

How the Texts We Teach Shape Students' Perceptions

Amy Piotrowski

A few years ago, a group of students in my 11th grade English class came to some interesting conclusions about American literature. We were finishing the school year by reading *A Raisin in the Sun*, and the students were enjoying reading the play even though the countdown to summer vacation was well underway. This class was a group of reluctant readers, not interested in doing much reading, especially now that we had completed the state standardized test. One afternoon, when we were halfway through the play, I came into the classroom to start the day's discussion. Several students were huddled together having a lively debate.

Student 1: It's going to be Walter Lee.

Student 2: Nah! It's going to be Ruth

Student 3: You're both wrong. It's gotta be Benetha.

Me: What are you talking about?

Student: We're trying to figure out who dies at the end of the play. We can't decide who it's going to be.

Me: Why does someone have to die at the end of the play?

Student: Ms. P, you told us that this class is American lit, and someone has to die at the end of the story.

Me: Why does someone have to die at the end of the play because this is American lit?

Student: Well, we read *The Crucible*, and John Proctor gets hanged at the end. We read *Of Mice and Men*, and George shoots Lennie in the head. Then we read *The Great Gatsby*, and Gatsby gets shot at the end. Someone dies at the end of everything we read. We're just trying to figure out who it's gonna be this time.

Me: I don't want to give away the ending, but no one dies at the end of this play.

Student: Come on, Ms. P! Someone is going to die at the end. Just tell us who it's going to be!

Me: No one dies at the end of play.

Students: Just tell us! Please!

It hadn't even occurred to me that my students would draw this conclusion from what we had read. But the more I reflected on it, the more I realized that my students were right. Each of the novels and plays we had read up to that point in the school year ended with a main character dying. In fact, most of the short stories we had read also featured a main character's death. In this school district, 11th grade English focused on American literature, and I told my classes so at the beginning of the school year. My students made a logical conclusion based on what I had assigned them to read. Through the texts I had assigned, I had sent the message that great works of American literature end with the main character dying.

The books teachers assign in our classes have a profound effect on how students perceive literature and what books are important. Are there other texts that would have given my students a better idea of the range of American literature? What texts should students be reading in secondary English classes, and how should teachers select texts for their students?

Selection of Texts and the Canon

The texts that were in my school district's curriculum are the same texts that have been taught for many decades. Wolk (2010) found that "students today are reading the same texts – and the same kinds of texts – that students read 50 years ago" (p. 10). When Wolk asked high school students and undergraduates about the books they were assigned to read, they reported that they were assigned classics – and mostly classics that do not end happily. In fact the three Shakespeare plays on his list of most read texts are *Romeo and Juliet*, *Macbeth*, and *Hamlet*. Reading these three plays and none of the comedies sends the mes-

sage that Shakespeare wrote only tragedies that end with the stage littered with corpses. Students could graduate high school without even knowing that Shakespeare also wrote some of the wittiest comedies in the English language. The rest of Wolk's list isn't much more cheerful. The list of works of American literature most often taught includes *The Great Gatsby* and *Of Mice and Men*. Is life in America always so depressing? Do American writers never seek to tickle the nation's funny bone? One might think so if they had taken my 11th grade English class.

Why are the same texts taught again and again as the years go by? Scholes (1985) says that "The 'masterpieces' are *there*, so we teach them. They have been pre-selected by culture, laid down by fossils in the sedimented layers of tradition" (p. 58). In other words, we keep teaching the same texts because they are the texts have been taught for years. It can be argued that these texts have stood the test of time and become indispensable parts of our curriculum. This line of thinking says that teacher must pass down to the next generation the great writers and texts that our nation has produced. But is this the best way to select texts to teach? Perhaps not.

Rethinking the Texts We Assign

It may be time to challenge the literary cannon and rethink the texts we read in secondary classrooms. Scholes (1985) argues "The curriculum must be subject to critical scrutiny like everything else in our academic institutions. Its very 'naturalness,' its apparent inevitability, makes it especially suspect" (p. 58). Teachers should be questioning the texts in our secondary curriculum: Do these texts speak to our students and the lives they lead today? Do they reflect our students' experiences? Do they provide our students insight into the lives of other people? Teachers would do well to make sure that the texts they assign are relevant to students and to give students a taste of all of the different kinds of texts out there.

Rethinking the text that we teach doesn't mean that weighty and even tragic works should never be taught. Jago (2011) makes a compelling case for depressing books. She rightly points out that "the good guys don't always win" and that sad stories "help young people prepare for the ills they are almost sure to face in their own lives" (Jago, 2011, p. 4). However, a steady diet of tragic stories is an incomplete one. If teachers are going "to create truly diverse and captivating reading experiences," we need to teach more than just tragic stories (Wolk, 2010, p.

12). Teachers should be introducing students to a rich variety of texts, both serious and light-hearted. There should be room in the curriculum for *A Midsummer Night's Dream* as well as *Romeo and Juliet* and for the comedy of Mark Twain alongside the tragedy of Arthur Miller.

Students may struggle with heavy, serious reading material. Rosenblatt (1995) points out that "the adolescent needs to encounter literature for which he possesses the intellectual, emotional, and experiential equipment" (p. 25). Teachers need to really think about what texts their students are ready for, and not just in terms of what grade level they read on. Students must be ready for the emotional impact of a text, and a constant series of tragic endings may be emotionally inappropriate. Teachers can find opportunities to introduce students to texts that can evoke a range of emotions.

Perhaps the best works to teach are the ones that students can relate to because they reflect teen's experiences of school, family, falling in love for the first time, and facing the challenges of growing up. As Rosenblatt argues:

Texts must be provided that hold out some link with the young reader's past and present preoccupations, anxieties, ambitions. Hence, a standard literary diet prescribed for all has negated the reality of the school situation. In our heterogeneous society, variations from group to group and from individual to individual require a wide range of literary materials that will serve as the bridge from the individual's experience to the broad realms of literature. (p.69)

Contemporary society is diverse, requiring diverse texts in our classes. Our students are not all the same, so it may not always be best to have everyone in our classes reading the same text. This could open some exciting opportunities for literature instruction as teachers seek to match students with texts they can relate to.

Teachers can create opportunities for students choose texts to read, including texts that don't end tragically. By utilizing literature circles (Day, Spiegel, McLellan, & Brown, 2002), teachers can have groups of students focus on different texts and then share what they are reading with the rest of the class. This can give students a greater idea of the variety of texts out there, and it allows the teacher to bring more texts into the classroom than would be possible if everyone was reading all of the same books.

Young adult literature provides a wealth of texts that deal with important issues while not necessarily hav-

ing a tragic ending. Young adult literature has a range of stories that appeal to students. Here are a few young adult novels that do not end in the death of a main character that secondary students may enjoy:

- *Holes* by Louis Sachar. Stanley Yelnats and the other boys sentenced to Camp Green Lake dig holes, supposedly to build character. Sachar weaves a story spanning generations that ends in redemption.
- *Challenger Deep* by Neal Shusterman. Caden Bosch's struggles with schizophrenia are based on the experiences of Shusterman's own son. While Caden's journey isn't free from tragedy, the reader also gets to see people surviving and living with mental illness.
- *Eleanor and Park* by Rainbow Rowell. A love story of two teens at a Nebraska high school. A Romeo and Juliet tale where the lovers do not die.
- *Paper Towns* by John Green. High school senior Quentin tries to solve the disappearance of Margot, his next-door neighbor and classmate who he's loved for years. An engaging mystery that does not have a dead body.
- *The Absolutely True Diary of a Part-Time Indian* by Sherman Alexie. Junior deals with the loss of family members, poverty, and being an outsider at a predominantly white high school. Junior's humor and determination make this an eye-opening, heartbreaking story that ends on a hopeful note.

If the curriculum requires students to read the classics, there are some classics that do not end with the main character dying. These canonical texts can be taught in secondary English classes when students need a break from the tragic:

- *The Importance of Being Earnest* by Oscar Wilde. High school students love reading this comedy about two men who pretend to be someone named Ernest.
- *Pride and Prejudice* by Jane Austen. All of the main characters are still alive at the end of Austen's famous romantic comedy.
- *A Midsummer Night's Dream* by William Shakespeare. Lovers escaping a disapproving father, warring fairies, and a group of bumbling actors. Another comedic complement to *Romeo and Juliet*.
- *Treasure Island* by Robert Louis Stevenson. While this adventure of pirates and buried treasure does have a few deaths during the

story, its ending isn't tragic.

- *A Raisin in the Sun* by Lorraine Hansberry. An African-American family in Chicago debates how to spend an inheritance from the life insurance policy of Lena Younger's late husband. When Lena uses the inheritance to buy a house in a white neighborhood, the neighborhood sends someone to buy the house back from the Youngers. As I told my students, no one dies at the end of the play.

How to Select Texts to Teach

Teachers should base their text selections for their classes on what they know about students and what they know about texts. Teachers need to know their students and need to read widely themselves so that they can match students with texts that will interest them and challenge their thinking. The best way to rethink the texts we teach may be to focus on the students rather than a focus on covering texts. Some questions that teachers may ask themselves as they select texts for their classes could include:

- What topics, themes, or genres might interest my students? What do my students need to work on in terms of their reading skills, and what texts might help us work on those skills? What are my students' academic strengths, and how can I build on those? What are my students emotionally ready, or not ready, to read?
- Where am I in my curriculum? What goals and objectives do my students and I need to work towards as we seek to master state standards? If I have texts required by my school's curriculum, what other texts might pair well with these required texts?
- Is it time to mix things up? Is it time to read something more lighthearted or something more serious for change of pace?
- What's going on at this point in the school year? Do we have time to read a longer or more challenging text? Or do we need a text we can tackle in a shorter amount of time? Is this a good point in the school year for a whole class novel, or is this a better time for literature circles or independent reading?

Conclusion

Students draw conclusions about literature from the texts we have them read. It may not be best to stick with the same texts that have been taught for decades, especially since they tend to have tragic endings that leave students convinced that literature worth studying must always end in death. The liter-

ary canon we teach in secondary English class can expand to include the comic as well as the tragic, and young adult literature as well as the classics. Teachers can select texts that speak to students' interests, reflect students' lives, and provide students a view into the lives of others. Secondary teachers would do well to provide students with a balanced literary diet of a variety of texts that show the variety of humanity's experiences.

References

- Day, J., Spiegel, D., McLellan, J., & Brown, V. (2002). *Moving forward with literature circles: How to plan, manage, and evaluate literature circles to deepen understanding and foster a love of reading*. New York, NY: Scholastic.
- Jago, C. (2011). *With rigor for all: Meeting Common Core standards for reading literature* (2nd ed.). Portsmouth, NH: Heinemann.
- Rosenblatt, L. (1995). *Literature as exploration* (5th ed.). New York, NY: Modern Language Association of America.
- Scholes, R. (1985). *Textual power: Literary theory and the teaching of English*. New Haven, CT: Yale University Press.
- Wolk, S. (2010). *What should students read?* Kappan, 91(7), 8-16.

Dr. Amy Piotrowski is an assistant professor of secondary education and English education at Utah State University - Uintah Basin. Before going into teacher education, she taught middle school and high school English in Houston, Texas. She can be reached at amy.piotrowski@usu.edu.
