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TEACHING JUSTICE THROUGH LITERATURE: HOW HIGHER EDUCATION INFORMS ETHICS AND IDENTITY

a thesis submitted to
Regis College
The Honors Program
in partial fulfillment of the requirements
for Graduation with Honors

by

Kami Mittlestadt

APPROVAL PAGE

Thesis Written by

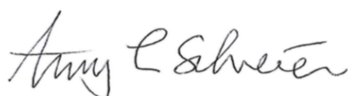
Kami Mittlestadt

Approved by

_____________________________ Thesis Advisor

_____________________________ Thesis Reader

Accepted by



_____________________ Director, Regis College Honors Program

TABLE OF CONTENTS

ACKNOWLEDGEMENTS	iv
ABSTRACT	v
INTRODUCTION: DISCOVERING LITERARY ETHICS	1
CHAPTER I: RESEARCH – PEDAGOGY AND TEXTS TO TEACH	9
CHAPTER II: COUNTERARGUMENTS IN THEORY AND PRACTICE	16
CHAPTER III: COURSE SYLLABUS	20
CHAPTER IV: EXPLANATION OF SYLLABUS – TEXTS AND ASSIGNMENTS	26
CONCLUSION: WHY THIS MATTERS	39
BIBLIOGRAPHY	42

Acknowledgments

I have so many thanks to give for the incredible support I’ve received on this project. My family for listening to me rant and talk through my process, especially my Mom who helped proofread every random document I sent her. Thanks to all of my friends in the English, Peace and Justice, and honors departments for their continued advice, help with phrasing, and in my endless research efforts. I couldn’t have succeeded without my team of advisors and readers, Dr. Narcisi, Dr. Partridge, and Dr. Le, and their continued advice on my draft and responses to the many emails I sent with random questions. Thank you also to my sweet boyfriend who celebrated every success with me, listened to me ramble, and kept me accountable in my work. To everyone who sent me sources, helped me meet deadlines, or even expressed support, thank you so much!

Name: Kami Mittlestadt Major: English and Peace & Justice Studies

TEACHING JUSTICE THROUGH LITERATURE:
HOW HIGHER EDUCATION INFORMS ETHICS AND IDENTITY

Advisor's Name: Dr. Kate Partridge
Reader's Name: Dr. Khahn Le

This thesis argues that literature is a valuable tool in examining issues of justice, and teaching ethics through literature is a way to build critical thinking skills and awareness of the world. In this thesis, I examine research and teaching methods that have already been studied and implemented in the teaching of ethics and justice in companionship with literature, and use these resources to propose my own syllabus for a community college class on Ethics in Reading. The syllabus is broken into 7 units: an overview of justice in literature, five specific justice issues (race, feminism, queer studies, eco-criticism, and poverty), and a final unit for the application of the concepts in a holistic way that reach beyond the class.

There is a balance between how justice issues can be taught through literature, and how literature can be read in an ethical way. Everyone deserves access to a good education, and education of any kind holds inherent value. Narrative and stories are central to how we construct everything about ourselves that shapes how we influence and perceive the outside world, including our conception of justice. Teaching certain stories in certain ways allow for the teaching of justice, increased awareness of the world, and the creation of a self that wants to improve the world.

Introduction: Discovering Literary Ethics

Many things I've encountered in my academic career have seemed counter-intuitive to me. I enjoy inter-disciplinary studies that I can analyze in their contrast and further study to understand how they work together. The nature of consuming content and media, and what we think is worthy of study and why, has been a specific area of interest. This is especially true regarding literature: what I'm reading, why, and the ethical implications behind reading it. I am a double major in English and Peace and Justice Studies at Regis University, and as such have been exposed to many different kinds of readings and content around pre-established ideas and what is "proper" surrounding the literary canon. In addition, I have analyzed ideas around breaking boundaries and ethical considerations of not only what we study, but what we don't, and why. Who is being included in the narrative that perhaps is outdated or overdone? Whose voices are being left out? Is it possible to create a literary canon that truly speaks to all voices and is filled with authors who "deserve" to be there? How can we judge that?

The field of English, especially around high school and lower college levels, is taught following a pre-determined curriculum of what is considered great literature of the past – usually within a tight literary canon with limited diversity in the authors, content, and ideas. It is pretty rare to find a high school student who has not read at least one of the following: *Fahrenheit 451*, *1984*, *The Great Gatsby*, *To Kill a Mockingbird*, or *Macbeth.* All of these works are well-written classics, with themes around the functions of power and justice, and provide excellent opportunities for building close-reading skills. All of their authors are also white, American or English, and nearly all men.

While the literary canon is much debated, it is very present in the field, and sets a precedent for much of what is learned and much of what students are exposed to in their early

academic career. In my experience, there is not much if any branching out of the canon until college level, if not upperclassmen college level. This curates a limited view of reading and literature, and the world that it both shapes and is shaped by. Having a knowledge of both the canon and that which lies outside of it is necessary to inform a holistic awareness of literature. When considering the literary canon, there are benefits, but there is also room to question what is left out of it, and why the authors who make it up have been deemed important enough to be there. Many of the authors who were influential in creating literary tradition as we know it today, especially when focusing on a subset such as American literature, were not exactly people to be looked up to in their personal lives.

The ability to publish has historically been restricted to specific groups – typically white men – which inherently imposes some limits on the available literature of a time and continues to create roadblocks for minority authors today. In an article from Literary Hub called "Women in Publishing 100 Years Ago: A Historical VIDA Count – Representation and Gender (Im)Balance in 1916" by Rachel McCarthy James in 2016, James reports on her extensive research and a "look at the coverage that the *New York Times Book Review* (then called *The Review of Books*) gave to male and female authors, respectively, 100 years ago in 1916." She found that 1,392 books were reviewed in 1916, with only 304 by women, and only 7 by writers of color. However, there were no books by a black writer or woman of color. These are only reviews of books and do not reflect what was actually being published, but demonstrates what was considered valuable enough to review in the public eye.

In December 2020, the *New York Times* published an article titled "Just How White Is the Book Industry?" looking at how the Black Lives Matter protests from the summer caused an increase of books written by people of color to rise on best-seller lists, and discussing the overall

disparity in the publishing of books by white authors and authors of color. They conducted a study to measure the difference in these numbers over time and discovered that “Author diversity at major publishing houses has increased in recent years, but white writers still dominate. Non-Hispanic white people account for 60 percent of the U.S. population; in 2018, they wrote 89 percent of the books in our sample” (NYTimes). The statistics from this study and the previous article on book reviews from 1916 show an extreme difference in how many works by women and authors of color versus how many by white men are being published and reviewed. These numbers are from the 20th and 21st centuries, and don’t account for the progress made from previous centuries or representation for other groups such as the queer or disabled communities. The way literature is taught often portrays these limited samples as the complete representation of the vast world of literature, which is far from accurate.

Within my Peace and Justice Studies classes, I’ve been taught to question everything I learn, where it comes from, and how accurately and ethically it portrays the lesson it is trying to teach. The fields of justice studies and English create an intersection that allows for several different perspectives on a topic, and many ways to question and apply their lessons. This intersection between my majors has been one of my favorite places to be during my time at Regis. Peace and Justice Studies is an inherently interdisciplinary field, and I would argue that the study of literature can be as interdisciplinary as it’s allowed to be, depending on the theories applied.

While the state of mind and worldview differ between my academic disciplines, I tend to combine their ways of thinking – especially regarding how to solve or respond to a problem. If a classic work of literature has an author that can be dubbed “problematic” or unethical in some way, there are a number of realms in my life telling me how to respond to this work, and many

have different answers. My English degree would provide me with several different theories through which to study the work, such as New Criticism which would argue that the author doesn't matter relative to the truth of the work, or New Historicism which would tell me to read the work in the historical context of when it was written to get a different perspective (Barry). My Peace and Justice degree would ask for the context and message of the work, look at the ethical implications of both reading and not reading the work, what information should be known before reading it, how to teach it, etc. While there are some exceptions, both of these disciplines tend to give multiple perspectives and allow for a grey area reading, not just black and white interpretations – there is not always one right answer, but that's the beauty of the study and analysis.

However, the other realm where much of my time is occupied is on the internet, which runs on clear-cut interpretations of problems and the arguments between them. Cancel culture is a term thrown around often and is alive and well on social media. The internet's answer to how to respond to a work with a problematic author would be to "cancel" the author – and therefore all works they've written, usually resulting in a boycott of their work and their losing followers on social media. This can get complicated however, in situations such as with J. K. Rowling, whose works have left a notable and long-lasting impact on our culture, but who has been "cancelled" as an author due to her anti-transgender stances. Cancel culture can often also be taken too far, with works that are considered classic being "cancelled" for language or the teaching of "inappropriate" topics such as portrayals of race and gender outside of white heteronormative ideals.

This seemingly clear-cut stance on whether or not to approve of something also often doesn't account for the context behind some of these works, or even the need for them regarding

the importance of including representation of different races, genders, and religions in academia. One example of this is *Huckleberry Finn* by Mark Twain, a prized American classic. In 2011, a publishing company in Alabama released an edited edition of the book replacing the n-word with "slave." The purpose of the edited version was to appeal to schools that had banned the book due to the word but allowed for the content, and the publishing company completely sold out of their first set of edited editions published (cbsnews). This brought up much controversy around whether the censorship changes the impact of the language on the story and defeats the purpose of using the exact language Twain chose: to get the reader's attention.

The editing of the book seems to create a compromise between lessening the discomfort experienced when reading the book enough to promote the teaching of it while not losing the book as a whole. However, due to many book bans surrounding content including the subject of race, even the edited version of Huckleberry Finn faces backlash in classrooms. It is a story of a young white boy who has to unlearn racism. Therefore, if the struggle and language involved in the character's development are removed, then so is the overall message of the work: the need to unlearn racism even if it is what we are taught. However, the debate in education continues to be prevalent – whether to teach the work as is, teach the censored version, or not teach it at all. Each have points for deliberation in which there is perhaps no easy correct answer – but may depend on who you ask.

An extreme level of "cancelling" often leads to a call for protest or removal of the work, such as advocating to not spend money on Harry Potter merchandise to the benefit of Rowling, or schools no longer teaching Huckleberry Finn due to its use of the n-slur. However, this brings up more questions regarding the individual consumption of or engagement with texts and their related goods rather than an institutional level – whether or not to spend money on something

that will profit Rowling is an individual decision, but it does not change the fact that Harry Potter merchandise is sold virtually everywhere. In addition, if the cancelling of an artist or their work were to have a larger effect on widespread consumption, considering the removal of the work could be a problem for several reasons. For one, if all problematic media and art were to be removed from the planet, we would lose entire traditions, and much of what is foundational to that which we consider non-problematic. We would also lose a history that we need to learn from and would be removing all basis by which to judge the progress we have made.

In addition, there are inconsistencies within what is dubbed problematic and what isn't, as certain things are normalized in some cultures and condemned in others, and even the meaning of words changes over time. Many terms that were previously common in everyday speech have been deemed slurs in recent history, and words such as queer have been reclaimed from their previous negative connotation to a point of pride for their community. Additionally, not everyone will agree on what is problematic or not, and the line between "woke" and "too sensitive" is an ever-present point of contention. These are some of the factors that make the cancelling of works increasingly complicated, as well as the action that may or may not be taken in response to the cancellation. K-12 schools and public libraries may experience book banning, but larger bookstores such as Barnes & Noble and Amazon will continue to profit from selling books of any kind.

The opposite extreme to cancel culture would be willful ignorance in the face of something problematic, which creates a different set of issues. This happens occasionally in academia, where students are tasked with reading a book and regurgitating the information with incomplete knowledge of an author or their work. *Huckleberry Finn* was required reading in

many schools for decades before being removed due to the language used, and there are many works by influential white authors heavily informed by privilege that is not acknowledged.

Finding the balance between these two extremes is what led me to the topic for this thesis: how justice issues can be taught through literature, and how literature can be read in an ethical way. My experience with my English degree, my Peace and Justice Studies degree, and the time spent in my world online have all shaped my desire to find a place of study combining all my areas of interest. In addition, I have a desire to teach at a college level when I've finished my schooling, and there is a notable gap in research on this specific topic that I'd love to fill with a class of my own. I spent several of my high school years attending community college classes, and have gained a passion for the fact that everyone deserves access to a good education, and that education of any kind holds inherent value.

My time at community college provided me with a space to explore things I normally wouldn't have and find an interest in things that I wouldn't have otherwise, such as Dance History, Celtic Literature, and Comparative Religious Studies. My community college professors were all extremely valuable in helping me broaden my basic knowledge of the world and the topics that interested me such as literature, philosophy, and sociology, and I have those professors to thank for the path I've continued on while at Regis. I also want to provide a space for future students like myself trying to expand their world and learn about something that perhaps wouldn't be taught in a traditional core curriculum.

Literature is a valuable tool in examining issues of justice, and teaching ethics through literature is one way to build critical thinking skills and awareness of the world. This is the foundation for the topic of this thesis, in addition to my desire to someday teach at a college level. In this thesis, I look at research and teaching methods that have already been studied and

implemented in the teaching of ethics and justice in companionship with literature. In the process of conducting my research and writing this thesis I have been especially informed and inspired by bell hooks, specifically her collection of essays *Teaching to Transgress: Education as the Practice of Freedom*, published in 1994, though her arguments still hold true. In her introduction she writes: “I celebrate teaching that enables transgressions – a movement against and beyond boundaries. It is that movement which makes education the practice of freedom” (12). This claim is one I fully stand by: education should enable positive action and create community, and teachers of every level have a part to play in making this vision a reality.

In addition to my research and inspired by my future goal of being a professor, I have written my own syllabus for a community college class on Ethics in Reading. The goal of this class is to teach various ways to be able to use literature to look at real-world issues using reading to see the world through an ethical lens, as well as informing personal worldview and identity. I have broken down the syllabus into seven sections: an introduction to ethics and an overview of justice in literature, five specific categories within which to explore justice through the readings, and a final unit for the application of the concepts beyond the class. The five specific issues will be the following: race, feminism, queer studies, eco-criticism, and poverty. I’ve intentionally chosen these topics and their order to allow them to build on each other and introduce their intersectionality as the class progresses. I will have three reading days per unit and one reflection and discussion day, allowing for two weeks per unit.

Chapter I: Research - Pedagogy & Texts to Teach

Teaching literature is inevitably somewhat interdisciplinary, especially within higher education. Literature is not just the words on the page, it's psychology, history, sociology, philosophy – it is using language to see the world in possibly a different way, or shape the way we think about what we already know. Justice and ethics may seem like their own discipline, but they too require the study of people and how we work in the world in order to fully apply relevant ideas. In the article "Teaching Literature as an Ethic of Care," Hilder argues that "we should consider the unique power of good literature and imaginative pedagogy to influence the reader's moral development. We are not just in the business of training students for keen analytical thought and writing" (49). Hilder also discusses this argument's application in both K-12 classrooms and higher education: teaching literature at any age has the power to influence the continued processing and shaping of one's morals and perceptions of the world.

The class I'm constructing is intended for a community college level, but resources for running a classroom based in social justice at any grade level are valuable. For example, an article by Southern Poverty Law Center titled "Social Justice Standards: The Teaching Tolerance Anti-Bias Framework," provides resources for anti-bias teaching methods in each grade. The article looks at learning outcomes divided into four sections (identity, diversity, justice, and action), and provides examples of ideals and potential issues at different grade levels. A chapter titled "Young Adults and Their Reading," from the book *Literature for Today's Young Adults* by Nilsen, et al. provides a look at young adult literature and how young adults see themselves within it. Nilsen writes: "getting to this level of literary appreciation is more than a matter of developing an advanced set of decoding skills. It is closely tied to intellectual, physical, and emotional development" (16). This is valuable due to the popularity of young adult literature

among a wide age group, and because while YA literature is one example, understanding more about how people see themselves reflected in literature may influence how literature of any kind should be taught.

Teaching literature both as an art form and as something to build critical thinking skills is incredibly important, in any country or classroom. Dougherty's article titled "We Need to Talk About English: On National Literature Surveys and Other Aspects of the Curriculum" discusses the literature surveys taught in Norwegian higher education systems and criticizes how they handle teaching English. Dougherty is a United States citizen teaching in and writing about his experiences in Norway, and his article is striking in that he pushes his students to question the value of their own education. He helps them cultivate an awareness and skepticism regarding what they're being taught and why, and uses their responses to argue for his point. In his conclusion, he writes of the importance of teaching literature as an art form and as something to learn from, but criticizes how it's being taught. He suggests: "we could start offering literature instruction that is more student-centered, which is to say, more practically, and ethically, oriented" (264). Dougherty seeks to serve his students and cultivate an environment where they can question what they're learning and help them learn in the process.

In the book *Narrative Impact: Social and Cognitive Foundations*, Ronald N. Jacobs writes of the integration between how someone reading a collection of narratives can both relate their identity to them and evolve their thinking from them: "collective identities are created and transformed through the integration of personal and collective narratives. They are activated through 'mobilizational narratives' (Hart, 1992), which emphasize agency and block the formation of antagonistic or competing identities" (206). Jacobs also argues that beyond this formation of individual identity, "narratives help individuals, groups, and communities to

understand their progress through time in terms of stories … By arranging characters and events into stories, people are able to develop an understanding of the past, an expectation about the future, and a general understanding of how they should act" (206). This argument shows the impact of narratives on the formation of worldview and identity, a process which continues into adulthood and the college classroom.

Beyond the formation of identity, education can be a valuable tool in the pursuit of social change. Paulo Freire was a 20th century philosopher who argued that education is the key to the emancipation of subjugation and breaking out of systems of oppression. In his book *Pedagogy of the Oppressed* he conceptualizes education as something that promotes dialogue and communication between the educator and subject rather than an imposition of values. He writes: "The starting point for organizing the program content of education or political action must be the present, existential, concrete situation to the people as a problem which challenges them and requires a response – not just at the intellectual level, but at the level of action" (95-96). Education should not only be limited to the increase of knowledge, but it needs to be a dialogue that promotes and leads to further action.

In his later book *Education for Critical Consciousness*, Freire writes: "Human beings are active beings, capable of reflection of themselves and on the activity in which they're engaged. They are able to detach themselves from the world in order to find their place in it and with it" (92). Humans are capable of reflection, they can question what they are taught, reflect on it, and decide from there where to act. Expecting people to take in information and stop the process there only perpetuates systems of oppression that are ingrained in society and extend to the education system. Freire also writes on how knowledge is formed and gained: "Knowledge is built up in the relations between human beings and the world, relations of transformation, and

perfects itself in the critical problematization of these relations" (96). In other words, knowledge only passed from one person to another is not true knowledge. Pure knowledge occurs in dialogue between people, the world around them, and how they react, interact, and expand upon the original idea. This knowledge can be applied to further interactions and experiences, and is continually built upon, learned from, and applied.

In her book *Teaching to Transgress*, bell hooks references Freire and builds her own argument from his: "Multiculturalism compels educators to recognize the narrow boundaries that have shaped the way knowledge is shared in the classroom. It forces us all to recognize our complicity in accepting and perpetuating biases of any kind" (44). This follows Freire's argument that the education system is built to perpetuate systems of oppression, and that only by reforming it in a way that allows for the actual expansion of knowledge can we be moved to action. The methods with which hooks tries to counteract these flaws and set her students up for the most success possible creates a complete picture of the problems within education. She writes: "teachers must be actively committed to a process of self-actualization that promotes their own well-being if they are to teach in a manner that empowers students" (15). She is arguing that though educators must give the most care possible to the well-being of their students, they must also find a care for themselves that feeds into their work. She accredits this as the difference between "engaged pedagogy" and other forms of pedagogy: the care of all involved.

In determining the criteria for the sources in my syllabus, I'm accounting for both my own experiences in college classes and the hypothetical students I would be teaching. I am writing it for a community college class, which brings several things into consideration: catering to a very broad age range, trying to balance accessibility with materials that would challenge my

students to think in new ways, and expecting a classroom with students of all kinds of backgrounds and experiences. In addition, with the structure of the class I've factored in which readings I could actually see myself teaching, length of the texts, allowing for the material to build on itself as the course progresses, a diverse assortment of authors, and a mix of poetry, fiction, and nonfiction. I will begin with an introductory unit of ethics and literature, five justice issue centered units that will have three readings each, and a final unit for the purpose of application.

For the first unit on race, I plan on including an excerpt from Mary Rowlandson's *Narrative of Captivity* (1682), an excerpt from James Baldwin's *The Fire Next Time* (1963), and an excerpt of Toni Morrison's *The Bluest Eye* (1970). Rowlandson's narrative brings up race through the lens of a white woman who has racist opinions due to being abused as a prisoner of a war that precedes her, and the text prompts questions of explanation versus justification. Baldwin has an incredible life and story, and *The Fire Next Time* is semi-autobiographical. It brings up and addresses themes of race, religion, and sexuality through intense and poetic writing. It will lay excellent groundwork for the first unit and provide subject material to build on in the rest of the course. *The Bluest Eye* will be the final reading for the unit and will provide an opportunity to teach on Morrison and her life, and introduce the intersectionality of racism with feminist issues leading into the next unit.

The next two units are feminism and queer theory. I have included an excerpt of Virginia Woolf's *A Room of One's Own* (1929), Kate Chopin's "The Story of an Hour" (1894), and Ana Castillo's "Women Don't Riot." (1998). All three of these authors illustrate femininity and gender roles through society's outward perception of women, and by women's inward perceptions of the rest of the world. Of these three readings, there is one essay, one short story,

and one poem, intentionally chosen to show the varied female experience with both systemic oppression and internal dialogue.

In the queer section I chose to include Adrienne Rich's "Living in Sin" (1955), Emily Dickinson's "Wild Nights" (1861), and Ocean Vuong's "Not Even This" (2020). Rich and Dickinson have different ways they lived out their queerness, as well as differences in how they were perceived by society, and their writings reflect this. All of the authors in the feminist and queer units thus far have had an incredible impact on their areas of literature, and have biographies worth a teaching moment, so including them in the syllabus feels a natural choice. Vuong is a more contemporary choice, and as a Vietnamese gay man has quite a different perspective on queerness and identity.

For the eco-criticism unit, I've chosen an excerpt of Henry David Thoreau's *Walden* (1854), Sarah Orne Jewett's "A White Heron" (1886), and Joy Harjo's poem "Remember" (1983). All of these texts see nature as something worth being protected and immersed in, though are framed in different ways and as such provide different perspectives. *Walden* is a nonfiction account of Thoreau's time spent at Walden Pond, and his reflections on being immersed in nature for an extended period of time. "A White Heron" is a fictional short story that showcases nature as something to be observed but not interfered with. "Remember" by Joy Harjo is a poem about the living memory of nature informed by her indigenous background. This mix of mediums and author backgrounds give a holistic view of nature from different perspectives.

The final justice-centered unit is poverty, and I included an excerpt of William Faulkner's *As I Lay Dying* (1930), Flannery O'Connor's "Good Country People" (1955), and Zora Neale Hurston's "The Gilded Six-Bits" (1933). *As I Lay Dying* is driven by themes of poverty and familial obligation, and Faulkner's Southern Gothic style gives a unique tone. O'Connor's story

centers on a family of farmers and brings into question what makes a “good” person, and how much someone’s background can influence or excuse their actions. “The Gilded Six-Bits” follows a young couple as they navigate their relationship trying to provide for their family, and the dangers of comparison when making decisions – especially regarding money.

For the last unit I chose the short stories “The Ones Who Walk Away From Omelas” (1973) by Ursula Le Guin and “The Ones Who Stay and Fight” (2018) by N. K. Jemisin. Le Guin paints a picture of a utopian society that can only function due to the suffering of one person, and Jemisin creates a world in which complete control over thought keeps the peace in a perfect society. Jemisin’s story is a direct response to Le Guin’s written forty-five years later, creating an interesting perspective on the dilemma they’re both addressing. Both of these works include themes around the previous course units, and overall bring into question what justice is and what a truly just society would look like.

Chapter II: Counterarguments in Theory and Practice

The way I have constructed my syllabus centers around literature as a medium through which to learn about the world, justice, and the self. While the literature itself is incredibly important, it is one step towards an end goal, and different theories vary regarding what is considered valuable to study. In *Beginning Theory: An Introduction to Literary and Cultural Theory,* Peter Barry goes through an extensive list of theories and their history. One of the earlier theories is New Criticism, dating to the 1950's, which argues that every text is considered complete in and of itself, with no outside perspectives or additional knowledge needed. This theory relies on a close reading of the text to find a singular truth, which is universal and unvarying – regardless of time period, author's intention, context, or the reader's experience. New Criticism uses the expression "death of the author" in reference to the idea that once the author completes a work and releases it to the reader, the author's intentions and background are no longer relevant. New Criticism also employs the term "affective fallacy" which refers to the judgment of a work based upon the emotional affect it has on the reader, rather than on the content of the text. This method of study is often used in high school education, where students are expected to read, find an answer, and repeat it back for homework credit. New Criticism is helpful when refining close reading skills, but higher education requires a more holistic approach to teaching literature.

In the 1960's, Reader Response theory arose to counter New Criticism, and though different, it also provides a specific but somewhat incomplete picture when studying literature (Barry). This school of thought takes into account the impact that the reader's own life, ideas, and experiences have on their interpretation of the text. Like New Criticism, in Reader Response theory the author's intention and historical context do not matter; however, there is not one

universal answer that is being sought out. Reader Response theory criticizes New Criticism's idea of affective fallacy, as the reader's emotions and positions are crucial to their individual interpretation, and due to each person having unique experiences informing their reading, no reading will be the same, but they are all correct.

Neither of these theories encapsulate the full extent of what can be learned from literature, and the various affects it can have in regard to the reader and literary tradition. The syllabus I have constructed, and the readings chosen are informed by author experience, historical context, the emotional aspects of the readings, how they agree and disagree, how they work together, and how they can inform ideas of justice and ethics. Neither New Criticism nor Reader Response theory account for one work being informed by another, or how multiple works combine to form new ideas. Both of these theories supply valuable information about a text when used as a lens to study it, however, they do not allow for a holistic understanding of a work or multiple works in conversation.

While the above schools of theory are two examples of academic arguments against teaching literature the way I am arguing it should be taught, there is also a public current "popular opinion" regarding what are appropriate topics to be taught in classrooms, especially considering the vast age range I'm trying to cater to in a community college setting. There are many current movements across the country regarding the banning of books and topics in classrooms – Florida's "Don't Say Gay" bill (abcnews) and the banning of textbooks in Texas that include Critical Race Theory (NYTimes) being only a few examples. While book bans and restricted topics in classrooms may seem to be a problem for early education, they have an impact on college classrooms as well.

An article from Social Science Space, a website from Sage publishing, titled “The Impact of Book Bans on Higher Education” published in December of 2022 lists and describes specific laws and regulations in different states at varying grade levels. For example: in South Dakota there is a law prohibiting colleges from “compelling students to adopt or affirm certain ideas” from a list including concepts around race, sex, and religion. A law in Tennessee prohibits colleges from conducting mandatory trainings for faculty or students around topics “related to race, sex, religion, creed, nonviolent political affiliation, social class, or any other ‘class of people,’ or that ‘promotes resentment’ of any such group” (socialsciencespace). In this context, “training” can be argued to include classroom instruction, which poses additional restrictions.

Restricting topics in classrooms is a very real and current problem across the United States: in August 2022, Pen America published an article titled “America’s Censored Classrooms” outlining educational gag orders proposed in 2022. Educational gag orders are defined as: “state legislative efforts to restrict teaching about topics such as race, gender, American history, and LGBTQ+ identities in K–12 and higher education” by the site, which tracks them in their weekly updated Index of Educational Gag Orders. In this article, they state that in 2022, “proposed educational gag orders have increased 250 percent compared to 2021. Thirty-six different states have introduced 137 gag order bills in 2022” (pen.org). This is not a new phenomenon – limiting factors on higher education and what is allowed to be taught were present during many historical events such as the Red Scare in the 1950s, the Civil Rights Movement, draft, and women’s movements in the 1960s, and general political movements in the 1980s and beyond.

Classroom guidelines generally are positive things, and policies against racism and harassment are incredibly important. However, when the goal of these policies is censorship and

control over what is allowed both in the classrooms and the trainings provided to faculty, there becomes an ethical dilemma around what kind of rules should be allowed. As bell hooks writes in *Teaching to Transgress*: “The unwillingness to approach teaching from a standpoint that includes awareness of race, sex, and class is often rooted in the fear that classrooms will be uncontrollable, that emotions and passions will not be contained” (39). Restricting these topics is an act of fear and an attempt at oppression. However, teaching texts of all kinds, by authors of all backgrounds, and on all topics in a safe place to learn and ask questions is an incredibly valuable resource. What we read influences our identity, and how we see ourselves directly impacts how we see and treat others. Exposure to possibly uncomfortable topics that a student may not have been previously exposed to such as race or sexuality is necessary, as within that exposure and education comes an opportunity to learn about the world outside oneself, and have an increased understanding of the people in it.

Chapter III: Course Syllabus

Ethics in Reading

The Class

Narratives play a huge role in the construction of the self, and therefore there's inherent value in having access to narratives, stories, texts, and communication. Education and reading are means through which the self can be constructed, interrogated, and evolved. Stories are a resource for individuals to express their sense of self as well as an understanding of past and present. When considering the impact stories have on us and our actions, the impact of which stories we are reading, and how and why we are reading them, also holds a clear importance. This course takes these ideas of the formation of the self through narratives, and through the reading of narratives centering on justice issues, teaching how to build one's conception of justice through literature.

This course contains seven units, starting with an introductory unit on the course, ethics, consumption of media, and how narratives impact identity. Following this will be five specific justice units: race, feminism, queer, eco-criticism, and poverty. The final unit will be on the application of all the previous concepts and how they interconnect. The schedule I have written for the syllabus consists of three readings per unit for the primary five, and two readings for the final application unit. The schedule I've written will allow for two weeks per unit with two classes per week, leaving at least one extra class day for reflection on the unit before moving to the next one.

Student Learning Outcomes

- Course Introduction
    - Students will be able to: identify how media consumption affects worldview, connect their self-perception to their worldview, and explore multiple answers to questions of ethics.
- Unit 1: Race
    - Students will be able to: explore perceptions of race from multiple perspectives and voices, explore multiple forms and degrees of racism, and understand how racism can affect people on different sides of a certain group.
- Unit 2: Feminist

    - Students will be able to: explore the different forms sexism can take, identify how racism and sexism interact, and explore the different ways in which women have overcome various systemic challenges.
- Unit 3: Queer
    - Students will be able to: use the knowledge from prior units to analyze themes in this unit such as intersectionality, find connections and reflect on them, and determine how contexts in which the authors were writing affected what they wrote.
- Unit 4: Eco-criticism
    - Students will be able to: recognize how nature is characterized in different ideologies, analyze the differences between the characterizations, identify how the authors' backgrounds inform their view of nature, and use knowledge from previous units to analyze themes and how they connect.
- Unit 5: Poverty
    - Students will be able to: analyze works within context of the authors' backgrounds, recognize the effects of poverty on other areas of life, and question the intersectionality in each story and how they build off previous units.
- Unit 6: Conclusion and Application
    - Students will be able to: apply what they've learned in the class thus far, create and develop their own questions around justice and ethics within the stories, analyze difference within the stories and their ethical dilemmas, and trace the course themes from the introduction through the entire course.

Assignments

Bi-weekly Reflections:

Give me a few sentences (or up to1 page) reflecting on this unit before moving to the next. Some questions to consider:

What questions do you have? What information is missing? Anything need to be expanded upon before moving to the next unit? Can you see how this unit connects to the previous one? What are your thoughts on this unit's learning outcomes, and have you met them?

No need to answer every question, just think through them so that I can assess whether we're where we need to be before the next unit.

Midterm Assignment

Pick one author from each of the three units so far (race, feminist, queer) and put them into conversation.

Questions to consider: Is there a specific area in which they agree/disagree? Is there a specific way in which their environment/background influences them? How do the mediums in which each author writes inform their point/argument? How does intersectionality function here?

4-6 pages, MLA format, In-text citations and bibliography.

Final Assignment

Reflect on the semester: What have you learned? How have you grown? How has your thinking changed?

Think back to the themes we talked about the first week of class and how we've continued to address them. Think through each of the justice units, the learning outcomes, the texts, and how they built to the final unit. Tell me how your thinking has evolved with each unit, and pick one of the themes to trace through each unit as well.

Use your reflections and class notes!

7-9 pages (aim for about a page per unit plus your introduction and conclusion paragraphs), MLA format, In-text citations and bibliography.

Texts

Texts will be provided – don't waste your money! Print if you like but make sure to have the readings accessible in class in some form.

Reading list:

Ronald Jacobs: "The Narrative Integration of Personal and Collective Identity in Social Movements" – *Narrative Impact* (2013)

Mary Rowlandson: *Narrative of the Captivity and Removes of Mrs. Mary Rowlandson Who Was Taken by the Indians at the Destruction of Lancaster* (1682) – excerpt
James Baldwin: *The Fire Next Time* (1995) – excerpt
Toni Morrison: *The Bluest Eye* (1970) – excerpt

Kate Chopin: "The Story of an Hour" (1894)
Virginia Woolf: *A Room of One's Own* (1929) – excerpt
Ana Castillo: "Women Don't Riot" (1998)

Adrienne Rich: "Living in Sin" (1955)
Emily Dickinson: "Wild Nights" (1861)
Ocean Vuong: "Not Even This" (2020)

Henry David Thoreau: *Walden* (1854) – excerpt
Sarah Jewett: "A White Heron" (1886)
Joy Harjo: "Remember" (1983)

William Faulkner: *As I Lay Dying* (1930) – excerpt
Flannery O'Connor: "Good Country People" (1955)
Zora Neale Hurston: "The Gilded Six-Bits" (1933)

Ursula Le Guin: "The Ones Who Walk Away From Omelas" (1973)
N. K. Jemisin: "The Ones Who Stay and Fight" (2018)

Schedule

DATE	READINGS	ASSIGNMENTS
Class Introduction		

Mon	Overview of major course themes	
Wed	Jacobs – *Narrative Impact*, chapter 9	Reflection due after class
Unit 1: Race		
Mon	Rowlandson – *Narrative of Captivity,* removes 3-7	
Wed	Baldwin – *Fire Next Time,* pages 20-31	
Mon	Morrison – *The Bluest Eye,* pages 45-50, 137-139	
Wed	No reading, review of unit 1	Reflection due before class
Unit 2: Feminist		
Mon	Castillo – "Women Don't Riot"	
Wed	Chopin – "Story of an Hour"	
Mon	Woolf – *Room of One's Own*, chapter 1	
Wed	No reading, review of unit 2	Reflection due before class
Unit 3: Queer		
Mon	Rich – "Living in Sin"	
Wed	Dickinson – "Wild Nights"	
Mon	Vuong – "Not Even This"	
Wed	No reading, review of unit 3	Reflection due before class Midterm Assignment Due Midnight
Unit 4: Eco-Criticism		
Mon	Thoreau – *Walden*, Conclusion	
Wed	Jewett – "A White Heron"	
Mon	Harjo – "Remember"	
Wed	No reading, review of unit 4	Reflection due before class
Unit 5: Poverty		

Mon	Faulkner – *As I Lay Dying,* first 3 sections (Darl, Cora, Darl)	
Wed	O'Connor – *Good Country People*	
Mon	Hurston – *Gilded Six-Bits*	
Wed	No reading, review of unit 5	Reflection due before class
Final Unit: Application		
Mon	Le Guin – *The Ones Who Walked Away From Omelas*	
Wed	Jemisin: *The Ones Who Stay and Fight*	
Reflections, Review, and Final Assignment will fill remainder of semester, exact schedule TBD		

Chapter IV: Explanation of Syllabus – Texts and Assignments

My course contains seven units, starting with an introductory unit on the course, ethics, and an overview of justice and literature. Following this will be five specific justice units: race, feminist, queer, eco-criticism, and poverty. The final unit will be on the application of all the previous concepts and how they interconnect. For the purpose of the schedule included in the syllabus, the class will meet twice a week and have lectures Mondays and Wednesdays. The schedule does not account for breaks or specific dates for the course, but is an outline that can be adjusted due to the needs of a given semester. The schedule I have written for the syllabus consists of three readings per unit for the primary five, and two readings for the final application unit. There will be two weeks per unit with two classes per week, leaving at least one extra class day for reflection on the unit before moving to the next one. Each reflection day, a short, informal reflection assignment will be due before class to collect questions, evaluate the status of the class, and make sure anything needed is covered on the final day of the unit before moving to the next.

The introduction to the class will lay the groundwork for the units that will follow, and will consist of an overview of ethics, media consumption, why thinking about what we read matters, and how the media we consume and narratives we read impact personal identity. A relevant example of an ethical dilemma in the consumption of media would be J. K. Rowling, as she has revealed herself as transphobic in recent years. However, the Harry Potter books and other works within her canon have been incredibly influential and remain a pop culture staple. Another example more frequently taught in the academic canon is Junot Díaz, having received many awards including a Pulitzer Prize for Fiction in 2008 for *The Brief Wondrous Life of Oscar Wao*. However, he also faced sexual assault allegations in 2018 by a former graduate student.

According to a New York Times article from June 2018 titled "Junot Díaz Cleared of Misconduct by M.I.T." the author withdrew from the Sydney Writer's Festival in Australia directly following the accusation, in addition to "The Cambridge Public Library and the Boston Children's Museum canceled scheduled events with Mr. Díaz. The Pulitzer Prize board opened an independent review of the accusations … and Mr. Díaz voluntarily stepped down as the board's chairman. Some independent booksellers said they would no longer carry his books." M.I.T., where Díaz teaches, also conducted a review of his behavior, "found no evidence of misconduct" and decided to keep him on its faculty. Further complicating Díaz' case is the fact that he was a victim of sexual assault himself in childhood, which he writes of in an article for The New Yorker in April 2018 titled "The Silence: The Legacy of Childhood Trauma." While being a victim himself does not excuse his supposed inappropriate actions towards others, it does factor into a consideration of responsibility and motive.

The examples of Díaz and Rowling, as well as many other authors with notable works and problematic stances and behaviors, prompt the question of how to engage with material written by problematic authors in an ethical way. In the case of Rowling, Harry Potter has a theme park, merchandise and brand partnerships, movies, and an endless pop culture influence. Regarding Junot Díaz, his book won a Pulitzer Prize and is still taught in classrooms, in addition to the fact that he is still employed at one of the top Universities in the US.

How should a consumer of these works let the information about these authors, among others, influence their decisions about what books to read, movies to watch, or school to attend? The answer varies depending on who you ask: whereas the internet has "cancelled" Rowling, many readers and scholars argue for the death of the author principle – that once an author releases a work the reader can enjoy it separate from them (Barry). Neither the complete

removal/boycott of a work, nor ignoring the problems with a work or author address the ethics of the question in a holistic manner. They both bring up their own issues, and there is not one sole correct answer. I argue that the teaching of literature is not to find one correct answer at all, but to look at multiple perspectives and put different views in conversation with one another.

For the second part of the introduction unit, I will include a short chapter from the book *Narrative Impact: Social and Cognitive Foundations* on "The Narrative Integration of Personal and Collective Identity in Social Movements" by Ronald Jacobs. This chapter cites several studies and explains how our identity as humans is shaped by narratives and the stories we read. This reading will be crucial in prefacing the following units and discussions in which the identity of the students in the class will be informed and their worldview broadened. These concepts of narratives tied to self-perception, worldview, and identity in addition to ethics and the consumption of media will all be revisited themes through the rest of the units.

Learning outcomes for introduction unit:

- Students will be able to: identify how media consumption affects worldview
- Students will be able to: connect their self-perception to their worldview
- Students will be able to: explore multiple answers to questions of ethics

The first justice unit is race, and I have chosen an excerpt of Mary Rowlandson's *Narrative of Captivity*, an excerpt of *The Fire Next Time* by James Baldwin, and an excerpt of *The Bluest Eye* by Toni Morrison. These three authors provide accounts of racism through different lenses and with different perspectives, and provide a look into the intersection of identities that will build in the units to follow. In Rowlandson's narrative, she is a white woman who is kidnapped by indigenous people during her family's participation in settler colonialism. In her account she describes being separated from her children and treated horribly, and as such

has an incredibly racist attitude towards indigenous people. Rowlandson's *Narrative* is broken into twenty removes, with each remove describing a place the group stayed for one or more nights. For the class I will assign removes 3-7, in which she mostly narrates her travels and the treatment of herself and her children. This narrative brings up an interesting possible grey area within issues of race, as racism is never justified but may be understandable in such cases, and Rowlandson has a unique perspective on this issue.

The Fire Next Time by James Baldwin is a semi-autobiographical essay, and tells of his experiences living in the 1930s and '40s in Harlem, New York. He argues that racism – and hatred of anyone from any side – stems from self-hatred projected outward, and criticizes the typical "American Dream" and different perceptions of freedom. Baldwin also writes extensively about religion, which is a trait in common with Rowlandson. I have chosen to assign pages 20-31 of the essay for the class. In this section he describes the summer he turned 14, which would've been 1938 or 1939. He describes his life in Harlem, New York, the treatment he and those around him received due to being black, and the kind of lives and limited options they are forced into as teenagers. Of the few paths available to young black people in Harlem at the time, going into ministry was one option, and Baldwin describes being drawn to the church and driven into it out of fear. Baldwin makes several arguments about why he thinks his society functions as it does, and what needs to change in order to break the cycles he's witnessing.

The third reading in the race section is from *The Bluest Eye* by Toni Morrison, a book telling the story of a few young black girls, set in Ohio over the year 1940. The girls face abuse, racism – both external and internalized, and sexism, all while trying to form their own identities and find their own purpose and joy in life. I have included pages 45-50, which is told from the perspective of one of the young girls, Pecola. Pecola thinks through her wishes to be beautiful

and have blue eyes, and buys herself Mary Jane candy while admiring the pretty girl on the wrapper. I've also chosen to include pages 137-139, which are narrated by Cholly, a young boy at the time. Though the chapter is from Cholly's perspective, he tells of the group of old black women who care for him and their journeys, experiences, and burdens throughout their lives. This work is fiction, unlike the other two readings in this unit, but is nonetheless informed by Morrison's own life and experiences. In the excerpts chosen as well as throughout the book, sexism and intersectionality are incredibly present, which leads well into the following unit on feminism.

Learning outcomes for Unit 1 – Race:

- Students will be able to: explore perceptions of race from multiple perspectives and voices
- Students will be able to: explore multiple forms and degrees of racism
- Students will be able to: understand how racism can affect people on different sides of a certain group

For the feminism section, I am using the poem "Women Don't Riot" by Ana Castillo, "The Story of an Hour" by Kate Chopin, and an excerpt of Virginia Woolf's *A Room of One's Own*. This combination of poetry, fiction, and an essay give insight to the female experience in different mediums and moments in time. In "Women Don't Riot," Castillo paints a picture of women's issues and the female experience. She uses repetition to create the feeling of cyclical and taught behavior, and calls for the breaking of these cycles. The Chicana author provides some diversity in this section and ties to the previous section – as well as provides an introduction to the following two readings. "The Story of an Hour" tells of a woman with a heart condition whose husband is declared dead after a railroad accident, and for one hour she allows

herself to fantasize about a life lived for herself instead of for him. He comes home unexpectedly, and it is revealed that he had not been in the accident after all, and his wife immediately has a fatal heart attack due to the shock. This short story is a commentary on women's independence and lack of agency when tied to a man, and was originally published in 1894 amidst first-wave feminism.

I've chosen to include the first chapter of *A Room of One's Own*, which begins with Woolf addressing her topic: women in fiction – and the many meanings that phrase can take. From the prompt her thesis for the essay becomes: "a woman must have money and a room of one's own to write fiction" (6) and she begins explaining how she arrives at this thesis. In the first chapter she uses fictional places and people inspired by her experiences to show how she has been treated and interacts with the world as a female scholar. Woolf describes places she is allowed access to and is prohibited from due to her gender, uses food imagery, and includes a conversation with one of her female colleagues about previous generations as a start to breaking down and working through the limits imposed upon women – and how to overcome them.

Learning outcomes for Unit 2 – Feminism:

- Students will be able to: explore the different forms sexism can take
- Students will be able to: identify how racism and feminism interact
- Students will be able to: explore the different ways in which women have overcome various systemic challenges

In the queer section I'm including Adrienne Rich, Emily Dickinson, and Ocean Vuong, who together offer a diverse array of communicating the queer experience through poetry. Rich's life story holds interest because she went from discontentedly living with a man to finding a lifelong female partner. The work I chose from her is "Living in Sin," which narrates a day in the

life of a woman who is clearly expected to be the primary caretaker of the home and is not fulfilling that responsibility. The poem describes dust gathering in her home, and the subject falling in and out of love, supposedly with her husband, and feels clearly frustrated by her circumstances and in lack of something. Knowing Rich's background, it can be assumed that the frustration comes from being confined to heterosexual gender roles and is not fulfilled by her relationship or responsibilities, so she's dissociating from them.

In her poem "Wild Nights," Dickinson uses no pronouns but does employ feminine imagery such as the sea, and implies a level of going against society's wishes. She claims the wind cannot alter the course, and that chart and compass can no longer help her find her mooring. In addition, Dickinson references Eden, inferring the perfect state of the world before the fall of man, where she is rowing before finding her mooring in her love – moving through supposed heteronormative perfection to the one she truly wants to be with. Dickinson was never known to have lived with a woman, but has many letters she wrote to female lovers and much implied homoerotic poetry. Ocean Vuong's "Not Even This" is a striking poem in which he is navigating his identity through time. Vuong is Vietnamese and identifies as gay, and the intersectionality of his identity is clear in his writing. He takes small moments and tiny details and threads them together in a way that creates a complete picture, punctuated with statements that make no sense out of context.

At the end of this unit there will be a midterm paper. For this assignment, the students will choose one author from each of the three units so far and put them into conversation over 4-6 pages of writing. The exact interpretation of this prompt will be open-ended, however some questions will be provided to guide the students' thinking, including: whether there's a specific area in which the authors agree or disagree, if there's a specific way in which the authors'

environment or background influences them, how the mediums in which each author writes informs their points and arguments, and how intersectionality functions between the units. This will allow the students to think through how the units are building on each other, how issues of justice intersect, and how various forms of narratives communicate personal stories and major themes.

Learning outcomes for Unit 3 – Queer:

- Students will be able to: use the knowledge from prior units to analyze themes in this unit such as intersectionality
- Students will be able to: find connections and reflect on them – Midterm Assignment
- Students will be able to: determine how the contexts in which the authors were writing affected what they wrote

In the eco-criticism unit, the authors I've included are Henry David Thoreau, Sarah Orne Jewett, and Joy Harjo. These three voices characterize nature in three very different ways, both due to the authors' backgrounds and the mode in which they write. For Thoreau I have chosen to include an excerpt of his book *Walden*, which chronicles Thoreau's two year, two month, and two day stay at Walden Pond. While I enjoy this book and agree with many of the points made in it, it is often taught in a way that leaves out valuable context to the story. Thoreau was a significant influence in the formation of the American literary tradition, but his writings do not often acknowledge the privileges he had that allowed such influence – an element I consider to be crucial to an informed reading of this text especially. The excerpt from *Walden* to be assigned is the Conclusion, chapter 18. The conclusion of the text gives both a summation of the most notable things Thoreau has learned during his time at Walden Pond, as well as why he left and

his reflections since leaving. He discusses the importance of not getting trapped in one life, train of thought, or set of ideas, and his attempts to break from these things is both what led him to the pond and home from it.

I then included Jewett's short story "A White Heron," in which an impoverished young girl and her grandmother are offered money by a hunter to find a white heron. However, when the young girl finds the heron, she refuses to give away its location knowing that she is sparing its life. The story is full of natural imagery and clearly carries the message that nature must be protected, even when incentive to destroy it is present. The young girl seems to be the only one in the story who realizes the value in nature itself, and the adults around her have other priorities – which could be placing an emphasis on childhood understanding and innocence that is lost but should be maintained. Jewett frequently went on walks to treat her rheumatoid arthritis, and as such developed an appreciation for nature that led to her writing in the American Regionalism movement, in which the setting of story plays a crucial part.

In Harjo's poem "Remember," she characterizes specific elements of nature as living things. Harjo is prompting the reader to be aware of nature as something that gives and sustains life, not just as a resource or something to pass by. I included an indigenous author in the eco-criticism section intentionally, as nature tends to be viewed and characterized differently than in Western cultures. Western ideology tends to include an individualistic view of people and our place within our society and nature. Our culture promotes a mindset centered on seeing people as individuals who have to take what we need to build a profit to provide for ourselves.

In *Walden*, Thoreau prompts the reader to step outside oneself and experience nature, and in doing so is thinking in individualistic terms advising others on how to live an ideal life. In "A White Heron" Jewett sees nature as something to be observed and preserved, but not interfered

with. Harjo completely contradicts both of these views, claiming that we are already one with nature, we always have been, and continue to be. This is how she sees her universe – as one continual entity growing and changing together in its interconnectedness. Which view of nature is correct or whether one is more correct than another I could not say. However, for the purpose of this syllabus I included all three, as the purpose of the way I'm trying to teach literature is to look at different perspectives without one necessarily needing to be more correct than another.

Learning outcomes for Unit 4 – Eco-criticism:

- Students will be able to: recognize how nature is characterized in different ideologies
- Students will be able to: analyze the differences between the characterizations of nature
- Students will be able to: identify how the authors' backgrounds inform their view of nature
- Students will be able to: use knowledge from previous units to analyze themes and how they connect

For the poverty unit, the first text is an excerpt of *As I Lay Dying* by Faulkner, the second is "Good Country People" by Flannery O'Connor, and the third is "The Gilded Six-Bits" by Zora Neale Hurston. All three of these authors are writing within a similar time, but provide different insights into poverty and the intersectional struggles that come with it. *As I Lay Dying* is broken into small sections divided by narrators, and I've chosen to include the first three sections, narrated first by Darl, then Cora, and back to Darl. Darl's sections give the reader a sense of the family's life, and tell of the family's farm, how they all live day-to-day, and the tensions they encounter. The main family clearly is not close and does not all get along, but work together to

keep the family afloat anyway. Cora is the family's neighbor and narrates from an outside perspective, but focuses especially on money and how her family gets by financially.

The next text for this unit is the short story "Good Country People" by O'Connor. This story follows a woman named Hulga, who is the daughter of farmers and is missing one of her legs due to a hunting accident when she was young. Hulga is trying to navigate her independence, her relationship with her family, her religion, and her overall identity, all of which are brought into question when she encounters a supposed Bible salesman who shows an interest in her. Both Hulga and the Bible salesman named Manly Pointer try and use the resources available to them to transcend their lower-class upbringing – while she considers her education to do so, he uses charisma and supposed "street smarts" to get what he wants.

The final reading of this unit is Hurston's "The Gilded Six-Bits." While in the beginning the story focuses on the relationship between the young married couple who are its main characters, it is clear by the end that money and loyalty are the driving forces. When a new rich man comes to town and shows an interest in Missie May, the young wife of Joe, she has an affair with the promise of money. While the couple stays together, their relationship clearly changes and the money turns out to be gilded, and the rest of the story is laced with uncertainty. All three of the authors in this unit are American, from the South, and were writing around the Harlem Renaissance. Though they are writing in a similar time, their styles are unique and each showcase specific themes and intersections between them. This intersectionality is why this is the final of the justice units, having built off of the previous four.

Learning outcomes for Unit 5 – Poverty:

- Students will be able to: analyze works within context of the authors' backgrounds

- Students will be able to: recognize the effects of poverty on other areas of life
- Students will be able to: question the intersectionality in each story and how they build off previous units

The last unit of the syllabus will be for the purpose of application of the themes that have been building in the previous five units, and a revisiting of the questions from the introduction. It includes “The Ones Who Walk Away From Omelas” by Ursula Le Guin and “The Ones Who Stay and Fight” by N. K. Jemisin. Jemisin’s story is a direct response to Le Guin’s, and reading the two together creates a unique perspective on justice, morality, and different ways to go about achieving them. Both stories are set in dystopian societies that are supposedly perfect and happy, but the thriving nature of the society hinges on one aspect. In Le Guin’s, the city of Omelas has no flaws or suffering, but only because of one child who is locked away and suffers immensely on behalf of the whole city. The townspeople can go and visit the child, but only to see it, and cannot help in any way. This guilt of having their happiness rely on the suffering of an innocent child leads to some people simply walking away from the town, hence the title of the work.

Jemisin’s story is set in the city of Um-Helat, where there is no suffering for this happy society due to officers who do not allow unjust thoughts to invade the town – namely the idea that some people are more important than others. This idea, among others, is one of an outside and imperfect world, and cannot be allowed to invade this utopian city. One man begins to think this way and is promptly and painlessly killed by these officers because there is no way back for him. He is killed in front of his child, who is then offered a hand – an opportunity to renounce these thoughts and return to the utopia.

Both of these stories pose a conception of what an ideal world without suffering can look like, though they are quite different, and each bring up their own ethical dilemmas. This unit’s

purpose will be to apply the lessons and skills from the first units with a new text, and show the overarching point of the class: using literature to see the world through an ethical lens and dig into real world issues.

Learning outcomes for final unit – Application:

- Students will be able to: apply what they've learned in the class thus far
- Students will be able to: create and develop their own questions around justice and ethics within the stories
- Students will be able to: analyze differences within the stories and their ethical dilemmas
- Students will be able to: trace the course themes from the introduction through the entire course – Final Assignment

Following the final unit will be the final assignment, which will be a reflection paper on the entire semester, tracing one of the major course themes through each unit and assessing how the student's thinking has evolved during the course. I have written the assignment to be around 7-9 pages, assuming the five justice units and the final application unit will have a page each, plus an introduction and conclusion paragraph. The purpose of the assignment will be to summarize one of the themes addressed throughout the semester such as intersectionality, how narratives tie to identity, or ethical consumption of media. The students can use the bi-weekly reflections they've been doing to trace their thoughts, as well as notes on the readings and from class to analyze how the themes shape the course, how the texts build on each other, and how their own perceptions and ideas have grown over the course of the semester.

Conclusion: Why This Matters

Our moral codes as individuals shape how we see the world and participate in it. Morals inform ethics – the study of conduct towards ourselves and others, and the intention behind them. Our individual morals, ethics, intentions, actions, and reactions are all tied inherently to our identity, which is comprised of the notion of self in different contexts and the narratives we construct around selfhood. In *Narrative Impact*: *Social and Cognitive Foundations*, Jacobs cites Stuart Hall on the topic of identity as a narrative of the self: "'it's the story we tell about the self in order to know who we are.' Narratives of selfhood provide templates for orienting and acting in the world: by differentiating between good and evil, by providing understandings of agency and selfhood, and by defining the nature of social bonds and relationships" (205). Narratives and stories are central to how we construct everything about ourselves that shapes how we influence and perceive the outside world, including our conception of justice.

Due to the importance of narratives in the construction of the self, there is an inherent value to having access to narratives, stories, texts, and communication. Education and reading are means through which the self can be constructed, interrogated, and evolved. Stories are a resource for individuals to express their sense of self as well as an understanding of past and present (Jacobs 206). When considering the impact stories have on us and our actions, the stories we read and how and why we are reading them also holds a clear importance. Teaching a variety of stories in holistic and open ways allows for the teaching of justice, increased awareness of the world, and the creation of a self that wants to improve the world.

This clearly ties to the importance of education as a realm in which to be exposed to narratives that provide the opportunity to learn and construct the self in the best possible way. However, with the value of education comes the importance of access to it, and there are very

real limiting factors that prevent this access. From varying theories and ways to read literature, to legislation restricting what is legally allowed to be taught, and factors such as location and funds all play a part in whether or not education is available and/or effective. Community college can be an excellent option and resource to combat some of these restrictions, especially regarding cost.

I consider my time at community college to be some of the most valuable of my academic career due to the diversity within the classes taught, the material taught, and my fellow students from every walk of life. I gained so much more than just book knowledge. Education doesn't have to be fancy to hold value, and community college is accessible and unique in the ability to provide high-quality education to students of all backgrounds and let them engage with the course material and each other. This is where my passion for community college is rooted: I want to provide the same high quality and accessible education that I received, and provide other students with the opportunity to learn about themselves and their world in the classroom.

While core classes will always have their place, electives and classes outside the core requirements for any degree hold inherent value as well. The class I've constructed for this thesis is a literature class of sorts, but it is by nature interdisciplinary. The works included are diverse and bring to light a wide array of questions, perspectives, and ways to read them. In the last paragraph of bell hooks' book *Teaching to Transgress: Education as the Practice of Freedom*, she writes: "The classroom, with all its limitations, remains a location of possibility. In that field of possibility we have the opportunity to labor for freedom, to demand of ourselves and our comrades, an openness of mind and heart that allows us to face reality" (207). The philosophy and ideology hooks creates and explores in this essay is one I desire to emulate in my future classroom.

Should I be able to teach this class at a community college someday, my goal will be to allow my students access to narratives they can both relate to and be challenged by, and allow their formation of self and conception of justice to be challenged. I want to provide a safe space to learn about others, broaden worldviews, and facilitate dialogue and understanding. My passion for literature and my passion for justice often coincide, and throughout this thesis I have explored the ways in which they can support each other. I hope one day to show others how literature and justice can work together for positive change.

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