In recent years, professional influences on all sides have pressed me to put my students in the driver’s seat, making them more active in their own learning, giving them more voice and choice in their work, and developing skills that will benefit them well beyond my classroom. And I’ve done pretty well, I think—I’ve increased the emphasis on research; created flexible, problem-based assignments with multimodal products; improved the balance between writing and literature. But the better I felt about how my writing instruction addressed 21st-century skills, the worse I felt about my literature instruction. My students came to understand texts and explain the meaning they found there, but I knew something was missing. The skills they gained in using textual details to make meaning seemed to start after that key first step: deciding which textual elements were notable. I had to admit that most of the time, I gathered (or pointed the way to) the raw materials—passages, images, and patterns—and then my students constructed meaning from them. But that’s not enough; if I’m committed to teaching the skills of literary study in addition to the content, I have to go all the way.

Students’ understanding of how we English teachers recognize textual significance seems to fall into clusters around two extremes. On one end, students believe that teachers have a mystical ability to identify important elements among the greater textual mass and to divine from them the author’s intended meaning. On the other end, they believe we arbitrarily choose elements and then overanalyze to find a meaning that the author (who just wanted to write a darn story/poem/play) never meant to convey. Some students fall in between—either trusting teachers to have a reliable method, or not particularly caring how we do it. While I don’t mind being thought to possess some magical second sight, these (mis)perceptions all disturb me because I care more about students’ mastering the hows than about any of the what’s, more that they can interpret a text than that they can recall the literacy motif in *The Tempest*.

Like most English teachers, I often use apprenticeship to build students’ interpretive skills, using class discussions and modeling to offer “supported interaction with people [namely, me] who have already mastered the Discourse” of English studies (Gee, “Literacy” 7). James Paul Gee distinguishes apprenticeship from learning, which entails meta-level language and cognition as students recognize and have language for the knowledge they are acquiring (“What”). Apprenticeship is effective in many ways, but it asks students to fake their way through literary analysis by groping for the kinds of language and thinking they have heard from (perceived) genuine literary analysts (e.g., the teacher and perhaps savvy classmates). This improvisation using inadequate materials, which Gee calls “mushfake,” David Bartholomae calls “inventing the university,” and my students call “fake it ’til you make it,” goes only so far in developing critical and analytical reading skills. My students deserve to be explicitly taught the distinctive practices of English studies in a way that adds learning to apprenticeship by offering meta-level language and thinking beyond literary terms and the like.
These philosophical positions are noble, but how do I teach the skill of identifying what matters in a text? How do I get beyond the vague phrases (“What stands out to you?”) and circular suggestions (“find passages that develop the theme”)? If a “teacher cannot think for her students, nor impose her thought on them” (Freire 104), what can I do to make these thinking skills explicit? The answer at which I arrived is both promising and daunting: teach literary theory.

**Feasibility and Value**

Immediately, I had doubts. Are secondary students ready to use the critical lenses of theory? Will literary theory do something important for them? If so, where can I fit it into a curriculum crowded with competing objectives?

Some might argue that attempting to teach literary theory to high schoolers will result in either failure or oversimplification. But my own experience has supported John Dewey’s definition of immaturity as the potential for growth (42). Often, large, complex concepts spur exciting advances in the students whose age or performance might invite low expectations. Len Unsworth asserts that, once they can decipher and reproduce codes (such as a text), “quite young learners can engage productively in reflection literacies” by interpreting the values and assumptions influencing that text (15). In other words, literacy, not age, is the factor that matters. While the particular grade level at which theory might be introduced will vary based on student population, it is likely that some students in every high school are ready for the level of literacy that literary theory offers, and they certainly can gain insight by viewing their own world through the lenses of theories. The college-bound seniors in my course, who hail from several countries and display widely ranging abilities, have found success on varied levels, from “OK, this makes sense” to “what a revelation!” In Gee’s terms, offering the meta-level language without apprenticeship would be empty, but withholding it because we doubt students’ capacity to learn may be unfair. We should reveal the man behind the curtain, making literary analysis less mysterious, more achievable.

High school students may resist some lenses, argue that theory is pointless, and achieve only a simplified understanding of theory. On the other hand, teenagers have the potential to grow significantly by applying critical lenses to texts and the world. Thus, incorporating theory responds to Janet Emig’s call to action: “We must not merely permit, we must actively sponsor those textual and classroom encounters that will allow our students to begin their own odysseys toward . . . theoretical maturity” (94). Teaching literary theory lays the groundwork for many of the new ways of thinking we’re expected to address, from media literacy to social critique. To teach literary theory is to teach critical thinking about texts of all kinds.

Recent scholarship has broadened the definition of literacy, offering statements like Gee’s that literacy is about “saying (writing)-doing-being-valuing-believing combinations” (“Literacy” 6). In fact, the field has named so many kinds of literacy that some, such as Anne Wysocki and Johndan Johnson-Eilola, object to the flexibility with which the term is used. Even so, there is no denying that for today’s students to flourish in the 21st century, they must go beyond “routine decoding of textual information” (Unsworth 14). One way to help students avoid “compliantly participating in the established, institutionalized textual practices of a culture” is to develop multiliteracies (Unsworth 14), for which literary theory is a useful tool.

Critical lenses can be a vehicle for what the New London Group and others call critical literacy—increasingly important in a media-drenched society. Our ultimate goal is for students to “[question] the taken-for-grantedness of systematic knowledge, understanding that what appears to be the ‘natural’ view of phenomena is actually a view produced by particular combinations of historical, social, political influences” (Unsworth 19). With this kind of literacy, “people become aware of, and are able to articulate, the cultural locatedness of practices” (New London Group 85). A tall order, to be sure. The payoff of tackling it is that “meaning-makers remake themselves. They reconstruct and renegotiate their identities” (New London Group 76); helping students gain critical literacy goes beyond preparing students for exit exams, college, and work, to developing thoughtful, reflective citizens.
A complex literacy requires powerful and rich tools. Literary theory is an effective addition to students' kits because looking through varying lenses reveals the systems that affect text production of all kinds, from 17th-century plays to 21st-century pop lyrics. Because these lenses provide the driving questions and the language to challenge both readers' and authors' assumptions, literary theory offers a framework for teaching critical literacy.

The Common Core State Standards for English Language Arts and Literacy for both the 9–10 and 11–12 grade levels state that students should be able to identify and analyze a central theme in a work of literature ("English Language Arts Standards," ELA-Literacy.RL.9-10.2, 11-12.2). The standards emphasize analysis of textual details that develop a theme, downplaying the complex thinking required to identify it in the first place. These standards seem to reflect the same lack of emphasis on that key first step that bothered me in my own classroom, where I, like many of my colleagues, have dropped hints and selected passages until students pieced a theme together.

A teacher hoping to remedy this situation by fitting theory into an already crowded course has a few options. The least intrusive (although potentially most reductive) is to present several theories early in the year as tools to be accessed in future units. To take this approach, introduce the concept of theories as critical lenses (see sample lesson) and survey a set of theories using brief, clear explanations. Consider making the students theory cards like the ones Deborah Appleman provides in Critical Encounters in High School English: Teaching Literary Theory to Adolescents. Choose the theories carefully, taking into account the literature that will follow. In later units, have students apply the lenses and their language to articulate the meaning those theories help students make of the texts. The approach of offering an early, brief survey of lenses will require the instructor to accept rudimentary understanding early on, knowing it will develop as the students circle back to the theories with each new text.

A second option is to build a unit around a set of theories, inviting students to engage with each one. Teachers may use one short work to teach each theory—perhaps Charlotte Perkins Gilman's "The Yellow Wallpaper" for feminist theory, George Orwell's "Shooting an Elephant" for postcolonial theory, and so on. Alternatively, a novel such as Jane Eyre or The Color Purple can provide fodder for discussing many theories and discovering the value of layering or switching between theories to enrich one's reading of a text (see Figure 1). In this case, the theories may be offered first or after an initial reading of the text at hand, depending on other learning objectives and students' comprehension level.

Finally, consider a variation on these two approaches: use literary theory as a framework for an entire course. Introduce all theories early on and then tackle one theory in each subsequent unit, offering varied texts to which the students apply the lens at hand. This approach may work well for the teacher who is happy with (or obligated to follow) a particular reading list, but who is interested in a new way to approach it with increased emphasis on interpretive skills.

Is It Practicable?

Literary theory's usefulness in high school classrooms can only be realized where theory meets
practice, so the practical aspects of teaching theory require careful attention. The New London Group explains four types of pedagogical practice: situated practice (immersion in the discourse), overt instruction (using metalanguages for conscious learning), critical framing (interpreting the subject of learning in relation to its context), and transformed practice (transfer of meaning-making practice to new contexts). Much of what we do when we teach literature in secondary English class is situated practice (we model meaning-making and ask students to participate in it), with some overt instruction as we teach students to know and recognize literary strategies (such as metaphors or frame narratives). We may even do some critical framing and transformed practice as we teach literary and media analysis. But when we hold back literary theory from overt instruction, we also hold students back from learning as deeply as they can through the other layers. This is especially true of transformed practice, since naming and explaining the “how to” of certain thinking skills makes them transferrable to other contexts. Literary theory provides interpretive skills that people can adapt to new texts, including those created by today’s many “meaning-makers” (New London Group 67), from Banksy to Brad Paisley.

To use literary theory to develop critical literacy, we must avoid limiting “the scope of action allowed to the students” to “receiving, filling, and storing the deposits” of knowledge (Freire 100). Instead, we must invite inquiry and call students to action. As I designed my first literary theory unit, I found that I must craft essential questions carefully, sacrificing several that I considered important but that (if I was honest) had only one acceptable answer in my mind. I knew that I wouldn’t allow students to genuinely pursue their own learning if I had an agenda for the conclusions they drew. For the same reason, I designed activities that required me to keep my mouth shut while students spent time with themselves and each other to gain understanding, allowing myself into the discussion only when, with scaffolding and time, students had developed their ideas.

Anyone considering teaching literary theory in high school should get her hands on not only Appleman’s Critical Encounters but also a readable literary theory text such as Stephen Bonnycastle’s In Search of Authority: An Introductory Guide to Literary Theory or Lois Tyson’s Critical Theory Today: A User-Friendly Guide. The following samples demonstrate ways literary theory can be taught, including an introductory touchstone activity, a lesson plan for applying a single lens late in the study of a work, and a sub-unit exploring one theory during a multi-theory novel study.

**Introducing the Concept of Literary Theory**

Students often think texts generate meaning in a single, albeit complex, way. For this reason, scaffold opening lessons so that students move toward an understanding of how lenses offer new ways of seeing and reading. An opening, concrete experience can act as a touchstone and metaphor for students’ ensuing work with theory. In this lesson, students will face an overwhelming jumble of text and use colored lenses as tools to begin making sense of patterns within the language. Obtain a handful of red and blue transparent films (science departments may have some to lend) as well as red, pink, blue, and green markers for a dry-erase board or large piece of paper. Brainstorm lists of words that relate to two pairs of related themes (see Figure 2 for an example). Assign a marker color to each theme such that green and blue are used for one pair while red and pink are used for the other. Use these colors to write the words in a dense, disordered mass on the board.

In class, distribute the colored films (students may share as needed), but warn students not to use the lenses yet. Instruct students to spend three minutes making observations about the board (assure

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Nature</th>
<th>Society/culture</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Peace</td>
<td>Violence</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Pebble, breeze, babbling, puppy, brook, moonlight, waterfall, butterfly, etc.</td>
<td>Tornado, wolf, cliff, lightning, shark, swarm, drought, earthquake, etc.</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Red</td>
<td>Blue</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Green</td>
<td>Blue</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Pray, parable, congregation, chastity, litany, collar, vow, meditate, praise, verse, sanctuary, etc.</td>
<td>Aristocracy, vote, master, servant, pay, peasant, poor, feudalism, slave, power, respect, etc.</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

FIGURE 2. Brainstorm lists of words related to two pairs of themes, and assign colors.
them that "there are many words" is a fine place to start). Next, have them view the board through the lenses, spending five minutes or more noting their new observations. Finally, have them look again without the films, noting any new observations. Viewed through the red lens, the green and blue words will be much more prominent (and the opposite for the blue lens), which will allow some students to realize that those words relate to a common theme (e.g., "nature"). Looking again without the films will help some discover that finer distinctions (e.g., peaceful and violent) can be made. Other students may get no further than to observe that the lenses make some words seem to disappear. Ensure students that all of these observations are valid.

Next, have students share their observations at each stage. Ask students to articulate how the colored lenses helped them discover something new about the mass of words. While not all students will have discovered patterns, it is likely that they can do so with the help of their classmates. Finally, if any distinguished between the red and pink words or the green and blue words, have them recount their process of discovery. End this discussion by connecting critical lenses (or literary theories) to this experience. Ask them if they recall times when they have seen a work of literature as simply a mass of language, only to have a teacher reveal some significant theme they missed entirely. Ask how that experience resembles their initial viewing of the board full of text. Explain the similarity between colored films and critical lenses: we can take them up and use them to find out what stands out in a text, revealing patterns and greater meaning. And like those films, we can set one theory aside and take up another one at will.

Such a physical experience offers a schema to which students can attach subsequent concepts and skills related to the complexities of critical literacy. Specifically, seeing how physical lenses can reveal patterns or highlight certain details prepares them later, using critical lenses, to take on "the text analyst role, interrogating the visual and verbal codes to make explicit how the choices of language and image privilege certain viewpoints" (Unsworth 15).
Lesson Plan: Postcolonial Theory and The Tempest

If lenses have been introduced early on as a flexible tool, introducing a theory for a day or two within a larger unit can enrich students’ reading of literature. For instance, students might consider Shakespeare’s The Tempest through a postcolonial lens.

To reactivate prior knowledge, begin with a five-minute freewriting recording everything they can recall about literary theory. Either in class or for homework the night before, have students read excerpts from Bonnycastle’s chapter “Post-Colonial Criticism and Multiculturalism” in In Search of Authority. Alternatively, a comparable explanation, presentation, or guided note-taking session could replace the reading.

Place students in small groups and direct them to Bonnycastle’s list of driving questions, including “How did the culture of the colonizer affect that of the natives? How did exploitation occur, and what reparations are in order? How open were the people in power to the experience of the natives? How does a person form a solid identity when he or she is part of a group which is consistently viewed as vicious, irrational or subhuman by the dominant forces in society?” (207–08). These questions explicitly scaffold reflective or critical literacy because they help students “read” the choices an author makes by “including certain values and understandings and excluding others” (Unsworth 15). Ask students to apply the postcolonial lens in general and the questions in particular to The Tempest, especially the portrayals of Caliban, Ariel, and Prospero. Groups should discuss potential answers until they feel they’ve made some valuable observations, and then identify three sections of the play that are illuminated by these questions, making notes about their significance.

Once students have drawn conclusions, have them imagine that they are a production team staging a modern performance of The Tempest that conveys their postcolonial reading of the play. They will decide how to use casting, costuming, set design, and (most importantly) direction to stage the three sections they identified. Questioning may help them get started; for example, How would you cast and costume Caliban? Which textual details led you to that decision? What perception do you hope this Caliban will create in the audience? What tone of voice would Prospero use here? What gestures? What attitude do you want the audience to perceive from him? To have toward him? Have the students present their decisions as appropriate, whether through brief performances, sketches, oral presentations, or other means. Depending on the teacher’s goals, this activity can take as little as 30 minutes or as much as two or three periods, with the depth and elaborateness of student work varying accordingly.

In this lesson, the language of postcolonial theory (colonizer, exploitation, identity formation, and so on) acts as the meta-language that Gee says is necessary for learning (as opposed to apprenticeship). Students may or may not instinctively sense Caliban’s value and devaluation (for instance), but introducing postcolonial theory as a rich tool offers them greater means to recognize and articulate the values and assumptions manifest in the play—in other words, it offers them explicit access to critical literacy because it teaches them to recognize one aspect of “cultural locatedness” (New London Group 85).

Sample Sub-Unit: The Lens of Social Class

Introducing many theories during study of one novel allows both a stronger grasp of the concept of theory and a sense of lenses’ layerability. Some lenses, however, may be tricky to “sell” to high schoolers. In this sub-unit within a study of Jane Eyre, students reflect on the principles of Marxism to reach an unbiased understanding of the concept before considering the text through a social-class lens. Students pursue the following essential questions: How does social class affect people’s lives and thought? What opportunities does applying a social-class lens offer a reader? What are the risks of social-class theory?

Because students may be resistant to Marxist readings, introduce the concept of a social-class lens in stages, first revealing the complex roles of social class in our lives and then moving into its role in literary theory. Gauge student reactions and respond flexibly, either spending more time on the concept or transitioning more quickly to application. That said, moving too quickly into use of the theory may increase resistance or, worse, make students think...
that the social-class lens applies to a 19th-century British novel but not in modern American society. At this stage of the unit, the teacher’s “efforts must coincide with those of the students to engage in critical thinking,” as the instructor reflects on what has happened thus far and determines the best pacing moving forward (Freire 102). Regardless of the opening lessons’ pace, follow this sequence:

1. Pose a series of questions, such as, How do economic and social classes shape society? What advantages or disadvantages does one’s class determine? How does class affect our thinking and behavior? Do you see more harmony or conflict between social classes? Allow students time to freewrite to take stock of their reactions. Use partners or small groups and then a large-group discussion to delve into the role of social class in students’ experience of the world. In particular, push them beyond the walls of the school or the limits of everyday experiences to consider social class and power in their city, including sectors they don’t encounter but are aware of. Then ask them to think beyond their city to the United States and the world. Do not plan the course of this discussion; carefully balance the learning goals with the topics students put forth. Focus on the ways that they interpret the many messages about social class; this is a chance for students to practice reflection literacy by identifying how “choices of language and image” in the world around them “privilege certain viewpoints” (Unsworth 15).

2. Provide a brief description of social-class theory (made from scratch, adapted from Bonnycastle or Tyson, or drawn from Appleman’s appendix). In groups, have them consider Jane Eyre Chapter 5 (which includes Jane’s departure from Gateshead, the living conditions at Lowood, and Jane’s questions about the school’s funding). Ask the students to create statements about what they notice when viewing the chapter through the social-class lens, citing specific details to support each statement. Direct these conversations as little as possible, pushing the students to rely on the theory description and the text.

3. Have students prepare for a follow-up discussion of the Lowood chapters by reading Bonnycastle’s chapter “Marxist Criticism” (or similar). Seek to complicate the understanding they have established over the previous two lessons to strengthen their grasp of what a Marxist reading is and can do. Bonnycastle’s text carefully delineates the objectives of a committed Marxist and the benefits available to a more diversified reader using a Marxist lens. Push students to understand both so they recognize that they can comprehend Marxism without agreeing to become Marxists.

With the social-class lens and Marxism clarified, proceed to apply the lens to the remaining Lowood chapters. Remaining lessons should rely on questioning, writing to learn, and group work to maintain a focus on the students’ meaning-making, not on transmitting the teacher’s understanding to the students. Student-driven research into the historical context of the novel may be useful, since students cannot understand Brontë’s representation of class and power without understanding the world in which she lived. Students could use technological tools, the library, and history faculty to pursue relevant research.

By applying the social-class lens to Jane Eyre, students foreground hierarchical and capitalistic patterns that they and/or Brontë’s characters initially accept as natural. Thus, teaching Marxist theory supports a key aspect of the critical framing layer of pedagogical practice because it “make[s] strange” familiar structures and therefore invites evaluation of the “historical, social, cultural, political, ideological, and value-centered relations of particular systems of knowledge and social practice” (New London Group 86). Further, as students incorporate Marxism’s central questions into their critical repertoire, applying them to other parts of the novel, other texts, and their own worlds, they transfer their meaning-making skill to new contexts, demonstrating transformed practice, the fourth layer of the New London Group’s pedagogical framework for multiliteracies.

Conclusion

In talking about literacy, our field almost always offers something like Gee’s description of “a sort of ‘identity kit’” that we put on to play “a particular role that others will recognize”—a role that will offer a ticket to economic success (“Literacy” 7).
While that is our primary goal, literacy is not only about getting others to allow us to participate. Literacy allows us to orient ourselves meaningfully in society, to navigate conflicting messages, to receive and create art, to become conscious of the influences upon us, and otherwise to maneuver in a world that is literate and created for the literate. Thus our goal in both composition and literature study must be to offer the skills that lead to multiliteracies. Explicitly teaching literary theory empowers students to do for themselves what they may think they need a teacher to do for them—recognize the raw materials in a text from which they can make meaning.

Writing in 1996, the New London Group told us that the new expectations are “adaptation to constant change through thinking and speaking for oneself, critique and empowerment, innovation and creativity, technical and systems thinking, and learning how to learn” (67), abilities that are echoed in every list of 21st-century skills. Research in composition has demonstrated the possibilities for teaching those skills through writing instruction, but teaching our students to use critical lenses can make literature study just as rich a place for developing multiliteracies.

Works Cited

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In the ReadWriteThink.org lesson plan “Examining Island of the Blue Dolphins through a Literary Lens,” students connect with Island of the Blue Dolphins by looking at the text through three literary lenses: a mirror that allows them to find themselves in the text world, a microscope through which to understand the text’s literary elements, and a telescope that helps them see beyond the text. Students first reflect on the meanings of courage and adversity through journal writing and skits. They then read the novel with a focus on Karana’s character, setting, and vocabulary. Next, students reflect on the story by imagining how they would have reacted in the same situations faced by Karana. After sharing journal responses, students look outwards to their community for people who have overcome adversity with courage, and students brainstorm ways they could recognize these people.

http://www.readwritethink.org/classroom-resources/lesson-plans/examining-island-blue-dolphins-1068.html