing his own mistress Myrtle. Myrtle is the wife of a gas station owner. Though her means are humble, her

dreams are extravagant. She believes she has found her American Dream in Tom, but her dream comes crashing to a halt.

Each character ends the novel so completely unhappy that it's hard to imagine what the effects of the American Dream might be. If fictional characters can't even find happiness what does that mean for us?

Myrtle, Gatsby, Tom and Daisy also represent class. Gatsby didn't believe he as good enough for Daily because he was penniless. Love wasn't enough. Now that he's wealthy, Gatsby believes Daisy will return to him. Myrtle truly believes Tom will come and rescue her from her greasy hell. Unfortunately, those are the dreams of the poor. Tom and Daisy have no intention of leaving their comfortable wealthy lifestyle even if it means staying unhappy forever.

By the end of the novel, everyone is dissatisfied. Gatsby is murdered by the mourning husband of Myrtle. Myrtle is killed by a drunk Daisy driving back from New York. Tom and Daisy run off together escaping the scandal in their wake, each knowing the other was unfaithful. No character escapes unscathed and no one is happy.

Why Great Fits:

Great is a retelling of Gatsby. Almost everything is the same except Nick, Jordan, and Gatsby are gender-swapped. Gatsby has become Jacinta, Nick to Naomi, Daisy to Delilah, Tom to Teddy and Jordan to Jeff. The rest of the plot progresses in much the same way as *The Great Gatsby* up until the end.

Jacinta kills herself instead of being murdered, and releases an online video explaining everything that has happened calling out Delilah in the process. Naomi

releases the video wide for the world to see. We don't see the repercussions of the video, but it does give a more conclusive ending, which teens typically prefer to the open and sad ending of *The Great Gatsby*.

Our main character Naomi comes from a more modest background. She lives with her father in Chicago and is visiting her wealthy mother for the summer. Even at this point, the character's version of America are quite different. *Great* tackles this disparity through the entire rest of the novel. Jacinta, Naomi and Delilah see the world in very different ways much as our students do.

This leads easily into class discussions. Class is the reason these people see America differently. Student could even discuss whether the American Dream is really viable anymore. Is it even a dream?

Like in *The Great Gatsby*, no character is content with their lives by the end of the novel. Naomi has seen too much to return to the way her life was before in Chicago. Jacinta dies after Delilah betrays her and runs back to the arms of Teddy. While the two rich characters attempt to run off the way Daisy and Tom did, the social media age won't let them. Through Jacinta's video, both will face consequences Tom and Daisy never did. This adds to the possible discussions about cyberbullying and social media etiquette that our students need to understand.

Why Replace:

The Great Gatsby was a story about its time. Unpopular upon publishing, it's wasn't until many years later that it found an audience. Perhaps the audience saw too much truth in its pages. Perhaps they understood the commentary on this unsustainable

dream Americans believe in. And while it has become the quintessential American novel, it's no longer a story about our time. Great could be that story.

Great is as much a commentary on our society as *The Great Gatsby* was in its time. *Great* captures the focus on social media perfection we strive for so vehemently. Today we see news story after news story about Instagram stars explaining how completely fake all their photos are. This online persona isn't sustainable. Pride comes before the fall and we are certainly proud right now.

Except for the English majors who worship at the altar that is Gatsby, *Great* is simply more relatable. The characters are the same age as our students and the timing is perfect. Because *Great* is a retelling, it clearly tackles the same issues *The Great Gatsby* tackles, just in a more modern way. *The Great Gatsby* still has beautiful language the could be examined alongside *Great*, but students are far more likely to stick with reading *Great* over *The Great Gatsby*.

Scarlet Letter by Nathaniel Hawthorne – Fangirl by Rainbow Rowell

Themes in *The Scarlet Letter*: Isolation, Judgement, Purpose

Summary & Themes:

Hester Prynne is going to have a child out of wedlock, and her Puritan town is up in arms. Forced to wear a scarlet "A" for adultery, Hester secludes herself in the on the outskirts of Boston with her daughter Pearl. Meanwhile, the town's preacher Arthur Dimmesdale holds the secret of Pearl's paternity and Hester's old husband has come

from Europe to exact revenge. The tale interweaves the themes of isolation, judgement and guilt.

Hester isolates herself on the outskirts of Boston and makes a quiet living as a seamstress as a way to atone for her sins. Dimmesdale becomes isolated from the town and he deals with the guilt of what he's done with Hester and Roger Chillingworth, Hester's husband, is so intent on revenge he isolates himself from the world as well. The isolation, both forced and self-selected puts a strain on all of the characters eventually leading to their unhappy endings.

For a group of people who left Europe because of religious persecution, the townspeople certainly do quite a bit of their own. From parading Hester through the town as a harlot to judging Pearl for being wild and Dimmesdale for harboring a secret. It seems no matter the circumstance, no one escapes judgment. Chillingworth judges Dimmesdale for having an affair with his wife. Hester judges Chillingworth for taking such pleasure in tormenting Dimmesdale.

Judgment is true not only on an earthly level but also on a religious level. When a red A appears in the sky, Dimmesdale takes it as a sign from God. He keeps seeing these signs and takes them as signs of damnation. His judgment comes not from the people of the town, but from the holy figure he's sworn to uphold.

Hand-in-hand with judgment comes guilt. Dimmesdale's guilt in particular drives him to burn a scarlet A into his flesh before dropping dead from a heart condition no doubt worsened by the guilt he felt. Meanwhile, Hester seems to feel no guilt. She wears the A and self isolates, but never appears to feel guilty for her actions. She raises Pearl and moves on with her life. Her guilt doesn't define her. Chillingworth isn't

defined by guilt either, but by revenge. His sole focus becomes revenge and when he loses his opportunity, he dies shortly thereafter. Only Hester, who finds a different purpose for her life manages to live her life. The two men become so consumed by guilt and revenge that it kills them.

How *Fangirl* fits:

Cath and Wren are twins headed for college. Wren is outgoing and is ready to make friends while Cath would rather live in her fan-fiction world. When Wren tells Cath she doesn't want to room together, Cath has to find her own way through her life and determine whether she is strong enough to handle it.

Cath self-isolates just as Hester does. Cath has her interests in writing and in Simon Snow, her beloved fictional character, but has little interest in connecting in the real world. Cath stays in isolation for quite a bit of the novel, only venturing into the social world whenever required to. Cath feels safe in her isolation and it takes the course of the novel to bring her out.

Cath faces judgment at many points in the novel. Her writing professor tends to believe that fan-fiction is killing writing, her roommate doesn't understand her obsession, and Wren claims to have grown out of it. Though not forced to wear a scarlet "A," Cath has marked herself for public ridicule for writing fan-fiction. On top of it all, Cath has a social anxiety disorder and has a meltdown toward the end of the semester. The brand of mentally unstable adds to the level of isolation and judgment Cath receives.

Like Hester, Cath does allow herself to not be defined by her flaws. She pushes through with help from her family and the few friends she makes and teaches her professor that fan fiction isn't so bad. And as Arthur and Roger are brought down by what they let define them, characters in *Fangirl* are as well. Nick only used Cath to get a good grade and teaching assistant position. He lets her do more work than necessary and slaps his name on his. His devotion to grades at all costs leads to his downfall.

Why replace:

The main argument here for replacement is readability. *The Scarlet Letter* is tough to get through especially for struggling readers, and I feel it could have been shorter to tell the same story. This feeling comes mostly from how *The Scarlet Letter* was written, and though it's important for students to experience writing of that era, it's not necessary to read a whole novel.

Fan fiction, anime, and video-games are gaining traction. They have gone from being considered weird and geeky-in-a-bad-way to being legitimate. Many students in our classrooms are writing fan-fictions and even more are reading them. Fan fiction allows aspiring writers the opportunity to play with established characters and tell new stories with them. It allows them to completely change the world and tell a brand new story. We need to acknowledge this power and give it the legitimacy it deserves.

Fangirl's treatment of mental health also adds a great level of discussion. We still treat mental health with such fear that many students don't understand it or understand what to do if they are showing signs of depression, social anxiety, etc. These are discussions we need to have with students and *The Scarlet Letter* doesn't allow that

explicit of a connection. These connections, however, still require students to have read the novel to fully discuss the connections to it.

Slaughterhouse-Five by Kurt Vonnegut – Grasshopper Jungle by Andrew Smith

Themes in *Slaughterhouse-Five*: Time, Masculinity, Freedom

Summary & Themes:

Slaughterhouse-Five is about a man "unstuck in time." Billy Pilgrim is a soldier in World War II who is captured by Germans at the Battle of the Bulge. Taken to Dresden, he survives the firebombing. After returning home for a time, he is abducted by aliens and experiences his life's past and future while living in an alien zoo. Vonnegut's absurdist writing style is on full display.

Told out of chronological order by a narrator that might be untrustworthy, *Slaughterhouse-Five* plays with the concept of time. Vonnegut gives us years to help us put the events in order, but everything feels disjointed it becomes difficult to keep time straight. Even Billy can't seem to understand what's happening. Time becomes that ever-present and never-acknowledged character.

Masculinity plays a major role in *Slaughterhouse-Five*. Billy Pilgrim has no interest in fighting in the war. In fact, he does very little even to protect himself. His fellow soldiers consider him less of a man because of this. One of the "manly" soldiers gets them captured and dies on the train to the POW camp. In his dying words, the soldier, Weary, blames Billy for his death and another vows to kill him. Vonnegut uses this to discuss the masculinity of soldiers and of society. Because Billy didn't want to

fight, he wasn't a man, yet his attitude helped him survive the war. Billy was also selected by the aliens as the male specimen from Earth. Does that mean he's perfect? Or was he easy?

The alien zoo lets the novel tackle freedom. Billy is free to do whatever he wishes within the confines of his dome in the zoo. A porn star is also brought from Earth and the two are to mate. Ostensibly, Billy has freedom in the zoo, but he can't leave and he can't make his own decisions. When to eat, when to have sex, and when to sleep are made for him. The rest of Billy's life mirrors this idea. He was a prisoner of war. His marriage on Earth wasn't bad, but it wasn't passionate. He was institutionalized with PTSD. Billy's whole life moves from one stage of captivity to another with varying degrees of a "free" atmosphere.

How *Grasshopper Jungle* Fits:

Grasshopper Jungle focuses on the lives of Robby, Austin, and Shann in Ealing, Iowa. Austin tries to figure out his feelings for his girlfriend Shann and his male best friend Robby. All the while, the town is being overrun by giant praying mantises, and Austin is meticulously recording the details of the present and his past as a historian.

Time is vital to *Grasshopper Jungle*. The story is split between the present and the story of Austin's family history. However, Austin doesn't tell only his story. At any given moment, Austin details the whereabouts and goings on of the other residents of Ealing in what I call "meanwhiles." So while Austin is doing one thing, he tells us what each of the other people in town were doing at that exact moment and how it affects the story. Smith's take on time is exciting to read and keeps the story moving.

Austin is constantly questioning what it means to be a man, like every teenage boy. He questions whether it's right for him to have sexual feelings for his best friend and whether that makes him less of a man than his brother in the army. He knows a man is supposed to protect those he loves and does his best to do so. All these conflicting ideas come together at the end of the novel. Living together with a group of survivors in an underground bunker, Austin is the provider. Though he has a child with Shann, they are not together. He protects his son and does everything a "man" should do, even as Austin still struggles with the ideas.

Grasshopper Jungle tackles freedom in much the same way as *Slaughterhouse-Five*. Austin, Robby, and Shann all feel trapped in Ealing, and, by the end of the novel, they truly are. They live in an underground silo, only leaving to scavenge what the bugs have left behind. However, even though they are literally trapped, Austin feels the most free here. The structure of society has broken down and the people have true freedom, with the exception of constant threat of death from giant bugs.

Why Replace:

Truthfully, these are two of my favorite novels. Vonnegut's absurdist humor fits nicely with Smith's view of the world. But, where *Grasshopper Jungle* excels is in the representation of teenage boys. For me, this is the most authentic portrayal of a teenage boy I've ever read. From their constant thoughts of sex, to their constant insecurities, *Grasshopper Jungle* is an honest exploration of what teenagers experience.

Despite the fact *Grasshopper Jungle* deals with an apocalypse, the idea of identity comes across more strongly. The apocalypse happens in the background. We

are left with a message of hope of finding identity and being comfortable in that identity instead of the disappointment the world didn't get fixed. Austin's world was fixed.

Grasshopper Jungle would be a challenging novel to read in the classroom. It's frank discussion of sexuality can be a little over the top occasionally. Austin talks about being "horny" frequently. Frank discussions with parents would be required before the novel could be handled in class, but I truly believe the writing style in *Grasshopper Jungle* does what no other novel does.

That clear focus on identity puts *Grasshopper Jungle* ahead of *Slaughterhouse-Five*. Vonnegut's absurdist writing isn't for everyone. Some readers find him overwhelming, and his style can certainly be that for struggling readers. Seeing how the two novels treat time similarly would be an interesting conversation and would also open up discussion about how we create time and how we prioritize it.

12th Grade

The Things They Carried by Tim O'Brien – Front Lines by Michael Grant

Themes in *The Things They Carried* - Truth, Guilt, Friendship

Summary & Themes:

The Things They Carried is told almost as a series of vignettes all centering on the Vietnam War. The main character, also named O'Brien, but not the author, goes through the war and details his experiences.

Though in the novel O'Brien the character seems obsessed with truth. By the end of the novel he talks about how truth is malleable, and that true truth doesn't matter

as much as what the story is trying to say. This leads us to question every story before this and makes us wonder if any of the stories O'Brien the author tells us are even based in fact. This sort of cognitive distress is one of the main discussions in the novel.

Many war novels discuss the idea of guilt, particularly survivor's guilt, and *The Things They Carried* is no different. Multiple characters in multiple stories feel guilty for the death of Kiowa, and have to find a way to keep living through that guilt. Guilt permeates the soldiers both in terms of those who survived their comrades, and for the deeds the soldiers performed. War isn't pretty and neither are the scars.

Like guilt, friendship permeates this novel and most war novels. The group of men the novel focuses on can't help but form a deep friendship. They've been through the muck with each other, literally and figuratively and have come through the other end stronger, for the most part. Without each other, none would have been able to make it.

How *Front Lines* fits:

Front Lines is an alternative history novel set during World War II. The draft now includes all peoples regardless of gender. This novel is the story of some of the fits "soldier girls" to go to the front lines and fight for their country.

In the prologue, a character tells us about truth. She mentions that she wants to tell the truth before her own minds fixes the truth to make it more acceptable. This bring into question whether or not we can trust her as a reliable narrator and whether or not we can trust our own memories. She says she wants to tell the story as truthfully as she

can and the one thing she won't do is lie, but could her mind already be fixing these truths?

Like *The Things They Carried, Front Lines* also deals with guilt and friendship. The girls feel guilt for those they left behind and those they might not see again. They feel it for those they lost on the battlefield and those they might lose in the hospital, and even for those they lose at home. Rio, one of the three main characters loses her sister to war in the opening chapter of the novel. Her guilt leads her to enlist in the military and do her part for her country.

Like most war literature, *Front Lines* also focuses on friendship. Some girls come in as friends, some see each other as enemies at first, etc, but by the end, their platoon develops a deep friendship and respect because of the events of the novel. It's the friendship of soldiers that most civilians can't understand. It's the friendship of trauma. The girls must lean on each other to pull them through the trenches, both literal and metaphorical, of the war.

Why replace:

Like some of the other novels on this list, this is simply a matter of availability. *Front Lines* was published in late January 2016. This novel is so new, the plot summary can't easily be found online. Students would have to read the novel to be ready to participate. This is one of the tenets of this thesis. Replacing the long texts every few years keeps the curriculum fresh and keeps students reading. No one has a chance to get complacent.

One of my main arguments has been relatability, and, sure most people can't relate to soldiers, but they can relate to the age of the characters. Most of these characters are our students age. Some of our students may be thinking about the military as a career option. The draft is an easy topic of conversation with both novels, but *Front Lines* let you bring in the hypothetical as well as the factual. What if girls had been able to be drafted? Would that have been fair? Was it sexist to not draft them or to only select males? These questions can happen with both novels, but with *Front Lines*, we could talk about what the author believes might have happened as well.

This novel, unlike most YAL novels, is told in third-person. Despite the fact that each chapter is told from the perspective of one of the characters, we still have an omniscient point-of-view. Students can discuss whether or not this type of storytelling is more or less effective than telling a story first person. This type of analysis might help students move past their egocentrism into a type of empathy.

Also, I believe *Front Lines* is simply a better book than *The Things They Carried*, Michael Grant is a great writer and his writing flows off the page in a way that keeps readers going and wanting more.

The Awakening by Kate Chopin – Belzhar by Meg Wolitzer

Themes in *The Awakening*: Love, Identity, Consciousness

Summary & Themes:

The Awakening focuses on Edna Pontellier and her discovering to find herself. Married with two sons in Louisiana, Edna desires more. Through various relationships,

Edna tries to find out who she is and what she wants from life. When she doesn't like what she finds, Edna escapes by drowning herself in the sea. In this way, she finally finds the freedom she so desperately desires.

The Awakening obviously focuses on identity. When Edna realizes she does not want to be just a wife and mother, her troubles begin. She begins a relationship with a man named Robert who knows the relationship to be a disaster and leaves. While he husband is away for a long period, she begins a relationship with another man and becomes close to another woman. These dalliances let Edna discover who she is and what she wants. However, her identity crisis becomes too much to overcome and she lets the sea swallow her.

Edna's coming into consciousness is the point of *The Awakening*. It's in the title. Her subconscious awakens and she starts having feelings she doesn't understand and acting on impulses she didn't know she had. Edna strives to understand these feelings and beings to access deep layers of her identity. However, as a society lady, these questions of psychology were beyond what she was allowed to do. As a lady, she should have accepted her life, but that was not something Edna was willing to do.

More than anything, Edna seems to want love. Real, deep love. Though she is married with two sons, she does not feel the passion of life with her husband. She tries to feel love with multiple suitors while her husband is away and even while he's near, but she is never able to find that connection. Even when she and Robert declare their love for each other, Robert knows it's destined to fail, and, on some level, Edna does too. The search for love along with the awakening in Edna's soul push her to the only escape within her grasp.

How *Belzhar* fits:

Belzhar is set in a school for "fragile" teens called The Wooden Barn. The students in the school have suffered trauma and are having trouble readjusting. In this school, an elite English class meets to focus on one author for the semester. The selection process is unknown, but somehow, Jam, our protagonist, is selected along with four other students. The author on deck for the semester, Sylvia Plath. None expect to like the class, until a journal assignment leads them to a special place where they can access the pains of the past.

Jam has built her identity around her British boyfriend Reeve. After he died in a tragic accident, Jam can't pull herself together. She feels as if most of her died with him. The journal allows Jam to be with Reeve again if only for a time. The journals allow the writer to visit with the person they lost. However, the person in the journal can't move forward. They can only discuss the past. This allows the writer to, hopefully, bury their demons and move forward. Speaking to Reeve allows Jam to begin to separate herself from him, and maybe move forward without him.

Whenever a writer puts pen to paper, they fill up five pages. No more, no less. Once the journal is full, the writer can no longer access the special place. Jam questions her own consciousness multiple times. How can she begin writing and then lose herself so completely and not know what she wrote? Is what she's experiencing real? Does it matter? Do the feelings seem any less real even if the place isn't? Jam has to come to terms with these questions along with her own identity.

Each of the students in this class has lost someone close to them. Someone they loved. Each long to get them back. Jam lost her boyfriend. Sierra's brother was kidnapped after she was mean to him. Casey lost her legs and her sister in a car accident and her mother hasn't been the same since. Each student is dealing with the loss of love in a different way and each has to come to terms in a different way.

Why Replace:

Though it's interesting to discuss a woman out ahead of her time both in Chopin and Edna, *The Awakening* is so insufferable, I can't justify reading the whole novel. Excerpts will allow students to understand Edna's character without reading the entire novel. *Belzhar* will allow students to discuss the same themes as well as allow students some access to Sylvia Plath. Reading excerpts of her work will help add depth to the novel.

Belzhar will keep students' attention. They will want to know what happened to each character and what is going to happen with them. The ending contains a twist and will surprise readers without crossing a line into cheese. By the end of the novel, we discover Reeve never died, and never dated Jam in the first place. She became so obsessed with him she created a fantasy relationship, and when he rejected her, her world shattered. She created the story of his death and mourned for over a year before attending The Wooden Barn. The twist allows students to look at their own relationships in a different way. What makes a relationship? What makes a true friend? The novel will allow students to discuss three different authors at once and to really examine themselves and their relationships in a way other books don't allow.

Students will be able to relate to some of the losses of these characters. Maybe not to the level of a kidnapping or paralysis, but certainly the loss of love. In their world, the loss of a boyfriend/girlfriend can be devastating. Teenagers say "I love you" very quickly because they give everything so quickly and it's easy to see where a relationship can go south to affect a person so deeply. They can't understand being a wife and mother yet, but they can understand the loss of first love.

Grendel by John Gardner – School for Good and Evil by Soman Chainani

Themes in *Grendel*: Good and Evil, Consciousness, Communication

Summary & Themes

In *Grendel*, we see the story of Beowulf through the eyes of one of the villains. Throughout the novel, Grendel questions the difference between good and evil and tries to determine where he fits in the grand scheme of the world. The entire novel is an existential question forcing us to consider what we think we know about heroes and villains.

We know Grendel as one of the villains from the epic poem *Beowulf*. The novel written hundreds of years later picks up the story long before Beowulf arrives. Grendel is trying to figure out what it means to be good or evil and when Beowulf comes along, that definition is complicated. Grendel sees Beowulf as the evil and sees himself good, or at least more good than Beowulf. He has discussions with the dragon to find out more about himself and more about his world. By the end of the novel, our own definitions of what it means to be good or evil is complicated.

As I mentioned, *Grendel* is an existential novel. Grendel spends most of the novel trying to figure out who he is and where he fits in the world. He knows he's a monster, but he doesn't want to be monstrous. But when Beowulf arrives, he can only play the role of the monster leading to his demise. This interplay of nature vs. nurture and the idea of becoming more than birth is a driving force behind the novel.

Communication also plays a key role in the novel. Grendel can't communicate well with the Danes or with Beowulf and instead comes off as monstrous. The most intelligent conversations Grendel has are with the dragon. There he is able to express his thoughts articulately and safely. It shows us that everyone has a story to tell, and we need to be ready to listen.

How *School for Good and Evil* Fits:

In *School for Good and Evil*, we are introduced to Agatha and Sophie. Every four years, two children from their town are taken to two legendary schools. One is the school for good and one is the school for evil. These schools teach future fairy tale characters how to be characters. To succeed is to get your own story. To fail is to become a gargoyle or worse. This school holds more secrets than stories and when the girls are seemingly mixed up, the lines begin to blur.

On the surface, Sophie looks like the perfect candidate for "good." She is beautiful and does many good deeds. However, all the deeds are for her own selfish gains and she is incredibly vain. Agatha looks drab. She's not interested in her looks and is a bit standoffish. Underneath that veneer, Agatha wants to help. Both girls expect to be taken, Sophie for "good" and Agatha for "evil", but the school changes their

placement, much to the chagrin of everyone. Both girls have to come to terms with what it means to be good and evil, and what it means to be somewhere in the middle. The other characters must also find their place in a world where fairy tale definitions of good and evil no longer apply.

Going along with the idea of good and evil is the idea of consciousness and fate. The girls are told that a magical pen known as the Storian dictates the fate of every student at the schools. When the pen starts writing, their story is in progress and the pen dictates the ending. But neither Agatha nor Sophie want their story to end the way the pen has in mind. They have to determine how to be agents of their own fate, an idea fairy tales don't have.

Learning to communicate is key in the novel. Sophie and Agatha have to learn to fit in in their schools or face expulsion (a fate that is, as cliche as it sounds, worse than death). They must learn to play the game, and learn when to use what words and with whom.

Why Replace:

The simplest reason for suggesting a replacement for *Grendel* is simply because students aren't reading it. I didn't read it. It was the one book in high school I didn't finish. I read every other book all through high school. I was always prepared, but I couldn't even force myself to read *Grendel*. I've heard students at my school say the same thing. The reading simply isn't happening. Even though the conversations around the novel were interesting, I didn't read the novel. It wasn't until years later I finished it, and I didn't like it any more the second time.

Granted, *School for Good and Evil* is a much simpler read than *Grendel*. In fact, it can be found in the young readers section at Barnes and Noble. However, there's a tenet of English class that says it's not the difficulty of the text that matters, but rather what is done with the text matters. And despite the location of the book, there's more complexity here than one would expect, and there's certainly room for exploration.

School for Good and Evil allows for discussion on many levels. On one, students could talk about the plot and characters of the book itself. They can also discuss their representation of other characters from well known stories, and whether those representations are something we should strive to have for our characters. Students could also look closely as fairy tales from their childhood, their Disney counterparts and the versions we see in *School for Good and Evil*. Ideas of fate and free will can also be discussed in the course of the novel and in students' lives.

Their Eyes Were Watching God by Zora Neale Hurston – The Serpent King by Jeff Zentner

Themes in *Their Eyes*: Innocence, Love, Society

Summary & Themes:

The story is told as an older Janie looking back on her life. She reminisces to her friend, trying to dispel the rumors flying around her small home town. She tells of her multiple husbands and her search for love, and the societies she found herself in.

Innocence and love are closely linked in this novel. The whole reason Janie leaves home in the first place was for love, and that's her constant search through the

novel. She travels from man to man thinking she has found "the one," and truly hopes she has. Unfortunately, that never seems to be the case. Janie needs love, in fact. Without it, she feels her soul withering, but with it, she feels young and alive.

Innocence fits with this idea because the jaded people around think love is a folly. Sure, you could be married, but love fades, and money pays. Innocence is linked to idealism in this novel much as Janie's view of love. Janie's view of innocence seems to be nature, and throughout the novel she speaks of the natural state. Janie manages to hold on to this idea of innocence and somewhat stay innocent herself throughout her marriages.

Through the novel, Janie marries several times and experiences life in several different ways. The novel handles each part of society differently. The lower class seems to be more honest and good than the upper classes, but Janie always has the desire to move up the ladder. When she does, things fall apart. She learns that her happiness is not linked to class or to society's idea of normal. She finds her own happiness and returns home.

How *The Serpent King* Fits:

The Serpent King is set in rural Tennessee. Three friends in their last year of high school are trying to navigate the typical pitfalls of senior year while dealing with some special circumstances. Our protagonist, Dill, has a Evangelical revival preacher for a father, whose congregation handles poisonous snakes. Now in jail for possession of child pornography, Dill's life is thrown into turmoil. He feels stuck in his hometown,

and with no way out, Dill begins to spiral. Facing an angry mother at home and ridicule from the town, Dill has to find his own happiness.

The innocence of childhood comes crashing down in this novel. Though Dill was never blind to his father or his ways, Dill has to deal with it in a new way. He is no longer shielded in any way and must find his solace in his friends.

The novel has a romantic plot, but this is more about the love between friends. The three are all outcast in the small buckle of the Bible belt, and the three must rely on each other to survive or be eaten alive by small town politics and expectations.

Leaning on each other also brings in the idea of society. This small Tennessee town has expectations of what society should and shouldn't look like and none of the three fit. One is obsessed with fantasy novels, one has a popular fashion blog and is off to NYU for college, and the other has a Jesus-freak mother and disgraced, jailed father. Though all are very different in their deviations, none fit the norm of this town and the three have to find their own society or try and escape.

Why Replace:

Much like *Front Lines, The Serpent King* is a very recent novel. Published on March 3, 2016, the novel has barely been on the shelves. And as mentioned before, keeping curriculum current is a way to keep students reading.

In my home state, Oklahoma, students could relate to some of the Bible belt politics as seen in the novel. As a very conservative state, religion enters into political sphere quite frequently and the topic of church is in school frequently. Youth Groups and those events are some of the most attended out of school events. Though most

students might not truly know what an Evangelical almost cult-like preacher might be like, they can understand the idea of being embarrassed by parents and trying to escape their expectations.

Some students will also be able to relate to the idea of feeling stuck. Dill sees no way out of his hometown. His mother all but forbids him from attending college because he needs to work off his father's debts, and Travis is expected to work in his father's lumber yard despite his dreams to write. And Lydia can't understand why the two don't just leave. Told in third-person with each chapter focusing on a character, this novel expands how students read while showing them a side of society many of them have experience with.

Also, like *To Kill a Mockingbird*, *Their Eyes Were Watching God* is told with the wisdom of experience. Janie can look back on her life and see her mistakes and talk about them as mistakes. The characters in *The Serpent King* can't do that. They can only see what's in front of them and have to make daily decisions on what's best for them. Their identities are constantly in flux like those of our students and that fluid state is what makes *The Serpent King* worth teaching.

Chapter 4: Implications

At this point, we've read the research and seen the proposed replacements. The only way to determine whether or not students will be more engaged with these novels is to try it. For one year, take a classroom and read these novels instead of the typically prescribed curriculum.

My inspiration for this thesis stemmed from students not reading, and then cheating on various assignments. Though that's still the driving force behind this thesis, I hope, if nothing else, it invites change in curriculum. Stagnation breeds apathy. And our students are apathetic. At my school this year, we adopted new textbooks. After narrowing the options to two, it came to a teacher vote. Multiple teachers said to me they were voting based on which textbook didn't require them to shift their curriculum. Not which one gave the best option for the students, but which one required the least amount of effort to implement. From my point of view, that's not a reason to adopt a book. Perhaps we should have polled our students in each class and been as delegates in an election. The students want to see one textbook, therefore that's the way we vote. After all, they are the ones who have to use it. This fear of change and reticence to adapt has lead us to classrooms where students don't read. We have to be willing to adapt, willing to shift, and willing to fail.

I understand the reticence to change curriculum. Starting over by creating lesson and unit plans is a daunting idea, and we spend enough of our own time grading and planning as it is. Perhaps research needs to be completed on what makes teachers so hesitant to change curriculum. Is it the task of writing new lesson plans? Is it just lack of funding for books? Is it because many teachers forget that students don't necessarily

have the same love for literature we do? Just because we, as teachers, love *To Kill a Mockingbird* or *The Great Gatsby* doesn't mean our students will no matter how much we frontload.

If we do so much frontloading, are students really gleaning anything from the book? What if we didn't have to front load? Current young adult fiction would allow teachers to spend more time reading with their students rather than preparing them for a book.

After teaching a year with this curriculum, one would need to examine many different pieces to determine effectiveness. More research also needs to be completed in the field of engagement when it comes to different types of literature. Do students respond most to short stories, poems, full novels, excerpts, other mediums etc? What is it about those mediums that bring students in? To take this idea further, what types/genres of novels do students respond to. Are they more likely to read a YA novel, contemporary adult novel or classic novel? What are they looking for in a book? What would they read if they had the choice? Allowing students an active role in their curriculum choices might improve engagement. At the very least, hopefully this inspires a minor shift in curriculum. Shake up the classroom. Read something different.

In this chapter, I've provided a couple of activities for each of the novels described.

These novels are nowhere near the only novels that could be for each classic. Each year hundreds of novels are written and young adult literature is still growing.

Activities

Animal Farm - Steelheart Activities:

Students could create two societies, one in which everyone is equal, and one in which they control everything. What services would need to be captured first? How would you maintain control? What agencies would need to come next? Can everyone ever truly be equal? Is a utopia possible or will it always turn to dystopia? Discussing the possibility of utopias and equality will force freshmen to think of something outside of themselves and introduce them to terms that will follow them for the rest of English.

Students could also create their ideal hero. What qualities make a hero? Then, as they read *Steelheart*, start turning all of those good qualities evil. How can nobility be turned evil? What about strength? What would it take to turn Superman in to Lex Luthor? By the end of the novel, they should have created their hero's antithesis and we will be able to discuss that term and see how it applies.

Things Fall Apart - Like Water on Stone Activities:

The Armenian genocide and the Holocaust are far from the only genocides in history. Using the Guided Inquiry model, students could research any genocide in history and, as a class, could learn how to stop history from repeating itself again. Students could learn about what led to the genocides or how they were finally stopped.

Students could examine political climates to see what allowed them to begin in the first place. As it is, I fear we are on the brink of a possible genocide, and we, as teachers, need to do everything we can to educate our students to recognize those signs.

Novels in verse are popular right now. It's hard to find a student who hasn't read at least one Ellen Hopkins' book or Karen Hesse's Out of the Dust. That being said, students are scared of poetry. The purpose behind each word intimidates most students away from writing their own. Writing their own stories (personal or fictional) in verse will help dispel those fears. By starting with ideas and working toward verse, students will begin to understand the purpose behind word choice and build a foundation for making better arguments later in school.

Call of the Wild - Dorothy Must Die Activities:

This novel would be an excellent place to talk archetypes and the Hero's Journey. Amy traverses the journey as do so many other heroes. Students could be assigned either an archetypical plot and could examine what novels or films fit those plots. It would allow students a time to look critically on the culture they consume on a daily basis.

While reading the novel, students could keep track of a character and analyze how they differ from either the film or the original Wizard of Oz novels. Students could also include other retellings of The Wizard of Oz, such as Wicked, in their analysis.

Speak - Tilt Activities:

Students could practice their own poetry writing skills. They could either construct standalone poems or write their own story in verse. If classrooms followed this proposed curriculum, then students would have read one novel in verse already so the exercise would help enforce this idea. Students could also compare the use of verse in *Tilt* and *Like Water on Stone*. This would require students to evaluate whether either author is a good poet or a only good storytellers who happen to use verse to tell a story. It would make a good comparative essay.

This novel would be a good way to track characters. Because the novel is broken up mainly into three narrators, students could compare how the characters grow. Others could be assigned the characters that have only a page at the end of chapters. Some appear multiple times, but some only once. Those assigned to those characters would play a vital role in character tracking.

Brave New World - The Uglies Activities:

As a prereading activity, we could have discussions about what groups of people exist in today's society. They could go into the novel with that lens as a way to get into *The Uglies*. Students could chart the qualities of each group of people and see if a certain group in today's society has those qualities. Students could answer the question

"are we creating our own caste system?" This could easily be done with *Brave New World* as well.

Students could research the popularity of plastic surgeries. What is it about perfection that we keep striving for? Why can't we be happy with the bodies we have? Researching the cost as well as media representation might help students analyze their own world more easily. This could be done as a multimodal project. Students would not be allowed to turn in a traditional paper, but would be required to do either videos, prezi presentations, pieces of art, etc.

A Separate Peace - The Absolutely True Diary of a Part-Time Indian Activities:

Students could examine the meanings of the phrases "absolutely true" and "part time." Those phrases are chosen specifically for the title, and they have deep meaning. Examining the title will help students develop their analysis skills and help them as they read. The meaning of the title might change as they read the novel and having the constant piece of analysis to go back to will keep students engaged.

Students could research various Native American tribes and their traditions and cultures. It will help educate white students in Native American culture and help give other Native American students more exposure to other tribes. Students could do a guided inquiry research project on issues facing Native American cultures. They can find a topic that interests them and help educate other students on those issues.

To Kill a Mockingbird - Spud Activities:

Working with excerpts from TKAM, students would be able to analyze the difference between the two novels when it comes to perspective. TKAM is told by a grown woman looking back on her life and *Spud* is told by a child living through it. Students will analyze how those choices affect the reading of the novel. What decisions does the author make and how does that affect our experience as readers? Does either feel more like a genuine teenager or are both missing the mark? How do you capture the teen experience as an adult?

Students can also research civil rights in more than just the United States. *Spud* deals heavily with apartheid. Spud's dad is terrified of what Nelson Mandela will do once he's out of prison and at one point Spud says he's ashamed to be white. Whether that be religious or racial, the majority treats the minority as lesser. It's good to know the history of more than just one country. It helps put the United States in the global perspective.

Lord of the Flies - Beauty Queens Activities:

As a fun project, students could be given a list of items and told they can only have 5 to make a new society on an island. In groups they must come up with the items and the explanation as to why they picked them. It would be interesting to see what

items they picked and the teacher could have scenarios ready to discuss with the students to see if they made wise choices.

According to an activity in the Penguin teacher guide to *Lord of the Flies*, students could be split into groups and asked to turn the leaders of the novel, Jack and Ralph, into candidates and let the class vote for their choice. Other groups could also choose "third party candidates" like Simon or Piggy. This could easily be adapted for *Beauty Queens*. Leadership is important in both novels.

As I Lay Dying – Dreamers Often Lie Activities:

Students could keep a log of all the Shakespearean characters they meet and place them in the place to which they belong. They can also discuss what the inclusion of that character means for the plot and how it would change with another character. Getting students to understand the purposeful decisions from authors can be a challenge, and this use of characters will help them understand that concept, and maybe even help them recognize the types of characters they've met in their own lives.

Students could research the concept of master plots for a multi-genre research project. Most students, and especially struggling readers, sometimes struggle to connect with plots of novels. Getting students to understand that all plots can be boiled down to one of just a few master plots opens up a world of knowledge for students. They could try and determine the master plot of this novel as well as one of the Shakespearean

plays. From there, they could find other medias that fit that plot and present the plot in some form to the class.

The Great Gatsby - Great Activities:

As I mentioned before, students could analyze passages from *The Great Gatsby* and *Great* side by side. *Great* is loyal almost to a fault to *The Great Gatsby*, but that makes analysis fascinating. What ideas did Benincasa keep of Fitzgerald's and what needed to change? Why were those changes made?

Students could track a character in *Great* from beginning to end to see how a character changes. Personality tests are still incredibly popular with students and we could capitalize on that. Give students a personality test at the beginning of the novel to give themselves a color that best represents them. Then ask students to take the test again as their character and see what color comes up. Then, as the novel continues, take the test again and again and see if the colors change or stay consistent. By the end of the novel, students would have a colored chart detailing how characters have grown. Maybe students assigned the same character would disagree and would gives a launching pad for classroom discussion.

Scarlet Letter - Fangirl Activities:

Even though it sounds obvious, students need to create and maintain a fanfiction story for the duration of the time reading *Fangirl*. They can get the experience of messing with the world, etc. and get creative writing experience. Some student may be waiting for the opportunity to try writing and finally fall in love with it. Students could choose any novel, any character, any world to focus on. For those who might not like writing, they could create art projects based on the world, or videos. It doesn't have to be written to be fiction. Students could also do research on fanfiction.net to discover the different types of fan fictions out there. Though some can be inappropriate, many tell as good or better stories than the original.

Students could also research various types of mental illness. Nothing as serious as schizophrenia or psychosis, but the ones that may go unnoticed like social anxiety or bipolar disorder. How many people suffer and how many go undiagnosed? How do people manage their disorders? What does it feel like to have those disorders? This project will give students insight into how their peers might experience the world and how they can help.

Slaughterhouse Five - Grasshopper Jungle Activities:

Students could make plot triangles for *Grasshopper Jungle*. I know the activity sounds juvenile, but they would see that they didn't all focus on the same plot. *Grasshopper* has so many plotlines, it would be fascinating to see where each student thought the climax happens. Is it when the bugs are born? Is it when Austin and Robby

have sex? What about Austin and Shann? Is it when Austin's family history comes to a head? Is it when they discover the bugs weakness? Any could be correct, it all depends on what plot the students examine. After creating their own triangles, students could create larger and larger groups to come up with one master triangle.

Students could be given a story in pieces. Each student would be asked to put their story together chronologically. They may find that not all of them agree. Is there a right answer? This activity could be extended by adding more to the story. This could continue for quite some time. Students could also each be given separate scenes and asked to put their individual scene in order and then put the scenes in order. Then students could be asked to put the scenes in the order they think tells the best story. The activity would teach students how important it is for an author to decide how to tell their story, and whether a story would be more interesting told out of order.

The Things They Carried - Front Lines Activities:

One of the activities done at my school with *The Things They Carried* is a draft letter, and this activity is still applicable. Many reluctant students enjoy writing the draft letter because of the chance to be creative and I see no reason to remove that. The novel lends itself just as well for this assignment as it does with *The Things They Carried* and it allows for deep political and moral discussion, which helps kids figure out their own minds.

The novel is split into three distinct character perspectives despite the fact the novel is told in third person omniscient. For at least a section of the novel, students could be divided into groups and instructed only to read the perspectives of a certain character and then determine what reading only one perspective does to a novel and that discussion could be expanded into discussions about news. One happens when you look at only one source? Do you ever get the full story? It would be interesting to see what students came away with with a limited perspective and students could also discuss the use of third person instead of first for this type of writing style.

The Awakening - Belzhar Activities:

Again, though this seems obvious, the journaling activity would be fascinating. Though some students might not take it seriously, others would. They could examine something in their life they wish had gone differently. After writing on the topic for an extended period, they might find themselves accessing new information and making new connections. The journal process could serve as a cathartic experience for them. As a teacher, I would check to make sure the students were keeping up with the assignment, but would only read on request/concern. Some topics they tackle might be of a personal nature they need to deal with on their own. In spot checks, I would look for keywords that might need dealing with.

Because this novel tackles Sylvia Plath, it would be interesting to compare how the two authors handle the topics of love, depression and hope. Students could write a comparative piece explaining how the two work together, or even how Chopin also fits

into the mix. The novel invites analyses of more than just one novel and students need to know how to find connections between novels.

Grendel - School for Good and Evil Activities:

Students could be assigned a fairy tale and research its origins, find other adaptations of the tales and discuss how the novel deals with that character (or their offspring). After reading the novel, each students (or group) could present on their fairy tale. It would be fascinating to see students delve into stories of their childhood as they leave their childhoods behind. Looking at these stories at this point in their lives might be a great way for them to confront adulthood.

Students could be divided for discussion into schools of good and evil and could only answer in the way their school would allow them. Good must find the nobility and lightness in the world where evil finds the problems and tries to fix them while being put down. For some students, this shift in perspective might help them in their own lives.

Their Eyes Were Watching God - The Serpent King Activities:

As this is a senior class novel, students could be asked to write down a list of expectations they have for themselves and a list their parents have of them and another for what society has of them. As we read the novel, students could analyze their lists

and see what expectations they want to achieve and which ones are put upon them by someone else. I have a feeling some would change their own expectations through reading the novel after realizing some they wrote for themselves were actually someone else's idea.

Students could also create their own cult religion. What would they worship? What rules and rituals would need to be in place? What would be the punishment for breaking them? Though this could be a controversial activity for some students, the idea would be to teach that any idea can be taken too far. It might help some find more comfort in their religions once they examine their thinking a little more deeply rather than just accept what's in front of them.

Implementation

Granted, this shift would be difficult to make in one year. In a time where budgets are tighter than ever, buying hundreds of copies of current novels would be very expensive. However, with new apps like Curriculet, putting these novels into our students' devices is easier and cheaper. With the growth of technology, our school will soon put devices in each of our students' hands. This will allow for digital downloads of novels, keeping costs down and allowing for more diversity in terms of texts.

It might also be possible to write grants for class sets of one of the novels every year. Though the process isn't easy, it's possible. Once the idea is approved, we have to find at least three different sources of material and use the cheapest or most appropriate source. Teachers can contact the publisher directly in hopes of a class set, or contact

Ingram books. After the source is located, the school needs a purchase order and the books can be ordered. Teachers could look at the mass-market editions of some novels, or look at library binding. Library binding may be more expensive, but they come with a guarantee of replacement should the books become damaged. It would not be possible to order all these novel in one year. The process may be slow, but slow isn't a bad thing. I've already discussed a fear of change, and completely redoing an entire year's worth of curriculum in one year is unreasonable. A slow shift will help students and teachers both adjust to something new. Along the same lines, this slow shift will also allow teachers to see if the new curriculum is a good idea, and will allow for changes as it's happening.

Students could also read in literature circles. As I discussed, there are literally hundreds if not thousands of YAL novels are published every year, and my suggested replacements are certainly not the only options. Donalyn Miller advocates for no longer teaching a whole class novel at all (2015). She says it's better to use common texts like short stories, poems, etc, and let students select their own novels from a list. The novels would focus on a certain theme or genre so teaching whole class lessons would still be easy, but the texts could vary widely. Perhaps teachers could work with librarians in their districts to come up with a longer list of novels that deal with the same themes as the main "classic" novel. This would save on the cost of the books and would allow students to read one novel in full, but receive exposure to many other novels. If they find one they relate to, perhaps they can read more in the same vein and become readers as we all hope they will.

The challenges of an English classroom are well-documented. We are met with a room full of mostly reluctant readers every day and it's our job to educate them and ideally teach them to think about their world critically and to think about language critically. It's our job to create informed citizens and, ideally, readers. The longer we stay stagnant, the more likely we are to lose those readers. We have to keep up with the times. We have to be ready to change and ready to try new things even if they don't work. Validating what they are reading and giving students and active voice in their curriculum will help bring readers back to us.

Rationale

I include this letter as a potential rationale letter to the school board to justify the potential shift in curriculum from the classics to a focus on young adult literature. Because we as a society are so entrenched with the classics, the shift will not be easy, with parents, other teachers, or administration. However, I believe YAL will help students find a love of literature English teachers want to instill in their students. As best I could, I attempted to sum up my argument in one page and to show the virtues of YAL.

Dear _____,

My students aren't reading.

With all the information on the internet, they feel they don't need to. From Spark's Notes to Shmoop to YouTube, the important lessons can be found online, and student know it. It's time to change what we do.

When we assign the same novels our parents and grandparents read in high school, we are sending the message that those are the only novels worth reading. And we bring with these classic novels, the old-school English classroom. We don't acknowledge what technology can do or how our students have changed. Rather than finding something our students naturally relate to, we force them to try and relate to something completely out of their realm.

I ask for you to examine young adult literature. Though it may lexically easier, the subjects tackled and styles used rival those of the classic novels we use in our classroom every day. We can teach the same lessons with either novel. These new novels also have the benefit of not being online. In order for students to be prepared, they must read. And they may find some enjoyment along the way.

Young adult literature has come a long way in the last few decades, and every further in just the last five years. The range of novels published and the quality of those novels has exploded into a vibrant scene. Teens of other races, sexualities, and identities can finally see themselves in novels. Those identities need validation.

We say we want students to connect to school, yet we push their interest away. We say "we know best." And that's that. What if, for once, we allowed students the

opportunity to take charge of their learning, and show them that their culture matters. What they read matters. What they see matters. They matter. We can only do that once we acknowledge that the books they want to read aren't easy drivel, but a representation of a complex time of life. They feel everything to the power of ten and so do the characters in these novels. Perhaps they can find solace in the knowledge they aren't the only ones struggling.

It's time for us to go back to the drawing board and reexamine what we teach and how we teach.

Sincerely,

Kerry Friesen

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