BRINGING STUDENTS BACK TO BOOKS: USING A STUDENT-CENTERED THEMATIC CURRICULUM TO DEVELOP MOTIVATED READERS

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ABSTRACT

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Though English remains a required subject in elementary, middle, high schools and most liberal arts colleges, literature's status as a chosen form of entertainment steadily declines. Facing competition from revolutionary technology in cell phones, video games, computers, personal music devices, and a bevy of adolescent-oriented television programming, books struggle to hold teenage interest.

This lack of motivation to read, coupled with increased demands on high school teachers to meet testing standards and manage logistically difficult classrooms, has created an English classroom where literature is the enemy—boring and irrelevant in a fast-paced world.

The ramifications of this disinterest are great; because students are not reading, their comprehension and writing skills are suffering tremendously. On an even larger level, they are not being asked to think—about themselves, about others, about the underlying issues that make people human.
The goal of the curriculum proposed here is to bring students back to books; to motivate students to read by implementing texts in the classroom that will mean something to them. If a student is then motivated to read, they will read, and will reap the benefits of increased comprehension and composition abilities.

Following this rationale, I have devised an English curriculum for high school seniors. The curriculum is structured into thematic units that are pertinent to teenagers and employs texts that are at once engaging and challenging. Ideally, students will learn to read critically and live purposefully, having gained personal insight through an enjoyable experience with literature.

I structure my argument by examining the development of the high school English curriculum and its emphasis on the literary canon, moving into a discussion of practices in the current high school English classroom. I then present the research and rationale behind the use of student-centered thematic units in order to enumerate my own proposed curriculum.

I conclude that the best way to develop adolescents as students is to see students as adolescents, choosing texts that speak to their interests and concerns. In this way, the students will be motivated to read and will become purposeful readers and writers.
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Lastly, since this thesis is about reading, I would also like to thank those people who made me love to read--my parents. I love you and am thankful for you every day.
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INTRODUCTION

I am a reader. I come from a family of readers, and probably would have been one anyway, even if my school environment had not encouraged me as such. However, I am also a teacher, and if my years in the classroom have taught me anything, it is that very few students value and love reading the way I do. This painful disconnect afflicts so many high school English teachers; we choose a profession to teach the literature we love, only to be confronted by students who refuse to love literature. The irony inherent in this scenario only increases the gap between teacher and student, placing literature firmly in the realm of the classroom and outside the realm of applicability for students. In an age of technology and constant communication, students see no need to spend solitary time reading for pleasure, and rail against required reading.

This refusal to read brings with it many associated problems, namely, a decrease in writing ability. Cognitively, reading and writing skills are developed in tandem (Reagan 178,180), and so the need for composition skill in college, business, or personal communication implies a needed present-day emphasis on reading abilities. If, then, the high school English classroom can become a place that attracts students to reading instead of pushing them away, the skills needed for more effective writing should follow.
I hold that students need to read more, and that the high school English classroom is the place to focus this initiative. The best critical readers are those who can make connections, situating literature within literature, or literature within their own life experience. High school students, more mature than middle or elementary school readers, have a greater ability to read critically. Thus, curriculum developments aimed at increasing students’ appreciation of and involvement with literature should be integrated at a time when students are gaining more personal awareness and have already encountered a variety of literature. Just like children connect with stories from childhood, adolescents could be made to connect with stories from high school, since both are such developmental phases. Therefore, coupling appropriate literature with innovative teaching methods during the developmental phase of high school would form lifelong readers and encourage adult literacy. If high school is a time of such shifting values, why shouldn’t those values shift positively? Students don’t always hate reading, but they do by the time they reach high school:

Research has shown that students’ intrinsic motivation to read begins to decline from grade four on (Gottfried, 1985; Guthrie & Davis, 2003). Intrinsic reasons for reading include reading to learn, to satisfy curiosity, or to pursue personal interests. Perhaps part of the decline relates to the middle and secondary school climate that becomes increasingly extrinsic in nature. For example, emphasis at the upper grade levels tends to be oriented toward grades, standardized test scores, competition, teacher control and
discipline (Eccles, Wigfield, Midgley, Reuman, Maclver,& Feldlaufer, 1993). Thus, the decrease in motivation may in fact be due to a changing classroom context that increasingly emphasizes performance as opposed to learning (Guthrie & Davis, 2003).

(Swan 283)

Sadly, “too often the literary tradition is presented in our classrooms in such a way as to alienate the students permanently from it” (Miller 27).

The high school English classroom is the last opportunity to have a captive audience for a variety of literature courses, and it is also an environment in which more challenging texts can be readily incorporated. Whether high school seniors are matriculating on to college, the proposed curriculum would not only enhance their effectiveness as readers and writers, but also would increase their appreciation for and enjoyment of literature. In the words of Stephen Fishman:

If we really care about curriculum, we should help students use it, test it, and preserve what is best in it for a developing world. And if we really care about students, we need to study curriculum to understand how it can best promote the methods and traits of character students require for informed, fulfilling lives. (Fishman and McCarthy 27)

As teachers, we “must concentrate on the nourishing of a personal awareness of the joys of literature, and the students’ capacity for critical judgment” (Rosenblatt, Making Meaning 113).
I propose a “reimaging” of the high school English classroom—a move away from the rote analysis of canonical works in favor of a curriculum structured by themes that are readily practical for teenagers. Such a curriculum would necessarily need to include typically canonical works, since many do have an enduring, universal value, but would view them in new contexts. Similarly, such a reimaged high school English curriculum would incorporate poetry often and functionally as an economic expression of those themes found in other genres. The study of poetry will increase students’ critical reading skills, as will the frequent use of nonfiction texts. Challenging nonfiction essays and memoirs should not just be the provenance of advanced history, government, or philosophy courses, but should also be integrated systematically with fictional texts to situate students within time periods and schools of thought.

Literature must be made pertinent in order for high school students to see its value. In the words of Reed, Schallert, Beth and Woodruff, “The distance between teachers’ definition of literacy and students’ actual practices needs to be bridged in order to increase the likelihood of deep engagement and genuine excitement in school-based literacy events” (274). Students do not see the value in reading, so they do not enjoy reading. Because students do not read, their writing suffers. To compound this problem, research primarily prescribes only general solutions and theories to combat this indifference to literature. In structuring units of study that speak to teenage interest, I follow Dewey’s concept of student-centered instruction, and endow it with current research on the effectiveness of concept-oriented classrooms. Building from the rationale of
these educational philosophies, this paper will propose a specific, reconfigured high school English curriculum, focused on the senior year of study, whose aim is to build lifelong readers, critical thinkers, and effective writers.
CHAPTER I

HISTORY OF THE HIGH SCHOOL ENGLISH CLASSROOM

Many practices in the high school English classroom are long-standing and were forward thinking at their inception, but have become grossly outdated. To present new rationale and new practices for the high school English classroom, it is essential to examine the origin of the old practices. Indeed, “a cognizance of the historical development can be of value in conducting curriculum evaluation and making course improvements” (Stahl vii), and so this study will be grounded in those historical developments. In order to make functional changes to the current landscape, a deeper understanding of the high school English curriculum’s development is valuable. An understanding of the historical development of these roots “also helps teachers understand why they are prejudiced in favor of certain elements in the high school English curriculum” (Stahl vii-viii), and thus allows them to overcome these prejudices.

Though English is now a standard and integral component of a high school education, it was not recognized as such until late in the nineteenth century (Stahl 3), and its development as a subject is intimately tied to the development of secondary education in this country. Established in 1635, the Boston Latin School anticipated modern high schools and taught Latin and Greek as its chief subjects (Stahl 3). At the time, the foremost American universities,
Harvard and Yale, essentially existed to train clergymen, and so the Latin school served a specific function training students for college and their subsequent clerical careers (Stahl 4). Latin was also the language of academia, so English was prohibited from being spoken at university—thus, its instruction at the Latin school level was unnecessary (Stahl 4). As a young country, America was still deeply tied to Europe and its focus on classical language, and viewed its own tongue as plebian and for domestic use only. There were only scattered, unorganized attempts to teach English “in a grammatical manner” (Stahl 5) in the face of the Latin school movement, and only with the political clout of Benjamin Franklin did English make any sort of in-road into the formal classroom.

In 1751, after eight years’ resistance, Franklin opened “Franklin’s Philadelphia Academy” which stressed the study of English in its secondary curriculum (Stahl 5). Though Franklin’s Academy was originally successful, its program of English studies gradually became subsumed by its program of classical studies (Stahl 7), and so the revolutionary educational experiment was not as resounding as Franklin originally intended. However, there were some important vestiges left over from Franklin’s English education experiment; the primary English instructor, Mr. David James Dove, stressed the importance of rote memorization in his classes, his students “naturally endeavoring to imitate his proper Accent and just Pronunciation” (Stahl 6-7). In a similar mechanical fashion, as Franklin’s Academy disintegrated, English grammar was the only English study that remained by 1771 (Stahl 7). From Franklin’s early effort to give
English a home in academia, only the methods of that subject remained within education—memorization, recitation, and grammatical mechanics.

These lasting emphases, coupled with a need to uniformly judge student performance for college acceptance, led to the inception of the English literature canon. Since both the Latin schools and the academies were primarily a means to university admittance, it followed that universities would develop a standard list of English works as a way to test applying students and eliminate variables. Now that English had begun to gain acceptance as a subject of study, its curriculum began to become more formatted and directed specifically towards its use at a collegiate level. Colleges initially developed their own lists of prescribed readings, but by 1901, the College Entrance Examination Board began publishing standardized lists of English classics which replaced those that were university-specific (Stahl 14). These “assigned masterpieces” (Stahl 13) were originally incorporated simply as a means to judge student composition ability, but knowledge of the texts themselves was eventually required (Stahl 12). Thus, the themes of Homer, Virgil, Shakespeare, Milton, Irving, Webster, and Hawthorne indisputably became the stuff of academy English classrooms (Stahl 14).

This uniform list of “assigned masterpieces” was useful for admission purposes, but inherently limited the scope of study in English. Much like today, teachers began to teach for these tests, and classrooms became factories—focusing more on the end rather than on the means. John Dewey would later deem this type of education “Fordism”—a system that was “efficient in the rapid production of commercial goods but inefficient in generating quality worker
experience” (Fishman and McCarthy 26). Though secondary classrooms at this time were productive and efficient in preparing students for entrance exams, these “admission requirements eventually became dictums, and...tended to foster narrow, rigid programs in secondary school English (Stahl 16). In formatting and standardizing the English curriculum, the literary canon limited the scope of learning in the secondary classroom, removing imagination and personal interest.

While the focus of the Latin schools and academies remained immovably fixed on teaching for college acceptance, many recognized a need for a more democratic type of secondary schooling that would educate those students not matriculating on to college. Thus, in 1821, The School Committee of Boston established the English High School, which emphasized the study of English in oral and written communication, but focused primarily on grammar (Stahl 16). So, though the works studied in school weren’t rigidly limited by the College Entrance Examination Board, the study of English was limited to a “systematic analysis of the English sentence as an important means of mental development” (Stahl 18). In this way, even while secondary education was becoming more democratic in its purpose, its focus still remained rigidly fixed on English merely for grammatical instruction.

English as a secondary subject, then, at the beginning of the twentieth century, was stuck in a battle between standardization and innovation—much like today’s curriculum reform efforts. The College Entrance Examination Board, The Committee on College Entrance Requirements, and the Conference on English
on the Committee of Ten all strove for “rigid formalism” (Stahl 22) in the secondary school curriculum. In protest, the formation of the National Council of Teachers of English (NCTE) in 1911 occurred out of this “struggle to free the common schools from the tyranny of prescribed uniform entrance requirements set by the nation’s colleges” (Squire 3).

The development of the NCTE then gave birth to 1917’s National Joint Committee on English which proposed a reorganized secondary English curriculum (Stahl 23) to give teachers “greater freedom from the inflexible English programs imposed upon them” (Stahl 22).

In contrast to the list of “assigned masterpieces” and memorization as mental exercise, the National Joint Committee proposed that: “Literature chosen for any given school should make a natural appeal to the pupils concerned, for without interest, which depends upon this appeal, there will be no beneficial results” (Stahl 23). In 1935, the NCTE Curriculum Committee followed suit, and proposed that English curriculum be organized around “strands of experience” such as “exploring the social world” or “studying human nature” (Stahl 25). This kind of “progressive education” linked “the teaching of English to the growing body of scientific data on child development and children’s interests” (Squire 4) and regarded instruction as a means to social utility. Curriculum reform took a similar democratic turn during World War II when English studies were widely renamed as “language arts” (Stahl 25), implying an integration between language uses and literature study. This type of integration demonstrated a need to fulfill the student both academically and socially, and the curriculum changes
proposed in 1952 were reminiscent of the civically-minded NCTE aims of 1935. The following statement from the 1956 Commission on the English Curriculum sounds remarkably similar to today’s curriculum reform call to arms:

A world of change, of speed, of massed groups, of heightened tensions, and of gravely conflicting views—this, in general terms, is the world the adolescent faces today. To meet such a world with equanimity and intelligence, the adolescent needs an education of great scope and power. In communication skills, he needs particularly an education more comprehensive and more exact than his forefathers required. He must have skill in intelligent reading and listening that he may broaden the background of his knowledge and increase his powers of judgment and imagination...He must know from personal contact with the literature of his own country and that of other nations what men have thought and felt and lived for in the days gone by and have bequeathed to him as part of his cultural tradition. (Stahl 26)

Though these major developments in English secondary curricula are well-intentioned, valuable and effective, the major problem they present is that in the effort to reform the classroom for university, political, practical or social ends, the student himself has somehow been lost. As John Dewey says, “knowing how to build on individual student interests and their unique dispositions is the key to effective education” (Fishman and McCarthy 24), and all the reforms and
innovations in recent and present history will not matter if they do not, in some way, personally connect to the student:

What matters that we have the strongest sequential program in literature if our young people do not read thereafter? What matters how much knowledge of new language study they acquire if they cannot use language with power and sensitivity? What purpose our more efficient methods of teaching children to read if they are reading without connection, feeling and critical judgment?

(Squire 6)

The best prescribed reform, then, for the high school English classroom, is an individual one. It is a curriculum focused on the student’s increased “experience and involvement” (Squire 6) with literature—an experience that has long-term life ends, not immediate university or technical ends. The best curriculum has “both a reforming and conserving function, a responsibility to develop each student’s individual potential while ‘transmitting’ the best thinking, doing and feeling that the older generation can offer the younger” (Fishman and Mcarthy 24). The hope is that, in the student’s actual engagement with literature, they will carry literature lessons with them unknowingly, and be able to apply those lessons more genuinely and willingly than they would have under the “rigid formalism” of “assigned masterpieces.”
CHAPTER II
THE CURRENT HIGH SCHOOL ENGLISH CLASSROOM

The curriculum strictures implemented during the development of America’s high school English curriculum persist today with new complications in both classroom practice and student profiles. The same logistic factors that hinder the English classroom debilitate schools at large: “high student mobility, absenteeism, minimal student engagement, misbehavior, missing homework, cultural and linguistic diversity, special needs, and increasing numbers of students from poverty and single parent households (Campbell and Kmiecik 3). Teachers “faced with the reality of over-crowded classrooms, high-stakes testing, and standards-based environments” (Campbell and Kmiecik 3) feel the same pressures as students to meet levels of performance pre-ordained by factors outside their own classrooms. In this way, “more ‘authentic’ forms of learning are lost” (Campbell and Kmiecik 3) that actually encourage higher-level, true learning, or what Reed, Schallert, Beth and Woodruff term “involvement” (255).

Indeed, the absence of true learning is apparent in our classrooms. According to the 2002 National Association for Education Progress Report, “only 36 percent of seniors nationally demonstrated proficient reading levels” (Campbell and Kmiecik 2). The fact that “little over one third of our nation’s high
school seniors can understand challenging material” (Campbell and Kmiecik 2) speaks poorly for our high schools and bodes even worse for our colleges.

Today’s high school English classroom is more than the democratic secondary education its founders intended: public education has vowed to leave “no child behind,” but this movement, working for the whole of public education, widely ignores the needs of individual students. The “No Child Left Behind” reform (United States Department of Education), initiated in 2002, has implemented the unfortunate mentality that “school improvement will be defined as constant improvement on standardized tests with no real regard to the child or to whether he or she has learned how to learn” (Santa 476). Yet, “external pressures such as these are not what we need to solve the complex problem of adolescent literacy” (Santa 466). The 2004 Reading Next report, written for the Carnegie Corporation of New York, reveals the following alarming statistics and concludes that frustrated reading comprehension lies at their core:

More than eight million students in grades 4-12 are struggling readers; every school day, more than 3,000 students drop out of high school; only 70 percent of high school students graduate on time with a regular diploma; 53 percent of high school students enroll in remedial courses in postsecondary schools. (Santa 466)

Perhaps one of the greatest enduring struggles in the high school classroom is the students themselves. The high school teacher has the unique job of working with these precisely situated individuals who hover between childhood and adulthood and exist in a permanent state of becoming. This is both
the blessing and the curse of being a secondary educator; the students have so much to offer, and are potential waiting to happen, but are often easily distracted or disengaged by their studies. In The Rise and Fall of the American Teenager, Hine characterizes the positives and negatives of the modern teenager in this way:

America created the teenager in its own image—brash, unfinished, ebullient, idealistic, crude, energetic, innocent, greedy, changing in all sorts of unsettling ways. A messy, sometimes loutish character who is nonetheless capable of performing heroically when necessary, the teenager embodies endless potential not yet hobbled by the defeats and compromises of life. The American teenager is the noble savage in blue jeans, the future in your face.

(10)

Teenagers are at the center of their own universe, and because they “have difficulty recognizing that others may perceive the world differently than themselves” (Beach et al. 11), they assume to be at the center of everyone else’s awareness. This inherent self-consciousness makes it difficult to focus students on their studies, so a curriculum that works with this natural impulse, instead of against it, would be successful in capturing student interest.

The logistics of a modern-day high school classroom provide enough challenges in themselves: overcrowded classes; limited time with students; little, no, or invasive parental involvement; the pressures and struggles of adolescence. When these structural difficulties encounter the personal issues of
instruction, the result is a basic disconnect between teacher and student—what the teacher prescribes does not meet the student where he is, and a lack of motivation and its attendant issues follow.
CHAPTER III
RATIONALE FOR THEMATIC UNITS

Motivation, then, is the overarching and determinate factor in improving student performance. Students “who will not read are at as much a disadvantage as those who cannot” (Campbell and Kmiecik 11), and the most imperative concern for English educators should be “the need to help our students acquire the habit of turning to literature for personal pleasure, broadened horizons and greater insight” (Rosenblatt, Making Meaning 107). Accordingly, teachers must employ texts that are at once enjoyable, inviting, and pertinent. Much like the “assigned masterpieces” used in the developing English curriculum, “standard reading texts and uniform curricula make life somewhat easier for the teacher and administrators, but they make it very difficult for students to get involved with the material at a level that is right for them, and therefore find few intrinsic rewards in learning” (Campbell and Kmiecik 12). Most students do not feel personally connected to the material they are assigned, so they are not motivated to read. Thus, when they are forced to read, they do not think critically about the text. This resulting lack of critical thinking skills also stems from the student’s preexisting concept of formal education; “since students grow comfortable with learning facts, and do not learn to construct meaning for themselves, [since] meanings are imposed upon them” (Campbell and Kmiecik
What has come to pass in the high school English classroom is a hollow shell of education—teachers and students going through the motions, “full of sound and fury,” but if students have no desire to read, ultimately “signifying nothing.”

Motivation is the key catalyst in creating change in the high school English classroom, and the way to increase motivation is to speak to the students’ central interest: themselves. High school students are guilty of a kind of “adolescent egocentricity” (Beach et al. 11), and a student-centered curriculum works by capitalizing on this self-involvement. However, once drawn into the material, the student sees that his own issues are more universal than personal. Structuring a curriculum by thematic units avoids “encouraging phoney or sterile literary experiences in which complex books are intellectually analyzed but never emotionally felt or experienced” (Miller 24).

Ultimately, students “can read words accurately, but they do not comprehend what they read” (Santa 466). Comprehension, then, would increase proportionately with heightened motivation—the introduction of pertinent themes in literature would increase student motivation and foster better reading comprehension. The proposed, reimaged, student-centered curriculum would “reflect a balance of structure and freedom” (Santa 468) between the teacher’s selection of thematic texts and the students’ application of those texts. Increased cognition then takes place at that intersection “where students have access to fiction and nonfiction texts rich in ideas, controversy, and different points of view;
and where students have the opportunities to explore their own inquiries" (Santa 468).

The best readers are those who are “metacognitive” (Santa 468)—those who are able to ground a text in their personal experience or connect a text to other works. It follows, then, that the most direct way to enhance critical reading skills is to instruct with texts that encourage metacognition—texts that invite students to think about their own thinking, knowledge and experience. In reading, “comprehension is the integration of new information with prior knowledge, [so] the more we know about a topic, the easier it will be for us to understand information” (Santa 470). Thus, the thematic selection of texts specifically for a graduating senior presupposes the students’ background knowledge of such themes and lays the groundwork for their increased textual comprehension.

This engagement with the student herself is essential for increased motivation and enjoyment of reading. Acknowledging the preeminence of the student’s experience in teaching literature, Louise Rosenblatt develops her concept of reader-response theory. According to Rosenblatt, there is no “correct” answer when reading literature; the text gains meaning in its interaction with the reader. The fusion between text and reader produces substance—what the reader brings to the text is equally as important as what the text itself says: “any literary work, is after all, merely a bundle of paper inscribed with strange hieroglyphics, until some human being responds to it in terms of sense and thought and emotion” (Making Meaning 106). Reader-response theory develops
in direct opposition to the new critical school of the early twentieth century that believed meaning existed only in the text—that the text stands alone, in a vacuum. Rosenblatt’s views are much more democratic and privilege student experiences with literature. Reader-response theory is an excellent approach to increasing student motivation, and offers a grounding rationale for a curriculum centered around student-friendly thematic units.

However, the theory must be approached with some caveats—namely, that it can form lax students who indulge their own perspectives too much while neglecting the text itself. The danger inherent within reader-response theory is its extreme application. Manifested in many high school writing assignments, the complete focus is on the student, to the exclusion of the text. Students are asked simply to keep journals, write emotional responses to a text, or compose personally reflective pieces. In order for students to fully develop their critical reading and writing skills, they must be asked to read purposefully and work with a text in challenging ways. It is not enough to ask students to write about personal experiences—those experiences must be connected to a text that is linguistically, structurally, or thematically challenging in order for the students to be fully involved and develop as writers. The home of true learning is the place where the student writer encounters a text, engages his background with the text, and produces a piece of work that witnesses the synergy of the two

Students should be self-aware, and their ideas should be privileged in the classroom, as Rosenblatt demonstrates, but it is imperative that writing assignments remain grounded in the text. Students are most often enrolled in
remedial college courses (Reading Next, 2004) because they have not been asked to critically read texts and analyze them in a meaningful way. Texts that are engaging as well as challenging shake the student out of his “adolescent egocentricity” and create thoughtful readers who are ultimately better writers. Like Reagan notes, “because reading and writing employ similar cognitive processes and rely upon a common text knowledge, experienced readers are usually proficient writers, while inexperienced readers are almost always basic writers” (177). Improved writing skills, then, are an implicit benefit of a student-centered, reader-response curriculum that promotes student interest and increases motivation for reading. The student’s ability to appreciate literature and understand its applicability to her own life results in an ability to penetrate the text and write about it thoughtfully.

Graves calls student motivation the “sine qua non” of learning (447)—that without which nothing else can follow. Swan reinforces this concept, stating that “the principle of interesting texts is important in a concept-oriented classroom because the goal is to create lifelong learners” (288)—interest must be the ever-present motivating factor. Dewey argues that education does not have one universal aim, but many specific aims that grow from the individual needs and experiences of each student” (111). Thus, “an educational aim must be founded upon the intrinsic activities and needs of the given individual to be educated” (Dewey 108) in order to develop both the students’ motivation and an effective classroom.
Reed et al. examine the current literacy practices that motivate adolescents in an attempt to apply the characteristics of those practices in the classroom. They argue that the principles of internet communication truly engage students while traditional literacy practices do not, and so they believe that “looking at what adolescents are doing can inform what we want them to do” (252), instead of imposing curriculum on them and hoping motivation follows. Reed et al. want to learn from adolescents’ positive approach to media and popular culture, and so they “examine the role of motivation in adolescents’ interaction with literacy activities…to understand their response to more traditional literacy” (252).

These authors discuss the logistics of motivation—what factors need to coincide for students to feel in control of an experience, enjoy an experience, and want to repeat that experience. Ideally, true “involvement” occurs when students encounter a task that is “appropriately challenging without being too difficult, something that requires comprehension but is comprehended” (260). Tasks that “are challenging enough to appeal to competence, that allow for authentic choice” (255) lead to this type of true engagement or involvement. Citing the example of a student holding multiple Instant Messenger conversations, Reed et al. note that this task does just that: “the students must choose with whom they speak, how to adapt their words appropriately, and how to juggle the fast-paced challenge of holding multiple conversations at once” (255). These criteria can then be applied to engineer motivation in the classroom.
Individual control and interest are central to students’ enjoyment and pursuit of literature. Reed et al.’s research suggests that while students are motivated to seek out new literacies, like internet communication, they were also motivated by traditional literacies that spoke to their individual interests. While many students do prefer reading about pop culture or sports, research from Moss and Hendershot “also suggests that adolescents are motivated by reading nonfiction materials on topics about which they are passionate” (Reed et al. 269). Indeed, nonfiction texts in language arts classrooms were viewed as an “untapped resource for promoting motivation” (Reed et al. 269). The incorporation of nonfiction texts does heighten academic rigor by asking more from students than we do now. The nonfiction text becomes an important motivational tool, providing an example where adequate challenges can meet comprehension. Most importantly, “adolescents’ motivation to read personally meaningful texts continues to be important as they grow older” (Reed et al. 269). Reed et al. cite the work of Moss and Hendershot (2002), along with Wade, Buxton and Kelly (1999) to report that the following characteristics of a text itself are central to students’ motivation:

Students showed the most interest in texts that presented: 1) important or valuable information, 2) unexpected or surprising information, 3) information that students could connect with their prior knowledge, 4) a great deal of imagery or descriptive language, and 5) connections among topics. (Reed et al. 269)
Along with the caveat given about reader-response theory, Reed et al. cite Alverman’s warning that instructors must not be lured into thinking that students can become superficially “motivated for traditional literacy tasks simply by allowing them to write ‘cool’ or ‘fun’ assignments” (Reed et al. 273). The task must join student to text, text to challenging assignment, and not work simply to please the student or give him a false sense of accomplishment. Indeed, “struggling readers performed extremely well when given a text that was both personally interesting and at an appropriate reading level” (Swan 284). The incorporation of texts joined authentically to student experience will produce authentic understanding.

In Teaching Literature to Adolescents, Beach, Appleman, Hynds and Wilhelm examine those techniques that most readily connect students to literature. They argue that the incorporation of pertinent literature and an understanding of student audience is essential for effective instruction. Beach et al. acknowledge the essential difference between knowledge and understanding, positing that “simply having knowledge about literature...doesn’t necessarily mean that [the student] knows how to insightfully interpret literature” (4). In order to move students away from these “relatively passive, dependent roles” (5) as readers, teachers must incorporate pertinent texts and apply said texts in a way that produces true understanding. As teachers applying relatable texts in the classroom, “we invite them, through literature and other language activities, to define their own sense of self and resist the false fronts that seem to accompany their teenage years” (24). With literature, “we are not just teaching books. We are
teaching ideas” (167), and so we must incorporate texts in a way places the idea at the forefront and the text itself behind. If students can access a text willingly through its predominant themes, the inner working and literary value of the text will follow. In adolescence, teachers “understand that each student’s mind is a closed system, each shaped differently by a different set of experiences, [so] we need to help them find meaningful points of connection to the experiences of other people, both real and fictional” (170). Using literature with universal themes can touch a student individually, and move that student outside himself, to a larger conception of the universal.

Beach et al. cite the case study of Tanya, a Maine high school teacher, who found that her English classroom was invigorated after incorporating thematic units. She says:

The great thing about all these units is that they are all issue-oriented. There are multiple perspectives around these issues [e.g. Race, War, Civil Rights]. Kids are interested in the debate. And we can’t fall into the information-centered trap of playing guess what the teacher already knows … I am helping them learn to read so they can … make tentative conclusions about personal and social issues, state their claims and identities, and figure out how these decisions should inform how they live, vote, problem solve, etc.

(Beach et al. 8)

As Tanya’s case study demonstrates, students are motivated once they are invited into active participation with a text, once they can see its relevance.
Students “want to read about people like themselves, people they can recognize. One critical task of the literature teacher, then, is to help students see this relevance where they might otherwise not” (170). Thematic units work because they make texts immediately relevant to students, and their goals are two-fold, both academic and personal; by forming a curriculum around student interest, the student becomes personally motivated to read, and develops better reading comprehension because he is practicing his reading skills more.

Beach et al. also argue for the literary canon, a move I endorse. The literary canon, in itself, is not to blame; the fault lies in the canon’s stagnant application throughout high school English classrooms. Works that remain part of the literary canon today do so for a reason, and not because they were initially needed as a way of assessing student performance for college admittance. Classic works are classic because they are good works of literature, and portray lasting, universal representations of human nature. Noting the place of the classics among modern literature, Rosenblatt argues “the difficulty is that [the classics] are not being taught and read creatively, selectively and personally...the glory and the challenge of the great works of art [lies in their] power to enter into the life of generation after generation” (Making Meaning 106-107) Working to incorporate texts that resonate with students does not mean promoting every bestseller or pandering to students’ calls for easy reading. Rather, “our job as teachers is to know our students, to know the literary canon, and to know where the two might meet harmoniously” (Beach et al.170).
A key element of student motivation is meeting and overcoming challenges (Reed et al.), and students will not be motivated to keep reading if they do not encounter and conquer formidable texts. The key is to make these formidable texts accessible, so that the student develops personally as well as academically. When teachers focus on the connection between the student and the literary work, and give valuable literature a home in the classroom, they prevent students from turning "to the more facile satisfactions of the popular magazine or cheap novel" (Rosenblatt, Making Meaning 110). Beach et al. note "our students don’t care that the book is old. They just want the book to deliver something interesting, something that helps them understand the world in which they live" (172).

Along with the canon, research also supports my emphasis on poetry and nonfiction. I hold that poetry develops the readers’ trained eye, and that its reading, as well as its creation, "begins in delight and ends in wisdom" (Frost 440)). Poetry forces students to pay attention to detail, and its systematic incorporation in the classroom can work to develop critical readers. Poetry enables students to make intertextual as well as intratextual connections, since within the poem, "everything is related to everything else" (Showalter 65). Rote memorization of poetic figures is not the key to poetry, but rather, "understanding how (my emphasis) figurative language can be employed to engage readers in the poetic experience" (Beach et al.153) is most important. A keen understanding of poetry allows students to better grasp the application of rhetorical devices in all genres. In its concise, economic, deliberate form, "poetry offers the literature
instructor some of the most fundamental, immediate, active, even physical ways to engage students in learning” (Showalter 62).

Similarly, the use of nonfiction texts teaches students the strategies and logic of factual or argumentative writing. In addition, the incorporation of memoirs, biographies or autobiographies not only places students firmly within a historical time frame, but also forces them to identify how authors portray themselves—inviting the students’ own self-reflection. Thus, the relevance of poetry and nonfiction texts follows the personal/academic impetus of the thematically-centered curriculum. Poetry and nonfiction texts, along with properly incorporated canonical works, engage the reader with the promise of personal relevance, and teach strategies for critical reading and discerning authorial intent along the way. Research shows that “when students learn they can ‘get smarter’ by reading, and by using strategies for searching information and comprehending texts deeply, they continue to be motivated to learn” (Swan 285). Thus, thematic units form students who are motivated to read, and turn motivated students into strong, purposeful readers.
CHAPTER IV
PROPOSED THEMATIC UNITS

Using the aforementioned research rationale, I propose a student-centered curriculum developed around thematic units pertinent to graduating high school seniors. The explicit benefit of this kind of structure is that students are being taught “through repeated opportunities for seeing relationships and implications in ever wider and more consistent contexts” (Rosenblatt, Making Meaning 109). Thus, the proposed thematic units overlap and interconnect, developing student’s metacognitive abilities.

Specifically, five sets of thematic ideas would structure the curriculum: Growth and Change; Love and Relationships; Dreams, Realities, and Limitations; Personal Freedom and the Public Self; Argument and Ethics. These themes are central to the lives of high school seniors who universally struggle with understanding their changing selves in the context of a changing world. In each unit, the initial and primary emphasis would be placed on the theme itself, with the texts assuming importance of their own as the students’ understanding of the theme and its relevance grew deeper. Students’ motivation and ability to read would then develop as they authentically grappled their way through each challenging text and learned about personally important issues.
The variety of texts chosen reflects what William Paulson calls a “cultural apprenticeship” (122) in which the student is confronted by pertinent themes embodied in an enormity of ways. Paulson supports this incorporation of widely chosen texts: “since human reality is no single version of reality but an accretion of versions…culture needs fictions and poems both past and present as part of its representation of its own latent possibilities” (126) The proposed curriculum works like literary training wheels; students are engaged in “cultural apprenticeship” by identifying the familiar with the unfamiliar, understanding sensations well-known to themselves in foreign contexts. Indeed, “careful inspection of methods which are permanently successful in formal education…will reveal that they depend for their efficiency upon [going back to] a situation which causes reflection out of school in ordinary life” (Dewey 154). Dewey argues “the initial stage of thinking is experience” (153), and so this common ground of experience between student and text paves the way for connections and subsequent realizations. In this way, the student’s experience opens the door to a text and invites critical thinking to enter.

The diverse texts chosen are not easy, and were carefully selected as such. With an eye towards increasing motivation, it is essential to challenge students as “diversity of stimulation means novelty, and novelty means challenge to thought” (Dewey 85). The representative works display pertinent themes that raise interest and motivation for literature, and elevate critical reading skills by forcing students to investigate those themes. Form in the chosen works will prove
most difficult, as in the modern poets (cummings, Yeats), postmodern author (Hejinian), and in the more philosophical texts (Plato, Hume, Kant, Locke).

I propose to begin the year with a thematic unit centered around the formidable concepts of growth and change. I see no topic more pertinent to a high school senior than this one, and it sets the tone for the year that is full of ends and beginnings. Graduating students are, just as Kerouac says in On the Road: “on the roof of America and all we could do was yell...somewhere an old woman with white hair was probably walking towards us with the world, and would arrive any minute and make us silent”. Graduating seniors, however, live in a curious moment between present and future, and again, like Kerouac, envisage themselves in a fleeting, romantic way, “burning like fabulous yellow roman candles exploding like spiders across the stars.” Adolescence is “considered one of the most interesting, important, and meaningful developmental periods that we experience as human beings” (Reed et al. 262), so it follows that literary selections should address the various nuances of those changes.

Albert Murray’s Train Whistle Guitar introduces the theme of growth and change. This is the first novel in a three-part series, and Murray debuts his young hero, Scooter, who grows as organically as Joyce’s Stephen Dedalus. Murray’s style invokes jazz (helpful for the Langston Hughes and Fitzgerald to be studied later) and describes the ways and means by which Scooter grows up in African-American Alabama. The novel is written from a childish perspective and told in a simple, childlike way, making it a good starting point.
James Joyce’s *Portrait of the Artist* not only describes the process of growing up, but its composition mirrors that process. Students will be able to see how a growing mind works, and note how issues important to Stephen Dedalus at certain stages fade away, while other issues remain to form his character. Stephen’s growth and character are the form of the novel, something that may be difficult for students to grasp; the novel begins as baby talk, and matures into an adult stream-of-consciousness style. This is one of the most challenging proposed texts because it is so experimental, but students will appreciate understanding how the text develops with Stephen.

Chinua Achebe’s *No Longer at Ease* moves students from Joyce’s Dublin to Achebe’s Nigeria, but the contrast only highlights the universality of coming-of-age experiences. This novel is the extension of Achebe’s often-studied *Things Fall Apart*, and depicts the difficulties Obi Okonkwo experiences in having a modern education in a traditional African-American society. Obi struggles with change in a more modern setting than his father did in the prehistorical setting of *Things*, and must reconcile the ways in which he is changed from the town that produced him. In *This Side of Paradise*, Fitzgerald deals with his favored themes of social acceptance and exclusive societies, but places those concepts within the developing persona of Amory Blaine. Amory “comes of age” in the socially revolutionary Jazz Age, and confronts adolescent pressures and issues in a real way. He is a likable character, more so than Salinger’s Holden Caufield, and I believe it will benefit students to see Amory make both positive and negative
choices, instead of predominantly negative ones. This is Fitzgerald’s first novel, and is an easier text than the later Great Gatsby, serving as an excellent example not only of the growth and change theme, but of Fitzgerald’s style on the whole.

From Amory Blaine and his Jazz Age tribulations, students will next examine a postmodern representation of growth and change themes. Lyn Hejinian’s My Life is a postmodern representation of memory, of the way memory records sensuous moments so concretely. High school students feel very keenly, so a text that is structured only by scattered portrayals of remembered experiences should resemble the way in which they categorize experiences. This novel is excitingly experimental, and difficult reading, but is an excellent way to incorporate writing assignments and introduce students to demanding literary form.

Having had their minds stretched and bent by Hejinian’s postmodern expression of change, students will move to Kerouac’s On the Road, his seminal account of growing and traveling as part of the Beat Generation. Generally, students are taken with the “hippie” lifestyle Kerouac portrays, and are motivated to analyze the ways in which he changes during his travels. For this text, only excerpts would be used, due to some unwanted drug references.

If Kerouac is thrilled to live and grow and change, Yeats is terrified. In “The Second Coming,” Yeats believes the universe is characterized by beginnings and endings, visualized by his representation of the gyre. For Yeats, change is inevitable, and ultimately positive, though its process can be painful.
Students should respond strongly to the apocalyptic tone of the poem, but its violence can be used as a counterpoint for Yeats' ultimately positive philosophy of change.

e.e. cummings' poem, “along the brittle, bright treacherous streets of memory…” is a soft counterpoint to Yeats' poetic vision. This poem addresses the danger of living too much in the past and not embracing change. Its theme can be taken with Wordsworth's "Tintern Abbey" which always understands memory as positive means for evaluating current situations.

In “anyone lived in a pretty how town,” cummings establishes similar parallels between past and present, static and dynamic. This poem characterizes the adult goings-on of a picturesque town in a rhyming, childlike way. Cumming uses the anonymous “anyone” to address the universality of the growth and change themes, and the cyclical nature of growth and change is also emphasized by the constant repetition and reshuffling of the refrain: “sun moon stars rain.”

In a similar Romantic nod to nature, Wordsworth's “Tintern Abbey” is a tribute to the way in which experienced situations build a reservoir of memories that can be called upon at will and applied to distant situations. Wordsworth writes the poem having visited the pastoral Tintern Abbey five years ago, returning for the first time since. Wordsworth advocates that memory is “a dwelling place for all sweets sounds and harmonies,”—memory as the agent that makes change positive.

Frost views nature as an occasion for reflection; physical nature is valuable for the insight it allows him into human nature. In “Birches,” the sight of
birch trees in nature moves Frost to remember his connections to the trees as a child, and to muse on reentering that world again. Like cummings’ “anyone lived in a pretty how town,” the connections to childhood and often simple linguistic choices invite a study of the adult themes behind those choices, such as Frost’s use of irony.

Kahlil Gibran is contemplative like Frost, and employs a style that is at once poetic and philosophical. In The Prophet he assumes the persona of a traveling prophet delivering wisdom and offers maxims for a variety of life issues. The “Farewell” segment highlights a sense of coming and going, and the impermanence of saying goodbye. It is beautifully written, memorable, and applicable for students preparing to say their own farewells to so many things.

Unit I: Growth and Change

Purpose: To help students understand change as growth by viewing different perspectives on change in various genres.

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<th>Fiction</th>
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<td>Murray</td>
<td>Kerouac</td>
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<td>Train, Whistle, Guitar</td>
<td>On the Road</td>
<td>“The Second Coming”</td>
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<td>Joyce</td>
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<td>Portrait of the Artist</td>
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<td>“anyone lived in a pretty how town”</td>
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<td>Achebe</td>
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<td>No Longer at Ease</td>
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<td>“along the brittle bright treacherous streets of memory”</td>
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<td>Fitzgerald</td>
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<td>This Side of Paradise</td>
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<td>Hejinian</td>
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<td>My Life</td>
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Students will view change either positively or negatively, and the variety of texts accommodates these two opposite perspectives. Kerouac, cummings, Wordsworth and Frost demonstrate nostalgia; Murray, Joyce, Fitzgerald, Hejinian, and Gibran offer realistic portrayals; Yeats and Achebe view change with an impending sense of doom. Ideally, students will realize that growth and change are not always all good, or always all bad, but are irrefutable facts that must be confronted. By viewing the variety of ways each author confronts and adapts to change, students will be better prepared to encounter these facts themselves, and will be challenged to discern each author’s voice toward change by reading critically.

In the thematic sequence of units, students would next transition into the inevitable adolescent themes of love and relationships. This unit transitions easily from the first with questions such as: “How does change affect our relationships? How does our own ability/inability to deal with change affect our relationships?” As developing individuals, high school students experience dramatically changing romantic, platonic, and familial relationships. The themes of growth and change lend themselves to this next unit, and again, the variety of texts employed demonstrates the different incarnations of love and the subtle inner workings of relationships.

The first novel, Louise Erdrich’s Love Medicine, examines the interlocked relationships of four families on the Turtle Mountain Indian Reservation in North Dakota: the Lamartines, the Kashpaws, the Lazarres and the Nanapushes. Erdrich’s novel does not clearly outline the relationships between families, but
unfolds over time, like gossip between neighbors. The effect of this technique emphasizes the murkiness and inescapability of relationships, but highlights an underlying oneness of this small community. The storytelling technique will be new and different for students, and the novel offers perspectives on love that are rooted in its Native American tradition, but are universally applicable.

Tolstoy’s *Anna Karenina* would be studied next, as a demonstration of conflicting relationships and complicated loves. Anna Karenin holds an ongoing affair with Count Vronsky, and refuses to disguise it as her high society husband would like. Anna is a figure much like Woolf’s Clarissa Dalloway, but is more strong-willed and refuses to comply with traditional social standards for women. What Anna originally experiences for Vronsky is passion, but as the novel progresses, Anna’s singular passion for Vronsky becomes her undoing, and she goes on to lead a miserable existence with him, having finally been divorced by her husband, Karenin. Anna eventually commits suicide, bound neither by love for her husband, child, or family. This novel is an excellent look at nineteenth century Russia, and is a good place for students to first encounter Russian literature because its characters are so strong and complex. Anna is a tragic figure who does love deeply, but probably loves herself more than anyone else. In this way, the novel also foreshadows the next unit on personal freedom and public responsibility.

The incorporation of Plato’s *Symposium* moves students from fiction into nonfiction and into the philosophy on love. Plato uses the conceit of a symposium, an ancient Greek dinner party, to present a variety of speeches on
the nature of love. This work tends to be interesting for students because it is a
good entry point at which to encounter Plato, since it is often funny, and written in
a more narrative format than the Socratic method he usually employs. Since the
Greek language has four separate nouns for the English word “love”, this text is
an excellent resource for discussing the different incarnations of love. The text
presents Aristophanes’ mythology of love, in which he advances that novel idea
that men and women were originally one being, cut in half by Zeus. Because of
this, men and women now travel the world, always searching for their other half. I
would also present Socrates’ speech on love’s transcendence, as he argues that
eros for a specific individual gives rise to beautiful ideas. For Socrates, the end
result of love is wisdom. The text is challenging, but full of novel perspectives on
love, and is an excellent introduction to Plato.

Taken next, e.e. cummings’, “somewhere I have never traveled” is a more
personal tribute to love, as cummings describes the way his lover makes him feel
. One of his most famous poems, its sentiments and emotions are quickly
understood, but its flower and Spring images require a good deal of explication.
In “love is the only every god,” cummings writes about the nature and functions of
love, drawing comparisons between the enormity of love and the enormity of the
natural world, like Frost or Wordsworth might.

Cummings last exhorts students to “above all things be glad and young.”
This is a poem in love with youth, and the love that youth enjoys. It discusses the
infectious nature of love; if man is in love with the world, then the world will be in
love with man. A positive, idealistic look at love, situated in the pretty, happy days
of youth. In cummings’ work, there is an immediate sensation of feeling and precisely captured emotion which makes his poems ideal for high school seniors “for whom feeling is first.” All three cummings poems will be taken together to examine the different images and representations he uses for love, much like Plato’s Symposium.

Still considering poetry, students would then examine Shakespeare’s representations of love. His Sonnet 116, “Let me not to the marriage of true minds” discusses the changing nature of love, but acknowledges that the best love does not alter “when it alteration finds.” Much like Sonnet 130, Shakespeare establishes the all-encompassing, accepting nature of love in which “My mistress’ eyes are nothing like the sun.” In Sonnet 130, Shakespeare reveals the imperfections of his lover, but concludes that those imperfections make him love her even more. Here, he advocates love for a very ordinary woman—one who is not the most intelligent or most beautiful, but whom he loves nonetheless. This poem should prove reassuring for high-school students because Shakespeare highlights the fact that love looks beyond appearances. Samuel Taylor Coleridge’s, “Frost at Midnight” shifts the unit’s focus from romantic love to familial love, representing the love a parent has for a child. As the wind blows outside, Coleridge sits warm by the fire, describing the kind of life he wants his son to have. He thinks as his son sleeps nearby in the cradle, and Coleridge’s thoughts reflect the selfless love of father for son.

Like Coleridge, Yeats examines parental love in “A Prayer for My Daughter.” Though the poem ultimately is another tribute to his unrequited love
for the revolutionary Maud Gonne, Yeats describes the things he does not want his daughter to be. It is implied that the unwanted characteristics are those possessed by Maud Gonne, so Yeats is at once pronouncing what he admires in a woman by listing those things that frustrate him so much about Gonne. In this way, the poem neatly ties together the eros and agape forms of love.

Last in this unit is Virginia Woolf’s Mrs. Dalloway, which examines the relationships Clarissa Dalloway chooses for herself, and the ones she feels society determines for her. In many ways, she feels limited by her marriage to Richard Dalloway, but she is also enabled by it to establish a place in postwar World War I London society. She feels she has lost her identity as Clarissa and has simply become Mrs. Richard Dalloway. With the arrival of her long-ago love Peter Walsh, Clarissa is forced to wonder what might have been. She remembers herself as a young girl in love in Peter, and remembers the dreams she once chose freely—which stand in stark contrast to her current lifestyle. The relevance here is that, in the course of one day, Clarissa is often happy with her comfortable role with Mr. Richard, and often sad with her “kept” lifestyle. The text examines the role of marriage for women, and invites a comparison to marriage in today’s society. Conveniently, the novel provides an excellent segue into the themes of personal freedom and public responsibility, since we are led to believe that Clarissa chose Richard out of a certain selfishness and selflessness—wanting to make herself and her future children comfortable, but losing the opportunity to follow her personal dreams.
Unit II: Love and Relationships

Purpose: To examine different types of love and their expression in various genres.

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<td><em>Symposium</em></td>
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<td><em>Anna Karenina</em></td>
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<td><em>Mrs. Dalloway</em></td>
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<td>&quot;you shall above all things be glad and young&quot;</td>
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<td>Coleridge</td>
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<td>&quot;Frost at Midnight&quot;</td>
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The focus on specific kinds of relationships works to remedy adolescents' blanket conceptions of this theme: "much of the mismanagement of personal relationships results from following a stereotyped and automatic reaction to the general outlines of a situation instead of responding to the special characteristics and changing qualities of that situation" (Rosenblatt, *Literature* 99). If students can grow to read interpersonal relationships with the same critical eye they are developing for literature, they can better understand their "emergence of different selves in different relational contexts" (Reed et al. 263). The Coleridge and Yeats poems address the love of parent for child; Plato, Tolstoy and Cummings
describe romantic love; and Shakespeare, Woolf and Erdrich are concerned with the inevitability of relationships. The student, then, can identify with the need to fill out those different relationship capacities, and can address the ways in which each author depicts the realities of love.

The third proposed unit shifts the thematic focus from individual relationships to the responsibility of public relationships by asking how individuals function within a group and how our relationships are informed by a sense of responsibility. As seniors, students are becoming functioning adults, and as such, are refining their relationship to the world at large. This, however, is a difficult process to navigate: “In finding it [a niche], the young adult gains an assured sense of inner continuity and social sameness which will bridge what he was as a child, and what he is about to become, and will reconcile his conception of himself and his community’s recognition of him” (Erikson 111). That comfortable niche in society is often carved at the intersection of personal freedom and public responsibility, and the chosen texts investigate the ways in which these two themes are inextricably intertwined. These two contraries demonstrate students’ need to clarify their relationship with themselves, and how that relationship affects their interaction with others: “Individuals need to feel in control of who they are, what they experience, and how they experience specific contexts. A lack of such control can lead to disidentification, and decreased motivation” (Reed et al. 267)

The best introduction to a study of the self is within Thoreau. Thoreau lives at Walden Pond for two years, and Walden is a direct record of his thoughts and
activities while there. The book is difficult reading for students because it contains many allusions and unfamiliar vocabulary, but it is an excellent beginning for this theme because Thoreau works first to improve himself in order to become a better member of society. It is interesting to read his maxims and understand his overwhelming responsibility to self. His motto to “simplify, simplify, simplify” is important for students to hear, and helps them to understand that the aim of life is not to accumulate for oneself, but to be better, in order to best contribute to society. Whitman’s, “Song of Myself” is an easy and excellent transition from Thoreau, also praising the transcendental self. In free verse Whitman presents an exuberant view of the selfhood, celebrating the particulars of his own body, as well as understanding himself in the context of a larger, vibrant world.

Richard Adams’, Watership Down moves students from a presentation of the individually achieving self to a study of individuals achieving together. Though the novel is about rabbits, not people, the lessons are the same. Adams employs a large cast of characters and examines the ways in which the rabbits work together in order to survive. Heavy on intertwining plot and character, Adams creates a rabbit culture, complete with a language, slang and rabbit mythology, that establishes clear parallels to human life. The plot and deep character involvement should be enough to keep students involved, though the novel is difficult reading at times.

In Paradise, Morrison presents the individual stories of disenfranchised women who find living together at an old convent, unanimously hated by the
surrounding town of Ruby, Oklahoma. Though each woman has an individual past, she acquires an identity as part of the convent group, and the story is told in Morrison’s prophetic, mythic, poetic tones. The convent women suffer a bad end, but the reader is led to believe they are transcendent as a group. The novel has the potential to be confusing, but reads like a haunting mystery that should intrigue students.

Ayn Rand’s *Atlas Shrugged*, asking the oft-repeated question, “Who is John Gault?” explores what would happen if the giant shoulders of a society stopped producing and supporting, and decided instead to only take care of themselves. Obviously, Rand writes to advance her objectivist philosophy, but the story introduces valuable speculation about how much men actually rely on one another. Rand’s novel advocates self-reliance in heroic way, like Thoreau and Whitman do, but I felt it was better to include her work later in the unit because it is especially challenging and can act as a counterbalance to the group-centered arguments of the later works.

In this way, *Atlas Shrugged* provides a marked contrast to Alice Walker’s, “Everyday Use.” For Walker, it is best to be authentic—to be part of one’s own authentic community and to propagate its traditions. “Everyday Use” explores this idea through the dichotomy of two sisters—one who moves beyond her community via distance and education, and one who stays at home, unable to be as “successful” as her sister. This story invites comparisons to Achebe’s *No Longer at Ease*, and forces students to consider who they are, who their communities are, and what sort of responsibility they have to those communities.
Unit III: Personal Freedom and Public Responsibility

Purpose: To bring students to a greater understanding of who they are, how their communities have influenced them, and what responsibilities they have to those communities.

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<td>Adams</td>
<td>Thoreau</td>
<td>Whitman</td>
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<td><em>Watership Down</em></td>
<td><em>Walden</em></td>
<td>&quot;Song of Myself&quot;</td>
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<td>Morrison</td>
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<td><em>Paradise</em></td>
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<td>Rand</td>
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<td><em>Atlas Shrugged</em></td>
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<td>Walker</td>
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<td>&quot;Everyday Use&quot;</td>
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All texts, with the exclusion of Thoreau, examine the ways in which groups work together, and how those groups divide responsibility. Thoreau will be considered first as an example of ultimate personal freedom—the transcendental self—and this presentation will coincide with Whitman’s poetic celebration of the self. Since our society is always “engaged in the momentous process of seeking some valid pattern for living, some freshly grasped central image of man’s relationship to man” (Rosenblatt, *Making Meaning* 107), it is imperative to situate students within this pairing and allow them to critically confront the necessity of social interactions, instead of moving blindly through them.

Since the previous unit is comprised primarily of novels, it will carry into the second semester of study. The essential transition from the previous unit is the way in which dreams and personal freedoms are limited by realities and public responsibilities. In all texts chosen here, there is a frustrated sense of loss, and the ever-present reminder of what could have been.
Langston Hughes’ vision of what could have been is captured by physically festering metaphors. In “A Dream Deferred, Hughes captures a unique image of a deferred dream made substantive, personifying it with descriptions of rot and decay. The historic context of this poem is necessary for its understanding, but it also stands outside time and can be applied to all the following novels. Since the other works examine the frustrated realization of dreams or the limitations that keep dreams from being a reality, this poem will serve as an introduction to the unit.

Ironically, all works in this unit are modernist—from the post-World War One era categorized by a sense of loss and alienation. In “The Love Song of J. Alfred Prufrock,” T. S. Eliot creates Prufrock, the modern anti-hero and “Everyman”, who merely exists in the world, ebbing and flowing along with it, as “the woman come and go/talking of Michelangelo.” Prufrock is exceedingly comfortable with his realities and limitations, and exists in the world without any real fire to change it, or to be otherwise than he is. In a way, this is a perspective representative of the modern period, and stands in stark contrast to the other dreamers this unit will discuss, like Gatsby.

Fitzgerald’s Jay Gatsby is the ultimate dreamer, an irony the novel’s title, The Great Gatsby, implies. Unlike Prufrock, Gatsby always wants to be more than he is. Gatsby springs “from his own platonic conception of himself” (104) and spends his entire life striving to be better, all in the hope of winning Daisy Buchanan’s love. Daisy is “high in a white tower, the golden girl” (127) and she belongs to that high society of people who “gleamed like silver, safe and proud
above the hot struggles of the poor” (157). Gatsby’s story is a sad one, and we are ultimately left to wonder if he was better or worse for having tried to elevate himself at all. Fitzgerald explores the undeniable exclusivity of old money society in the Roaring Twenties, and his work is made more poignant because so much of it is autobiographical. His beloved wife, Zelda, was Daisy to him, was the rich to his poor, and he never forgot it. The novel invites students to wonder whether it is better to be authentic and except who they are, or to always be reaching for something beyond their grasp.

Ernest Hemingway’s The Sun Also Rises examines the similarly frustrated quest of a limited hero. Like Gatsby longs for Daisy, Jake Barnes longs for Lady Brett Ashley and in both cases, the protagonists fail. Jake’s inability to possess Brett is very much tied to the post World War II time period, since Jake has been brutally wounded, and Brett has been so sexually liberated that she can’t bear to be tied to one man. The novel examines what the characters want, and what actually is, and speaks to the general discontent that marked the expatriate generation. Hemingway’s novel works for this unit on both a character level, in Jake, in Brett, in Robert Cohn, in Pedro Romero, and in terms of its overall theme and background. Jake is an especially likeable Hemingway narrator because he is so vulnerable, and Hemingway’s concise writing style makes it easy for students to follow the plot, but forces them to read between the lines to discern character.
Unit IV: Dreams, Realities and Limitations

Purpose: To help students understand the positives and negatives of dreams.

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<th>Fiction</th>
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<tr>
<td>Fitzgerald</td>
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<td>Hughes</td>
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<td><em>The Great Gatsby</em></td>
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<td>&quot;A Dream Deferred&quot;</td>
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<td>Hemingway</td>
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<td>Eliot</td>
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<td><em>The Sun Also Rises</em></td>
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<td>&quot;The Love Song of J. Alfred Prufrock&quot;</td>
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In addition to comprehending the nuances of growth and change, high school seniors are able to poignantly feel loss, and their energetic acceptance of this fact can be neatly aligned with Eliot’s Prufrock, who really doesn’t feel anything anymore. Prufrock’s experiences have become so limited he is left to wonder if he even “dares to eat a peach” or “wear his trousers rolled.” This complacent acceptance of limitations (“I am no Hamlet...”) will then work in sharp contrast to the big dreams of Fitzgerald’s Jay Gatsby and Hemingway’s Jake Barnes, and invite a discussion of which character, in the end, is left the worst, having dreamt or not. An essential idealism accompanies youth, while a certain cynicism often comes with age. Thus, the goal in applying this theme is to help students who walk that line between childhood and adulthood to strike a worldly harmony of the two chords.

The final thematic unit in the proposed, student-centered curriculum is a thematic take on argumentation and ethics. Students could transition into this unit by considering questions such as: “Can you argue for your dreams? To what basic rights are you entitled? How can you form the most persuasive arguments
to achieve your goals?” In this last unit, students will confront the largest majority of nonfiction texts to grapple with both form and content of arguments.

The unit would begin with the “2001 Harvard Commencement Address”, given by U2 lead singer, Bono. Bono provides an excellent, relatable, modern-day example of ethos, logos and pathos in action. He speaks to Harvard’s graduating class about the need to increase aid to Africa, the need to alleviate debt in third-world countries, and the increasing AIDS epidemic. He encourages the students to change the world, in typical commencement fashion, but does so in a very grounded way. He is careful to establish his ethos by addressing immediately how much he hates” rock stars with causes,” but evidences his conviction for these causes by discussing his personal experiences in affecting world change. He is at once funny, moving, and a voice students will recognize. As graduating high school seniors, especially, students are looking for messages, and this speech presents just that, in a conveniently clear example of rhetoric.

Having already encountered Plato’s Symposium in the unit on love and relationships, students will be prepared to examine Plato’s arguments in the Republic. I will include Socrates’ discussion of justice and how this conception of justice structures the ordered soul, and in turn, the ordered city. Socrates advocates the “philosopher king” because he is the only one wise enough not to want the job, while men like the Sophists enjoy manipulating crowds through their words. Students will examine the role of virtue and be introduced to the Socratic method of making an argument. Especially if students will be attending liberal
arts colleges, this text is a necessary philosophical introduction, but invites the universal question, “can ethics be taught?”

John Locke’s *Second Treatise on Government* examines the state of nature, the right to property, the state of slavery, and the state of war, and explores the beginnings of government—a practical application after Plato’s philosophical grounding in the *Republic*. Clearly, students will be familiar with Locke’s words and ideas from our own Constitution, but it is necessary for them to truly consider those rights Locke believes we inherently possess and to follow the form of his argument.

Immanuel Kant’s *Grounding for the Metaphysics of Morals* will prove more difficult than Locke and most texts, but is important for its objective argument about ethics. Kant considers ethics “the laws of freedom” (1), and particularly examines the interplay of duty and happiness, and the ethics of lying, if even for good reason. Kant believes that our understanding of morals cannot be merely logical, but must be empirical; we must have life experiences in order to fully form our own ethics and beliefs. There is a universal law of nature for Kant, but he believes that law only becomes worthwhile when it can be applied to specific instances. Kant’s conception of morality is largely based on reason, and he presents the concept of a “categorical imperative” as an objective standard by which humans can make rational, and thereby, ethical decisions.

Where Kant’s ethics privilege reason over the passions, Hume’s ethics acknowledge the interplay of the two. In *An Enquiry Concerning the Principles of Morals*, Hume believes that sentiment, and not just a rational understanding of
evil, is necessary to keep man committed to virtue. He argues that “warm feelings and prepossessions in the favor of virtue, and all disgust or aversion to vice” (15) make men ethical, not rational conceptions of ethics alone. For Hume, if men become indifferent to the distinctions of feelings bound up with ethics, “morality is no longer a practical study, nor has any tendency to regulate our lives and actions” (15). Hume is easier to read than Kant, but Kant should be read first in order to introduce students to the rationality of morals. Hume can introduce sentiment and the passions into a discussion on morality.

Di Lampedusa’s The Leopard is then a fictional examination of the moral and political themes previously outlined by Locke, Kant and Hume. In the novel, Di Lampedusa describes the political unrest of Italy in the 1860s, leading up to the declaration of Rome as Italy’s capital in 1870. The novel’s main character, Don Fabrizio, is prince of Sicily, and at the center of Garibaldi’s movement to keep Sicily from being absorbed as part of the Roman Empire. Given the time period, Di Lampedusa contrasts Fabrizio’s old life of wealthy aristocracy against the face of new revolutionary democracy.

Virginia Woolf’s, A Room of One’s Own brings the students’ focus back to argument, after an exhaustive examination of rights and ethics. Woolf famously argues that women writers need space to create, just as men do. However, she acknowledges that successful female works, Austen’s in particular, are successful partly because they have been composed in a home’s public spaces, and accurately represent that home life. She creates the hypothetical figure of “Shakespeare’s sister” who would have had untapped literary potential, but no
room to create. The underlying argument is that “the room of one’s own” is not simply a physical place, but symbolically represents women’s need for a larger place in literature.

Woolf would certainly not agree with the portrayals of women in Marvell’s “To His Coy Mistress” and Marlowe’s “The Passionate Shepherd to His Love” since both pastoral poems depict a man aggressively wooing a woman. However, the speaker of Marvell’s poem is trying to seduce his mistress by exaggerating the rapid approach of old age, while Marlowe’s narrator tries to persuade his love simply by depicting the pleasures of their proposed life together. It will be good for students to explicate a poem in order to locate an argument, and they will be able to compare the ways in which the two poets try to accomplish a similar objective. Students will be familiar with the rhetorical forms of ethos, logos and pathos at this point, and will be able to identify them at work in poetic form. Marvell’s particular emphasis on the passage of time is a nice cyclical connection to the first unit’s focus on growth and change.

Robert Herrick’s, “Gather Ye Rosebuds” makes a direct argument to “gather ye rosebuds while ye may,/ Old Time is still a-flying.” This lyric circumvents the personae of the previous poems and speaks directly to the students, admonishing them to always make the most of their time. The connection to Marvell and Marlowe is a clear transition, and Herrick’s poem, simple in its argument, is a nice sending-forth note on which to end the semester.
Unit V: Argument and Ethics

Purpose: To teach students about rights, morals, and the function of those entities within persuasive arguments.

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<tr>
<td>Di Lampedusa</td>
<td>Bono &quot;2001 Harvard Commencement Address&quot;</td>
<td>Marvell &quot;To His Coy Mistress&quot;</td>
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<td><em>The Leopard</em></td>
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<td>Locke</td>
<td>Marlowe &quot;The Passionate Shepherd to his Love&quot;</td>
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<td><em>Second Treatise on Government</em></td>
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<td>Kant</td>
<td>Herrick &quot;Gather Ye Rosebuds&quot;</td>
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<td><em>Grounding for the Metaphysics of Morals</em></td>
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<td>Woolf</td>
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This unit’s progression into a majority of nonfiction texts is both thematically and practically sound; having dealt with themes in literature throughout the semester, students will now grapple with difficult nonfiction and philosophy texts as a precursor to their impending first semester of college. By understanding argumentation and its attendant ethics, a student will “acquire the sensitivities and reasoned set of values that will make him proof against the shoddy and sensational...and receptive to the sound and humane” (Rosenblatt, *Making Meaning* 108). As students understand their identities through literature, they must acknowledge “the importance of the social context” (Reed et al. 263) and the chosen texts depict foundationally social nature of relationships. Students can examine questions about the nature of ethics: how ethics affect our
relationships and sense of public responsibility, and how their personal ethics have perhaps changed as they have grown older. The incorporation of argument at years’ end also allows the previous themes to be reinvigorated as sides of an issue, after they have been extensively studied and applied to the student’s lives.

Overall, the teacher will not impose the text’s meaning upon a student, but rather, will orchestrate the meeting of the two so the student can understand the text in a way that best pertains to him. As previously mentioned by Beach et al., teenagers have “difficulty recognizing that others may see the world differently from themselves” (11), but class discussion and group activities can work with this “egocentricity” to produce practical results. By seeing a text from other perspectives, students are forced to define themselves and their own position on the text more clearly. Rosenblatt offers an effective round of self-assessment questions that a student can employ after reading a text and discussing it with a group:

Why was his reaction different from those of other students’? Why did he choose one particular slant rather than another? Why did certain phases of the book or poem strike him more forcibly than others? Why did he misinterpret or ignore certain elements? What was there in his state of mind which led to a distorted or partial view of the work? What in his temperament and past experience helped him understand it more adequately? What questions and obscurities remain? (Literature 75)
These types of questions both explicate and connect the student to the text and scaffolding assignments from levels of less complexity to more complexity will increase students’ motivation as they are challenged with and conquer each successive level.
CHAPTER V

CONCLUSION

It is the teacher’s task to “foster fruitful interactions between individual readers and individual literary texts” (Rosenblatt, Literature 26) so that students can witness how literature “presents our basic problems in heightened form” (Rosenblatt, Making Meaning 111) When we are aware of our student audience, we realize that “our teaching materials are the problems, preoccupations, sensitivities, insecurities, anxieties and aspirations which our students bring to the literary work” (Rosenblatt, Making Meaning 110), and we establish a classroom course of study that grows organically out of student attitudes.

When students witness that teachers are working for them and with them, they become more motivated to learn and are freed from traditional, mechanical education “which is socially serviceable but whose service they do not understand and have no personal interest in” (Dewey 85). If students are engaged by texts that appropriately address their maturing concerns, they will enjoy reading more and become better readers in the process. Thus endowed by literature, students better understand themselves and the world around them by having actively and purposefully engaged with pertinent texts.

Given the individual needs of each classroom, it may not be feasible for a teacher to cover all texts that have been proposed. In the interest of covering
certain texts in more detail or addressing unplanned, additional student interest, it may be advisable for the teacher to restructure the texts in each unit as she sees fit. The texts proposed here are not exhaustive; surely, others teachers with different literary favorites could incorporate works that have motivated and engaged them as readers. However, all texts proposed here do meet the two criteria I have outlined to motivate student readers: they are pertinent and challenging. The only way to get better readers is to create students who like to read, and students will only like to read if they can see value in a text. The five proposed thematic units work by placing a text’s value at the forefront of the students’ understanding and asking students to think deeply about the text’s themes in their own lives. In this way, the proposed curriculum accomplishes what every high school curriculum should; it prepares students individually and academically to meet the challenges of life in a modern world.


--- --- ---- “anyone lived in a pretty how town.” 73.

--- --- ---- “love is the only every god.”81.

--- --- ---- “somewhere I have never traveled.” 44.

--- --- ---- “you shall above all things be glad and young.” 66.


Marlowe, Christopher. "The Passionate Shepherd to His Love." Ferguson, Salter and Stallworthy 233.

Marvell, Andrew. "To His Coy Mistress." Ferguson, Salter and Stallworthy 435.


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--- --- ---."The Second Coming." Ramazani, Ellman and O'Clair 112.