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Engaging Students with Literature

A Curriculum Module for AP® English Literature and Composition

2010
Curriculum Module

The College Board

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The College Board

This Curriculum Module touches upon what is at the heart and soul of AP® English Literature and Composition: reading and understanding literary works. More specifically, it offers suggestions for how to get your students to read more, how to train them to evaluate the artistic quality of what they read and how to explore literature more deeply.

In "Standing on Merit: The Role of Quality and Choice in Student Reading," Barry Gilmore reveals, "I'm as interested in what texts students choose as I am in how they discuss those texts. I want to see, in other words, how they handle that one part of the instructions which may seem to them most tangential, the injunction to choose a work 'of literary merit.'" He presents a strong case for both directing what students read and for allowing them latitude in making their own choices of what they read. The balancing act of helping students learn what defines "literature of merit" while allowing them freedom to judge for themselves becomes more clear in this article.

John Harris, in "Our Zeitgeist: Fighting the White Noise," states that "[t]he Zeitgeist reading and writing project encourages students to read and research a particular era of history and write a term paper at the end of the spring semester after the AP Exam." In addition to facilitating student engagement with literature of or depicting a particular era, the project also allows students to discover that literature has more to say beyond the works themselves; those works can also say important things about the historical contexts in which they were written.

Julie Dearborn's article "Strategies for Engaging Students in an Analysis of *Frankenstein*" provides a comprehensive unit for teaching that novel. Her primary goal "is for each student to discover the pleasure of reading a classic novel like *Frankenstein*," and she does so via activities that lead students through a close reading of the novel. Dearborn shares examples of ways to use small group, whole group and individualized discussions of major themes and elements of the novel as methods of engaging students in literary analyses.

Standing on Merit: The Role of Quality and Choice in Student Reading

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It's the start of the year in 12th-grade AP English Literature and Composition, and the students are furiously scribbling their responses to an essay prompt from the 2002 AP Exam:

> Often in literature a character's success in achieving goals depends on keeping a secret and divulging it only at the right moment, if at all. Choose a novel or play of literary merit that requires a character to keep a secret. In a well-organized essay, briefly explain the necessity for secrecy and how the character's choice to reveal or keep the secret affects the plot and contributes to the meaning of the work as a whole.

The assignment serves as a formative assessment in more than one way. It's useful, of course, to see the quality of essays the students produce right off the bat with this sort of prompt and limited time; much of our work throughout the course focuses on improving this sort of essay with sophisticated syntax, smoothly incorporated evidence and thorough analysis. Because of my addendum that the students must write about one of three texts from their summer reading, the essay serves as a way to check that students have completed the summer assignment. And the essays are also an immediate, if limited, gauge of the creativity and depth of thought students bring with them to the study of literature.

But I'm conducting another assessment, too, one that many students don't even realize is a part of the assignment: When I read the essays, I'm as interested in what texts students choose as I am in how they discuss those texts. I want to see, in other words, how they handle that one part of the instructions which may seem to them most tangential, the injunction to choose a work "of literary merit."

It's worth discussing why and how students are allowed to choose texts on which to focus; below, I'll address the extent to which students need latitude in their reading choices. For now, suffice it to say that in this case the students have considerable autonomy in choosing texts, as they do on the actual AP Exam. So what constitutes a work of literary merit? In this particular year, one student writes about Sebold's *The Lovely Bones*. Another chooses Boyle's *The Tortilla Curtain*. Some of the choices seem in line with the canonical works commonly taught in high schools: Tan's *The Joy Luck Club*, Dickens's *Great Expectations*, Shakespeare's *Twelfth Night*, all good choices for this particular question. Others are contemporary choices and might raise some eyebrows: Settenfield's *Prep*, Albom's *The Five People You Meet in Heaven*, even Brown's *The Da Vinci Code*.

It's a broad list, and once I've collected the essays I often write all of the titles students have chosen on the board so that the whole class can see the range of works under discussion. Then I ask the students what they think.

"I'm not sure *The Da Vinci Code* is really a work of literary merit," says one student, frowning at the list.

A boy on the other side of the classroom raises his hand immediately. "I didn't write about it, but that was one of the best books I've ever read," he says.

"What makes you say that?" I ask.

"I stayed up all night just to finish it. I couldn't put it down. It wasn't just action. There was all this history and philosophy and character description. I thought it was great."

"That just means it's a page-turner," says another student. "It doesn't mean it's *literature*."

And there it is, in a single word: the gulf between what a student might choose to read and what he or she is told to read, the sense that there is one set of texts that belongs in the classroom and another that belongs in the bookstore and the backpack. It's not the word *literature* but the pronunciation of it, with its implied hierarchy and judgments, that drives home to me the contradictory truths with which every English teacher grapples: On the one hand, students need teachers to guide them through challenging, difficult and canonical texts that they might not approach on their own; while on the other hand, the very act of assigning those texts may seem to invalidate the reading choices that students make on their own.

"So," I say to the class, "here's your homework: What makes a novel or play a work of literary merit?"

Defining Moments

The search for a common definition of literary merit is not a new one. An article in *The English Journal (*1928), for instance, described a survey conducted nationwide among librarians to determine literary merit based on a 100-point scale; in this case, 100 represented the quality of "Shakespeare's writings" and zero represented the composition of "an average 6-year-old child just learning to read and write" (Graves 1928, 328). The small sample of around 60 librarians ranked *The Scarlet Letter* at 86.7, *The Adventures of Sherlock Holmes* at 57.9. A 1992 article by Arthur N. Applebee in the same publication attacked the issue from a different angle: Applebee evaluated studies that "looked in turn at the book-length studies that students are asked to read" and "at the selections of all types that teachers actually report using" (Applebee 1992, 27).

Both authors approach the subject with the notion that literary merit is determined by those in the know; teachers and librarians are the arbiters of quality, and canonical works such as a Shakespearean play (also at the top of Applebee's resulting list) set the standard for literary merit because they are, well, canonical: If the English teachers and librarians like them, they must be the best. I'm partial to the choices of English teachers myself,

I admit, but before I assault students with works that *I* consider to be of merit, or even before I try to justify my approach to choosing works for study, I find it worthwhile to hear what the students themselves think our working definition of the term should be. They, after all, have to live with our choices as much as, if not more than, I do. Even in 1928, Graves was aware that works can't be divided easily into two columns; one doesn't quickly sort through titles and emerge with one list of worthy texts and another list of pulp. Students generally come to the same conclusion pretty quickly.

The day after making the assignment, once the students shuffle into class and nervously take out their homework (thinking to themselves, I'm certain, "Do I have to turn this in? How will he *grade* this? What if I'm *wrong*?"), I ask for a volunteer to give me a first criterion for our definition. I write the response on the board, we discuss it, haggle a bit, possibly modify or erase or add, and then move on to a new criterion. The exercise takes most of the class period, at the end of which I take up the original responses for a completion grade, and when it's over we have usually come to a consensus (or nearly to one) that looks like this one from the class I've been describing:

A Definition of Literary Merit

The work of literature:

1. Entertains the reader and is interesting to read.
2. Does not merely conform to the expectations of a single genre or formula.
3. Has been judged to have artistic quality by the literary community (teachers, students, librarians, critics, other writers, the reading public).
4. Has stood the test of time in some way, regardless of the date of publication.
5. Shows thematic depth: The themes merit revisiting and study because they are complex and nuanced.
6. Demonstrates innovation in style, voice, structure, characterization, plot and/or description.
7. May have a social, political or ideological impact on society during the lifetime of the author or afterward.
8. Does not fall into the traps of "pulp" fiction such as clichéd or derivative descriptions and plot devices, or sentimentality rather than "earned" emotion.
9. Is intended by the author to communicate in an artistic manner.
10. Is universal in its appeal (i.e., the themes and insights are not only accessible to one culture or time period).

Certainly, there are arguable points on this list. How, for instance, does one judge the intent of the author? In a sense, however, arguable points are exactly what I'm after. While I feel that literary merit is fairly easy to agree on at the extremes — most people do, in fact, accept that Hamlet is a pretty darn good play — there's a lot of gray area in the middle that I want students to explore through thoughtful discussion and with the burden of proof.

When we finish our list, which is a little different every year but for the most part contains the same 10 or so criteria, I again offer the list of works students chose for the timed essay assignment. Here's where the going gets tough; not all students believe the criteria apply to all of the texts in the same way. Is *The Five People You Meet in Heaven* overly sentimental or insightful and thought provoking? Did Dan Brown write *The Da Vinci Code* with the intent to create great art or to keep readers turning pages, or both? Some texts, we all agree, meet only three or four of our criteria, others seven or eight; *Hamlet* meets all 10, we think, but what about a Shakespearean play like, say, *King John*? We have to ask, as well, whether or not all of the criteria count equally.

There's also an implicit argument students sometimes make that they — students — are not part of the "literary community" they cite in their definition. It's important to discuss the role of students, as a whole and as individuals, in the ongoing dialogue about how we judge quality in fiction. If we don't have this discussion, we could send the message that Michael R. Collings warned about in an essay in regard to teaching works by Stephen King: In telling students that an author like King is "too unsophisticated, too clumsy, too peripheral, too *common* to merit attention," we also communicate that "student readers are themselves too unsophisticated, too clumsy, too peripheral, too *common* to merit attention" (Collings 1997, 120).

In the end, even if we're left in limbo about a few titles, the class agrees that the distinction of literary merit involves considering a spectrum of works, not a simple division. That's a good first step, and here's a second: The next assignment is for each student to take the work he or she wrote about on the essay assignment and provide some evidence for every item on our list. What do the critics say about *Prep*? What does the author say about it? Are there any particularly well-written passages that can serve as evidence of its quality? Some of the responses must still, of course, be subjective, but the exercise forces students to dive into a deeper level of consideration about some texts than they might have before.

"I get it," says one student. "Some of the works we like to read aren't necessarily works of literary merit. So is your point that on the AP Exam we should just write about a Shakespeare play to be safe?"

Actually, that's not my point at all. In fact, I expect that AP Exam Readers see an awful lot of Shakespeare, and I know, as an acquaintance of mine who has evaluated the essays for many years told me, that AP Readers score the value of a student's open-ended essay according to the quality of writing. The Readers do not make a judgment on the title alone, though it factors in.

"For the purposes of the exam," I tell my students, "I want you to make a thoughtful decision. But this discussion is about more than that: We're talking about what you read and why."

Definition and Student Choice

One might take the easy way out and argue that a common definition of a term like "literary merit" is important precisely because of where and when it crops up. Besides appearing regularly on the AP English Literature and Composition Exam, the phrase appears in the language arts standards of dozens of states: New York, Vermont, North Dakota, Florida, Minnesota, et al. In Wisconsin, for instance, eighth-grade students should "develop criteria to evaluate literary merit and explain critical opinions about a text, either informally in conversation or formally in a well-organized speech or essay" (Wisconsin 2006). The argument, then, must go something like this: If every work a student reads to fulfill a school assignment is offered reverentially by the teacher as a paragon of literature — whether that work is *Romeo and Juliet* or *Charlotte's Web* — how can that student ever develop a "critical opinion" about a work he or she picks up on his own, whether that work is *The Lovely Bones* or a Harlequin romance?

That's not to say that there's not a certain de facto exploration of the concept of literary merit going on in many, if not most, language arts classrooms. Teachers are apt to include a variety of texts in their syllabi and students tend to develop an ad hoc sense of what's "good." At the same time, many students, I believe, develop a sense of guilt or defensiveness about the works they like to read but aren't "allowed" to read (think J. K. Rowling, James Patterson or Stephenie Meyer) and, at the worst, shut down in English classes because they feel no investment in works they've been assigned. More and more teachers are realizing the dangers of a top-down approach to making assignments; in the interest of cataloging the ongoing debate over the issue of literary merit, it's worth noting yet a third article from *English Journal*, this one written in 2001 by Rocco Versaci as part of a defense of comic books in the classroom:

> As teachers of literature, we should not strive to get students to accept without question our own judgments of what constitutes literary merit, for such acceptance inevitably positions students in the position of seeing literature as a "medicine" that will somehow make them better people, if only they learn to appreciate it. When students view literature in this light, they resent it, and literary works remain a mystery that they cannot solve.

Students need to tackle challenging texts they may never have heard of with the help of a passionate and informed teacher. They also need, for the act of reading for enjoyment, to be validated. They *also* need some tools to evaluate the novels and plays that they *choose* to read. An important step, then, is paying attention to student choice. Ultimately, we need to validate a student's ability to choose texts of merit on his or her own (or at least to choose texts on his or her own and then evaluate the merit).

As differentiated instruction becomes standard pedagogical practice in more and more classrooms, student choice in reading assignments has become a subject of some discussion. Interestingly, one study conducted by the National Center for Education Statistics concluded that although "students felt more positive about the experience when they were allowed to select a story, there were no differences between choice and

non-choice samples in students' reports of their motivation to perform well on the assessment" of that material (Campbell and Donahue 1997). But it's not necessarily improved reading comprehension on standardized tests that proponents of student choice seek to accomplish, although a better test score wouldn't be a bad side effect. Take, for instance, Alfie Kohn (1993, 8–20):

> Every teacher who is told what material to cover, when to cover it, and how to evaluate children's performance is a teacher who knows that enthusiasm for one's work quickly evaporates in the face of being controlled. Not every teacher, however, realizes that exactly the same thing holds true for students: Deprive them of self-determination and you have likely deprived them of motivation.

The goal, in other words, is to produce lifelong readers, but also readers whose experiences with texts are rich and deep and have the capability to grow over time.

In the case of an AP English Literature and Composition teacher like myself, that goal is brought home by the very format of the exam I'm preparing students to take. The open-ended question on the AP Exam doesn't require students to write about particular works; it requires them to write about literary concepts. Some choices support some arguments better, but a student must have more than the works of Shakespeare in his or her arsenal to answer competently every possible question about characterization, structure, theme, plot or literary technique. The question, in other words, allows for choice, an argument in itself for syllabi that also make such allowances.

In the case of my own summer reading assignment, students read three novels or plays. The first I assign to the entire class; last year, this work was *The Importance of Being Earnest*. (I have my own reasons for making that assignment; they pertain to where and how I start my curriculum.) Students choose the second work from a list of 10 contemporary novels like *Life of Pi*, *The God of Small Things* and *The Kite Runner*. Through this list I accomplish a few goals simultaneously: I expose students to contemporary literature from around the world; I provide choice while at the same time ensuring that enough students will read each work that I can have them participate in small literature circles in class or online; and I offer, implicitly, one standard of literary merit — my own. In our class discussions I'll encourage students to question that standard, since it's as subjective as any other, but it's a starting place for their thinking about the matter.

The third work students read is a novel or play of their own choosing. Here's the actual assignment:

> Choose one other novel or play of literary merit to read over the summer. This work may be contemporary or classic, but you will be required to defend your choice and to analyze and refer to it in class discussions and writing assignments. If you want a list of suggested titles, try asking friends, your parents, the local bookstore clerk, a librarian or other teachers — or even me.

Thus, I get *The Da Vinci Code* from one student, *Great Expectations* from another. Which student came out ahead? That depends on whom you ask.

Throughout my course, I try to offer students choice in their reading in a variety of ways. When we study *Hamlet*, I assign small groups to read other tragedies together and to present group projects. Instead of a standard research paper on the work of one writer, I ask students to focus their research on a thematic comparison of works by more than one author; the reading list is the toughest part of this assignment, and it usually takes consultation with more than one English teacher in our school for a student to put that list together. At other times, I ask students to choose outside reading from a list and complete dialectical journals or, sometimes, to sit down with me for an oral interview about the text. And sometimes (over the winter holiday break, for instance) I instruct them to read one book — any book — that they can tell the class about upon our return.

Along the way, I manage to teach a healthy number of canonical works: Chaucer, Shakespeare, Conrad, a whole slew of poets. And the discussion about literary merit doesn't end in the first week of school; it enriches our reading of, say, a sonnet by Milton in the same week as an epigram by Jonson, or cummings's "since feeling is first" in the same class period as Catullus' poems to Lesbia. In this way, we create an ongoing discussion among readers: those in the class and those from throughout the centuries.

When the Discussion's Over: Further Strategies

I believe in the value of the philosophical discussion of the phrase "literary merit" with students, but I also value practical application of concepts and ideas raised in the classroom. Here, for instance, are a few ideas for capitalizing on an initial conversation about how we judge quality in the texts we read:

- As I mentioned above, the question of a work's merit offers avenues for research that are ultimately, I think, more interesting and meaningful than a simple encyclopedia-based report on an author's life. Send students looking for critical responses to a text from contemporary reviewers, other authors or the literary community. It's interesting to read, for example, the response of Steinbeck's own generation to *The Grapes of Wrath* through the lens of historical understanding.
- Many sample writing prompts, such as the one I quoted at the beginning of this article, are available to teachers at the College Board's AP Central® website and in other places on the Web; it's fairly easy to construct more of your own. Throughout the year, I periodically read several of these prompts to students and have them list titles they might use to answer each one. The exercise doesn't just prepare students for the actual AP Exam or other on-demand writing assignments like it; it also gets them talking to one another and as a class about what they've read, where there are gaps in their reading ("I've never read a work I'd classify as magical realism — have you?"), and how they as a group judge quality and merit. During these sessions, I encourage students to jot down titles, mentioned by classmates, that are unfamiliar or that they might like to add to their own personal reading lists.

- Often, the criteria included in a class definition of literary merit compel students to value close reading and careful analysis. If, for instance, a work that fits the definition includes "innovation in style" or "voice," as the class definition provided above suggests, then surely it's incumbent upon a group of students studying *Pride and Prejudice* to find examples of innovative style or to identify the characteristics of the narrator's voice. Pointing to the criteria on the class definition, I sometimes place the responsibility on small groups of students to decide which passages in a text we most need to discuss as a class; this approach has the added benefit of making it certain that *someone* in the class will have an opinion to add to the discussion of a given passage.

- The process of applying a definition of merit to specific texts does not only lend itself to better discussion, it also provokes just the sort of thoughtful response I'm looking for in analytical essays. One might use parts of the definition to make an essay assignment (there's value in writing about specific passages that demonstrate innovation, for instance), but the definition might also be helpful in the revision process. Many student essays not only fail to show the sort of thematic depth specified on the list above, they actively try to excise depth out of themes of novels and plays in their essays, summing up an argument with a neat, tidy conclusion that fails to illustrate the nuances of the work's meaning ("Macbeth fails because of his ambition …"). Revisiting the list is a good way to guide students closer to writing sophisticated thesis statements and final paragraphs.

At some point during the year I share this information with the class: The College Board itself is vague about the meaning of the phrase "literary merit." It defines the term partly through comparison to a list of texts, partly by excluding "ephemeral works in popular genres" that "yield all (or nearly all) of their pleasures of thought and feeling the first time through," and partly by referring to Thoreau's injunction to "read the best books first" (College Board 2006, 45). It's a disservice to students, I think, not to allow them an opportunity to examine such a term critically; to, in fact, enter into a dialogue that has been ongoing for perhaps as long as stories have been told; and to engage in that dialogue as equal members, not as mere recipients of others' opinions. If we want students to value the works we respect enough to read and write about them with care, we need to respect the student's right to value or not to value works of literature. We must let those works rest not on the weight of syllabi or traditional lists or teachers' preferences but, in fact, on their own merits.

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Our Zeitgeist: Fighting the White Noise

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Read, Read, Read!

iPods, Play Stations, YouTube, Cable TV, DVDs, IM, texting, Tweeting, Facebook or a good novel? Increasingly books face more and more competition for teenagers' attention. Even the teenager who likes to read finds the onslaught of alternative media hard to ignore. Furthermore, if family members do not read plays, poems or novels at home, then it is likely that, for many students, reading literature (or reading at all) may not be modeled at home — a key element to encouraging reading among many students.

At the same time, the AP English Literature and Composition Exam is, among other things, a test of how well read a student is. A well-read student is more likely to have a large vocabulary, respond more quickly to texts and with more eloquence, and have greater familiarity with the various motifs in the poetry and prose passages. This is such an important factor that vertical planning for the AP Exam must include a rigorous reading program for the two or three years of high school prior to enrolling in the course. Yet no amount of assigned reading in and out of class can necessarily overcome the white noise of the high-tech distractions seducing our students away from Twain, Ellison and Shakespeare.

Each of us faces the problem outlined above, and many of us enjoy individual victories with students who turn on to reading as late as their enrollment in AP English Literature and Composition. But we also despair over students who leave our classes without a love of (or even a mild interest in) literature. These students may certainly be intelligent enough to get by, choking down books or by taking shortcuts with summaries; however, we fear their education will always be a chore and their teachers next year will again have to try to overcome their aversion to reading.

Why are the readers such a delight? We may love to teach them partly because they share our love of reading (and potentially writing). But I love them most because, in my eyes, half of my job as a high school English teacher is already done with them. The readers have acquired so many skills from their reading and, better yet, will acquire many more through their own self-propelled education that I need only point these students in the right direction and guide them forward rather than tempt, shove and cajole them. These students are, more often than not, academically ready for college.

The AP Exam rewards the well-read booklovers. Yet a love of literature is more likely to happen in the first 17 years of a student's life than in the eight months you have him or her

before the AP Exam in May. Thus, the AP teacher has an obligation to prepare students for the rigorous reading expectations of college and to turn them on to reading during their few months in the course.

Santa Monica High School

At Santa Monica High School we have an open-door policy for our AP English classes. Anyone can enroll in AP English Language and Composition or AP English Literature and Composition with either a recommendation from their present English teacher or by requesting a waiver (a relatively easy process of signing, in the presence of a school administrator, a paper acknowledging the difficulty of the course). Santa Monica High School is also a large comprehensive high school in a city of 75,000, surrounded by the even larger urban area of Los Angeles. Our population is ethnically diverse: 50 percent white, 35 percent Latino, 10 percent African American, 5 percent other. These two factors contribute to the wide range of personalities, cultures and skill levels in our AP English Literature and Composition classes. This diversity enriches class discussions, but one of the great challenges of teaching the course is that the skill levels of the enrolled seniors are also very diverse. Directly correlated to this is the wide range of reading interest among the students enrolled in the course. Some never read unless forced; some read addictively. Most of them like reading if they get sucked into a plot or an engaging character, but they would rather text on their cell phones, go to the movies or surf the Web.

Thus, outside reading is a key element of my AP English Literature and Composition curriculum. Over the course of a year, students read five novels, a play (*Candide*), selections of the Bible, and a "schoolwide" book each summer. Coupled with rigorous reading expectations over the previous two or three years of high school, the hope is that this will generate fairly well-read students. More important, if the reading and writing assignments inspire the students, many of the seniors in the courses will carry a love of reading with them into their future endeavors.

Teacher and Student Goals for the Project

The zeitgeist reading and writing project encourages students to read and research a particular era of history and write a report at the end of the spring semester, after the AP Exam. I have designed this "guided" independent reading and writing project to address three concerns, two of which I have already mentioned. First, the project is designed to engage readers who have previously either meandered through outside reading without a focus or faked their way through it because of a lack of interest in reading. Second, the project is designed to have the flexibility to teach to diverse skill levels and yet maintain a high level of rigor for all students. Third, since an AP class is more a preparation for college than preparation for an exam in May, the project is designed to give students a taste of the semester-long research projects that they will encounter in college.

The goals from the student perspective are as follows:

1. Get the satisfaction of intensive research and the vastly more insightful reading that comes from this research.
2. Learn to work one-on-one with a teacher, developing research strategies, thesis statements and drafting. (Hopefully most students will appreciate the value of proactive learning by the end of the unit if they do not do so already.)
3. Find your own comfort level of rigor to encourage your best writing.
4. Integrate historical research into literary analysis writing.
5. Appreciate the impact of literature on how we all perceive our history.
6. Write a sustained literary analysis essay, not just the shorter papers so prevalent in high school but less frequently assigned in college.
7. Meet the rigorous standards of an AP course.
8. For some: GET AN "A."

The Zeitgeist Assignment

If successful, the project should result in students reading widely through their spring semester, writing a seven- to 10-page essay worthy of the sophisticated expectations of college courses and, with a little luck, provide students an opportunity for success that may tip the balance toward students becoming avid readers.

At the beginning of the spring emester, I hand out a reading list (see Appendix) and the following instructions.

The Zeitgeist Project/ Harris/ 11AP

Read at least two novels and one nonfiction book about a particular era or movement in American history. You might want to focus on the Civil War, the 1960s, World War II or Vietnam; you might even want to follow a trend such as the abolitionist movement or the space race. Students in the past have used *Blood Meridian* and *Moby Dick* to understand Manifest Destiny, *Catch 22* to understand the absurdity of World War II, or *White Noise* to understand the postmodern perspective of the 1980s.

Just as Steinbeck's *The Grapes of Wrath* dictates, in part, how we see our own Depression-era history, many novels (and films) influence the way in which we interpret historical moments in American history. We do not just rely on history books, documentary films and newspapers. Primary sources and nonfiction accounts of our past do not always end up as the dominant stories of our past. For example, most Americans' understanding of the Puritan culture of the Massachusetts Bay Colony is profoundly informed by Hawthorne's *Scarlet Letter* and Miller's *The Crucible*.

Your goal is to become familiar, via literature, with a particular era or movement of American history. Write an essay in which you demonstrate that the novel (or novels) you read capture the zeitgeist of a particular period (i.e., the theme of the novel is the theme of the era). Also be aware of how the novel also may inform the culture's perception of that era. In order to do that best, you will need to juxtapose the perspective of a nonfiction account of that era to the perspective in your novel(s).

The best place to start is with a novel. For your first zeitgeist proposal, consider the first novel you would like to read and the era or movement you would like to research. Write a one- to two-page project proposal explaining your area of interest, the books you may read and the themes you may research. You will find some *mere suggestions* for titles and periods or movements below. (See Appendix.) Talk to me about your ideas!

Right away there are two main challenges for the students: picking a first novel and understanding what *zeitgeist* means. This will require the teacher to devote some class time to describing novels on the list.

The Zeitgeist Concept

This is not a simple concept for students to grasp. Their understanding will evolve as they read and as you teach the idea to them. I begin by using the language they already know, such as theme and tone. The zeitgeist of an era (such as the Great Depression) or of a movement (such as the civil rights movement) is the historical theme or set of themes that the populace perceived at that time or the historical perspective we now have regarding the themes, intellectual trend and tone of an historical period or movement.

This difficult abstraction slowly reveals itself through the use of examples; I will use books students have already read during their junior year, such as *The Great Gatsby*, *The Grapes of Wrath* and *The Scarlet Letter*. I also discuss the enormous impact television and film have on our perception of historical periods, and I constantly emphasize the undoubtedly huge impact art has on our perceptions of the zeitgeist of a particular era.

Once students do begin to see that the themes of a novel can parallel the zeitgeist (i.e., themes) of an era, the zeitgeist concept becomes exciting for them. Ideally, students will not only begin to understand the potential for a novel to capture the spirit of the times of a particular era (i.e., depict the crucial themes of the people living at that time and place) but also, more profoundly, they will appreciate the potential for a widely read novel, such as one assigned in high schools across America, to form the way we perceive the zeitgeist of an era or historical movement. This more postmodern notion of the subjective malleability of history and the role of literature in the forming of our historical perspectives can be a fertile ground for some of our more sophisticated readers and writers.

Picking a Book

Note that the books on the reading list (see Appendix) are mostly either canonical or recently praised contemporary works. Although I love mysteries and spy novels as much as anyone, I designed the list to encourage students to become better read in the classics or what likely will become classics. Simultaneously, I designed the list to have the flexibility to meet the potential interests and reading levels of a wide range of students without risking a potential "watering down" of the curriculum. The struggling readers will have ample opportunity for success without necessarily revisiting the potential frustrations of the rigorous, commonly taught AP English Literature and Composition classroom books (such as works by Conrad, Shakespeare and Faulkner). I use a few rules:

1. Rely on the students' knowledge of United States history. Most students in AP English Literature and Composition are either also studying U.S. history or studied it in a previous year. Encourage research into an area of history they find intriguing, they think they have some mastery of or they wish to learn more about. If you are especially motivated, coordinate with the U.S. history teachers to augment the reading list and help guide students' book choices. I rely on the history department for help with the nonfiction choices, since I am less familiar with that genre. If your knowledge or your students' knowledge tends toward histories other than U.S. history, you may want to either focus your reading there or simply expand the scope beyond American literature and history.

2. Use your judgment about what authors are most appropriate for your students and, if possible, become increasingly familiar with the books on your "recommended" list. For example, few students will be successful with Faulkner's *Absalom, Absalom!* on their own, but most students ought to be able to manage O'Brien's *The Things They Carried* or Roth's *Goodbye, Columbus*.

3. If possible, present the unit during the spring semester because you will know your students' reading abilities better, and you can inform them during the previous fall semester that this project is coming up and that they might want to either think about areas of research in advance or, for the most motivated students, start some reading in advance. Guiding their choices in reading is very important for success, because few of the students are sufficiently well read to make informed choices about their area of research or the best books for the project.

4. Have them start with a novel. Students need to let the literature dictate themes that they hope to pursue as indicative of the zeitgeist of an era. If students read a nonfiction work first, they tend to get excited about an historical topic and forget altogether that the project ultimately is a literary analysis paper, not a history paper. The nonfiction reading is simply there to encourage students to understand their chosen eras better, so that they may write about a particular historical period with greater familiarity and juxtapose the historical perspective with the literary perspective of their novels.

5. Encourage students to read well beyond the three-book requirement. Many students will read four to six books simply because of their excitement about the project. (This is one of the joys of this project; many students will transcend your expectations.)

6. Some books work much better than others for this project. The reading list included here (see Appendix) merely scratches the surface; however, I strive to choose social novels, novels with grand scope and widely read canonical works because these books tend to do one of the following: (a) capture the zeitgeist of an era because they are so widely read that they dominate our impression of an era or movement (e.g., *The Scarlet Letter*, *The Godfather* or *The Grapes of Wrath*); (b) capture the zeitgeist because the novelist intended to do just that (e.g., *Ragtime*, *The Killer Angels* or *The Jungle*); or (c) capture the zeitgeist because the scope of the book is so vast (e.g., *Invisible Man*, *Moby Dick* or *Underworld*).

7. Let the students write about books you read as a class, but do not let them use them as one of their three choices. Also be wary of students passing off books read with a class in previous years as one of their three choices.

8. You do not have to limit this project to AP English Literature and Composition; this unit can work well in other English or history courses.

9. Avoid contemporary novels unless the student is especially excited about a particular work or thesis. Students and I find it hard to define the zeitgeist of the era in which we live.

Proposals

Collect the students' one- to two-page proposals before you approve their first novel. Comment on these and return them quickly so that you don't delay their independent reading. Students who narrow their scope early and start reading will be more likely to succeed in this project.

Guidance: The First Two Book Talks

The book talks are the key to the diversified teaching model of this assignment. These are modeled after conferences with college professors during their office hours; a minimum of four such sessions should be required. Ideally, students eventually learn the efficacy of meeting with a teacher one-on-one. After the due date for the first novel, I will schedule two to three weeks of book talks during lunch, before school and after school. Class time is too precious to spend on class projects, and it is essential that you give your full attention to a student during the talk (a task that is hard to do while managing the rest of the students).

Initially, the first book talk should establish the level of reading comprehension of the novel. During the 10- to 15-minute discussion I will pull specific quotations from the novel at random, read them aloud and then ask the student what is going on in the text. I will also ask numerous follow-up questions. Fairly quickly, one can get a sense of the degree of the student's comprehension. If it is going poorly, I will cut to the chase and ask if the student is truly finished. (Usually a student will confess at this point.) On the other hand, a well-prepared student will be difficult to interrupt. In order to encourage their best preparation for the first book talk, I model one in class using a book the students read during the fall semester. They should feel empowered by this demonstration, as it is not as difficult as it may sound if one uses a recently read book. However, students who did not read the book carefully will be well warned of the degree of specific knowledge they will need for our first book talk.

Since the project starts in the spring, I already will have a fairly good sense of the reading abilities of the students in my class. Thus, when I have students schedule their book talks, I will customize the required materials that they have for the talk. For the first two sessions, I may require some students to bring just their books, but for other students I may require historical summaries, freewrites, summaries, character lists and/or working thesis statements. (I have a preference for freewrites, but use what you find most helpful and most appropriate for the student.) This preparation helps the struggling reader develop the necessary focus for success.

During the book talks, I have gone so far as to make a study of their body language when I ask at the beginning of the talk, "Did you finish the book?" (Look out for the shift in the chair, the look up and the pause!) Most of the time is best reserved for discussing the direction of the research and potential paper topics and/or thesis statements. Students lead

the best conversations, and you simply guide their research, their focus and their grasp of the scope of the assignment. But for the struggling reader, you may have to provide instruction about the themes of the novel and the historical trends of the time period she or he is writing about. The supplemental writing assignments often make these sorts of conversations more fruitful.

Consistently throughout the process, remind your students that this is not a history paper but a literary analysis paper. The nonfiction work should not dictate the paper topic, since a student must write that a novel or set of novels serves to capture or even create the zeitgeist of a particular era. Thus the nonfiction book serves two supplementary purposes: First, it provides an historical understanding of the context of a novel; second, it exposes a student to the stylistic differences of a historical approach to past events, as opposed to the approach a novelist might take. The differences in tone, narrative convention, poetic liberties, etc., are important to note because most students assume that history writing is our primary source of knowledge of history; however, this assignment will likely enlighten them otherwise. Fiction, film and television probably impact the common person's perception of history and the zeitgeist of an era far more than history books, especially once people are out of school. They will eventually see that while academics rule published history, artists, writers and filmmakers have an enormous impact on our perception of historical events.

The Third Book Talk

The third book talk, held after all the reading is complete but the due date for the paper is still a couple of weeks away, should require at the very least a specific working thesis. At this point not only should you discuss the novels or nonfiction texts but also discuss the papers on the horizon. Some students may bring in a draft or partial draft at this early time. I often require freewrites from those who are still struggling. Ideally this conversation will direct students into writing or perhaps further research.

I grade these first three book talks based on how well the students understood the book, their completion of the reading and their satisfaction of the specific writing requirements I gave them. If I am fairly confident that the reading was done and that they understood the book, I am eager to give the students an A. I also strive to sufficiently weight the assignment so as to encourage students to do the reading. Hopefully, they walk away from the book talk feeling that they have a better grasp on their topic and received a satisfactory grade.

The other important aspect of these book talks is the potential social and academic bonding with a student. In a 15-minute conversation, I can learn much more about a student than I might over months of school. Students also tend to become more motivated when working on a project in which their teacher is taking a personal interest. Although these book talks can be very time consuming, they pay off in excellent papers and better relationships with students.

These first three book talks are time consuming, and teachers should consider that before committing to this sort of independent project; however, the time invested before school, during lunch and after school is recouped in a few ways. First, there is only one paper assessment for all three of these independent novels. I would much rather discuss history and literature with a student for 15 minutes than grade a paper. Second, the assessments often associated with outside reading can be completed by a clever student even if he or she has not read the novel; however, it is very hard to lie one's way through a book talk. The questions regarding specific passages befuddle the student who is only familiar with a novel summary. Thus, the book talks are more likely to encourage a student to read. Third, the time spent getting to know students and showing an interest in their reading and writing will pay off in class management, and in motivating more recalcitrant students.

Parents can also be a wonderful resource for help during the reading and research stage of this project. Parents often become intrigued by their child's topic or book choices. I encourage parents to read the same books and discuss them at home; at the very least, parents and grandparents can be a valuable resource for explanations of the zeitgeist of a particular era.

Scheduling and the Last Book Talk

I schedule the paper to be due at the end of May for two reasons: First, I want the students to do the bulk of their drafting after the AP English Literature and Composition Exam. They are free from the stresses of the exam and more open to the argument that it is one part of their preparation for college, but the paper more closely models something that they will likely do in college (a paper with an argument extended over approximately 10 pages). Second, I need to collect the papers with enough time to grade them before the end of the semester. Last year I collected 72 papers with an average length of eight pages. Add the papers I collected for other classes, and I had a Russian novel's worth of high school writing to grade. The good news is that the papers tend to be well written because so much time and thought has gone into their composition. I also am not as concerned with making corrections that raise writing issues to be addressed in future papers, since this is the last one of the year.

The process of creating freewrites, graphic organizers, outlines, drafts and peer writing begins after the AP Exam. During this time of writing and editing, meeting with a student during class is manageable. Every student will go over a draft of their paper with me in class. Because this happens over several days, some will show me early drafts, some later ones. Many students at this point will have seen the efficacy of teacher meetings in the research and writing process and will try to meet with me after class as well. Again, you can customize your instruction to each student's needs in these conversations.

Even those students who struggle with reading and the writing process should be successful if they are willing to put in the effort. The success stories revolve around students who became so enamored with their own thinking on this project that they were

pulled away from the incessant siren song of their iPods, cell phones and TV, and instead saw that, with effort and individual help, they could write to a high standard.

I like the project because I get to know the students better and because students with low skills do not need lower standards in order to be successful. They can read books directed toward their interests and reading levels, meet with a teacher to guide them through the process, and have ample time to research, plan and compose their essays.

Readers, Readers, Readers

In essence this is an independent project with considerable hand-holding. Some students will need several one-on-one conversations with you in order to be successful, while others may only need three or four such sessions. This may be your students' first exposure to an intensive, long-term research and literary analysis paper that may mirror the rigors of a college term paper. They will need your guidance to manage the research and write a paper with a sustained argument. If your students go to a school with very large classes, it is possible that they have written very few long papers in their entire high school career.

In the final tally of insightful papers and great conversations with students, I hope that I have a few more bibliophiles in my class. Each year, I reflect on this project and how to do it better. The students who were inspired to write insightfully and read extensively inspire me for the following year. Although I can't include here the smiles of successful students, I will share the titles of a few great papers:

"*Blood Meridian* and *Moby Dick*: Idealism and Brutality in America's Manifest Destiny"

"*The Godfather*, *The Sopranos* and the Swirling Simulacra of the Mob"

"*Tender Is the Night* and 'Babylon Revisited': The End of the Party in Paris and the American Ex-Patriot Depression"

"*The Octopus*: The Railroad-Dominated Economy of California in the Late 1800s"

"Mundane in America: *Babbitt*, Suburbia and the '20s"

"*Catch-22* and *Slaughterhouse-Five*: Absurdity and America's Disillusionment with War from World War II to Vietnam"

"*Beloved*: The Legacy of African American Trauma After the Reconstruction"

"*Invisible Man*: Divisions in the African American Reform Movements"

Appendix: Suggested Reading List

(Please note that this list focuses on American literature; please feel free to adapt it to your own needs.)

The following era designations are approximate and novels often will cover eras beyond the scope of these groupings.

1990s and Now

The Corrections by Jonathan Franzen

Falling Man by Don DeLillo

Extremely Loud and Incredibly Close by Jonathan Safran Foer

The Tortilla Curtain by T. C. Boyle

Independence Day by Richard Ford

A Hope in the Unseen by Ron Suskind.

I Am Charlotte Simmons by Tom Wolfe

MAO II by Don DeLillo

Under the Banner of Heaven by Jon Krakauer

A Million Little Pieces by James Frey

The Spirit Catches You and You Fall Down by Anne Fadiman

1980s

White Noise by Don DeLillo

The Sportswriter by Richard Ford

Bonfire of the Vanities by Tom Wolfe

Slaves of New York by Tama Janowitz

Bright Lights, Big City by Jay McInerney

Less Than Zero by Brett Easton Ellis

The Joy Luck Club by Amy Tan

Rabbit Is Rich and *Rabbit at Rest* by John Updike

American Psycho by Brett Easton Ellis

Vietnam War

The Things They Carried by Tim O'Brien
Dispatches by Michael Herr
American Pastoral by Philip Roth
Paco's Story by Larry Heinemann
A Dangerous Friend by Ward Just
The Quiet American by Graham Greene (not American)

The Cold War/Post World War II

Underworld by Don DeLillo
Libra by Don DeLillo
Sophie's Choice by William Styron
Portnoy's Complaint by Philip Roth
The Amazing Adventures of Kavalier & Clay by Michael Chabon

1970s

Fear and Loathing: On the Campaign Trail '72 by Hunter S. Thompson
Fear and Loathing in Las Vegas by Hunter S. Thompson
Surfacing by Margret Atwood
Drop City by T. C. Boyle
The Ice Storm by Rick Moody
The World According to Garp by John Irving
Democracy by Joan Didion

1960s

The Right Stuff by Tom Wolfe
The Electric Kool-Aid Acid Test by Tom Wolfe
The Journey to the East by Herman Hesse (Hesse is not American; read with Acid Test)
One Flew Over the Cuckoo's Nest by Ken Kesey

American Pastoral by Philip Roth
Slouching Towards Bethlehem by Joan Didion
Wise Blood by Flannery O'Connor
The Autobiography of Malcolm X
Desolation Angels by Jack Kerouac
The Crying of Lot 49 by Thomas Pynchon
Rabbit Redux by John Updike

African-American Experience Prior to the Civil Rights Movement

Native Son and *Black Boy* by Richard Wright
Another Country by James Baldwin
The Fire Next Time by James Baldwin (nonfiction)
Their Eyes Were Watching God by Zora Neale Hurston
The Color Purple by Alice Walker
The Bluest Eye by Toni Morrison
Tar Baby by Toni Morrison
Poetry of Langston Hughes
Invisible Man by Ralph Ellison
Go Down, Moses by William Faulkner
Shadow and Act by Ralph Ellison

1950s

On the Road by Jack Kerouac
The Dharma Bums by Jack Kerouac
In Cold Blood by Truman Capote
Invisible Man by Ralph Ellison
"Howl" by Allen Ginsberg
The Last Picture Show by Larry McMurtry
Snow Falling on Cedars by David Guterson
The Bell Jar by Sylvia Plath

Franny and Zooey by J. D. Salinger
The Naked and the Dead by Norman Mailer
Lolita by Vladimir Nabokov
Tropic of Cancer by Henry Miller
Rabbit, Run by John Updike
To Kill a Mockingbird by Harper Lee
Black Like Me by John Howard Griffin

Late 1940s

The Black Dahlia by James Ellroy (LA)
The Sheltering Sky by Paul Bowles
All My Sons by Arthur Miller
The Adventures of Augie March by Saul Bellow
The Amazing Adventures of Kavalier & Clay by Michael Chabon

WWII

A Separate Peace by John Knowles
Slaughterhouse-Five by Kurt Vonnegut
Dangling Man by Saul Bellow
The Naked and the Dead by Norman Mailer
The Plot Against America by Philip Roth
Snow Falling on Cedars by David Guterson
The Thin Red Line by James Jones
Catch-22 by Joseph Heller

Big Studio Hollywood

The Last Tycoon by F. Scott Fitzgerald
Day of the Locust by Nathanael West
The Little Sister by Raymond Chandler
The Studio by John Gregory Dunne

An Inconvenient Woman by Dominick Dunne
Playland by John Gregory Dunne
A Hollywood Education by David Freeman

1930s

Lost Horizon by James Hilton
The Big Sleep by Raymond Chandler
Light in August by William Faulkner
The Fountainhead by Ayn Rand
To Kill a Mockingbird by Harper Lee
Native Son by Richard Wright
After Many a Summer Dies the Swan by Aldous Huxley
Ask the Dust by John Fante
Their Eyes Were Watching God by Zora Neale Hurston
The Postman Always Rings Twice by James Cain
World's Fair by E. L. Doctorow
1933 Was a Bad Year by John Fante
As I Lay Dying by William Faulkner
Seabiscuit by Laura Hillenbrand
In Dubious Battle by John Steinbeck
The Maltese Falcon by Dashiell Hammett
Black Boy by Richard Wright
Of Mice and Men by John Steinbeck

1920s

The Razor's Edge by W. Somerset Maugham
Babbitt by Sinclair Lewis
The Sun Also Rises by Ernest Hemingway
An American Tragedy by Theodore Dreiser
Main Street by Sinclair Lewis
This Side of Paradise by F. Scott Fitzgerald

1910–1919

A Farewell to Arms by Ernest Hemmingway
An American Tragedy by Theodore Dreiser
Winesburg, Ohio by Sherwood Anderson

1900–1909

Ragtime by E. L. Doctorow
The Awakening by Kate Chopin
The Jungle by Upton Sinclair

Late 1800s

Sister Carrie by Theodore Dreiser
McTeague by Frank Norris
The Virginian by Owen Wister
The Octopus by Frank Norris
Looking Backward: 2000–1887 by Edward Bellamy
My Ántonia or *O Pioneers!* by Willa Cather
Roughing It by Mark Twain
The House of Mirth or *The Age of Innocence* by Edith Wharton
Angle of Repose by Wallace Stegner
Lonesome Dove by Larry McMurtry
Little Big Man by Thomas Berger
Beloved by Toni Morrison
The Autobiography of an Ex-Colored Man by James Weldon Johnson
The Portrait of a Lady by Henry James

The Civil War

Cold Mountain by Charles Frazier
The Red Badge of Courage by Stephen Crane

The Killer Angels by Michael Shaara
The March by E. L. Doctorow
The Unvanquished by William Faulkner

1850s

Uncle Tom's Cabin by Harriet Beecher Stowe
Blood Meridian by Cormac McCarthy
Life on the Mississippi by Mark Twain
The Life and Adventures of Joaquin Murieta by John Rollin Ridge
Roughing It by Mark Twain
Cloudsplitter by Russell Banks

Early California History

Ramona by Helen Hunt Jackson
Angle of Repose by Wallace Stegner
The Octopus by Frank Norris

Early Western History

Death Comes for the Archbishop by Willa Cather

1840s

Moby Dick by Herman Melville
The Blithedale Romance by Nathaniel Hawthorne
Walden by Henry David Thoreau
The Known World by Edward P. Jones

Colonial Period

The Scarlet Letter by Nathaniel Hawthorne
The Last of the Mohicans by James Fenimore Cooper

The Crucible by Arthur Miller
John Adams by David McCullough
Founding Brothers by Joseph Ellis

Pre-Colonial Period

The Ice-Shirt by William Vollmann

Strategies for Engaging Students in an Analysis of *Frankenstein*

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I teach at Mercy High School, an all-girls, college-preparatory school, which has a student population of 525, many of whom are first-generation Americans or international students. The English department maintains an open enrollment policy for AP English Literature and Composition, with a prerequisite of three years of high school English. Some, but not all, of the students in my AP English Literature and Composition class have taken AP English Language and Composition during their junior year, so some, but not all of them, are used to the rigors of an AP course. Students also have varying skills levels and learning styles. My biggest challenge as a teacher is to engage all of them, the gifted readers and writers as well as those who struggle. My primary goal is for each student to discover the pleasure of reading a classic novel, such as *Frankenstein*. I continually emphasize that reading is meant to be a pleasurable activity and that many of the canonical books we read were as popular in their own time as Hollywood movies are today.

I begin this unit by introducing the students to the elements of gothic horror and connecting those elements to pop culture. I arrange the students into small groups of three or four and instruct them to list the sights and sounds that all horror movies have in common. Almost all girls are familiar with this genre, having cut their teeth on the *Scary Movie* and *Friday the 13th* franchises. After they've worked on their lists for about 10 minutes, I call on individual students to give examples of specific sights and sounds, and I compile a list on the board. The sight list includes things like blood, old mansions, dead trees, secret passageways, bats, rats, lightning, body parts, coffins, graveyards and humans with bulging eyes and pale skin. The sound list includes thunder, howling wolves, squeaking doors, wind blowing through dead branches, creepy violin and organ music, shrieks and screams, and hooting owls. Students are typically quite excited by the time we have compiled our lists, and they become even more so when I show movie clips of classic and modern horror movies, such as *Dracula*, *Frankenstein*, *The Bride of Frankenstein*, *Young Frankenstein* and *Interview with a Vampire*. I only show about five minutes of each movie (scenes with little or no dialogue work best) and instruct them to write down all the things from our lists that they see and hear.

By this point, I have established the buy-in: Students understand that *Frankenstein* is a book that has motifs with which they are already familiar, and they are looking forward to reading it. The students read a Signet Classic edition that includes a foreword with biographical information about Mary Shelley; the Signet edition also includes Shelley's introduction to the novel, in which she tells how she came to write it. (Reading this helps

familiarize students with the [to them] stilted language of the novel.) I also have my own copy of the Case Studies in Contemporary Criticism edition; it contains excellent essays from five contemporary critical perspectives as well as 10 pages of illustrations and photographs of Victor Frankenstein's Creature.

Before we begin reading the novel, I give a brief lesson about Mary Shelley's life and times and tell students about the fateful night when Lord Byron, Mary Shelley and Percy Bysshe Shelley dared each other to write a ghost story and how, as a result, Mary Shelley wrote *Frankenstein* when she was only 19. I have some postcards of Mary Shelley, Percy Bysshe Shelley and Lord Byron, and as I pass these around I tell the students how Mary Shelley's mother died 11 days after giving birth to Mary and I connect this to the preoccupation with death that pervades *Frankenstein*. I tell how Mary met Percy when she was 15 and ran away with him even though he was already married and how three of the couple's four children died before the age of six. I tell them how Percy himself died young, when he was sailing on a lake in Italy and his boat capsized. I also emphasize the celebrity status that poets had in the 19th century by comparing them to rock stars with groupies (I use Mary's half sister, Claire Claremont, and her affair with Lord Byron as an example of a woman who was a groupie before this term even existed).

My prereading activities also include a discussion in which I ask students to whom they think the title of the novel, *Frankenstein*, refers. Most assume it is the Creature, but a few know that it refers to the creator and not his creation. I always give lots of praise to the students who know that Victor Frankenstein is the eponymous hero of the novel. I then ask students to close their eyes and picture the Creature, then draw what they see on a piece of binder paper. Their drawings are always renditions of the Boris Karloff/Herman Munster creature: a green-faced, square-headed man with bolts in his forehead and jagged scars on his face, wearing black clothing.

We are now ready to begin the novel. I assign just the first two of Robert Walton's letters and instruct students to write a list of 10 unfamiliar vocabulary words that they encounter as they read; I stress that they not look up the words in a dictionary. For the next class, I put a list of these words on the board and we practice determining their meaning through context clues. The vocabulary in *Frankenstein* is not inordinately challenging; typical unfamiliar words include *ardor*, *countenance*, *visage*, *lineaments*, *hitherto* and *fortnight*. These are recurring words in the novel, so by preteaching them I pave the way for a smoother reading experience. I also take this opportunity to explain the differences in the British and American spellings of certain words. The British spelling of *ardor* and *color*, for example, is *ardour* and *colour*. I tell students that I only want them to use the British spelling if they are quoting the book. To help students digest the words, I arrange them into pairs and instruct them to imagine they are Robert Walton's sister and answer his letters, using five of the words they have just learned. In addition to reinforcing new vocabulary, writing the letters also connects students with the potentially off-putting framing device of the novel.

Victor Frankenstein's Creature first appears in Robert Walton's fourth letter: "We perceived a low carriage, fixed on a sledge and drawn by dogs, pass on towards the north, at the

distance of half a mile: a being which had the shape of a man, but apparently of gigantic stature, sat in the sledge and guided the dogs." I ask students what they think Robert Walton is describing here, and they always understand that this is the first description of the monster. I have them create posters of this scene, using descriptive details from the novel, and then display the posters. When Victor makes his appearance in the next paragraph, I lead a discussion on how Robert Walton responds to him. Students typically say things like "He likes him a lot"; "He's really nice to him"; "He takes care of him"; and "He thinks he's smart." I want to establish early on the differences in the ways that Victor Frankenstein and his Creature are treated by society.

At this point, I have students break into small groups and engage in close readings of the letters. My goals are twofold: First, I want to introduce the thematic connection between Robert Walton and Victor Frankenstein (they both have a burning ambition to bring glory upon themselves; both are tenacious and driven by a desire to conquer nature. Walton wants to discover a new land; Frankenstein wants to create life). Second, I want students to notice the images of ice and cold that Shelley uses to begin the novel. They symbolize the cold reception that the Creature receives from society and from his creator, Victor Frankenstein. Ice, snow and cold are associated with the Creature throughout the novel, from his first appearance in the North Sea to his final disappearance into the "darkness and distance" on the "ice-raft."

Throughout the unit, I have students engage in close readings of particular passages to reinforce how Shelley's use of language supports her themes. One example is in Chapter 10, when Victor and his Creature have their confrontation. I tell students to compare and contrast this scene with the first time Robert Walton sees the Creature. I want them to notice the weather, the appearance of the Creature and his effect on those who see him.

At the point in the novel when Victor begins his narrative, I typically assign about five chapters at a time for homework and have students complete dialectical journals focused on elements of the novel, such as justice/injustice, images of nature, lust for power/greatness, the limits of science, the grotesque/the unnatural and suspense/surprise. I instruct students to write a minimum of three entries per chapter, and I collect the journals when we have completed the unit. During class, I arrange the students into small groups and have them discuss comprehension and analysis questions and find quotes to support their answers. In the early chapters, I focus the questions on how Victor is treated as a child and his love of science. When Victor goes to college, I ask students to focus on his rebellious spirit and the relationship he has with his teachers. In later chapters, questions are focused on Victor's treatment of his Creature, the Creature's response to the world and the world's response to him, Victor's relationship with his family and friends, the Creature's relationship with the cottagers, the Creature's suffering, and whether or not the revenge he exacts on Victor Frankenstein is justified.

In Chapter 4, when Victor describes the process of making the Creature, I lead the girls in a discussion of the language Mary Shelley uses. I point out words and phrases such as "My eyeballs were straining from their sockets," "My confinement," "My midnight labours," "My cheek had grown pale" and "My limbs now tremble." I guide students to consider the possibility that, with this language, Shelley is comparing Victor's process of creating a

living being to giving birth, thus establishing through imagery that Victor is the parent of his Creature. This prepares them for upcoming discussions about what kind of a parent he is to his "child."

Before Chapter 5, when Victor first describes his Creature, I hand back the pictures the students drew of "Frankenstein." I instruct them to rip the pictures into shreds and deposit them in the recycling bin; this is a symbolic purging of the Hollywood-created image of the Creature, encouraging students to read about him with a fresh perspective. After this, I pass out a collection of pictures of Frankenstein's Creature; they include "The Brummagem Frankenstein" (1866), "Irish Frankenstein" (1882), Charles Ogle as the Creature in *Edison's Frankenstein* (1910), Christopher Lee as the Creature in *The Curse of Frankenstein* (1957), Keith Jochim as the Creature in Victor Gialanella's *Frankenstein* (1981) and Robert De Niro as the Creature in Kenneth Branagh's *Mary Shelley's Frankenstein* (1994). (I got these pictures from the Case Studies in Contemporary Criticism edition of *Frankenstein*, but most of them can be found on the Internet.)

For my students, it is always a revelation that there are so many different ways of imagining the Creature. After they have digested this idea and discussed which versions of the Creature they like and why, I arrange the students into small groups (of no more than four) and have them create large posters of their own renditions of the Creature, using descriptive details from the novel and their collective imaginations. They include quotes from the novel in their posters, and we display the posters. Shelley uses very few concrete details to describe the Creature, and we discuss why she made the choice to leave so much to the imagination of the reader. This is a great opportunity for style analysis. Students can compare the richness of Shelley's descriptions of nature to the spare descriptions of the Creature. Why does Shelley do this? What is she saying about humanity's relationship to nature?

After we finish reading Chapter 6, I begin to show clips of Kenneth Branagh's *Mary Shelley's Frankenstein*. Before we watch the first clip, I instruct the students to take notes on points of divergence between the novel and the movie. There are various choices Branagh makes as a director that subvert Shelley's theme, and I want the students to be aware of these. After we view the first clip (from the beginning up to the point that Victor animates the Creature), I draw a Venn diagram on the board and we compare and contrast the novel and the movie. The most important difference I want the students to notice is that in Branagh's movie, Victor Frankenstein is portrayed more heroically than he is in the novel: He attempts to take responsibility for what he has done by chasing the Creature around with an ax, trying to kill it (an abortion comparison is apt here), and after he wakes from his fever he is led to believe that a cholera epidemic has killed his Creature. (In the novel Victor simply flees from his Creature in terror and hopes for the best.) We repeat this compare/contrast activity at appropriate points in the unit, never viewing a scene before reading it and typically watching about 20 minutes at a time. Other points at which the movie diverges thematically from the novel include the trial of Justine (it is left out of the movie entirely) and the Creature's demand at the end of the movie that Victor use Justine's body as the raw material for his mate.

After Chapter 14, I give each group of three to four students one of the following questions and have them create a lesson for the class in which they answer it. They may present their answers in the form of a skit, or with visual aids such as posters, or by creating handouts and leading the class in a discussion or an activity. Their presentations should be 15–20 minutes long.

Questions for Group Project

1. There is an ongoing debate called Nature vs. Nurture. It addresses the questions: Are we born with certain characteristics (nature) or do we develop characteristics as a result of our environment (nurture)? Considering what we know about the Creature, what side of the debate do you think Shelley falls on? Do you agree with her? Use specific textual details to support your answers.
2. You learn lots of facts, events, equations, etc., in school that will not only make you book smart, but you will also develop general characteristics that will help you function in society. Consider what you learn in school besides the facts. What are all the "facts" the Creature learns from the time he is a "baby" to the time he takes his final leap into the icy sea? What does he learn besides the facts? Use textual details to support your answers.
3. Where (and when) does the theme of justice/injustice occur in the novel? Some instances may be less obvious than others. What points do you think Shelley is making about human beings and society? Use textual details to support your answers.

After we read the section in which the Creature narrates his experiences to Victor, I divide the students into groups of three or four and give each group a scene from the book and instruct them to write a skit dramatizing it. Scenes that work well include Robert Walton and his crew first spotting the Creature, Victor Frankenstein animating the Creature and running away in terror, the Creature murdering William and framing Justine as she sleeps in the barn, the trial of Justine, and the Creature teaching himself to read by watching the cottagers through a peephole. After the students write their skits, they perform them for the class. I have a box of costumes and props I have collected over the years, and students are encouraged to use its contents to enliven their productions. Students must use language from the novel in their skits, and for homework they must individually analyze the scene that they dramatized; their analyses should focus on imagery and thematic elements of the scenes and be three to four paragraphs in length.

The final writing assignment for this unit is a compare/contrast essay. Students may choose to compare and contrast Robert Walton and Victor Frankenstein, Victor Frankenstein and the Creature, or the novel *Frankenstein* and Kenneth Branagh's movie *Mary Shelley's Frankenstein*. I typically spend about a month on this unit. If there is time when we are finished, I show Mel Brooks's movie *Young Frankenstei*n as a reward for all of our hard work. This shows students how a serious novel can be satirized, and it reinforces my message that literary classics are meant to be enjoyed, not worshipped.

Works Cited

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