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A Story-Centered Approach to AP English Literature, Curriculum, and Assessment

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Abstract

Advanced Placement and Literature and Composition is the pinnacle of literary studies in the secondary-school classroom. However, the content of the course and its primary mode of assessment equally damage the reputation of literary analysis as a purposeful academic field and threaten to further stigmatize the humanities in a moment when their usefulness is under scrutiny. Students should be shown how stories, and not literature, can be better appreciated in the AP literature classroom through a biocultural, and evolutionary approach to fiction and storytelling.

Key Words: AP Literature, literary studies, humanities, secondary-school classroom, biocultural, evolutionary

Introduction

"Now, what I want is Facts. Teach these boys and girls nothing by Facts. Facts alone are wanted in life. Plant nothing else, and root out everything else. You can only form the mind of reasoning animals upon Facts: nothing else will ever be of any service to them." – Charles Dickens, *Hard Times*

Imagine an English classroom: students are instructed to come in silently. Students should be sitting and all be prepared with identical materials when the bell rings. Students read a passage and answer an aligned AP, ACT, or SAT multiple choice question within a short period of time. A timer rings to indicate time has finished, and the teacher calls on a student to review the answer. The teacher has explained that evidence must be provided for justification; evidence must be extrapolated from the text. All answers must be based in the facts on the page. Everyone should be looking at the same page, thinking the same thing, coming to the same conclusions, producing the same, single, irreducible answer. Formal class begins and a series of similar readings, checks for understanding, and regurgitation of steps is repeated throughout the period. The bell rings. Students exit. Wash, rinse, and repeat.

Now imagine another English classroom: Students enter smiling, greeting the teacher and each other as they prepare for the day. If the day is a research day then students are either reading stories they've sought out themselves, conducting independent research, or consulting with the instructor to help them refine their proposals or claims. On whole class reading days, students take turns presenting their own thoughts, questions, and epiphanies with their classmates. The teacher guides students to refine, question, or revise their own thinking and the thinking of their peers in order to deepen their learning. The teacher prompts students to ask their own questions about what a story might mean to them today, what it might have meant for those in the past, and

what it might offer others in the future. They consider what meaning stories bring to our lives, and how they might help us all live better lives.

In which classroom will students be more likely to learn? Or perhaps the better question might be, what should the focus of the learning?

Many secondary school students in the United States find themselves in the first classroom mentioned, where the stories being studied are only a means to an end. The objective in these classrooms is answering the prompt, supporting the answer with evidence, and never deviating from the overarching goal. If a student can push their analysis to a more complex development of theme that ties their lives to the lives of the text in some way, then so be it, but that will only earn them a sophistication point at most. Rarely do teachers ask students to connect plays, poems, or novels to their own lives. This is of course no fault of the teacher. Focus on the task and attention to the aligned assessment are what they have been trained to adhere to. Accordingly, many secondary English classrooms present students with a style of literary analysis that is bland, boring, and at best limits authentic engagement. At worst, this style of instruction jeopardizes the creation of a well-read, mindful public and finalizes a student's understanding that literature and stories aren't the same thing. The serious consideration of stories, arguably the most important human invention besides fire, is being abandoned.

Despite story's centrality to the species and its immediate importance in the shaping of human identity, the value of storytelling is under severe scrutiny. It should not be surprising to learn that traditional readership in the US is steadily declining. In 2017, the National Endowment for the Arts determined that "[a] smaller share of adults read novels or short stories in 2017 than in 2012, 2008, or 2002" (10). The decline in the public's general reading habits directly influences English departments across the country. For instance, in the 2018 report from the

Association of the Departments of English on the changing nature of the undergraduate English major, the executive director of the MLA, Paula Krebs, advocated that

> [i]n a national climate of declining numbers of students majoring in English, it's time to use the data we have to make real changes in our outreach, in the cases we are making for our majors, and even in our departmental structures and curricula.
>
> The committee's report connects the decline in interest in the English major to a national decline in leisure reading and to the reshaping of reading practices by electronic media. (i)

I agree with Kerbs that the cases we make for literature courses and English departments more broadly should be stronger. In the face of declining readership, lower enrollments in undergraduates majoring in English, and the shift of primary and secondary schools away from the instruction of literary texts altogether. But what if English departments and their secondary school precursors adequately defend literary analysis as a useful academic discipline by promoting a new vision for the English literature classroom?

The literature classrooms that have the most urgent need for reinvention are the classrooms that carry students from secondary schools onto college campuses. Advanced Placement English literature, for example, introduces high school students to university-level literary analysis before they graduate, shaping their understanding of how literature is studied in college. Unfortunately, the current structure of the AP English literature course and exam perpetuates an archaic form of literary study, one that limits the potential of the discipline's evolution in both high schools and colleges and subsequently diminishes the potential to create fulfilled, life-time readers. In response, I propose a story-centered approach to literature in the AP English classroom This course builds upon the work of biocultural literary critics such as

Nancy Easterlin and Brian Boyd to give a coherent and useful theoretical framework of understanding to the course that will revitalize the bridge between literary studies in high schools and universities.

I. Stories Under Scrutiny: The Future of AP Literature

Would it be hyperbolic to suggest that the longevity and happiness of human life in some way depends upon stories? Outlining how modern humans developed apart from our ancient ancestors during the cognitive revolution, popular evolutionary historian Noah Yuval Harari highlights narrative's value to the species when he asks: "How did *Homo sapiens* manage to cross this critical threshold, eventually founding cities comprising tens of thousands of inhabitants and empires ruling hundreds of millions? The secret was probably the appearance of fiction. Large numbers of strangers can cooperate successfully by believing in common myths" (27). All structures of organization among human beings – whether they are cultural, economic, or institutional – are made up of commonly held beliefs about behavior. These beliefs, Harari explains, are founded on stories.

How were people able to cross large swaths of barren, harsh, or inhospitable landscapes and occupy almost every corner of the world? They probably accomplished this feat in the same way they learned to avoid food or water sources they knew were dangerous – by telling stories. Imagine an early human 70,000 years ago on the savannah at the dawn of the cognitive revolution. This early human has lost a mate. The mate drank poisoned water from a contaminated source and died. As a result of their tragedy, the early human begins to signal to other humans in their tribe what has befallen them. They shout, dance, or sing their sorrow. They share their story in all its agony in the hopes that it will inspire others to not come under the same fate. Now imagine a tribal leader ten thousand years later, telling a more intricate story, about

how the tribe's survival depends on the journey from a known land to an unknown land, where more food, prosperity, and safety await them. The second story is more abstract, and relies on the testimonies of others that already started to move out of the savannah, across the Bering Strait, and into the rest of the world, but it shares the same function as the story about the water source. Both stories promote the safety, survival, and security of the species.

Stories in this most fundamental sense encompass all artistic productions, and as literary theorist Brian Boyd argues, "we have evolved to engage in art and in storytelling because of the survival advantages they offer our species" (*On the Origins of Stories* 209). Stories can help propel action, ease concern, and even promote outrage; in short, they help *homo sapiens* make meaning of the world. The ability to make meaning through narrative play is what helped humans evolve into the most intelligent animal on the planet. Nancy Easterlin, also a literary theorist, identifies that as human beings evolved from our earlier ancestors into the species that we are today that "the increasing complexity of meaning construction proceeded hand-in-hand with the emergence of higher intelligence" (678). Stories not only helped the species to evolve into the animal we are today, but narratives continue to help explain our existence and how we might live happier, more fulfilled lives.

Take for example the young adult novel *Speak* by Laurie Halse Anderson. In the book, a teenager is sexually assaulted at a party. She spends the rest of the novel deciding who she can speak to, how she can speak to them, and what the results of speaking about her trauma might be. While *Speak* might exceed the earlier stories mentioned in terms of abstract complexity, it is no less useful in helping individuals survive. Readers are given the opportunity to experience vicariously a situation they may or may not have experienced before. They have a model of how to behave, or how not to behave, and they can hopefully take away from their reading a better

understanding of what they or another individual might experience in the face of such overwhelming anxiety and pain. Again, stories help us make sense of our lives. However, understanding how stories function and literary studies seem to be completely different pursuits, and for those on the outside of literary studies looking in, stories, seemingly, don't seem to serve a purpose. Everyday people assume that literature has no concrete value in their lives, and as a result the future of literary studies seems uncertain.

Unfortunately, most people on the outside of literary studies perceive English departments as elite institutions that offer little to individuals or societies or as dated institutions where scholars study books that people don't read. Students conduct research that everyday people can't access, and, on average, the departments fail to promote the digital literacy skills today's readers need to develop. With all of the perceived drawbacks to the teaching of literature in the 21st century, what can literary studies at the high school and university level offer individuals? While some scholars have illustrated that stories are the foundation of higher-order intelligence in human beings and the primary mode of meaning making that humans have, school districts, universities, and even students struggle to understand what literature can do for them and society. The value of the discipline seems difficult to comprehend. What if the study of literature were eradicated from English departments completely? Effort are being made now to make way for more practical, utilitarian English departments that focus solely on writing and rarely address the function of stories in everyday life. What would be the impact of such a shift?

The implications of such an erasure go far beyond the elimination of English departments at the collegiate level. As secondary school teachers have cried out against the standardization of literature classrooms since the passing of the No Child Left Behind Act in 2001, literary studies in high school English departments is being either limited or eliminated in many districts to

make way for test-prep reading courses. Ultimately, such a shift will create a society that does not value or understand the benefits of reading, and more importantly, the benefit of stories to individuals and societies. The threat to literary studies at the collegiate level is certainly not a new phenomenon. As University of New Orleans English professor Nancy Easterlin recently identified, "all of the humanities, and perhaps most particularly the arts-centered disciplines…have to fight for survival" (661). Motivating the attacks on the humanities and on literature departments more specifically is the assumption that literature offers little to no utilitarian purpose. Not surprisingly, the scrutiny of English departments and their limited usefulness directly affects secondary school English classrooms. When stories themselves are not given the same value in the classroom as the skills readers learn, reading scores often dictate content and curriculum at the sacrifice of student engagement. While surveying the development of this problem in American education, author, education activist, and high school English teacher Kelly Gallagher asserts that "schools value the development of test-takers more than they value the development of readers," which strips literature of its meaning and helps to promote a crime he describes as *Readicide*, or the killing of the love to read (194). Education researches Lydia Brauer and Caroline Clark argue that despite the movements to open up the cannon and make literature more accessible, "secondary English suffers from an identity crisis and remains disconnected from a stable curricular domain – a sense of the culturally relevant tradition in which students and teachers are participating" (294). Essentially, the arts, and more specifically literary studies, are under attack because they cannot easily justify their function.

With universities seeking to cut costs and with school districts moving away from teaching literature altogether, the question for both institutions becomes what can students gain from the study of literature and what use does it contribute to our institution or to society? AP

English literature, as a course and as an assessment, is caught in the middle of dramatic upheavals in educational policy and practice. Under examination, the course comes to embody all of the contestations over what curriculum is taught and why, how students should be assessed, and how the course shapes future readers. However, how much of the abstraction surrounding literature comes from merely its signifier? What would happen to the course if the public's understanding of literature could be altered? How might it affect English departments in colleges and high schools, and more broadly, how might it affect the larger population of readers? Before advocating for a new vision of the course, allow me to explain what AP literature is, how it teaches and assesses students, why it developed the philosophical underpinnings it has today, and how it perpetuates an inaccessible idea of Literature with a capital L.

AP English literature aims to provide high school students with a thorough introduction to college-level literary analysis. The course and the exam are administered by the College Board, the same institution that administers the SAT. Essentially, students enter the course as juniors or seniors in high school, they learn the basics of close reading and literary analysis, and they take an assessment at the end of the year that is meant to measure how well prepared they are for college-level literature courses. In the introduction to the College Board's *AP English Literature and Composition Course Description*, the course's architects explain that:

> students devote themselves to the study of literary works written in—or translated into—English. Careful reading and critical analysis of such works of fiction, drama, and poetry, selected locally by responsible educators, provide rich opportunities for students to develop an appreciation of ways literature reflects and comments on a range of experiences, institutions, and social structures.

> Students will examine the choices literary writers make and the techniques they utilize to achieve purposes and generate meanings. (11)

Students spend the year analyzing what the College Board has determined are the six "big ideas" of literature – character, setting, structure, narration, figurative language, and literary argumentation, with a focus on developing a literary thesis (*AP English Literature* 15-16). If students pass the AP exam held in May of each year with a score of three out of five or better, then most US colleges and universities award the student college credit for an English course before entering the university system. While there is also a course in AP English language and composition that focuses on writing, universities often award students with passing credit on the literature exam with credit for a first-year writing course and vice-versa. Whether universities grant students credit for courses and for skills that they may not have taken or acquired reveals an equivalency issue where further research should be conducted, but it is best to recognize that just as any other form of standardized assessment has its shortcomings, and the AP program is not perfect either.

While the merits and demerits of the AP program in general have been widely debated, it should be noted that the conversation concerning the potential shifts in AP English literature are also contentious. While the course, its structure, and its outcomes might seem straightforward, the College Board offers teachers a surprising amount of freedom in terms of course creation. Such freedom leads to a wide variety of curricula, teaching practices, and beliefs in how the discipline should function in the secondary school classroom across the country. Now while diversity is good for students, if there isn't a clear coherent argument being made by all AP English lit classrooms about how they theoretically align their courses, then the future of the

discipline will remain uncertain. Understanding these variations in instruction can help highlight the course's dramatic need for change.

One reason the course varies among curricula and instructional practices from school to school is because teachers are given complete control over what texts they wish to teach and how they wish to teach them. In the 2019 *AP English Literature and Composition Course and Exam Description*, the College Board states that "[i]ndividual teachers are responsible for designing their own curriculum for AP courses, selecting appropriate college-level readings, assignments, and resources" (1). While the College Board advocates giving teachers the freedom to write their own curriculum, that doesn't stop districts, administrations, or parents from limiting the liberty teachers can take in crafting their own syllabi, but as long as the curriculum teachers create aligns with the AP English literature standards and prepares students for the end-of-year AP exam then teachers have the green light to teach what they will. The permission to write curriculum free of oversight is a privilege that many veteran teachers only dream of.

Further, instruction practices, texts, and outcomes vary depending on how qualified the instructor is to teach a college-level literature course or it varies based on teachers' differing philosophies of what the study of English literature should look like. The larger implications surrounding this discrepancy is that when English as a discipline is scrutinized for its perceived purposelessness, teachers that might not be qualified to teach an equivalent course at a university are shaping secondary students' understanding of what the discipline can do. That is not to say that AP teachers, aren't doing great work. They are, and their work in the classroom is invaluable; by unqualified, I mean that a sizable portion of AP English literature teachers don't have the disciplinary background and foundation necessary to teach the discipline at a college-level.

While the College Board recommends that a teacher have a master's degree in their subject area in order to teach an AP course in any discipline, individual schools and districts are free to adhere to or disregard that directive as they wish, which can influence the quality of instruction a student receives and how they might view literature in the future. For instance, a 2012 survey conducted by the College Board found that only 40% of the respondents for teachers of AP English literature have a master's degree in the discipline (Milewski 12). If AP English teachers don't have a master's degree in their field of study, then many might have a master's degree in English education or education more broadly, but some studies suggest that not having a degree in the content area can impede the quality of instruction a teacher can give students. In their research on the connection between an English teacher's effectiveness and their amount of discipline specific training, Rebecca Harrison and Angela Insenga demonstrate the benefits of coupling the course requirements of university English teacher preparation programs to English departments themselves (111). In most universities, English as an academic discipline and English teacher preparation programs are usually in different departments or colleges entirely, creating a disconnect between the work of literary studies and the English teacher preparation programs. As Lydia Brower and Caroline Clark have also found, teachers without a discipline foundational in content or curriculum usually present students with a compilation of borrowed assignments, curriculums, and practices that lead teachers to becoming "jacks of all trades but masters of none" (296).

The problem surrounding discrepancies in AP English teachers' qualifications is compounded by the fact that unlike college-level literature courses where students are doing mostly process-based writing assignments propelled by their own inquiry, the AP English course has a one-size-fits-all assessment for every student despite what texts they studied throughout the

year. As will be explained later, this exam can also further exacerbate the qualification problem, as less-qualified teachers might feel the pinch of teaching to the test more than others. However, for now it will be best to explain the structure of the exam itself before elaborating on how different teachers tackle the task.

In May of each academic year, high school students enrolled in AP English literature are assessed by a flawed exam that fails to align with the academic discipline. The main failing of the exam is that it values product over process and asks students to perform a task that they will most likely never be asked to complete again. The exam is composed of two parts: a one-hour, fifty-five-question, multiple-choice test; and a two-hour free response section where students are prompted to write three literary analysis essays. One essay is meant to respond to a prose fiction passage, another prompts students to analyze a poem, and in the final essay students are instructed to create their own literary argument based on reading they've done in their course throughout the year. While the multiple-choice section might be efficient to grade, and the short essays might demonstrate some skills of literary analysis, the assessment limits authentic student engagement and further, it deviates from how the discipline I taught and assessed in a university setting.

Objective of an individual's views on the merits or demerits of standardized testing, the multiple-choice section of the text discourages the type of reading required of students in a college-level literature course. With five readings and fifty-five questions in one hour, it is incredibly difficult for students to demonstrate their analytical abilities, especially when the questions aren't geared to assessing student's own ideas. Take for example the following multiple-choice question taken from the *AP English Literature and Composition Course and*

Exam Description that students are asked to respond to after reading Marge Piercy's poem "To be of use:"

> 13. In line 5, "that element" refers to both
>
> (A) water and work
>
> (B) love and labor
>
> (C) mud and muck
>
> (D) skill and strength
>
> (E) wind and tides. (146)

In the poem, the speaker illustrates how "[t]he people [they] love the best…/swim off… / to become natives of that element" – that element being the water (Piercy). The multiple-choice questions, while an incredibly efficient way to assess many students at once, fails to assess anything other than comprehension of a passage and the ability to differentiate between literal and metaphoric language. While the question above does require the student to comprehend that the speaker loves people that literally swim into the water and metaphorically jump into their work, it doesn't require them to develop a complex, analytical understanding of the piece. Further, it doesn't ask them the value of the story, to them or to others, nor does it ask them to produce their own questions. When observing an AP English literature class, Mary Metzger commented that in an age when AP teachers have more resources than ever before, "these resources are meaningless if a teacher's central aim is the limited forum of the AP exam rather than the development of student inquiry and the larger understanding such inquiry leads to" (23). One might argue that the ability of a student to comprehend several complex pieces of literature over a short period of time signifies that they would also be able to analyze them independently. One might also argue that students' analytical abilities are assessed on the timed essays that

follow. However, as Jeffrey Markham explains in his criticism of the AP exam's format the multiple-choice questions "assume that students have well-developed analytical skills" but the exam "requires that little be done with those skills" (18). With multiple choice questions, students are encouraged to find the singular right answer, one that is irreducible and concrete, much like the classroom cited in the introduction. Now detractors might point to the three timed-essays as the section of the assessment where real analytic ability should be demonstrated, but even the format of the essays limits students' ability to meaningfully engage with the text they are analyzing, regardless of the framework they approach the text with.

Timed essays do assess a student's ability to compose literary arguments, but they don't assess an individual's ability to think over a period of time, revise, rethink, and edit – skills that are necessary for success in life and in university classrooms. Most college-level literature classes, for instance, require students to compose their own literary arguments through process-based writing. Students are required to either respond to prompts written by an instructor that engage with a broader topic for an extended period of time or they are instructed to compose their own prompts or research questions; on the other hand, AP English literature classes most often assess students' ability to analyze literature through timed writing assessments, most of which take place within forty minutes. Forty minutes is enough time to have lunch or enjoy a pleasant walk. It is hardly enough time to compost a thoughtful, engaging, well thought out piece of literary analysis. Such stressful styles of assessment lead to pedagogical practices that are more concerned with the product that students are producing rather than their learning or thinking. For instance, when Mary Metzger, an English professor from Western Washington University conducted a study of AP English literature classrooms, she concluded that "[t]he more that AP English teachers concern themselves with test preparation, the less likely it is that their

students will arrive in my class prepared to do the work I require of them" (27). The work she requires of them being independent inquiry and thorough analysis, and while it might be easy to fault the high school teachers for being underqualified in discipline understanding or overly concerned with testing, Joseph Jones highlights the simple fact that "most [AP instructors] are judged solely by the performance of their students on the exams" (54).

Most educators will tell you there is nothing wrong with testing, as long as the assessment clearly demonstrates what students have learned. However, the AP literature exam has been deeply criticized for not only failing to assess the skills necessary for a student of English literature, but for failing to take on any deeper meaning than being just another standardized test. For instance, Markham asserts that the AP English literature exam is nothing but "an academic exercise that is ultimately useless to personal growth" (19). This assertion is being further demonstrated by the Covid-19 crisis, where all AP exams are being shortened from their three-hour testing period to a forty-five-minute testing period that students can take remotely. While the crisis has presented what seem to be impossible to overcome challenges to the education system, there is no excuse for limiting an entire year's worth of instruction to a forty-five-minute exam that students can take without a proctor from their phone.

In terms of assessment, it's clear that AP English literature fails to test students in a way that will prepare them for college-level literature. Some critics have even cited that the course's popularity is in part due to the fact that a passing score might mean that the students that passed may never have to take another literature course in college, further perpetuating the perceived uselessness and stuffiness of Literature with a capital L. Underlying the assessment and exacerbating the inadequate measurement of acquired skills, the dated mode of literary analysis that the exam is tied to perpetuates the misconception that literary analysis and studying stories

are vastly different pursuits. But what if we recognized, and then separated ourselves from, New Criticism entirely?

While arguing for revisions to the exam, Jones highlights "that each [AP English Literature] exam is rooted in, and has been criticized for, what is described as a New Critical approach to literature and a 'product' (as opposed to 'process') approach to composition" (53-54). He continues his criticism by asserting that "AP, like a dawdling old dowager, seems quite willing to remain the last bastion of New Criticism …. While the skills, however limited, that the AP English exams measure do indicate the ability to carefully consider aspects of texts…, they are certainly not the only English skills that will be of use to them [in college]" (Jones 54). Jones identifies what other critics already have, but he furthers the argument by citing New Criticism as the foundation of the exam's failings.

For those that haven't been in a history of literature classroom in a few years, New Criticism is an outdated mode of literary analysis popular in the last century that helped to establish the field of Literature with a capital L as an elite preoccupation. While the New Critical mode of analysis has been largely abandoned in most universities, the AP English literature classroom and exam continue to promote that style of investigation and inquiry. But how did the course become so tied to this old-fashioned style of analyzing stories, and what might be done now to incentivize change?

First, we should recognize that AP classrooms should recognize that universities have abandoned New Criticism for good reasons. For instance, Nancy Easterlin elaborates on how the field of literary studies shifted away from New Criticism when she explains,

> As values shifted considerably in the twentieth century, they formed a catalyst—or are perceived to form a catalyst—for the main theoretical movements

> influencing American literary scholarship. Although New Critical methodology was quasi-scientific, introducing a focus on the literary object through the method of close reading, its theoretical expressions encouraged severing the text from life and history, in the process reifying nineteenth-century spiritual values through insistence on the irreducibility of the organically unified work. (661)

When Easterlin describes the "insistence on the irreducibility of the organically unified work" she means that scholars of New Criticism argued that novels, poems, plays, or other forms of art – regardless of the audience, when they were produced, or why they were produced – have a single, irreducible meaning, and that meaning could be revealed through the "quasi-scientific" practice of close reading where a text is analyzed by identifying and comparing its component parts to reveal a single theme (661). As Easterlin observes, this style of reading perpetuates the already founded ideas of a particular group of people, limits the participation of people that might disagree over a text's theme, and establishes the field of literary studies as an inaccessible tower of predominately wealthy, white students who know Homer and Shakespeare, which qualifies them to be the sole judges of literary merit. While many universities have left New Criticism behind for different critical approaches to texts such as Marxism, Feminism, or Reader Response theory, the AP literature exam is still, for better or worse, bound to New Criticism.

The fact that AP English literature is still tied to an elitist mode of literary criticism shouldn't be surprising, as researchers such as Chris Crowe have identified "the most traditional, conservative bastions in literature in America are those that are home to the thousands of high school Advanced Placement English classes throughout the United States" (123). Since AP English lit is tied to an outdated mode of literary analysis, the course takes on the reputation of the stuffy, inaccessible literature classroom that all individuals dread, the type of classroom

where everyone is searching for the same answer and the same justifications. Such a reputation not only perpetuates New Criticism, but it limits authentic student engagement. Worse, the assessment that students take to see if they'll be granted college credit for a literature course doesn't look like an assessment in a college level literature course.

While the style of assessment performed by students on the AP exam in no way mirrors what students are asked to accomplish in college-level classroom, access to the course and the assessment is more open today than ever before, and without surprise, the College Board wants to expand testing and access to the course to as many students as possible. Some researchers such as Elizabeth Fleitz have asserted that such a style of assessment doesn't benefit students educationally, instead it

> benefits the Educational Testing Service (ETS), making it millions of dollars each year. It benefits universities, allowing them to give away the equivalent of scholarships without spending a dime. It benefits parents, allowing their son or daughter to receive free college credit, shortening their time to a diploma. But what about student learning? What kind of skills are learned in a course that prepares students to take a test, and are those skills representative of those taught in a real college course? (2)

As I hope the above commentary has shown, the course, as a whole, does not. This is not the fault of AP English teachers themselves, but the consequence of putting, what Fleitz calls, "Profits Over Process" and putting the study of literature over the study of stories (1).

If the College Board truly wants students to engage with texts that prompt them to engage with "a range of experiences, institutions, and social structures," then students' understanding of literature and its function in society should be broader than its application on a timed exam (*Course Description* 16). While AP English literature teachers across the country are advocating

for ways to reshape the course, there is little agreement over what that course should look like and why. For example, the theories of how AP English literature should change are composed by critics, scholars, and teachers that come from vastly different institutional backgrounds that reflect the immense diversity in terms of student population. Their differences in instruction and curriculum building also manifest in the varied content they decide to deliver to their students.

Curriculum in AP literature is in a state of flux, for the better and for the worse, and that's primarily because the curricula of university English departments have been evolving. In the early 1990s Harold Bloom's *The Western Canon* defined the canon as a collection of texts that should be "preserved" for pleasure and comfort (17). However, in the years and decades to follow, many critics began to question who was in charge of which texts were preferable and what the merits for criteria were, just as critics of New Criticism questioned why only certain individuals had a monopoly over identifying the irreducible meaning of an organically unified work. In accordance with the shifts in the university, AP English literature curriculum has also adapted to the shift away from mostly canonical texts to a broader array of literature. In the *Course Description*, the authors outline that "there is no canon of expected texts" that students have to memorize or recite to pass the exam (49). The revised 2019 *AP English Literature and Composition Course and Exam Description* also omitted the former disclaimer that students should study works deemed to be of literary merit.

Some individual teachers are beginning to advocate that AP lit adopt more recent and relevant theoretical approaches to literature and move away from New Criticism in their classrooms. For example, AP Lit teachers Simao Drew and Brenda G. Bosnic, in their efforts to revitalize AP English literature, have sought connect the traditional canonical texts of AP English's past with a compelling "introduction to gender perceptions and misperceptions" (90).

In their course, feminist theory is meant to help students develop an even more astute ability to observe why, given gendered circumstances and constraints, a character might make the decisions that they do. Both educators examine historically canonical works through the lens of feminist theory, and ask students to analyze them using that theoretical framework. Their goal in framing the class from a feminist framework of understanding is "to make female characters realistic and sympathetic while trying to make their struggles relevant to students' world" (90). While never explicitly stated by the teachers, their goal represent a larger trend in the field to move away from New Criticism and show students that stories can have significant meaning in their lives, especially for women, who have historically been barred from inclusion and participation in the field.

As Markham and Metzger before them, these teachers shift the focus away from the exam to focus more on student-driven inquiry and open-ended discussion. However, in their advocacy for a feminist approach to teaching canonical texts in AP English classrooms, the teachers never mention the exam or how they prepare students for it. Perhaps the underlying assumption is that if teachers are teaching to rigorous levels of engagement and processing, then the exam will take care of itself. Drew and Bosnic note how vital engagement is to building a successful classroom culture in the AP English literature classroom, a belief highlighted by other teachers of the course. For example, AP English Teacher Chris Crowe believes that an even wider opening of the curriculum and content away from the course's "traditional" routes is vital to helping students build investment in a course that is usually seen as confusing or elitist (123). In asking students to analyze children's books, or young adult novels, he expresses that any text, regardless of merit or status, is sufficient for analytical study.

While Crowe advocates for less traditional texts, others promote continuing to read more traditional works. For instance, one AP literature teacher, John Rauh, claims that AP English students especially those classified as gifted would benefit from a curriculum "designed… to capitaliz[e] on the principles of structuralism" (191). In his proposed course design, Rauh's students study four distinct periods of literary history across four quarters: "Ancient to Medieval Literature: *Metaphorical Understanding*" (192); "Renaissance Literature: *Metonymic Understanding*" (193); "Romantic Literature: *Synecdochic Understanding*" (194); and "Modern Literature: *Ironic Understanding*" (194). Under Rauh's structural and historical approach to AP English literature, students would read *Sir Gawain and the Green Knight* and *The Canterbury Tales,* Shakespeare and Swift, and close out the year with close readings of Nietzsche and T.S. Elliot. Rauh attests that his course design:

> more than adequately teaches students the content skills they need to be successful on the AP Literature test; however, the course simultaneously seeks to give them a philosophical framework within which they can use those skills to find personal relevance in education as it potentially connects them with the universal, providing sustainable ideas to guide them through life. (195)

Few practitioners would disagree with the assertion that many of them were brought into the field by their faith in literature's ability to move them and others, but how can teachers make their faith more accessible?

Drew, Bosnic, Crowe and Rauh all exemplify the belief that literature is good for us, but is literature's best defense still the same as the one adults use when they want their children to eat vegetables? As literary historian W.B. Carnochan explains: "By now we may claim to have renounced preaching in the classroom, but we have by no means renounced the belief, at least

implicit, that English is good for you" (1960). Other champions of the literature and its merits include longtime critic, teacher, and reading advocate Mark Edmundson who urges that when thinking about what to teach and why teachers should "select the books that are full of vital options. Let [teachers] choose the works that they themselves have been transformed by and that they think, now, can have the greatest effect on students" (122). However, the other major academic disciplines don't have to perpetually defend the existence of their departments by claiming that the work they do is good for students. Chemistry and finance do not need to boast of their love of the subjects to survive. Their results are tangible. Literary critics and scholars, are in no short supply when it comes to defenses of literature, however earnest they might be. What if we could come to a consensus on the value stories bring to our lives? What if we presented a unified front to advocating for how stories can strengthen societies? What if we pushed the elite modes of literary analysis to the side and put stories back in the center of English classrooms?

II. The Story-Centered AP Classroom

What are most people's favorite memories of elementary school? I contend that a sizable portion of people might say one of two things – either play time or story time. It should not be a surprise, but many might be shocked to learn that story time is also a form of play. When children hear stories, they are able to navigate in their imaginations scenes that they might not have otherwise had the opportunity to experience. They can visit different planets with the narrator of *The Little Prince* or they can make potions in the basement of Hogwarts with Harry and his friends. They can play with scenarios that in real life might be dangerous or scary but that in stories are safe and contained. Reading, otherwise known as playing with stories, is a

natural human pleasure, a pleasure that humans as a species have adapted evolutionarily. However, many of the nonreading public cited in the introduction might not be able to recall their love of story time and would be further baffled to learn that reading stories can be pleasurable. Their experiences and memories of studying stories might be confined to the first classroom cited in the introduction where analyzing "literature" is the focus. I content that most students don't develop an intense dislike of literature until they reach middle school and high school, where the study of literature circumvents the value of stories. The public's fear of literature is understandable, and sadly, the current instructional practices and framing strategies for the discipline are promoting students to flee from the study in order to survive the tortures of the literature classroom. However, what if we shifted our focus away from literature, to focus more on stories? What would the implications for all literature classrooms be?

Stories are fun; literature is abstract. Stories are reservoirs of pleasure; literature is tiring, if not altogether boring and incomprehensible. But what is really the difference between the two? Ultimately, nothing separates them besides perception. New Criticism's hold on the AP English literature course extends past its grip on the exam. Its pervasiveness threatens the value students place on storytelling as a whole, and because AP literature is pinnacle of literary instruction in high school, it affects how lower grades are introduced to literature and informs discipline alignment in secondary schools. Now work done by the cited AP researchers and teachers to promote the purposefulness of the course is invaluable, but their attempts to reinvent the course still reinforce a literature vs. story binary. While theory is valuable to critical analysis, what is its place in the classroom? Cursory understandings of theoretical frameworks can forge confusing misconceptions for students that can further alienate students from the subject, and confuse what the discipline is meant to accomplish. Students should be shown how stories already affect their

everyday lives, and how their stories can affect others. Rather than through "philosophical" or "theoretical" frameworks to understand literature, teachers and students can benefit from a biocultural approach to storytelling. Since biological approaches to storytelling are an emerging field with a plurality of names to discuss this framework of understanding, I'll stick to the term I created earlier – a story-centered approach. However, scholars employ different terms depending on their specific discipline. Before I outline the scholarly foundations for this vision of AP English literature, I would like to sum up what the story-centered approach means in layman's terms.

Essentially, a story-centered classroom approaches storytelling and critical analysis from an evolutionary point-of-view., which means encouraging students to first recognize that stories are an invaluable part of human nature, an adaptation that we've developed to help the species live more secure, safe, meaningful lives. Further, they promote the idea that all stories have value, and all stories are potential subjects for analysis – not just leather-bound classics. My hope for such a course is not merely to introduce students to another theory for their toolkit. Instead, I want AP English literature through this reimagining to transform secondary school literature classrooms by giving students a scientifically founded understanding for the function of stories in our everyday lives. Through this renewed understanding of stories, we can eliminate the biases against literature and reveal to the students both a serious and an accessible purpose to our study.

Brian Boyd, an authority in story-centered approaches to literature, uses the broad term "evocriticism" to refer to the movement that encourages critics towards analysis from an evolutionary point-of-view. He uses this term because "it allows room for others interested in evolutionary approaches to the arts," such as anthropologists or film critics to enter into the conversation surrounding what types of cultural productions human beings create by

evolutionary artistic impulse ("For Evocriticism" 394). Other critics and voices in the evocritical movement, such as Nancy Easterlin, use the terms cognitive, or biocultural approaches to literature. There is even a Wikipedia page that lists out other various literary Darwinists (a term synonymous with evocriticsm, but one Boyd avoids using) writing and publishing today and the different terms they utilize when describing evolutionary analysis. When first presented with the plurality of jargon-like terms, people can be confused by semantics, and confusion distorts the purposefulness of the framework, ultimately leading prospective teachers and researchers to mistake evocriticism as just another passing fad in the merry-go-round of academic critical theory. They might think that yesterday it was Marxism and Feminism, today it is evocriticism, and then what will it be tomorrow? They might ask themselves, what benefit could this framework of understanding have for students?

To better explain what exactly evocritics do, I present the most coherent and concise known scholarly definition. In Boyd's defense of the pursuit, "For Evocriticsm: Minds Shaped and Reshaped," he explains that "[e]vocritics show how the fact that human minds owe their structure to evolutionary pressures makes a difference to literature—to features of human minds and behaviors that literature deploys, represents, appeals to, engages, and modifies" (294). Evocritics recognize and acknowledge the value of Darwin's theory of evolution by natural selection to humans' physical and cognitive development. Coinciding with that recognition is the argument that because human beings developed the adaption to tell stories, they serve a particular evolutionary function – in other words they help us survive. Stories can help us safely navigate situations that might confound or threaten our safety if we were to be directly involved in them; stories help us make meaning out of situations that can help us develop ethically, or teach us how to make decisions in certain situations. Just as the early human expressed their

sorrow to the tribe and demonstrated the danger of a water source, stories today, such as *Speak*, can help young people better understand how to survive the traumas of sexual assault and victim blaming. Simply, narrative "modifies" the way we approach situations, relationships, and events (Boyd, "Arts, Humanities, Sciences, Uses" 577).

Definitions aside, many AP English teachers might be convinced that this theory is different from the rest, but the more difficult question is what do evocritics even do, and how can we make this pursuit accessible to students who will be doing the work later? Teachers interested in a story-centered approach to literature should understand two major tenants of the field before they promote this vision in their own classrooms. First, story-centered approaches advocate that all stories have value. Whether it's a 19th-century novel or a comic book, each story is the evolutionary biproduct of human creativity. Stories help us survive and make sense of the world. The same is true for all forms of art. For instance, Easterlin advocates for art's and, more specifically, story's function in our society by asserting that the "great advantage of imaginative literature is that [it] invites our powers of meaning construction in a safe domain that allows our interpretive powers to range more freely" (679). As elementary school students sitting on the reading rug in schools every day, taking part in art that asks us to create imaginative spaces gives us the freedom to play and experiment in a safe environment. Their engagement with picture books is no less a literary pursuit than the close-reading of *Great Expectations*. Brian Boyd further contends that "the arts and humanities in general face the complexities of being human, in critical and creative ways that recognize those complexities and yet hold out hope—like the sciences, but not only by way of science—of enriching our purposes" ("Arts Humanities, Sciences, Uses" 591). Being human is difficult, as both teachers and students can recognize. Art approaches that difficulty by acknowledging it and creating imaginative spaces where people can

creatively explore potential responses and solutions. Regardless of the text being explored, all art, and all stories, are subjects for analysis in the story-centered course.

Second, biocultural literary critics acknowledge that as people engage with fiction, they are able to experience and navigate safely the experiences of other people, and might think themselves how they would act in a certain situation given certain circumstances, leading to a more enriched, happy life. In other words, stories let humans play. Boyd explains how "[p]lay allows creatures to try out essential behaviors, like fleeing, fighting, or chasing, in situations where they are not currently needed" ("Arts, Humanities, Sciences, Uses" 577). Whether people are reading *Jane Eyre* or watching *The Wire*, they are exploring, in a safe, fictional environment the problems humans encounter and the solutions or barriers to fulfillment they experience. What is the difference between Jane navigating her romantic desire for Mr. Rochester, and Bodie Broadus navigating the decisions to sell crack in his neighborhood? Certainly, vastly different physical environments, time periods, racial and class distinctions and accessibility. However, each portrays for its audience, what it is like for a certain person to survive in a given environment.

As this juxtaposition suggests, in a story-centered AP English literature class, stories can take more forms than merely novels, plays, and poems. For instance, in Boyd's *On the Origins of Stories,* a foundational text in the biocultural literary movement, Boyd first demonstrates how the approach can be applied to a classic, canonical text, one that a student or parent would expect to see in an AP English classroom, such as Homer's *The Odyssey,* before illustrating how the same approach can be applied to a text that might not be normally described as a literary text, such as Dr. Seuss's *Horton Hears a Who*. Despite the generic and thematic deviations of these vastly different texts, Boyd demonstrates how a story-centered – or biocultural – approach to literature

can be applied to almost any story, highlighting the simple fact that all stories have value. With such a framework, students in a story-centered AP English literature classroom can view any text they engage with as a story of importance.

The story-centered approach would not only benefit the AP English literature class. Hopefully all high school English departments could be made more meaningful, engaging places through purposeful alignment with the outlined course. As AP English is currently structured, students across the country are being introduced to vastly different variations of literary analysis – some styles of study more beneficial to the learner and to society than others, and as I hope I've demonstrated, these discrepancies not only obscure the study of English for high school students that otherwise might have enjoyed it in college, but the discrepancies that proliferate in examinations could result in what researcher Kristine Hansen describes as "encouraging colleges to establish policies that grant credit for high school writing so students can spend less time writing in college" (491).

I want to tell another story: Khan academy, one of the world's leading innovators of self-directed, online learning geared towards primary and secondary-school students with over seventy courses, and fourteen AP courses, doesn't have a course in AP English literature. Innovation has just begun on an early and middle grade English Language Arts course with a product still in Beta trial, but the site has been in operation for more than a decade helping primary, middle, and high school students review math, science, and history skills. In all that time, while courses and lessons were created for virtually every other subject, including SAT reading prep, literature was never mentioned. Sadly, this story is reminiscent of others told by teachers such as Kelly Gallagher, which demonstrate how the differentiation between literature and stories is killing the appreciation of reading among adolescents.

With a story-centered approach, students would spend the first several weeks being taught that fiction is a foundation for the human experience. In the first and second weeks of school, they would investigate several excerpts and articles written by Harari, Boyd, Easterlin, and others working in the field to give students the tangible understanding that stories scientifically matter. Some might be wary of encouraging students to read literary theory in high school. First, if a student is taking an AP English literature course, then they should ideally be engaging with the same level of readings that students in a 2000-level college level literature survey should be engaging in. This might be one or two scholarly journal articles a semester, just enough to give students a grasp of the terminology and its foundations, but not enough to overload them and confuse them. Realistically, students can be taught the story-centered approach without the theoretical foundations by being told the simple stories that took place in the introduction – stories about humans learning to communicate to survive, and how that communication has developed into more complex forms of narrative such as poetry, novels, plays, TV, films, and music. Whether students begin the year with more complex readings that ground the story-centered approach or whether they are given an easy-to-understand frame for the course is ultimately the decision of the teacher, but either way students should learn the basic evolutionary tenants of story-telling and begin applying it to texts of their own choice to promote student inquiry and engagement.

Choice in text selection is paramount to the story-centered classroom. In the second imagined classroom from the introduction, students enter class on research days and tackle different tasks depending on the student and their individual readings. In the traditional AP English literature classroom, all students are primarily engaging with the same text for an extended period of time, regardless of an individual student's ability or interest. However, in the

story-center AP English classroom, students are prompted to choose their own stories for analysis with the guidance of a knowledgeable instructor. For two to three days a week in a traditional five-day school structure, AP English students would read, annotate, and ultimately form their own research questions concerning texts that interest them. Instead of providing twenty students with identical copies of *Crime and Punishment*, twenty students have chosen twenty different novels, poems, or plays that they wish to analyze. Instead of leading a discussion of a single text, teachers are given the freedom to teach specific skills that can be applied to a variety of texts. The purpose of such a course structure is to give students power over the stories that they read, and the stories they choose to seek out. Teachers should advocate that students push themselves to read stories that they might not have normally explored, or that might be intellectually challenging in order to be well prepared for the AP English literature exam, but not at the sacrifice of engagement and investment.

In terms of assignments that students are completing, shouldn't that depend on the student and the goals they've set for their reading? In the proposed course, students spend the first few weeks after the evolutionary introduction choosing a novel, author, or topic to study, and developing a research question with the instructor. Important questions can be asked about any text, but let us take the poem from the first section of the thesis that was included in the AP exam description and alter the questions to reveal what a story-centered approach might ask: How does the speaker in this poem react as a result of their observations? What do their reactions reveal about their proximity to the situation, their point-of-view, or their cultural values? How does identifying these reactions change our understanding of the poem's theme and the speaker? What message did this send to audiences when it was written, what message does it send today, and what might this story offer readers in the future? Answering each of the questions will take a

thorough analysis of the poem and a survey of what others have said about the poem before. While reading their selected texts, students should also begin compiling an annotated bibliography of what other scholars have said about their text in the past to help students ground their arguments. Again, the size of a student's bibliography and depth of research depends on the text at hand and the abilities of the students, but teachers should consider that students in their AP English literature classrooms are conducting research and incorporating others' thoughts into their own work at a level comparable to a 2000-level literature course.

When students do come together as a whole group, ideally only one or two days a week, their discussions of a work should be prompted by their own inquiries and questions rather than by the prompts of a standardized assessment. For whole class discussions, teachers should choose stories (whether they be in the genres of poetry, drama, or prose fiction) that students can meaningfully connect with, but that also help prepare them for the AP literature exam.

In the proposed course, the exam and texts of "literary merit" are not the focus. However, what if we pushed focus away from the exam towards a more holistic understanding of human achievement? What if students were asked to spend the year analyzing texts of their own choice, creating their own research questions, and writing arguments that have meaning to them instead of responding to last year's AP prompt? What if we advocated that what happens in our writing and in our discussion with others is more paramount to our personal development than the results of a standardized assessment?

I have written the attached syllabus for this proposed course with students in mind. They, like stories, should be the center of teachers' attention. However, teachers should feel free to alter the assignments, structure, and guidance of text selection to best meet the needs of their respective student populations. A story-centered approach is in no way meant to be a one-size-

fits-all style of instruction, unlike the AP exam, but the course should start with a single question and continue on from there: what value do stories bring to human life, and how might they teach us to live better?

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Appendix: The Story-Centered Syllabus

AP English Literature

"The powerful play goes on, and you *may* play a part." – *Walt Whitman*

Course Description:

What do you think of when someone says literature? You might think of old dusty shelves, or you might think of curling-up by the fireside. Others might think of George Lucas and Star Wars, while others might think of Kendrick Lamar and his Pulitzer-Prize-winning album, *Damn*. Despite the wide variety of associations we develop when we think of literature with a capital L, stories have a profound effect on what we believe and how we behave as a species, regardless of their origin or audience.

In this course, you will be presented with some of the most exciting and recent research in the field of literary studies. We will analyze storytelling through the understanding of human evolution, and we will come to understand that narratives, like other forms of art, are evolutionary adaptations that are essential to our survival as a species. Some literary critics call this approach a biocultural approach, but for our purposes we can call it putting stories at the center of the classroom. We will ask questions about characters, the communities they represent, the problems they encounter, the epiphanies they either have or avoid in order to better understand how human beings can enrich their lives through engagement with literary art.

This AP course will be different from other AP courses you've taken in the past. The focus of the course will not be on the AP English exam at the end of the year, and as a result we will do little in-class timed writing. Instead, the focus will be on your own inquiry and depth of understanding on a certain text or body of literary work. Our philosophy in this course is that through the drafting and portfolio process, the timed essays will learn to write themselves. We

will have three practice examinations throughout the year, one in the Fall and two in the Spring, to better help you prepare for the exam. However, the focus in this course should be on the content, and the skills necessary for success in college, not just a three-hour exam.

Course Objectives:

- Students will be able to explain the evolutionary significance of art, and more specifically stories, to human being.
- Students will be able to explain the evolutionary benefits reading stories can have on individuals.
- Students will survey a wide variety of literature in the English language to determine the various threats to survival, barriers to participation in social activity, and constraints on meaningful lives that characters experience.
- Students will be able to analyze the message a text is sending about the above issues through an examination of literature's component parts, namely: character, narration, setting, figurative language, and style.
- Students will be able to present complex literary arguments that are driven by their own engagement and inquiry.

Assignment Weight

- Two Annotated Bibliographies, 20% (10% Each)
- Two Longer Essays, 30% (15% Each)
- Weekly Thoughts, Questions, and Epiphanies or TQE's, 20%
- Weekly Explications 30%

Assignments

1. Annotated Bibliographies: As you being this course, you will find that I am interested in what you think, not what others think. However, in order for an individual to develop their own complex ideas, and to assert an argument or position on a topic, it is often necessary to interact with the diverse, varied ideas that may or (more ideally) may not align with your own. **Thinking, and more importantly rethinking, is the key to success in this course**. Accordingly, reading, summarizing, and hopefully synthesizing the work of researchers and scholars is necessary to help an individual develop a nuanced and complex argument.

   The purpose of an annotated bibliography, is to compile a comprehensive list of sources that you have read, summarized, and begun to evaluate. Entries for annotated bibliographies for a research article should be anywhere from **250-300 words**, and they should **attempt to summarize the author's main claims and how they establish those claims**. Further, in the final sentences of your entry, you should attempt to engage with the scholar or argument directly by asking and navigating a few of the following questions: What do I think of the scholar's argument? if there a sound line of reasoning; are their points compelling; does their work make you rethink an idea, topic, or perhaps the work of another scholar. In these sections, you are not striving for perfection. Instead you are merely trying to comprehend, compile, and begin thinking about your own research topic.

   A due date for annotated bibliographies will be determined by the student and instructor upon completion of their research conference.

2. Longer Essays: At the end of each semester, students will submit a research essay, roughly 8-12 pages, that presents an original argument on the biocultural significance of a text. Students should use the sources the from their annotated bibliography to help place the cultural and historical significance of a text and to demonstrate an understating of the conversation surrounding a text so that they can build on that understanding themselves. Students will have writing conferences in the beginning of each semester to determine their research topics, possible texts for analysis, and sources available on the connection between each. Once students have completed their conferences, they will spend the rest of the semester reading, researching, and participating in that drafting and revision process. Eventually students will develop two thorough pieces of original literary analysis for their end-of-year portfolio. (We develop this portfolio in the hopes that the AP literature exam will move away from the standardized assessment to a more holistic approach.)
3. Weekly Thoughts, Questions, or Epiphanies (TQE's): Analysis and discussion in this course is driven by students' thoughts, not the teachers. Accordingly, every Friday, we will discuss a text as a whole class. Students are asked to bring in three thoughts, questions, or epiphanies they had about the text in the course of their reading. Since the discussion should be driven by your own thoughts, the structure of this assignment is flexible, but students should plan to come in with two short pieces of writing, between 75-100 words each that outlines their thinking for a particular piece of literature: What did this make you think of, and why? What stood out to you, and why? What assertions can you make about this text upon a first read, how? What knowledge from other texts help you inform your understanding of this text and how? Thinking about these

questions before you arrive in class lends us the opportunity for more meaningful discussion. Students will pass in a copy at the beginning of class each Friday before discussion begins. While TQE's only comprise 20% of your overall grade, not coming prepared each week can leave both you and your grade at a disadvantage. Read the text and come prepared.

4. Weekly Explications: To prepare for the AP exam, and to help you deeply analyze your independent reading as you begin to research your topic, I will ask you to write a weekly 500-word explication of a passage from your independent text. These explications should be in response to a small section of a literary text – no fewer than a few sentences, and no longer than a paragraph or two. In an explication, you should identify connotations associated with certain pieces of language, characters, settings, points-of-view, or conflicts. Analyze those connotations to develop a short argument about the function of this smaller section of literature. How does it help develop the whole? What is its significance? Why does this section merit analysis? If you can't answer these questions about a particular passage, then the section might not be the best for an explication. NOTE: Quotes from study guide websites such as Spark Notes or Shmoop will not be graded. Be original, and think for yourself. These assignments are due at the beginning of class on Monday.

Vita

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