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PRACTICE

Critiquing What Is and Imagining What Can Be: Literary Studies and Diverse Identities

WENDY KEYSER

As the sole out teacher at my high school, it made sense to advise the Gay Straight Alliance. Here, I shared my story of marriage and having children to teens heading off to their first Pride Prom, eager to imagine their potential futures. But as an English teacher, though I often brought social justice issues into literary discussions and activities, I was at first hesitant to introduce LGBT topics for fear that a parent in the religiously conservative town would complain I was pressing an agenda. However, both my philosophy of teaching and my approach to living life require honesty, embracing unpredictable paths, and taking meaningful risks. My understanding of literature is dialogic, meaning that the truth is neither fixed nor stable, because it exists within a context of experiences, conversations, and connections.

From a sociocultural perspective, a literary discussion on a particular text varies, depending on the histories of the people in the room, the current political climate, and the culture of the school. Since I expected students to both refer to and acknowledge the limitations of their own experiences when tackling literary texts, I needed to do the same. Although discussing identity issues may strike some people as too political or personal for the classroom, choosing not to discuss them sends a message as well, reinforcing beliefs that LGBT experiences are taboo, illicit, or over-sexualized. I resist these beliefs, and as an educator concerned with both society and language, I have come to value the full integration of substantive connections between English class and sexual orientation.

Schools are places of education, and we educate as powerfully through the texts of our physical buildings and cultural conventions as we do through our structured lessons. The structural and pedagogical shift from separate classes for students with special needs towards inclusion shifted community beliefs about the degree to which human difference equates to social divisions. School practices that made my life

difficult, then, did not just affect me but posed statements of value and belief. In challenging these, I embraced the potential of the school to educate through its policies and practices as well as through its classrooms.

Dialogic Discussions in English Class

Dialogic discussions are central to my teaching, with the goal being that students will speak to one another rather than only to the teacher; they will collaboratively wrestle with ideas and listen carefully to one another's contributions, using them to rethink their own perspectives. Open questions, which have multiple possible answers, invite students to play with ambiguities in literary texts and in the world. After prompting students with an open question, I ask follow-up questions based on student comments, encourage them to find examples in the text that support or bring into question the claims at hand, and ask students to experiment with another perspective that runs counter to those already shared. I aim to include relevant meanderings rather than stick to purely answering the question, while still maintaining a sense of purpose and momentum to the conversation. These discussions can last thirty minutes or more, and they can be buttressed by writing activities preceding or resulting from them.

Because this style of talk may be different from what students have experienced in previous classes, where they were asked to briefly answer a series of questions from the teacher, I share a description of dialogic interactions with them before the discussion, as well as give students feedback on their progress at the end of the class. Sometimes it is helpful to ask students to write freely on the topic for five minutes or to use sticky notes to identify and comment on a few passages before we begin to discuss. I call this preparation the "contribution," with the expectation that everyone prepare something to say. During the conversation, they may also take notes that I call "observation and response," which means that they write down a classmate's idea and include

their elaboration on or rebuttal to those thoughts. At the end of the conversation, they may write a reflection, which is an answer to the question: What do I think now, compared to before we had this discussion? What will I continue to think about as we read this text going forwards?

When these discussions go well, they are exciting and energizing, but it may take a number of attempts and the willingness to wait out awkward silences or uncertain moments. As a facilitator, I must be flexible in order to respond to unanticipated student responses, because I am not looking for right or wrong answers. This stance entails an ability to tolerate risk, especially when discussing identities. Students may make comments that are inadvertently offensive to me or to others, and it is my role to preserve the safety of the space while also allowing students to enter into a dialogue from the place of their thoughts and experiences. I strive to balance inviting student participation with challenging ideas that exhibit a lack of understanding. The open questions that I share in this article have yielded lively, unpredictable discussions.

In this piece, I offer questions that invite discussion of issues of LGBT stories and experiences. As an overarching strategy, I ask students to apply the ideas in a literary work to a different, related situation; with issues of justice, identity, and stereotypes, I incorporate LGBT issues, with the caveat that experiences of identity are non-transferable. While there are similarities between institutionalized racism and institutionalized homophobia, and both encounter issues of civil rights, there are also distinctions between the experiences of people from different groups that should not be blurred.

The Power of Words

In English class, I consistently ask students to address the denotations and connotations of words. New Criticism calls it “close reading,” and I have noticed the current popularity of asking students to annotate their texts. While this task can be meaningful, too often teachers do not give enough modeling and attention to teaching students how to select passages worthy of annotation or what questions and topics to contemplate and write down. One move that students can make is to consider word choice, compare a word to other possible words that could have been used, and discuss the implications of the language used. This practice can also be used to encourage students to read and critique social language for its implied messages, and I find that my classes get very animated when I take the opportunity to do so. In

their minds, I have just brought a vernacular topic into an academic setting, something that goes against the cultural norms of classrooms. However, I see these conversations as important work.

High school students, who are in a process of discovering and forging themselves as sexual beings, often use language with multiple layers of meaning without fully considering the impact of their words. Calling a peer a “slut” is one example. One male student, when he felt he was sharply dressed, would swagger around the room before class, saying in a sing-song voice, “I’m pimpin’, “I’m pimpin’.” I did not merely ask him to stop, but explicitly stated the definition of a pimp. Many students expressed shock at this meaning, which bubbled over into surprise that I would even discuss this subject with them. I spoke about prostitution and sexual slavery as real, current, serious issues that should not be easily translated into casual boasts, although our culture sanctions these. Students chimed in with their knowledge of the topic and posed further questions. By discussing language use in a straightforward way that is extremely engaging for students, I teach them the significance of questioning and challenging culturally accepted beliefs through language.

“That’s so gay” is another high school trope that I have worked to dismantle for its implications. While my GSA students objected to this phrase enough to launch a campaign against it, many students throughout the school felt that it was innocuous and did not carry legitimate homophobic meaning. Students had been coming to GSA with stories about homophobic language their classmates used freely in class without repercussions from the teacher. One teacher complained that an out student’s identifying herself as “bi” was too “sexualized.” Students protested that our Ally Week that happened to coincide with the Supreme Court’s overturning of the Defense of Marriage Act was too “political.” Strands of subtle and overt antigay messages infiltrated the school even as it slowly became more accepting in accordance with society’s shifts.

The GSA wanted to create a space for unspoken support to move towards outward expressions of support for our LGBT community members. We invited departments, sports teams and clubs to voice their support through morning announcements, involving physical education and science teachers, the guidance department, and girls’ lacrosse. The Celebrate Life club, a pro-life group, crafted an announcement that read: “We value and respect all life, and that includes the lives of gay and lesbian people.” In tandem with the announcements, we created a creative challenge to the

students: what could our school community say instead of “that’s so gay?” After signing the ally pledge to stand up against homophobic language, students suggested phrases like: “That’s so pineapple,” “That’s so wacky,” and “That’s highly illogical, Captain,” a shout-out to *Star Trek*. The goal was to engage staff and students in weighing the implications of words spoken and words ignored.

As a result of the Don’t Say That’s So Gay campaign, a tall oil painting leans against my classroom wall with a life-sized Spock holding a pineapple against a pink backdrop. His speech bubble says, “It’s not gay . . . it’s highly illogical.” This painting has become another text that contributes to my classroom culture, because students never fail to notice and ask about it. This conversation builds upon a discussion of my classroom expectations on the first day of class. I share the principle: “respect everyone,” and ask students to list ways that they can embody respect in class. The most popular answer is “don’t interrupt,” which is a valuable talking point to launch a semester of open-ended discussions. When I add my ideas, I point out that I said “everyone” rather than “everyone in this room.” I want us to be respectful of groups defined by race, class, gender, or sexual orientation, as well as to be respectful of individuals.

Outing Myself and My Curriculum

Through the act of being out as a teacher, married and with kids, I offer an example of adult life for LGBT and straight high school students. Vocal adult allies in the school and graduates who volunteer to speak at an Out and Proud panel discussion join me to create a “presence of supportive adults” (Mayo, 2013) that contributes to a broader safe space beyond the GSA. My individuality contradicts stereotypes, as students find out that I love poetry, run in the woods, and enjoy finding new soup recipes. I cannot stand it when someone taps his foot repeatedly, and I love a great question about *Sula* (Morrison, 1982). A ninth-grade boy who was unfamiliar with talking about LGBT issues in January heatedly interjected into a conversation in May, “Come on, Ms. Keyser, would you want your partner to do that to you?” showing that sexual orientation was no longer an obstacle in considering human experiences within relationships.

Even though Massachusetts was the first state to legalize gay marriage, it was also the first state to hold a legislative vote considering its repeal. I addressed this historic and political moment in both the Gay Straight Alliance and the English classroom. Excitingly, I brought my GSA to meet

with our local representative, who was one of the few in the state undecided on the issue, and he ended up voting with us. Unexpectedly, my ninth grade class initiated a conversation on the upcoming vote. “Are you in favor of gay marriage?” a boy asked, clearly the one nominated by his peers. I was already out at the school, and had even received baby gifts from one student when my partner gave birth, so it was not too difficult to explain that I would like my rights protected.

I was then blindsided by a question from another student: “But if we let gay people marry, won’t we have to let people marry their dogs?” I am not sure why the question did not feel like the barb it was. In the moment, I felt compassion for this young man, whose family must have dispensed this illogical analogy. In retrospect, I find a tinge of humor in it, mixed with the sinking feeling that some voting citizens of our country still hold the same belief. “So, marrying me is the same thing as marrying a dog?” was my response.

Despite the value of sharing details of my life with my students, I eventually came to believe that outing myself was not sufficient, and that my curriculum needed outing as well. By restricting our fiction and nonfiction readings to heterosexual stories, I was inadvertently imparting an academic value of exclusion. This realization did not immediately create change in my classroom, because I faced the obstacles of internal fear and external resources. I overcame my fear by taking incremental steps, and I slowly accrued resources as I proceeded with this new goal. In this article, I share specific texts, prompts, and possible companion pieces for high school English classes; these resources are displayed and elaborated upon in Appendix A.

As challenging as coming out with my students was, it was easier than explicitly integrating LGBT issues into the curriculum, perhaps because that was more planned and purposeful. I was nervous to be accused of being too political or trying to brainwash my students. I made the shift subtly and cautiously by outing Lorraine Hansberry. Even though I had been teaching *A Raisin in the Sun* for a decade, I had not known that the author identified as lesbian in her later years until I pulled up her biography (Regents of the University of Minnesota, 2009) for the class to read. Perhaps because they were expecting a dry text in the author biography genre, or maybe because they were less easily disconcerted than I expected, reading the sheet aloud was uneventful. After a brief moment of relief, I realized how tentative I had been to think that this one-liner was sufficient to engage students in addressing issues of identity, gender, and sexual orientation. I have since incorporated these topics into my classes, and

they have provoked interesting, lively discussions, thinking, and writing.

While I do not like to highlight only the down side of difference, it is also important that students contemplate the tragic results of bigotry. Just as I offer *Night* (2006) by Elie Weisel for his personal experience of the Holocaust, I expose students to the thought-provoking series of interconnected poems by Lesléa Newman called *October Mourning: A Song For Matthew Shepard* (2012). In this slim volume, she explores his torture and murder from a number of perspectives, including that of the boys who kidnapped and killed him and even the rope used to tie him to a barbed wire fence. These poems are accessible and in-your-face, a refreshing balance for poetry that takes multiple re-readings to decipher.

Poems from *October Mourning* work well in a unit of multiple and unusual perspectives. I invite students to begin thinking about perspective by selecting a poem we have already studied and rewriting it from another perspective; for example, “Mother to Son” by Langston Hughes can be recast from the voice of the son. Perhaps he is defensive about his lack of persistence or feels that his obstacles merit his turning back.

I select two poems: “The Clothesline” and “The Fence,” both taken from *October Mourning* and written from an anthropomorphized perspective. These are heavy, sobering, important poems. “The Fence” states: “Their truck was the last thing he saw/ I saw what was done to this child/ I cradled him just like a mother.” I pair these with other poems that use a personified speaker. In “The Wild Iris” (1993) by Louise Gluck, the speaker is the bulb of the iris waiting to emerge from the earth, and in “Mushrooms” by Sylvia Plath

(1998), the speakers are the mushrooms, “nudgers and pushers in spite of ourselves.”

To practice writing from a perspective other than their own, students complete a “mystery poem” assignment. Each writes a poem from the perspective of an anthropomorphized speaker, revealing its identity only in the title, as Plath does in “Mushrooms.” Students bring in their poems with the titles removed, and each student numbers their paper with the number of poems. After pushing desks into pods, groups of three travel around the room, reading each poem

and guessing its title. The lesson concludes when each student reads their poem aloud and reveals the answer.

While *October Mourning* relays tragedy, I also like to include humor in our studies of identity. For a light-hearted story with a twist, I enjoy “The Obelisk” (Forster, 2009). In this short story, a straight married couple is hiking up a hill to view an obelisk when they meet up with a pair of charming sailors. The four people break up into two pairs, each member of the couple hiking along with one of the newcomers. The young woman and her companion enjoy a romantic interlude and then hurry down to catch up with her husband. When he and his sailor friend enthuse about the obelisk at the top, the reader learns of a final detail

that these two do not know: the obelisk has toppled.

We, along with the young woman, are left to deduce just why these two have not viewed the obelisk aside from the picture on their gift shop postcard. This story uses irony to highlight the common assumption that people are straight until proven otherwise. Pairing this piece with other stories with an ironic twist at the end could support students’ understanding of this literary device; alternately, the story could

The Passion of Matthew Shepard, Fr. William McNichols

be taught alone or as a pre-reading activity before reading a novel by E.M. Forster, such as *A Room with a View* (1995).

Challenging Injustice Inside and Outside of the Classroom

Thoreau asks a powerful question: “Unjust laws exist: shall we be content to obey them, or shall we endeavor to amend them, and obey them until we have succeeded, or shall we transgress them at once?” (1849). I label these as options A, B, and C on the board and ask students to consider their personal stance. This is not about the speed limit, which may be inconvenient but is not unjust, so I ask them to imagine that slavery were still in place today: what would each one do in response to the injustice? Interestingly and disappointingly, the typical response is to inquire what their own race is, if they would be combating their own slavery or someone else’s. This question alone is worth probing for its ethical implications. Usually most students select B, trying to change the law while following it, and very few select C, transgressing the law at once.

I then ask students to brainstorm current laws that are unjust, or that some people may feel are unjust, which challenges them. In the mix of examples, I include the ban on gay marriage in some states; until the latest Supreme Court ruling, I also included the limitation on gay marriage rights to those provided at the state level, excluding legally married spouses from federal tax and Social Security benefits. Students were surprised and outraged, especially when I explained that tax laws affecting me were different from those affecting high school teachers in adjacent rooms.

When students ask me, “Have you ever been mistreated at school because of sexual orientation?” I tell them that I have been treated respectfully, overall. But when my partner was pregnant with twins and I requested my allotted five days of “family sick” leave for the delivery and transition home, I had to write a letter to the superintendent to request an “exception” to the district’s policy, because we weren’t able to be legally married yet and therefore weren’t considered “family.” Sitting in a wobbly chair in front of the principal’s weighty, expansive desk when he told me I would have to write this letter, I felt belittled and singled out. Wasn’t having children together the definition of creating family?

Another time, I noticed that our school web filter was blocking websites with GSA resources, labeling them “sexually explicit content.” Wondering: How is human rights equated with pornography? I found our tech support man. in

the windowless office between stacks of piled broken computers, mice, and wires, he told me, “Well, there is a higher likelihood that those websites will be sexually inappropriate.” I felt sullied and claustrophobic in the cramped, fluorescent-lit room. I later learned that he complained I had personally attacked him when I took the matter to an administrator and introduced the support of the American Civil Liberties Union on web filtering issues in schools.

In each of these instances, the school eventually chose equality over discrimination, but not without initial judgment that I had to challenge. They granted the leave time and unblocked websites with educational LGBT content. Interactions with individuals worked in tandem with structural change; the leverage of marriage equality in Massachusetts and the legal advocacy of the ACLU pressured my administration to listen. My school was a microcosm of society: not a uniform entity, but a group of individuals.

Injustice happens on a continuum, and I find that directly teaching the connections between stereotypes, discrimination, and oppression helps students understand the roots of justice issues. I teach that stereotypes are unavoidable, because they are humans’ way to make sense of the world, but I encourage students to develop a mindset of noticing and “talking back to” the stereotypes in their minds. I ask, “Where do you think stereotypes come from?” This question is not a brief side road from our literary conversation, but an essential building block to further inquiry. Students offer events from their lives that could have led to the formation of stereotypes. I am careful to respond with empathy rather than judgment. I teach students that stereotypes come from generalizing from experiences, something we are hard-wired to do as an evolutionary survival mechanism. Yet these narrow ways of thinking also create problems, because they lead us to treat others as identical to others in their group, rather than the individuals that they are.

I then introduce the poem “Sure You Can Ask Me a Personal Question,” which confronts stereotypes applied to Native Americans through one speaker’s side of a dialogue laced with sarcasm: “Yeah, it was awful what you guys did to us./ It’s real decent of you to apologize./ No, I don’t know where you can get peyote. / No, I don’t know where you can get Navajo rugs real cheap. / No, I didn’t make this. /I bought it at Bloomingdales” (Burns, 2002). I ask students to think about suppositions people make about others based on their group status. I invite students to write an imitation poem by borrowing Burns’ format of writing one side of a conversation in order to expose and criticize stereotypes made

about another group. I provide students with the choice of subordinated groups, such as senior citizens, LGBT individuals, low-income people, people with disabilities, or another group they suggest.

To continue a study of injustice, the essay “White Privilege: Unpacking the Invisible Knapsack” (McIntosh, 1988) points out unnoticed privileges of whiteness, from the color of band-aids to the ability to walk through a store without suspicion. I ask pairs of students to write a list like McIntosh’s that addresses another privileged perspective. Students may select between young, straight, middle-class, and able-bodied people. Once during this activity, I struck up a conversation with a pair who had chosen to write about the knapsack of privilege carried by heterosexuals. They were eager to participate but stumped for examples, and I suggested they think about representation: when had they seen LGBT individuals or couples in a commercial, especially one emphasizing marriage, family life, or romance? I am pleased to have spotted a few such examples in advertisements since then, but I was also delighted when these high school students responded with “ahas” of understanding, extending the example I provided to consider other issues of visibility and acknowledgement.

Incorporating LGBT perspectives in English class is both a stance of inclusion regardless of the text at hand and an ongoing pursuit of works suited for high school students. I continue to search for an extended literary work that features LGBT characters in complex roles without a singular focus on identity struggles. For this reason, I was disappointed by *Lovers at the Chameleon Club* (Prose, 2014), in which the self-loathing of its main lesbian character leads her to perform torture and die miserable and unloved. On the other hand, I recently discovered the novella *Kitchen* by Banana Yoshimoto. In this story, the main character moves in with a male friend and finds that his mother Eriko is transgender; however, this aspect of Eriko is described as only one part of a nurturing, funny, vulnerable character. Eriko is neither the token lesbian aunt making a guest appearance in a book, nor the tragic character only defined by her persecution. As society’s conversation of LGBT and gender issues evolves, I want my classroom to remain on the forefront, introducing tough questions and bringing to light real and imagined stories for the complicated interplay between what is and what can be.

I have heard it said that coming out is a political act, and I agree that when people see the uniqueness of an individual rather than a vague and distorted box, they may change their

politics. But teachers are charged with being apolitical, keeping these opinions to themselves. This tension cannot be neatly balanced when it is my individual rights that are on the line. So I would like to recast the old maxim and say instead that both coming out and teaching about LGBT experiences and rights are educational acts. They both converge in the power of stories, which is the initial experience that drew me to teaching English in the first place. Stories in literature have the ability to captivate, inspire, disturb, prod—they paradoxically take the reader delightfully away from her current surroundings and confront the reader with the need to view his environment in a new and different way. Similarly, creating a dialogic classroom in which students listen to one another with openness to rethinking their suppositions about academic and real-world topics allows the power of an individual’s story to enter into our students’ education. The stories of my life can be combined with experiences that students share with one another to that end.

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Sonnet 20

A woman's face with nature's own hand painted,
Hast thou, the master mistress of my passion;
A woman's gentle heart, but not acquainted
With shifting change, as is false women's fashion:
An eye more bright than theirs, less false in rolling,
Gilding the object whereupon it gazeth;
A man in hue, all 'hues' in his controlling,
Which steals men's eyes and women's souls amazeth.
And for a woman wert thou first created;
Till Nature, as she wrought thee, fell a-doting,
And by addition me of thee defeated,
By adding one thing to my purpose nothing.
But since she prick'd thee out for women's pleasure,
Mine be thy love and thy love's use their treasure.

—William Shakespeare

Appendix A. Literary Texts for High School Students Working with LGBT Issues

Title	LGBT/Gender Issue.	Discussion Questions	Creative Response	Pairable Texts
<i>Kitchen</i> by Banana Yoshimoto. Novella.	Transgender central character.	Discuss how Eriko's character includes gender identity but is not restricted by this one aspect of her.	Create a mind map of the role that the room of the kitchen plays in the main character's life. Then, select a room or space that is significant to you and create a map of this space's meanings.	by J.D. Salinger and <i>The Bell Jar</i> by Sylvia Plath, two novels which address coming of age, independence, and a critique of society.
"Sure You Can Ask me a Personal Question" by Diane Burns. Poem.	Addresses stereotypes through sarcasm and humor.	Where do stereotypes come from? How do they go awry and become hurtful to all parties? How can we confront stereotypes in our own minds and in the minds of others?	Choose another group that faces stereotypes. Writing one side of a dialogue and implying the other, create a poem shedding light on the flimsiness of stereotypes.	"What the Doctor Said" by Raymond Carver, a poem in the form of a retold conversation.
"On the Duty of Civil Disobedience" by Henry D. Thoreau. Essay.	Provokes thought on individual response to injustice.	What law is unjust in our present society? Would you transgress the law at once, follow the law and attempt to change it or follow the law? Discuss how and why. You may consider laws affecting LGBT Americans.	SRsearch civil disobedience acts that are current and/or local. These must be nonviolent, accept legal consequences, and performed in order to promote justice. Evaluate whether the act of civil disobedience was moral, justified, and effective. Present your findings to the class.	<i>"March: Book One</i> and <i>March: Book Two</i> by John Lewis, Andrew Aydin, and Nate Powell, the first two books in the trilogy of graphic novels depicting John Lewis' nonviolent civil rights activism. Letter from Gandhi to British Viceroy Lord Irwin, announcing plans of march to protest the British Salt Tax through civil disobedience (1930).

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“The Obelisk” by E. M. Forster. Short Story.	Includes gay romance as a plot twist.	How does the author use the readers’ assumptions to create humor and irony?	Given a selection of tourist postcards from different regions, students select a postcard and incorporate it into a short story in an unexpected way. They may work in groups or individually.	<i>A Room with A View</i> by E.M. Forster, a novel by the same author Video of commercial for Amazon Kindle Paperwhite tablet, featuring a gay twist at the end.
“White Privilege: Unpacking the Invisible Knapsack” by Peggy McIntosh. Essay.	Provokes thought on invisible privilege.	Select another group that holds invisible privileges (such as adults younger than senior citizens, men, able-bodied people, or straight people). Write an imitation piece in the form of a list that this group holds.	Share stories of experiences that relate to the examples on McIntosh’s list. When have you (or those with you) been granted or denied the benefits of one of these privileges? How did it affect you?	“Just Walk on By: Black Men and Public Space,” an essay by Brent Staples reflecting on an awareness of how his black, male body evokes fear in others and how this phenomenon affects his sense of self.
<i>October Mourning: A Song for Mathew Shepard</i> by Lesléa Newman. Poetry.	Depicts multiple imagined perspectives on the murder of Matthew Shepard.	Is death resulting from malice worse than accidental death? Why/why not? Are individuals responsible for their prejudiced thoughts and actions, if these prejudices have been taught to them by society? Explain your reasoning and examine the other perspective.	Select an experience from your own life and write a series of three to five poems about the same event, each told from a different perspective. Include both animate and inanimate speakers.	“The Wild Iris,” a poem by Louise Glück from the perspective of an iris. “Mushrooms,” a poem by Sylvia Plath from the perspective of a mushroom. “Heat,” a poem by Hilda Doolittle addressed to heat.
<i>Sula</i> by Toni Morrison. Novel.	Considers social expectations of women through three generations of characters who defy prescribed gender roles.	Is Sula’s quest to be true to herself ultimately selfish or freeing? Can one be true to oneself without harming others?	Select two characters who have a lot to say to one another that is left unsaid in the scope of the novel. Write a dialogue between them.	“Turned,” a short story by Charlotte Perkins Gilman, features two women who reject the man who has loved them both.