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Teaching Social Justice Through Gothic Young Adult Literature

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METHODS

Teaching Social Justice through Gothic Young Adult Literature

Lindsey Carman Williams and Ashley S. Boyd

Creating the classroom as a brave space (Arao & Clemens, 2013) is important now more than ever. Not only should the classroom be warm and inviting to students, but it should also serve as a place to encourage students to engage in social justice efforts through critical thinking and action. In *Teaching to Transgress*, bell hooks states, “To teach in a manner that respects and cares for the souls of our students is essential if we are to provide the necessary conditions where learning can most deeply and intimately begin” (1994). One way of respecting and caring for students, which hooks calls for educators to do, is to critique inequalities based on gender, race, socioeconomic class, sexuality, dis/ability, and nationality through literature. Using literature as a vehicle to discuss oppression with students is a pivotal step toward helping students develop critical thinking skills and to reflect on how certain power structures in society perpetuate inequalities based on identity.

Yet, the traditional literary canon continues to persist in secondary classrooms, and we know that canonical texts reflect dominant ideologies and perpetuate problematic narratives “about Whiteness, masculinity, heterosexuality, Christianity, and physical and mental ability, for example” (Borsheim-Black, et al. 2014). Because of this, scholars have proposed methods for teaching such works critically and for drawing students’ attention to the narratives they exclude and for soliciting readers’ connections to contemporary topics (Borsheim-Black, et al. 2014; Dyches 2018).

Pairing the canon with young adult literature (YAL), or texts that reflect the lives and experiences of students in our classrooms, has been another method proposed to expand upon the limits of classic texts. Rybakova and Roccanti (2016), for example, encourage “using YAL as a scaffold for canonical literature in secondary English Language Arts classrooms” which “takes advantage of the strengths of both categories and benefits readers of all types as they navigate what it means to

construct literary meaning” (p. 31-32). Furthermore, YAL has been well-documented as an avenue that facilitates youth’s understandings of social justice, reflecting and expanding upon their knowledge of systems of oppression such as racism, class disparities, gender inequity, and the intersections of those systems (i.e., Simmons 2012).

In this article, we illustrate how teachers can combine critical approaches, traditional texts, and young adult literature from the Gothic realm to highlight social justice topics, using literacy to center inequity and to amplify marginalized perspectives. Scholars like Natalie Neill argue that early Gothic texts such as Mary Shelley’s *Frankenstein* highlight the detriment of toxic masculinity in its depiction of Victor Frankenstein (2018), and we argue that Gothic Young Adult Literature (GYAL) provides similar critiques of social justice issues. Drawing on our mutual concerns for equity and justice as well as our collective teaching experiences which include working with secondary students, teaching literature in higher education, and engaging in professional development with in-service English teachers, we offer myriad pedagogical strategies for how to teach about social justice topics in the ELA classroom through GYAL. The current climate in the US often makes it difficult to discuss topics related to social justice, especially in states such as Florida that have passed so-called “anti-woke” policies; however, it is important to discuss issues of racial, gender, class, and other inequities through the vehicle of literature since students in our classrooms are most often experiencing these inequities themselves. The Gothic genre itself is subversive, which makes it essential to use when discussing the prevalence of social inequalities and inequities.

We begin with an overview of Gothic literature and its connections to social justice, and then we offer two works of GYAL that serve as companions to traditional literary texts that are often assigned as required reading in ELA curriculum. For each pairing, we provide examples of discussion questions, class activities, and ideas for extension to social action projects,

which help students enact social justice in spaces outside of the classroom. Overall, we argue that pairing GYAL with literary Gothic texts allows for teachers in a range of social and cultural contexts to be able to launch a conversation about social justice through themes like gender inequality and oppressive power.

Exploring Social Justice in Young Adult Gothic Literature

Gothic literature utilizes elements of horror, fear, and the supernatural to express cultural anxieties and issues. Ruth Robbins and Julian Wolfreys in *Victorian Gothic* argue that “the Gothic, as a body of fiction, is always already excessive, grotesque, overflowing its own boundaries and limits” (2000). Gothic literature examines issues related to social justice, making it a useful genre to encourage students to explore these issues, which occur in everyday life, inside the classroom and outside of the classroom. For example, Justine and Elizabeth can be seen as targets of male violence in Shelley’s *Frankenstein*, which is deeply connected to gendered oppression. Otherness has long been associated with difference, and this of course connects to difference based on race, gender, class, sexuality, disability, nationality, as well as other marginalized identity markers. Jack Halberstam also adds that “Gothic fiction. . . produces the deviant subjectivities opposite which the normal, the healthy, and the pure can be known” (1995). Again, most social justice issues stem from binaries that are embedded in Western society, such as male/female, heterosexual/homosexual, white/Black, and normal/abnormal. Most often Othered figures in Gothic fiction, such as Heathcliff, a racially ambiguous character in Emily Brontë’s *Wuthering Heights* (1847), and Hester Prynne, a shunned sexually active woman in Nathaniel Hawthorne’s *The Scarlet Letter* (1850), highlight how fear of the Other and transgression leads to violence and mistreatment. Gothic literature, especially GYAL, has the potential to demonstrate how to treat those who are othered in society with respect but to also foster discussion about the consequences of mistreatment and violence—all topics relevant to our present-day classrooms.

Gothic YAL has a history of widespread popularity, ranging from J.K. Rowling’s *Harry Potter* series to Leigh Bardugo’s *Six of Crows* series to the more recent *White Smoke* by Tiffany D. Jackson. In particular, GYAL texts explore uncertainties surrounding the self, to which teens can also relate. According to Michelle J. Smith and Kristine Moruzi in *Young Adult Gothic Fiction*, “YA Gothic literature works through a

variety of contemporary anxieties pertaining to race, gender, sexuality and technology via its depiction of relationships between humans and non-humans” (2021). Readers of GYAL are given the opportunity to analyze why inequities exist in our world (i.e., tension between socioeconomic classes in Suzanne Collins’ *Hunger Games* series) and illustrate the need to address oppression to strive toward equity (i.e., creating solidarity despite difference in Bardugo’s *Six of Crows*). We believe that engaging young adult readers with GYAL not only piques their interest in reading but also allows them to understand the consequences of oppression in these fictional worlds. Encouraging students to read GYAL, especially alongside traditional texts, invites them to care about the complex systems of oppression (i.e., patriarchy, capitalism, and imperialism) that impact many lives today.

Accessibility and Engaging Interest in Pairing YA Novels with Gothic Classics

Quite often, secondary English teachers are required to teach literary classics such as Mary Shelley’s *Frankenstein* and Emily Brontë’s *Wuthering Heights*. By pairing GYAL with literary classics, students may find the traditional texts more accessible to read, interpret, and engage with. Furthermore, pairing texts allows teachers the ability to highlight social topics across them, bringing to light an issue of oppression in the traditional text through the more relevant one. Thus, we designed the unit described below with the following inquiry:

Not only should the classroom be warm and inviting to students, but it should also serve as a place to encourage students to engage in social justice efforts through critical thinking and action.

In what ways can GYAL be paired alongside Gothic classics to help facilitate students’ understandings of social justice issues?

With this in mind, we created these units and offer them as examples of pairing and teaching GYAL with Gothic classics in ways that promote attention to issues of oppression and equity. The first example pairs Kiersten White’s *The Dark Descent of Elizabeth Frankenstein* with *Frankenstein*, a work frequently taught in senior English classes. Similarly, Edgar Allan Poe’s works are included as text exemplars on the Common Core State Standards, so the second example pairs Mary Amato’s *Open Mic Night at Westminster Abbey* with Poe’s

horror tales for younger grades. Our aim was to provide pedagogical ideas and lessons for teaching *Frankenstein* and Poe's short stories, such as "The Tell-Tale Heart" and "The Cask of Amontillado," in the modern-day ELA classroom while emphasizing and focusing on social justice issues based on gender and socioeconomic class and inequities that stem from oppressive social institutions such as the government.

Teaching about Gender

Kiersten White's *The Dark Descent of Elizabeth Frankenstein* recounts the well-known story of Mary Shelley's *Frankenstein* (1818) through the perspective of Elizabeth Lavenza, Victor's female companion. White's captivating re-telling of the familiar tale explicitly voices Elizabeth's frustrations with Victor's behavior as well as her limited options as a lower-class woman in nineteenth-century British society. White's *The Dark Descent* depicts several Gothic themes such as isolation,

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and, throughout the book, Elizabeth is constantly isolated from the Frankenstein family and even Justine by her otherness: "My mind was already gnawing anxious circles around my origin" (White 2018, emphasis original).

Victor, throughout the book, reveals his desire to have power and control over Elizabeth as well: "You are mine, Elizabeth Lavenza, and nothing will take you from me. Not even death" (White 2018). By the end of the book, Elizabeth critiques Victor's thirst for power which has caused much death and devastation to the Frankenstein family. White's book also illustrates the themes of evil and violence, especially through Victor's misdeeds. At the end of the book, Elizabeth discovers that Victor has killed Henry and uses his body parts to make the creature that is eventually named Adam. White's *The Dark Descent* depicts the horrors of ambition, desperation, and insecurity, which are Gothic themes that connect to issues of social justice.

White's neo-Gothic novel extends Shelley's discussion of gender inequity in a different manner. Readers follow the story through Elizabeth's narration and discover that she experiences constant persecution based on gender. She does not

receive the same education as Victor and is expected to manage the household after Madame Frankenstein dies. Elizabeth's cunning dialogue and action helps her obtain her position in the Frankenstein family, yet, as a woman, she still experiences much oppression. Taking a different approach from Shelley's novel, which subtly discusses toxic masculinity, White's book explicitly discusses Elizabeth's experiences of gender inequality in more detail, which provides a great opportunity to discuss the theme in class with students.

Focusing on Gender, Voice, and Difference

To help generate reflection and discussion in the classroom on issues surrounding gender equity and fear of difference, we draw on several activities that encourage students to engage with those themes. While acknowledging that Elizabeth has minimal dialogue and agency in Shelley's novel, teachers should reiterate that Elizabeth's and Justine's lack of dialogue in *Frankenstein* highlights the immense privilege and power that men had during the Enlightenment period (Haggerty, 2016). White's book chooses to add more backstory about Elizabeth and Justine to provide more details for readers. We, then, direct students to compare both depictions of Elizabeth and Justine in White's *The Dark Descent* and Shelley's *Frankenstein*. Upon doing so, we prompt students with the following questions: Why does Shelley choose to not give Elizabeth and Justine as much dialogue while White chooses to do so? How might both of these depictions illustrate gender inequity in different ways? To help them compare *Frankenstein* to *The Dark Descent*, we then ask readers to locate and mark with post-it notes at least two instances of when Elizabeth appears in White's novel (e.g., readers might locate quotes such as: "I had always been jealous of Victor for leaving. Now I knew to be jealous of what he had left for," and determination in "I needed Victor back, and I would not let him abandon me again" White, 2018) and two instances in Shelley's novel. After students share their marked words and passages with the class, we ask: How do both Shelley's and White's depictions of Elizabeth portray instances of gender inequality? What are some specific examples? How might Elizabeth not have much agency and voice in each novel?

The next activity is titled "Think, Pair, Share," in which students either create a Venn Diagram or a table. Building on the discussion above, for the "Think" portion of this activity, we ask students to create a map of overlapping similarities and differences between the depiction of gender inequity in

Thinking about Gender Inequality	Thinking about Fear of Difference
How are Elizabeth and Justine depicted in Shelley's <i>Frankenstein</i> ? How about in White's <i>The Dark Descent</i> ?	How is fear of difference depicted in <i>Frankenstein</i> ? In <i>The Dark Descent</i> ?
Why is Victor treated better than Elizabeth in both <i>Frankenstein</i> and <i>The Dark Descent</i> , especially considering that both are raised the same way?	Who did you feel the most sympathy for (i.e., the creature, Elizabeth, Justine, Victor, Henry) in both texts? Why or why not?
How does reading the story in both a male perspective (Shelley's <i>Frankenstein</i>) and a female perspective (White's <i>The Dark Descent</i>) change our understanding of the plot, especially when we consider how boys and girls are sometimes treated differently in society?	How would your perspective of Shelley's and White's book change if each text was narrated by the creature?
What are some ways that Elizabeth and Justine should have been treated better in both texts? How do these texts cause you to reflect on how you treat people according to their gender?	What are some ways that fear of difference could have been avoided in both novels? How do these texts cause you to reflect on how you respond to difference?

Frankenstein and *The Dark Descent*. This part of the activity further helps students examine the key issues of gender oppression and representation, such as how Elizabeth in White's *The Dark Descent* has more dialogue compared to Elizabeth in *Frankenstein*. Both texts, of course, discuss the presence of toxic masculinity, but both go about it in different manners. Again, we ask them to point to specific places in the text for evidence of their observations. After creating the diagram or table, students move on to the "Pair" portion of the activity. During this part, we pose questions to students around gender inequality and fear of difference.

We encourage students to talk with a partner during this portion of the activity. Finally, during the "Share" portion of the activity, we ask students to share their responses with the entire class. The goal of this activity is to encourage students to engage with a particular Gothic theme (such as gender inequality and/or fear of difference) that is depicted in both texts. After seeing and acknowledging the differences between Victor and Elizabeth in both texts, we then ask students in small groups to consider how gender inequity occurs today, such as how their siblings might be treated differently based on gender or on physical expectations of women. Returning to the issue of agency above, we ask students to think of times and places where women are left out or silenced. We then ask students to select two to three examples and brainstorm ways to address

them. For example, students might realize that girls are not asked to play on a sports team, so they might brainstorm a way to ensure that girls are equally asked as much as boys during physical education classes or recess.

Extending to Social Action for Gender Equity

As with any social justice-focused endeavor in the classroom, it is crucial to move readers from critique to action. We encourage teachers to provide students opportunities for social action projects (Epstein 2013), or assignments in which they can identify a problem related to an issue and design some sort of intervention to promote change. In this instance, to connect students to present-day concerns about gender inequity, students might design an action project based on their brainstorming above. First, as a way to recognize that gender inequity remains a problem, students could design awareness campaigns or public service announcements that solidify the issue, noting how it arises in their lives and/or society. Attention to voice, as noted above in the brainstorming where women are silenced, connects to the themes in the Gothic texts. To act more subversively, students might decide where and when to speak up and advertise those strategies.

In addition, students could research local and national inequities, such as gender pay gaps and determine a related ac-

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tion, such as lobbying a business-owner or writing to a local legislator. To make it even more local, students could focus on gender inequities in their own school contexts, such as in the treatment of sports mentioned above or through dress code policies, and they could create and share presentations with school administrators to address those and champion change. When we have engaged secondary students in critical projects around gender, they have partnered with a local women’s shelter to supply needed items and collected funds to donate. At the university level with similar projects, students interviewed members of their campus and created a public service announcement about women’s safety. Seeing how gender is an issue in the traditional and GYAL texts can prompt youth to discern its ramifications in their own worlds.

Teaching about Government, Rules, and Oppression

Mary Amato’s *Open Mic Night at Westminster Abbey* examines the power of social institutions such as government that perpetuate the privilege/oppression binary which impacts marginalized identities. The book, written in a play format, follows the story of Lacy, a sixteen-year-old who finds herself residing in Westminster Cemetery along with other ghosts, including the famous American writer, Edgar Allan Poe. Lacy finds it difficult to adjust to the afterlife, especially since Mrs. Steele, a long-time resident of Westminster, enforces harsh rules that impact the well-being of every inhabitant. There are several Gothic themes that Amato explores in this work, such as loss and power of the dominant group. Lacy, who reflects on her human life throughout the book, must come to terms with the impact of her death on her family. She encourages her

sister Olivia, even though she cannot hear her, to cope from her loss: “Shine the light in the darkest part. I know it’s hard. But if you don’t do it, you won’t be alive!” (Amato, 2018). Amato also challenges the notions of rationality and order throughout *Open Mic Night*. Sam, the son of Mrs. Steele, rejects his mother’s authoritarian ruling by simply stating, “Fuck the restoration of order” (Amato, 2018). Lacy, as well as other ghosts, join Sam in uprooting the restrictive rules of Westminster Abbey. Overall, Amato’s *Open Mic Night* encourages young readers to reflect on Gothic themes of loss and oppression to understand the complexity of choices and the bitter-sweet moments of life.

Discussing Systemic Oppression

Below we highlight activities that we developed for teaching the theme of governmental power and order in both Amato’s *Open Mic Night* and Poe’s works in the secondary English classroom. First, we define with students the concepts of resistance and oppression, asking them to share current examples of each. Next, we ask students to discuss reflection questions which focus their attention on the Gothic themes of resistance and oppression in small groups.

After students discuss the above questions in small groups, we then task them with participating in an activity called “Justice Creatively!” The purpose of this assignment is to encourage students to reflect on the themes of social justice in a new creative medium. Students can select a creative medium from any of the following options:

Thinking about Resistance	Thinking about Oppression
How is resistance depicted in Amato’s <i>Open Mic Night</i> ? In Poe’s “The Masque of the Red Death” and/or “The Cask of Amontillado”? What happens to characters like Lacy and Prince Prospero when they try to resist against unjust rule or a bad situation?	How does Lacy face mistreatment in Westminster Cemetery? How does Prince Prospero face the same? In what ways does Lacy express her anger toward oppression? What about the main character from “The Cask of Amontillado”?
How has reading Amato’s work and Poe’s tales affected your understanding of resistance? How have you seen resistance create change in your community?	How has reading Amato’s work and Poe’s tales affected your understanding of oppression? How have you seen oppression affect people in your community? Why is it important to discuss this?

- play (a scene or two)
- short story
- poem (one or two)
- diary entry (one or two)
- a music playlist, or
- a TikTok video

Next, we challenge students to explore the themes of resistance and oppression from the two texts through this medium. Examples include an analysis of Sam's struggle with bravery from Amato's *Open Mic Night* and Prince Prospero's attempts to avoid the plague from Poe's "The Masque of the Red Death" (1842) in a two-voiced poem. Or students may examine Lacy's rap about justice – "Look, I don't deserve this. My murderer does. So where is the justice, the fairness?" – and Poe's "The Cask of Amontillado" (1846) (Amato, 148) in a musical playlist where each selection reflected the character's tone and message. Students then share their work in a sort of class open-mic/gallery event, and we end with reflective writing, asking them to respond to the following questions: How did creating a poem, play, etc. help you reflect on the character's perspectives and experiences with resistance and oppression? What institutional obstacles were at play in your instances? Overall, this class activity helps develop analysis and critical-thinking skills as well as understanding of the themes.

Extending to Social Action on Resistance and Oppression

As mentioned with the previous pairing, to extend their understanding of resistance and oppression, students could also complete social action projects. Regarding these themes, students could examine a current situation, again locally, nationally, or globally, in which both are occurring. For instance, they might research the Russian invasion of Ukraine and determine some way to assist refugees and/or spread awareness about what Americans can or should be doing at this time of global crisis. They could find instances near their schools in which workers are resisting oppression, such as through a union strike, or they might even design their own related to a school policy or procedure and communicate an action plan with governing bodies. In our teaching experiences, students

have used social action to garner support for mental health services in their schools, resisting an existing dearth within the structure of schooling.

The Affordances of Pairing Gothic Texts and YAL

In this article, we have offered activities and ideas in response to our inquiry about how Gothic literature can be paired with GYAL for social justice foci. While we have only been able to cover two sets of novels and themes—gender inequity and resistance and oppression—a host of other possibilities exist in this area. For instance, students could examine Octavia Butler's *Fledgling* (2007) and Bram Stoker's *Dracula* (1897) to discuss the depiction of racial Otherness. Our goal is to show how Gothic texts can be read for contemporary issues and how those can be made more engaging and understood more clearly when accompanied by texts specifically written for young adults. We intentionally accompanied our suggested readings and activities with social action projects since such opportunities are crucial for students to extend their learning and relate it to their environments—to transgress the typical boundaries of classroom assignments. These endeavors allow students to build on their critical literacies and apply them to their communities, hopefully helping them create authentic bridges between literature and life (Luke 2012).

In cultivating such activities, however, it is crucial for teachers to serve as a guide, allowing students to name and address related inequities as they determine, rather than as imposed by the teacher. hooks reminds us in *Teaching to Transgress* that "Commitment to engaged pedagogy carries with it the willingness to be responsible, not to pretend that [educators] do not have the power to change the direction of our students' lives" (1994). We have a responsibility as educators to establish the classroom as a space of liberation for students who are constantly bombarded with inequities in other spaces and in various communities (hooks, 1994).

This can be a difficult balance to strike, as the teacher's job is to help students narrow topics and to ensure they conduct research and present their recommendations appropriately. We encourage teachers to remain flexible and open to the process and to keep student-learning at the center. In addition, we recognize that social action projects can be daunting; in the political climate in which we find ourselves, this kind of critical teaching may feel unwelcomed. We believe our pairing with traditional texts provides a thematic focus that is text based. Preparing rationales for teaching that include learning goals,

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standards met, and skills developed can help address concerns, and garnering parental and administrative support in advance of projects can as well. We have found that providing youth with the opportunity to act and take a stance on social justice is well worth the effort it entails.

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Francesca Vozza, 4th Grade



Blessing Mulungi, 4th Grade



Madelyn (MJ) S., 4th Grade