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Expanding the Literary Enterprise: How we experience the texts of the Advanced Placement English Literature and Composition Curriculum

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**Expanding the Literary Enterprise:
How we experience the texts of the Advanced Placement English
Literature and Composition Curriculum**

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Honors Thesis
Colby College English Department
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Chapter One

The Advanced Placement exams each year test students on a wide range of subjects from History to Calculus. These exams are meant to be the highest-level classes high school students can take, and demonstrate a student's interest in academics. The AP English Literature and Composition exam proves a student's ability to understand novels often considered a part of the canon- the list of texts every one should read in order to be intelligent and cultured. "The concept of the canon names the traditional curriculum--the scriptural canon" (Guillory 6) which began with the bible and which texts were considered sacred. Today the canon indicates texts that are considered to have high literary merit, an idea that is constantly being disputed. In Italo Calvino's article "Why Read the Classics" he tries to define what the literary canon means. Some of the ways he defines the canon are texts that "exert a peculiar influence" or are "treasured by those who have read them." (Calvino) He also mentions the importance of an author that "is one you cannot feel indifferent to." (Calvino) What the literary canon is, and what books are considered a classic, is hard to fully define, which is why it remains open to new additions and old texts are often challenged. The canon is constantly changing. Texts considered a part of the canon today have high quality writing as well as relevance to certain historical periods or places. These are the texts that are often considered "classic" literature and often read in a classroom curriculum.

Each year the College Board chooses from an extensive list of texts to be part of the options for the essay section of the exam. The AP English Literature and Composition board boasts that "the course is designed to help students

become skilled readers and writers” by “reading complex imaginative literature (fiction, drama, and poetry) appropriate for college-level study.” (AP Board 1)

The AP Board gives a suggested reading list and a suggested approach to the content. The syllabus says that the thirty week course should begin with weeks 1-2 as a course introduction, weeks 3-7 focusing on poetry from Renaissance to the Twentieth century, weeks 8-11 on Nineteenth century novels, weeks 12-17 on drama and plays, weeks 18-24 on contemporary fiction, weeks 25-27 on contemporary poetry, and the final weeks to review for the exam. (AP Board 47)

The exam is composed of two sections, a multiple choice section where students demonstrate their understanding of selected passages through critical reading, and a free response section where students choose texts they think best answer the questions. The AP board explains:

The generic method for the approach to such close reading involves the following elements: the experience of literature, the interpretation of literature, and the evaluation of literature. By experience, we mean the subjective dimension of reading and responding to literary works, including pre-critical impressions and emotional response. By interpretation, we mean the analysis of literary works through the close reading to arrive at an understanding of their multiple meanings. By evaluation, we mean both an assessment of the quality and artistic achievement of literary works and a consideration of their social and cultural values. (AP Board 7)

But when closely examining these texts and the ways in which students are taught to think and write about them, I found that there are some shortcomings, namely the ways in which readers are supposed to interpret a text.

The AP exam curriculum is a study of the classical texts, the canon, which leaves out many texts that should be important to the education and understanding of literature. The canon includes pages on pages of recommended reading, but the background of the author and their protagonist is restricted mostly to the male point of view. Texts like *The Divine Comedy*, *The Great Gatsby*, *Heart of Darkness*, *Julius Caesar* and the list goes on. This shows how:

The process of canonical selection is always also a process of social exclusion, specifically the exclusion of female, black, ethnic or working-class authors from the literary canon. The unrepresentative content of the canon is described in the rhetoric of canonical critique as a kind of scandal, after two millennia a scandal, which has gone on long enough.

(Guillory 7)

When certain backgrounds are not represented in the literary canon, certain readers, specifically women, are pushed into narrow interpretations or experiences with these highly regarded texts. Through my research, I have found that not only the background of the reader, but also how they are taught these texts, affects their experience I have chosen four texts that are taught often in the high school classroom in order to demonstrate my argument of gender inequality within this curriculum and how the reading experience affects a student's interaction with a text and the course itself.

Virginia Woolf in her essay, “A Room Of One’s Own” discusses the issue of female authorship by saying “a woman must have money and a room of her own if she is to write fiction; and that, as you will see, leaves the great problem of the true nature of woman and the true nature of fiction unsolved.” (Woolf 6)

Woolf’s essay, written in 1928, begins to find the answers of why women are left out of the literary canon, and how that affects their involvement in the literary conversation. She discusses the problems of woman writers in earlier times, yet many of her arguments and critiques of the academic canon still persist today. She asks the question “have you any notion of how many books are written about women in the course of one year? Have you any notion how many are written by men?” (Woolf 28) Today women face fewer obstacles in order to become renowned writers, yet not only does the literary canon still only include predominately male authors with male protagonists, but also the way the texts are taught caters to the male perspective. In order to understand the issue of gender inequality in the AP canon, I will use these questions as well as adding: How are these classic male texts taught in the classroom? How does this curriculum and education affect the reading experience for students of a different background?

Woolf’s essay discusses the issues of a male dominated canon and how that affects women readers and writers. Woolf asserts in her essay that women, even if they are talented and well read, will never get the same attention or opportunities as their male counterparts. In order to show why there are fewer

classic women writers, Virginia Woolf uses the fictional Judith Shakespeare, Shakespeare's sister, to highlight this idea:

It would have been impossible, completely and entirely, for any woman to have written the plays of Shakespeare in the age of Shakespeare. Let me imagine, since facts are so hard to come by, what would have happened had Shakespeare had a wonderfully gifted sister, called Judith, let us say...His extraordinarily gifted sister, let us suppose, remained at home. She was as adventurous, as imaginative, as agog to see the world as he was. But she was not sent to school. She had no chance of learning grammar and logic, let alone reading Horace and Virgil. She picked up a book now and then, one of her brother's perhaps, and read a few pages. But then her parents came in and told her to mend the stockings or mind the stew and not moon about with books and papers...She had the quickest fancy, a gift like her brother's, for the tune of words. Like him, she had a taste for the theatre. She stood at the stage door; she wanted to act, she said. Men laughed in her face. (Woolf 48-49)

Virginia Woolf shows how a woman, despite her talents or abilities, would never be able to gain popularity or fame like Shakespeare or any other male author.

Women during Shakespeare and then Woolf's time faced limitations because of their gender, and many believe those limitations have been eradicated.

Women authors are included in the literary canon, and women can be full time writers. But when closely examining the AP English Literature and Composition exam and curriculum, the canonized texts show that yes, Judith

Shakespeare would be included in the canon, but how her texts would be taught to readers demonstrate an inequality that still exists. Woolf's fictional narrator wonders about the "perennial puzzle why no woman wrote a word of that extraordinary literature when every other man, it seemed, was capable of a song or sonnet." (Woolf 43) Although the problem of women writing is no longer a problem, the inclusion of women in the canonized curriculum and conversation still is. How women are portrayed in literature and how students are taught to understand texts in limited ways are now the "perennial puzzle." Women are rarely seen in the classic canonical texts, and if there is a female character, she is often portrayed in ways that demonstrate oppression

Suppose, for instance, that men were only represented in literature as lovers of women, and were never the friends of men, soldiers, thinkers, and dreamers; how few parts in the plays of Shakespeare could be allotted to them; how literature would suffer! (Woolf 83)

How women are represented in literature is one of the examples of gender inequality in the classroom today. In many of the texts read in the AP curriculum, women are depicted as weak, as evil, or as crazy. These categorizations are not questioned or discussed in the classroom setting, rather the conversations are focused on the male protagonist and his dilemmas or successes. In order to solve the "perennial puzzle," inequality in the canonical curriculum, the conversations need to evolve to include the ways in which female characters are depicted and interpreted and how the reading experience has evolved as new readers approach old classics.

This problem is the basis of the reader response criticism movement. These critics believe that connecting to a text is how meaning is found and then discussed in the classroom. In Wolfgang Iser's essay "The Reading Process: A phenomenological approach" he describes the way in which a reader understands and connects with a text. It is "the convergence of text and reader" that "brings the literary work into existence." (Iser 295) Iser argues that what allows a text to be understood and discussed is the ability of the reader to connect to the text. It is the reader's ability to feel part of the text that makes it come "alive." For this to happen "a literary text must therefore be conceived in such a way that it will engage the reader's imagination in the task of working things out for himself." (Iser 296) Iser believes that authors have put forth an intended meaning for the reader to interpret. The reader must connect to that meaning in order to interact properly with the text. As Iser says:

The written text imposes certain limits on its unwritten implications in order to prevent these from becoming too blurred and hazy, but at the same time these implications, worked out by the reader's imagination, set the given situation against a background which endows it with far greater significance than it might have seemed to possess on its own. (Iser 297)

Iser argues that there needs to be a connection between the text and the reader for the meaning to be found. The text has "hazy" implications and interpretations that the reader must find and make clear for his or her self.

How the reader "experiences the text will reflect his own disposition, and in this respect the literary text acts as a kind of mirror." (Iser 300) Iser believes

that for a reader to fully understand a text, the readers must connect to the text through their own experiences. Iser believes that:

There is an active interweaving of anticipation and retrospection, which on a second reading may turn into a kind of advance retrospection...two people gazing at the night sky may both be looking at the same collection of stars, but one will see the image of the plough, and the other will make out a dipper. The 'stars' in a literary text are fixed; the lines that join them are variable. (Iser 300)

The reader should be able to connect the dots through their own perspective as well as the perspective of the author. The reader's imagination, as well as experience, allows the reader to see the big picture: the meaning of the text. The reader finds meaning by connecting each star, each part of the text, through their imagination. Iser believes that any reader should be able, through their imagination, to fill in the gaps and find meaning in the text by connecting the stars into a bigger picture. This argument is flawed though; when a text is taught in a way so that the reader cannot fill in the gaps on his or her own to experience.

Patrocinio Schweickart confronts these issues in her article "Reading Ourselves: toward a feminist theory of reading." Schweickart writes about how many readers, specifically women, are unable to see their reflection in the canonized texts and therefore do not have the same reading experience. She cites the problem as how "the different accounts of the reading experience that have been put forth overlook the issues of race, class and sex, and give no hint of the conflicts, sufferings, and passions that attend these realities." (Schweickart 485)

Schweickart points out the flaws of Iser's argument by demonstrating that there are other factors than just imagination that affect the ability to connect the stars and find meaning in a text. Certain barriers exist that cause readers to connect the stars into different constellations, or meanings, than the author intended to be discovered. Schweickart believes that one's background and perspective create barriers in their ability to fill in the gaps of a text. Schweickart focuses on the female reading experience and how their perspective affects the ways in which they read and understand texts. Schweickart begins by demonstrating the gender inequality of the curriculum, and how women are forced into a certain way of thinking:

In her freshman year a female student...might be assigned an anthology of essays, perhaps such as *The Responsible Man...Or Conditions of Man*, or *Man in Crisis*...Perhaps the student would read a collection of stories like *The Young Man in American Literature: The Initiation Theme*...In more orthodox literary program she might study eternally relevant classics, such as *Oedipus*...And whatever else she might read, she would inevitably arrive at the favorite book of all Freshman English courses, the classic of adolescent rebellion, *A Portrait of the Artist as a Young Man*. By the end of her freshman year, a woman student would have learned something about intellectual neutrality; she would be learning, in fact, how to think like a man. (Schweickart 488)

Schweickart demonstrates the issues that arise with the texts that are a part of the literary canon and how they are taught and discussed. In order to be a part of the

literary conversation, the female student would be asked to stifle her own interpretation of the text. The perspectives that are forced on to the female reader by the author, professors and the reader's fellow students demonstrate a male perspective, and leave no room for any other. Therefore, Schweickart finds, women are taught to think like men. Schweickart says that:

The male reader feels his affinity with the universal, with the paradigmatic human being, precisely because he is male. Consider the famous scene of Stephen's epiphany in *A Portrait of the Artist as a Young Man*...A man reading [the] passage is invited to identify with Stephen, to feel 'the riot in his blood', and thus, to ratify the alleged universality of the experience. Whether or not the sight of a girl on the beach has ever provoked similar emotions in him, the male reader is invited to feel his difference (concretely, *from the girl*) and to equate that with the universal. (Schweickart 489-490)

But what happens to the other readers experiencing this passage? According to Schweickart, the female reading experience creates a forced connection to the protagonist, creating an emasculation and "double oppression." The female reader would be "powerless" against any other perspective, forcing the female reader to identify with the male protagonist and be reminded by the connection between "maleness" and the "universal." (Schweickart 490)

Schweickart goes on to describe how women are given no other perspectives or protagonists that allow them to feel that affinity and force male readers to experience this oppression. Women characters were often written as

weak or evil, never a strong character a reader would want to believe in or see them self in. Schweickart describes how this affects readers:

The first result of my reading was a feeling that male characters were at the very least more interesting than women to the authors who invented them. Thus if, reading their books as it seemed their authors intended them, I naively identifies with a character, I repeatedly chose men; I would rather have been Hamlet than Ophelia, Tom Jones instead of Sophia Western, and perhaps, despite Dostoevsky's intention, Raskolnikov not Sonia. More peculiar perhaps, but sadly unsurprising, were the assessments I accepted about fictional women. For example, I quickly learned that power was unfeminine and powerful women were, quite literally, monstrous...Those rare women who are shown in fiction as both powerful, and in some sense, admirable are such because their power is based, if not on beauty, then at least on sexuality. (Schweickart 489)

Constantly women readers are forced to identify with the male perspective, constantly being reminded of the connection men have with all things powerful, as well as being reminded that the universal means to not be female. Schweickart argues how readers must resist these instances in which they are forced to read through the 'universal' male perspective. "What does it mean for a woman to read without condemning herself to the position of other?" (Schweickart 490) It does not make it impossible for a woman to read and understand a canonical text, but readers must find new ways to "climb aboard" the text in order to stop the oppression. The flaw of the AP English Literature and Composition canon is the

obstacles that female readers are forced to face in the classroom by the texts included and the ways in which they are taught. In the next chapters of my thesis I will explore texts that demonstrate Schweickart's problem with women being taught to read and think like men, and then give alternatives to teaching these canonized texts that give a point of view beyond the universal male perspective.

Chapter Two

In order to demonstrate the obstacles that women face in the AP English Literature and Composition curriculum I have chosen two texts to explain how the reading experience can lead to gender inequality. These two texts are J.D Salinger's *The Catcher in the Rye* and Vladimir Nabokov's *Lolita*. Both of these texts are considered part of the canon, have been included in the AP English Literature and Composition exam, and are taught very often in the AP curriculum classroom. Many of the AP suggested reading lists from either the AP Board website or classroom reading lists include both texts, and both texts were included on the exam multiple years. Written by a male author with a male protagonist these texts are designed to connect with and relate to the male reader. When examined closely they demonstrate a divide that occurs between genders in the reading experience. These texts allow for extremely different reading experiences and responses, but the exam and therefore the classroom do not take into account this division that occurs. The exam asks for a limited reading response to each text, and the students are forced to comply in order to demonstrate their skills as a reader and a writer.

The novel *The Catcher in the Rye* is about a young, privileged, rebellious boy and his experiences that occur in the few days after he is kicked out of school. The character tells the story of his private schoolboy upbringing and his experiences from school to life, often through the frame of women he meets and knows. This includes girls he has dated, girls he loves, girls he hates, even a nun

and a prostitute. Holden has a very confused sense of self because of his issues with women, his school, and his family but because he is the only protagonist, the reader is forced to see the world through Holden's eyes. Because the reader is limited to only Holden as a protagonist, the reader is forced to relate and connect to him. The male reader can easily relate to Holden and his descriptions of the people he meets and the situations he gets himself involved in.

The text begins with Holden describing himself and his current situation. He begins by describing his all boys school as "strictly for the birds" and how he would "like to be somewhere at least where you can see a few girls around once in a while, even if they're only scratching their arms or blowing their noses or even just giggling at something." (Salinger 2-3) Every experience or situation that Holden faces he frames with a certain girl or conversation with a girl. Holden allows for the male reader to easily connect with him when he discusses girls and the desires he has for them. Holden's issues with sexuality are discussed in terms of his desires and why he acts the way he does. When discussing Holden's "attitudes towards sexuality" he "to some degree" is submitting to "to society's demand that young men be sexually adroit." (Frangedis 74) This issue is something that male readers can identify with, while many females may not have the same experience. The male reader can connect with Holden's issues with sexuality and women, whether it is Jane Gallagher and how when they played checkers "she wouldn't move any of her kings" (Salinger 31) to the prostitute he invites over when he begins "to feel pretty sexy." (Salinger 92) The range of different attitudes towards women that Holden feels allows for different ways a

male reader can relate his experiences to Holden's. Holden experiences all from sexual desire to sexual fear allowing for many male readers to have had the same emotions or issues. Holden is governed by women and by the desires he feels for women. The way that Holden describes his experience, or lack of, with women asks for the male reader to understand or sympathize with Holden. Holden shows the experience of a young, privileged white man that almost anyone of the same background can understand. But what can help change the conversation about Holden and his obsession with women is to think beyond just the way he views those of the opposite gender. Instead the classroom conversation should be about why Holden interacts with women the way he does.

Holden is the typical white male teenage boy that many other boys like him can relate to, but in the text there is no solid female character that a female reader can connect with. He is constantly looking at women and fantasizing about women, yet none of the women have any true character or connection to the reader. There are pages upon pages of Holden watching and describing girls:

I just saw down on one of those leather couches right near the clock in the lobby and watched the girls...girls with their legs crossed, girls with their legs not crossed, girls with terrific legs, girls with lousy legs, girls that looked like swell girls, girls that looked like they'd be bitches if you knew them. It was really nice sightseeing, if you know what I mean.

(Salinger 123)

In Paul Bail's article, "Sex, Violence, and Peter Pan: J.D. Salinger's *The Catcher in the Rye*," he argues how Holden's sexuality can be discussed in the classroom

in new ways to allow for more diverse reading experiences or understandings of Holden and his problems. Bail argues that Holden has a serious issue with sexuality and a fear of the desires he feels. Holden constantly describes women in a sexual manner, but then “to escape the confusing world of raw adolescent sexuality, Holden consoles himself with treasured memories of Jane Gallagher. Even though he was attracted to Jane, the main ‘game’ he and Jane played was checkers.” (Bail 73) Holden teeters between the sexual desires that he feels for women, like hiring a prostitute, to constantly remembering Jane and her checkers in the back row. When celebrating or critiquing the text it should not be about Holden and his obsession with women, but instead the idea of “teenage boys” susceptibility to confusion about sexuality and women. Holden tries to act upon his sexual desires but often gets scared, like with the prostitute—“‘don’t you feel like talking for a while?’ I asked her. It was a childish thing to say, but I was feeling so damn peculiar.” (Salinger 95) Holden often has the opportunity to act on his desires for women but instead he “likes being around females who are in some way less threatening or easier to control, like celibate nuns, his prepubescent sister, and the imaginary deaf-mute girl he fantasizes about marrying.” (Bail 74)

Holden’s ‘easy to understand’ language and prose allows for the male reader to easily connect to him because he talks like a real boy; he does not use difficult language or have a very heightened vocabulary and often reverts to using slang words. The language that Holden uses comes from male conversational language and slang, and to make it more oppressive this language is used almost entirely to describe women’s bodies and sexuality. In Carl F. Strauch’s article

“Kings in the Back Row: Meaning through Structure. A Reading of Salinger’s ‘The Catcher in the Rye’” he discusses the importance of language in the novel. Salinger makes Holden speak how real boys would talk amongst themselves; “Holden’s speech is obviously justified as a realistic narrative device, since it is the idiom of the American male...verbalized acceptance of the slob values of his prep school contemporaries” (Strauch 7) Holden is meant to speak the “idiom of the American male” using low language and slang. Salinger makes sure that Holden’s language is similar to what his male companions would speak like. Holden’s language is just another way that he becomes a relatable character for male readers. He makes it seem like he is having a conversation with his reader, rather than forcing a reader to unpack heightened language and prose. Holden’s language is yet another way that Salinger creates Holden as a normative male that talks about women and heterosexual desire in such a casual way that it seems conversational. But Holden’s language is just another barrier the female reader must face in connecting to the text.

Holden even plays with the language of another male author from the text *The Great Gatsby*. Holden furthers himself even more from a female reader when he imitates or plays with the language of other male authors and male protagonists. After having to read through the tongue of the American male slang the female reader then has to decipher the allusions to other male protagonists and their own form of this language. Holden starts everyone’s name with “old” a term that comes from Jay Gatsby, another classic male protagonist, and his saying of “Old Sport” throughout the novel. Holden’s use of another male protagonist’s

language perpetuates the male system of reading and writing. Holden is passing down a ritualized way of speaking that all males are supposed to understand, use, and connect with. When Holden describes women his American male idiom, his slang, comes out the most. For example he describes the first time that he met Jane as “the way I met her, this Doberman pinscher she had used to come over and relieve himself on our lawn, and my mother got very irritated about it. She called up Jane’s mother and made a big stink about it.” (Salinger 76) Or when he talks about a girl he danced with at the club. He says:

When she turned around, her pretty little butt twitched so nice and all. She knocked me out. I mean it. That’s the thing about girls. Every time they do something pretty, even if they’re not much to look at, or even if they’re sort of stupid, you fall half in love with them, and then you never know where the hell you are. (Salinger 73)

The language that Holden uses to describe these girls is low language with simple and vulgar diction. This low language allows Holden to disrespect women, describing his attraction even if they are ugly or stupid. Holden leaves out the names of the women he most vividly describes. Most of the women’s names are easily forgotten, as are their stories, instead they are just the image of the sexualized female. But the true meanings of what he says, the disrespect, is hidden by his slang language. It makes it seem like Holden is describing the woman rather than being vulgar about a woman’s taste in clothing, how she looks, or her intelligence. Whenever Holden describes a woman, he does so with judgment. The women he meets or sees never live up to his expectations. They are

either unattractive, “the three of them were pretty ugly” (Salinger 69) or unintelligent, “I get to feeling sorry for them. I mean most girls are so dumb and all.” (Salinger 92) Even the way girls talk bothers him-- “she was sort of muckle-mouthed. I mean when she was talking and she got excited about something, her mouth sort of went in fifty different directions.” (Salinger 77) He uses this slang language to sound conversational and comical when he describes women, but behind the language is simple judgment and disdain for the women he finds attractive.

Holden has obvious issues with women and sexuality throughout the novel. This type of judgment used on girls can be seen as his attempt to evade the sexuality he fears. Holden’s judgment of women is what he uses to evade his fear of sexuality. He blames the stupidity and ugliness of women for why he never has had sex:

The trouble with me is, I stop. Most guys don’t. I can’t help it. You never know whether they really want you to stop, or whether they’re just scared as hell, or whether they’re just telling you to stop so that if you do go through with it, the blame’ll be on you, not them. (Salinger 92)

Rather than simply discussing Holden in the terms of a “coming-of-age novel” and his “psychological and moral development,” as the AP Board asks on a previous exam, there is a wide array of different ways to discuss the text. For example, a female reader trying to connect to Holden is trying to see through the eyes of a man, while also being forced to relate to Holden’s sexist judgments on women. This, as Schweickart describes, doubles the female reader’s oppression in

the reading experience of the text and in the classroom. Holden constantly discusses women and sexuality because it frightens him, and he wants to stay in control. Bail says that Holden experiences “himself ‘in role’ as a male and therefore by cultural definition the one, who, unlike the girls, is supposed to stay ‘in control’ of the situation.” (Bail 72.) Holden attempts to distance himself from women by describing them the way he does.

When this is discussed in the classroom or thought of in terms of the novel’s central themes the reader can think about why Holden feels the way he does about women. Students should be thinking about the why Holden acts the way he does and perhaps in connection to Holden and how he suffers from mental instability. Instead of applauding Holden readers should be questioning why Holden acts the way he does and allow for broader readings of Holden as a character and why Salinger created him. Holden’s obsession with women and sexuality is what creates inequality in the reading experience by how he judges women. Women read these texts and are taught to see through Holden’s eyes and his negative descriptions of women. When these women are reading and do not understand the “male idiom language” they only see judgment and disdain for women. And in the end of the text the reader is asked to sympathize with Holden, not only because of how relatable he is as a character, but because of his mental illness as an excuse for his actions. Holden is unreliable, yet each reader is left feeling the need to connect to him and like him, as well as the novel and its message. This is what causes creates a divide between genders in the classroom. The female reader is asked to have the same experience as the male reader when

approaching *The Catcher in the Rye*. The female reader, despite having to see through the male view, read the male slang, and have their gender criticized countless times, is supposed to feel the same way about the text and about Holden. All readers, not just female readers, need to discuss and understand Holden beyond just his ability to connect with as an upper white class male.

Another upper class, white, male protagonist found in the AP English Literature and Composition curriculum is Vladimir Nabokov's *Lolita*. The narrator, Humbert Humbert, gives the reader another unreliable protagonist with a skewed perspective and then expects us to sympathize with him despite his deranged actions. Humbert does not try to be relatable like Holden. Humbert uses fancy and beautiful prose becoming pretentious and unattainable to imitate. He describes women in an unbelievable way, going as far as describing certain girls as imagined fairies called nymphs. He does not fear sexuality and instead starts a relationship with Lolita, a young girl that is also his stepdaughter. But Humbert in the end is given the same sympathy and connection to the reader as Holden.

Throughout the text Humbert tries to convince his reader that he did not rape Lolita, instead claiming she seduced him—"and then she was in my arms, her innocent mouth melting under the ferocious pressure of dark male jaws, my palpitating darling!" (Nabokov 66) Humbert throughout the text asks his readers to see his point of view. He is constantly showing all the ways that Lolita wanted him back, and how he deserves forgiveness and sympathy despite the fact that he is having sex with a child. Humbert is always speaking to "the gentlewomen of the jury" (Nabokov 135) or to "my reader." (Nabokov 154) He tries to identify

with his reader, to the women especially, when describing what happens between him and Lolita. Humbert is aware of his female readers, and how they might feel about him having a sexual relationship with a young girl, so he constantly asks them directly for their approval. He continuously makes pleas to the ‘gentlewomen’ of the jury to understand why he did what he did. His heightened prose and vast knowledge make him seem like an intelligent and esteemed man, rather than a fake academic that obsesses over young girls. The first time it happens Humbert uses his impressive prose to show how Lolita initiated the act:

‘Okay,’ said Lolita, ‘here is where we start.’ However, I shall not bore my learned readers with a detailed account of Lolita’s presumption...My life was handled by little Lo in an energetic, matter-of-fact manner as it were an insensate gadget unconnected to me...I am not concerned with so-called ‘sex’ at all. Anybody can imagine those elements of animality. A greater endeavor lures me on: to fix once for all the perilous magic of nymphets. (Nabokov 134)

Humbert tricks his readers into viewing Lolita as an adult, one with sexual prowess, and a nymph—a magical female myth that has powers over him. He calls her “little Lo” because of her inexperience sexually but makes sure his audience knows that it was only because she was not a normal girl. Instead he wants it to be clear that she is a nymph—

I wish to introduce the following idea. Between the age limits of nine and fourteen there occurs maidens who, to certain bewitched travelers, twice

or many times older than they, reveal their true nature which is not human, but nymphic (that is demoniac). (Nabokov 16)

Humbert wants to establish that his readers know Lolita had magical powers, and that he was not the only one to be “bewitched” like him. Humbert alludes to many other famous writers and points out their own obsession with nymphets; “Virgil who could the nymph sing in a single tone...King Akhnaten’s and the Queen Nefertiti’s pre-nubile Nile daughters” even “Dante fell madly in love with his Beatrice when she was nine, a sparkling girlie.” (Nabokov 19) Humbert creates a division between the genders of his readers. For the women readers he appeals to their sensitivity and reminds them that he was not the one in control, but rather under the influence of Lolita. To his male readers he emphasized that all the great men, kings, Virgil and Dante all had the same desires as he did, which makes him not only more relatable, but also respectable. Throughout the novel and Humbert’s abduction of Lolita he tells the readers that she had the power, that she wanted it, that she was not a girl but an enchantress. But when you look beyond the language that Humbert so carefully chooses, the prose and the metaphors, is the story of a man obsessed with a young girl whom he kidnaps and rapes.

Despite his elevated language the message of Humbert’s force is evident, “an expression of pain flitted across Lo’s face... ‘You chump,’ she said, sweetly smiling at me. ‘You revolting creature. I was a daisy-fresh girl, and look what you’ve done to me. I ought to call the police and tell them you raped me.’” (Nabokov 141) Lolita tells Humbert that he hurt her, and that he raped her, but in

the end the reader is tricked into sympathizing with the poor, imprisoned Humbert.

Humbert asks his reader for forgiveness, recognizes his actions, hoping that he will be pardoned—"I was a pentapod monster, but I loved you." (284) He sees his mistakes in the end, allowing him to triumph as a protagonist and as a man. Humbert throughout the novel tries to depict himself as respectable, as a scholar and a writer in the same vein as Dante and Virgil. He presumes that any male reader would want to forgive someone that could be as great as the most studied male authors like Virgil or the most powerful men of history like King Akhenaten. Humbert presumes that by depicting Lolita as a seductress and as a mythical monster they would denounce Lolita and forgive him. Because he is on trial for murder rather than rape he tries to demonstrate that he knows he made a mistake, and deserves forgiveness, "I would have given Humbert at least thirty-five years for rape, and dismissed the rest of the charges...I wish this memoir to be published only when Lolita is no longer alive...this is the only immortality you and I may share, my Lolita." (Nabokov 309) Humbert acts like he recognizes his mistakes with Lolita and says he does not want to hurt her more by publishing what happened, allowing his readers to root for him and see him as morally admirable. But what happens in the classroom conversation when readers are unable to find compassion for Humbert?

In Elizabeth Patnoe's essay "Lolita Misrepresented, Lolita Reclaimed: Disclosing the Doubles" she discusses these issues and the reading experience of many women when they have to read *Lolita*.

Critics focus on the book's aesthetics and artistry, discuss it as an American travelogue, view Humbert with compassion, as truly contrite, a tragic hero. Though diverse, these readings remain hegemonic, and they do not contend with gender issues. (Patnoe 85)

"Everything except what Humbert really does to Lolita" (Patnoe 88) is discussed in the classroom, leaving out an enormous portion of readers who do not forgive Humbert despite his countless pleas. Patnoe in her essay shows the different reactions that students have to the text based on their gender and how gender is an important aspect to the reading experience because "the same text affects a woman reader differently." (Schweickart 490) The message that most readers find in *Lolita* never include issues of trauma or rape instead going as far as "*Vanity Fair* calls [it] 'the only convincing love story of our century.'" (Patnoe 83) She describes the experience of the classroom discussion and how "what is often assumed to be or represented the 'male' perspective became the dominant perspective." (Patnoe 88) She cites that many females felt that they could not participate in the conversations because they felt silenced by the male students or because their experience with the text was too different from the rest of their classmates. Patnoe believes that this is because readers "have been limited to those discussions and reactions deemed appropriate by the reigning cultural powers." (Patnoe 86) Readers do not want to believe that a novel so popular could really be about the rape of a teenage girl and the cover up of the male protagonist.

Humbert glosses over the 'issues' between him and Lolita, rather focusing on the love he feels for her using flowery language and depictions of their

‘enchanted’ relationship. Patnoe’s focus in *Lolita* is the connection between the reading experience and trauma and how that affects the meaning of the text, but the ideas can be used to think about female readers as a whole. Patnoe believes that *Lolita* is misread and misunderstood when thinking about gender issues because of how Lolita is represented as “seductive” and not as a “molested adolescent girl.” (Patnoe 83) When readers are forced to look at the text through a limited lens, reading the novel can be “so pleasurable for some and so traumatic for others.” (Patnoe 85) When observing a classroom and the discussion of the novel Patnoe saw that “many other men praise the book’s artistry, Nabokov’s brilliant language. One associate said he loved the book—his favorite.” (Patnoe 86) Patnoe began to see that many of the readers “trivialized Lolita’s experience and dismissed the trauma many readers experience.” (Patnoe 86) The male perspective, the ability to relate to Humbert by finding his actions moral in the end, leaves many women feeling oppressed and uncomfortable with the text.

This issue of a division between the reading experiences and then classroom discussion is rarely explored or remedied,

For a long time women’s voices in general, but especially women’s voices of anger and pain, have not been sound or heard. Despite the critical history of reader response and personal criticism, for the most part our discipline still disallows even the slightest hints of personal perceptions and reactions in scholarly work: we are expected to engage intimately with some of the most emotive stories ever told, but we are also expected to

squelch certain results of that engagement...we have been limited to those discussions and reactions deemed appropriate. (Patnoe 86)

Females' responses to this text, or any response that differs from feeling compassion for a protagonist obviously deranged, is often "squelched" or never explored. *Lolita* is taught and read through the lens of limited themes, from the American tourism to a writer's artistry in language. The new, different, or even traumatic, responses are often never discussed, "readers and critics almost always embrace what they consider the book's pleasures, almost always skirt its pains." (Patnoe 86) For many readers *Lolita* is just one of many "disturbing texts" that "are routinely, matter-of-factly, and authoritatively explored, even enforced" (Patnoe 87) to think of certain aspects of the text. Patnoe believes that these texts are causing women readers to be "disempowered." (Patnoe 88) This creates the same oppression that Schweickart talked about where the text "trivializes...the female personal...while hegemonically advancing the male personal." (Patnoe 90) Men in the text feel an affinity with Humbert and Holden while women experience oppression.

In texts like *Lolita* or *The Catcher in the Rye* there are many different experiences in reading. When reading *The Catcher in the Rye* female readers are taught by the protagonist to understand the American slang speech that objectify women through Holden's desires and fears. When reading *Lolita*, female readers are tricked by the protagonist into ignoring the trauma and pain inflicted on Lolita to instead enjoy the prose and the imagery of America in the 1960's. In the end the female reader is forced to relate and empathize with this type of male view

that only gives her a misrepresented and oppressive narrative. To be successful on the AP exam the reader must assess the “literary works and a consideration of their social and cultural values” (AP Board 7) designated by the AP board curriculum. This is why we look at *Lolita* in terms of how America was during the time and tourism. But as we see in *Lolita* and *The Catcher in the Rye*, female readers are facing barriers that male readers are not. In order to achieve an understanding of the text they must follow what the AP board believes demonstrates the meaning of a work’s “social and cultural values”—the male dominated perspective. The meaning of the texts that are discussed express a male point of view and through that oppressing the female reader, making it more difficult for them to achieve high scores when they do not share the same background as the protagonist. When female readers cannot connect to the text in the way that they are supposed to, they are silenced in the classroom or designed to feel a barrier. The issue here is not women being unable to connect to the text, but when they are unable to connect to a text in the way that the AP board feels they should in order to be successful on the exam. There are so many narratives, or ways to connect the gaps, like Iser says, but if they do not connect the dots in the way the numbers denote then they are forced out of the literary conversation.

Chapter Three

Despite being untrustworthy narrators with untrustworthy motives Vladimir Nabokov's Humbert and J.D Salinger's Holden triumph in the end when the reader feels compassion for them. Yet when the untrustworthy or unlikable narrator of a text is a woman the sentiments of the reader become very different. Texts with male protagonists that share similar shortcomings as female protagonists do not yield the same reactions of the readers. To illuminate this issue is the protagonist of Henry James' *The Turn of the Screw*, a text of the 'horror' genre because of the female protagonist. *The Turn of the Screw*, *Lolita* and *The Catcher in the Rye* all have protagonists that deal with paranoia, irrationality, and deranged interests, yet the response readers have to the characters vary drastically. I believe that this is caused by the gender of the protagonist, and the gender of the reader.

The protagonist of *The Turn of the Screw*, the governess, has many of the same traits and issues of Humbert and Holden, but in the end she is admonished rather than empathized with. In the end of the novel most readers choose to believe the worst of the female protagonist and rebuke her for what she has done, rather than trying to find compassion or sympathy. Despite being a female protagonist, readers of all genders find the governess reprehensible in the end, with no compassion to give. In my own experience in the AP classroom with this text, every single student believed that the governess was insane. One course syllabus for *The Turn of the Screw* focuses on how the text's style and writing sets

up readers to believe the governess as guilty. (AP Board) This demonstrates that the problem is beyond the gender of the protagonist, or the author, but with how readers are taught to understand these texts. Despite having similar issues of unreliability the male protagonists are sympathized with while the female protagonist is not.

The Turn of the Screw is framed by a group of writers sitting around telling ghost stories. One man, Douglas, begins to tell a story that he calls “beyond everything. Nothing at all that I know touches it...for dreadful—dreadfulness!” (James 116) The story comes from the diary of a woman who took up as the governess at a mansion out in the country, the Bly House. She goes to care for two young children, Flora and Miles, whom she immediately falls in love with, saying that the girl was “the most beautiful child I had ever seen” (James 123) and constantly dotes on the boy for his intelligence and talent. From the beginning the reader is handed clues to the character of the governess with her remarks like “I think, is what I came for—to be carried away...I’m rather easily carried away.” (James 124) The reader begins to question the governess more quickly than with Holden or Humbert, even though they both are just as “easily carried away” or driven to passionate expressions. Readers believe that these instances of paranoia just prove more each time the governess’ descent into insanity. She writes how much she loves the children and her job, yet her views of them seem to be misconstrued by her descriptions. She sees her new home as something out of a fairytale that is slightly horrific:

I had a view of the castle of romance inhabited by a rosy sprite, such a place as would somehow, for diversion of the young idea, take all colour out of story-books and fairy-tales. Wasn't it just a storybook over which I had fallen a-doze and a-dream? No; it was a big ugly antique but convenient house...in which I had the fancy of our being almost as lost as a handful of passengers in a great drifting ship. Well, I was strangely at the helm! (James 125)

The governess is torn between seeing her new life as a beautiful, romantic storybook and being lost in an ugly, frightening place. Her paranoia begins to show from the very beginning of her diary and automatically the reader begins to question her reliability. Humbert creates a similar feeling in his journal, describing his experiences with Lolita as an enchantment, or part of an “ignorable, ardent, sinful dream.” (Nabokov 166) Everything in his journal seems like it is in a haze, or part of a dream. For Humbert we applaud these instances of beautiful prose and story telling, but for the governess we see this as another instance of insanity and unreliability.

Rather than allowing ourselves as a reader to get caught up in her story we question every comment and action the governess makes because of her gender. Humbert and Holden's similar instances of paranoia or insanity allow for compassion while the governess' causes the reader to pull back from the story. Finally all of these seem to come to a breaking point when she has her first sighting of the ghosts of Miss Jessel and Peter Quint, the former governess and her lover, “what arrested me on the spot—and with a shock much greater than any

vision had allowed for—was the sense that my imagination had, in a flash, turned real. He did stand there! —But high up, beyond the lawn and at the very top of the tower.” (James 132) The governess begins to see visions of these former workers and believes them to be real while the reader believes that the governess has finally lost her mind. She begins to write about the ways that the children also see these visions when she tells her diary that Flora and Miles would say things like “He’s a horror” or “I’m afraid of him.” (James 140-141) The meaning of these comments are vague and could be interpreted in a manner of ways by the reader. It is possible that the children are really seeing the ghosts as well and that is why they make these comments, but most readers assume that the governess has forced or fabricated these confessions. These ambiguities in Holden and Humbert’s stories pull the reader towards the protagonist while in *The Turn of the Screw* it works for the readers to diverge from the governess.

The governess becomes more and more possessive of the children, calling them her own, and trying to shield them at all times from the horrors she believes to inhabit the Bly House. She even kisses Miles, “I shall never forget the sweetness and gaiety with which he brought out the word, nor how, on top of it, he bent forward and kissed me. It was practically the end of everything. I met his kiss.” (James 169) Humbert’s continuous talk of Lolita and their intimacy is an important part of the text, but rarely changes the way the reader perceives the character of Humbert and his reliability. Some readers even think that Lolita really was seducing Humbert. But this moment seems to be a breaking point for readers in *The Turn of the Screw*. When the governess kisses Miles readers

believe that she is completely deranged because her desire for a child. The readers see it as the governess kissing a child and never questioning any aspect of the scene like they did with Humbert. In the final scene of the story the governess, alone with Miles, again tries to convince him of seeing Miss Jessel and Peter Quint outside the window. She calls that he is here, and to her enjoyment, Miles finally claims to see Quint: “they are in my ears still, his supreme surrender of the name and his tribute to my devotion.” (James 217) But in the end:

He had already jerked straight round, stared, glared again, and seen but the quiet day...I recovered him might have been that of catching him in his fall. I caught him, yes, I held him—it may be imagined with what a passion; but at the end of a minute I began to feel what it truly was that I held. We were alone with the quiet day, and his little heart, dispossessed, had stopped. (James 217)

The ambiguities in the text never allow for the reader to think that perhaps the governess is truly experiencing these evils or trying to help the children instead condemning her to a liar and murderer. The combination of the female protagonist and the sense of confusion in the novel never allow for a connection to the governess, instead causing readers to dismiss her point of view. Before Miles' heart finally stops beating the governess constantly describes how hard she was holding Miles and trying to rid the vision of the ghost. The final scene brings to question how Miles died. Did he die of fear of the governess or of the ghost? Did the governess embrace him so hard that he died? Or did his heart stop because he was finally out from under the control of the ghosts of Quint and Jessel? The

questions are left up to interpretation, but there only seems to be one answer to these questions in the AP English Literature and Composition curriculum.

The readers in the end are left to figure out the ending on their own. James leaves the ending open to interpretation, for it to be ambiguous and disturbing, but for the readers to decide whether to feel compassion for the governess. The readers should have questioned whether the horror that the governess was forced to save the children from was real or if she the one who created it all in her mind. Despite the ambiguity of the ending of *The Turn of the Screw* most readers come to the conclusion that the governess killed Miles, and she was actually insane and the visions and the horrors were all produced in her mind. The readers constantly condemn the governess and blame her for the murder of Miles. This shows the ways that readers resist connecting to the non-white, non-heterosexual, non-privileged protagonist. The governess is deemed crazy and that everything was made up in her imagination.

The text *The Turn of the Screw* demonstrates how most female characters are represented in most novels. With the past two novels I spoke about how there were no female protagonists or characters for a reader to connect with. With this novel there is only one protagonist- the female governess. Yet, even with only the female protagonist's narration, the reader tries to evade the connection, condemning the protagonist and her point of view. Schweickart discussed in "Reading Ourselves: toward a feminist theory of reading" how many believed that "power was unfeminine and powerful women were, quite literally, monstrous" (Schweickart 490). The representation of women as monstrous, or insane, occurs

in many texts part of the literary canon. In Sandra Gilbert and Susan Gubar's *The Madwoman in the Attic* they discuss the limited representations of female characters in novels. According to Gilbert and Gubar women in novels are either depicted as an angel or as a monster. The angelic female is part of the text with "no story as her own but gives 'advice and consolation' to others." (Gilbert and Gubar 599) She is saintly, selfless, beautiful, and quiet, with no background or story of her own. Gilbert and Gubar describe the monster in female literature as made to "represent all of man's ambivalent feelings about his own inability to control his physical existence." (Gilbert and Gubar 607) This is why readers are so resistant to connect to female protagonists that demonstrate intelligence of power, because it allows the majority of the past protagonists, the privileged male, to lose control.

The governess, like these other 'monstrous' women evoke images of power and control when she tries to control the Bly house and the children. The monster is a woman that has power, tries to control those around her, and is often described as sexual and conniving. These are all seen in the portrayal of the governess. She tries to control everything at this large estate, and seems to have sexual desires for the children, and in the end is deemed as evil and suspected of killing Miles. Critics have gone as far as saying that it was her "neurotic case of sex repression," desire for her master, that drove the governess to insanity.

Alexander Jones in the essay "Point of View in the Turn of the Screw" looks at the issues that occur when a reader cites sexual repression as the governess' descent into insanity. She finds fault with critics that believe that the

ghosts were “‘creatures of the governess’s sex-starved imagination’” and that images like “toy boats and towers become phallic symbols” (Jones 114) to support those claims. Often times the argument of sexual repression uses the governess and her love for Miles, referring to how she “admits that she ‘throws’ herself upon him, she is constantly kissing him, folding him in her arms, or hugging him tightly ‘to...[her] breast.’” (Jones 116) The governess’ insanity being connected to sexual repression only furthers the issues of gender inequality in the classical canon.

Texts that have protagonists with similar issues, but different genders, lead the reader to very different conclusions in the end of the novel. Both Humbert and Holden grapple with sexual problems but that rarely causes readers to deem them evil or monstrous. In the end of Jones’ essay he asks the reader if “can we be positive that Douglass is not the liar, forging a manuscript to entertain his little circle of friends?” (Jones 122) There are multiple meanings available to the end of *The Turn of the Screw*, but most readers only conclude with one. Jones brings up only one of the conclusions that are available to thinking about *The Turn of the Screw* beyond the monster-like insanity of the governess. Gender is the biggest component of the text and how the reader views the protagonist. How would their stories differ if they were female? Would the reader still find fault with the governess if she were instead the male master of the estate?

Women readers, as Schweickart discussed, would rather relate to the male protagonist rather than the female protagonist when the only options of females depicted in texts are of an angel or a monster. “Male characters were...more

interesting” while female characters were either “unfeminine,” “monstrous” (Schweickart 490) or simply boring. Females in novels are often perceived as perfect, virtuous and boring angels or evil, sexualized, crazy monsters. In *The Turn of the Screw* the governess becomes the monster. She is deemed unsympathetic, unreliable and a murderer by the reader because she is given the power of trying to ‘save’ the children of the house. Most readers assume that she made everything up, and that she killed Miles, and it was all because of the sexual repression combined with too much power. Rather than examining the ambiguities in James’ novella, readers come to the conclusion that everything in the governess’ diary is fabricated. The novel written as a diary causes readers to question her bias and her reliability but it seems only because she is a woman. Humbert also writes his story in a journal, but the readers believe his arguments and actions and find him sympathetic and morally acceptable. When male students read *The Turn of the Screw* they are never forced to feel uncomfortable because they easily dismiss the governess as crazy and regain the balance of power in their favor. The women readers of the text end up still feeling as the other because it is just another example of a stereotypical female character; either a monster, and crazy, or as the angel—basically either horrible and evil or as no one important or notable.

As Jones says in his essay there are many other possible conclusions to the end of *The Turn of the Screw*, so why is it that readers usually only find one? In order for women to gain equality in the literary conversation and the reading experience female students must “examine, assimilate, and transcend the extreme

images of ‘angel’ and ‘monster’ which male authors have generated for her.” (Gilbert and Gubar 596) Rather than seeing the governess as a monster, readers should be looking at different aspects of the text and why they come to the conclusion that she fabricated everything. All readers should be looking beyond the clichéd ‘monster’ or ‘angel’ categories of the female protagonist but discussing the characters in new ways, which I will demonstrate with Mary Shelley’s *Frankenstein*.

Chapter Four

Mary Shelley's *Frankenstein* is a novel written by a woman with a male protagonist. Shelley created a male character with a god-complex and the desire to prove himself in every way possible. In order to best understand the text, and why it should be taught in new ways, it is important to think about why Shelley chose to make her protagonist the way she did, how she chose to portray gender throughout the text and what message that gives the reader. The AP Board website syllabi recommends to look at *Frankenstein* through "style as central to the story." (AP Board 53) Another source has students thinking about the gothic genre:

I arrange the students into small groups of three or four and instruct them to list the sights and sounds that all horror movies have in common.

Almost all girls are familiar with this genre, having cut their teeth on the Scary Movie and Friday the 13th franchises. (AP Board)

Readers are taught to think in these terms of the text but many other issues in the text deserve to be discussed, when considering gender.

The novel revolves around Frankenstein and his desire to learn more about the scientific pursuits of creating his own man--to bring the dead back to life. Frankenstein is on his own with his desires to prove his intelligence and ambition. He describes himself as having a temper that was "sometimes violent, and my passions vehement...it was the secrets of heaven and earth that I desired to learn"

(Shelley 29) Frankenstein becomes obsessed with education and furthering himself. He says,

I followed the routine of education in the schools of Geneva, I was, to a great degree, self-taught with regard to my favorite studies... Under the guidance of my new preceptors I entered with the greatest diligence into the search of the philosophers stone and elixir of life; but the latter soon obtained my undivided attention. (Shelley 32)

Frankenstein begins to dedicate his life to the study of creating life and to becoming a god-like figure. He spends years working on creating his own man. Many readers question their ability to sympathize with Frankenstein because of his inhumane, and one minded desire to find answers and play God. But when he finally succeeds he instantly realizes his mistake—

How can I describe my emotions at this catastrophe, or how delineate the wretch whom with such infinite pains and care I had endeavored to form?... His yellow skin scarcely covered the work of muscles and arteries beneath; his hair was of a lustrous black, and flowing; his teeth of a pearly whiteness; but these luxuriance's only formed a more horrid contrast with his watery eyes [and his] shriveled complexion and straight black lips. (Shelley 53)

He realizes that what he had created as a monster and becomes afraid of the mistake he made by “infusing life into an inanimate body.” (Shelley 54)

Frankenstein tries to further himself from his creation when he realizes that he made a monster not a God, and feared that his intelligence and work would go to

waste because of it. He fears that it was something “even Dante could not have conceived.” (Shelley 55) He wants to be one of the historical, and literary, figures of power, but what he made is not something fictional or great, but something horrible and real. Just like Humbert, Frankenstein appeals to his readers by alluding to other powerful figures like Dante, tricking them into thinking of him as respectable and important. Frankenstein tries to interact with other great writers but because of his cold, inhuman, pursuits he fails to create something good, instead creating something monstrous.

Frankenstein tries to leave behind his earlier pursuits and pretend that he never created the monster, but eventually he realizes that it is he cannot do that. The monster finds him and wants revenge for leaving him out on his own. By watching a family in the woods the monster learns about life, love, languages, writing, and reading. He is able to gain intelligence on his own, recognizing “of what a strange nature is knowledge! It clings to the mind when it has once seized on it like a lichen on the rock.” (Shelley 132) When Frankenstein begins to realize that his monster has intelligent and the ability to learn he becomes even more frightened. The monster has the same ambition and passion to learn like him, which intimidates Frankenstein. The monster begins to connect to *Paradise Lost*, saying how it “excited different far deeper emotions” (Shelley 144) in him and inspired him,

I often referred the several situations, as their similarity struck me, to my own. Like Adam, I was apparently united by no link to any other being in existence; but his state was far different than mine in every other respect.

He had come forth from the hands of God...but I was wretched, helpless, and alone. (Shelley 144)

Like Frankenstein, the monster associates himself with literary greatness like Dante and Milton. But what makes the monster different from Frankenstein is his desire to change, and feel real human connection.

The monster wants to be with someone else, to not be alone, demonstrating his human-like desires which differs from Frankenstein's single-minded pursuit for scientific greatness. The monster tells Frankenstein that he "must create a female for me with whom I can live in the interchange of those sympathies necessary for my being." (Shelley 162) Frankenstein begins to create a female monster but fears the consequences it would bring because of this creature's gender. He fears any part of feminine power or ability. Frankenstein fears that like his monster, this female creation would have the affinity to learn and create. The ability of a female monster to learn as quickly as the male monster scares Frankenstein because of the possibility it would lead to him losing his power to a real 'monstrous' woman. Frankenstein recognizes the possibility of a powerful woman, which is why he destroys his work. The monster does not fear this, only wanting love and a family. The monster has more humanity in him than Frankenstein, but he also has a feminine side, which is more important to think about. The monster has many feminine parts to him: his feelings of otherness from the rest of the world, and the fear he elicits because he is intelligent and powerful. This hidden concept of female power in the text is what is complex about *Frankenstein*. Readers sympathize with the monster and his desires instead

of Frankenstein's, therefore sympathizing with woman's ability to learn and create. Shelley tricks her readers into connecting with a female character by creating a genderless character that when examined, symbolizes feminism and the possibility of female power and respect. But this idea of sympathizing with a female protagonist is ignored and never recognized in the classroom.

Shelley creates two images of femininity hidden in the text *Frankenstein*. First is the monster that Frankenstein creates. The monster is upset that he has no power, no background, and no connection to the surrounding world. He asks himself "Who was I? What was I? Whence did I come? What was my destination?" and realizes that "these questions continually recurred, but I was unable to solve them." (Shelley 132) The monster's inability to connect to any background or history makes a statement on how women felt divided from literature and history. Just like a female reader has trouble connecting to texts like *The Catcher in the Rye* because of the narrator's use of male slang and imitations of other male authors, the monster feels a division from the rest of the world. The monster, like some readers, cannot connect to a history that they cannot see themselves in. What the monster feels is the experience of the other that all female readers must endure when reading these texts like *Lolita* or *The Catcher in the Rye* or *Paradise Lost*. He does not see himself in any text or history because his story does not exist.

The second image of femininity in *Frankenstein* that Shelley uses is the idea of a female monster. Frankenstein "speculates on female monstrosity ("she might become ten thousand times more malignant than her mate") that he

considers the threatening presence of the monster's male sexuality ("a race of devils would be propagated upon the earth'." (London 256) Frankenstein's fear of a female monster represents the male fear of female power and sexuality. Just like readers condemn the governess as a monster because of her power, Frankenstein condemns the idea of a female monster. Frankenstein realizes what a female 'monster' could be capable of and decides to destroy his work. A female monster, powerful and intelligent, would threaten Frankenstein and the balance of male power.

The images of femininity in the monster Frankenstein created and the monster he destroyed are just some of the ways to find gender throughout the text, something rarely spoken about in the classroom. Most classroom discussions focus on issues like Frankenstein's desire to be God, the making of man, nature versus nurture, or just defining the genre of Romanticism. But if different themes found in the text begin to be discussed or used on the AP English Literature and Composition curriculum we can begin to eliminate such gender inequalities of previous exams. The anthology "Approaches to Teaching Shelley's *Frankenstein*" demonstrate some of the different issues of the text that are less discussed but more important.

William Veeder's essay "Gender and Pedagogy: The Questions of *Frankenstein*" begins with the statement that: "The chief danger in reading is not (as we tend to fear) that we will not find meaning but that we will find it too soon, that irritably we will reach after and find, insist on and settle for, that fraction of the text that fits most conveniently." (Veeder 38) This represents the issue of

reading in the AP English Literature and Composition curriculum. Readers find the most convenient conclusion, the most obvious meaning, and ignore all other interpretations. Readers of *Frankenstein* latch on to the issues of nature versus nurture or the creation of man and religion instead of thinking about deeper concepts like gender or the author's perspective on feminism. Veeder believes that Shelley's "central preoccupation" was "gender" (Veeder 38) yet that is rarely discussed in the AP English Literature and Composition classrooms.

Veeder brings up questions that point out issues of gender in the text and why the importance of a female author is ignored. This allows readers to think more critically and more broadly about *Frankenstein*. Veeder believes that the separation between "the sexes that will recur throughout *Frankenstein*" (Veeder 39) are contrasted with Robert's attempt to bridge the gap with his letters to his sister Margaret. These symbolize her desire to end a division between genders. The powerful women of the text are never seen or never created, like Margaret or the female monster. Shelley expresses her opinion on gender division by doing this, showing the ability women have, but are not allowed to use within the literary world. By bringing up simple moments of gender seen in *Frankenstein* allows the reader to see how these exist throughout the text and how that can affect how the text is read.

Veeder brings up many different ways that gender is used throughout *Frankenstein* and how "the monster's creation [relates] to Frankenstein's misogyny." (Veeder 43) Veeder allows the reader to think about the text and what he believes to be Shelley's meaning; "what Shelley is dramatizing here is

projective narcissism, male self-love.” (Veeder 44) Veeder shows all the ways that this assertion works in the novel, citing how many view the monster as a symbol of feminism, and how Frankenstein felt about the monster throughout the text. First he “became as timid as a love-sick girl” (Veeder 44) to then chasing the monster for the rest of the text. Frankenstein begins in love with his monster, thinking it will be the image of himself, as man, but instead turns into his worst nightmare—a woman more powerful than him. Shelley created a character that is full of narcissism and misogyny, and begins a battle between himself and his monster, symbolizing a battle between the sexes. The division between genders in the text is also a fight between genders, between misogyny and the possibility of female power. Shelley is making a statement on gender and how male power has constantly oppressed female readers and writers.

Veeder believes that Mary Shelley uses *Frankenstein* to demonstrate the battle between sexes and Susan Wolfson’s essay “Feminist Inquiry and *Frankenstein*” continues to think about the text as a form of feminist criticism. Despite Shelley being the daughter of a famous feminist, readers never think about *Frankenstein* in terms of gender, or why a female author, especially one of her background, would write a text almost entirely of male protagonists. Wolfson writes about why the text is important:

Shelley (often the only woman read in courses on Romanticism) is the daughter of the most prominent feminist of the immediate post-revolutionary era and because her novel makes visible an ideology of

gender through psychological orientation and social behavior of its characters. (Wolfson 50)

Often times the background of the author, Shelley's feminist mother and upbringing, is left out of the conversation of the novel and therefore any statements of gender equality or female power. She begins her argument by citing how many believe that "all the interesting, complex characters in the book are male, and their deepest attachments are to other males. The female on the other hand, are beautiful, gentle, selfless, boring nurturers and victims." (Wolfson 50) Shelley's male characters are complex and ambitious like Frankenstein and Clerval while the female characters "fulfill culturally endorsed definitions of femininity: nurturing, devoted to home and family, self-sacrificing to the point of death." (Wolfson 51) The female characters in *Frankenstein* fulfill the stereotypical idea of the 'angel' from Gilbert and Gubar's criticism. The female characters are there only to help the male protagonists and have no true importance or story. By identifying the characters and the stereotypes that they fulfill students can begin to think about what statement Shelley is making about the culture during her time for women. Frankenstein goes on to pursue scientific greatness while his wife is left to enjoy poetry and care for the home, but Shelley makes a statement by having Frankenstein fail and create something that demonstrates feminine power. Wolfson writes that:

At the center of all these concerns with gender and behavior is Shelley's characterization of the Creature... as an inscription of the feminine...doubly like a women in patriarchal society—forced to be a

symbol of someone else's desire, yet exposed (and exiled) as the deadly essence of passion itself. (Wolfson 57)

The monster can never be anything other than Frankenstein's creation, his desire, and his mistake, because he is a monster, which Shelley uses to as a symbol for being a woman. The monster can never achieve greatness despite its intelligence and power, constantly forced to feel like the other.

Frankenstein is a complex text to understand when the different gender divisions and images are discussed. Readers are divided between sympathizing with Frankenstein or with the Monster, both seemingly powerful male protagonists, when in reality these different protagonists represent a divide between genders and Shelley's ideas on female power. Wolfson ends by thinking about Shelley, her authorship and her perspective of gender, "Shelley's ability to give compelling representation of these dilemmas and to associate them with the ideologies of gender by which she was influenced animates the text of *Frankenstein* in ways that can continue to animate our students' attention."

(Wolfson 59) I chose *Frankenstein* to act as a recommendation for its use in the classroom because of these complexities in the text. The text allows for discussion about gender and power because of the different protagonists and their intricate issues, which makes the choice for sympathy or dislike more difficult. Gender is hidden throughout the text, forcing readers to think more deeply about how women are represented in literature, how female readers experience the literary canon, and how students choose to sympathize with certain characters. But these ideas are rarely discussed, which leaves most of the text unexplored. The

statements of gender are blatantly throughout *Frankenstein* but readers latch on to the most convenient meaning, the meaning that allows for success in the AP curriculum.

When the most convenient meaning allows for students to succeed in the AP curriculum there is an entire section of a text left out, as well as certain readers. The most convenient meaning is the meaning found through the male perspective even though different genders will find different meanings in a text when examined closely. By only discussing certain aspects of a text it forces certain readers to find the most convenient meaning, stopping them from examining the text more deeply. But when a student is forced to latch on to a meaning of the text that is being discussed in the classroom, it stops them from fully understanding the text. This then affects their performance on the AP exam. Today the perspective and ideas discussed about a text need to be broadened beyond the heterosexual, privileged male ideology as I will discuss in my next section on how we can remedy gender, and other, inequalities that exist in the curriculum.

Instead of limiting students to thinking about a text in certain terms in order to excel in the course and on the exam, there needs to be allowances for other types of experiences with a text. There first needs to be a re-examination in the classroom of protagonists and how some are considered sympathetic and some are not, like with Humbert and the governess. After readers are able to see why they choose to sympathize with some characters rather than others we can begin to understand the different issues of gender inequality in the texts, and how we

understand the text as a whole. The meanings and themes, which are considered the most important in the classroom curricula, can be redefined and broadened, allowing all readers to understand texts in different ways and still achieve success on the AP English Literature and Composition exams. There is an obvious theme of gender seen in *Frankenstein*, and the fact that the author is a female author with a background in feminism, but that is rarely part of the text that meant to be discussed on the AP exam. Students that come from a range of backgrounds or perspectives should all be able to excel on the AP exam despite concluding a different meaning from a text.

Chapter Five

Frankenstein’s monster demonstrates the issue with reading experience for many students in the AP English Literature Curriculum—the uncomfortable feeling of seeing through a perspective different from your own background or understanding. When a reader cannot see himself or herself in a text their experience differs. They face different barriers when trying to fill in the gaps of the text or relate to the protagonist. This issue is visible in Christopher Myers’ essay “The Apartheid of Children’s Literature.” Myers recounts an experience he had discussing best selling children’s books with a student and how that affected his ideas on the canon and literature. When talking to his students one asks “so you’re telling me these are all the books published last year for kids...and in all those thousands of books, I’m just not in them?” (Myers 2) The student goes on to say how these books have protagonists who have superpowers, or who can talk to animals, but because of his color, his background, there is never a character like him. Myers’ article talks about the issue of children’s literature, but the problem exists as well in the high school literature curricula.

There is a “gap in the much-written-about sense of self-love that comes from recognizing oneself in a text, from the understanding that your life and lives of people like you are worthy of being told, thought about, discussed and even celebrated.” (Myers 5) The issue is beyond just “self-love” but also with success in the classroom and on exams. When books are meant to become “mirrors that affirm readers’ own identities” (Myers 5) like Iser also discussed, there becomes

an issue in the reading experience when the reader cannot see themselves in the text. Myers talks about how readers who cannot see themselves in a text are “threatened by difference, and desperately try to wish the world into some more familiar form.” (Myers 7) In order to stop this division, this inequality in the reading experience, there needs to be a “more expansive landscape” (Myers 9) for readers to see themselves in.

Throughout my research I have found many cases of gender inequality in the AP English Literature and Composition curriculum and exam based on reading experience. Beyond just the gender of the protagonist and the gender of the author is the issue of the gender of the reader. Schweickart says how “the same text affects a woman reader differently.” (Schweickart 490) This claim is the same with any reader of a background that differs from the heterosexual, white, privileged male perspective that dominates the classical canon. The way that those of a different background react or respond to different texts is something that is normal and understandable. But this is still something that is not accounted for in the AP English Literature and Composition curriculum.

There are two aspects of how we can remedy these inequalities. First is an issue of what texts are included in the AP English Literature and Composition exam. Second is the issue of how these texts are read and taught. Through my research I have demonstrated the ways in which certain texts barricade many readers from experiencing texts in a way that the AP exam asks for. In order for all students to have an equal opportunity to succeed on the exam all students deserve to have their experience heard and understood. The solution will not

mean that all students at all times will be able to connect to a text, to see themselves in a text, or feel completely comfortable in a text. By adding more texts to the canon, as well as changing the way we understand some texts, we can give all readers the chance to connect to a protagonist and see themselves within the novel. This also means that some readers will feel uncomfortable when reading a text or have a different experience than their classmates, which gives a new perspective to those students.

In order to provide new perspectives to the AP English Literature and Composition students, the canon needs to be redesigned to add new texts. There needs to be a lengthened list of texts for the exam with authors of different backgrounds and protagonists of different backgrounds. Texts should be included to broaden the ability for different readers to connect to different backgrounds, while also showing other readers new perspectives. As time has gone on there have been more diverse students signing up for these high level classes; the classes are not only just white, privileged men. But despite these changes in the students the curriculum has not changed. There needs to be texts that give the perspective of not only different genders but different races and sexualities and other backgrounds that are not seen in the curriculum as of now. The canon needs to include texts of all different kinds like James Baldwin's *Giovanni's Room*, which shows the perspective of a gay man, or *Maine* by J. Courtney Sullivan, which tells the story of three strong female characters, or *Krik? Krak!*, which demonstrates the point of view of Haitian women.

An article on the website Flavorwire asks twenty-one writers “which new or underrated books deserve classic status.” (Diamond 1) The choice of texts include *A Grain of Wheat* by African author Ngugi wa Thiong’o’s, Margaret Atwood’s *The Handmaid’s Tale*, *Housekeeping* by feminist writer Marilynne Robinson and many others. All the choices on the list have the writer detail why the chosen text deserves to be a classic and many of the descriptions demonstrate how different perspectives should be included in the AP canon. One author argues that more women writers deserve to be classic because they make it on top reading lists but are “nowhere to be found on the Modern Library list. The Modern Library list has a whopping total of eight women writers.” (Diamond 20) Another author says that a text deserves to be a part of the canon because of its ability to portray a “timeless experience in a way that strikes the reader as fresh, novel, profound, and unforgettable” while also allowing “more readers to engage” (Diamond 8) with African authors. Another author describes how the text should be included when it crosses a “boundary like class or sex.” Even though,

such boundaries move and change all time, but we will always wish to return to the book that shows just how things were when a boundary lay there uncrossed, perhaps even unrecognized, then how the boundary became clear, magnetic, had to be crossed, was crossed. (Diamond 11)

When we add these new perspectives to the canon we can begin to show new ideas, new backgrounds, and allow for these new boundaries to be crossed. By adding new texts to the canon, not only do we redefine the meaning of classic, but also we allow more readers to understand the non-normative perspective. By

adding different authors, different protagonists, and different meanings to the classroom curriculum we can allow not only for all readers to be able to see themselves in a text, but give more readers a widened understanding of sex, culture, class and gender.

These choices and descriptions made by these writers demonstrate the issue in the AP English Literature and Composition canon. This issue is that it has not evolved along with other parts of society and history. New texts deserve to be a part of the canon and discussed in classrooms. There are so many more texts out there that deserve to be considered canonized classic texts, and many of these texts demonstrate perspectives of different backgrounds. But by adding new texts to the canon it does not mean that we should stop reading past classics. Instead we need to think about these texts in new ways. We need to go back to the classic texts and think about how they are taught and how they can be changed to allow for a less limited reading experience.

The Catcher and the Rye can be taught to think about male sexuality and adolescence and how society creates these feelings of fear that Holden experiences. We can think about why Holden has such judgment for women and maybe how that existed in society when it was written. We can look at *Lolita* past Humbert's language but how he uses that to hide his true intentions, and the way he tries to appeal to women, all allow for a deeper discussion of gender in the text. Discussions could be about Humbert and the way he writes in order to create an enchanted world to trick his readers. Or we can look at *Lolita* and her character, rather than seeing her as a seductress nymphet but a woman that experiences

trauma and rape. When we read *The Turn of the Screw* we can try to read the text as a real ghost story or maybe why the governess has feelings of oppression and paranoia beyond just the solution of sexual repression. Or we can question the reliability of the frame, Douglass, instead of the governess and why readers automatically discredit the governess' diary. When we read *Frankenstein* we can work to find the different statements of gender that Shelley makes in the text and think about the importance of the author. When we read *Frankenstein* we should look for the ways that female power comes into play, especially with the monster, rather than questioning whether or not he was created through nature or nurture.

By questioning our first, or past, impressions of these canonized texts we can begin to understand the issues of gender in the canon and how it existed during history and today. It can allow readers to create a new system of the reading experience and to eradicate such inequality in the classroom. Questioning why we choose to connect to a protagonist like Humbert and Holden but not the governess or the monster allows students to see these moments of gender inequality and begin to change how we read these texts.

Junot Diaz's article in *The New Yorker* "MFA vs. POC" examines his issues with writers today and the literary canon. He cites "the standard problem of MFA programs. That shit was too white" (Diaz) as why quit. Diaz's issue explains the problems of gender inequality that still exist in today's canon. He was taught to write "exactly the dominant culture's blind spots and assumptions around race and racism (and sexism and heteronormativity, etc)." (Diaz) Diaz

says that he was never taught to write from his own background or about race, instead creating the same writing that exists in the curriculum today. Diaz recognizes that “the default subject position of reading and writing—of Literature with a capital L—was white, straight and male.” (Diaz) By allowing for new writing to be considered canonical and taught in the classroom, these issues of Literature being defined as “white, straight and male” can be solved and redefined. By teaching new texts, and old texts in new ways, we can create a new system of reading and writing. Instead of using the old system of the male frame of mind, the male slang language, and the male system of imitating past male works we can change that to create new narratives and new perspectives. We can stop the old system and create a new one. Diaz found a place where him and other non-white privileged men can demonstrate how their

ideas, critiques, concerns, [their] craft and, above all, *[their]* *experiences* would be privileged rather than marginalized; encouraged rather than ignored; discussed intelligently rather than trivialized. Where [their] contributions were not an adjunct to Literature but its core. (Diaz)

Once we can re-examine literature beyond just the past male dominant perspectives and introduce new perspectives, all backgrounds will be “privileged rather than marginalized.” Only by following these steps can we allow for a more expansive reading experience for all students.

From best selling children’s literature to MFA writing programs, this passage through education creates a system of gender inequality for readers. Children’s literature teaches young kids that their perspective is not important

because it does not exist in their favorite stories. MFA programs teach writers to write exclusively from the male, heterosexual, white, privileged perspective. The AP English Literature and Composition exam teaches students that they need to see through this perspective in order to prove their reading and writing abilities and succeed on the exam. These all create a system of inequality for readers that are not the white male perspective. The inequality comes from the division between female and male readers, which becomes a division between readers who have an affinity to the protagonist and readers who are asked to do so despite their feelings of otherness. The female reader is forced into feelings of otherness and being uncomfortable in the reading experience. The feeling of 'otherness' only becomes oppression when it only occurs to certain readers, any reader that is not white, male, straight and privileged. Not only do these readers deserve to feel a connection to a text without any feelings of being uncomfortable, but also all readers deserve to experience those feelings as well. This allows for all readers to explore new ideas and gain a new perspective throughout the curriculum. This would be the true way to succeed in the end of the AP English Literature and Composition curriculum. The key to changing the inequality in the AP curriculum is not to strive for all readers to connect to the protagonist and the text at all times, but for there to be a balance. Some texts should connect to female readers and allow them to feel an "affinity" to the text and to the world and allow for other readers to experience the feelings of "oppression" or of being "powerless."

(Schweickart 490)

In order to do this we must “Color Outside the Lines” as Sand Mastrangelo says in her article “Coloring Outside the Lines: Addressing the Error in Literacy Education.” In order to allow all readers to experience a connection with a text, while also broadening the horizon of all readers, is to color outside the lines. The AP English Literature and Composition exam needs to add texts that have the perspective of different backgrounds, while also teaching the canonized texts in new ways. All readers “regardless of race, socioeconomic status, or gender identity, respond tangibly to archetypes of narrative fiction.” (Mastrangelo 2) Many students feel that in order to be successful, in the classroom or on an exam, they must “color [themselves] within the oppressive boundaries” (Mastrangelo 3) of such standardized curricula as common core or AP exam. It is true that “all students deserve an education tailored to their interests and needs” and these students “will color themselves within the borders if we don’t challenge pervasive insular mindsets that exist.” (Mastrangelo 4) In order to change how readers experience literature, the AP board and teachers need to “reexamine [their] bookshelves” because by “providing all students with individualized, relevant texts, we will facilitate their entry into more expansive landscapes.” (Mastrangelo 5)

All students, despite their background, deserve to connect to a text and have their opinions heard and understood not only to succeed in the classroom but also to succeed on the AP English Literature and Composition exam. It is “essential” to make “the literary enterprise into a means for building and maintaining connections” (Schweickart 501) between all readers and all texts. All

students should at times experience the feeling of an affinity to a protagonist and to a text, while at other times experience the feelings of oppression and otherness. Only by creating this balance can we eradicate gender inequality in the AP English Literature and Composition curriculum, and allow for all readers to succeed in these classrooms and on these exams. By doing this we can create a new system of reading and writing expansive enough to include children's literature, AP courses, MFA programs and the literary canon itself. Eradicating gender inequality allows for all readers to succeed in the AP exam and beyond, creating a new, more expansive, literary enterprise.

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