

Children's Classics Through The Lenses of Literary Theory

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INTRODUCTION

Literary theory is largely absent from high school English courses. While virtually all high school students read and respond to literature, few are given opportunities to analyze the works they read using established, critical methods. This curriculum unit will introduce high school students to four critical approaches, and it will ask students to apply each approach to selected works of children's literature.

Four methods of literary criticism - feminism, Marxism, post-colonial criticism, and reader-centered criticism – are especially useful in understanding the wide variety of texts students study in high school and college English courses.

Feminist criticism suggests that readers can fully comprehend works of literature only when they pay particular attention to the dynamics of gender. Many high school readers are naturally drawn to the issue of gender. In several canonical works – *The Scarlet Letter* and *The Awakening* are good examples – understanding the roles of key female characters is an important and provocative task. Our use of feminist criticism will produce interesting discussions of traditional gender roles and societal expectations in literature and in the world of daily experience.

Marxist criticism suggests that readers must closely examine the dynamics of class as they strive to understand the works they read. Many students focus naturally on the issue of class when they read works which explicitly call attention to it – the novels of John Steinbeck and Richard Wright, for example. Extending this focus to works of literature which do not call particular attention to class struggle will be a challenging and potentially rewarding endeavor. Like our use of feminist criticism, our use of Marxist criticism will produce provocative discussions which seek to apply the method's ideas both to works of literature and to the world of daily experience.

Post-colonial criticism is given to examining cultural changes in the many parts of the world colonized by Europeans during the last three centuries. The method's proponents study the cultures of both the colonized and the colonizers, focusing particularly on the ways in which these cultures influence (and sometimes consume) one another. In a school district defined by ethnic plurality, the lens of post-colonial criticism should be especially interesting. Our use of post-colonial criticism will prompt students to examine cultural struggle as it is manifested in works of literature, in the mass media, and, in many cases, in students' personal experience.

Reader-centered criticism dismisses the notion that works of literature contain distinct, “fixed” meanings. Proponents argue that new meaning is created by the “transaction” that takes place every time a reader engages a text. It has been my experience that high school students are easily frustrated by English teachers who deem their personal responses to literature insignificant in the face of teacher-defined “correct” responses. Frustrated students will find intellectual comfort in our use of reader-centered criticism. With guidance, students will come to understand how a reader’s personal response to a work of literature can be instrumental in making the work meaningful.

To justify the addition of literary theory to the established English curriculum, teachers need look no further than the curriculum’s stated goals, one of which is to foster critical thinking skills. The phrase “critical thinking” has buzzed through teacher inservices for many years. Certainly it is useful for students to learn to think critically about their lives and about the world around them; such thinking can only lead to more informed decision-making – a worthy goal, to be sure. But it often seems that, with several notable exceptions, the call to place greater emphasis on critical thinking skills is an empty call. More specifically, the call to teach critical thinking skills is commonly mired in frustrating abstraction; most teachers understand what it is to think critically, but many are unsure how best to help their students reach a similar understanding. I believe that introducing methods of literary theory to high school English students is one way to make critical thinking a more meaningful part of their lives.

Of course it is possible to use methods of literary criticism to better understand *canonical* texts. But many students think of these texts as inaccessible – impenetrable, even – simply because they are schoolbooks, books “owned” by teachers and other adults. I believe that students’ first exposure to the methods of literary criticism will be most successful if it is built upon the comfortable familiarity of children’s classics. This curriculum unit will feature a variety of picture books, children’s novels, and young adult novels. These books are engaging and accessible, even to students who did not encounter them as younger readers; they will provide the non-threatening starting place many students need as they venture into the challenging world of critical theory.

I will teach the unit in stages. Each stage will begin with my introducing a single critical method. Students will learn the ideas and practices associated with the method, then apply what they have learned in the “laboratory” of children’s classics. After completing each stage, students will read one or more canonical works especially suited to the method they have most recently mastered. As my principal teaching assignment is Pre-AP English 2, the canonical works I choose will fit the traditional American literature track. Practice with feminist criticism might lead to Kate Chopin’s *The Awakening*; practice with Marxist criticism might lead to John Steinbeck’s *The Grapes of Wrath*; practice with postcolonial criticism might lead to N. Scott Momaday’s *House Made of Dawn*; practice with reader-centered criticism might lead to J.D. Salinger’s *The Catcher in the Rye*. Other teachers may feel free to use the unit’s four stages singly or in any

combination, and to substitute canonical works appropriate to their specific teaching assignments.

During every stage of the unit, I will remind students that each method of literary criticism is a “lens” through which they may view a wide variety of texts. I will stress that what is true for the photographer is true for the critic: no lens, no critical method, is a consistent “best choice.” Rather, every lens, every critical method, is more useful in some situations than others. By the end of the unit’s final stage, I believe my students, having worked with feminist criticism, Marxist criticism, postcolonial criticism, and reader-centered criticism, will be able to decide for themselves which critical method(s) to apply to any text they subsequently encounter.

FEMINIST CRITICISM

Gender can be a provocative subject for high school students. The physical and psychological confusion of adolescence, the often bitter clashes young people have with their parents, the growing desire many teenagers have to share their lives with others – it is no wonder our students seize upon gender issues with a passion little known in other academic settings. I believe that my students’ peering through the lens of feminist criticism will make for the most engaging phase of the present unit; it is for this reason I have chosen feminist criticism as the unit’s starting place.

Feminist criticism is a wide-ranging field; an adequate definition of the methods of feminist criticism must include several currents of thought. The following sentence, taken from *A Handbook of Critical Approaches to Literature*, lists three of feminist criticism’s principal tasks, “Feminist critics generally agree that their goals are to expose patriarchal premises and resulting prejudices, to promote discovery and reevaluation of literature by women, and to examine social, cultural, and psychosexual contexts of literature and literary criticism” (Guerin et al. 197). This unit is primarily concerned with the first and third tasks; during this stage of the unit, students will examine the roles female characters play in a number of children’s classics, and they will seek to understand the worlds children’s authors create by viewing those worlds through a lens that calls constant attention to the dynamics of gender.

Students will read a brief essay detailing methods of feminist criticism, then read a number of picture books and children’s novels, and, when time permits, young adult novels. A single question will inform the reading of each work: “In the world of this book, what does it mean to be female?” Working individually, students will write brief feminist analyses of the works they read; working in cooperative groups, students will discuss their findings. I will suggest that points of disagreement often make for especially productive discussion – students should always feel free to question their classmates’ opinions – and I will ask one member of each group to make a record of the group’s conversation. During small group sessions, I will move through the room,

listening to students' opinions and making sure discussions remain focused on the texts in question.

The engaging picture books of Patricia Polacco should provide a positive first experience with the application of feminist criticism. Polacco's *My Rotten Readheaded Older Brother*, *The Keeping Quilt*, *The Butterfly*, and *I Can Hear the Sun* feature strong female characters. These characters, and the places they occupy in the worlds Polacco creates for them, stand in stark contrast to the weaker, sometimes negligible female characters found in many other picture books. Students will read and discuss several of these books, too. For each picture book, students will write a single-sentence answer to the question mentioned above. Sentences will vary considerably, but all should be fairly telling.

Many classic children's novels feature prominent female characters and difficult gender-based conflicts. Among these books are Scott O'Dell's *Island of the Blue Dolphins*, Katherine Paterson's *Bridge to Terabithia*, Patricia MacLachlan's *Sarah, Plain and Tall*, Jean Craighead George's *Julie of the Wolves*, Ouida Sebestyen's *Words by Heart*, and Laura Ingalls Wilder's *Little House in the Big Woods*. During the unit's first stage, students will read and discuss at least one children's novel. (I could divide a class of 30 students into six groups of five and assign one of the six novels listed above to each group.) The products of reading and discussing children's novels will be more substantial than the products of reading and discussing picture books. I will ask students to submit paragraph-length analyses of the children's novels they read. These analyses will begin with the same direct, single-sentence assessments students wrote in response to picture books, then continue with thoughtful analysis of relevant textual evidence.

The world of young adult novels is often a world of gender-based conflict. Francesca Lia Block's *Weetzie Bat*, Jerry Spinelli's *Stargirl*, Melvin Burgess's *Smack*, and Laurie Halse Anderson's *Speak* all feature compelling gender issues. Each of these books should prompt an engaging, provocative discussion. In the interest of time, I may not ask students to read and discuss both a children's novel and a young adult novel. If time allows for both, I will ask for the same paragraph-length analyses of young adult novels I asked for with children's novels.

To briefly demonstrate the work students will do through the lens of feminist criticism, I will consider the issue of gender in one of the most widely-read children's novels. Scott O'Dell's Newbery-winning *Island of the Blue Dolphins* is ideally suited to the first stage of the curriculum unit. The novel's principal character is Karana, a Native American girl who is left behind when her tribe, having suffered a deadly encounter with a hostile foe, flees its island home. For many years, Karana is the island's only human inhabitant; her story is one of survival and discovery. A feminist reading of *Island of the Blue Dolphins* must focus on the fearsome decisions Karana makes to break with gender-based tribal customs. Generations of patriarchal control – no female presence is apparent in the tribe's power structure – and gender-specific behavior make it very difficult for

Karana to break with tradition. In one notable scene, Karana, in dire need of a spear, is troubled by the prospect of breaking a tribal taboo which prevents women from making weapons. Her triumph – over the immediate threat posed by wild dogs and the anguish which accompanies her decision to violate a rigid tribal custom – is one of the book’s defining moments. The ending of *Island of the Blue Dolphins* – a happy one, in the minds of most readers – seems almost sinister when viewed through the feminist lens. After years of successful, independent living, Karana is rescued by white sailors. These sailors, who are – or are affiliated with – Spanish missionaries, take Karana from her island home and set sail for a missionary settlement on the California coast. O’Dell’s narrative ends on board the Spanish ship. While the reader can certainly appreciate the value of renewed human companionship in Karana’s life, it is difficult for the feminist critic to believe Karana will be a happier person after joining this foreign, largely masculine society.

MARXIST CRITICISM

The lens of Marxist criticism causes readers to focus their attention on the dynamics of class. Marxist critics believe that literature typically supports the social and economic theories of Karl Marx. Most students have at least some vague awareness of Marxist thought, but all will benefit from a well-written introductory essay. This essay will include relevant quotations from Marx’s writing and from Deborah Appleman’s *Critical Encounters in High School English*, a work which contains a brief but effective summary of Marx’s most important ideas. When students are familiar with the basic principles of Marxist criticism, they will enjoy an old-fashioned read-aloud.

Dr. Seuss’s beloved picture books *Yertle the Turtle* and *The Lorax* are perfect choices for a first look through the lens of Marxist criticism. Both books involve a struggle for power - a desire for material domination which necessarily involves the unwilling sacrifice of others. In *Yertle the Turtle*, Yertle, a brutally ambitious turtle, wants to rule much more than the small pond he calls home when the book begins. To Yertle, a ruler’s power varies directly with his range of vision: if Yertle can see it, he believes he owns it. To see (and, therefore, to own) more and more of the area surrounding his pond, Yertle forces other turtles to allow him to stand on their backs. This is a startlingly direct representation of a key Marxist idea: the power-hungry ownership class (or bourgeoisie) is necessarily tiny (in Yertle’s case, the bourgeoisie is comprised of exactly one recalcitrant reptile), and survives only because the sacrifice of an overwhelming majority, the working-class proletariat (in *Yertle*, the proletariat is comprised of the countless turtles upon whom Yertle steps on his way to total domination) makes survival possible. In *The Lorax*, a greedy, uncaring corporation devastates the natural world in the name of profit. The Lorax, an enchanting creature in deep sympathy with the natural world, symbolizes the terrible toll exacted by the corporation’s hunger for economic domination. While *The Lorax* ends on an optimistic note, most readers are left with grave doubts concerning the natural world’s prospects for recovery. The corporation, having stripped the natural world of every valuable resource, moves on, but even in its absence, the

natural world teeters on the brink of permanent failure. A full-group discussion of *Yertle the Turtle* and *The Lorax* will follow our read-aloud. I will prompt students to view both texts through the lens of Marxist criticism; after a fifteen- to twenty-minute discussion, students, working individually, will write brief Marxist analyses of the books.

Several children's novels lend themselves to Marxist criticism. Lois Lowry's *The Giver* and Natalie Babbitt's *Tuck Everlasting* join previous choices *Little House in the Big Woods*, *Words by Heart*, *Bridge to Terabithia*, and *Island of the Blue Dolphins* as useful selections for the unit's second stage. Students will read one of these children's novels, then follow the individual and small group procedures established during the unit's first stage. A single, somewhat general question will provide focus: "In what ways can Marx's essential ideas be applied to this book?"

To briefly demonstrate the work students will do through the lens of Marxist criticism, I will consider the issue of class in one of my students' favorite books. Lois Lowry's *The Giver* is, at once, a deeply disturbing and powerfully uplifting novel. Jonas, the book's principal character, is a twelve-year-old member of a meticulously-controlled, utopian society. Jonas's society is truly classless – genetic engineering, behavior modification, and mandatory drug therapy guarantee the society's most cherished quality, Sameness. Absent from Jonas's society are the many negative traits Marx associates with capitalism. No one in Jonas's world seeks to exploit other citizens; no one desires more than his or her prescribed allotment of material goods. The challenge of reconciling the world Lowry describes in *The Giver* with the world Marx believed would be the "end of history" boils down to a single issue: free choice. Marx's world is classless, perfectly balanced, and voluntarily communist. Lowry's world is classless, perfectly balanced, and scrupulously controlled by a powerful, external authority. It is certainly possible to compare Lowry's world to the totalitarian states which brutally forced "communism" upon their citizens during the second half the 20th Century, but it is very difficult to compare Lowry's world to the ideal communist state Marx describes. Perhaps the most interesting intersection of Marxism and *The Giver* is Marx's notion of "internal contradictions." Marx believed that every class structure contained the seeds of its own destruction. The world of *The Giver* has no class structure – every citizen is an equal, though carefully-controlled, member of society – but the seeds of destruction are indeed present. When Jonas, like every other citizen, reaches his twelfth birthday, he is put to work in a job the society's elders select for him. Jonas's job is unique: he will be the society's next Receiver of Memory. Every memory, every "awareness" that has been sapped from Jonas's society is now concentrated in the mind of a single citizen, the Receiver. When Jonas's work begins, the former Receiver takes on a new identity; he is now the Giver of Memory. The very existence of collective memory is the undoing of Jonas's society. A breakdown in the system of Giving and Receiving causes memories to "escape" into the larger community. Every escaped memory is a step – sometimes blissful, sometimes terrifying – toward true freedom.

POST-COLONIAL CRITICISM

Post-colonial criticism suggests that works of literature which involve the coming together of different cultures can best be understood if readers focus their attention on the ways in which cultures influence one another. Post-colonial criticism is most frequently applied to literature involving the many cultures changed by European colonization from the sixteenth century to the present. Examples abound: over time, Great Britain's control of India and present-day Pakistan produced a wealth of literature influenced by centuries of traditional Indian culture and by the fruits of formal British education; in North America, the pervasive effects of European colonization have prompted many Native American writers to work tirelessly for the preservation (and resuscitation, in some cases) of uniquely Native narrative traditions.

Students in most American public schools are taught that cultural diversity is a good thing, but they are often asked to think about diversity in a simple, somewhat unrealistic way. Post-colonial criticism asks students to look beyond the "It's A Small World" model of ethnic diversity and to ask tough questions about the many ways in which we are defined by the clashing cultures of which we are parts. In a cosmopolitan city and in a school district whose statistical majority is an ethnic minority, the reasons for asking these questions are clear.

Students will begin their work with post-colonial criticism by reading an essay that explains the method's founding ideas and common practices. A written activity that might help get intellectual juices flowing could involve students' reflecting on the cultural influences exerted upon their own lives. (Many of our students come from multi-ethnic homes, and virtually all of our students have friends from a wide range of ethnicities.) After some initial discussion, students will enjoy a read-aloud of H.A. Rey's beloved picture storybook, *Curious George*. On first glance, this familiar book seems unrelated to the kind of cultural exchange that is post-colonial criticism's principal focus. A key question (and a question that is constantly useful to those who practice post-colonial criticism) will provide direction. That question is, "How does the colonizer (in *Curious George*, the "colonizer" is the man in the yellow hat) regard the colonized (the monkey George, in this case)?" The indomitable George is a delightful character, but his situation, from the perspective of post-colonial criticism, is quite disturbing. He is the simple native whose life is immeasurably improved by "civilization." At the beginning of *Curious George*, the monkey lives a carefree life in his native Africa, swinging from vines and munching bananas. George remains a happy monkey after his capture; he is, in fact, only portrayed without a smile in one picture – the picture of George held captive in a jail cell. Students who are not fond of analysis will likely point out the fact that George is, after all, a monkey, not a member of some definable culture. True enough, but in the larger scheme of things, George is a symbol of the other, a "primitive" who is (quite necessarily) overjoyed when he is uprooted and transported to a "better" place.

Several children's and young adult novels lend themselves well to post-colonial criticism. In fact, almost any book that involves cultural "struggle" should work well with this part of the unit. Three good choices include Louise Erdrich's *The Birchbark House*, Laura Ingalls Wilder's *Little House in the Big Woods*, and Scott O'Dell's *Island of the Blue Dolphins*. Students will read one of these children's novels, and then follow the individual and small group procedures established during the unit's previous stages. A single question will provide focus: "In what ways does cultural struggle define this book?"

To demonstrate the work students will do through the lens of post-colonial criticism, I will briefly consider the issue of cultural struggle in the classic *Island of the Blue Dolphins*. (Above, I used a feminist reading of *Island of the Blue Dolphins* to demonstrate the sort of work students will do during the unit's first stage. This is significant – I believe it will often be possible to use single novels in multiple parts of the unit.) The trauma Karana, the novel's protagonist, experiences early in life, is trauma caused by cultural upheaval. Karana's people, a relatively peaceful island tribe, attempt to deal honestly with the belligerent tribe seeking to harvest, under the direction of Russian traders, one of the island's most valuable natural resources. A post-colonial reading of the novel will focus first on the exploitative nature of this deal – the foreign tribe has no intention of honoring its word to Karana's people – and second on the personal trauma Karana suffers as a direct result of the exploitation of her tribe. This personal trauma (explained to some extent above) involves Karana's having to face the necessity of breaking ancient tribal taboos. Karana's decisions could prompt very interesting discussions, especially among those students who have consciously turned away from family or cultural traditions, deciding instead to embrace new ways of conducting their lives.

READER-CENTERED CRITICISM

Reader-centered criticism promotes the theory that reading is fundamentally a transactional experience. Reader-centered criticism rejects the more traditional idea that discreet, "final" meanings exist in every work of literature. Practitioners of reader-centered criticism recognize the fact that authors invest works of literature with "intended" meanings, but they insist on the greater importance of the individual reader's personal experience of these works. For example, a novelist may take great pains to weave a complex extended metaphor through many chapters of a novel. A competent traditional assessment of the novelist's work would necessarily involve this metaphor, recognizing it as part of the novel's intended pattern of meaning. A reader-centered assessment may or may not involve the metaphor. If a reader finds the metaphor a meaningful part of the reading experience, then for that reader, the metaphor is important, worthy of careful attention. If a reader does not find the metaphor meaningful (or, as the case may be, if a reader does not find the metaphor at all), then for that reader, the metaphor simply does not matter; other parts of the novel are more important, worthier of the reader's careful focus.

Many high school English teachers are quick to point out the potential dangers of a reader-centered approach to literature. Two objections – the larger philosophical, the smaller procedural – are most common. Reader-centered criticism celebrates the fact that individual readers respond to works of literature in wildly different ways. High school English classes focus, more often than not, on the “discovery” of single, correct responses to literature. English teachers who believe it is their duty to “teach” works of literature by telling their students what is true about those works will likely find a reader-centered approach frivolous, a waste of precious class time. This is the most common philosophical objection to reader-centered criticism. How, teachers might ask, can we make time to encourage our students’ personal responses to Hamlet’s awful dilemma when our students have not yet dissected each of the play’s major soliloquies? From a strictly curricular perspective, this is a legitimate question; it is true that time spent on personal, typically informal responses to a work of literature is time *not* spent on more formal, teacher-centered explication of the work’s “important” qualities. But, argue teachers who promote reader-centered approaches, the meaningful practice of reader-centered criticism can free student reading from the awkward confines of traditional pedagogy, greatly increasing the likelihood that students will find reading a purposeful, rewarding activity both in and out of class.

Unfortunately, “the meaningful practice of reader-centered criticism” is not easy to accomplish. Herein lies the most common procedural objection to reader-centered criticism. In a chapter devoted to the practice of reader-centered criticism, Appleman quotes a student who thinks he has found a way to beat the system, “You really can’t tell me anything about this book since my personal response is the only thing that counts” (29). If a teacher wants reader-centered criticism to be a meaningful part of his work with students, he must make it clear that the reader-centered approach, like every other critical approach, is firmly rooted in the text itself. Ineffective practice of reader-centered criticism makes it much too easy for students to simply “fake it,” ignoring the text they are asked to read and focusing exclusively on their own experiences. Teachers can work to avoid this stumbling block by training their students in the methodology of reader-centered criticism and by encouraging them to respond to works of literature in meaningful, relevant ways.

We will begin our study of reader-centered criticism with an essay describing the methods’ basic principles. The essay will draw on the Appleman chapter and Louise M. Rosenblatt’s *Literature as Exploration*. When students are familiar with the basic practice of reader-centered criticism, I will ask them to find picture books they were especially fond of as younger readers. Students will re-read these books at home, and then examine them through the lens of reader-centered criticism. This will happen in steps: first, students will write brief, first-person essays describing their experiences with the books they have chosen. Next, students will introduce and briefly discuss their books with classmates in a small group setting. Students will remain in small groups for the unit’s final reader-centered activity. Working with three or four classmates, students will

read (or re-read, as the case may be) one of several provocative young adult novels. Students will write reader-centered critical essays about these novels, then compare and contrast their work with that of other group members. Each group will make an “album” of individual responses to the novel the group reads; I will display these albums around the classroom for others to examine.

Any memorable picture book will serve the unit’s first reader-centered activity. I will keep a number of classics on hand for those students who do not have access to their original picture books. My “default” selections will include Maurice Sendak’s *Where the Wild Things Are*, Margaret Wise Brown’s *The Runaway Bunny* and *Goodnight Moon*, and H.A. Rey’s *Curious George*, among others.

I believe young adult novels containing especially provocative subject matter will produce the widest range of student responses. Stephen Chbosky’s *The Perks of Being a Wallflower* and Chris Crutcher’s *Stotan!* join previous choices *Smack*, *Weetzie Bat*, *Stargirl*, and *Speak* as good selections for the unit’s third stage. Students will read one of these novels and complete a two-step, reader-centered activity. The activity’s first step takes the form of a reader-response journal. At regular intervals, students will write personal responses to their novels. I will offer very little guidance here – the more students rely on their own reading experiences, the more authentic their responses will be. A very general question will prompt each entry: “What about this book elicits some response – positive, negative, or neutral – from me?” I will tell students that their entries may take any form, from traditional literary analysis to personal narrative to bitter diatribe. The activity’s second step involves students sharing selected responses with others who have read and written about the same books. This sharing will take place in groups of five or six; students will be free to withhold entries they consider too personal to share with others. The purpose of sharing responses is to drive home the essence of reader-centered criticism: that every reader’s experience is unique, and every reading of a given text results in the negotiation of new meaning. Each group will produce an album of unique reader responses. Albums will feature at least one response from each group member, and should demonstrate the many different ways group members reacted to the books they read.

To briefly demonstrate the reader-centered method, I will give a personal response to one aspect of an especially controversial young adult novel, William Burgess’s *Smack*. “Smack,” of course, is slang for heroin; Burgess’s novel is a deeply troubling story of heroin addiction among British runaways. While I have no personal experience with illegal drugs, I responded strongly to many aspects of Burgess’s narrative. One summer, when I was much younger, I had a penchant for reading cautionary tales of drug addiction. I was afraid to check books of these stories out of the Bellaire City Library (a comfortable and nicely-air conditioned summer home-away-from-home), but I found it strangely exciting to sink into one of the library’s over-stuffed leather chairs and read the book’s terrifying narratives. Drug addiction was far from my world of daily experience, but these frightening tales, most of which featured middle-class characters who reminded

me of my family and friends, made it seem strangely, even thrillingly, close. Much of *Smack* – especially the book’s second half, which describes the rapid disintegration of Tar and Gemma’s lives – reminded me of those afternoons at the library. One difference was particularly striking. The cautionary tales I read as a child invariably ended in one of two ways: total recovery or death. In *Smack*, Burgess describes the deaths of two minor characters, drug dealers who overdose while sampling an especially potent shipment, and he allows one of his principal characters, the ever-searching Gemma, to stay clean after a difficult detoxification. But the book’s most important character, Tar, and several minor characters, are addicts to the end. The voyeuristic thrill of “Just Say No” horror stories ended after I turned the last page; the anguish I felt reading *Smack* lingered much, much longer.

CRITICISM AND CANONICAL TEXTS

Teaching the unit in segments will allow me to introduce complementary canonical works after closing each unit segment. Students will never read canonical texts through only one critical lens, but they will use any useful lens(es) in their overall examination of these more established texts. For example, Nathaniel Hawthorne’s *The Scarlet Letter* is a perfect follow-up to the unit’s first segment, feminist criticism. Students quite naturally discuss this novel’s principal character, Hester Prynne, in terms of gender. Taking the next step – using feminist theory to analyze the part Hester plays as a female character in a world dominated by a powerfully masculine theocracy – should help students understand how easy (and how useful) the transition from children’s texts to canonical texts can be. Crucial to preserving the integrity (the aesthetics, perhaps) of the reading experience is my constantly reminding students that critical lenses never reveal the whole of any work of literature; rather, they function, well, as colored lenses, allowing certain hues to emerge more plainly than they would in the absence of such helpful tools. Most appealing is the prospect of examining single canonical texts through multiple lenses. John Steinbeck’s masterpiece *Of Mice and Men* is an ideal example. Certainly it would be easy to view the book through the lenses of a Marxist critic – Steinbeck made no apologies for his progressive (radical, many would say) politics – but imagine how rewarding an experience it might be to examine the book as a feminist critic (focusing on the awful situation Curley’s wife endures) or a reader-response critic (focusing, I would guess, on the book’s life-changing, final scene).

CRITICISM AND THE WIDER WORLD

It is very important to me that my students recognize the utility of the various critical methods outside the world of academics. To this end, it might be interesting to apply the various critical methods we will study as parts of this unit to advertisements, television programs, and other cultural “artifacts.” In an election year (the Presidential campaign will be well underway by the end of the coming school year), we will not need to worry about materials for analysis. It will be fascinating to hear students’ informed critical reactions to the products of their world. (Especially intriguing is the prospect of

analyzing a single “item” – TV show, song, advertisement, political speech, etc. – through multiple lenses.)

LESSON PLANS

Lesson Plan #1 – Feminist Criticism, First Step

Goal

Students will apply basic principles of feminist criticism to the picture storybooks of Patricia Polacco.

Method

- Students will read a brief essay detailing the basic principles of feminist criticism. This essay will suggest to students that feminist criticism, like all the other critical methods they will study, is but a single lens through which they might examine works of literature.
- I will arrange the classroom in a way that allows students to work together in groups of three or four. Working in small groups (inside the classroom, or perhaps in the courtyard, etc.), students will read aloud two or three of the Patricia Polacco storybooks I bring to class. Titles include *My Rotten Readheaded Older Brother*, *The Keeping Quilt*, *The Butterfly*, and *I Can Hear the Sun*, each of which features at least one prominent female character. The best approach will involve students’ reading aloud to each other, sharing the books’ fabulous artwork, generally taking their time and enjoying these simple but powerful texts.
- After students read each book, they will pause and, working individually, write single-sentence answers to the following question: In this book, what does it mean to be *female*?
- When students have written responses to this question, they will share their thoughts in a brief discussion. I will move through the room, monitoring discussions and asking questions, where useful.
- Students will repeat this process for each of the additional Polacco books they read.
- At the end of the session, we will discuss students’ findings in a large-group setting, attempting to find common threads running through the various books.
- As a closing activity, students will write a paragraph characterizing Polacco’s female characters through the lens of feminist criticism.

Notes

This lesson will serve a very important purpose: it will demonstrate to students for the very first time that sophisticated critical thinking can be productively applied to seemingly simple works of literature. If this is not made clear at the very beginning of

the unit, it seems likely the unit will be less meaningful than it should be. It is crucial that students understand the near-universal applicability of the critical methods they will study during the course of the unit. If they believe, for example, that feminist criticism can only be meaningfully applied to the classics, to recognized masterpieces, then they will have missed the unit's largest (and most important) point: the lenses of critical thinking can be usefully applied to a wide range of situations, "artificats," etc. To make sure this happens, I will need to walk a very fine line, encouraging students to focus all their critical skills on Polacco's picture storybooks and encouraging them, at the same time, to simply enjoy the books as books. This balance will help drive home another crucial point: criticism need not sap the fun from reading. It is important to me that my students are able to think critically about the books they read; it is equally, if not more, important to me that my students enjoy the "simple" act of reading.

Lesson Plan #2 – Literature Circles

Goal

This plan, useful in several different phases of the unit, asks students to spend approximately one week reading a children's or young adult novel in a small group setting. Regular reading will be accompanied by various written and discussion activities.

Method

- Working in groups of five or six, students will first choose a children's or young adult novel that "fits" the critical method we are currently studying. They will do so using lists that I provide – lists comprised of five to ten titles I believe most useful.
- After students choose a novel, they will purchase or borrow copies, then work together to set a weekly reading schedule. This step will be crucial – if all members of a group are not on task each day, written and discussion activities will fall flat. Students will submit written schedules to me at the end of the activity's first class period.
- Each day, depending on what else is on my schedule, students will spend part or all of the class period discussing their latest reading assignments and completing various written activities (some defined by students, others my creations) designed to complement discussion.
- When students have finished reading their novels, they will write "abstracts," relative brief statements characterizing the novels they have read through the specific lens of the critical method we are studying.
- As a final activity, groups will create book fair "stations" using poster boards, various graphics, etc. We will take a full class period to stroll through the classroom examining each other's work. This closing activity should give students a good opportunity to share their experiences with one another. So often,

we simply set books aside after we finish reading them, not making any effort whatsoever to interact with the book after the reading experience comes to an end. The magic of reader-centered criticism lies in the ongoing engagement readers have with the texts they experience. Sharing these texts with others should help make this ideal a reality.

Notes

Done carelessly, literature circles can be extremely frustrating. With focus and consistency, literature circles can be a wonderfully empowering way for students to work and learn together. Past experience tells me the key lies in regular check-ups. It is critical that students draft a feasible reading and discussion schedule before they begin their chosen books, and it is critical that students stick to this schedule as they make their way through the texts. If adjustments are necessary, students can certainly choose to make adjustments; but a schedule carefully constructed at the beginning of the project should make adjustments much less necessary. During those parts of the class period given to literature circles, it is imperative that I “make the rounds,” checking in with each group at least once: asking questions (some addressed to the group, others addressed to individuals), and searching for breakdowns in the agreed-upon schedule. In a school as busy as mine, it is inevitable that some students will simply find themselves too busy, some night, to complete their reading. While there is no need to be fanatical about these things, there is a need to make students understand the virtue of consistency, the benefits of keeping up. For groups reading short or “fast” books, it will be useful for me to have secondary titles in mind to suggest to students when they have finished their first, chosen texts. It may be necessary to offer small amounts of extra credit for this additional reading, but properly managed, this should not have a damaging effect on the authenticity of student averages.

Lesson Plan #3 – Karl Marx, Meet Dr. Seuss!

Goal

I will acquaint students with the basic principles of Marxist criticism by reading aloud and discussing with them two classics by Dr. Seuss, *Yertle the Turtle* and *The Lorax*.

Method

- Students will read a brief essay detailing the basic principles of Marxist criticism. They will discuss this essay with me, as needed, for full comprehension.
- In the tradition of elementary school story time, students will gather around and listen as I read aloud *Yertle the Turtle* and *The Lorax*.
- After each read-aloud, students will write brief responses identifying any ideas found in both the introductory essay and the storybook.

- When students have finished writing, we will engage in full-group discussion, focusing on Marxist aspects of the two Dr. Seuss texts.
- For closure, students will write thoughtful paragraphs stating clearly the various Marxist ideas found in the books.

Notes

As the unit's leading candidate for "laughingstock lesson," this one-day activity should be handled with real care. Students should understand with absolute clarity that I am not labelling Dr. Seuss a Marxist, but that I am pointing out Marxist trends in two of Dr. Seuss's most famous picture storybooks. This distinction should help students learn more specifically how critical methodology can be useful. I will explain to them the notion that the various critical methods can all be useful, but only in carefully chosen situations. Feminist criticism would produce relatively little mileage if the method were applied to these two storybooks. (After all, an answer to the question, "What does it mean to be female in this book?" would be met with a resounding "Absolutely nothing" from readers of the two Dr. Seuss classics; the books contain no significant female characters.)

ANNOTATED BIBLIOGRAPHY

Note: I have included in this bibliography a limited range of choices teachers might make when selecting books for the various parts of this unit. I was happily surprised, when writing the unit, to find that virtually any children's or young adult novel presents opportunities for exploring one or more of the most common critical methods.

Anderson, Laurie Halse. *Speak*. Farrar Straus Giroux: New York, 1999.

This acclaimed young adult novel, built around one girl's silent suffering in the wake of brutal acquaintance rape, is ideally suited to the feminist and reader-centered parts of the unit.

Appleman, Deborah. *Critical Encounters In High School English: Teaching Literary Theory to Adolescents*. Teachers College Press: New York, 2000.

Deborah Appleman's book is essential reading for high school teachers who want to incorporate formal methods of literary criticism into their curricula. Appleman includes a great number of references to other works; many of these could be helpful to teachers who want to incorporate critical methods not discussed in this unit.

Block, Francesca Lia. *Weetzie Bat*. HarperCollins: New York, 1989.

A beautiful and controversial young adult novel, *Weetzie Bat* (and its several sequels) will work well with the feminist and reader-centered parts of the unit.

Brown, Margaret Wise. *The Runaway Bunny*. HarperCollins: New York, 1942.

A reassuring picture story-book, this is one of several classics I will have on hand for the first phase of the reader-centered part of the unit.

Burgess, Melvin. *Smack*. Avon Books: New York, 1996.

This young adult novel is the harrowing account of teenage heroin addiction in present-day England. The book is ideally suited to use with the reader-centered part of the unit. Given its inclusion of anarchism as a minor theme, the book might also be a useful text during the Marxist part of the unit.

Chbosky, Stephen. *The Perks of Being A Wallflower*. MTV Books: New York, 1999.

A contemporary take on J.D. Salinger's *The Catcher in the Rye*, *Wallflower* is a provocative, moving young adult novel perfectly suited to the feminist and reader-centered parts of the unit.

Erdrich, Louise. *The Birchbark House*. Hyperion Paperbacks: New York, 1999.

This children's novel which tells the story of a young American Indian girl. This book could work with the feminist part of the unit, and is ideally suited to the post-colonial part of the unit.

- Guerin, Wildred, et al. *A Handbook of Critical Approaches to Literature*. Oxford University Press: New York, 1999.
This book is a great desk reference for any teacher planning to incorporate formal methods of literary theory into his or her instruction.
- Lowry, Lois. *The Giver*. Dell Laurel Leaf: New York, 1993.
A powerful, sometimes terrifying vision of a utopian future, this novel will work very well with the Marxist, feminist, and reader-response parts of the unit.
- May, Jill P. *Children's Literature & Critical Theory*. Oxford University Press: New York, 1995
Jill May's book contains two particularly useful chapters, "Reading, Discussing, and Interpreting Children's Literature" and "Literary Criticism and Children's Literature." Though May's book is not specifically geared for high school courses, it does lay pedagogical groundwork for including critical theory in reading programs at all levels of education.
- Paterson, Katherine. *Bridge to Terabithia*. Harper Trophy: New York, 1972.
A moving children's novel adequately suited to the feminist and Marxist parts of the unit and perfect for the reader response part of the unit.
- Polaco, Patricia. *My Rotten Redheaded Older Brother*. Aladdin Paperbacks: New York, 1994.
This book is one of Patricia Polaco's many beautifully written and illustrated picture storybooks, all of which are perfect for the feminist section of the novel.
- Rey, H.A. *Curious George*. Houghton Mifflin: New York, 1941.
Good for the first stage of the reader-response part of the unit; also a good choice for a read-aloud at the beginning of the post-colonial section of the unit.
- Sendak, Maurice. *Where the Wild Things Are*. Harper Collins: New York, 1963.
A reassuring picture storybook, this is one of several classics I will have on hand for the first phase of the reader-centered part of the unit.