

UTILIZING STUDENTS' LIVED EXPERIENCES TO  
ENHANCE THE LITERARY CLASSROOM: ONE  
TEACHER'S LOOK AT THE USE OF CANONICAL  
AND MULTICULTURAL LITERATURE IN THE  
COLLEGE CLASSROOM

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## CHAPTER I

### INTRODUCTION

*Lived experience is the breathing of meaning* (van Manen, 1990, p. 36).

#### **Overview of Study**

This teacher research study examined the use of canonical and multicultural literature in an Introduction to Literature class at a community college in a Midwestern state. This study asked to what extent students related to canonical and multicultural literature using teacher research as a theoretical stance. The information gathered during this study will help me, the teacher researcher, in meeting the needs of students enrolled in my literature classes. The findings of this study will provide insight into the literary selections that have meaning for students.

#### **The Problem**

When new literature teachers enter the field, they face a plethora of literary choices to select for their students. They not only have authors, such as William Shakespeare and Mark Twain, considered in the long-standing canon, but numerous multicultural authors, such as Joy Harjo, a Native American, and Paul Laurence Dunbar, an African American, recognized now for their literary accomplishments. The literary selections are growing because people of color, differing cultural heritage, and/or gender are now included in students' literary textbooks.



With all these literary choices, new teachers can become overwhelmed in selecting their curriculum. This study shared my personal reflections and those of my students in showing to what extent they related to canonical and multicultural literature because of their lived experiences. This study provides implications for me and possibly for other literature teachers as well. Furthermore, this study can serve as a guidepost in showing literary teachers how to use student input in shaping their curriculum selections.

### **Theoretical Stance**

As a literature teacher and teacher-researcher, I want to provide my students with a literary curriculum that most engages students' interests. van Manen (1990) feels that teachers are involved in actions that immediately and directly affect students' lives. He feels that teachers need to be involved in thoughtful learning that "helps students grow up and give shape to life by learning what is worthwhile knowing and becoming" (p. 158).

van Manen's (1990) description of pedagogical tact asserts teachers should want to determine what is in the best interests of students. One of my goals as a teacher is to ask what is good for my students to learn, and that was the reason for this study. I want to provide the best literary curriculum for my students. I had questions regarding my literary curriculum, and this study provided answers to my questions from which I can learn and improve my classroom practice. van Manen (1990) believes that students' lived experiences can aid teachers in determining what is the best classroom practice for those students, and that was why I asked students to share their lived experiences as they related to the literary works in the study.

This study is one of teacher research. As a teacher-researcher, I collected data about how students related their lived experiences to the literary themes found in this study to answer my research questions. After the I collected the data, I reflected in my teaching journal on what students wrote in their journal entries and our their second surveys. Patterson (2003) writes that reflective practice is grounded in practical experience and the knowledge of research and theory. In this study, I used my classroom experience and my knowledge of research and theory to guide me in finding answers to my research questions.

The knowledge gained from this teacher research study will provide me with an avenue “to adjust [my] classroom practice to better meet the needs of students” (Hansen, 1997, p. 2). The findings from this study will help me to provide a literary curriculum that will enrich students’ learning experiences.

### **Research Questions**

Primary Question:

What type(s) of literature in an Introduction to Literature class engage students’ interest? To what extent do students relate to canonical literature?

To what extent do students relate to multicultural literature?

### **Purpose of the Study**

When I began my teaching career nine years ago, I was excited and worried at the prospects of having my own classroom. Thoughts of classroom management, unfamiliar surroundings, and the need for lesson plans flooded my mind. My first year of teaching

was one of survival. After two years of adjunct teaching at a regional four-year university, I accepted a position at a two-year Midwestern community college. The bulk of my teaching load was in Composition I and II, but I was also given the job of teaching Introduction to Literature courses.

With two years of Composition teaching under my belt, I felt very comfortable in teaching the modes of essay writing to students. The need for preparation time for my composition courses was decreasing. This freed up some extra time for a new adventure. The new quest was Introduction to Literature, a course I welcomed because it gave me an opportunity to test my teaching skills in a new subject. Bishop (as cited in Siu-Runyan, 1996, p. 420) tells of the importance of literature, “Literature is one of the vehicles through which a culture transmits its values, attitudes, mores, world views, and philosophies of life.” Literature helps students understand the world around them better, and I was eager to take on this literary teaching challenge.

In teaching my first semester of Introduction to Literature, I selected works that had left memorable impressions on me, such as William Faulkner’s “A Rose for Emily,” a tale of twisted love that morbidly will last forever. I loved Faulkner’s short story because it went beyond the norm of his time. Faulkner was not afraid in his writing to discuss homosexuality or a proper Southern woman’s obsession with the dead. Furthermore, I also chose Eudora Welty’s “A Worn Path,” a sentimental story of an old woman’s struggle to keep her grandson’s memory alive. This story pulled at my heart’s strings and made me feel such empathy for the grandmother’s perseverance despite the

obstacles in her path. Yes, I am embarrassed to say that upon reflection I gave little thought to including in my class anything other than works that I personally liked.

Before my second semester of Introduction to Literature, I was preparing a reading list of the upcoming semester for my students. As the final copy of the reading schedule rolled off my printer, it suddenly dawned on me that I had been very prejudiced in my reading selections. I chose only authors whom I personally favored. What was I thinking? Had I not listened to Dr. Bergin in Clinical I, a class that stressed the importance of multicultural literature to students' learning? Was I asleep when my professor for History of the English Language talked of the canonical authors that preserved our Western heritage and the need for their inclusion in students' reading lists? Was I daydreaming when my Late American Literature instructor argued that women were the forgotten minority of writers not appearing on the American writing scene?

As I looked at my chosen list of authors, I saw the preferred authors of DeLisa Kerr-Ging. At this point in time, I had given no thought to including authors not of my personal preference. Then I began to question, "Should different authors than the ones on my list be included?" My list did include a wide range of genre styles from Leslie Marmon Silko's short story, "A Man to Send Rain Clouds" to Ernest Hemingway's short story, "A Cat in the Rain." When it came to authors of differing ethnic backgrounds, Toni Cade Bambara, an African-American woman, as well as John Keats, a European male, found their ways on my reading list. A fair amount of men and women were equally sprinkled on the list, so the gender issue appeared to be balanced. When it came

to issues of multiculturalism, I thought I had a good showing by including feminist writer Adrienne Rich and Helena Viramontes, an Hispanic author.

However, the above representation of authors was more by chance than by design on my part. These authors simply appeared because I liked them, and after some thought, I felt that I owed it to my students to reexamine my suggestions to ensure that I had their best reading interests at heart. Since I, as an English teacher at a community college, have the sole responsibility of selecting my reading curriculum, I needed to be able to provide justification for my selections, not only for myself, but for my students. I needed to reexamine the literary canon and its formation and to investigate the potential enrichment of multicultural readings for my students. In other words, I needed to know where the canon had been and to know in what direction to take it to best benefit my students, so I researched the literary canon from its start with the Greeks to present day.

For me, literature is becoming more a reflection of society. Women and minority authors are now receiving acknowledgment for their literary efforts in literature books. These new works further stretch literary teachers' time constraints because they only have so much allotted time in which to share their literary curriculum with students.

Furthermore, canonical literature purports works by Caucasian male authors, and works by that group of authors might not always be of benefit to some of my students. Not all my students are Caucasian males. Women as well as people of differing ethnicities and cultures enter my classroom, and I wanted to see to what extent my current students related to canonical and multicultural literature.

### **Significance of the Study**

With our growing multicultural society, Van Slambrouck (1998) feels that literary teachers need to use literature that meets students' needs. Does literature written by Caucasian males best provide a personal experience for all students? Does literature written by a female African American or a male Native American best provide a personal experience for all students?

This study examined to what extent students related their lived experiences to canonical and multicultural literature. I wanted to find out which literature the students best connected with on a personal level. Rosenblatt's Transactional Theory of the reading process was used to help me accomplish this task. Transactional Theory, as it applies to literary criticism and the teaching of literature, suggests "a reciprocal, meaningful, and mutually defining relationship" between the reader and the literary text. Transactional Theory proposes that the relationship between reader and text is much like that between the river and its banks, each working its effects upon the other, each contributing to the shape of the literature (Probst, 1987, p. 1). Using Rosenblatt's Transactional Theory, I wanted to see which literature students remember beyond a given test date. I wanted to see what literature they could apply to their daily lives.

The importance of this study was the relevance it will have on the selection of literature for my Introduction to Literature class. I can use this insight as a resource in preparing for future literature classes.

Furthermore, this study added to the existing research on student responses to literature by making one class' thoughts known on canonical and multicultural literature. Often, teachers' voices are heard debating the worth of canonical and/or multicultural literature. However, students' voices are not heard in regard to these literary selections, and that was why this study was of importance. Some literary teachers do not include students' choices in their curriculum. Literature teachers need to listen to students' voices before they plan their next literature curriculum because students are an integral, yet often forgotten component of the learning environment. The learning process should include the students' learning styles and interests. Hootstein (1996) found that some bond of connection must be formed between the subject matter and the learner in order for students to be motivated to learn. It stands to reason that if a student is not interested in the subject matter, he or she will not be motivated to learn. Hootstein (1996) advocates that teachers relate instruction to students' experiences.

### **Assumptions**

The assumption was made that the participants in this study would read each work discussed in class. Another assumption was made that students would be honest in answering the surveys and in doing the journal entries. It was assumed that students would turn in both the beginning and ending surveys as well as all their journal entries, so I would have a complete written account of their preferences regarding canonical and multicultural literature.

Finally, it was assumed that literature would provide a personal experience for students. It was further assumed that this personal experience would increase the educational benefit of the literature for students.

### **Limitations**

This study was limited to research done in one Introduction to Literature course at a community college. The results found in this class may not be applicable to populations differing from the ones written about in this dissertation. Moreover, the results of this study may or may not correspond to what a literature teacher might find in his or her own classroom.

In addition, this study was limited because students might have written responses in their journals and final surveys to please me. Students might have responded in a certain way because they felt that I was looking for a certain response.

### **Definition of Terms**

**Aesthetic Stance**—is that of the reader who comes to a text in a less directive frame of mind, seeking not particular information or the accomplishment of an assigned task, but rather the full emotional, aesthetic, and intellectual experience offered by a text (Probst, 1987, p. 2).

**Canonical Literature**— A canonical work has a timeless quality that elevates itself above the rest and stands the rigors of time. The literary critic and author Samuel Johnson once declared that “a piece of writing becomes literature if it has survived the century mark” (“Canon Formation,” 2001, p. 1).



**Culture**—the behaviors and beliefs of a community of people (Tomlinson, 2000, p. 3).

**Efferent Stance**—is the appropriate stance to one seeking information, regarding a particular subject (Probst, 1987, p. 2). Rosenblatt states, “The efferent stance is centered on the public, generally shared meanings, and less on the privately felt aspects” (as cited in Karolides, 1999, p. 166). With this stance, the reader is looking for particular information or accomplishing an assigned task. They are not seeking an aesthetic experience offered by the text.

**Efferent/Aesthetic Continuum**—According to Louise Rosenblatt:

I [Rosenblatt] am emphasizing the range of possible stances between the efferent and the aesthetic poles. Between the two poles, there is a sequence of possible proportions of attention to public and private aspects of sense. Students’ readings can be at one end of the pole or the other. But there are many, perhaps most, students’ readings with the proportion falling nearer the middle. (as cited in Karolides, 1999, p. 167)

**Literary Theme**—a central or dominant idea taken from a piece of literature

**Literature**—“Written texts that leave gaps for the reader to fill in from his/her own experience, which get the reader to think and feel by interacting with the text, thereby enhancing the reader’s life” (Tomlinson, 2000, p. 3). Such literature could be experienced in the form of novels, poems, short stories, articles, plays, films, advertisements, or even birthday cards (Tomlinson, 2000).

**Louise Rosenblatt’s Transactional Theory**—Transactional Theory, as it applies to literary criticism and the teaching of literature, suggests a “reciprocal, meaningful, and mutually defining relationship” between the reader and the literary text. Transactional Theory proposes that the relationship between reader and text is much like that between the river and its banks, each working its effects upon the other, each contributing to the shape of the literature (Probst, 1987, p. 1).

**Multicultural Literature**— The National Council for the Social Studies Task Force says, “Multicultural literature is literature such as poetry, short stories, novels, folklore, plays, essays, and autobiographies from various ethnic and cultural groups that promote the examination, understanding, and empathy for people from various ethnic and cultural groups” (as cited in Valdez, 1999, p. 8). In shorter terms, Chu (2000) writes, “Multicultural literature is defined as writing that includes all cultures” (p. 257). In addition, Banks (1991) states, “Multicultural literature reflects the social, political, and economic context in which it is created” (p. 10).

**Personal Reading Experience**—when students are able to relate a piece of literature to an experience they have had during their lifetime.

**Stance**—the way in which a reader reads a text, which is to say the stance that one adopts towards the text (Purves, 1988), such as the Efferent or Aesthetic stance.

**Students’ Interpretations of Literature**—According to Rosenblatt (as cited in Karolides, 1999), when we talk about students’ interpretation of the work, we are talking

about what is evoked, based on textual information, in the reader during a reading.

Students' interpretation of a work is backed with support from the text.

**Students' Perceptions of Literature**—students' opinions about a piece of literature before and after the students read the literature. Students' opinions are backed with support from the text, but are backed with students' personal feelings regarding the text.

### **Summary**

In this chapter, a background review of my teaching experiences helped frame my research questions. The overview of the study, the statement of the problem, the theoretical stance, the research questions, the purpose of the study, the significance of the study, the assumptions, the limitations, and the definition of terms were stated. The research questions asked to what extent students related to canonical and multicultural literature based on their lived experience.

## CHAPTER II

### REVIEW OF LITERATURE

*Literature is a powerful form of dialogue* (McCarthy, 1998, p. 257).

#### **Introduction**

First, the review of literature that follows visits the literary canon and its formation as well as takes a look at multicultural literature's use in the classroom. Second, the advocates of multicultural literature are heard along with research on the effects of multicultural literature on students. The first two sections are included because some teachers may not be familiar with the evolution of the canon and may not be familiar with what literature is labeled multicultural. Third, an overview of the teaching of the literary canon will be given. Fourth, the use of canonical and multicultural literature in textbooks will be presented. It is important for literature teachers to see how canonical and multicultural literature is used in the classroom.

Fifth, research will be presented which centers on the curriculum choices of English teachers at the secondary and college level when their students' perceptions and interpretations of literature are taken into consideration. This section will most closely examine the populations on which my study will focus. Finally, the research surrounding Louise Rosenblatt's Transactional Theory in regard to literary works and their influence on students' perceptions and interpretations will be examined. This section is included

because it gives teachers a theoretical perspective on how I plan to conduct my study. I will use Rosenblatt's aesthetic stance to look for students' ability to relate their lived experiences to literary themes found in canonical and multicultural literature.

### **A Look at the Literary Canon and Its Changing Face**

“The current academic debate in the popular press should not be surprising because the implications extend—far beyond the classroom” (Bredahl, 1989, p. ix). In “Implications of the Canon Debate,” (2001) the article states:

Though the debate over the literary canon may seem to be solely in the realm of academics, we must realize that the canon is part and parcel of society. Each of us has a voice in the formation and retention of so-called literary works. The debate is truly one about power, but armed with the right information, one can become, in turn, empowered. (p. 1)

Before the canon's formation can be broached, a definition of what constitutes a canonical work needs to be given. A “canonical work” is defined as “a work that has a timeless quality that elevates itself above the rest and stands the rigor of time” (“Canon Formation,” 2001, p. 1). The literary critic and author Samuel Johnson once declared that “each piece of writing becomes literature if it has survived the century mark” (“Canon Formation,” 2001, p. 1).

Because teachers face tremendous time constraints, especially in those first years of teaching, finding time to read anything other than the textbook and students' papers can be troublesome. The following account puts the literary history and its future into a

concise format for English teachers. What follows will shed some light on canonical and multicultural literature.

Landing (1998) writes, “When deciding on classic or more contemporary works, preparing a reading list for students can be akin to walking into a minefield” (B4). There is so much literature to choose from, and it is hard to choose which selections will work in the classroom.

Ottenhoff (1994) believes that the debate about the worth of canonical and multicultural literature to students in literary classrooms is still going strong and that the need for informed voices is very important as the struggle continues over what literary works we most value to be taught in our schools.

Moreover, when I began my teaching career, I can remember how overwhelmed I felt at all the choices I had in selecting a literature curriculum. I heard a myriad of voices ringing in my ears when I sat down to make my first Introduction to Literature reading list. I heard conflicting voices of former teachers debate the merits and shortcomings of canonical and multicultural literature. The voice of one teacher still haunts me in regard to this debate. She remarked, “You don’t need that multicultural literature in this part of Oklahoma; we are all white.” This teacher had forgotten the three Native American students sitting in the back row of her second hour. I do not think that she once considered sharing a poem by Native American Joy Harjo. I feel that they could have connected with the Native American experiences on which Harjo wrote, and her other Caucasian students might have benefited as well.

In addition, Ottenhoff (1994) writes of a sensible, informed voice needed to speak on canonical and multicultural literature. I know that my students' voices will be those sensible and informed voices because they bring a wealth of personal experience with them into the classroom. They can use their personal experience as a springboard in helping them understand the literature. They will lead me on this journey of discovery, and their perceptions and interpretations of literature will help define what are personal literary experiences for them. Hopefully, students' voices will inspire other literature teachers to use the information that follows to make their literary classrooms more conducive to personal experiences for their literature students.

However, before my student voices will be heard, I will present my own voice along with other writers of canonical and multicultural literature. Background on the canonical and multicultural literature must first be looked at, so teachers can see a clear view of the issues surrounding these topics.

The history of the literary canon is one of change. Casement (1996) writes: Over the centuries, the canonical works grew to encompass books from a variety of languages and national cultures that we identify as Western and includes American authors and ideas as well. Which canonical works have been in favor with curriculum designers has varied over time. But the idea of the canon, the agreement about what many of its contents are, and the practice of teaching

its works have been present throughout the development of Western culture. (p. 1) (see Figure 1)

Casement was not the only one to note the changing aspect of the literary canon. Gorak (1991) reiterates Casement's argument. She states that many writers feel that the canon operates on the basis of exclusion. Gorak further writes:

The historical evidence amassed in The Making of the Modern Canon indicates that no homogenizing entity called 'the Canon' ever existed. No matter the various meanings ascribed to 'the canon,' a standard, a sublime truth, a rule, a master-work, an artistic model, and, latterly, a book-list for educational use, no list has remained intact for centuries. Literary scholars made their selections, fallible as they were, and they remained. Although added to from time to time, the list has remained intact for centuries. (p. ix)

Casement (1996), author of The Great Canon Controversy, calls for a review of the canonical facts. He feels that many parties make broad generalizations about the literary canon without looking at its history. However, the past defines where the canon is now and where it is going in the future, and it is worthy of review. The following will trace the canonical timeline from the Greeks to present day.



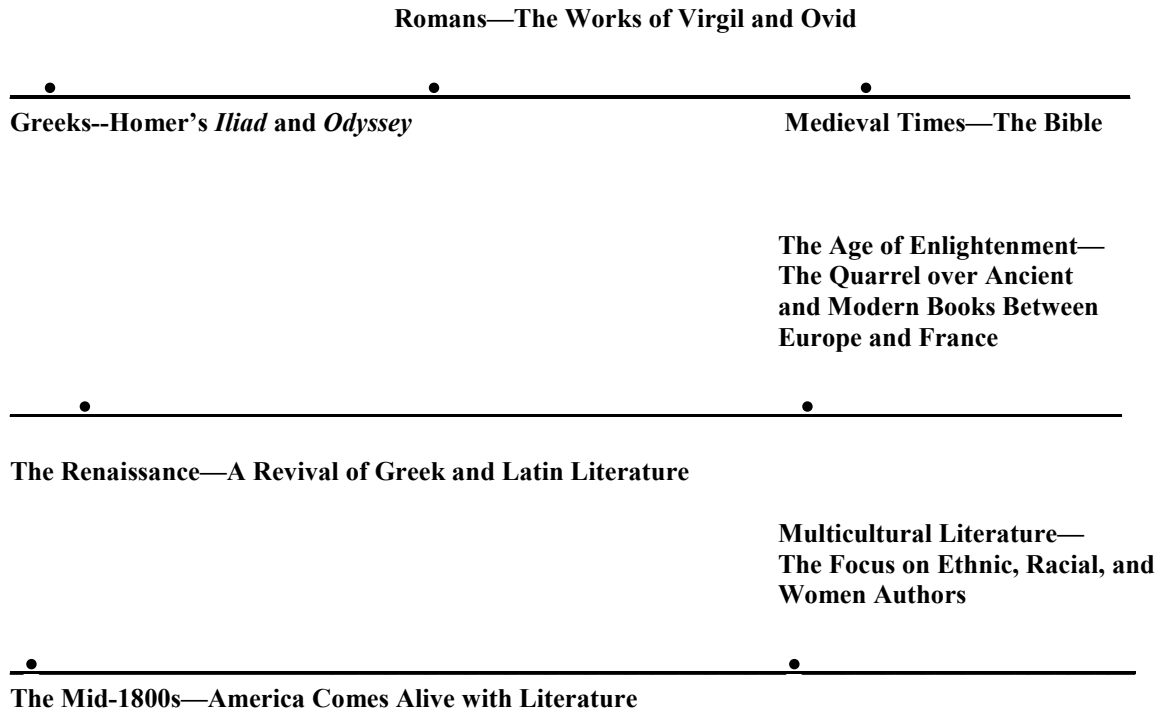


Figure 1. Literary Timeline Through the Ages.

### **The Literary Canon and Its Start with the Greeks**

The history of the evolving canon starts with the Greeks. The first canonical works were Homer's Illiad and Odyssey, which were composed in the eighth century B.C., although they were descriptive of a time several centuries earlier (Casement, 1996). By the end of the fifth century B.C., Greece was reaching the height of its classical age. The range of literature during this time period was broad in scope. Aristotle's Nicomachean Ethics told of how moral responsibility was attributed to individuals ("Aristotle," 2003), and Sophocles' tragedy Oedipus Rex spoke of how one man's good intentions turned disastrous. Likewise, names like Pindar, Sappho, Pythagoras, Herodotus, and Aeschylus had risen to the fore and were followed in the next several generations by Thucydides, Euripides, Astrophanes, Demosthenes, and Euclid (Casement, 1996).

### **The Literary Canon and Its Continuation with the Romans**

When the Romans came into power, they borrowed much of their literary style from Greek schooling. Hadas (1965) writes that when Roman writers needed to put their thoughts down on paper that they looked to the Greek model. In fact, Roman writers never ceased to be influenced by Greek literature. However, by the end of the Third Century B.C., Roman writers were developing a literary style all their own.

As Casement (1996) notes, the canon shifted with the rise and fall of cultures. He writes, "By the time of the late Empire, the four featured Latin authors were Virgil, Terence, Sallust, and Cicero" (p. 2). The writing during this time period was also wide in

scope. For instance, Virgil wrote the Aeneid which follows the legend of Aeneas' victory of the Trojans ("By Virgil," 2003), and Cicero (Casement, 1996) wrote on the workings of the government in On the Republic. Other prominent authors included Horace, Ennius, Ovid, Lucan, Nero, and Statius (Casement, 1996). Hadas (1965) shared that during the Fourth Century B.C., Rome's seat of power was moved to Constantinople and that its forums were ransacked by barbarian invaders. Roman literature suffered a severe blow during this time, but death did not come to the literary works. In later centuries, Latin's daughter tongues—French, Spanish, and Italian—would generate literature in scope and depth to equal that of the great Romans.

### **The Literary Canon and Its Focus During Medieval Times**

With the fall of the Roman Empire, the medieval times ushered in a reduced study of the great books to a mere shadow of the practice begun in Greece. The great books became the province of the church. Secular schools were no longer seen as worthy repositories of knowledge. Monasteries became the only centers of literacy, and the training done by them was oriented toward religion (Davies, 1996).

Furthermore, Gorak (1991) surmises that the adoption of a Christian canon brought about drastic changes in reading and in the ideas of history. Now, literature was meant to aid in the construction of the Christian soul whereas before it was meant to aid in the construction of the human image. As the tides changed from a Roman to a Christian perspective, the canon reflected the changes. The Bible took center stage over the considered pagan works of the Greek and Roman cultures.

### **The Literary Canon and Its March Through the Ninth Century**

As time marched forward, the canon continued to reflect the society from which it grew. Casement (1996) states that near the beginning of the Ninth Century, study of the great books experienced a revival inspired by the influence of Charlemagne. This period brightened the prospects for renewed interest in classical learning, especially the recovery of Greek philosophical and theological thought. Also, new literary works were added. For example, Beowulf, written by an unknown author, was penned during this time.

### **The Literary Canon and Its Place in the Renaissance Period**

Never before in the Sixteenth Century had men been so intoxicated with the power of the written word; never before had the written word reached so many people. “Printing made it possible; Reformation furor and Renaissance elan combined to accelerate it” (Simon, 1966, p. 123). During the Renaissance, secondary schools concentrated on teaching the Latin and Greek languages and their great books; universities focused on a longer list of those works, and they were read more thoroughly (Casement, 1996).

However, “preoccupations with the Greek and Latin classics were replaced by writings in the vernacular; religious fervor associated with the Reformation was superseded by secularism, and literacy, once the monopoly of the scholarly elite, spread to the people” (Simon, 1966, p. 123). During the Sixteenth Century, Humanist works gave way to the launch of full-blown national literature (Davies, 1996). As the Renaissance gave way to the Enlightenment period, intellectual culture underwent

another transformation. This metamorphosis happened largely outside of the educational institutions, but offered a more profound challenge (Casement, 1996).

With this time period, there came authors who became firmly embedded in the literary canon. William Shakespeare entered the literary stage; his prose and poetry were considered commentaries on human nature. In addition, Sir Thomas More, author of Utopia, took his place in the literary canon with his look at a perfect society.

### **The Literary Canon and the Enlightenment Period's Battle of the Books**

During the Enlightenment period, authors' thinking turned to progress. "The phrase 'Enlightenment' was frequently employed by writers of the period who were convinced that they were emerging from centuries of darkness and ignorance into a new age enlightened by reason, science, and a respect for humanity" (Tackett, 2001a, p. 1). For instance, in the mid-Thirteenth Century, the works of Ptolemy, an astronomer, were held in high canonical regard, but during the time of Enlightenment, the works of Copernicus were seen as a better replacement for the former work. In addition, a greater number of quality vernacular work was being written as authors increasingly turned toward the modern languages as their means of expression (Casement, 1996).

Furthermore, during the age of Enlightenment, a major intellectual controversy in England and France was brewing. This controversy came to be known as the "quarrel between ancients and moderns" or the "battle of the books" (Casement, 1996). The debate over ancients versus moderns is nothing new when it comes to the increasing volume of literary choices for literature teachers.

### **The Literary Canon in the Modern Light of the Nineteenth Century**

During the Nineteenth Century, the study of modern languages and the reading of literature written in those languages came to the forefront. Literary works were sometimes read in the original language, but often, they were translated into English. With several earlier centuries' worth of modern literary works now eligible for inclusion in the humanities' curriculum, some of those works replaced some of the ancients (Casement, 1996). Further, the Nineteenth Century was adding many new works of its own. Goethe, Austen, Dickens, Eliot, Melville, Flaubert, Ibsen, Tolstoy, Twain, and James wanted their recognition on the literary scene.

While Europe debated the value of ancients versus moderns, the American colonies were established, and the American school system began to develop (Casement, 1996). American literature during this time shows America's quest to understand and define itself. "With the flowering of prose in the mid-1800s, the young nation found its own voice. By then, fiction had become the dominant literary genre in America" (Tackett, 2001b, p. 1). American literature called to be in the canon.

### **The Literary Canon and the Twentieth Century**

The Twentieth Century followed in the fashion of the latter Nineteenth Century. The expansion of the canon continued. When the century drew to a close, authors like Shaw, Proust, Woolf, Faulkner, Kafka, Camus, Sartre, Mead, Einstein, and many more took their places among the greats. In contrast, the changes that led to scaling down the study of great books grew stronger.

On an interesting note, a survey of the most widely used literary works in high schools found that the high school canon changed very little between 1963-1989 (Aiex, 1989). During this time period, in every anthology was the core of the canon. For example, Anne Bradstreet, author of “To My Dear and Loving Husband,” had only one work shown during this time period (Dolle, 1990). Only one work is shown by this female Puritan author alongside the male authors of William Bradford, author of The Mayflower Compact, and Edward Taylor, author of the metaphysical poem, “Huswifery.”

#### **An Elaboration on the Changing Quality of the Literary Canon**

With a brief look at the canon’s history, readers can see that the canon’s content has fluctuated with the changing of the guards. Editor Robert von Hallberg (1984), editor of Canons (as cited in Gorak, 1991, p. 1), writes, “A canon is commonly seen as what other people, once powerful, have made and what should now be opened up, demystified, or eliminated altogether.” Bredahl (1989) agrees with the editor’s statement. He desires not to see noncanonical works simply brought into the canon. He contends that those random additions simply increase the power of those defining the canon. He calls for a rethinking of the literary canon as a whole. He states, “The canon should be broken open by imaginations that violate the assumptions built into the idea of the canon. America’s accepted body of literature needs to focus attention on the writings of ethnic and women writers” (p. ix).

Bredahl realizes that America is not made up of only Caucasian American men. America is much more. It has women, people of color, people of different cultures, and

people of different ethnicities who make up this diverse land, and their voices need to be heard not only in everyday life, but in the literature that students read.

### **The Literary Canon, the Beginnings of Multicultural Literature, and the Multicultural Literature of the 1980s and 1990s**

Since the changing contents of the literary canon have now been established, it is time to look at the issue of literature labeled as “multicultural,” a literature considered outside the domains of the current literary canon. The term “multicultural literature” was first coined in the 1920s by educators who started writing about intercultural and ethnic studies used to orient the population to newly arrived immigrants (Antonette, 2005). Multicultural literature would further evolve into the canonical controversy of the 1980s and 1990s (Casement, 1996), and the larger term of “multicultural education” needs to be addressed first. Banks (1993) maintains:

Multicultural education is an idea, an educational reform movement, and an ongoing process whose major goal is to change the structure of educational institutions so that male and female students, exceptional students, and students who are members of diverse racial, ethnic, and cultural groups will have an equal chance to achieve academically in school. (as cited in Valdez, 1999, p. 3)

One of the primary ways to accomplish the mission of multicultural education is through multicultural literature. The National Council for the Social Studies Task Force (1992) says, “Multicultural literature is literature such as poetry, short stories, novels, folklore, plays, essays, and autobiographies from various ethnic and cultural groups that promote



the examination, understanding, and empathy for people from various ethnic and cultural groups” (as cited in Valdez, 1999, p. 8). In shorter terms, Chu (2000) defines multicultural literature as writing that includes all cultures. In addition, Banks (1991) states that multicultural literature reflects the social, political, and economic context from which it came.

Furthermore, Phillips offers this assessment of multicultural literature; he writes, “There is more [multicultural] material used today in schools, but it is used sporadically and inconsistently. It has a tangential character. We need to get to the core of what is the appropriate canon for this day and age” (as cited in Van Slambrouck, 1998, p. 1).

### **The Advocates of Multicultural Literature Are Heard**

Many multicultural supporters see the benefits of this type of literature used in classrooms. The National Council of Teachers of English (1987) feels that students should not be denied access to multicultural literature. They believe students should experience the process of engaging a text and integrating its meaning with their lives.

Similarly, Banks (1991) feels that it is essential for all members of American society to develop their multicultural literacy—an understanding of racial, ethnic, and cultural groups and their significance in today’s society. Banks believes that “once the multicultural door is opened to students, the legitimacy of the voice, content, and style of these writings will touch students deeply” (as cited in Valdez, 1999, p. 3). The readers will be comforted by the universality of the human experience and excited and inspired by its diversity (Alexander, 1994).

Additionally, Banks (1992) believes that a school's curriculum should encourage and assist students to understand the values and beliefs of their community. He cautions that "the curriculum does not serve its target audience responsibly or fairly if it constructs cultural stone walls that enforce boundaries among individuals" (p. 32). Rather, he asserts that individuals should be freed from their own ethnic limits and encouraged to develop an appreciation for diversity that perpetuates the growth of a more fair-minded citizenry.

Moreover, Banks (1991) states:

Multicultural literature should help students to develop empathy for differing groups and to give voice to all participants in U.S. history and culture. It should help students to know, to care, and to act in ways that will develop and foster a democratic and just society where all groups experience cultural democracy and empowerment. (p.13)

American History instructor, Jim Tracy, agrees with Bank's viewpoint. He emphasizes that students live in a multicultural world and that they need to become comfortable in talking about cultural differences. He feels that literature is a valuable resource in providing students with opportunities to deal with differing points of view (as cited in Landing, 1998).

Peter Erickson (1991), a research librarian at the Clark Art Institute, states, "The point in literary studies is not to create absolute, immovable barriers, but to acknowledge

that readers' identities need to be taken into account if we are to understand the culture we hold in common" (B3).

Proponents of the multicultural canon feel it is easy to see why many minority authors are seen as intrinsically noncanonical. Their belief contends that the process of inclusion or exclusion of texts is identical to the representation or nonrepresentation of certain social groups (Guillory, 1993).

For example, Taxel (1992) reviewed several books about Christopher Columbus. These books were examined to show, that with several important exceptions, "most authors continue to present a romantic and mythic conception of Columbus as a great adventurer and ignore the catastrophic impact his arrival had on the native people of the 'New World'" (p. 30). In this article, Taxel's (1992) demand for multicultural books needs to be seen as part of an interpretative war, a long struggle to ensure that important narratives, such as history and literature, do not remain exclusively in the hands of the elite.

In addition, Barrera, Liguori, and Salas (1992) conclude that teaching multicultural literature is ultimately not about texts and stories, but that it is about people. They feel the successful use of multicultural texts and stories depends greatly on the multicultural awareness and understanding of the teacher and the classroom environment.

### **Research Involving the Effects of Multicultural Literature on Students**

Nieto (1992) finds that students like to read stories about themselves. Although children within the majority culture read about themselves all the time, children from other cultures typically do not have the opportunity to see themselves in books.

Furthermore, Ford, Stoodt, Amspaugh, and Hunt, after observing elementary reading classrooms, surmise that multicultural literature has special appeal for all students. Through encountering children from other cultures, students learn to value the similarities and differences among people, making for a more understanding world (as cited in Ford, 2000).

### **The Literary Canon and the Teaching of That Canon by English Teachers**

Multicultural advocates feel that English teachers help perpetuate the so-called immovable canon. They blame the training programs of English teachers. They feel that “these programs remain loyal to their Renaissance roots and rarely address cultural affiliation” (Alexander, 1994, p. 268).

Alexander further declares:

Most senior lead English teachers were educated according to the melting pot theory that espouses the commonalties of human beings by blurring ethnicity and emphasizing the assimilation of immigrants. As students, these teachers were indoctrinated in the timeless validity and intellectual achievement of the canon’s selections. As teachers, then, they tend to perpetuate the values on which they were reared. (p. 267)

Alexander (1994) continues by telling of two English teachers discussing multicultural literature. The teachers remarked, "It is watered-down literature. The college offers courses in it because it sells. It interests those teachers who need a new gimmick to lure their students into attentive and obedient behavior. Do not waste our budget money on trendy literature" (p. 266).

Shapiro (1982) feels that the "back to basics" proponent, like those mentioned above, limits the use of multicultural selections. Shapiro states that limited budgets and pressure to teach the "basics" hinder the teachers who want to pluralize the study of literature.

Despite the opposition to multicultural literature by some, Van Slambrouck (1998) contends that the push for a broader selection of literature in high schools has been underway for more than a decade. He asserts that a more diverse literary stance is accepted among professional educators. The only debate is about finding the right balance between the old and the new literature.

In summary, the classroom teacher is undoubtedly the most important element in a literature program (Aix, 1989). "They will be called upon to redefine their positions within the dynamics of classroom learning. Recognizing the moral imperative implicit in the study of multicultural literature, they also will become learners, in search of the truth" (Alexander, 1994, p. 269).

Hilliard (1991/1992) challenges educators to develop politically correct curricula

suitable for a democratic society and notes that ultimately, “if the curriculum is centered in truth, it will be pluralistic, for the simple fact is that human culture is the product of the struggles of all humanity, not the possession of a single race or ethnic group” (p. 13).

Most importantly, teachers need to remember that students respond to literature according to their experiences and their world perspectives. According to Lehr and Thompson (2000), it is important for English teachers to create the right balance between old and new to meet students’ needs.

#### **A Look at Canonical and Multicultural Literature in Classroom Textbooks**

Studies of literature instruction in schools also indicate that literature selections remain very narrowly defined, “with the literary canon changing with glacial slowness” (Applebee, 1990, p. 67). While some progress since the 1960s has been noted in broadening the range of authors included in classroom literature anthologies, such modest gains do not necessarily translate into changed classroom practices. Analyzing responses from a random sampling of 650 secondary schools across the United States, Applebee (1990) concludes that literary selections taught in the classroom remained narrowly defined. Applebee states:

In the present survey, only 16 percent of the selections chosen for study during a five-day period were written by women, and only 7 percent were by non-White authors. The narrowness of the selections is particularly troublesome given some 20 years of emphasis in the professional literature on the need to move beyond traditional selections, to better recognize the diverse cultural traditions that

contribute to contemporary American life as well as to the broader world of which we are a part. (p. 122)

Though proceeding with, perhaps, glacial slowness, there is change afoot. Across the nation, to varying degrees, English teachers are now being asked to reexamine their literature choices in order to better reflect and more accurately portray the multicultural reality of the United States (Bigler & Collins, 1993).

Currently, the English curriculum reflects a more multicultural perspective. Students in the United States represent more cultural backgrounds than ever before. Because of these changes, students will increasingly read works that have a different cultural perspective from their own. In fact, today, many teachers are redesigning their curriculum to account for the new American multicultural constituency (Webster, 2001).

A current example at the college level can be seen in the new Heath Anthology of American Literature. Edmundson (1990) notes that the anthology intends to be comprehensive and representative of cultural diversity. However, it slights some American groups, such as Middle Eastern and Eastern European people. Edmonson feels that the slight is not the book's main problem. The problem, for him, lies in the book's 6,000 pages of text. He asks, "How can those pages be fitted into a year's course, much less a semester's, at better than a sprint through the pages? It is likely that the faculty will select the curriculum, and that selection will fail to meet the cultural realities of society" (p. 1133). As Harris (1992) further adds, "Recent textbook anthologies have

fattened noticeably in their editors' attempts to represent greater cultural diversity, but the length of the semesters has remained the same" (p. 118).

### **The Research That Shows How Students' Interpretations and Perceptions of Literature Influence Their Teachers' Curriculum**

Jordan and Purves (1990) utilized African American, Asian, Native American, Hispanic/Latino, and Anglo-European literature in their study. They also included literature related to women's issues. The researchers began by interviewing secondary and university teachers who taught literature. These teachers told of the problems that students faced when approaching texts from outside their own culture.

Next, during the course of the 1991-92 school year, Jordan and Purves (1990) interviewed students in several secondary schools concerning their understanding of the courses' aims and objectives and of specific texts of one or more of the target cultures. The questions paralleled those asked the teachers and arose from the teachers' responses to the questions.

Jordan and Purves (1990) noted that there were some common themes among teachers when discussing students' perceptions of multicultural literature. They found that students needed to like a literary piece in order to understand it. Also, the researchers discovered that students were inclined to read their own culture and experiences into a work and that students wanted a good story line in the literature. In contrast, students resisted points of view [found in the literature] that were unfamiliar to them.



Furthermore, Jordan and Purves (1990) cited:

It should be clear that these students responded to literature on a personal basis. Even when told that a text was from another culture, students did not look at the text as a cultural artifact. Instead, they reacted to the story or to the characters therein. If they could identify with someone in the text, there was a chance that they would like the text. If they understood little or found little to identify with, then they tended not to like it. Consistently, they tended to ignore the author and the location of the text in their stated responses. (pp. 12-13)

In addition, Ellen Bigler and James Collins (1995) conducted a case study that looked at the teaching of literature in an upstate New York middle school in the ethnically polarized community of Arnhem. The majority of their data included interviews and observations in the schools and at community events during the 1991-1992 school year. Interviews with teachers and students, along with follow-up interviews, were conducted the following 1992-1993 school year.

During several classroom observations in Mrs. L's classroom, an Arnhem middle school teacher, Bigler and Collins (1995) noted the traditional nature of her [Mrs. L's] literature selection and her avoidance of issues of inequality and prejudice. On the other hand, they emphasized that in these respects she is a perfectly normal teacher of her generation. However, at times, she chose to ignore students' comments on multicultural literature because she saw those comments as too politically charged. Furthermore, there is little in the educational backgrounds of Arnhem teachers or American teachers more to

predispose them toward embracing the merits of a more wide-ranging literature curriculum. Most current teachers acquired their degrees before multicultural education was discussed in college classrooms.

At the case study's close, Bigler and Collins (1995) argued that the integrating of voices previously unheard of is not a straightforward process of one set of literary choices for another. They found that teachers at this middle school had trouble in teaching multicultural literature to students because their collegial background did not include the sharing of multicultural ideas with them. Therefore, since the teachers had no formal training with multiculturalism, they avoided its use in the classroom.

Similarly, Agee's (1998) study examined some of the factors that shaped how 18 experienced English teachers in New York and Georgia high schools assessed their instructional effectiveness and how they used their assessments to make instructional decisions for the teaching of literature. The research focused on three issues: (a) how these teachers gauged their effectiveness, (b) what factors shaped their beliefs about effective teaching and learning, and (c) how their assessments informed decisions about instruction.

To examine the larger system of beliefs that informed these teachers' perspectives on effective teaching and learning, the researcher collected data on factors that shaped their decisions, the kinds of evidence they sought to gauge their effectiveness, and how their teaching reflected their beliefs (Agee, 1998).

Agee (1998) found that these English teachers perceived the effectiveness of their literature instruction to be based on their purposes for teaching English and their perceptions of whose voices should be heard and valued in the classroom. What their students learned about literature and how they learned it depended upon the perspectives that their teachers brought into the classrooms.

### **Louise Rosenblatt's Transactional Theory in Providing an Avenue for Literary Teachers to Select Their Curriculum**

Researcher Louise Rosenblatt believes that students and the literature they read do a dance with one another across the pages of a literary work. She feels that students have a transaction with a text, where students can make meaningful connections with it. The meaningful connections come when students have the needed background to understand what the text is saying. Rosenblatt's transaction between reader and text is important for literature teachers. When and if students have a meaningful connection to a text, literature teachers can ask why a meaningful connection was made and by whom it was made. This theory will help literature teachers to better meet the needs of current and future students. The information that follows tells about the important research Louise Rosenblatt has done in understanding readers' relationships with the text.

Rosenblatt's views set forth in The Reader, the Text, and the Poem (1978) have been tested and tempered by years of her observations and reflections on readers' involvements with texts ranging from Chaucer and Shakespeare to Joyce and Wallace

Stevens. Rosenblatt (1978) feels that an important role of the literature teacher is to understand the students in her classroom and to consider some of the factors that might mold the students' responses to the literature.

For example, Rosenblatt did research on a freshman class at a New England women's college to show that it is important to consider some of the factors that mold a reader's response to a certain literary work. Rosenblatt (1938) asked the girls, "Why do you read novels, anyway?" (p. 43). Rosenblatt (1938) found:

The college girls placed great emphasis on literature as a means of broadening one's knowledge of people and society. This reflected their adolescent curiosity about life. And for the average reader as well, literature contributes to the enlargement of experience. We participate in imaginary situations; we look on at characters living through crises, and we explore ourselves and the world around us through the medium of literature. (p. 45)

Moreover, Rosenblatt (1978) holds to the belief that students need to be given the opportunity to engage with literature on a personal level. She believes that the role of the literary teacher is to provide an atmosphere that enables students to have an honest and meaningful relationship with the literature.

### **Rosenblatt's Transactional Theory Paradigm**

Rosenblatt (1994) sees transaction, language, and linguistic transactions all coming together to characterize her Transactional Theory of the reading process. To Rosenblatt, "transaction was constant with a philosophical position increasingly accepted

in the 20<sup>th</sup> century” (p. 1058). Her paradigm required a break with entrenched habits of thinking. “The old stimulus-response, subject-object, individual-social dualisms gave way to recognition of transactional relationships” (p. 1059). Rosenblatt saw human beings as continually transacting with the environment around them.

When it comes to language usage, Rosenblatt (1994) believes that the words chosen to convey meaning are based on people’s transactions with a particular environment. Rosenblatt feels that “people make sense of a new situation or transaction and make meanings by applying, reorganizing, revising, or extending elements from their personal linguistic-experiential reservoirs” (p. 1061). In other words, the meaning people derive from a situation depends on their lived experiences

In the same fashion, when it comes to reading, Rosenblatt states that there is an exchange between readers and the text based on the readers’ transactions with their environment. Rosenblatt sees it as a dance. What readers take from a reading depends upon their lived experiences. The dance, the meaning taken from a text, depends on the students’ ability to relate the text to their lived experiences.

### **Rosenblatt’s Transactional Theory As a Whole**

Rosenblatt’s Transactional Paradigm, as it applies to literary criticism and the teaching of literature, suggests a reciprocal and meaningful relationship between the reader and the text. Rosenblatt’s Transactional Theory proposes that “the relationship between reader and text is much like that between the river and its banks, each working

its effects upon the other, each contributing to the shape of the literature” (Probst, 1987, p. 1).

Rosenblatt further (1978) compared the relationship between the reader and the text as a live circuit. As with the elements of an electric circuit, each component of the reading process functions by virtue of the presence of the others. When one component, the reader, the text, the time, or the place, changes a different circuit, a different reading event occurs. Not the words, as uttered in sounds or inked marks on a page, constitute the poem, but the responses to them. For the reader, the poem is lived during his transactions with the text. Rosenblatt saw students’ lived experiences as fundamental to the relationship forged with the literature. Given different lived experiences, the relationship students forge with the literature will be different.

Furthermore, Rosenblatt (1978) asserts that there could be a danger with the Transactional view in that it focuses too narrowly on the reader’s mind and is too isolated from anything outside the reader. The text is more than paper and markings. The transaction is between the reader and what he feels the words mean. The paradox comes in that he must use the memory of his world in understanding the text as well as realize that the text is part of the world outside himself. When the boundary of the inner and outer world is broken down, the literary work leads him into a new world of discovery.

Rosenblatt (1978) contends that each time a reader experiences a text that the text becomes new to the reader. The process of understanding a work involves an attempt to grasp all the elements through which the author conveys his sense of the world. The

reader must make new connections with the literature each time that he reads a work because he has had more lived experiences to draw upon, and consequently, those experiences would change the way he looked at the literature since his first reading of it.

In addition, Rosenblatt (1978) writes that the reader of any text must actively draw upon past experiences and elicit meaning from the words based upon the reader's purpose for reading. She determined, through her years of research with undergraduate and graduate students, that "the reader performs very different activities during aesthetic and nonaesthetic readings" (p. 23). She feels that the contrast was derived from the difference in the reader's focus during the reading.

In nonaesthetic reading, Rosenblatt states (1978) "the reader's attention is focused primarily on what will remain as the residue *after* the reading—the information to be acquired, the logical solution to a problem, the actions to be carried out" (pp. 22-23). With this type of reading, the reader is primarily concerned with what he will carry away from the reading.

In aesthetic reading, in contrast, "the reader's primary concern is with what happens *during* the reading. In aesthetic reading, the reader's attention is centered directly on what he is living through during his relationship with that particular text" (Rosenblatt, 1978, pp. 24-25). With this stance, students are not seeking particular information or the accomplishment of an assigned task, but rather the emotional, aesthetic, and intellectual experience offered by the text.

Rosenblatt (1994) believes that a reader must adopt a conscious or unconscious stance that guides the reader's purpose for reading. Rosenblatt (1978) argues that a given text can be read either efferently or aesthetically. She writes that readers might focus their attention on "the qualitative living-through of what they derive from the text of 'Ode on a Grecian Urn,' or they might turn their attention to the efferent analysis of the poem's syntax" (p. 25).

Rosenblatt (1978) contends that a person's reading must fall somewhere in a continuum, determined by whether the reader adopts a predominately aesthetic stance or a predominately efferent stance. She feels that a particular stance determines the mix of public and private elements that fall within the scope of a reader's attention.

Rosenblatt (1978) elaborates that "efferent" and "aesthetic" reflect the two main ways of looking at the world, often summed up as "scientific" and "artistic." She believes that it was necessary to emphasize that a predominant stance does not rule out fluctuations. "Within a particular aesthetic reading, attention may at times turn from the experiential synthesis to efferent analysis, as the reader recognizes some technical strategy" (p. 1067).

Furthermore, Rosenblatt (1994) as well as Ames (1955) and Cantril & Livingston (1963) found that perception depends on the viewer's selection and organization of visual cues according to past experiences, expectations, needs, and interests. The perception may be revised through continued transactions between the perceiver and the perceived. Not only does the way students relate to a text depend upon their purpose for reading it,



but their ability to relate to a text depends upon their lived experiences in establishing a connection with a piece.

### **Final Words of Wisdom from Louise Rosenblatt**

Rosenblatt (1938) emphasizes near the end of Literature As Exploration that students' personal responses to literature will be based on their attitudes toward human beings. Any attempt to ignore these student reactions would destroy the foundation upon which greater student sensitivity for others could be built. Rosenblatt contends that readers bring their lived experiences with them as they transact with a text. She sees the value in students sharing their lived experiences with others. Through this sharing, Rosenblatt feels that a world of thoughtful learning and deeper understanding can be opened for all students of literature.

### **Summary**

This review of literature has shown one view of the changing face of the canon. It has shown that multicultural literature is being placed in literary textbooks. It has shown that many classroom teachers struggle in teaching both canonical and multicultural literature. It has shown how some literature teachers choose their curriculum choices based on students' perception and interpretations of that literature. Furthermore, it has provided insight into Rosenblatt's Transactional Theory by establishing an important link between the reader and the text that will be utilized in this research study. When reading a text, Rosenblatt believed that meaningful connections come when students relate their lived experiences to that text.

With this review of literature, I wanted to paint a picture of the past and present state of literary curricula in the United States. By providing this information, I wanted literature teachers to prepare for their future by making informed decisions on their literary curriculum choices. To do that, literature teachers needed to see the past literary choices and to consider the newer multicultural literature entering their textbooks. Literature teachers needed to see that students have a wealth of information they can share to make the classroom experience more meaningful for all involved. It is important to ask as literature teachers, “For whom are we doing the teaching?” and “Why is what we are teaching meaningful or not meaningful to them?”

In answering these questions, literature teachers need to listen to the invaluable voices of their students. Those students can best answer those questions of what types of literature foster a personal relationship with the literature utilized in this study.

## CHAPTER III

### METHODOLOGY

*Teacher research involves collecting and analyzing data as well as presenting it to others in a systematic way (Hubbard & Power, 1999, p. 3).*

#### **Introduction**

This study was a teacher research study of the types of literature that engaged students' interests. I used qualitative research methods to request survey responses and journal writings from students asking the extent to which certain types of literature elicited a personal experience with students. The following sections are outlined in this chapter: methodology, design of study, participant selection process, course description, data sources, theme analysis, trustworthiness, quality issues, and ethical issues.

#### **Methodology**

This research study was one of teacher research. I questioned the extent to which students' lived experiences related to canonical and multicultural literature. I knew my students could provide insight in understanding this classroom phenomenon. Hubbard and Power (1999) write, "Teachers are surprised and delighted to realize that research can focus on problems they are trying to solve in their own classrooms. At its best, teacher research is a natural extension of good teaching" (p. 3).

McCutcheon and Jung (1990) identify teacher research as a systematic inquiry into classroom practice that focuses on the practical application of the research findings in the classroom. Teacher research seeks to answer questions and solve problems that arise from the daily life of the classroom and put the findings into immediate practice. In conducting teacher research, teachers intentionally investigate what goes on in the classroom to determine if it is of benefit to their students.

Teacher researchers go about their research in a very systematic way by using multiple and diverse research instruments to check the validity and reliability of their findings as well as to paint a true portrait of what goes on in their classrooms (Wiggins, 1998).

Seven years ago, I began teaching an Introduction to Literature course, and I have always questioned my literary selections used in teaching the course. van Manen (1990, p. 154) writes of pedagogical tact as “taking personal action to do what is right and good” in the classroom. I wondered about what types of literature engaged students’ interests and to what extent students related to canonical and multicultural literature used in my classroom. The knowledge gained from this study will help me provide future students with literary experiences that are meaningful to them, not literary experiences they forget when they leave my classroom.

These questions have led me to investigate the answers to these questions in a systematic way by using multiple research instruments. Results may help other teachers learn about how students relate to canonical and multicultural literature. van Manen’s

phenomenological theory (1990) purports that research involving the lived experiences of students can make a teacher more aware of the meaning and significance found in pedagogical situations, and that was my hope in this study; I wanted to learn from students' lived experiences which types of literature, canonical or multicultural, engaged students' interests. The findings from this study will be used to create a literary curriculum that students' will be engaged with and will grow from the literary experiences offered in the course.

Teacher research is descriptive in nature because it involves "gathering data that describes classroom events and then organizes, tabulates, depicts, and describes the data collection" (Grace, 2001, p.1). By using students' journals, their survey responses, and my teaching journal, I will describe the ways in which my students related to canonical and multicultural literature and "will build a knowledge base, concerning the particulars of classroom practice through reflection, inquiry, and action" (Hansen, 1997, p. 3).

The keys to good teaching are found in a teacher's own classroom, looking at the students, curriculum, and his or her own role as an educator. I spoke with authority when I talked of my students and my curriculum. I was in touch with what informs my teaching, and that gave me the authority to share with other teachers what I found in my classroom, in hopes that my findings would inform other teachers of literature.

### **Design of the Study**

In a teacher research study, teachers are propelled by a desire to improve their classroom practice through the asking of their own questions and the finding of those

answers in their own classrooms. Teacher research is inquiry in the context of focused efforts to improve the classroom environment (Rigsby, 2005). Teacher researchers often design their own research instruments and analyze the data to improve their classroom practice. The procedures in conducting teacher research follow an orderly process. Since this study worked to capture students' lived experiences in relation to the literature they read, it provided very personal and in-depth accounts of students' connections with canonical and multicultural literature based on their lived experiences. English teachers may be able to use the information gathered in this study to help in creating their literary curriculum. In addition, this study may be used as a foundation for further research to be done on students relating to the literature they read.

The data collection process for this study consisted of two student surveys and multiple student journals. Written consent was obtained from each student and from the college where the study was conducted. Each student was given the right to withdraw from the study at any time. Each student's identity and responses to surveys and journals was kept confidential.

### **Participant Selection Process**

I obtained permission to conduct research from the Institutional Review Board to insure that the rights and welfare of the students were protected (see Appendix D). The participant selection process began after my proposal approval and after permission had been granted from the Institutional Review Board. In addition, written permission was obtained from the president of the college where the study was conducted.

Furthermore, the students were asked to sign a consent form after an explanation of their involvement in this study (see Appendix C). That explanation told how this study was on a voluntary basis and how no compensation of any kind would be given for students' participation in this study. Students were informed that their participation or nonparticipation would have no bearing on their grade in the course. Students were informed at the time of the explanation and on the consent form that they could leave the study without question at any time.

After the consent forms were collected, each student drew a number that was used in place of his/her name. Each student was to remember his/her number and place it on every document that he/she turned in to me. This number served as a descriptor for each student, insuring his/her anonymity in the study. Also, the use of a number freed each student to write honestly and reflectively about the literature discussed in class. Non-participants did not write journal entries about the works utilized in the study and did not complete the first and second surveys utilized in the study.

### **Course Description**

This Introduction to Literature course focused on the analysis of literary devices, such as plot, setting, character, points of view, symbol, and theme. Students used these devices to garner personal meaning from the story (e.g., Students discussed the themes of the short stories or poems. Students shared what symbols in the short stories or poems meant to them. Students shared how points of view can be used effectively in the short stories or poems). Students were asked to use the classroom text, the Norton Anthology

to Literature, Eighth Edition, to support their thoughts. My reading list of authors and their works was categorized by genre and as to whether I considered the author to be canonical or multicultural. The reading list is as follows:

Canonical Literature Defined As Caucasian Male Authors by the Teacher

Short Stories

“A Rose for Emily”—William Faulkner  
“Cat in the Rain”—Ernest Hemingway  
“A Cask of Amontillado”—Edgar Allan Poe  
“An Occurrence at Owl Creek Bridge”—Ambrose Bierce  
“Young Goodman Brown”—Nathaniel Hawthorne

Poems

“Ode on a Grecian Urn”—John Keats  
“On My First Son”—Ben Jonson  
“A Last Confession”—W. B. Yeats  
“Shall I Compare Thee to a Summer’s Day”—William Shakespeare  
“Dover Beach”—Mathew Arnold  
“Fireflies in the Garden”—Robert Frost

Non-Canonical Literature Defined As Female Authors and/or Authors of Color by the Teacher

Short Stories

“Happy Endings”—Margaret Atwood (Caucasian Female)  
“Why I Live at the P.O.”—Eudora Welty (Caucasian Female)  
“The Yellow Wallpaper”—Charlotte Perkins Gilman (Caucasian Female)  
“A Story of an Hour”—Kate Chopin (Caucasian Female)  
“A Good Man Is Hard to Find”—Flannery O’Connor (Caucasian Female)

Poems

“We Real Cool”—Gwendolyn Brooks (African-American Female)  
“Barbie Doll”—Marge Piercy (Caucasian Female)  
“Sympathy”—Paul Laurence Dunbar (African-American Male)



“We Wear the Mask”—Paul Laurence Dunbar (African-American Male)  
“Ballad of Birmingham”—Dudley Randall (African-American Male)  
“Diving into the Wreck”—Adrienne Rich (Caucasian Female)

Furthermore, my Introduction to Literature course met two times a week on a Tuesday and Thursday for an hour and fifteen minutes. The course lasted for a regular 16-week semester.

### **Data Sources**

#### **First Student Survey**

Surveys are good ways of obtaining the desired information from participants under investigation because of their specific design (Saxon, Garratt, Gilroy, & Cairns, 2003). This first survey asked students specific information regarding their experiences. The first survey was needed because the students were the only source of this information.

During the first week of the course, students completed and returned the following survey. This survey took about 30 minutes for them to complete. This survey asked them to tell some biographic information about themselves as well as their experiences with literature (see Figure 2).

Each student was given this survey on the first day of the course and was asked to return it by the end of the first week. This biographic information was used to describe the composition of my Introduction to Literature class.

This information was provided, so anyone attempting to replicate this study in the

**The First Student Survey**

**Number** \_\_\_\_\_

**Sex** \_\_\_\_\_

**Age** \_\_\_\_\_

**Circle one of the following ethnicities that describes you best:**

Caucasian    African American    Native American    Asian American    Hispanic

Other Explain \_\_\_\_\_

**What type(s) of literature have you been exposed to in the past?**

Figure 2. The First Survey

future would have the most detailed information available and would be able to make accurate inferences as to different findings between or among studies. Furthermore, teachers would benefit from information regarding students' past exposure to literature types because past exposure to either type, canonical and multicultural literature, might predispose a student to prefer the familiar type over the unknown or lesser known. This survey along with my findings could potentially aid future literature teachers in planning a literary curriculum that better meets their students' needs.

### **Second Student Survey**

On the last day of the course, students completed the second survey that asked them to rate each work on the extent to which they could relate to the work on a 1 to 4 point scale. This survey took about 30 minutes for students to complete. Students rated each work based on the work's meaningfulness to them on a scale from 1 (strongly agree) to 4 (strongly disagree) (see Figure 3).

The second survey was used for clarification. For example, if a student's journal response was unclear as to whether he or she had a personal experience in common with the literature, I used the numbered rating the student provided to clear up any questions that I had. This second survey was used to secure accuracy and to provide students with an opportunity to reflect on the pieces of literature in which they were able or not able to relate to their lived experiences. Although the argument could have been made that the recently read works would receive more favorable ratings due to students' recent exposure to them, the results showed the literature pieces that the students connected with

## The Second Student Survey

Hi Students,

Thank you for all the work you have done in helping me with my dissertation research. Below is a list of works that we discussed in class. Please, rate whether you were able to relate your lived experiences to each work listed. **One** will be the **strongest agreement** that you were able to relate your lived experiences to a work while **four** will be the **strongest disagreement** that you were not able to relate your lived experiences to a work. Circle the number that adequately reflects your ability to relate your lived experiences to the work.

	Strongly Agree	Agree	Disagree	Strongly Disagree
“A Rose for Emily”	1	2	3	4
“Cat in the Rain”	1	2	3	4
“A Cask of Amontillado”	1	2	3	4
“An Occurrence at Owl Creek Bridge”	1	2	3	4
“Young Goodman Brown”	1	2	3	4
“Happy Endings”	1	2	3	4
“The Yellow Wallpaper”	1	2	3	4
“A Story of an Hour”	1	2	3	4
“A Good Man Is Hard to Find”	1	2	3	4
“Why I Live at the P.O.”	1	2	3	4

“We Real Cool”	1	2	3	4
“Barbie Doll”	1	2	3	4
“Diving into the Wreck”	1	2	3	4
“Sympathy”	1	2	3	4
“We Wear the Mask”	1	2	3	4
“Dover Beach”	1	2	3	4
“Shall I Compare Thee to a Summer’s Day”	1	2	3	4
“A Last Confession”	1	2	3	4
“On My First Son”	1	2	3	4
“Ballad of Birmingham”	1	2	3	4
“Ode on a Grecian Urn”	1	2	3	4
“Fireflies in the Garden”	1	2	3	4
If you would take a few minutes to answer the following questions, that would be most helpful.				
What work was <b>most</b> related to your experience? Explain your answer.				
What work was <b>least</b> related to your experience? Explain your answer.				

Figure 3. The Second Survey.

and the ones in which they did not connect. Since learning only benefits an individual if it is retained, this survey amplified those pieces that students connected with in a way that showed Rosenblatt's aesthetic reading experience. This second survey better reflected the knowledge retained by the student than did the journal entries due to the lapse of time between the reading and the response.

### **Student Journals**

In this study, I analyzed reflective student journals and teacher journals. Students' reflections on literature can help them think more about themselves and their own lives. Students can see that "words do affect, do change opinions and lives, their lives" (Kurzman, 1998, p. 29). Students' journals opened a portal that allowed me to ascertain their experiences and views concerning canonical and multicultural literature.

For each short story or poem discussed in class, students had a designated journal prompt in which to respond. Students wrote 22 journal entries in all, and each took 20 minutes to complete. Here is the journal prompt: Was there something from this work that you could relate to your lived experiences? Please, provide more than a "yes" or "no" answer to this question. If you answered "yes," tell what part of the work brought about this response. If you answered "no," tell how your lived experiences differed from this piece of literature. Students replied to the same prompt for each work. This journal prompt was used because it did not assume that students should feel a certain way in response to the literature read and discussed in class (see Figure 4).

**Journal Prompt for “A Good Man Is Hard to Find”**

Number \_\_\_\_\_

Please, respond to “A Good Man Is Hard to Find,” a short story by Flannery O’Connor. Use the following journal prompt for your journal response:

Was there something from this work that you could relate to your lived experiences?

Please, provide more than a “yes” or “no” answer to this question. If you answered “yes,” tell what part of the work brought about this response. If you answered “no,” tell how your lived experiences differed from the literary work.

Figure 4. An Example of Students’ Journal Prompt.

Students turned in journal entries for a given week each Friday. I chose to take up journal entries each week, so students did not have a chance to lose them over a longer time period. These student journals provided a detailed account of how students related or did not relate their lived experiences to the types of literature discussed in class (see Appendix A).

### **Teaching Journal**

“Teachers have found that practicing journal writing with students may contribute to the learning process as students are encouraged to continue reflecting on their learning experiences and to try discovering relationships that they might otherwise not see” (van Manen, 1990, p. 73). In addition, “there is a certain satisfaction and opportunity that comes from reviewing in journal form where they [teachers] have been professionally” (Renck-Jalongo & Isenberg, 1995, p. 213).

My teaching journal provided a place for me to record the literary themes from which students were able to relate their lived experiences. Students wrote in their journals and surveys about the connections they made with their lived experiences and the themes found in the literature. The information contained in my journal entries included the number of positive responses and negative responses to each type of literature covered during the week. In giving a positive response, students agreed and/or



gave a specific example of relating through their lived experiences to the literature discussed in class. In giving a negative response, students disagreed and/or gave a specific example of how their lived experiences differed from the literature discussed in class. My journal helped me determine and track if students were able to relate to canonical and multicultural literature. During classroom discussions, I made notes about students' thoughts on the literature utilized in the study, and that helped me to answer my research questions. Also, I wrote in my journal immediately following the weekly review of students' journals and after the second survey was given at the end of the course. During this weekly review of students' journals, I categorized their journals according to the literary themes on which students wrote as well as reflected on the meaning of those literary themes based on the students' lived experiences in my journal. After the second survey, I reflected on the numerical responses given by students and compared those numerical responses to students' journals to see if the wording in their journals reflected the numerical rating they chose for each work (see Appendix B).

### **Data Analysis**

The method of data analysis was theme analysis. According to van Manen (1990), theme analysis is the process of recovering the messages that are embodied in the collected data. van Manen (1990) describes theme as:

1. The means to get at a notion.
2. Theme gives shape to the shapeless.
3. Theme describes the content of the notion.

4. Theme is always the reduction of a notion. (p. 88)

Through multiple readings of the students' journals and surveys, I illuminated the connections students made with their lived experiences and the literary themes found in the works utilized in the study. Furthermore, I noted the discrepancies as to why students did not make connections with their lived experiences and the literary themes found in the works utilized in this study. In using van Manen's selective highlighting approach to analyze the data, different colors were used to code the connections students made and did not make between their lived experiences and the literary themes found in the works. My teaching journal was the place where I recorded, categorized, and reflected on the data collected for this study, so I could gain a deeper understanding of the phenomenon as it occurred in my classroom. Through reflection, teacher researchers work to describe and clarify what is occurring in their classrooms (Jalongo and Isenberg, 1995).

I used my research data to determine to what extent students related their lived experiences to canonical and multicultural literature. I developed this understanding through students' words and my own personal reflections on those words.

Analysis of the gathered data was conducted as the data became available. This immediate and continual analysis of the data needed to be done because students' responses to the literature varied throughout the study.

### **Establishing Trustworthiness**

Establishing trustworthiness is an important part of research. Trustworthiness is a description of the credibility and dependability of a research study (Lincoln & Guba,

1985). When trustworthiness is established, a deep understanding can be gained by those viewing the research (Pitney, 2004). Trustworthiness was established through the use of triangulation to ensure the credibility and dependability of the research findings.

Triangulation is a research design that includes two or more approaches to data collection or analysis to ensure the credibility and dependability of the research study (Lincoln & Guba, 1985). In this research study, four data collections were used to confirm the study's results. In students' journals, they were asked to provide a yes or no answer to whether they related or not to a literary work. Also, in students' journals, they were asked to explain their yes or no response. At the end of the course, students were given the second survey in which they were asked to rate on a 1 (strongly agree) to 4 (strongly disagree) scale whether they were able to relate or not to each work utilized in this study. The second survey was used for clarification. For example, if a student's journal response was unclear as to whether he or she had a personal experience in common with the literature, the numbered rating the student provided was used to clear up any questions regarding students' journal responses. This second survey was used to secure accuracy and to provide students with an opportunity to reflect on the pieces of literature in which they were able or not able to relate to their lived experiences. In my teaching journal, I categorized students' journals according to the literary themes on which they wrote as well as reflected on the meaning of those literary themes based on the students' lived experiences in my journal. After the second survey, I reflected on the numerical responses given by students and compared those numerical responses to students'

journals to see if the wording in their journals reflected the numerical rating they chose for each work. By using the four sets of data obtained through students' journals, the second survey, and my teaching journal, these differing sources provided a cross-reference to validate the collected data.

### **Quality Issues**

A variety of research methods was used to maintain rigor in the research study. Student surveys, student journals, and my teaching journal comprised the data sources used in this study.

This study spanned the course of four months. Students were given the same writing prompt for each work. In addressing that journal prompt, the student journals brought forth written descriptions of how students did or did not relate to canonical and multicultural literature based on their lived experiences, so as much insight as possible would be collected on this phenomenon.

The goal of my study was to understand to what extent students related to canonical and multicultural literature based on their lived experiences. My goal was to find answers to my research questions; the study's purpose was to understand better the personal relationship that students had with canonical and multicultural literature, so more appropriate teacher selections of literature for the course could be made.

This study's findings cannot be generalized to students in other Introduction to Literature courses. Its goal was to deepen literature teachers' understanding as to the

extent that students were able to relate or not relate to canonical and multicultural literature.

### **Ethical Issues**

My study started only after I received permission from the Institutional Review Board and the college where the study was conducted (see Appendix D). Written consent forms were obtained from the students (see Appendix C). Safeguards were used to protect the confidentiality of the students and their responses. At any point during the study, students could have withdrawn from the study without question or penalty. Students were told that their participation in the study would not affect their grade, and the use of numbers in place of students' names allowed their responses to be anonymous. Only the students knew the number that was used in place of their names. I had no knowledge of students' numbers because students kept these numbers confidential. Furthermore, all journal entries were typed, so students' responses could not be recognized on the basis of their handwriting.

## CHAPTER IV

### FINDINGS

*An educator who is oriented in a strong way to the world of children develops a fascination with real life. The meanings of the lived sense of phenomena are not exhausted in their immediate experience. A rich and thick description is concrete, exploring a phenomenon in all its experiential ramifications (van Manen, 1990, p. 152).*

#### **Introduction**

The data for this study were gathered from an Introduction to Literature class at a small Midwestern community college. My intention for this study was to see what types of literature engaged my students' interests. I divided the students' reading list into canonical and multicultural literature, and the study's intent was to see to what extent students related to these types of literature. van Manen's selective highlighting approach was used to illuminate connections students made in their journals and on their second surveys between their lived experiences and the literary themes found in the literature utilized in this study. Discrepancies were noted in students' journals and on their second surveys between their lived experiences and the literary themes found in the literature used in this study. The findings revealed that students did and did not relate their lived experiences to canonical and multicultural literature. I believe my students illustrated through their journals and their final surveys the answer to my question, "What type(s) of literature in an Introduction to Literature class engage students' interest?"

The chapter is organized in four sections. The first section illustrates my Introduction to Literature classroom, which met two times a week for an hour and fifteen minutes over the course of sixteen weeks. The first section describes the composition of the Introduction to Literature class used in this study. The findings were obtained from the first survey, which students were asked to complete on the study's first day. The second section will take a numerical look at the positive and negative responses given by students in their journals in relating their lived experiences to the literary themes found in canonical and multicultural literature. The third section uses students' journals to help answer to what extent students were engaged in the literature. This section will reflect on the connections students made to the literary themes found in canonical and multicultural literature. The fourth section looks at the discrepancies given by students as to why they could not relate their lived experiences to canonical and multicultural literature. The fifth section will further clarify the connections students made or did not make between their lived experiences and the literary themes found in the literature. The findings for this section were obtained from a survey that asked students to rate their ability to relate or not to relate their lived experiences to works discussed in class. This survey was given on the last day of the study.

### **A Picture of My Introduction to Literature Students and Their Knowledge of Literature**

This first section takes a picture, a moment captured in time, of the students who participated in this study. On the first day of the study, students were asked to complete a survey that asked their sex, age, race, and literary background. In reviewing their

surveys, students, by their answers, created a class portrait using words to help readers see who participated in this study.

Twenty-six students participated in this study. Three other students volunteered to participate in the study, but withdrew from the study after the first two weeks. All three students who withdrew said that they did not have time to participate in the study.

Seventeen of the 26 students were male, and 9 students were female. Students fell within three age groups. Thirteen students ranged in age from 18-21. Six students ranged in age from 23-32, and 6 students ranged in age from 33-55. Twenty-four students were Caucasian; one was Native American and Caucasian, and one participant did not specify his/her race.

When the survey asked students to explain the types of literature they had been exposed to in the past, eighteen students commented that they had been exposed to short stories and poetry. Two students commented that they had read the Classics of literature. The students cited Shakespeare, “A Rose for Emily” written by William Faulkner, and “The Cask of Amontillado” written by Edgar Allan Poe as Classics.

Furthermore, two students wrote that they had studied both canonical and multicultural literature in their past reading experiences. One student specifically named Maya Angelou as a multicultural author this person liked to read. One student commented on having a limited exposure to literature, but this person gave no reason as to why that was so.

The first survey painted a picture lacking in diversity, except in terms of students’ ages and past exposure to literature. After learning about my students, I could not wait to



learn about which types of literature, canonical or multicultural, engaged students' interests.

### **A Numerical Look at the Positive and Negative Responses Given by Students in Their Journals**

At every class session's end, students were asked to complete a typed journal entry. This typed journal entry helped to answer my research question, "What types of literature in an Introduction to Literature class engage students' interest?" The journal asked students if they related to a work based on their lived experiences. If they answered "yes," they were to explain what part of the work brought about this response. If they answered "no," they were to tell how their lived experiences differed from the work. By answering this journal prompt, students gave answers as to the extent that they were able to relate or not relate their lived experiences to the canonical and multicultural literature discussed in class. A positive response to the literature was one in which students had lived experiences in common with the literary themes found in the literature utilized in this study. A negative response given by students in their journals was one in which students' lived experiences had nothing in common with the literary themes found in the literature utilized in this study.

Furthermore, students completed 299 journal entries in this study. Of those 299 journal entries, students wrote 220 positive responses indicating that students' lived experiences had something in common with the literary themes found in the literature utilized in this study. In contrast, 79 negative responses were given by students indicating that their lived experiences had nothing in common with the literary themes found in the literature utilized in this study (see Appendix E for a numerical look at

students' positive and negative journal responses based on their lived experiences to the themes found in canonical and multicultural literature).

### ***Positive Journal Responses***

When all the students' journals for each of the 22 works utilized in this study were added together, students gave slightly more positive responses in relating their lived experiences to the literary themes found in the multicultural works by a total of 114 positive responses to 106 positive responses to the canonical works.

When all the students' journals for each of the 10 short stories utilized in this study were added together, students gave 58 positive responses in relating their lived experiences to the literary themes found in the 5 multicultural short stories and 63 positive responses to the 5 canonical short stories.

When all the students' journals for each of the 12 poems utilized in this study were added together, students gave 56 positive responses in relating their lived experiences to the literary themes found in the 6 multicultural poems and 43 positive responses to the 6 canonical poems (see Appendix E for a numerical look at students' positive and negative journal responses based on their lived experiences to the themes found in canonical and multicultural literature).

### ***Negative Journal Responses***

A negative response given by students in their journals was one in which students' lived experiences had nothing in common with the literary themes found in the literature utilized in this study. When all the students' journals for the 22 works utilized in this study were added together, 50 negative responses were given by students as to

why they were not able to relate their lived experiences to the literary themes found in the canonical literature, and 29 negative responses were given to the multicultural literature.

When all the students' journals for each of the 10 short stories utilized in this study were added together, 44 negative responses were given by students in not being able to relate their lived experiences to the literary themes found in the 5 canonical short stories in contrast to 18 negative responses given by students to the multicultural short stories.

When all the students' journals for each of the 12 poems utilized in this study were added together, 43 negative responses were given by students in not being able to relate their lived experiences to the literary themes found in the 6 canonical poems as opposed to 11 negative responses given by students to multicultural poems (see Appendix E for a summary of the numerical look at students' positive and negative responses based on their lived experiences to canonical and multicultural literature in their journals).

### **Connections Students Made Between Their Lived Experiences and the Literary Themes Found in the Literature**

This second section looked at the lived experiences of students and their relationship with the literature discussed in class. Students formed connections between their lived experiences and the literary themes found in the literature. First, the connections students forged between their lived experiences and the literary themes found in both canonical and multicultural literature will be revealed because of the large number of positive responses given by students to the literary themes found in conjunction with both types of literature when compared to the themes found in common with only canonical or only multicultural literature.

Second, the connections students forged between their lived experiences and the literary themes found in common with only canonical or only multicultural literature came to light. Third, connections students forged between their lived experiences and a unique literary theme found central to only one work, whether that work be canonical or multicultural, came to the surface.

After highlighting various passages in students' journals, two connections regarding students' lived experiences and the literary themes pervaded their journals written about both canonical and multicultural literature. Students forged connections between their lived experiences and the literary themes of "love is an important part of life" and of "social acceptance is wanted by people."

Furthermore, students made connections in their journals between their lived experiences and the literary themes found only in canonical works, and those connections made by students were not found in their journal entries on multicultural works. Those literary themes students related to were changing directions in life and the questioning of faith. When it came to students relating their lived experiences to literary themes found in multicultural literature, students connected with only one literary theme, the "oppression of people" theme.

In addition, students forged a connection between their lived experiences and several literary themes, such as a wish to freeze certain moments in time ("Ode on a Grecian Urn"), living for the moment ("We Real Cool"), wanting something bigger in life ("Fireflies in the Garden"), and what is considered safe may not always be ("Ballad of Birmingham"). These literary themes were unique to a particular work, whether the work be considered canonical or multicultural.

## **Connections Students Made Between Their Lived Experiences and the Literary Themes Found in Canonical and Multicultural Literature**

From the 22 canonical and multicultural works selected for this study, six canonical works and three multicultural works shared connections between students' lived experiences and the literary theme, "love is an important part of life." One canonical work and two multicultural works shared connections between students' lived experiences and the literary theme, "social acceptance is wanted by people."

### ***The "Love Is an Important Part of Life" Theme***

In their journals, students connected their lived experiences to the literary theme, "love is an important part of life." This connection between students' lived experiences and this literary theme were found in both canonical and multicultural literature. On the first day of class discussion, "A Rose for Emily" took center stage. I recorded in my teaching journal one student's poignant thought during class discussion:

Everybody wants to be loved, Mrs. Ging. That is why we are put on this earth—to love. Emily [the main character in the work] wants Homer to love her. That is why she bought the rat poison and knocked him off. She never wanted his love to leave. I can relate to this work because I held to love too tightly for fear of losing it.

This student's statement was echoed during the rest of the hour and throughout the remainder of the sixteen weeks in their voices and in their journal entries. In fact, four other students wrote about the importance of being loved by someone in "A Rose for Emily."

Not only did students talk of the importance of finding true love between a man and a woman in reading Faulkner's "A Rose for Emily," but in Hemingway's "A Cat in the Rain," students spoke of the love that can be found in owning a pet cat. One student wrote:

Pets love you. They do not care whether you are the President or the garbage man. Everybody needs to feel cherished, loved, and respected like pets make people feel. I could relate to this short story because I have a pet that has been a great source of joy and comfort in my life.

Likewise, two other students commented on the love a pet provided them.

Also, love was seen through the heartache students identified with in Bierce's "An Occurrence at Owl Creek Bridge," Yeat's "A Last Confession," Jonson's "On My First Son," and Chopin's "Story of an Hour." In each work, a character dies or moves on to another relationship, and ten students shared their lived experiences with losing loved ones of their own.

A student remarked on the dying of a loved one after reading "On My First Son":  
Yes, I can feel the author's pain because I have lost my mom and two brothers.  
Death is never easy to take, to understand, or to accept. I can promise you that until you lose someone very close, you will not realize how much you love and miss them until they are gone.

In reading Chopin's "A Story of an Hour," one student remarked, "I can relate to this story because I experienced the shock of unexpectedly losing a loved one. The shock almost caused me to have a heart attack like Louise Mallard [the main character] had in the story discussed today in class."

The desire for love took a different turn in Shakespeare's "Shall I Compare Thee to a Summer's Day." Five students related their lived experiences to this poem because they had someone they adored as much as the object of affection mentioned in this poem. "Yes, I can relate to this poem because of my recent experience with love. I have someone in my life who makes me feel as if I am in bloom--with love for her. I love her very much," commented one student on this poem. Another student further added:

I find it funny that in the second line that Shakespeare states that she is more temperate and lovely than a summer's day. It wouldn't be good enough for her to be compared to a summer's day, but she would have to be better than it. Men do that all of the time by magnifying the good points of their love. I can relate the love my husband shows me to the love talked about in this poem. Since the day we married, he is always telling me how beautiful my eyes are.

Atwood's "Happy Endings" brought out the importance of protecting loved ones for one student. That student wrote:

Yes, I can relate to this story. I have a sister who would have multiple friends, and she would come to me, telling me that she had caught one doing something that she [my sister] did not approve, and I had nerve enough to confront the young man and give him a piece of my mind because a person cannot let loved ones get hurt.

### ***The "Social Acceptance Is Wanted by People" Theme***

The importance of social acceptance by others or "fitting in with others" as I noted in my teaching journal was a literary theme in which students were able to connect their lived experiences. This literary theme was found in both canonical and

multicultural literature. With one canonical work and four multicultural works, students identified that they related to the literature based on their lived experiences.

Early on in the study, this need for social acceptance literary theme was mentioned in students' journals. "Young Goodman Brown" was one such short story in which students related their lived experiences to this work. In my teaching journal, I noted one student's thoughts:

Yes, Goodman Brown was questioning his religious faith, but he was dismayed because the Christians he hung around with were two-faced. Goodman Brown wanted somewhere to fit in with others. During my life, I have questioned not only my faith in God, but also in the Christians around me. I can relate to this work.

In Hawthorne's "Young Goodman Brown," six students felt that people keep dark secrets to themselves, so they will be accepted by others. One student related her lived experience of keeping secrets from her family, so she will be accepted by them:

People hide themselves and their dark secrets to fit in with everybody else. That is what Brown discovered about his fellow Christians. They were keeping secrets to fit in with the fold. I can relate to this story because I have kept secrets in my own life to avoid the retribution of others because of the secrets' power to hurt them. There are two secrets I have kept from my family.

Other examples of characters wanting acceptance from their peers or their families included Welty's "Why I Live at the P.O.," Perkins-Gilman's "The Yellow Wallpaper," Piercy's "Barbie Doll," and Dunbar's "We Wear the Mask."



Welty's "Why I Live at the P.O" had six students relating to Sister, the main character. Sister was the outcast of her family. The six students expressed in their journals how "they wished to be loved by their families."

Likewise, after reading the semiautobiographical work of Perkins-Gilman, one student noted that the isolation imposed by the unnamed narrator's husband led the narrator to want acceptance by the society from which she was removed. The student stated:

I have dealt with depression and needing an outlet to regain my sense of self-worth. Without daily interaction with other humans, I felt that life did not have any meaning. Each one of us wants to be part of something larger than ourselves. I can definitely relate to the narrator's bouts of depression. I almost went mad because my family wanted me to stay inside and take care of myself during my ordeal. What I needed was the opportunity to resume my normal activities.

One other student related how they wanted to be accepted by society, not secluded from it because of their bouts with depression.

Furthermore, the ultimate act of social acceptance was tried by the character in Piercy's "Barbie Doll." The character cut off her nose and her legs in order to attain the outward perfection so craved by society. This poem brought about strong reactions from ten students sharing their struggles with weight and social acceptance. One student declared as noted in my teaching journal:

Yes, I can relate. I am always striving for a perfect body just like so many others and just like the woman in the poem. My weight has always been an up and down battle for me. It is a constant struggle that haunts me. I now have a

daughter who is going through some of the same issues even though I have been careful not to emphasize ‘worth equals beauty.’

In a similar fashion, Dunbar’s “We Wear the Mask” talks of how people hide their emotions, so they will be socially accepted by society. Fourteen students shared “how they put on a happy face because a happy face is easier for society to accept than other emotions” in relating their lived experiences to the work.

### **Connections Students Made Between Their Lived Experiences and the Literary Themes Found Only in Canonical Literature**

Students forged two connections in their journals between their lived experiences and the literary themes found only in canonical literature discussed in class. The two literary themes that students connected their lived experiences to were “changing directions in life” and the “questioning of faith.” Out of the eleven canonical works, four works shared the changing directions in life literary theme while two works shared the questioning of faith literary theme written about by students in their journals as they reflected on their lived experiences.

#### ***The “Changing Directions in Life” Theme***

The changing directions in life literary theme was written about often in students’ journals as students shared their lived experiences. In Faulkner’s “A Rose for Emily,” Hemingway’s “Cat in the Rain,” Bierce’s “Occurrence at Owl Creek Bridge,” and Hawthorne’s “Young Goodman Brown,” the main characters want a change in their lives. When writing in their journals, nine students described how they related their own lived experiences of changing directions in life to those experiences of the main characters in the three literary works.

In a “A Young Goodman Brown” journal entry, one student recorded:  
Yes, I can relate to this work. I changed my life’s direction for the better three years ago. I left my ex-husband because he ignored me, and that was the best change I ever made. I took a dark journey through the woods [like Goodman Brown], but I saw the light at the end of the tunnel.

As noted in my teaching journal, students commented in class discussions about how they had made the choice to come to college and about how they hoped that the choice would pay off in the end. Students related to the literature based on their lived experiences. Whether students were right out of high school or coming back after 18 years out of high school, all students talked and wrote of taking a new turn in their lives just as the main characters did. One student wrote:

The woman in “Cat in the Rain” I see a connection to. Everyone has something that they want regardless of the availability of that item. I too have a “cat” that I would like to have. My “cat” is the college degree that I am seeking. I have given up my job and become a full-time student. I hope my choice will be rewarded with a better job at the end of my studies.

Likewise, after one student read “Occurrence at Owl Creek Bridge, I recorded in my teaching journal this comment made by the student:

I wanted a change in my life. I wanted to make a difference in my family just like Peyton, the main character, wanted for the South. I wanted to attend college even though I have regrets of leaving my kids at home. I can relate to Peyton wanting to make a difference. That wanting to make a difference has brought me back to school.

I feel that students were able to connect with the changing directions in life literary theme because of their lived experiences. No matter their ages, students taking my Introduction to Literature course were all freshmen, as noted in my teaching journal. For the students in my class, attending college was a change from life as they previously knew it. This change enabled students to write about their connection with the literary theme of change found in the canonical works, “Cat in the Rain” and “Occurrence at Owl Creek Bridge.”

***The “Questioning of People’s Faith” Theme***

Two canonical works beckoned students to share their lived experiences with the literary theme, questioning people’s faith. Those works were Hawthorne’s “Young Goodman Brown” and Arnold’s “Dover Beach.” For students who wrote about “Young Goodman Brown,” six students shared of questioning their faith in Christianity as it related to their lived experiences. They seemed to connect with this work because Young Goodman Brown’s walk through the woods matched students’ own walk through “the woods” in figuring out what religion meant to them. One student commented:

Yes, I was saved about five years ago, and to this day, I question my faith in Christ. I listen hard to hear His Word, and it makes me crazy inside. I realize the devil is battering my path, and I have to learn to push him aside.

When it came to “Dover Beach,” one student questioned his faith in humanity.

He wrote:

Yes, there are struggles in all our lives. As you get older, it seems like you lose faith in humanity at times. The harder you try, the worse it gets. War is inevitable [as mentioned in the poem], and nobody wins. I can relate to this poem because I served in the military and know of the bloodshed that comes from war.

Yes, war is inevitable, but my service to my country convinced me that killing people is wrong, no matter what the reason.

### **Connections Students Made Between Their Lived Experiences and the Literary Theme Found Only in Multicultural Literature**

Students made connections between their lived experiences and one literary theme found in multicultural literature. Students wrote about the oppression they faced in their pasts as they related to the multicultural works. Out of the eleven multicultural works, four works surfaced in which students related their lived experiences.

#### ***The “Oppression of People” Theme***

The literary theme of oppression was written about in students’ journals as they related their lived experiences to the multicultural works, “Why I Live at the P.O.,” “A Story of an Hour,” “Diving into the Wreck,” and “Sympathy.” For Welty’s “Why I Live at the P.O.,” the oppression came in the form of sibling rivalry. For Chopin’s “A Story of an Hour” and Dunbar’s “Sympathy,” oppression came in the form of society’s mandates. Welty paints a somewhat comical, but rather oppressive state that sibling rivalry can bring about, pitting one sibling against another. One student composed:

Yes, I can relate to this story. When I lived at home, I had two stepsisters, and they could do no wrong. So who always got her tail caught in the door? Me, of course. That’s why I moved away from home when I was fifteen. My life after that was not serene, but it beat the everyday battles of the hole.

Five other students wrote on how they were oppressed by a sibling.

In Chopin’s “A Story of an Hour,” Dunbar’s “Sympathy,” and Rich’s “Diving into the Wreck,” fifteen students related their lived experiences to the oppression placed

on people by society as shown in these works. One student wrote of the wife [the main character] in “A Story of an Hour”:

I feel like Louise at times. I am tied down by the demands of a marriage and playing the dutiful wife expected by society. I love my husband, but I feel marriage is too much at times. I can relate to the trapped feeling felt by Louise. I feel that same trapped feeling on a daily basis.

One student went further to lament how her lived experiences related to the example of men holding women back as displayed in “Diving into the Wreck.”

The student noted:

Yes, I know how upsetting it can be to work hard and feel like you are getting nowhere because you are a woman. In my place of business, men start out making more money than women....not fair....but very true to life. I can relate to this poem because I feel like the diver who was trying to make her way in the water. The water was making it hard for her to stay her course. I have often thought of leaving the profession I love because men make it hard for business women, like me, to stay the course.

In contrast, Dunbar’s “Sympathy” elicited student responses that likened students’ lived experiences to those of the caged bird’s in the poem. “Yes, when a woman is in a violent relationship, she can feel the same as the bird, beaten down to minimal existence with the wanting of a new world. I was that very bird not too many years ago,” wrote one student.

**Connections Students Made Between Their Lived Experiences and the Literary Themes Found to be Unique, Whether the Work Be Canonical or Multicultural**

Students forged a connection between their lived experiences and several literary themes, such as a wish to freeze certain moments in time, living for the moment, wanting something bigger in life, and what is considered safe may not always be. These literary themes were unique to a particular work, whether the work be considered canonical or multicultural.

***The Literary Theme Found Only in “Ode on a Grecian Urn” of a Wish to Freeze Moments in Time***

In Keats’ “Ode on a Grecian Urn,” twelve students wrote about the literary theme found only in this work of freezing moments in time. Students were able to forge connections to this literary theme based on their lived experiences. One student stated in her journal:

I am like the painter who painted pictures on the urn. I am always working on a scrapbook that will be used as a permanent record of my life. The photographs I cherish are scenes of my life captured forever in time. The painter did the same thing with his brush. He captured moments in time that will never fade from memory. I can relate to this poem because every chance that I get to work on my urn, my scrapbook, I take. My scrapbook will display the moments of this painter, me, long after I am gone.

***The Literary Theme Found Only in “We Real Cool” of Living for the Moment***

A living for the moment literary theme forged a connection for three students as they related their lived experiences to Brooks’ “We Real Cool” about pool players playing pool. A student penned:

Yes, I can relate to this poem. I felt, when I was younger, that life was really

short. I had to live for that very moment like the pool players. I ended up dropping out of school, getting pregnant, getting addicted to drugs, never living anywhere long, and in one sense, before I was born again, I was dead.

***The Literary Theme Found Only in “Fireflies in the Garden” of Wanting Something Bigger in Life***

Frost’s “Fireflies in the Garden” generated a wanting something bigger in life literary theme written about by students based on their lived experiences. As recorded in my teaching journal, one student quipped during classroom discussion:

Because I grew up with my parents not having much money, I always wanted the bigger things in life [as symbolized by the star in the poem]. I have always thought that bigger must be better because I had so little as a child. I have always been the small firefly that this poem mentions. I have to say I want the other option mentioned in this poem—the star. I want to be the biggest thing in the sky.

Two other students related their lived experiences to this literary theme.

***The Literary Theme Found Only in “Ballad of Birmingham” of What Is Considered Safe May Not Always Be***

Randall’s “Ballad of Birmingham” is based on the bombing of a church during the South’s struggle for civil rights. Five students wrote about the what is considered safe may not always be literary theme based on their lived experiences. A student declared:

I can relate to the mom’s feelings about her child going to church. She felt the church was the safest place for her child to go. Since I was little, I have always felt safe in going to church. However, this poem proves that the places we think



are safe may not always be.

### **Discrepancies Given by Students As to Why They Were Not Able to Relate to Canonical and Multicultural Literature**

Students gave several discrepancies as to why they could not relate to canonical and multicultural literature based on their lived experiences. Out of the 299 journal entries collected during this study, 79 negative responses were given by students indicating that their lived experiences had nothing in common with the literary themes found in the literature utilized in this study. Fifty negative responses were given by students as to why they were not able to relate their lived experiences to the literary themes found in the canonical literature, and 29 negative responses were given to the multicultural literature. These reasons included no lived experiences in common with the literature, too young to have engaged in the lived experiences found in the literature, and students' personalities made the lived experiences found in the literature not possible.

#### ***No Lived Experiences in Common with the Literature***

In 66 journal entries, students gave examples of how their lived experiences differed from the lived experiences written about in canonical and multicultural works. One student explained how her lived experiences differed from Emily, the main character, in "A Rose for Emily":

I cannot relate anything in my life to this story. I have not lost my father who kept me away from all other men. I haven't fallen in love with a man and then killed him because he didn't love me. I haven't shut myself off from society, like Emily did. Finally, I have never been psychotic enough to sleep with a dead guy.

Another student commented on “Why I Live at the P.O.”:

I could not relate to this story because when my family gets together it is always a joyful and happy time. Everyone likes everyone, and nobody has left the family and reappeared years later with a kid. The family in this story is far different from mine, and I am glad that I am not a member of that crazy family.

Another student had this to say about “The Yellow Wallpaper”:

My life is nothing like the sad narrator’s life in the short story. I haven’t been secluded from everyday life. In fact, as a child when I was grounded, I used to sneak out the window and down to my friend’s house because I could not stand to be alone for even a short time.

### ***Too Young to Have Engaged in the Lived Experiences Found in the Literature***

In four journals, students gave the response that they were too young to have engaged in the lived experiences found in the literature. When writing about “Happy Endings,” a student penned, “I could not relate to this short story because my life is not as crazy as the plots discussed in the story. I am not old enough to get married, divorced, or to have children.” Likewise, one student remarked about the married couple in “A Cat in the Rain”:

I am not old enough to be married and to screw my life up like the married couple in this story. They were married, but they were not in love. The husband was ignoring the wife, and the wife desperately needed a change. I have never been in a relationship that totally disregarded the other person’s feelings.

***Students' Personalities Made the Lived Experiences Found in the Literature Not Possible***

In nine journals, students noted that their personalities would make the lived experiences found in canonical and multicultural literature not possible. One student said of "A Cask of Amontillado," "I cannot relate to this story. I have never been mad enough at someone to want physical harm to come to them. My lived experiences are nothing like Montresor's. I have never wanted to seek revenge on someone to that extent—the bricking in of the clown [Fortunato].

Likewise, another student stated the following about "Why Live at the P.O.":

I do not relate to Sister [the main character in the short story]. It's not in my personality to be a doormat for others. I would never take that crap the family dished out to her. I would have made the move [to the P.O.] way before Sister did.

**A Numerical Look at Students' Second Survey Responses to Canonical and Multicultural Literature**

This third section asked students to reflect on all the literature covered during the sixteen-week period of the study. On the last day of the study, students were given a survey. They were asked to rate all the works covered in class on a scale of 1 to 4. One was the strongest agreement that they were able to relate their lived experiences to a work while 4 was the strongest disagreement that they were not able to relate their lived experiences to a work. At the survey's end, students were asked to identify the work they related their lived experiences to most and to explain why they related to that work. In contrast, they were asked to identify the work they related to least based on how their

lived experiences differed from the work. Also, they were asked to explain why they related least to that work. This survey's purpose was to clarify any questions I had about students' abilities to relate their lived experiences to a work in their journal entries.

When it came to students strongly relating their lived experiences to the literary themes found in the 22 canonical and multicultural works discussed in the study, students gave 65 strongly agree responses in relating to the literary themes found in multicultural literature and 55 strongly agree responses in relating to the literary themes found in canonical literature. Likewise, 88 agree responses were given by students in relating their lived experiences to the literary themes found in multicultural literature to 83 agree responses in relating to the literary themes found in canonical literature.

When it came to students strongly relating their lived experiences to the 5 canonical and 5 multicultural short stories utilized in this study, students gave 26 strongly agree responses in relating to the literary themes found in multicultural short stories and 24 strongly agree responses in relating to the literary themes found in canonical short stories.

Furthermore, 41 agree responses were given by students, showing that they related their lived experiences to the literary themes found in the 5 multicultural short stories. Likewise, 35 agree responses were given by students, showing they related their lived experiences to the literary themes found in the 5 canonical short stories.

When it came to the multicultural and canonical poems, 39 strongly agree responses were given by students, showing that they related their lived experiences to the literary themes found in the 6 multicultural poems. Similarly, 31 strongly agree

responses were given by students in relating their lived experiences to the literary themes found in the 6 canonical poems.

Also, 47 agree responses were given by students, showing that students were able to relate their lived experiences to the literary themes found in the 6 multicultural poems. Likewise, 48 agree responses were given by students in relating their lived experiences to the literary themes found in the 6 canonical poems. (see Appendix F for a summary of students' final survey results).

When it came to students not being able to relate to the literary themes found in the 22 canonical and multicultural works because their lived experiences differed from those found in the works, 13 strongly disagree responses were given by students to multicultural literature, and 9 strongly disagree responses to canonical literature. Likewise, 44 disagree responses were given by students to multicultural literature, and 62 disagree responses were given to canonical literature.

When it came to students not being able to relate to the literary themes found in the 5 canonical and 5 multicultural short stories because their lived experiences differed from those in the short stories, 9 strongly disagree responses were given by students to the multicultural short stories, and 5 strongly disagree responses were given by students to the canonical short stories.

When it came to students not being able to relate to the literary themes found in the 5 canonical and 5 multicultural short stories because their lived experiences differed from those in the short stories, 20 disagree responses were given by students to the multicultural short stories in contrast to the 31 disagree responses given by students to the canonical short stories.

When it came to students not being able to relate to the literary themes found in the 6 canonical and 6 multicultural poems because their lived experiences differed from those in the poems, 4 strongly disagree responses were given by students to the multicultural poems, and 4 strongly disagree responses were given to the canonical poems.

When it came to students not being able to relate to the literary themes found in the 6 canonical and 6 multicultural poems because their lived experiences differed from those in the poems, 24 disagree responses were given by students to the multicultural poems, and 31 disagree responses were given to the canonical poems

Furthermore, students chose a multicultural work, “We Wear the Mask,” as the work they related their lived experiences to most during the study. Five students cited this multicultural work as the one they related their lived experience to the most. A canonical work, “A Rose for Emily,” was given three votes by students as the work they related their lived experiences to the most.

A common literary theme was written about by five students who related their lived experiences to those found in “We Wear the Mask” written by Paul Laurence Dunbar. Those students wrote about hiding their emotions from others, so they would be accepted. One wrote:

I believe that many people wear a mask to hide their emotions. Some do it because they do not want sympathy from others. Others hide their emotions because they must keep their composure, which happens to be my reason. I tend to hide my emotions, so I won't make others upset.

Another student penned about the poem, “It is easier to wear a mask than to have to explain how I am feeling on a certain day. Wearing a mask and not revealing my true feelings make life easier for me.”

Students related their lived experiences least to the canonical work, “Cask of Amontillado,” written by Edgar Allan Poe. Three students found this work to be the one that they related their lived experiences to the least. However, three works were given two votes apiece by students for this distinction. Two were canonical works, Shakespeare’s “Shall I Compare Thee to a Summer’s Day” and Faulkner’s “A Rose for Emily.” One was a multicultural work, “Diving into the Wreck,” written by Adrienne Rich. No common literary themes were given in students’ surveys by any of those who chose “Cask of Amontillado,” “Shall I Compare Thee to a Summer’s Day,” “A Rose for Emily,” or “Diving into the Wreck.” However, students commented on the final survey that they could not even understand the vocabulary used by Poe well enough to relate their lived experiences to the work because “of the hard language used by the author.” One student remarked, “I have a hard time following Poe’s writing. His sentences are too long, and he uses too many big words.”

### **A Final Look at the Students’ Journals and the Second Survey**

When it came to the 220 positive journal responses written by the students, no students related their lived experiences to the literary themes found only in canonical or only multicultural literature. All 26 students related their lived experiences to both canonical and multicultural literature.

When it came to the 26 surveys asking students to rate whether they related their lived experiences to the literary themes found in the literature on a 1 (strongly agree) to 4

(strongly disagree) scale, no student related their lived experience only to canonical or only to multicultural literature. All 26 students related their lived experiences to both canonical and multicultural literature.

### **Summary**

In this section, a picture of my Introduction to Literature students was painted. Seventeen of the 26 students were male, and 9 were female. They ranged in age from 18 to 55. Twenty-four of the students were Caucasian. When students commented on the types of literature that they had been exposed to in the past, eighteen students, a large majority, said that they had been exposed to short stories and poetry.

In student's journal entries, students said they related their lived experiences more to the literary themes found in the canonical short stories than the multicultural short stories. However, students reversed this stance in their final survey; they stated that they related their lived experiences more to the literary themes found in the multicultural short stories than the canonical short stories.

When it came to poetry, students related their lived experiences more to the literary themes found in the multicultural poems than the canonical poems. This same finding remained constant in both students' journals and in their final survey.

As for students' connections with the literary themes written about in this section, both canonical and multicultural literature shared two literary themes in common based on students' lived experiences, and students gave a large number of positive responses to the two literary themes. The lived experiences written about by students in their journals formed a connection with the "love is an important part of life" theme and the "social acceptance is wanted by people" theme. Furthermore, it was found that



students formed connections based on their lived experiences with certain canonical and multicultural works. Several unique themes appeared in students' journals, whether the work be canonical or multicultural.

Furthermore, students shared discrepancies as to why they were not able to relate their lived experiences to the canonical and multicultural literature utilized in this study. Students' discrepancies included no lived experiences in common with the literature, too young to have engaged in the lived experiences found in the literature, and students' personalities made the lived experiences found in the literature not possible.

Students chose a multicultural work, "We Wear the Mask," as the work they most related their lived experiences to in the final survey. In contrast, students chose the canonical work, "Cask of Amontillado," as the work in which they related their lived experiences to least in the final survey.

In looking at students' positive journal responses and the second survey, none of the 26 students related only to canonical literature or only to multicultural literature. Students related to both canonical and multicultural literature.

## CHAPTER V

### REFLECTIONS

*Depth is what gives the phenomenon or lived experience to which we orient ourselves its meaning and its resistance to our fuller understanding (van Manen, 1990, p. 152).*

#### **Introduction**

This English teacher deliberated over settings, plots, themes, and the very words students would read in my Introduction to Literature course. I wanted the letters to jump off the pages and add meaning to my students' lives. I divided students' reading universe into two camps, the world of the canonical authors and the world of multicultural authors to see if the words penned by much used or often forgotten authors engaged students' interests. That student engagement with the literature is what every English teacher wishes to take place in her classroom.

This chapter shares my reflections on the use of canonical and multicultural literature as 26 students related to the literature through their lived experiences. The setting took place in a Midwestern community college's Introduction to Literature classroom. The data revealed that students related their lived experiences to the literary themes found in the works, not the canonical or multicultural labels given to the works by literary scholars. Since students forged connections with canonical and multicultural

literature, the canonical and multicultural labels given by literary scholars does not matter to them. Instead, students identified with the literary themes found in the literature, and they forged connections with the literature, whether canonical or multicultural, based on their lived experiences.

The context of this study may or may not apply to other Introduction to Literature classrooms. With that said, I can draw inferences from the situation in which I studied. My reasons for studying canonical and multicultural literature with students was to learn from students' experiences what types of literature engaged them. The following chapter allows me to interpret my understanding of what students shared with me in the class and wrote in their journals and surveys.

After I share my reflections on the study, closure will come to this journey that started with questions and ended with answers by discussing implications, recommendations, and final thoughts on this study.

### **My Reflections on the Connections Students Made Between Their Lived Experiences and the Literature Utilized in This Study**

During the beginning weeks of the study, I read in awe the passion and depth students shared in relating their lived experiences to the literary themes found in the literature. They were not afraid to write about the emotions and memories that the literary works brought to the surface. Students' powerful comments centered around literary themes that captured the essence of their lived experiences. These lived experiences seemed to answer clearly the research question that set me on my voyage.

Students answered, “What types of literature in an Introduction to Literature class engage students’ interests?” Their answer was “a variety of literary themes found in literature” touched their hearts and erupted their pens. The canonical or multicultural label did not help students identify with the literature. Rather, they responded by sharing the connections forged between their lived experiences and the literary themes found in the works, whether the works were canonical or multicultural. Students’ journals came alive with examples of relating their lived experiences to the literary themes found in the works. I as well as other teachers can learn from students’ words.

On many pages of my teaching journal, I wrote of how students expressed that they had never been asked to relate their lived experiences to the literature that they studied. Twenty students shared during class discussion that they had never be asked to relate to the literature on a personal level and that being able to relate their lived experiences to the literary themes, whether the works were canonical or multicultural, engaged their interests. One student wrote:

I would have never thought that I had anything in common with crazy Emily in “A Rose for Emily.” However, when I was younger, I loved my first love so much that I did not want the relationship to end. Once I realized that I had a personal connection with Emily, I really got into the story. This story will stay with me.

When students were able to connect their lived experiences to the work in some way, they became engaged in the work. The canonical or multicultural label did not help

students identify with the literature. It was the personal connections that students forged with the literature that mattered to them.

When we discussed Rich's "Diving into the Wreck," a work written by a multicultural author, one student proclaimed during discussion:

Who cares if Rich is a woman who writes about feminist issues? I am a man, and I have been in some unfamiliar situations like the diver in the poem. It doesn't matter if the author is female, black, or white. What matters is that I can identify with what the main character is going through—struggle!!!

With those words, I asked the class to show by a raise of hands if the author's gender, race, and/or ethnicity mattered to them as readers. No participants in the study raised their hands saying that the author's gender, race, or ethnicity mattered.

Next, I asked students if the author's gender, race, and/or ethnicity did not matter to them as readers, and I asked students to raise their hands. Twenty-three students raised their hands in answering that the author's gender, race, and/or ethnicity did not matter to them as readers. In my teaching journal, I noted one student's quote that best summed up how 22 other students felt that the author's gender, race, and/or ethnicity did not matter to them as readers. That student shared:

All I care about is getting something out of the story or whatever for myself.

I forget the author and focus on the story's characters and plot. If I can identify with the story, then the story holds meaning for me. If I can't identify with the story in some way, if my life differs from the story or whatever, then I forget it.

The author doesn't enter in. It's the story and its meaning for me that counts. Three students in the study did not raise their hands and did not voice an opinion on these two questions.

In addition, the 220 positive journal responses written by students and the results from the second survey showed that no student related their lived experiences to the literary themes found only in canonical or only in multicultural literature. Students related their lived experiences to the literary themes found in both canonical and multicultural literature.

When I plan my literary curriculum in the upcoming years, I will remember that students connected with the literary themes found in the works, not the canonical or multicultural label placed on them. I will use works that engage students' interests because of the literary themes found in the works, and I will not be concerned with whether the work is canonical or multicultural.

For a large majority of my Introduction to Literature class, being able to form a personal connection with the literature helped the students become engaged with the works utilized in this study. During the coming semesters, I plan to use works that contain these two literary themes, "love is an important part of life," and "social acceptance is wanted by people." Students formed a connection with these three literary themes because of their life experiences. Out of the 292 journal entries collected in this study, 23 journal entries were written on the literary theme "love is an important part of life." Twenty-eight journal entries were written on the literary theme "social acceptance

is wanted by people, and all 26 students, who participated in this study, wrote in their journals or spoke during class discussions on the “changing directions in life” theme. Because of the large number of student responses to these literary themes, I will include works that have these literary themes because of the connections students formed with them.

### **My Reflections on the Discrepancies Students Had Between Their Lived Experiences and the Literature Utilized in this Study**

In 66 out of 79 negative responses found in students’ journals, students expressed that they were not able to relate to a work because they had no lived experiences in common with the work. However, other reasons might be at work here. In my teaching journal, I noted that 17 students expressed in classroom discussions that the wording used in some works, especially canonical works, such as “A Cask of Amontillado,” were hard to understand. When students could not understand an author’s vocabulary, students seemed to shut down any attempts to relate the work to their lived experiences. For example, one student came into class and threw down his literature book. He requested, “Mrs. Ging, you have to help me. I just do not follow Poe’s wording! His words do not speak to me.”

During classroom discussions, I found that when students verbalized that they did not understand the words used by the author of a work that students rarely had anything else to say during the discussion, and if they did say something, it could be considered a negative comment much like this comment noted in my journal, “The story [“A Cask of

Amontillado”] is so untrue. It is a crappy story. I cannot understand some of the words Poe used.” When students had a hard time understanding the vocabulary used in the work, I noted in my teaching journal that they were not engaged with the work. During the course of this study, I shared unfamiliar words with students on the day we discussed the work, but this discussion did not seem to lessen the negative remarks given by students to certain works. In coming semesters, I plan to discuss words that students might be unfamiliar with before I have them read the work, so students will have a better chance of making personal connections with the work and will not be hindered by an author’s vocabulary.

Furthermore, I gave limited biographic information about the authors to the students. The biographic information consisted of each author’s birth and death date and nothing more than a sentence or two about the time period in which each author wrote. This limited information could be another reason as to why the students did not understand certain authors’ works. If I would have given the students time to do in-depth research on the authors, the information gained from the research might have helped them to understand why the authors wrote as they did.

When students did not understand an author’s words, they were not engaged with the work. However, if students spent time getting to know an author through research, they might be more receptive to an author’s words, even if they had trouble understanding those words, because the students had formed a personal relationship with the author because of their research.



In addition, this study has shown me the need to survey students at the beginning of each semester on what types of literature they like to read and on what authors they prefer to read. With that knowledge, I can limit the apathy students feel when they do not understand an author's wording by selecting works and authors in which the students have shown an interest.

### **Implications**

The purpose of this research was not to pit canonical and multicultural works against each other, but to determine which works held students' engagement and to describe the extent of that engagement, so I as well as other literary teachers could make their literature classrooms more engaging for students.

An implication that literature teachers should consider is selecting works with varied literary themes, thereby increasing the chances that students will be able to make connections between their lived experiences and the literature utilized in the classroom. It is not the canonical or multicultural label that interest students, but the literary themes found in the works. For example, if a teacher were to select multiple works that dealt with the theme of death, only those students, who have experienced a death of someone or something, could make connections with the literature based on their lived experiences.

In addition, I plan to include works that have the two literary themes that students responded to most positively in their journals. Those themes were "Love Is an Important Part of Life" and "Social Acceptance Is Wanted by People." Since one of my goals in a

literature class is to engage students' interests, works containing these two themes will be included in my curriculum.

Furthermore, an implication of this study to consider is that when students had trouble understanding an author's vocabulary, they had trouble making connections between their lived experiences and the literary themes found in the literature. When students are having trouble understanding an author's vocabulary, literature teachers could provide the needed vocabulary words before the students read the literature. By providing these definitions prior to the readings, those definitions could help students better understand the work and better enable them to make their own personal connections with the literature.

Likewise, another implication arises when students are having trouble understanding an author's vocabulary. Literature teachers could provide students with detailed biographical information on the authors and the time periods in which they wrote. By learning about authors' lives and about the time periods in which they wrote, student might be more receptive in trying to understand what the authors were writing about in their works.

To aid students in understanding the works discussed in class and to help them form connections with the works, I plan to read the first page of each short story and the first two stanzas of each poem aloud to them. After each reading, I will ask students if they have questions about the work that I can answer for them.

When students read a work, I will ask them to record passages from the reading that they had trouble understanding or any questions that they had about the work, so I can address what might be hindering them from making a personal connection with the literature.

Since students' voiced that they had never been asked to relate their lived experiences to literature before this study, I plan to continuing asking students to relate their lived experiences to the literary works since that is a way for students to form connections with the literature.

A final implication is the need for student input in what works and what authors they will study. By surveying the students to see which works and authors they prefer, teachers can select works and authors that are of interest to students.

### **Recommendations**

This study reflects the need to consider the implications of English teachers choosing their curriculum in an Introduction to Literature course and the benefits that curriculum may have on students in the classroom. Much has been mentioned in the educational literature concerning the importance of canonical and multicultural literature to students, yet more research needs to focus on the lived experiences of students in relationship to the literature they read in the classroom. This study is just a beginning when it comes to looking at the importance of the lived experience in students' engagement with the literature they read.

My experience from this study has led me to ask a new question. My question asks, “As people’s lived experiences change, does what they derive from a work change or remain untouched over time?” For example, one student remarked in her journal that “I was obese as a child, and even though I lost weight, I still harbor negative feelings toward society, despite no longer being ridiculed for my weight.” The changing aspect of people’s experiences needs to be examined further in students’ abilities to relate their lived experiences to the literary themes found in the literature they read.

Furthermore, I feel that more culturally and ethnically diverse authors need to be included in future studies to see if authors from more diverse backgrounds would yield different responses from students.

Also, I believe that a more diverse population than the one in this study might add additional insight into the phenomenon under study. Since this study did not deal with a variety of people of ethnic diversity, additional information might be gleaned from a study that looked at the lived experiences of a more diverse population.

I would recommend this study be replicated over more literary works than were analyzed for this presentation of data. With more canonical and multicultural works under study, a more in-depth look at how students relate and to the extent that students relate to literature could be presented.

I believe that more Introduction to Literature classes need to be included in a study of this nature to determine if the same or different results emerge from the new information. By broadening the scope of this study, English teachers can learn even more

about the phenomena of students' lived experiences and their relationships to the literature. More research needs to be done, so more consideration will be given to the power of students' lived experiences in benefiting their engagement with literature.

### **Conclusion**

I was fortunate enough in this study to have students who did not hesitate to share their responses to literature with me. Through their words, students answered my research question by saying that they became engaged with the literature when they were able to relate their lived experiences to the literary themes found in the literature. The canonical or multicultural label did not help students identify with the literature. It was the personal connections that students forged with the literature that mattered to them. This study provided clear evidence that students did not identify with a work because it was canonical or multicultural. Students connected with the works whose themes related to their lived experiences. The literary themes found in the works provided the backdrop students needed to be engaged with the literature that they read.

As I finish my dissertation, I remember my first day as a student in an Introduction to Literature class. During the first minutes of the class, the teacher wrote the word "Humanities" on the board. She stated that we took this Introduction to Literature course to fulfill a Humanities requirement for our degree, and she asked us to find as many words as we could in the word "Humanities."

After a few minutes, she talked about two important words found in that one word "Humanities," and they were "human" and "ties." She declared that literature shares the

human experiences that tie us all together. This teacher research confirmed what I learned in that class seventeen years ago. Students are engaged with literature that they can relate to their personal lives.

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Appendix A

SAMPLE OF STUDENT JOURNAL

### **Journal Prompt for “A Good Man Is Hard to Find”**

Number \_\_\_\_\_

Please, respond to “Happy Endings,” a short story by Margaret Atwood. Use the following journal prompt for your journal response:

Was there something from this work that you could relate to your lived experiences?

Please, provide more than a “yes” or “no” answer to this question. If you answered “yes,” tell what part of the work brought about this response. If you answered “no,” tell how your lived experiences differed from the literary work.

Yes, I can relate to this story. I have a sister who would have multiple friends, and she would come to me, telling me that she had caught one doing something that she [my sister] did not approve, and I had nerve enough to confront the young man and give him a piece of my mind because a person cannot let loved ones get hurt.



Appendix B

SAMPLE OF TEACHING JOURNAL

*August 25, 2004--*

On the first day of class discussion, “A Rose for Emily” was discussed. Quote from Student: Everybody wants to be loved, Mrs. Ging. That is why we are put on this earth—to love. Emily [the main character in the work] wants Homer to love her. That is why she bought the rat poison and knocked him off. She never wanted his love to leave. Look for Love Is an Important Part of Life theme as semester progresses.

*August 28, 2004—*

Love for pet found in “Cat in the Rain.”

*September 3, 2004—*

Also, love found in Bierce’s “An Occurrence at Owl Creek Bridge,” Yeat’s “A Last Confession,” Jonson’s “On My First Son,” and Chopin’s “Story of an Hour.” In each work, a character dies or moves on to another relationship, and students identified with losing loved ones of their own. Quote from Student: Yes, I can relate to this poem [“A Last Confession”]. While you can give your heart and soul when you love, it feels like it has been ripped out when the other person wants out of the relationship. I always want the other person to be as in love as I am. I can relate to this poem because my heart has been ripped out by someone I thought loved me.

*September 15, 2004—*

“Happy Endings” student wrote of protecting loved one—Yes, I can relate to this story. I have a sister who would have multiple friends, and she would come to me, telling me that she had caught one doing something that she [my sister] did not approve, and I had nerve enough to confront the young man and give him a piece of my mind because a person cannot let loved ones get hurt.

*September 30, 2004—*

The love is an important part of life theme continued into the poetry unit when one student wrote of Shakespeare's "Shall I Compare Thee to a Summer's Day," Use Student Quote: I find it funny that in the second line that Shakespeare states that she is more temperate and lovely than a summer's day. It wouldn't be good enough for her to be compared to a summer's day, but she would have to be better than it. Men do that all of the time by magnifying the good points of their love. I can relate the love my husband shows me to the love talked about this poem. Since the day we married, he is always telling me how beautiful my eyes are. This is a good quote to use to clarify the theme found in the literature that this student related to her personal experience with love.

Appendix C  
INFORMED CONSENT

## **Informed Consent**

**Project Title:** Utilizing Students' Lived Experiences to Enhance the Literary Classroom: One Teacher's Look at the Use of Canonical and Multicultural Literature in the Classroom

**Researcher:** DeLisa Kerr-Ging

B.S. in Secondary English Education

M. Ed. in Secondary Education with an emphasis in Reading

**Purpose:** This study will be done to help complete requirements for my doctoral dissertation research. The study you are asked to participate in involves anonymous responses to draw conclusions about how you relate to canonical and multicultural literature regarding the literary works I have chosen.

**Procedures:** You will be asked to complete two surveys and 22 typed journal entries.

The first survey will take about 30 minutes to complete.

The biographic information will be used to describe the composition of your Introduction to Literature class. Also, you will be asked to describe what types of literature you have been exposed to in the past. This survey will be given to you during the first day of class, and you will be asked to return it by the end of the first week.

No identities will be revealed of students taking this survey.

This second survey will take about 30 minutes to complete. This survey asks you to rate each work discussed in class using a number system. You will rate each work on the meaningfulness of the work to you. You will complete this survey during the last class session.

All information obtained from this survey will be kept confidential. The identities of students will not be revealed. Furthermore, students will be asked to complete typed journal entries for each literary work discussed in class, 22 works, and each journal entry will take about 20 minutes to complete. Journal entries will be done outside of class and will be turned in each Friday to me. Here is the journal prompt that will be used for every writing: Was there something from this work that you could relate to your lived experiences? Please, provide more than a “yes” or “no” answer to this question. If you answered “yes,” tell what part of the work brought about this response. If you answered “no,” tell how your lived experiences differed from this piece of literature. All information provided by the journal entries will be kept confidential, and students’ identities will not be linked to any data or reports.

**Risks to Participants:** There are no known risks associated with this project which are greater than those ordinarily encountered in daily lives.

**Benefits:** This study will help me and other educators to determine what types of literature enable the greatest engagement in an Introduction to Literature classroom. With this knowledge, future students will benefit from a more engaging curriculum that will increase their retention of knowledge learned.

**Confidentiality:** The data obtained during the research will be stored in a locked file cabinet, and I will be the only one with access to the data.

The data will be kept from August 21, 2004 until my dissertation is complete in the spring of 2005, and at that time, the research data will be destroyed.

Furthermore, you will not place your name on any documents returned to me. Responses will be kept anonymous. You will draw a number that is to be used in place of your name. You are to remember that number and place it on every document that you turn in to me. This number will serve as a descriptor for you, insuring your anonymity in the study.

In addition, no specifics from the data will be reported. Only generalizations will be made as indicated by the number of positive responses to canonical and multicultural literature.

**Compensation:** No compensation of any kind will be given to you for participating in the study. Participating in this study is only on a voluntary basis, and participation in this study will in no way affect your grade. You can withdraw from the study at any time or refuse to complete the surveys and/or journal entries at any time. Also, the OSU IRB has the authority to inspect consent records and data files to assure compliance with approved procedures.

**Contents:** If you have any questions, you can contact DeLisa Kerr-Ging at (580) 548-2370 or Dr. Kathryn Castle at (405) 744-8019. For information on

subjects rights, contact Dr. Carol Olson, IRB Chair, 415 Whitehurst Hall,  
(405) 744-1676.

**Participant Rights:** Your participation in this study is voluntary, that there will be no penalty for refusal to participate, and you are free to withdraw your consent and participation in this study at any time without penalty.

**Signatures:** I have read and fully understand the consent form. I sign freely and voluntarily. A copy of this form has been given to me.

\_\_\_\_\_

Signature of Participant

\_\_\_\_\_

Date

I certify that I have personally explained this document before requesting that the participant sign it.

\_\_\_\_\_

Signature of Researcher

\_\_\_\_\_

Date



Appendix D  
IRB APPROVAL LETTER

Oklahoma State University  
Institutional Review Board

Protocol Expires: 6/24/2005

Date: Friday, June 25, 2004

IRB Application No ED04113

Proposal Title: Utilizing Students' Lived Experiences to Enhance the Literary Classroom: One Teacher's  
Look at the Use of Cnonical and Multicultural Literature in the Classroom

Principal  
Investigator(s):

DeLisa Kerr-Ging  
4313 Valley Forge Drive  
Enid, OK 73703

Kathryn Castle  
235 Willard  
Stillwater, OK 74078

Reviewed and  
Processed as: Expedited

Approval Status Recommended by Reviewer(s): Approved

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Dear PI :

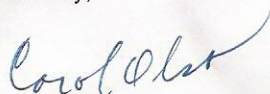
Your IRB application referenced above has been approved for one calendar year. Please make note of the expiration date indicated above. It is the judgment of the reviewers that the rights and welfare of individuals who may be asked to participate in this study will be respected, and that the research will be conducted in a manner consistent with the IRB requirements as outlined in section 45 CFR 46.

As Principal Investigator, it is your responsibility to do the following:

1. Conduct this study exactly as it has been approved. Any modifications to the research protocol must be submitted with the appropriate signatures for IRB approval.
2. Submit a request for continuation if the study extends beyond the approval period of one calendar year. This continuation must receive IRB review and approval before the research can continue.
3. Report any adverse events to the IRB Chair promptly. Adverse events are those which are unanticipated and impact the subjects during the course of this research; and
4. Notify the IRB office in writing when your research project is complete.

Please note that approved protocols are subject to monitoring by the IRB and that the IRB office has the authority to inspect research records associated with this protocol at any time. If you have questions about the IRB procedures or need any assistance from the Board, please contact me in 415 Whitehurst (phone: 405-744-5700, colson@okstate.edu).

Sincerely,



Carol Olson, Chair  
Institutional Review Board

Appendix E

A NUMERICAL LOOK AT STUDENTS' POSITIVE AND NEGATIVE JOURNAL  
RESPONSES BASED ON THEIR LIVED EXPERIENCES TO THE THEMES FOUND  
IN CANONICAL AND MULTICULTURAL LITERATURE

**A NUMERICAL LOOK AT STUDENTS' POSITIVE AND NEGATIVE  
JOURNAL RESPONSES BASED ON THEIR LIVED EXPERIENCES TO THE  
THEMES FOUND IN CANONICAL AND MULTICULTURAL LITERATURE**

<i>Canonical Short Stories</i>	Relate		No Response
	Yes	No	
"A Rose for Emily"			
Finding true love	5	3	
Holding onto the past	2		
Chooses among life's pathways	2		
Leaving a bad situation	1		
Nosey neighbors	2		
Not able to kill		3	
Did not like the homosexuality in story		1	
Town in story was larger than their home town		1	
Couldn't relate to Southern culture		1	
Writing style		1	
Total	12	10	0

"Cat in the Rain"			
Marriage		1	
Woman in need of love	7	3	
Major life change	5	1	
Love of animals	3		
Writing style		2	
Total	15	19	0

"A Cask of Amontillado"			
Revenge	7	4	
Deception	1	1	
Drunk behavior	1		
Writing style	1	1	
Total	10	6	0

"An Occurrence at Owl Creek Bridge"			
A life change	1		
Death of a loved one	6	4	
Consequences	1		
Take things for granted	2		
Writing style	1	2	
Religion	1		
Total	12	6	0

"Young Goodman Brown"			
Questioning faith in religion	6		
Social acceptance wanted by people	6		
Choosing life's path	1		
People saying one thing and doing another	1		
Dealt with too much religion		1	
Story too unrealistic to believe		1	
Writing style		1	
Total	14	3	0

*Canonical Poems*

"Ode on Grecian Urn"			
Wish to freeze moments in time	12		
Total	12	0	0

"On My First Son"

Death of family member	7	6	
Total	7	6	0

"A Last Confession"

Heartbreak from lost love	3		
Love needs to be unconditional	1		
Total	4	0	0

"Shall I Compare Thee to a Summer's Day"

Expression of love	5		
Total	5	0	0

"Dover Beach"

Life is a struggle	4		
Questioning faith in humanity	1		
Life can be lonely	2		
Total	7	0	0

"Fireflies in the Garden"

Finding something bigger in life	3		
Two different objects can be similar	1		
Enjoy watching fireflies and stars	2		
Everything in life has its place	1		
Fireflies are short-lived, but bright	1		
Total	8	0	0

*Multicultural Short Stories*

"Happy Endings"

Unreturned love	4		
Cannot let loved ones get hurt	1		
Story presents true life scenarios	5	1	
Be thankful for what you have	3		
Story presents unreal life scenarios		5	
Life can have happy endings	1		
Too young to have experienced events		1	
Not experienced marriage yet		1	
Total	14	8	0

"Why I Live at the P.O."

Oppression from family	6	1	
Wanting acceptance from family	6	3	
Family gatherings on the Fourth of July	1		
Total	13	4	0

"The Yellow Wallpaper"

Have felt depression in life	4		
Work at a mental facility have seen behaviors	1		
Feel the need to be socially accepted	2	2	
Experienced life's trials	1		
Total	8	2	0

"A Story of an Hour"

Death of a loved one	1		
Oppression of women by men	6		
Feel trapped by life	1		
Not married		1	
Shocked by life's events	1	1	
Life has its responsibilities	1		
Could not relate to story		1	
Total	10	3	0

"A Good Man Is Hard to Find"

Hard to trust people	4	1	
People think that times are getting worse	2		
Good people are in the world	3		
Know people like characters in the story	3		
People's self-interest ruined my day	1		
Total	13	1	0

*Multicultural Poems*

"We Real Cool"			
Living life for the moment	3		
Skipped school like characters in poem	1		
Total	4	0	0

"Barbie Doll"

Wanting acceptance from others	10	1	
People can be cruel	1		
Have to be yourself no matter what	1		
Total	12	1	0

"Sympathy"

Caged bird is better off inside the cage	2		
Know what it is like to feel caged by oppression	6		
People take freedom for granted	1		
Total	9	0	0

"We Wear the Mask"

Wanting social acceptance by others	14		
Don't let people bother me	1		
Total	15	0	0

"Ballad of Birmingham"

Know of horrific events happening to people	2		
What is considered safe may not be	5	1	
Remember Martin Luther King's efforts	1		
Have not experienced events in the poem		1	
Choice made turned out to be wrong one	1		
Not had to deal with racism		1	
Total	9	3	0

"Diving into the Wreck"

Have experience with diving	1		
Going into unfamiliar territory	1		
Women are oppressed in the workplace	3		
Made a wreck of my life	1		
Writing style	1		
Could not Relate to Poem		7	

Total	7	7	0
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Appendix F

A SUMMARY OF STUDENTS' SECOND SURVEY RESULTS

## A SUMMARY OF STUDENTS' SECOND SURVEY RESULTS

### Canonical

	Strongly Agree	Agree	Disagree	Strongly Disagree	No Response
<i>Short Stories</i>					
"A Rose for Emily"	4	9	4	2	
"Cat in the Rain"	5	8	5	1	
"A Cask of Amontillado"	6	1	10	2	
"An Occurrence at Owl Creek Bridge"	4	6	9	0	
"Young Goodman Brown"	5	11	3	0	
<i>Poems</i>					
"Ode on a Grecian Urn"	5	7	6	1	
"On My First Son"	8	5	6	0	
"A Last Confession"	4	10	4	1	
"Shall I Compare Thee to a Summer's Day"	5	10	5	0	
"Dover Beach"	4	7	5	2	
"Fireflies in the Garden"	5	9	5	0	
	<b>55</b>	<b>83</b>	<b>62</b>	<b>9</b>	<b>0</b>

### Multicultural

	Strongly Agree	Agree	Disagree	Strongly Disagree	No Response
<i>Short Stories</i>					
"Happy Endings"	8	7	3	1	
"Why I Live at the P.O."	9	5	4	2	1
"The Yellow Wallpaper"	3	9	4	3	
"A Story of an Hour"	3	9	5	2	
"A Good Man Is Hard to Find"	3	11	4	1	
<i>Poems</i>					
"We Real Cool"	8	6	4	1	
"Barbie Doll"	5	9	6	0	
"Sympathy"	6	9	3	1	
"We Wear the Mask"	10	8	0	0	
"Ballad of Birmingham"	5	8	5	1	
"Diving into the Wreck"	5	7	6	1	
	<b>65</b>	<b>88</b>	<b>44</b>	<b>13</b>	<b>1</b>

VITA

DeLisa Kay Kerr-Ging

Candidate for the Degree of

Doctor of Education

Thesis: UTILIZING STUDENTS' LIVED EXPERIENCES TO ENHANCE THE LITERARY CLASSROOM: ONE TEACHER'S LOOK AT THE USE OF CANONICAL AND MULTICULTURAL LITERATURE IN THE COLLEGE CLASSROOM

Major Field: Curriculum and Supervision

Education:

- 1993 Bachelor's of Science in Secondary English Education  
East Central University  
Ada, OK
- 1995 Master's of Education in Secondary Education with an Emphasis  
in Reading  
East Central University  
Ada, OK
- (July, 2005) Completed the requirements for the Doctorate of Education degree  
with a major in Curriculum and Instruction at Oklahoma State  
University.

Experience:

- 1994-1995 Adjunct English Instructor for East Central University  
Ada, OK
- 1995-To Present English Instructor for Northern Oklahoma College  
Enid, OK

Service in Field:

- Summer 2002 An Oklahoma State Writing Project Summer Scholar
- 2001-2003 A Board Member of the City of Enid's Library Advisory Board
- 2001 to Present An Oklahoma Humanities Scholar for the Connections  
Program for Newly Literate Adults

Name: DeLisa Kay Kerr-Ging

Date of Degree: July, 2005

Institution: Oklahoma State University

Location: Stillwater, Oklahoma

Title of Study: UTILIZING STUDENTS' LIVED EXPERIENCES TO ENHANCE THE LITERARY CLASSROOM: ONE TEACHER'S LOOK AT THE USE OF CANONICAL AND MULTICULTURAL LITERATURE IN THE COLLEGE CLASSROOM

Pages in Study: 131

Candidate for the Degree of Education

Major Field: Curriculum and Instruction

Scope and Method of Study: The purpose of this study was to examine what types of literature engage students' interests. Participants in the study were 26 students at a Midwestern community college. All students in an Introduction to Literature course were eligible to participate. Each student completed journal entries and two surveys for this study. The data were collected to answer if students related their lived experiences to the literary themes found in canonical and multicultural literature

Findings and Conclusions: The data revealed that students related their lived experiences to the literary themes found in the works, not the canonical or multicultural labels given to the works by literary scholars. The canonical or multicultural label did not help students identify with the literature. Instead, students identified with the literary themes found in the literature, and they forged connections with the literature, whether canonical or multicultural, based on their lived experience.

ADVISER'S APPROVAL: Kathryn Castle

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