

UNIVERSITY OF CALGARY

Literary Texts in the High School:

To Read or Not to Read?

by

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Frontispiece

All the world's a stage,
And all the men and women merely players;
They have their exits and their entrances,
And one man in his time plays many parts,
His acts being seven ages. At first, the infant ...
Then the whining schoolboy, with his satchel
And shining morning face, creeping like snail
Unwillingly to school.

As You Like It, II, vii, 138-145

ABSTRACT

With the implementation of a new high school English language arts program of studies anticipated in September 2001, two questions have arisen. How have we come to understand what it means to read literature? How do these ways of thinking about the reading of literature affect students and teachers?

To explore these questions, I undertake a discourse analysis of the texts that have shaped my practice: mandated programs of study, other official curricular documents, supplementary resource materials, and images of practice. Using a poststructuralist framework, I employ Foucault's notions of power/knowledge, subjectivity, and regimes of truth to unearth and examine two dominant discourses that have shaped the study of literature: competence and humanism. As a result, students have been positioned as depositories of mandated truths while teachers have been invited to transmit those truths.

With the above inquiry providing a basis from which to consider alternative approaches, I look to cultural studies to open up the yet uninvited in high school English language arts.

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For My Students

TABLE OF CONTENTS

Approval Page.....	ii
Abstract.....	iii
Acknowledgements	iv
Dedication	v
Table of Contents.....	vi
Epigraph.....	viii
Act One	
Scene I	
<i>The Time Is Out of Joint</i>	
Mandating and Covering English Language Arts Curriculum	
in Alberta: Questions that Arise.....	1
Covering the Mandated Curriculum.....	2
High School English Language Arts in Alberta	
... in My Classroom	5
Surfacing of the Questions.....	17
Act Two	
Scene I	
<i>There Is Nothing Either Good Or Bad But Thinking Makes It So</i>	
Conceptual Framework: A Poststructuralist Reading	19
Discourse.....	20
Subjectivity	24
Power/Knowledge.....	26
Regimes of Truth.....	28
Scene II	
<i>Though This Be Madness, Yet There Is Method In't</i>	
Approaching the Study.....	34
The Research Approach	34
The Texts of Study	37
Limitations	43
Act Three	
Scene I	
<i>Suit the Action to the Word, the Word to the Action</i>	
The Discourse of Competence.....	44
Forms of Acquisition	46
Forms of Reduction	54
Forms of Standardization.....	69
Concluding Observations.....	74

Scene II	
<i>The Glass of Fashion and the Mould of Form</i>	
The Discourse of Humanism	75
The Centrality of Universal Themes	77
The Privileging of the Canon.....	93
The Locus of the Self.....	97
Concluding Remarks.....	101
 Scene III	
<i>'Tis an Unweeded Garden that Grows to Seed</i>	
A Summation	103
 Act Four	
Scene I	
<i>How All Occasions Do Inform Against Me</i>	
What Is Cultural Studies?.....	107
A Cultural Studies Reading of Literary Texts ... All Texts.....	111
Cultural Studies and Shakespeare.....	113
Reading the Diploma Examination within Cultural Studies.....	115
Locating Power and Knowledge within a Cultural Studies Approach.....	117
 Scene II	
<i>This Thing's to Do</i>	
Cultural Studies Enacted in the Classroom	122
Is Cultural Studies Possible in the English Language Arts Classroom?.....	122
Where Do We Start with Cultural Studies?	124
Cultural Studies and the Nature of the Author.....	125
Agency within Cultural Studies.....	126
Cultural Studies Enacted in the Reading of Shakespeare	127
Summary Thoughts.....	133
 Act Five	
Scene I	
<i>We'll Put the Matter to the Present Push</i>	
A Process Review.....	134
 Scene II	
<i>The Readiness Is All</i>	
Possibilities for Further Research.....	139
 References	142

Something is rotten in the state of Denmark.
Hamlet, I, iv, 100

ACT ONE**SCENE I**

**"The Time is Out of Joint"
(*Hamlet*, I, v, 215)**

**Mandating and Covering
English Language Arts Curriculum in Alberta:
Questions that Arise**

"I don't do reading out loud."

"How about just a few lines?" I said.

"I don't get this Shakespeare stuff. Why do we have to read it anyway? It doesn't make any sense. Nobody talks like this anymore! I've hated it since grade 10. The only reason I'm in this course is because I need it to get into university."

The lesson's flow came to a complete halt. Up until this moment, the students seemed to be with me, or at least that was what I had perceived. My brain began to file through the dozens of possibilities for my next move with the students. However, my most immediate goal was to minimize any embarrassment this particular student might have been feeling and relieve the less relaxed atmosphere that had suddenly developed. At the same time, an infinity of thoughts sped through my mind within milliseconds.

Moments such as this one are common in the classroom. Looking back at this particular instance, I wondered about the ways in which my students and I had interacted. I also wondered about the tensions that had been emerging and were now evident: those experiences of constricting strain that arose between the curriculum I was required to teach, the students who were to be

taught, and the methodologies I employed to teach them. In fact, these incidents of tension had become increasingly noticeable to me with each group of students that entered my classroom over the past ten years. In other words, instead of being complementary to my students' moods and interests, I often felt that my attempts to *cover the mandated curriculum* were met with apathy, disinterest, and resistance.

Covering the Mandated Curriculum

In considering my most recent experiences with students, the notions of *mandated curriculum* and *covering the curriculum* became increasingly problematic for me. The earlier vignette, for example, is only one instance of heightened uneasiness that I experienced with what was taking place in my classroom. That is, I felt there was an ongoing struggle, whether subtle or overt, between getting my students to meet curriculum requirements and keeping them interested during class. The following scenario illustrates this within a conventional high school classroom setting.

The scene begins with students filing into the classroom and taking their places. Once the teacher is ready to begin, the students collectively refocus their attention on the day's work. The teacher then provides the students with an overview of the topics and concepts to be covered and proceeds by meeting the intended objectives and goals as mandated by Alberta Learning. While the lesson is in motion, the teacher strategically poses questions to encourage discussion so that the students can actively participate in the learning process.

At the end of the lesson, the teacher reviews the intended objectives and outcomes with the students as a summary of the class. If this lesson had been unfolding during an English 30 class (the grade twelve English language arts course in the academic stream), the knowledge, skills, and attitudes to be acquired would include those associated with being able to read one of Shakespeare's plays.

Reminiscent of my days in high school English classes, this familiar scenario identifies the teacher as authority and purveyor of knowledge. In return, the students are, for the most part, receptacles to be filled. In further consideration of my own recollections as an English 30 student reading various literary selections, the strategies employed by my teacher to guide my comprehension of the text included fill-in-the-blank quizzes, vocabulary exercises, timed oral presentations, multiple choice tests, and diploma practice examinations. For me, these activities and forms of evaluation were simply part of the "how-to-get-a-good-grade" game. Developing an appreciation of the author's artistry or even what these texts meant to me was not my primary goal. Instead, I felt I had to navigate through a maze of questions and assignments without being duped by the teacher. Success at this would have been symbolically represented by a grade of "A".

Even my university experiences seemed to focus on the same game. At the post-secondary level, though, it was more challenging because the instructors did not provide the literary interpretations as readily as was the case in high school. Nevertheless, the providing and receiving of knowledge, from

my perspective, seemed to continue. Again, the puzzle of English literature took on a very rational, strategic, methodical, and almost mathematical appearance. That is, students were required to read a text and respond to the author's intended meanings while the instructors were charged with the task of determining the worth of the students' responses, again identified by a grade of A, B, C, D, or F.

My thoughts halted. What does it mean to *cover the curriculum*? Who does the *covering*? Who decides what is to be covered? Why is it necessary to cover the curriculum? Immediately, I retrieved the automatic and rehearsed response: Alberta Learning (the government department previously known as Alberta Education), through a curriculum outline and guide, mandated what was to be learned by students at each grade level. *Mandated curriculum* ... again, the same questions: What does it mean to *mandate the curriculum*? Who does the *mandating*? Who decides what is to be *mandated*? Why is it necessary to *mandate* the curriculum? Upon reflection, I surmised that the *mandate to cover* curriculum defined my role in the classroom as Keeper of the Curriculum. That is, I was required to ensure that my students acquired the knowledge, skills, and attitudes deemed to be significant by the policy document defining what it meant to read literary texts in the high school language arts classroom.

For the last couple of decades, Alberta Education's *Senior High School Language Arts Curriculum Guide* (1982) served as the primary framework for English language arts teachers. More recently, the Western Canadian Protocol

for Collaboration in Basic Education's *The Common Curriculum Framework for English Language Arts, Kindergarten to Grade 12* (1998) has informed the development of a new program of studies. Implementation of Alberta Learning's *Program of Studies for Senior High School English Language Arts* (2000) is anticipated to begin at the grade ten level in September 2001 (Trehearne, 2000).

High School English Language Arts in Alberta ... in My Classroom

After these thoughts jettied through my brain, I focused on the need to reach out to the student who likely echoed the thoughts of a number of the others in the class. Of course, I could have simply ignored the situation by seeing if another volunteer would come forward to read. However, I decided that this was a teachable moment. The only difficulty seemed to be to figure out what I was going to do with this opportunity.

I began by asking the students to close their *Hamlet* text for the moment. "Okay, Dean, you don't have to read out loud right now. In fact, why don't we all take a bit of a break." A whispery chorus of sighs was detectable. "Let's talk about what you all like and don't like about this Shakespeare *stuff*, as you folks put it."

"Oh, Miss, we're not really going to do work now, are we?" grumbled Elaine.

"Don't think of it as work. We're just going to chat."

"So what if we decide that we don't *do* chatting?" piped up another student while the others twittered in amusement.

"Good point, Nathan, but we always have the option of some reflective and individual reading or writing."

"On second thought, a good discussion is very educational, right Ms. Filipetto?"

"I'm glad you're seeing it my way, Nathan." After I uttered these words, I was taken aback for a moment. Was I truly seeking for things to go *my way*, or was this a harmless expression? Somehow, I was beginning to feel that no expression was innocent. Nevertheless, I decided to push forward – whatever direction that was. "So, everyone, tell me: what do you like and dislike about reading Shakespeare's plays?"

A few seemingly eternal and almost painful moments of silence passed. Finally, Susan offered her thoughts. "It's not that I like it or don't like it. I just feel that we have to know about it because everyone else does. It's like you hear about it all the time. They're even doing movies about Shakespeare's stuff. I've seen DiCaprio in *Romeo and Juliet*, and he was pretty cool in that. Even if I didn't always catch what he said, I figured out what was going on. It was just a love story. We see that on television and in the movies all the time. I just don't get why we have to learn about *Shakespeare's* stories. What's so special about *his* stories? Didn't you tell us that what he tells about is really stuff that we hear about all the time? You know, love, hate, jealousy, and sorrow."

This student's realization underscored the widely accepted literary truth that the themes, characters, and plots of various pieces of literature have common underpinnings. That is,

literature ... has a lot to do with identifying the human world with the natural world around it, or finding analogies between them.... This story of the loss and regaining of identity is, I think, the framework of all literature. (Frye, 1963, p. 18, 21)

By engaging in an exploration of literary texts with this in mind, it has been suggested that literature would "free us from the inherent shackles fastened upon us by our society" (Burton, 1970, p. 5). In other words, reading literature in the high school classroom would assist students in coming to understand the human condition and how it is played out in their lives. Support for this goal can be found in Alberta Education's 1982 curriculum guide:

CONCEPTS	THE STUDENT SHOULD BE ABLE TO:
7. The study of literature can fulfill a variety of goals for the individual.	- understand that reading literature can increase his enjoyment, knowledge and appreciation of literature; develop his understanding of himself and others; and broaden his knowledge of his cultural heritage.
9. Human experience and values can be explored through literature.	- become aware of some of the variety, origins, conflicts and trends in human values; - appraise the values expressed in a literary selection.

(p. 24)

Is this what ought to constitute the reading of literary texts? Are these desired goals of our high school English language arts program?

"Absolutely, Sue. Shakespeare's themes are universal; his stories are timeless. In other words, whether we read his plays in high school or see them performed in Stratford at the age of fifty, we can identify with them."

As an English language arts teacher, I perpetuated the truth that the thematic topics explored in literary texts were universal and timeless; I worked

to convince my students that love, hate, betrayal and revenge, for instance, were common to the emotional experiences of all human beings (Halpern, 1997; Bloom, 1998). Consequently, students ought to be able to easily recognize these emotions in Shakespeare's plays, or any literary text for that matter (Burton, 1970; Macon et al., 1982).

It was at this moment that another flashback came to mind. I was reminded of Pablo Neruda's essay "Shakespeare, Prince of Light." In it he explained that each age of human enlightenment had people of wisdom who entertained us and moved us. He referred to Dante, Hugo, and Whitman saying that above all of these was Shakespeare.

These [other] bards amass leaves ...; beneath these leaves roots grow. They are the leaves of great trees.

They are leaves, and eyes. They multiply and gaze down on us, ... and help us discover ourselves: they reveal to us our labyrinths.

In the case of Shakespeare, there is ... the sorcery of his distilled poetry. Few poets are so compact and secret, so secure in the heart of their diamond....

A phantasmagorical wind blows through the tunnel of each play. The oldest sound in the world, the sound of the human heart, is the matter from which these unforgettable words are formed....

.... There will always be time and space to explore in Shakespeare, to lose ourselves And though we may go a long way without reaching the end, we always return with hands filled with fragrance and blood, with flowers and sorrows, with mortal treasures. (Neruda, 1983, pp. 162-165)

As someone who uncovered a latent appreciation for literature, I *felt* the sentiments expressed by Neruda. Somewhere in my memory there was a glimmer of hope about what I was doing with my students. Northrop Frye, as

well as others (Phelan, 1980; Bloom, 1998), echoed similar sentiments when he explained that, through literature, humans regained their identity and, in doing so, strove to create a world of which they would like to be a part (Frye, 1989). But, how did I come to accept these notions as my own?

I simply believed that what my teachers told me was truth. If they said that Shakespeare was the greatest poet that ever lived, I accepted that based on their role as instructors. I came to love literature mostly because my teachers maintained that it was deserving of my admiration. It would seem that I allowed myself to become a receptacle of information, abilities, and opinions. Was I doing cartwheels to please my teachers (Wong & Wong, 1998)? It was now disturbing to realize that I had never considered the possibility that it might not be necessary to learn or teach about Shakespeare's works. It was only with experiencing moments like my most recent classroom ones that I even wondered about the validity of choosing to study Shakespeare's plays. In contrast, Alfred Whitehead questioned what I had not considered by suggesting that, as a separate subject, the "most dreary of all, [was] Literature, represented by plays of Shakespeare, with philological notes and short analyses of plot and character ..." (Whitehead, 1929, pp. 6-7). In his estimation, this did not constitute what a curriculum ought to teach.

So what was I to do now? Unlike *my* mindset in high school and during my undergraduate days, that of my students was not simply going to be blind acceptance. How was I to get them to believe what Neruda passionately wanted the world to know? Were my students and I positioned in such a way

that Neruda's message was no longer possible to take up in the contemporary English 30 classroom? Ought it to be possible? Or, was Neruda's message a truth that served its purpose, but had no place in the present reality of our students? What was this present reality?

"But, Ms. Filipetto, why can't we just read other stuff that's easier? You know, that makes sense? Or why can't they translate his stuff so we can understand it," asked Larry.

During moments of resistance like this, I would have wanted to point out that learning was not usually easy or always fun (Wong & Wong, 1998). Somehow, however, I decided that this would be better left expressed at another time. So, in inquiring about the origin of their frustrations, my students had pointed to the unfamiliar language in Shakespeare as the source of their discontent. A ha! Perhaps, then, if we, as educators, were able to render his texts more accessible to students, they would be able to comprehend, enjoy and appreciate Shakespeare's plays for their literary value (Alberta Education, 1982, p. 24). Needless to say, I was not the first person to consider this as a solution.

Teacher resource materials are in abundance and teeming with activities for overcoming the language barrier students often experience when reading one of Shakespeare's plays. As a possible strategy for overcoming this barrier, teachers are encouraged to have students restate a portion of Shakespearean text using contemporary diction and phraseology. Another suggestion has students enacting a section of a play in the style of a popular television program

such as *The Simpsons* or *Friends*. Unfortunately, while many creative suggestions exist in response to student frustration with Shakespeare's language, many of my colleagues have pointed to student motivation as the source of their struggles with students. Upon questioning, some of my students reacted to this observation by remonstrating that, aside from occasionally brief backgrounds on authors and their times, a number of their teachers did little to assist them in developing an understanding of how a particular literary work could have importance for them (Willinsky, 1991). Perhaps, then, the solution was to approach the reading of literary texts from a personal perspective, one that led students to explore their inner selves. "Presumably, they w[ould] enjoy reading, discussing, and writing more if the focus [wa]s on their own reactions with literature rather than on the literature as an object or artifact" (Price, 1989, p. 11). With all of these possibilities and latest motivational trends available for enticing the inner student, many teachers of English language arts have been perpetually preoccupied with finding the magical key to engaging their students. Unfortunately, many students have continued to be dulled by English classes that seemed perfunctory in purpose and execution.

With this in mind, my thoughts returned to my students and my language arts lesson on reading *Hamlet*. I could quite easily have rattled off a dozen objectives and goals as prescribed by either the *Senior High School Language Arts Curriculum Guide* (1982), the *Common Curriculum Framework for English Language Arts, Kindergarten to Grade 12* (1998), or the *Program of Studies for Senior High School English Language Arts* (2000) to justify my pedagogical

choices. It would also have been easy to lull myself into the complacent belief that I was succeeding in my role as a teacher of English by being able to do so. After all, I was *covering* the *mandated* curriculum whose standards had been rigorously reviewed, thoroughly researched, and collaboratively finalized. I was also employing supplementary resources such as *Responses to Literature: Grades K to 8* while paying strict attention to the English 30 diploma examinations. These documents, though not official curriculum guides, also shaped how we read literary texts in my classroom thereby guiding my practice of *covering* the *mandated* curriculum. Somehow, though, this view of the English teacher's role and of curriculum standards did not sit well with me. I could no longer rationalize what I was trying to accomplish with my students. While it might have been acceptable to design lesson plans with the goal of fulfilling curriculum requirements during my undergraduate days or earlier in my career, this systematic approach to teaching English language arts was now problematic for me. I was at odds with the ways in which I had allowed myself to operate as a high school English language arts teacher. This mode of operating was in tension with my students' mode of being. Therein lay the difficulty. Had I gone astray? Had my students? What was different now in comparison to when I was studying English 30 as a student? What was my underlying purpose in teaching my students to read literary texts?

Unlike many of my colleagues, I did not choose to be an English teacher in order to share my love for literature. Ironically, though I whole-heartedly believed in the passion my teachers had for literature, I never became an avid

reader. Instead, I had been a television junkie. As such, I did not possess the knowledge, skills, and attitudes that came with the reading of literature as presented by my teachers. Therefore, I felt it was crucial to enlighten students by helping them overcome their frustrations with the world of reading literature. I was convinced that they needed someone like them, someone who was immersed in the world of media – instead of the world of books – and thus who also had to overcome a deficiency in what was needed to truly appreciate literature. As this person, I could help them see the value in reading literature – a value more profound than anything that television had to offer. At the time, these seemed to be noble, worthwhile, and, attainable goals. In fact, I taught with a particular urgency to accomplish this before students gave up on literature, as so many of my friends had when we finished high school. They were more than happy to capitalize on the resale of their English 30 texts and were delighted at the thought of never having to read another of Shakespeare's plays. I wondered: did my friends ever actually read the plays when they were being covered in class? Somewhere along the line, a tiny thread had begun to unravel into a growing jumble of knots.

I felt at a loss to respond to Larry's questions. At the same time, the echo of some of the more experienced colleagues in my department distracted me. "What's wrong with the kids today?! They don't want to do anything. They whine every time they actually have to read and think. Television is frying their brains. They're happy with their virtual reality life and living through the characters they watch who appear and disappear every half-hour, every evening. They don't want

to listen; they don't want to work; and they don't want to learn anything! Worse! Their parents serve them their Nike shoes and Calvin Klein jeans on a silver platter. Plus, every time these kids turn around, something new is competing for their attention! How can school compete with the Internet?"

These colleagues' sentiments were common amongst the English teachers with whom I interacted, most noticeably in times of frustration. I too had found occasion to utter the same lamentations. Perhaps this generalized representation of high school students had become one of the truths accepted by many adults. Perhaps it was in response to this perception that those who decided what ought to be taught deemed certain skills, concepts, or behavioural characteristics as necessary for students to possess (White, 1982). In these terms, the *what* of what students ought to know was being made very clear through mandated documents. Most importantly, the objectives within these documents comprised the guiding principles upon which teachers were expected to base their pedagogical practices. Unfortunately, these incremental objectives did not speak to the frustrations I had been experiencing for a number of years now. Instead, I was faced with questioning what it meant to read literary texts. That is, my students resisted the established curricular truths that privileged certain ways of reading texts, and they were also doubtful of the supposed need to study literary texts, especially the plays of Shakespeare. This resistance caused me to undertake a reflective re-evaluation of my classroom practices and pedagogical choices.

"Yeah, what's up with that?" agreed another student.

Quite frankly, I had no idea. So, what was I to do? "Well, Judy, that's definitely a valid concern. What if I ease both concerns? First, let's try the activity. Then, those who want it to be evaluated can submit it as a replacement assignment for one of our *Hamlet* quizzes so far." Sure, placate them into submission. I was certain that was a valid educational goal. I anxiously awaited their reaction.

Unexpectedly, Dean was the first to respond. "I'm game, Ms. Filipetto. As long as I don't have to read Shakespeare out loud, I'll give it a shot. But don't expect me to enjoy it. I'm just doing you a favour."

"No problem. Terrific! Before anyone thinks to back out, let's move on." Reluctantly, the students seemed to perk up. I began by asking the students to give me a simple sentence describing what they had for lunch such as *I ate an apple* (Trask, 1994). Needless to say, the students were suspicious but continued to humour me with only a few grumbles being audibly perceptible. I then asked the students to rearrange the words so as to create two other phrases.

"Okay, folks, of your three sentences, choose one that might be understood as a question."

Judy was the first to speak. "My sentence was *I had some soup*. And I changed it to *Had I some soup?*"

"Great. How about an arrangement that emphasizes whatever it is that you ate?"

Dean piped up, "How about *The Big Mac ate I?*"

"Okay, Miss, what's the point of all this?"

"I wondered how much you'd all endure before I was asked that question. Essentially, I'm hoping that, by experimenting with words, you'll come to appreciate the ways that authors play with word order in order to emphasize certain points and/or to get the audience's attention."

"I get your gist, Ms. Filipetto. But, it's one thing to play with everyday English and another thing to do that with Shakespeare's stuff." Just then, the bell conveniently rang. The students filed out.

My intention for the coming evening was to review my resources and see if I could explore other possibilities to encourage the students to meet me half way with Shakespeare. Though I was hopeful about preparing for tomorrow's class, I still felt uneasy about not being able to whole-heartedly explain why I felt it was important to study Shakespeare, particularly to myself!

After I arrived home that evening, I eagerly flipped through a number of the resource packages that I had acquired over the years. Soon, though, good humour turned to despair; I was now disappointed to see that almost all of the activities were information-based, followed by a quiz or a unit test of some sort.

Any proposed solutions including the use of the latest motivational trend seemed to simply patch up the perceived difficulties on the surface. This emphasis on methodology, some suggest, has caused a separation between pedagogical activity and purpose causing

cultural and educational theory [to] become detached from the methodology devised to carry it out, leaving students [and teachers] to grapple with the methodology without any notion of why they are doing so. (Graff, 1987, p. 34)

It was also unsatisfactory to locate blame for these difficulties within any particular group: teachers, students, curriculum writers, or program implementers. The use of any one of these groups as a scapegoat simply would not suffice. Something larger was at the core of this experience of detachment.

By the time I was ready to retire for the evening, I had lost sight of what I had hoped to explore the next day. Why did I really want to engage in an exploration of Shakespeare's *Hamlet*? What shaped my individual choices as a teacher? Was it really because that was what I had been taught to value and, subsequently, convinced I wanted to teach? What did it mean to me to teach students about reading *literary* texts over others? From where did the interest in reading literature such as Shakespeare's plays in schools originate?

Surfacing the Questions

What followed, then, was a yearning to question what was and what ought to be taking place in the high school English language arts classroom. As a result, it would be necessary to consider how the reading of literature in the high school English language arts classroom had been understood by all those involved in the classroom experience: government officials, pedagogical theorists, corporate lobbyists, school district supervisors, teachers, and students. Consequently, two questions emerged:

1. How have we come to understand what it means to read literature in the high school English language arts classroom?

2. How do these ways of thinking about the reading of literature affect students and teachers?

An exploration of these questions in this thesis has led me to reconsider the historical past, examine the lived present, and anticipate a hopeful future for the reading of literature in the high school classroom.

In what follows, I present a response to these questions in a form that parallels a five-act play. I also incorporate excerpts from Shakespeare's *Hamlet* as my section titles to echo the prominence that such literary pieces are given. This thesis invites us to question such privileging in English language arts.

In Act I, I introduce the layered complexity of literature's role in the high school English language arts classroom. In Act II, I outline the conceptual framework that I employed and how I chose to approach the study. In Act III, I consider the two dominant influences on the construction of English language arts in Alberta high schools. In general, I examine official documents, classroom texts, and my own practice to unearth these influences. In Act IV, I probe the (im)possibility of a cultural turn in English language arts in the hope that it might address the frustrations and tensions that I have experienced and witnessed within my own practice. In Act V, I explore how cultural studies could be enacted in the high school English language arts classroom.

ACT TWO

SCENE I

"There Is Nothing Either Good or Bad But Thinking Makes It So"
(*Hamlet*, II, ii, 265-66)

Conceptual Framework: A Poststructuralist Reading

The conceptual framework I draw upon in this study is the poststructuralism of Michel Foucault. Though not specifically recognized as a reading theorist, Foucault has explored a number of socially, culturally, and historically (Ward, 1997) constituted practices including sexuality, madness, and discipline and punishment (Rabinow, 1984). These explorations have proven helpful in considering a wide variety of constructions within society (Bogdan, 1992). With this variety in mind, Foucault can be said to have authored more than a series of texts. That is, he has created the foundation upon which and from which other texts can be constructed (Rabinow, 1984). Evidence of this can be seen in the proliferation of studies on or using Foucault's ideas to enlighten a variety of social theories – with one exception: those within the field of education. This scarcity might be reflective of the inevitable clashes that would occur if the largely modernist discourses in education were brought to bear against Foucault's ideas (Popkewitz & Brennan, 1998). That is, the ideas that have largely shaped the schooling of young people in Canada over the past century or so have primarily reflected the notions of rationality and objectivity within society. These Western European notions were challenged by Foucault who called

for a re-examination of how people interacted within the organizations created by society. With attention to applying Foucault's ideas to education, then, his constructs will be employed to consider the effect that the institution of education has had on those who operate within it. In English language arts, poststructuralism proves particularly useful in identifying and analyzing the ways in which literature has been read in the high school classroom by recognizing that language, the structures of society, and each person in society are historically and socially constituted (Davies, 1993). The implications here are that poststructuralism also opens up the possibility for determining what is problematic about how literary texts are read in the high school classroom.

In order to tackle this exploration in the spirit of Foucault, however, it becomes necessary to begin with the key notions that shape his analytic approach. These understandings refer to the constructs of discourse, subjectivity, power/knowledge, and regimes of truth. As a starting point, I first explore the notion of discourse since it binds all of the others and represents the production of ideas that are at the basis of our larger historical, cultural, and social relations (Sardar & Van Loon, 1997).

Discourse

In the simplest of terms, discourse refers to the communication that takes place amongst people. This communication comes in the form of talking and writing, that is, through storytelling, conversation, and other forms

of interaction (Culler, 1997). However, discourse is more than simply the interactions between individuals and groups. The discourses that are produced by various individuals, groups within society, and societies as a whole not only represent the thoughts and feelings they wish to articulate, but also govern the ways of being for these individuals and groups. That is,

[d]iscourses ... are ways of constituting knowledge, together with the social practices, forms of subjectivity and power relations which inhere in such knowledges and the relations between them. Discourses are more than ways of thinking and producing meaning. They constitute the "nature" of the body, unconscious and conscious mind and emotional life of the subjects which they seek to govern. Neither the body nor thoughts and feelings have meaning outside of their discursive articulation, but the ways in which discourses constitute the minds and bodies of individuals is always part of a wider network of power relations, often with institutional bases. (Weedon, 1997, p. 105)

In other words, discourses are the everyday productions of and encounters with language that reproduce the bits and pieces of knowledge making up our evolving cultural codes and societal traditions. Some of the discourses that have had the most dominant impact on our lives are those with institutional bases such as medicine and the law (Weedon, 1997). Of these institutions, education too reproduces traditions of concepts, patterns of actions, and roles and relationships that are continually being shaped and reshaped by those who partake in this institution. This sculpting process calls for students and teachers to gain insight into how to move around, about, within, and through these traditions. Most importantly, though, knowledge and awareness of society's traditions potentially enables students and teachers to alter them (Applebee, 1996).

Furthermore, these culturally and socially (Ward, 1997) produced knowledges represent the power structures that perpetuate and/or challenge existing ways of being and operating – those that are accepted as well as those scorned within society (Sardar & Loon, 1997). In this sense, discourses not only represent abstractions, but also mediate concrete situations (Ward, 1997). It is through this process of participating in the creation, reformation, and perpetuation of discourses that the individual experiments with the development of a sense of self within society while making sense of the world around him or her.

In English language arts education, varied discourses about reading have been articulated (Lodge, 1988). One view of reading sees it as a way to construct an understanding of our human existence. The conversations within this perspective would characterize reading as being

older than printing or writing or even language itself. Reading begins with wonder at the world about us.... Reading is "signs and portents," the flight of birds, the changing moon, the "changeless" sun, and the "fixed" stars that move through the night. Reading is the practical management of the world about us. (Binter, Dlabal, & Kise, 1969, p. 3)

Here, reading is constituted as a synonym for thought and observation and, thus, the basis for interpreting and operating within the surrounding environment. At the other end of the spectrum, reading is viewed as a simple process of decoding a series of scribbles on paper. This mechanistic discourse speaks of reading as a tool employed, perhaps, to acquire knowledge and develop skills for achieving a particular goal (Ruddell et al., 1994). Yet another discourse delves into the negotiation of meaning

between reader and text (Rosenblatt, 1995). This transactional view of reading involves conversations that revolve around how meaning is created through the interactions that occur between a reader, a text, and its author.

More recently, reading has been expressed as

an act of creation, a social activity that involves the production of self.... In the reading process, we discover both the construction of the reader and the text he or she reads. In the construction of self and text, meaning is also produced. (Block, 1995, p. xv).

Therefore, whether we construct reading as a medium of thought, a tool, a transactional experience, or a constructivist approach to self-understanding, it is notable that a particular view of society and the individual's place in it is revealed through the discourse that is appropriated. That is, if reading is thought, then the individual is afforded the capacity to construct reality. If reading is a tool, then the individual must make him or herself useful to society. If reading is a transaction, then the individual forms a concept of self through interaction with various literary texts. Lastly, in the fourth example, if reading is a social act of creation, then the individual is seen as an active constructor of meaning.

In addition to the social and cultural dimensions of discourse, another aspect of its construction is reflective of the values and beliefs held by a particular society during a particular historical period. For instance, in Great Britain's eighth and ninth century societies, the goal of education grew out of a perceived need to have religious instruction form the basis of a student's early years of schooling (Applebee, 1974). By the early sixteenth century,

this emphasis on religion led to the inclusion of the Lord's Prayer alongside the alphabet in children's exercise books. Consequently, "even parents without any worldly standing began to realize that their offspring stood a better chance of gaining ... their ultimate heavenly reward if they were taught to read" (Demers & Moyles, 1982, p. 2). Up to the seventeenth century, children read books that were intended to improve their behaviour through the recitation of religious beliefs that were embedded in the selections used in the classroom. With the reading of texts constituted in this way, students were positioned as receptacles and teachers were charged with the responsibility of filling their students with appropriate knowledge.

Subjectivity

In further exploration of discourse and how it positions those who operate within, about, and around it, an understanding of the self is needed. In the past, a number of terms have been employed in various ways to refer to the human person. These terms include "substance and attribute, form and matter, subject, mind, ego, and self-identity" (Schrag, 1997, p. 3). More recently, the individual person, or self, has been described as the living entity that is inserted into the physical being, or subject, with concrete life experiences.

This notion of subjectivity conceives of the individual person as a speaking subject who participates in the production of meaning through the application, manipulation, and consumption of language. This language

becomes instrumental in the production of meaning because it frames these meanings. It is also important to note that the producer and consumer of language is the subject of these meanings. That is to say, the notion of subject, here, is not to mean topic or theme. Rather, the subject is the self that creates and is created by the meanings produced through language. Most importantly, however, this speaking subject is simultaneously acting from what has already been produced in an attempt to create something that is newly uttered (Schrag, 1997).

For instance, if we consider the presence of literature in the schooling of young Canadians, we again see that the reading of literary texts has been shaped by a variety of discourses and power/knowledge relations that have created various subject positions over the years. More specifically, it was under the direction of Ryerson in 1871 that the first official course of studies was generated for and implemented in the common/publicly-funded school (Tomkins, 1986). During this historical period, the Canadian curriculum reflected not only British values and civic goals, but also societal changes. These changes stemmed from the Industrial Revolution that originated during in the latter part of seventeenth and eighteenth century in Europe (Ward, 1997; Poole, 1991). This revolution included the assembly-line approach to production. Consequently, the language of this era, identified as the Modern Era, included the notions of basic building blocks, separated elements, division of labour, and precision. Within education,

{k}nowledge was broken into pieces, reduced to its elements and compartmentalized; pupils themselves were viewed as raw

material to be processed ... and the precise division of the day into periods likewise stressed the order, obedience and uniformity characteristic of the factory system. (Tomkins, 1986, p. 76)

These modernist notions were echoed by the importance placed on speaking and writing English precisely such that the emphasis within literature was on correct reading, memorizing historical details of literature, and undertaking detailed analyses of various literary works. Thus, it can be said that the mechanistic language of that historic period informed the ways in which literary texts were read in the high school English language arts classroom. These ways, in turn, affected how students were positioned which, for the most part, was in the form of receivers of pre-determined knowledge and reproducers of society's norms. Therefore, the regimented efforts of teachers to ensure that students acquired a proper knowledge and use of English created a classroom experience that depended on the teacher for supervisory authority. It was within this authoritative role that the teacher imparted sanctioned knowledge to students who were disciplined to receive, accept, and employ segmented knowledge to ensure social cohesion and progress (Popkewitz & Brennan, 1998). These emerging power relations shaped how literature was read in the classroom.

Power/Knowledge

Power and knowledge are so intricately intertwined that "there is no power relation without the correlative constitution of a field of knowledge, nor any knowledge that does not presuppose and constitute at the same time

power relations" (Rabinow, 1984)). An example of this power/knowledge relationship can be found in Alberta's early years of education. At this time, the first readers distributed to all of the province's students were the Alexandra Readers. Through these texts and the primarily British teachers who presented its contents to their students, Albertan children were infused with the knowledge that the

British Empire was progressive, powerful and the most enlightened of civilizations and that the British people were brave, intelligent and moral. [In contrast,] ... Canadian selections tended to be descriptive stories of growing wheat on the prairies or were ... selected because, like 'Flander's Fields,' they spoke of Canadian love and loyalty for the Mother Country. (Sheehan et al., 1986, p. 41)

Following World War I, pride in the contributions of Canadians at the international level mixed with fears of American influence led not only to a nationalistic shift across the country (Tomkins, 1986), but also to curricular changes in Albertan schools. Specifically, the Alexandra Readers were replaced with the Canadian Readers. These latter readers featured the Canadian Ensign and the Ottawa Parliament Buildings alongside the Royal Family. There were also more selections with Canadian settings and heroes (Sheehan et al., 1986). Therefore, the almost exclusive influence of the British Empire on Alberta's early days of formalized schooling gave way to the effects of interactions with the United States and of international events such as war. The impact on education was the redefining of what ought to be taught. In other words, we see that

it is not the activity of the subject of knowledge that produces a corpus of knowledge, useful or resistant to power, but power-

knowledge, the processes and struggles that traverse it and of which it is made up, that determines the forms and possible domains of knowledge. (Rabinow, 1984, p. 175)

That is, particular knowledges were altered or replaced by others as certain power relations were played out over the course of time (Weedon, 1997).

When, over time, certain knowledges continued to be reproduced and identified as essential to the functioning of society, these ways of knowing often became fixed as truth.

Regimes of Truth

In earlier times, there existed not only the belief that truth could be determined, but also that establishing truth through scientific reasoning was an important goal (Poole, 1991). In more recent times, the notion of truth has taken on a more conditional quality, one whereby "statements become positional, contingent on the space, time, and language in which they are made and heard" (Miller, 1998, p. 5). For Foucault, truth is produced and consumed through far-reaching structures such as those of educational institutions. With this in mind, Foucault has suggested that the investigation of society's discursive practices needs to take into account the rules of right being sanctioned (Foucault, 1980). In expanding upon this point, he explains that

in a society such as ours, but basically in any society, there are manifold relations of power which permeate, characterise and constitute the social body, and these relations of power cannot themselves be established, consolidated nor implemented without the production, accumulation, circulation and functioning of a discourse. (p. 93)

That is, the extent to which discourses are afforded authority and authenticity determines which discourses are identified as knowledge and which become interconnected with power. In this sense, people do not possess, exert, fabricate, or institutionalize power. Rather, power "is the name given to a complex strategic relation in a given society" (Foucault, 1980, pp. 235-236). The resulting power/knowledge creates a conceptual framework: what we think we know about the world and how we are brought to think of it in that way.

For instance, the medieval grammar school of England emphasized that, without a strong grounding in Latin, it would not be possible to understand other areas of study such as philosophy, history, and the sciences. Therefore, the study of Latin language and literature was deemed essential. This study required the development of an understanding of the structure of Latin itself as well as the ability to comprehend its texts. A particular notion about language learning thus became sanctioned as truth. This way of knowing language emphasized both an understanding of its structure as well as its production, that is, the creation of a variety of texts using the form and structure of that language. This belief was accepted in both Europe and the pioneer communities of North America (Wilson, 1970).

By the nineteenth century, then, general notions about language learning reflected the medieval truths surrounding the learning of Latin. The result was the widespread development of courses in English that were referred to as the study of English language and literature (Applebee, 1974).

This way of coming to know language therefore framed how literary texts would be read in the English language arts classroom, privileging this particular way of reading literature. Sanctioned as essential to student learning, this knowledge of reading literature was given an authority that wielded influence over those in the classroom (Foucault, 1980). In granting authority to this way of knowing, these power relations made possible the formation of particular discourses of truth about how literature ought to be read. For any discursive investigation, then, it becomes important to locate the discursive moments of truth's creation, its reproduction, and its relation to power (Foucault, 1990). In other words,

[t]here can be no possible exercise of power without a certain economy of discourses of truth which operates through and on the basis of this association. We are subjected to the production of truth through power and we cannot exercise power except through the production of truth.... Power never ceases its interrogation, its inquisition, its registration of truth: it institutionalises, professionalises and rewards its pursuits. (Foucault, 1980, p. 93)

In analyzing these discourses and regimes of truth that privilege a particular way of reading literary texts in the English language arts classroom, we need to keep the following questions in mind. Which dominant power relations were at work during a specific historical period? How did these relations privilege certain discourses over others? How did these discourses sustain the particular relations of power that were in operation? Finally, how did these discourses inform what was to be privileged as truth? (Rabinow, 1984)

With respect to the landscape of reading, then, the discourses that shaped what was eventually appropriated as English language arts

education in Alberta were those that informed the formation of knowledge and truths in eastern Canada and, before that, Western European societies. Accompanying the view that students must come to learn the structure of English as well as become able to comprehend its literature, another truth that became sanctioned was that certain texts were more worthy of study than others. It was for this reason that, during the nineteenth century, references were made to a literary cannon – a collection of poetry and prose considered essential for study (Willinsky, 1991). As one example, literary pieces such as “Scott’s ‘Lay of the Last Minstrel’ could be found in the syllabi of most provinces where they often endured for the next half century, contributing to a national curriculum, albeit one based on Old World culture” (Tomkins, 1986, p. 84). Not surprisingly, Shakespeare’s works were also included in that academic tradition. However, it is rather noteworthy that, prior to the end of the nineteenth century, his writings were taken up primarily as a part of popular culture (Applebee, 1996). In this instance, we see how the reading of Shakespeare – today considered an essential aspect of English 10/20/30 courses – was, at one time, not perceived as required reading for high school students. The regime of truth surrounding Shakespeare was thus a relatively recent development in the history of language arts education. Nevertheless, it is significant that reading in schools – whether for the promotion of moral and civic values and/or the appreciation of literature – was based on the reading of particular selections deemed worthy of study as part of the education of a society’s youth.

In general, however, we have seen that the reading of literary texts in schools has been driven by a privileging of modernist notions of knowing and being. That is, "knowledge was the motor by which 'reason' could direct social action and guarantee future betterment in society" (Popkewitz & Brennan, 1998, p. 7). Also significant is that these notions were couched within a primarily patriarchal Western European culture (Molinaro, 1991). Attention to this historical context of English language arts was a key starting point for this study. It provided a backdrop for the reasons behind the reading of literary texts in the high school classroom and why these texts were read in particular ways. From this brief historical study, then, insight was gained into the social conditions and beliefs that led to the development of certain approaches to reading literature over others (Stoops, 1971). The value of historical study,

however, is not simply in helping discover the paths by which the present emerged, but in revealing particulars from the past which may serve as comparisons with the present, as lenses through which to consider our own times. (Startt & Sloan, 1989, p. xii)

One caution, though, must be acknowledged at this point. Given that historical study has primarily been an exploration of what people have done and why they have chosen to do so in particular ways, the tendency has also been to seek out universal human truths (Startt & Sloan, 1989). For this investigation, however, reflection on what has occurred in the past will serve to illuminate the discourses and regimes of truth that seem to have guided or were the result of certain societal choices and historical events surrounding

the reading of literary texts. It is also important to recognize the inherent limitation of a historical study as the act of interpretation based on selective information. Therefore, it becomes essential to examine more closely what reading literature in the high school language arts classroom currently looks like and how it affects the interactions between teachers and students.

ACT TWO

SCENE II

'Though This Be Madness, Yet There Is Method In't'
(Hamlet, II, ii, 222-23)

Approaching the Study

With poststructuralism in mind, the original questions of this study can be articulated in the following way:

1. How is the reading of literary texts discursively constituted?
2. What subject positions are students and teachers (dis)allowed within these discursive constructions?

I choose to explore these questions with specific attention to the English 30 curriculum. While I believe that any of the high school English courses could have been selected, English 30 usually receives the most scrutiny by teachers, administrators, employers, and others in society who hold positions of authority. One reason for this might be that English 30 is a common requirement for admittance into post-secondary programs.

The Research Approach

I have elected to employ a discourse analysis to investigate the constructions of reading literature that subsequently position teachers and students. Through discourse analysis, it is possible to gain insight into the dominant preoccupations and major strategies that influence those who take up and are positioned by the discourses of society (Pope, 1995). The reason for

undertaking a discourse analysis is rooted in its acknowledgement of language as a key dimension in the way people function within society and formulate their symbolic ways of being. This view of language also asserts that it is not possible to construct an image of reality plainly and clearly (Alvesson & Skoldberg, 2000; Foucault, 1980).

The way language is used does not so much reflect a person's inner, subjective world, as generate a version of this world that is in part a transient one. Neither accounts of subjectivity (feelings, attitudes, notions, values), nor ideas about the external world are consistent, partly as a consequence of there being no one-to-one relationship between language use and the phenomenon it is supposed to say something about. (Alvesson & Skoldberg, 2000, p. 202).

No longer does language provide a representation of absolute, universal truths that transcend all societal and human limitations (Ward, 1997). No longer is there the privileging of the objective, empirical, and scientific approach that had dominated for the better part of the last three centuries (Stewart, 1997). Instead, language is seen as being constructed and constructive; it is also characterized as having consequences with no foolproof method for handling the variations of its productions (Alvesson & Skoldberg, 2000). At the same time, this view opens up an expanded understanding of the production of meaning. That is, there is the implicit suggestion of "a crucial critique of the so-called realistic view of language, which treats utterances as relatively unambiguous entry points to the understanding of actions, ideas or events" (Alvesson & Skoldberg, 2000, p. 202). For these reasons, discourse analysis is a qualitative approach to research that would facilitate the examination of the kinds of meanings that are brought to bear from reading literature in particular ways.

In part, this study also includes a consideration of how students become shaped as readers and what it means to read particular texts such as Shakespeare's *Hamlet*. This exploration of the student as reader requires a consideration of how the student, as an agent in the production of meaning, is positioned. With respect to agency, I draw upon Bogdan's work (1990) which identifies three interdependent agents. The first of these agents is the subject, the actor within society. The second is made up of the concrete and materially defined objects found in a particular culture. Thirdly, there are the regimented norms that direct the interchanges and exchanges between the subjects and objects. More specifically within education, the subjects, objects and regimented norms can be identified as follows. The subjects include the teachers, students, government officials, theorists, and other members of society that shape or are shaped by what is read and how it is read. The objects are, primarily, the literary texts being read, this includes the author. However, depending on the approach to reading, it is possible for teachers and students to be objectified as well as the text and author. Thirdly, the regimented norms are those objectives, goals, and principles that are revealed to teachers through official documents such as the provincial curriculum guide. An instance of regimented norms can be seen in the accepted goals of education referred to previously that were indicative of Canadian pedagogy in the late 1800's through the cultivation of Christian ethics and British values (Wilson et al., 1970). During this historical time, teachers were positioned as moral tutors who were directed to expose students to a curriculum that privileged particular moral beliefs and acceptable cultural practices. At the

same time, the subject position of the child in this historical instance was objectified such that he or she was to be molded into an agent of future societal improvement through the reading of the sanctioned texts of that time (Tomkins, 1986).

The Texts of Study

Just as historical texts serve as an artifact of investigation for the ways in which literature was read in the past, texts of present significance can reveal much about present practices. At the same time, it must be acknowledged that the written form has been accorded particular authority in the Western world. "We are a paper and ink civilization" (Binter, Dlabal & Kise, 1969, p. 10). However, for this study, texts also need to be understood in the broadest sense. That is, whether we enjoy a live theatrical performance, notice an ad at a bus stop, or page through a novel, each of these is a form of language production. This extended view of text is necessary in order to acknowledge that discourse is revealed through a variety of language constructions. Within an English language arts classroom, therefore, a text does not become restricted to novels, short stories, poetry, modern drama, Shakespeare's plays, and non-fiction essays. Instead, the study of texts as language productions would include photographs, mime, cartoon strips, film, video, television productions, song recordings, radio programs, and the Internet (Alberta Learning, 2000).

In considering what is given present significance, I look to those documents that have informed what is taking place in the English language arts

classroom of today. In the Province of Alberta, the *School Act* specifies that a "teacher while providing instruction or supervision must b) teach the courses of study and education programs that are prescribed, approved or authorized pursuant to this Act" (1999, p. 21). Thus, with education as a public institution that operates within government guidelines, the official documents published by Alberta Learning become prime sources for ascertaining what knowledge is of most worth in the eyes of those who are charged with the task of constructing these texts. For these reasons, an analysis of these texts is crucial to this study. These official documents are also significant given that they can be accessed by anyone in Alberta through public libraries, local school boards, Alberta Learning, and the Internet. Consequently, anyone can be informed on what students ought to know. Equally useful to our analysis are other texts such as supplementary resource booklets that promise to align teacher practices with official documents. The third group of texts included in this study is comprised of various images from my own practice that reveal my recollections of interactions between teachers and students in the high school English language arts classroom. It is through an examination of these written and lived texts as artifacts that the layered nature of discourse can be explored. The textual artifacts of this study, then, are the

- *Senior High School Language Arts Curriculum Guide* (Alberta Education, 1982);
- *The Common Curriculum Framework for English Language Arts, Kindergarten to Grade 12* (Western Canadian Protocol for Collaboration in Basic Education, 1998);
- *Program of Studies for Senior High School English Language Arts* (Alberta Learning, 2000);
- *Responses to Literature: Grades K – 8* (Macon et al., 1997);

- English 30 Diploma Examination and related documents; and
- Images of My Practice in the English 30 Classroom.

A discourse analysis of these texts looks at the nuances, the presences, and absences they reveal.

The first of the documents listed above, the *Senior High School Language Arts Curriculum Guide* (Alberta Education, 1982), is the document that mandated high school English language arts studies for the past twenty years. As a program guide, this document outlines a philosophy, rationale, goals, and specific learning objectives for high school English language arts. This document also includes commentaries on appropriate methodology and a listing of the literary texts to be studied at each grade level. In reflecting on the shaping effect of this curriculum guide on my practice, I recall looking upon it as the high school language arts bible. Religiously, I incorporated each of the objectives outlined in its statement of content into each literary genre I studied with my students. This enabled me to justify each lesson by using the student objectives mandated within this document.

While the *Senior High School Language Arts Curriculum Guide* (Alberta Education, 1982) still shapes the reading of literature in the classroom, for the past five years or so, *The Common Curriculum Framework for English Language Arts, Kindergarten to Grade 12* (Western Canadian Protocol for Collaboration in Basic Education, 1998) has informed the practice of teachers. This curriculum framework is of particular interest for our study given that it was a collaborative political production of the four western provinces and two territories with the purpose of addressing the following major goals:

- high standards of education
- common educational goals
- removing obstacles to the access of educational opportunities for students, including improving the ease of transfer from jurisdiction to jurisdiction
- optimum use of educational resources. (Western Canadian Protocol for Collaboration in Basic Education, 1998, p. vii; Alberta Education, 1999, p. 1)

Using this framework as a basis for development, each province and territory was then equipped to design a new program of studies. For Alberta, the *Program of Studies for Senior High School English Language Arts* (Alberta Learning, 2000) is expected to guide the practice of teachers commencing September 2000 through a pilot program in selected Alberta high schools.

Other textual sources that garner attention are the supplementary resources that support the mandated curriculum. One example of these resources is *Responses to Literature: Grades K – 8* (Macon et al., 1991). In this guide, a variety of visual organizers is provided for use by teachers to assist students in becoming “immersed, engrossed, absorbed, and totally involved in literature” (Macon et al., 1991, p. 3). These organizers are presented as Engagement Activities with the purpose of involving students as participants in understanding a story rather than as analysts dissecting the story in order to construct meaning. Some of these Engagement Activities include the Story Frame, Plot Relationship Chart, Story Map, Prediction Chart, Knowledge Chart, Character Map, and Story Pyramid. The goal behind the incorporation of these activities is to “encourage students to become lifelong readers whose sense of the aesthetic is enriched by contact with quality literature” (Macon et al., 1991, p. 2).

Further insight into the practices of teachers and the experiences of students is gained from an analysis of the provincial examinations that are compulsory at the grade twelve level. Writing these compulsory examinations is required for obtaining a high school diploma. After two decades of being absent, these assessment instruments, including the English 30 diploma examination, were re-implemented during the 1984-85 school year. It may also be of interest to note that I was amongst the many Albertan students who wrote these government tests. In fact, I still vividly recall the anxiety that surrounded the preparation for and writing of the examination, knowing that it would be incorporated into my final English 30 mark.

The administration of this examination takes place at the end of every semester of the English 30 course – the final course in the grade 12 academic stream of high school English language arts. (The non-academic stream which has English 33 as its final course also requires students to write a diploma examination of a similar composition to that of the English 30 level.) All students in the province are required to write the examination on the same day and even within an hour of the recommended time provided by the province. Organized into two parts, the English 30 diploma examination is comprised of the following sections: *Part A: Written Response* and *Part B: Reading*. The first portion of the English 30 examination asks students to compose two written texts. The first of these is a response to a specified theme highlighted in a given text. This theme is also used as the basis for the second assignment. For this second piece of writing, students are required to use literature that they studied during

their high school years. Part B of the English 30 diploma examination is comprised of seventy multiple choice questions that test students using complete or partial literary selections representing poetry, modern drama, Shakespearean drama, the novel, the short story, and non-fiction texts. These two sections of the English 30 diploma examination are written on different days, usually a week or so apart from each other. The students' performance on these two examinations is equally weighted to comprise fifty percent of their final blended mark for English 30. The other half of the final blended mark is comprised of the grade assessed by the teacher based on the students' performance throughout the semester. With the two-day diploma examination being given equivalent status to the months of classroom work that students produce, the English 30 diploma examination is a preoccupation for students and teachers alike. Performance on this provincial test attracts further attention given that this two-part examination is often used as an entrance requirement for many post-secondary institutions.

In support of an analysis of these texts, an exploration is also needed of the exchanges that take place between students and teachers. As suggested by Alvesson & Skoldberg (2000), discourse analysis is not only concerned with documents that have arisen from the social interactions of people, but also with the resulting instances of interaction that emerge. In this way, images of practice are included in the broad definition of text (Pope, 1995). For this study, images of practice are represented by classroom vignettes, specific lessons, and sample

handouts that highlight my experience over a seven-year period of engaging students in literary texts.

Limitations

The absence of direct student involvement in this exploration is a clear limitation of this study. However, a first step in exploring the discourses of reading as they are manifested in Alberta's English 30 classrooms is to give consideration to the ways that various documents and teacher practices shape and are shaped by discourse. After all, the student's experience in the classroom is based on the teacher's chosen methodology and pedagogical stance which are in part shaped by official documents. In addition, by drawing on my classroom experiences, an indirect consideration of my students' perspective is included. Most importantly, though, it must be emphasized that this study is a direct result of my disappointment with what was taking place in the classroom. In turn, this disillusionment was a reaction to the ongoing frustration and discontent that my students were expressing. Nevertheless, while their voices might not have been the primary source of analysis, they were considered within the discourses that shaped my classroom practices and resulted in particular positionings of my students, the literary texts we read, and of me. Thus, it is hoped this study might point to what is at play in the ways literature is read in the classroom setting.

ACT THREE

SCENE I

"Suit the Action to the Word, the Word to the Action"
(*Hamlet*, III, ii, 17-18)

The Discourse of Competence

While reading *Hamlet*, my sensitivities were again heightened to my students' resistance. I wondered about how I, as a teacher, could be convinced that developing solid skills in deciphering and communicating the meanings of literary texts was essential to a strong grounding in English language arts. Yet, the majority of my students operated under the premise that English 30 was simply another hoop through which they were required to leap. Again, a barrage of thoughts reverberated in my mind.

"Why do we have to be able to pick out the imagery in *Hamlet*? What does it matter which flowers Ophelia was carrying?"

I couldn't find a response that didn't involve an automatic recitation of curricular objectives such as the global all-purpose response: "the development of language arts skills is integrally related to success in one's further education, career and social life" (Alberta Education, 1982, p. 4).

While I hesitated, another student spoke "Are you going to assign *another* essay? Will it count for marks?"

Again, all I could think of were the curricular objectives that had justified my efforts in the past:

the fundamental purpose of any curriculum should be to assist students both to acquire the skills, attitudes and knowledge they will need to meet the everyday requirements of life and to attain the maximum fulfillment of their nature as human beings (Alberta Education, 1982, p. 6).

This objective was supported by the new program of studies which aims "to enable each student to understand and appreciate language and to use it confidently and competently for a variety of purposes ..." (Alberta Learning, p. 1).

In the end, I remained frustrated by my inability to respond to my students without simply reiterating the educational reasoning that always left them empty in the past.

Once again, we see an emphasis on the *competent* use of language. Within the discourse of competence, the term *competence* is understood in a variety of ways. Words associated with this term include sufficient, adequate, specific, judgements, skills, strengths, and abilities (Nickse, 1981). It is also suggested that competence

refers essentially to a state of being or to a capacity. One who is competent is one who has a certain "fitness, sufficiency, or aptitude;" or to take the word's Latin derivation, a competent person is one who possesses a certain confluence, "symmetry, conjunction, or meeting together" of powers which allow him or her "to adequately deal with a situation." (Short, 1984, p. 124)

Competence involves the completion of a particular task, the achievement of a goal, and/or the learning of a skill. Most importantly, it is necessary to demonstrate the completion, achievement, and/or learning that has occurred (Short, 1984).

Forms of Acquisition

With respect to competence within English language arts, the *Program of Studies for Senior High School English Language Arts* (Alberta Learning, 2000) is organized according to five general outcomes.

General outcomes are broad statements identifying what students are expected to demonstrate with increasing competence and confidence from Grade 10 to 12.... Each general outcome encompasses specific outcomes that students are expected to achieve by the end of each designated senior high school English language arts course. (Alberta Learning, 2000, pp. 6-7)

Under the guise of the second basic aim of the *Program of Studies for Senior High School English Language Arts* (Alberta Learning, 2000), the development of students as confident and competent language users is echoed in each of the five general learning outcomes. For instance, the first general learning outcome describes having each student “appraise [his/her] own strengths and weaknesses as a language user, select appropriate strategies to increase strengths and address weaknesses, and monitor their effectiveness” (p. 18). Within the second general learning outcome, the student is directed to work with the “form that the text creator has fashioned and the textual elements, rhetorical devices and stylistic techniques that the text creator has employed ... [in order to] identify the effects that are created by particular forms, elements, devices and techniques” (p. 21). The third general learning outcome focuses on the research and management of ideas and information. Within this learning outcome, it is hoped that students acquire effective strategies for conducting research with increased independence and

sophistication (p. 37). Through the fourth general learning outcome, students are to learn “effective strategies for creating text and for enhancing the thoughtfulness, effectiveness and correctness of communication” (p. 47). Lastly, the fifth general learning outcome focuses on the goal of collaborating with others through the effective use of language-related strategies such as the ability to recognize “how stereotyping and parody contribute to the creation of positive and negative portrayals of characters in literature” (p. 66).

Within each general aim, the specific outcomes reflect the skills that students are expected to acquire, master, and demonstrate. Examples of these specific outcomes include the ability to “assess the contributions that visual and aural elements make to the meaning of texts” ; “identify and interpret figurative language and symbol, and recognize and interpret familiar allusions” ; “assess the contribution of imagery to the meaning of texts;” and “create and use own reference materials [such as a personalized dictionary/glossary and a personalized URL address list] to aid understanding” (Alberta Learning, 2000, pp. 23-24).

With skills described as outcomes similar to those we see above, literary texts are often perceived as organized structures that demonstrate a particular logic. This understanding of competence is essential to the view that a good reader can comprehend this logic by applying particular skills. In fact, some suggest that this process of comprehension can be scientifically studied (Reber & Scarborough, 1977; Irwin, 1986). As a result, emphasis has been

and is still placed on correctly understanding the form, structure, and meaning of a literary text. This emphasis stems from the assertion that attaining a particular level of language competence is deemed necessary for functioning in society. Support for this assertion is found in the following declaration.

As strong language users, students will be able to meet Alberta's graduation requirements and will be prepared for entry into post-secondary studies or the workplace. Senior high school students must be prepared to meet evolving literacy demands in Canada and the international community. (Alberta Learning, 2000, p. 1)

When competent language use is applied to the reading of literary texts, then, the texts are objectified and categorized as organized structures that demonstrate a particular logic. In this case, comprehension involves the ongoing evaluation of the process a student undergoes to arrive at an understanding of a text (Irwin, 1986). In this reading of literature, the student is positioned as a skilled labourer or a strategist who must acquire an understanding of the form and structure of a literary text in order to unravel its meaning. As a result, an emphasis on skills acquisition leads to the reduction of literary texts for the purposes of standardizing knowledge.

By reading literature in these ways, then, the text becomes the vehicle for acquiring, practicing and mastering particular skills such as the identification of imagery or the formation of effective paragraphs. At the same time, these goals constitute part of what students ought to know in order to become competent and proficient users of the English language. Taken a step further, the practicality of having to write examinations of some sort during and

at the end of an English language arts course is also identified as an important skill for students to develop (Marsh, 1987).

In order for this emphasis on skills acquisition to be possible, a particular view of language is required. This view is one that links language expression to reason, certainty and exactness. Within this perception, words act as true representations of the real world, echoing a notion of language that was most prominent during the Modern Era (Smith, 1999), a time that placed heightened significance on the conveyance of skills (Griffith, 1992). The influence of this way of knowing can be witnessed in nineteenth-century Albertan society. During this time, the notion of English language arts was constructed with attention to the view that students needed to acquire particular skills and develop particular abilities in order to use language effectively (Nickse, 1981). Thus, a particular *competence* was acquired as a result of a particular reading of literary texts.

The extent to which the reading of literary texts emphasizes the acquisition of skills can be seen in the overall organizational framework of the *Program of Studies for Senior High School English Language Arts* (Alberta Learning, 2000). That is, it is noteworthy that in addition to this program guide being organized by general outcomes that contain a number of specific outcomes, these defined expectations are further "categorized under headings and subheadings" (Alberta Learning, 2000, p. 7). For instance, within the second general outcome which focuses on the comprehension of and response to texts, one of the specific outcomes is to "understand and

appreciate textual forms, elements and techniques" (p. 32). This specific outcome is further divided into two objectives: to "relate form, structure and medium to purpose, audience and content" (p. 32) and to "relate elements, devices and techniques to created effects" (p. 33). Each of these objectives is further delineated by at least six detailed outcomes that are, in some cases, further categorized by grade level. For instance, in relating form to purpose, students are asked to

- identify and describe a variety of organizational patterns and structural features that contribute to purpose and content (such as the use of chronology to structure a narrative, the use of categories and headings to structure a report, the use of structured argument in a Shakespearean sonnet, and the use of design elements to structure a collage)
- explain how a variety of organizational patterns and structural features contribute to purpose and content
- apply knowledge of a variety of organizational patterns and structural features to understand purpose and to confirm meaning of content, and assess the effectiveness of a text's organizational structure (p. 32)

The first of these is expected of grade ten students with progressive increments leading to expectations for grade twelve students. Here again, the reading of texts is broken into skills, strategies, and tasks. As a result, the text is used as an instrument for achieving the desired end; subsequently, meaning making is secondary to structural analysis (Judy, 1981).

Another form of acquisition can be evidenced through the English 30 diploma examination. Of note is the emphasis on identifying the skills being tested. As reported in the *English 30 Bulletin*, a breakdown of the examination indicates that twenty-two percent of the questions focus on understanding and interpreting theme, thesis, and figurative statements. Eighteen percent of the

questions focus on interpreting form, structure, and style. In addition, ten percent is devoted to looking at the values expressed in a particular literary selection (Alberta Education, 1997, p. 29). An example from the June 1996 examination is the poem, "At the Tourist Centre in Boston." With this selection, the student is directed to read for the speaker's attitude, motivations, and tone. The student is also asked to identify contrasting images and indicate what particular phrases represent. On the January 1996 examination, students' reading skills and levels of comprehension are tested.

32. In the context of lines 1 to 6, Mr. Latimer's response in line 7 provides the effect of

- A. Exaggeration
- B. ironic humour
- C. dramatic tension
- D. understatement

39. Mrs. Wardell's response in lines 178 to 180 suggests that she

- A. expects her husband to be unreasonable
- B. knows that Mr. Latimer cannot be trusted
- C. is a naturally cunning and suspicious person
- D. assumes that Mr. Latimer is not telling the truth

(Alberta Education, pp. 9-10)

While these are only two examples, they are typical of the English 30 diploma examination. In addition, my intention through these examples is to demonstrate how the diploma examination primarily assesses the measurable skills that English 30 students ought to have acquired. The extent to which

students can demonstrate this acquisition determines the level of competence they have supposedly achieved with respect to the reading of literary texts.

To further support the information provided in the *Bulletin*, the *Examiners' Report* includes a compilation of the statistical analyses of student performance on that particular examination. In the *Examiners' Report for January 1995*, we find that the questions are categorized by the levels of thinking that they claim to test. For instance, within the Meaning classification of the English 30 course content, questions 5, 15, 36, and 64 test for literal understanding. Questions 3, 6, 7, 12, 17, ..., 58 and 59 are said to test inference and application. Evaluative thinking skills are reportedly assessed by questions 20, 45, 56, 57, and 70. A commentary is even provided for a number of the questions, speculating as to why students chose particular responses over others. Two are provided in the following excerpt from the *Examiners' Report for January 1995*.

-
15. For Gwendolen, the real interest of "History" (lines 54-56) lies in its
- A. truthful clarity
 - B. scholastic merit
 - C. gossipy revelations
 - D. practical usefulness

Question 15. This question proved to be surprisingly difficult, with only 53.9% of all students answering correctly. Students who took the time to reread lines 54 to 56 would note that Gwendolen says that without the examples of "indiscretions" (gossipy revelations) contained in History, it would be unreadable. Perhaps those students who chose alternative A (truthful clarity) did not recognize Gwendolen's intent when she refers to examples of men's susceptibilities as "painful." She does not mean "painful" to her, but rather of great interest: in fact, the only matters of interest that history hold for her.

20. In this excerpt, the playwright's **main** target of satire is
- A. wedded bliss
 - B. social pretension
 - C. masculine vulnerability
 - D. feminine competitiveness

Question 20. The last question of this set requires students to make a judgement about the main target of satire in this excerpt. The first question in this set, Question 19, requires students to *recognize* satire, the last question to identify the *object* of that satire.

Students who read the entire text carefully will have remembered that the first sentence of the preamble mentions that "this comedy satirizes Victorian society." The most apparent aspect of Victorian society was an outward display of propriety, regardless of the occasion.

While the manners remain unchanged, Alternative B, "social pretension," is the *best* choice because it includes A, C, and D.

(Alberta Education, 1995, pp. 7-8)

Taking all of the above into account, we again see how teachers are positioned as decoders and translators of the skills that students must master in order for them to demonstrate competence in English language arts through the successful completion of the diploma examination (Howard, 1998). In fact, so important was this provincial instrument of evaluation that I became preoccupied with unlocking the mystery around getting my students to acquire the essential skills that would lead to success on the examination.

Consequently, I organized my program so that each unit of study was assessed by having students complete an assignment similar to those found on the diploma examination. Initially, I felt I was cleverly preparing my students for successful performance on the examination. More recently, I

became increasingly bothered by the realization that much of what took place in my classroom was shaped by an emphasis on skills acquisition. I finally realized that I was perpetuating the positioning of my students as passive strategists. That is, I encouraged their activity of trying to figure out what the *correct* response to a text ought to be by rewarding this behaviour through the use of past multiple-choice diploma examinations as unit-ending assessment tools. For the most part, then, I taught my students that knowing about literature entailed being skillful, for instance, at finding examples of literary devices in a given excerpt. As my students grew to expect this on a regular basis, they rarely gave consideration to their own thoughts about the literary texts we read in class. Consequently, an obsession with accountability and student performance soon draped itself heavily over my students and me (Peterson, 1993).

Forms of Reduction

When an emphasis on competence translates into a preoccupation with skills acquisition, literature is often de-contextualized and reduced to thematic categorization. As a result, the correct understanding of the form, structure, and meaning of a literary text is still stressed.

Let us turn to one image of practice that demonstrates the shaping effect that an emphasis on competence has on the reading of literature in the high school classroom. In my efforts to assist students in preparing for the

English 30 diploma examination, I employed a handout that reviews past examination questions.

**Diploma Examination: Written Component
Major Assignment Topic Review**

June 1984 – consequences of the actions chosen by individuals

Many characters in literature accept and overcome the circumstances that threaten them. Some avoid these circumstances while others are unable to control the way their lives are affected by circumstances, yet do their best to fulfill their responsibilities.

What idea does the author develop regarding choices and consequences?

Jan. 1985 – positive forces of life are reaffirmed despite conflicts with destructive or threatening forces

Many literary works suggest that humanity possesses a powerful will to survive and endure that ultimately asserts itself over the destructive forces in the world. Even literature that is tragic in outcome often serves to remind us that human beings must be "singers of life, and not of death."

What idea does the author develop regarding the positive forces of life?

June 1985 – the factors and events contributing to self-awareness ...

Jan. 1995 – the effect of adversity on the human spirit

Much of literature explores the effect of adversity on the human spirit. The course of individual lives is determined largely by the degree to which their hopes and purposes prevail against adverse conditions, circumstances, or events.

What idea(s) does the author develop regarding the effect of adversity on the human spirit?

June 1995 – the individual's response to threatening forces

Much of literature reflects the struggle of the individual to cope with or overcome threatening forces. Sometimes these forces are beyond the control of the individual.

What idea(s) does the author develop regarding the individual in the face of threatening forces ...

I have used this handout to structure a discussion around the classification of past diploma examination questions into manageable categories such as enduring human isolation, developing self-awareness, overcoming obstacles, and facing challenges. Once each question was categorized, the literary texts we studied were also placed within these groupings. The objective underscoring this approach to preparing for the diploma examination was to simplify its questions so as to reduce student anxiety. While I might have succeeded in this latter goal, I also created the perception or, perhaps more accurately, the misperception that all literature could be reduced to a series of thematic categories. That is, while we reviewed for the diploma, every short story, modern play, Shakespearean play, and fictional piece we read was dissected according to its thematic elements. I can still hear myself saying, "Okay, who can tell me which main themes are revealed in *Death of a Salesman*? Can anyone give me the title of another story we read that dealt with a character seeking suicide as a form of escape from the harsh realities of life? Exactly, 'Paul's Case' is a perfect example...." It was this categorization and reduction of literature that became problematic for me when I began to reconsider how I was reading literary texts with my students.

Another instance of the reduction of literary texts within the discourse of competence is found in certain supplementary resources for teachers. In my early experiences as a high school English teacher, I believed that the *Responding to Literature: Grades K-8* (Macon et al., 1991) provided me with a number of practical suggestions for assisting students with the reading of

literary texts. As a result, I approached the reading of *Hamlet* by incorporating organizational cues such as story maps, prediction charts, and comparison circles to enhance reading competence. Unfortunately, the initial euphoria of these seemingly wonderful visual organizers turned into dismay when my students interpreted their repeated use as busy work. Yet, Macon, Bewell, and Vogt, the document's creators, maintain that their activities and visual organizers incorporate background experience and the various language arts in order to help students use effective strategies for comprehending a piece of writing. That is, their proposed approaches

truly *engage* the reader.... In essence, the suggested activities can be used to move students *into, through, and beyond* the text. Hopefully, they will encourage students to become lifelong readers whose sense of the aesthetic is enriched by contact with quality literature. (Macon et al., 1991, p. 2)

As a member of the committee that adopted *Responses to Literature: Grades K-8* as the theoretical framework for producing a district-based document that would inform teacher practices, I had whole-heartedly bought into the use of these organizational cues as a tool for motivating students to read literary texts. At that time, I had hoped that the use of these visual organizers would enable students to become competent readers by learning about the elements of a story through concrete strategies for gathering information and recording observations. I also believed that these strategies reduced student frustration by replacing "mindless worksheets that 'drill and kill' with literature-based instruction that provides for the active engagement of readers" (Macon et al., 1991, p. 2).

Upon reflection, I now suggest that these visual aids reflect exactly what they were reputed to have replaced, except with more sophistication than the 'drill and kill' worksheets of the past. For instance, the Story Map is basically a plot summary formatted within a series of sequenced boxes.

Story Map
By Isabel Beck

Purpose To provide literary essentials such as the main characters, the setting, the problem, the major events, the problem solution, and the theme for a story....

Description A Story Map helps students glean essential data from a story. In this activity, students complete the Story Map as a whole class or reading group ..., writing the required information in the space provided. Middle and upper grade students can fill in the outline on their own. Less prepared students may need assistance with ideas and procedures. Some guidance in deciding the main events in the story may be necessary, or students may include too many facts. Students need to learn to combine like events, give them a broader title, then proceed. In completing the Story Map, students should first listen to the entire story, if it is being read aloud. If they are reading the story or a book in parts or segments, they should complete the assigned portion prior to filling in the Story Map. Otherwise, they will lose the thread of the story or interrupt its flow by stopping to insert data in the Story map. The completed Story Map provides much material for discussion or writing, whichever is most appropriate for the literary selection being used.

.....

Sample Story Map for *Molly's Pilgrim*
by Barbara Cohen

Setting/main characters	Home and school. Molly, Mama, Miss Stickley, Elizabeth
--------------------------------	---

Statement of the problem	The other children laugh at and make fun of Molly.
--------------------------	--

Event 1	The children tease Molly.
Event 2	The class has to make Pilgrim clothespin dolls.
Event 3	Mama makes Molly's doll look like herself.
Event 4	The children laugh at Molly's doll
Event 5	The teacher tells about modern Pilgrims and the Jewish holiday that inspired Thanksgiving.

Statement of Solution	The children understand about Molly and decide to be friends with her.
Story theme (What is this story <i>really</i> about?)	People are different, but when you get to know them, you often like them.

(Macon et al., 1991, p. 9)

Similarly, the Prediction Chart is based on a format that asks students to record events of the plot by employing a three-column format. The first column lists the page numbers indicating the source for the event being recorded, the second column reflects what the reader predicts will happen, and the third serves as a place to record "What actually happened."

In another example, the Story Pyramid not only breaks literature into its component parts, but its use also entails the added dimension of effective word usage.

Story Pyramid By Brenda Waldo

Purpose To provide a vehicle for students to state who the main characters are, what the setting is, what the problem is, the main events in the story, and the resolution of the problem....

Description In the Story Pyramid students are asked to complete a pyramid-shaped outline, which will include the following information:

- Line 1. Name of the main character.
- Line 2. Two words describing the main character
- Line 3. Three words describing the setting
- Line 4. Four words stating the problem
- Line 5. Five words describing one main event
- Line 6. Six words describing a second main event
- Line 7. Seven words describing a third main event
- Line 8. Eight words stating the solution to the problem

At first glance this activity may appear to be too rigid. On further scrutiny, it is apparent that student answers may vary, and the central challenge of the activity is the selection of quality vocabulary to complete the design. Knowledge of story content plus the demand for just the right words stretches thinking and requires that students make cogent responses using an economy of words.

Sample Story Pyramid for *Julie of the Wolves*, By Jean Craighead George

1. Julie
2. brave perplexed
3. Alaskan towns/wilderness
4. Retain/ abandon "old ways"
5. Julie lives with wolf pack
6. Julie runs away from "dumb" husband
7. Julie lives with father in Alaskan village
8. Julie decides to abandon "old ways" for civilization

(Macon et al., 1991, p. 23)

Here, reading literature is reduced to a task designed to demonstrate reading competence through the selection of words/diction.

In being asked to complete activities such as those represented above, the literary text is reduced to an object for dissection. In these scenarios, students become positioned as workers on an assembly line fitting the appropriate part into the appropriate space. As a result, the work becomes routinized and students move from one story to the next with the purpose of filling out an assortment of one-size-fits-all templates. Consequently, the student's own response to the text is immaterial and, unfortunately, is often never addressed (Dugan, 1997).

In giving pause to this use of visual organizers, I am reminded of my past attempts to apply them to Act I of *Hamlet*. At this time in my teaching career, I determined that it would be useful for students to record some of the pertinent details of the story using the Story Frame organizer as seen below. To adapt this organizer to better fit my use of it, a couple of alterations were necessary: *plot* replaced *story* and *The problem is solved when* was replaced by *The problem arises when*. At the time, these alterations simply indicated the flexibility of this visual organizer to me.

Story Frame
By G.L. Fowler

Purpose To focus the reader on basic story content, including the setting and the main characters....

Description The Story Frame requires that a student focus on the main characters, the setting, the major events, and the

conclusion in a story. Enough information is given in the frame to enable students to put together the basic information required.... It is an excellent device to use with students who need to work with basic information in a story in order to comprehend the idea of a story grammar and to apply this concept to an appropriate literature selection....

Story Frame

The story takes place _____
 _____ is a character in the story who

_____ is another character in the story who

A problem occurs when

After that,

and _____

The problem is solved when

The story ends with

(Macon et al., 1991, pp. 5-6)

When I first employed the above strategy with my students, I felt that gaining insight into the characters of a story was key to comprehending how the seemingly casual initial incidents of a story came together to create a plot brimming with meaning to be discovered (Marsh, 1987). Given that the

complexity of character relationships often eluded students, I was convinced that a visual organizer could assist students in making the appropriate inferences that led to an understanding of the text being read (Emery, 1996).

Unfortunately, it was only after employing this nifty device for a number of years that the routine use of it struck me. Before that, the completion of the handout became synonymous with the indication that my students comprehended what was happening in Act I of *Hamlet*. That is, I assumed that if my students completed each statement with a legitimate response, then they had gained insight into the motivations behind Hamlet's actions or, as another example, the tension that existed between Hamlet and his uncle. As a consequence, I eliminated the possibility for the use of other strategies such as classroom discussion to explore the insights that students might have gained from reading a literary text. Instead, completion of the handout demonstrated a competence with reading *Hamlet* that could be objectively assessed for each student. Thus, by emphasizing this handout, I privileged the notion of reading literature for correctness. In other words, what began as a means to an end became the end itself.

Another instance of the de-contextualization and reduction of literature is seen in the structure and make-up of the English 30 diploma examination. To begin with, we again note that the examination is divided into two sections: written and reading comprehension. For the written portion, students are asked to produce two written compositions. The intention behind the first of these assignments seemingly encourages students to become actively

involved with a given text and generate meaning from their interactions with this text.

The Reader's Response to Literature Assignment directs students, as readers of a given selection, to respond to the selection in the context of a given thematic topic. The response must be focused on the students' ideas and impressions of the way in which details from the selection support some aspect of the thematic topic. Students may extend or develop their responses to the selection by referring to personal experience; however, responses must be clearly **focused** on the given selection. (*Alberta Education*, 1997, p. 10, 97-98)

I contend, however, that the situation alone – the writing of a test that will potentially affect university entrance eligibility – does not create an atmosphere that truly encourages a freely-generated reader's response to literature. Instead, the mindset of many students is to produce whatever will likely allow them to achieve an acceptable mark. In the end, however, our students are evaluated according to the following criteria: appropriate ideas indicate a *Satisfactory* standing; "a competent response to the task" demonstrates a *Proficient* level of performance; "superficial and underdeveloped" or "[m]arginally relevant and ... inappropriate" (p. 17) ideas reflect a *Limited* or *Poor* level of achievement. This assessment of the student's writing further perpetuates the emphasis on competence in reading literature. That is, students respond to the task at hand by meeting the criteria outlined by the evaluation guidelines (Judy, 1981). In fact, some of my students confessed that they paid little attention to how the literary excerpt actually made them feel. They basically tried to figure out how to best respond

in order to pass the test. In this respect, literature became a vehicle for fulfilling a purpose other than meaning making.

This narrowing of students' responses also occurred as a result of providing students with *Samples of Students' Writing* compiled by the Student Evaluation and Records branch of Alberta Education for each diploma examination. The intention behind the use of these samples was to help students recognize what was required to meet the standards of achievement as outlined by Alberta Education. More specifically, these essays provided students with effective introductions and clear modes of development through the use of supporting details, and a strong conclusion that echoed the intentions set out by the introduction. To supplement these samples taken from actual student responses on past examinations, a colleague and I created an essay that summarized what students needed to do in order to write an effective essay. So exam-friendly was this sample that students could virtually replace the specifics of the sample with those relating to other literary texts and still create an effective essay.

English 30 – Diploma Examination
Essay Sample taken from “To Build a Fire” for the Major Assignment

Introduction – 3 sentences:

1. general, universal theme statement
2. specific story plus focus
3. thesis statement specifying three details to be explained

Many people blame fate for the tragedies that befall them.

(1. General statement) In “To Build a Fire,” Jack London suggests that an individual’s character ultimately determines the choices he makes. **(2. Specific story plus focus)** This idea is effectively

developed through the character of the nameless man, who loses in his struggle against nature because he is ignorant, unimaginative, and proud. **(3. Thesis statement plus 3 details: ignorant, unimaginative, and proud)**

Body – 3 paragraphs:

1. each paragraphs explores one of the three details in the thesis statement
2. each detail includes examples from the story as proof
3. each example includes an explanation of its significance

The man begins his journey in the northern wilderness without knowledge of the north or the skills necessary to survive. **(first detail)** He is new to the environment, taking with him only a meager lunch, no additional clothing or blankets for warmth, and nothing with which to provide himself shelter from the bitter cold. Lacking any experience of the north, he does not appreciate how critical survival knowledge is, and he does not make any attempt to acquire such knowledge. The old-timer on Sulphur Creek gives him some wise advice, which he ignores completely. **(example from the story)** His ignorance makes him indifferent to nature – its indifference to man and the power it can exert over him. London shows that such indifference can have tragic consequences, not only in the wilderness but also whenever an individual chooses to ignore the potential dangers of a situation. **(significance of the example)**

London emphasizes, too, that the man lacks imagination. **(transitional device and second detail)**

Conclusion – three sentences:

1. repeat thesis
2. reword focus
3. restate universal theme or provide a suggestion/insight

Through this story, London has shown that three of the most necessary traits of character for making healthy choices are knowledge, imagination, and humility. **(repetition of thesis statement to include the three details)** The seeds of an individual's future are contained in his character; the consequences of future decisions, then are determined by which seeds an individual chooses to cultivate. **(focus reworded)** It is not enough to simply "grow" as life determines, an individual must choose for himself if he wants a healthy harvest. **(general universal theme)**

Through the use of this approach and handout, I, as a teacher, perpetuated a reductionist approach to reading literature. In this case, reading literature became an exercise in finding the appropriate details for completing a standard literary analysis. At its extreme, my students were being trained to write a fill-in-the-blanks essay. As a result, this linear, rational approach ignored any sensitivity or personal response to the literary text. What became privileged, instead, was a mechanical approach to reading literature.

In addition to having an impact on classroom instruction, let us consider the reductionist effect of the English 30 diploma examination itself. In the instructions for the Response to Literature Assignment on the January 2000 *English 30 Part A: Written Response*, students are told that

- Because the Reader's Response to Literature Assignment is thematically connected to the Literature Composition Assignment, read **both** assignments before you begin.
- Read "The Layers" carefully and thoughtfully before you start the writing assignments. (Alberta Learning, p. 2)

Students are then given the poem "The Layers" to read. The following directions are also provided so as to focus students' thoughts and ideas.

The poem suggests that the speaker chooses to persevere – to persist in spite of discouragement or loss.

What does the poem "The Layers" suggest to you about the effect of perseverance? Support your response with reference to specific detail from the poem.

(Alberta Learning, p. 3)

This excerpt demonstrates the notion that a correct answer exists, restricting students to finding details in support of the thematic prompt provided on the examination. This emphasis on the performance of particular skills is also

apparent when the student faces the Literature Composition Assignment of the January 2000 *English 30 Part A: Written Response*. Yet again, students are steered in a particular direction by the instructions.

Much literature examines the individual's capacity to persevere in the face of hardship or the unknown.

Write an essay based on literature that you have studied in which the author examines the way in which an individual's ability to persevere influences his or her life. **What idea(s) does the author develop regarding perseverance?** Support and develop your controlling idea with reference to specific detail from the literature that you choose to discuss.

Guidelines for Writing

- **Select** literature that is relevant to this assignment from the short stories, novels, plays, poetry, other literature, or films that you have studied in your high school English classes. You must focus your discussion on literature *other than* the poem provided in this examination booklet.
- **Focus** your essay on your controlling idea about perseverance. Markers will be looking for evidence that you are developing and supporting your controlling idea in response to *this* assignment.
- **Organize** your composition so that your ideas are clearly, effectively, and coherently presented.

(Alberta Learning, p. 10)

In the above excerpt, we see the reader being positioned as a strategist required to dissect a piece of literature in order to demonstrate the acquisition of a particular skill: the ability to decipher the ways that a literary text demonstrates an already determined theme. This approach to reading literary texts is in contrast to one that encourages the reader to explore and interpret a text. Instead, the diploma examination has already provided the thematic interpretation that is to be applied to a text.

Forms of Standardization

The third characteristic of the discourse of competence emphasizes form, structure, and correctness as standard and essential to a reading of literature. Attempts to establish a particular competence for English language arts students has often been linked to the establishment of levels and standards of competence. These efforts also served to ensure that schools were accountable to parents and society at large for what took place in the classroom (Nickse, 1981). Even today, some might suggest that curricular changes reflect the demands of corporations more than they demonstrate innovations in pedagogy (Hayden, 1998). Historically, it has been suggested that this accountability is linked to the rise of mechanization, rationality, and the perceived need to compete in an increasingly global community (Short, 1984).

With standardization as a driving force behind the mandated curriculum that teachers are required to cover, a poem I often used in class to explore the concepts of imagery now jarringly interrupts my practice.

Examiner

The routine trickery of the examination
 Baffles these hot and discouraged youths.
 Driven by they know not what external pressure,
 They pour their hated self-analysis
 Through the nib of confusion, onto the accusatory page....

In the tight silence
 Standing by a green grass window ...
 I shudder at the narrow frames of our textbook schools...
 Cut into numbered rooms, black-boarded, ...

The screw-desk rows of lads and girls
 Subdued in the shade of an adult –
 Their acid subsoil –
 Shape the new to the old in the ashen garden....

As I gather the inadequate paper evidence, I hear
 Across the neat campus lawn
 The professional mowers drone, clipping the inch-high green.
 (Scott, 1990, p. 16)

This *shaping* of the individual as part of a unified collective is mirrored in a number of efforts throughout history to control the learning of students by *shaping* their behaviour. For instance, eighteenth century children's books revealed that students were essentially regarded as empty receptacles "to be filled with imperial gallons of fact" (Demers, 1982, p. 1). At this time, the student was positioned as a *tabula rasa*, or blank slate (Wilson, 1970; Corcoran & Evans, 1987), devoid of the essential knowledges, skills, or attitudes as outlined by those who decided what a student ought to know. As a result, it became the task of the teacher to ensure that the student acquired what was considered appropriate. In fact, acceptable conduct and morality were linked to the correct use and understanding of English. Consequently, "English teachers [were] often perceived as defenders of the language against the onslaughts of 'barbarians' (including their students)" (Judy, 1981, p. 7; Tomkins, 1986). Therefore, literature was read for the purpose of acquiring a common set of skills and behaviours that reflected what society determined ought to be present in its future citizens.

With attention to more recent developments in Alberta, a review of *The Common Curricular Framework for English Language Arts* (Western Canadian

Protocol for Collaboration in Basic Education, 1998), the *Program of Studies for Senior High School Language Arts: Discussion Draft* (Alberta Education, 1999), and the *Program of Studies for Senior High School English Language Arts: Pilot Draft* (Alberta Learning, 2000) shows that all of these official documents sanction the same regime of truth. That is, schooling must prepare students to meet the literacy demands of Canadian society as well as the international community (Tomkins, 1986; Wilson, 1970; Sheehan, 1986). In light of this goal of curriculum, the reading of literature again positions students as passive recipients with teachers required to ensure that the dictates of society are carried out.

Similarly, the above notions that officially define English language arts are also reflected in the 1982 guide. For instance, while the term citizenship, itself, is not used, the "development of language arts skills is integrally related to success in one's further education, career, and social life" (Alberta Education, 1982, p. 4). Also, the nature of language is still based on the perception that "[s]tudents need opportunities to gain competence in using language in a range of functions and in a variety of contexts" (p. 4). What is most apparent in all of these documents, however, is that a set of individually observable constructs or strands can be delineated to describe what makes up the production and consumption of language. As a result, little is astoundingly different between previously and more recently developed curricular documents.

The extent to which skills are standardized also affects the literature read in the classroom. For instance, the literature I chose for studying the essential knowledges, skills, and attitudes of English 30 continued to be the same body of texts that had been used for the previous twenty years of diploma examination responses. As a result, *Hamlet*, *Macbeth*, other Shakespeare plays, *Death of a Salesman*, and "Paul's Case" were permanent fixtures in the courses I taught over the years. I immediately recall discussions with colleagues about which pieces of literature would provide students with the most flexibility or best material for completing the written section of the diploma examination. This scenario in and of itself demonstrates how the literary text takes on an instrumental role in the delivery of an English 30 language arts program that is driven by competence. Thus, it is my suggestion that the positioning of students and teachers has not vastly changed from the past. In fact, while *The Common Curricular Framework for English Language Arts* has preoccupied the consciousness of Alberta's educators for the past five years or so, what takes place in classrooms as a result of translating this document into a new program of studies is unlikely to cause teacher practice to deviate significantly from the past. Consequently, students will continue to be positioned as passive subjects who are required to complete a variety of tasks in order to demonstrate the acquisition of skills deemed essential to acquiring an acceptable level of "language fluency and proficiency" (Alberta Learning, 2000, p. 2). In turn, teachers will continue to have a central role in language learning because of their *focus* on language, its forms and functions. It is the English language

arts teacher who helps students develop and apply strategies for comprehending, responding to and creating a variety of texts in a variety of situations. (p. 2)

Literary knowledge will continue to be something that is predetermined and uncontested. Literary skills will be strategies that will gain students access to the knowledge being tested on the province-wide multiple choice and essay tests. Literary attitudes will be those that the teacher suggests constitute the appropriate interpretation about a given piece of writing. As a result, teachers will continue to hold "the keys to our civilisation" (MacNeil, 1995, p. 8). The end result is likely to be the continued disengagement of students.

Another form of standardization comes from an emphasis on the reporting of the final grades achieved by students after each diploma examination session. That is, the results from the individual diploma tests are compiled into overall results for a class within each school, creating the possibility for comparison between classes and teachers. In fact, teachers are often asked to engage in an analysis of the results by identifying areas of strength and weakness from their students' performance. From this analysis, they are then asked to determine if any patterns emerge from their observations and if areas of deficiency can be corrected through a change of practice. At the same time, English departments are often asked to assess their overall success and then present the areas of strength and weakness to district officials. The intent of these latter analyses is, apparently, to encourage reflection on present practices for the purpose of continual growth. Unfortunately, a number of teachers perceive that their value or worth hinges

on their students' performance on the diploma examination (Nickse, 1981). All of this is played out while local media rank each school's overall performance in order for parents to compare the results of one school with those of another. Consequently, the diploma examination has taken centre stage and both students and teachers continue to be acted upon by others who determine what knowledge is of most worth (Block, 1995; Klein, 1999).

Concluding Observations

Unfortunately, the demands placed on students to demonstrate acquired skills through an emphasis on form, structure, and correctness has become an end unto itself. In addition, the intent of dissection for the purpose of comprehension of the whole has become overshadowed by the ability to break apart the whole. The result of this aim has been a power/knowledge relation between the curriculum guide, the diploma examination, the student, and the teacher that reinforces the discourse of competence by sanctioning an attention to specifics and pre-established responses. Thus, the reading of literature from within the discourse of competence legitimates a regime of truth that emphasizes the acquisition of skills, the reduction of literature, and the standardization of what students ought to learn about literary texts.

ACT THREE

SCENE II

"The Glass of Fashion and the Mould of Form"
(*Hamlet*, III, i, 163)

The Discourse of Humanism

"So, Ms. Filipetto, are you trying to tell me that the way Hamlet interacts with his mother can be applied to all of us?"

"I don't quite follow what you're asking, Susan."

"Well, you said Shakespeare's themes are timeless and universal, and that was why we needed to develop an appreciation for his plays."

Just when I was convinced that my students weren't listening to what was being said in class, I was unexpectedly forced to justify my preachings. Unfortunately, just as my methods for reading *Hamlet* with my students were becoming increasingly problematic for me, my belief in the place of Shakespeare in a high school English language arts program was no longer unshakeable. As a last minute effort, I sought refuge in the curricular mandates that were whirling around my mind: to "encourage, in students, an understanding and appreciation of the significance and artistry in literature" (Alberta Learning, 2000, p. 1), the "fundamentals of human existence" (p. 1), and the "intricacies of the human condition" (p. 1). In the past, I would have used this philosophy as the basis for organizing the English courses I was assigned to teach. I would have felt charged with the duty to ensure that my students met the minimum requirements as outlined

by Alberta Learning. In doing this, I lived the belief that "better tomorrows are built by knowledgeable, reflective, literate people" (Ruddell et al., 1994, p. 39).

In order to nurture literate citizens, some suggest that an understanding of what it means to be human is essential. That is, students ought to be grounded in the innate capacities of humans to operate within society. This background is at the core of humanism (Popkewitz & Brennan, 1998). The notion of rationality here is important to humanism because it emphasizes the value of understanding the world through systematic observation and objective analysis. A methodical process is used to arrive at established truth. In the case of literature, the goal is to determine the universal truths being revealed in a particular literary text (Poole, 1991). Consequently, I will refer to humanism as rational humanism from this point on in this thesis.

Along with incorporating an objective and systematic approach to reading literature, rational humanism has traditionally perpetuated Western European patriarchal norms as representing the complete human experience (Molinaro, 1991; Henricksen & Morgan, 1990). These norms privilege a male, Caucasian experience in society. One example would be the use of the term *he* in reference to all human beings without thought to the inherent exclusion of women by the use of this term (Weedon, 1997). Another example would be the assumption that the values of European Caucasians around family honour would be the same as those experienced by East Indian males. This limited perspective also supports the logic that it is possible to trace what is common amongst human beings back to the very first humans (Frye, 1989). However,

some see this universality and the "confining [of] our grasp of truth to a single perspective and ignoring its partiality as creat[ing] nothing short of a one-dimensional and dangerously misleading mirage obscuring the complexity of human reality" (Henrickson & Morgan, 1990). My reading of the documents under study in this research project suggests that rational humanism is prominently figured in Alberta's language arts curriculum. Therefore, in order to gain an understanding of the ways in which rational humanism shapes the reading of literary texts in the high school English language arts classroom, I have chosen to focus on the following characteristics of rational humanism as they are revealed in the Modern Era: the centrality of universal themes; the privileging of the literary canon; and the locus of the self.

The Centrality of Universal Themes

"Literature invites students to reflect on the significance of cultural values and ... to think about and discuss essential, universal themes ..." (Alberta Learning, 2000, p. 1). This philosophy is presented as central to the goals of high school English language arts as outlined in Alberta's new program of studies. On the very first page of this document, the "Senior High School English Language Arts Philosophy and Rationale" includes "The Importance of Literature". This view of the worth of literature is also included in the 1982 program of studies that guided the practice of teachers, particularly mine, prior to recent curricular developments. In the *Senior High School Language Arts Curriculum Guide* published by Alberta Education, the rationale makes

reference to the significance of reading literature as an integral goal of the high school English language arts program. Specifically, this document states that literature maintains a prominent position within the English language arts program. "In fact, literature provides the subject matter for much of the reading, speaking, writing, listening and viewing in the program" (p. 6). In addition, the 1982 program of studies claims to be constituted by "objectives, concepts and materials which extend the range of students' response to literature, deepen their understanding of the nature of literature and provide rich opportunities for the exploration of human experiences and values" (p. 6). Therefore, the student should "become aware of some of the variety, origins, conflicts and trends in human values" (p. 24). He/she should also "understand the themes in literary works and evaluate their validity in terms of milieu, and in relation to life in general and to the student's own experience" (p. 25).

Implicit in the philosophies of both of these documents is the belief that there are certain ideas that are common to the experiences of all human beings and that these ideas can be understood by rational individuals. These common human ideas are often revealed through the writing produced by those who partake in the many varied societies that make up our world. Yet, because of these commonalities, these varied societies are linked by their humanness (Frye, 1989). With universal themes as an important focus of reading literature in Alberta's high school English language arts program, the shaping presence of rational humanism becomes apparent. An instance of the constituting effect of this discourse can be drawn from my classroom practices.

The image of practice that comes immediately to mind is one that involves the review of the main literary texts that my students and I would have covered during a semester of English 30. To undertake this review, I employed an organizational tool that summarized the main texts we read and also pinpointed pertinent details that would have been seen as useful in discussing the universal themes of these texts, primarily in preparation for the English 30 diploma examination.

	LITERATURE		REVIEW	CHART	
	Character	Plot	Theme	Symbolism & Imagery	Life Application
The Grapes of Wrath	Muley Graves Tom Joad Al Ma & Pa Granma & Grampa Uncle John Noah Ruthie & Winfield Floyd Knowles Jim Casey (others)	Introduction Tom returns from jail and meets Jim Muley refuses to leave. The family has abandoned its land. Development The Joads are now being forced to leave. Etc. Climax They reach California. Etc. Denouement They hide in other camps. Etc. Conclusion Rose gives birth. Etc.	Surprising ability of people to help others even when they have little themselves to give. Dehumanization of the individual by a mechanized and impersonal society. The oppressed will group together in order to fight for equality. Etc.	- Jesus imagery through descriptions of Casey and Tom - Biblical journey - Persistent struggle of the turtle - Desolate vs. fruitful settings - Water as representing life and re-birth	- the importance of family support helped me get through tough times at school

Hamlet	Hamlet Cladius Gertrude Ophelia Polonius Laertes Horatio Fortinbras (others)	Introduction The ghost appears to reveal the conflict. Young Hamlet and King Claudius are shown to be at odds with each other. Etc.	Appearances can be deceiving. Procrastination vs. being careful vs. being unable to take action. The story of the tragic hero is common in literature. Relationships and love can take on destructive qualities.	- Rotten garden imagery; rank smells - Corruption and decay - Chaos in nature reflecting chaos in the kingdom	- there is a fine balance between reason and emotion when making choices
Death Of a Sales-Man	Willy Loman Linda Biff Happy Charley Ben (others)	Introduction Willy returns from an unsuccessful trip to New England. Biff and Happy come home for a visit.	- Unrealistic views of success lead to tragedy - Everyone needs to feel worthy and appreciated - Materialism vs. defining success on one's own terms	- new stockings for Miss Francis vs. the old holes in Linda's nylons - seeds to represent the need for growth and new life - imagery of the jungle and of being boxed in	- I need to find meaning in life on my own terms instead of being influenced by the expectations of others.

In the above example, we see a handful of carefully selected details being extracted for their revelation of the literary elements of each story. The treatment of literature in this way supports the belief that universal patterns exist in literary texts. That is, if we examine the specific details of a piece of literature, we ought to be able to piece together its puzzle of meaning. The

purpose behind analyzing literature in this way is to demonstrate that the author has intended to communicate an idea that relates to and can be understood by all human beings. In addition, the inclusion of the "Life Application" column speaks to the goal of rational humanism that places significance on student responses to literary texts for the purpose of fostering a development of their own personal identity (Howard, 1998). However, despite the inclusion of this column for reflection, the emphasis that was placed on the universality of the themes overshadowed recognition of the particular experiences of my students.

As a result, there has been a noticeable void in a treatment of distinct experiences. This absence of the particular is problematic when we consider that it leads to a focus on sameness rather than paying attention to what might be different for each student. Let us consider one instance of this absence of the particular using the above Literature Review Chart. The image of practice I recall is one in which my students were asked to discuss the theme of relationships after reading Shakespeare's *Hamlet*. In the past, I explored this theme by having students look at the relationships that existed between the various characters as revealed through the plot of the play. As an example for students, I encouraged a discussion on how Hamlet interacted with his mother. My goal was to highlight her seemingly meek character by analyzing her displays of anguish for her son's emotional plight alongside her inability to take action against Claudius, her murdering husband. By pursuing this avenue of thought, I now find that I privileged an "unacknowledged masculinist bias" (Henricksen & Morgan, 1990, p. 44). In perpetuating this patriarchal view of

women as powerless beings in need of a husband to establish their identity in society, my students learned that a woman's identity was defined only in relation to someone else. That is, the woman is mother, wife, sister, daughter, and/or niece; she does not stand alone as a human entity. Thus, through this pursuit I silenced the possibility of considering Gertrude's actions from within the discourse of feminism. That is, I could have explored the suggestion that Gertrude had been positioned by a patriarchal society that silenced the voices of women causing them to appear weak. Or, my students and I could have discussed the specific needs that she might have been seeking to fulfill by taking a second husband. This interaction could have been followed by the acknowledgement that the death of a loved one – for either men or women – and the taking of a second spouse are common experiences. Yet, the way in which each person might choose to handle the situation would vary and would probably be affected by particular life circumstances. Moreover, I had not yet entertained the possibility that universal truths were notions established by a particular culture during a particular historical period of time. This is the limitation of a classroom that embraces universal themes to represent the totality of experience for students. The consequence is that the particular experiences of students become stifled.

An example of this silencing of the particular can be seen in another image of practice. In an attempt to help students understand the concept of universal themes while recognizing how much my students seemed to deplore lengthy writing activities, I sometimes asked them to create a thematic poster.

For this assignment, students needed to first review the elements of literature: plot, setting, characters, and conflicts. We then chose details from the literary text that we were studying to represent each of these categories. Once this brainstorming had been completed, we discussed the possible universal themes that the chosen piece of literature might reveal. By approaching the activity in this way, my intention was to demonstrate that a student could choose any piece of literature, first, and then be able to identify a theme that would be found within a list of common universal themes. Then, in the centre of a piece of construction paper, I asked my students to place a word or two representing the text's universal theme. Of course, our whole group discussion would have already generated a number of possibilities simplifying the process of choosing a theme by enabling students to refer to the list that had already been compiled on the chalkboard. The next step was to find five specific details from the text that supported the chosen theme and at least five images from magazines that could be cut and pasted onto the poster to enhance this universal theme. While some of my colleagues might have considered this approach rather elementary, I was convinced of its effectiveness. I felt that the activity generated from flipping through the pages, cutting out the images, and pasting them onto the poster paper facilitated discussion about literature and universal themes.

During a recent use of this exercise, however, I paid closer attention to the dialogue that was occurring amongst the students. I was disappointed, but not surprised, to note that once my students had quickly figured out the "answer

that Ms. Filipetto was looking for," they seemed to focus on other topics of casual discussion such as their plans for the up-coming weekend. In the meantime, their search for images demonstrated a simple understanding of theme. For instance, one group of students chose to represent the universal theme of love in *Romeo and Juliet* using the balcony scene.

But soft! What light through yonder window breaks?
 It is the East, and Juliet is the sun!
 Arise, fair sun, and kill the envious moon,
 Who is already sick and pale with grief
 That thou her maid art far more fair than she.
 Be not her maid, since she is envious;
 Her vestal livery is but sick and green,
 And none but fools do wear it; cast it off.
 (Act II, scene ii, 1-9)

The words they selected as their five specific details were *window*, *sun*, *moon*, *maid*, and *fools*. For the most part, these words were simply five identifiable objects mentioned in their excerpt. Hence, instead of enhancing the reading of literature, it became evident that I had succeeded in reducing the reading of literature to the categorization of details with the purpose of fitting a text into fixed universal themes. The lived curriculum of my classroom was thus characterized by a myriad of exercises that centred around the discovery of a text's universal themes as expressed through its other structural elements: diction, setting, imagery, mood, tone, characters, and conflict (Schlender, 1995). Unfortunately, the exploration of themes in this way began to resemble more the harvesting of literary examples to fit into neatly packaged thematic possibilities than a careful consideration of how a piece of literature conveys a

particular theme. Here, we also see an instance of the competency orientation inserting itself within the reading of literature for universal themes.

In another example, I am reminded of my use of the resource books published by the Centre for Learning. During my early years of teaching, these books were of limitless value to me! At that time, I felt they provided students with a concrete tool for understanding abstract concepts such as universal themes. For instance, I often used "Lesson 17: Theme – Between the Lines" from *Tools of Fiction: An Inductive Approach to the Short Story*. This lesson supports the idea that a mutuality of meanings exists in literary texts. It also treats theme as an extractable element of literature.

Reading Between the lines for Meaning

Being able to state the controlling idea or theme of a story is one sure test of a reader's understanding of it. A *theme* statement is a complete sentence expressing the story's central purpose, insight, or idea. Often it is a qualified generalization about life that flows from the story and offers some awareness of why people or things are as they are....

Some questions that lead to shaping a statement of theme are:

1. Why does the story end as it does?
2. How does the reader feel about the story's ending and why?
3. If the protagonist or antagonist change in the story, why do they?
4. What does the protagonist or other main character(s) learn through the events of the story and why?

... A good statement of theme is unique to the story it comes from, but it expresses a universal truth in a fresh way; that is, a truth that applies to all persons....

(Hinman et al., 1983, p. 97)

Needless to say, this approach privileges rationality and a commonality of experience in the reading of literature. Here, the role of the teacher is one of "custodian or informed explicator" (Corcoran & Evans, 1987, p. 2). Some might also suggest that this approach positions teachers as conduits of society's norms. That is, the emphasis on "truth that applies to all persons" (Hinman et al., 1983, p. 97) suggests that there are certain ways of being of which all people need to be aware. Perhaps, the underlying suggestion is also that through the use of this handout, teachers can help students acquire an understanding of this notion of common truth.

A contrast to the above experiences in classrooms would be ones that embrace more than the correct and acceptable meanings of a limited repertoire of literary texts. An alternative to this reductionist approach would thus see the application of feminism to the reading of literature in the high school classroom. This approach could include an exploration of

the meaning of the roles of heroines and heroes in literature; the new ways of reading women characters in Shakespeare; female imagery and voice in poetry, and the development of strong, authentic voice in student writing (Schlender, 1995, p. 30).

For instance, students would look at how the character of Lady Macbeth is constructed. Students would be asked to consider why Shakespeare would have had her call upon the powers of evil to "unsex" her in order for her to help her husband pursue his ambitious goals. In this way, students would be exploring the absences as well as the presences of meaning that enhance the personal experience. As another example, a reading of Shakespeare's *Hamlet* could be framed to consider the ways in which Ophelia is depicted and how this

characterization might marginalize women. Here, instead of students being guided to focus on the main character and his struggles with his father's untimely death, a less common approach is pursued. Thus, by approaching *Hamlet* in a way that has not been typically undertaken in the past, we, as teachers, can move towards acknowledging that our "choices frame the world in a particular way for students" (Fenwick & Parsons, 1996, p. 25). In other words, the ways in which literature is taken up shape how students locate literary texts in their lives. Unfortunately, the classroom experience I was exposed to as a student and the one I perpetuated as a teacher seemed to uphold the notion that literature was to be analytically read in order to discover its accepted and pre-established truths.

In a similar way, the inclusion of Canadian literature as a minimum requirement for mandated programs (Alberta Education, 1982; Alberta Learning, 2000) speaks to the privileging of another sort of universal truth, one associated with a particular national and cultural identity (Cameron & Oster, 1992). Some suggest that this approach to reading literary texts constructs

the reading of literature in secondary schools ... [as having become] entrenched as an activity which either supports other activities, such as the study of history or human values, or the study of the literary merit of the work itself. (Sumara, 1997, p. 20)

In the instance of Canadian literature, then, reading Timothy Findley's *The Wars* provides students with a text that encourages reflection on the effects of war's atrocities on the individual human spirit as a universal theme. At the same time, however, it serves to expose students to a Canadian author. This nationalistic purpose is thought to assist students in understanding what it

means to be Canadian. Proponents of Canadian literature refer to the opportunities that reading literary works written by Canadians offer to our students. That is, students can gain an understanding of Canadian culture and Canadian regionalism. However, some critics suggest that reading a literary work simply because it is Canadian does not guarantee an understanding of what it means to be Canadian given the vastness of experiences that are reflected in the literature of our geographically huge nation (Cameron & Oster, 1992). Regardless, Canadian literature is used as a vehicle for instilling a sense of nationalistic pride in students. In addition, some feel that

[t]eaching Canadian literature allows students to see themselves through literature and, therefore, helps develop a sense of identity. Reading their country's literature allows students to see themselves in a manner available to them in no other way.... Those in favor of teaching Canadian literature argue that such an interest may encourage adolescents to read as well as lead to self-understanding. (Cameron & Oster, 1992, pp. 21-22)

With nationalism and individualism as the goals for reading Canadian literature, a modernist reading of literary texts is promoted. That is, instead of using the text to open up the possibility for exploring a wide range of themes, Canadian literature is only taken up in particular ways with attention being paid only to particular differences that exist amongst people.

Therefore, a literary text such as *The Wars* is not read for its treatment of the atypical and sensitive theme of human sexuality. Rather, it is usually read for the theme of survival over adversity. Unfortunately, when I recall my own classes, I regretfully admit that I too maintained a standard focus that honoured this novel as a Canadian text. Purposefully, I avoided discussions that might

have considered topics, ideas, or themes other than those considered “universal” in nature. Thus, any themes that might have opened students up to issues not usually considered to be part of the mainstream human experience were left unexplored. Consequently, I continued to pass on the universal themes deemed acceptable by society while avoiding others so that students would partake in particular notions of what it meant to be human. For instance, we would have avoided less dominant ways of being represented by homosexuality that interrupt the hero notion. In reading literature in this way, my students and I were located within a coercive pedagogy that shaped them as a group of subjects to whom only certain sets of meanings, presented as truths, were made available.

Instead of reading literary texts in the above ways, what is needed is the opportunity to consider the universal alongside the particular – that which is common alongside that which is different, allowing one to interrupt the other. In other words, not only could teachers and students explore, for instance, the atrocities of war in Findley’s novel, but they could also consider how war is experienced on an individual level. This might enable students to speak of their own knowledge of experiences. For instance, a discussion about Croatia might interrupt the belief that war is experienced in the same way throughout the world. Another possibility could come from a discussion about the crisis in the Canadian military that resulted in the killing of a Somali child by Canadian soldiers. Through these discussions, the particularities and contradictions of war could be examined alongside its widespread presence in human society.

Within my own practice of reading *Hamlet*, for instance, my pedagogical choices reflected the assertion that "literature in some way or other, reflects and delivers up 'truths' about life and the human condition" (Rice & Waugh, 1989, p. 2). As Bloom (1998) would suggest, a reading of Shakespeare enables us to know what it means to be human. In fact, he asserts that Shakespeare invented the human. In this way, every era can refashion Shakespeare's plays so as to map the past onto the present (Halpern, 1997). From another perspective, storytelling is looked upon as an attempt by people to make sense of the world (Frye, 1989). The use of the narrative structure is seen as common because language constructed in narrative form assists us in coming to an understanding of why the world operates in the ways that it does. With so many well-known theorists providing convincing rationales, I was so convinced of these universal themes that I felt it would be strategic on my part to provide my students with a list of themes that covered all of the texts we would be reading that semester. Examples from this list include the following: overcoming threatening circumstances or oppositional forces; self-discovery; surviving isolation; the effects of the unknown on the individual; greed and selfishness; coping with death; and the destructive potential of nature. My intention with this list was to assist students in developing the ability to identify universal themes in any given piece of literature. Of course, this approach to reading literature was also influenced by looming thoughts of the English 30 diploma examination. Unfortunately, while my strategy might have assisted

students to some extent, I again managed to position literature within an instrumental paradigm.

To counter the influence of universal themes on the reading of literature, one approach suggests considering the reading of literature as a conversation between the reader and the text (Rosenblatt, 1995). In other words, reading literary texts could be seen as a social act (Clifford, 1991). Without this possibility, the student as reader was powerless. He was at the mercy of policy, curriculum, and the teachers who were mandated to carry out the regimes of truth sanctioned by these artifacts of culture and society. It was only during the latter part of the 1900s that the reader was recognized as possessing valuable knowledge that could be shared with the author's knowledge via the text. Consequently, the text lost some of its importance, but, for the first time, the reader took on a position of active subjectivity as opposed to being passively objectified as the vehicle through which the author's or text's universal theme would be transmitted or translated. As a result, until the last four or five decades, the locus of meaning, and therefore control, did not reside in the student at all.

As a departure from the view that teachers ought simply to guide students in determining the universal theme of a given piece of literature, reading can be experienced in two ways: efferently and aesthetically (Rosenblatt, 1995; Beach et al., 1990). The efferent stance involves seeking, gaining, and retaining, for lack of a better word, information. This is the stance that comes to mind when I think back to my high school English language arts

classes. That is, as students, we were positioned as passive readers. On the other hand, the aesthetic stance asks readers to respond to the text being read by using their own life experiences (Ruddell et al., 1994). It is also significant to note that both stances can be employed during one reading, with the reader shifting back and forth from a technical or information-finding mode to the recalling of a related personal memory. This shifting of stances allows for varied responses to a text, all occupying equivalent positions. However, while the search for a single correct universal theme is not the intention, extreme relativism is not acceptable either (Price, 1989). Instead, reading literary texts can be presented in the following way.

By agreeing on criteria of evaluation of interpretations, we can accept the possibility of alternative interpretations, yet decide that some are more acceptable than others.... Thus we can be open to alternative readings of the text of *Hamlet*, but we also can consider some readings as superior to others according to certain explicit criteria.... (Ruddell et al., 1994, pp. 1078-9)

Therefore, the de-emphasis of searching for universal themes in literature shifts attention to the particular and to cultural difference. Perhaps, this can lead to an exploration of the view that varied realities exist for varied people as opposed to

the gender-blind humanist tradition [that] suggests that rationality and modes of scientific thinking common to different individuals, or the artistic perception which is the special gift of the few, give access to a singular *true* reality.... (Weedon, 1997, p. 8)

This latter perspective is what stifles students who often see this sort of reading as yet another "academic" exercise.

The Privileging of the Canon

Along with reading literature for universal themes within high school English language arts programs, there also exists the belief that certain literary texts are more worthy of study than others (Corcoran & Evans, 1987). Thus, establishing a preset core of literary works is justified not only by the self-evident complexity and beauty of these works, but also by their potential benefit for the reader as a future member of society. As a result, these texts take on a privileged nature and are identified by the term *literature*. As literature, they are further characterized as belonging to a canon of works (Krieger, 1988). This study of privileged literature reflects an academic rationalist approach that encourages the development of the human mind through a reading of those works of literature that can aptly convey an understanding of what it means to be human. This notion is linked to Frye's assertion that "a great work of literature is also a place in which the whole cultural history of the nation that produced it comes into focus" (1989, p. 52).

Prior to and during the nineteenth century, until the advent of empirical research in reading in the 1880s and, later ... meaning was generally assumed to reside with the author; that is, the text was a representation of what the author meant, and the author was the ultimate arbiter of meaning. (Bogdan & Straw, 1990, p. 15)

Here, the language of modernity and the discourse that words could represent reality are evident. Reading a literary text was seen as the act of having meaning transmitted from author through text to reader. As a result, knowledge about the author was crucial to understanding his/her text.

Unfortunately, the prevailing ideas that we ask students to consider as they read literature within the English 30 curriculum are those associated with a particular set of texts – ones usually written by white, European males – and those sanctioned by a Western European society (Molinaro, 1991). Let us consider for a moment, some of the more common texts read in English 30: *Nineteen Eighty-Four* by George Orwell, *The Grapes of Wrath* by John Steinbeck, *For Whom the Bell Tolls* by Ernest Hemingway, *The Great Gatsby* by Scott F. Fitzgerald, and *Tess of the D'ubervilles* by Thomas Hardy (Oster and Johnston, 1997). Hence, students are exposed to the "giant vat or cauldron containing all the great works, all the accumulated literary scholarship ... [and] students line up and pass by, each to receive a draught in a battered tin cup " (Judy, 1981, p. 143).

In addition to these texts, the writings of another Western European male have also figured prominently. In fact, Shakespeare's plays have been listed as mandatory reading for high school students (Alberta Education, 1982) for decades. Thus, the teacher is required to encourage students to gain an understanding and appreciation of his plays. In addition, since students usually have had little exposure to Shakespeare's works, the teacher becomes the central figure in unraveling what his plays have to say to their readers.

In Alberta, high school students who progress through the three required levels of academic courses in senior high language arts read a minimum of five plays. Of these five plays, a student's Shakespearean experience has traditionally been – and often continues to be – founded in the study of three tragedies in particular: *Romeo and Juliet* in English 10, *Macbeth* in English 20, and *Hamlet* in English 30. Think of it: an entire society

schooled in the ethics and language structures provided by these models. (Fenwick & Parsons, 1996, p. 22; Altmann et al., 1999)

Therefore, the privileging of particular texts over others could potentially limit the ideas explored in the high school English language arts classroom. That is, in taking a brief look at the above plays of Shakespeare, we note that each has a prominent male protagonist (Romeo, Macbeth, and Hamlet) with a female character, perhaps two, (Juliet, Lady Macbeth, and Gertrude and Ophelia) acting in relation to this male protagonist. Consequently, students would not be exposed to a female character as the central figure of one of Shakespeare's plays. If students are presented with the truth that Shakespeare's plays are timeless and that he is a mortal god (Bloom, 1998), then what are we saying to students about the possible meanings that can be derived from literature? That worthy texts revolve around male characters? That female characters simply help to further the plot or to understand the plight of the male protagonist? Whatever it is that we implicitly or explicitly impress upon students, the implication is that the privileging of a literary canon limits the exploration of meaning much like an emphasis on universal themes does. Nevertheless, whether because of familiarity, convenience, availability (Altmann et al., 1999), or the proliferation of supplementary resources, many teachers will continue to use these texts. Thus, with little movement at present to reconsider the privileging of a literary canon, particular pieces of literature such as the plays of Shakespeare will remain an integral component of the high school curriculum in Alberta. "The 'canon' will remain loaded, pointing right at Shakespeare" (Fenwick & Parsons, 1996, p. 22).

As an alternative to privileging a literary canon, some theorists advocate the repositioning of authority with respect to author and text (Rosenblatt, 1995; Ruddell et al., 1994). They suggest the abandonment of reading literature to determine accepted universal truths or in order to acquire appropriate sensibilities and tastes. That is, neither the author nor the text ought to be granted ultimate authority. Consequently, the reader can be seen as an integral player in the negotiation of meaning with a literary text. In this sense,

[t]eaching becomes a matter of improving the individual's capacity to evoke meaning from the text by leading him to reflect self-critically on this process. The starting point for growth must be each individual's efforts to marshal his resources in relation to the printed page. (Rosenblatt, 1995, pp. 25-26)

Within this paradigm, the act of reading is no longer considered to be a series of pre-established skills, processes, and procedures. Nor is it thought to follow a linear pattern of deduction leading to a widely accepted universal truth about the meaning of a privileged text as located within the author's intended meaning of that text (Poole, 1991). Instead, the student, teacher, and text are all positioned as intermeshing subjects and objects. Whereas early modernist models of reading might have emphasized the construction of meaning as a gathering of information and might have focussed on the determination of universal generalizations or truths through the reading of specific literary texts, a situational orientation is possible. As a result, the author's position has assumed less importance, and the text and the reader's interaction with it have become the essential meaning-making constructs for reading literature (Biriotti & Miller, 1993). In other words, the

reader is the space on which all the quotations that make up a writing are inscribed without any of them being lost; a text's unity lies not in its origin but in its destination.... (Lodge, 1988, pp. 171-172)

More simply, the involvement of the reader comes with the death of the author and the need to acknowledge the reader's voice. As a result, in the case of schools, the reader/student is positioned as an agent of action in the process of reading, not someone we act upon in order to instill particular beliefs.

Another similar reshaping of the function of the author comes from Foucault. He has suggested that we consider authorship not as a single identity and as the originator of a particular text, but rather as one property or complex function of discursivity (Lodge, 1988, pp. 208-9).

We are accustomed ... to saying that the author is the genial creator of a work in which he deposits, with infinite wealth and generosity, an inexhaustible world of significations.... The truth is quite the contrary: the author is not an indefinite source of significations which fill a work; the author does not precede the words, he is a certain functional principle by which, in our culture, one limits, excludes, and chooses.... "What difference does it make who is speaking?" (pp. 209-10)

In challenging previous historical, cultural, and societal productions of the appropriated truths around authorship, Foucault helps us to question the privileging of a literary canon. As a result, reading literary texts, specifically the interplay between text, author, and reader, is reshaped and reconstituted.

The Locus of the Self

The privileging of particular literary works such as the writings of Shakespeare not only speaks to the importance of the literary canon (Bloom,

1998), but it also points to a society that values the ability to read literature for self-development (Rosenblatt, 1995). Reading literature within a rational humanist paradigm suggests that readers ought to be able to explore human wholeness as it exists between the ideals of humanity and the conditions of reality (Schlosser, 1976). Thus, the student, teacher, and text ought to promote personal growth (Read & Simon, 1975) and open up the possibility for more than “an active teacher-passive student relationship, in which the student has been viewed as a sponge soaking up the knowledge of the teacher” (p. 260). Here, the notion of identity is central to rational humanist thought and has become accepted as a natural, as opposed to a learned, way of seeing the world (Davies, 1993). One example is the way in which our North American societies divide their populations based on maleness and femaleness. This physiological and biological categorization has become so engrained in our thinking that conceiving of people without that distinction is rarely entertained (Davies, 1993). Even a quick stroll into the magazine section of a bookstore will reveal that a topic such as fitness or fashion – an interest evidenced in both male and female individuals – is divided into fitness for women and fitness for men; fashion for women and fashion for men.

For students, the self is revealed through curricular objectives that encourage them to “formulate their thoughts and ideas, organize and make sense of their experiences, and express and acknowledge their feelings. Exploration enables students to discover and understand what they think and who they are” (Alberta Learning, 2000, p. 15). Thus, the understanding of

identity presently privileged in high school English language arts programs is a modern one that conceives of a self that needs to be exposed. In other words, the student is one who reads in order to discover what already exists but has not yet been revealed to him or herself as well as to others. It is for this reason that students are encouraged to "respond personally by relating texts to their own experiences, feelings, values and beliefs" (p. 21). This personal exploration then facilitates the guiding of students to think of their own experiences as reflective of a common, universal, and human understanding of the world. With repeated exploration, then, the inexperienced reader can eventually develop discriminating tastes. That is, the "critical response, with practice, gradually makes our pre-critical responses more sensitive and accurate, or improves our taste, as we say" (Frye, 1989, p. 44). At the same time, though, it must be acknowledged that those who actually see themselves or their experiences reflected in the texts are affirmed; those who do not are marginalized and alienated.

The result of this sort of approach to reading literature is one that is familiar to my experiences both as a student and as a teacher of English language arts. My most vivid recollection of personal discovery as a student came in the form of response journals. While reading about Hamlet when I was in English 30, for instance, I was required to write about how his actions helped me to understand my own life choices. Unfortunately, I often responded in whatever way I could manage in order to complete the assignment regardless of whether this indicated "a true exploration of my inner self." Later, when I

began teaching English 30, I revisited the response journal. This time, it was with my students. My renewed enthusiasm was spurred on by theories that seemed to bring readers out of the shadows of imposed interpretation so that the author, text, and reader all share in the negotiation of meaning (Rosenblatt, 1978). I was excited by the prospect of my students coming to a better understanding of their inner selves by exploring the characters of *Hamlet*. To assist in this process, I provided them with a possible list of response questions and statements:

1. With which character do you identify most? Why?
2. How does Hamlet's inability to take action reflect times when you have chosen to procrastinate?
3. Describe some of the bits of advice that your parents have passed on to you? How do these compare to the wisdom Polonius passed on to Laertes? In both cases, how do parents influence their children's beliefs and values?
4. If you were Hamlet's best friend, how would you help him through the death of his father and the remarriage of his mother?
5. How has reading *Hamlet* helped you to understand who you are a little bit better?

Unfortunately, my students completed the assignment that I provided them with as much reflection and fervor as I employed when I was a student in English 30. As I had felt stifled many years ago, I restricted the possibility for the exploration of self, even a self that was pre-constructed and in need of discovery. There was not even the glimmer of hope that students might be able to see the self as a social negotiation, an agent spoken into existence. Instead of considering the various social and historical constructions that compete for each person's attention and the discourses that constitute the meanings

available to each person (Davies, 1993), I attempted to liberate the student through the reading of literature. Ironically, I succeeded more in constraining their explorations of meaning making as they read literature than facilitating the negotiation of new meanings.

Concluding Remarks

To reiterate, the implications here for teachers and students are significant. There exists the potential for much more than is presently being experienced in the high school classroom. That is, no longer does the student have to be positioned strictly as a passive recipient of knowledge. No longer does the teacher need to be the only source of knowledge. No longer does the mandate for sameness through the standardization of pre-determined responses have to be privileged. After all,

[t]oo often these secondary literature classes focus solely on analysis and explication, on wringing all possible meanings and interpretations from a text. Teachers have been more concerned about teaching critical analysis – the making of “acceptable” judgments about literary works (Judy, 1981, p. 142)

By reading literature in this latter way, many high school teachers have continued to perpetuate the discourse of rational humanism. At the same time, they experience “some difficulty shifting authority to the reader and, more importantly, to the communities of readers that engage in shared reading in school classrooms” (Sumara, 1997, p. 20). Often expressed as disinterest or alienation by students and as frustration by teachers, the resulting tensions that sometimes trickle out and other times burst forth point to the need to reconsider

how the reading of literary texts might be taken up in the high school classrooms of Alberta. Consequently, the emergence of new discourses intrudes upon the meta-narratives that have constituted what it means to read literature.

ACT THREE**SCENE III**

**"'Tis an Unweeded Garden that Grows to Seed"
(*Hamlet*, I, ii, 141-2)**

A Summation

With competence and rational humanism dominating the high school English language arts classroom, particular knowledges about reading literature are privileged, particular truths are perpetuated, and teachers and students are positioned in particular ways. These knowledges, truths, and positionings are characterized by the modernist constructs of rationality, objectivity, and universality. More specifically, teachers have been positioned as purveyors of knowledge, transmitters of society's codes, and keepers of the curriculum. At the same time, students have been positioned as the warehouses of information, receptacles of appropriate attitudes and tastes, and the depositories of the mandated regimes of truth (Block, 1995). While some might support these goals as being of benefit to society, I contend that the frustrations students have experienced as a result must be given mindful attention.

The following excerpt can be used to highlight this reductionist effect.

While the diploma stream should place greater emphasis on life skills and the matriculation stream should place greater emphasis on academic background and skills needed for university work, neither stream must neglect either the development of communication abilities or the pursuit of humanistic goals, both of which are equally important in the development of fully functioning members of society regardless of vocation. (Alberta Education, 1982, p. 7)

This claim has already been substantiated through the various images of classroom practice that have shown how literature has been de-contextualized and objectified in order to ensure that students acquire particular knowledges, skills, and attitudes. As another instance, the objectification of literary texts is seen in the prominence of the English 30 diploma examination. Shaped by the reading of literary texts in these ways, the resulting position assumed by students is limited in scope. In this case, the subject position of students is one of passivity and receptivity. At best, "readers became puzzle solvers, translating the meaning of the text through their own 'skill,' either as readers or interpreters" (Bogdan & Straw, 1992, p. 16).

The work of Popkewitz and Brennan can be used to frame the subjectivity of students in Foucauldian terms. Within their explorations, subjectivity is seen

not as an originary force, but as a constituted effect of knowledge regimes ("discourses") – bound up in all practices, no matter how silently physical – that inscribe bodies and thus subjugate people.... (Popkewitz and Brennan, 1998, p. 321)

In other words, the student's experience in the classroom is a manifestation of the knowledges and regimes of truth that have been sanctioned over time (Fenwick & Parsons, 1996). Through this thesis, we see that competence and rational humanism have primarily shaped the English language arts classroom. These privileged discourses have dominated the ways in which literature has been read in the classroom to such an extent that the new program of studies presents the importance of literature as an introductory feature. In contrast, earlier drafts of the program of studies tucked it in amidst other thoughts about language arts by treating it with less prominence. Even *The Common Curriculum*

Framework for English Language Arts barely acknowledges the term *literature* and instead focuses on the term *text* as encompassing all forms of language expression.

While some of my colleagues might gasp at the thought of reading literature in English 30 without attention to universal themes and the competent use of language, these approaches to reading literature do not singularly speak to the needs of our students. Again, while some might be able to argue the usefulness of an emphasis on rational humanism and competence, the tensions that have arisen as a result of their prominence in high school English language arts are too problematic to continue to be overlooked. Our students have tired of the disguised *drill and kill* exercises that now come in neatly packaged handouts. They no longer want to struggle with form essays that are written to demonstrate the ability to evidence a particular theme in any literary text. How often have I heard them exclaim, "Will this count?" or "But, what's the right answer supposed to be?" or "Why do we have to read Shakespeare anyway?" I am also reminded of a lesson I often employed to teach symbolism using excerpts from the movie created by the rock band, Pink Floyd. In this movie, the band features a number of its songs from "The Wall" album. The sections I chose for students to watch included the following images: masked students marching into a huge meat grinder, a schoolmaster animated as a puppet on strings, and a teacher shouting out orders in military fashion. As one of the final images, my students were shown the scene with the young people who have turned on their institution of education by physically demolishing their school as the background music

includes the chant, "Tear down the walls!" This final image is one that I feel would be most appealing to students if they could act on their frustrations with reading literature.

Without attention to the problematic ways that we have constituted these practices in the past, the frustrations of students will simply continue to surface unless we, as teachers, face the interruptions created by our students' resistance to these approaches. Thus, an acknowledgement of the tensions felt by students who experience an English language arts program, propagated in part by the discourses of competence and rational humanism, is necessary. Only in this way can something other than what has dominated the landscape of reading for the past century in Alberta be considered. Otherwise, the daily frustrations that our students experience with having to complete tasks that only hint at acknowledging their worth as contributing partners in the negotiation of literary meaning will continue to leave them feeling unessential.

What is needed, then, is another approach to reading literature that would counteract the all-encompassing effects of the discourses of competence and rational humanism by focussing on difference, power, and the production of culture. The discursive practice that I am suggesting be infused into the high school English language arts experience is that of cultural studies.

ACT FOUR

SCENE I

"How All Occasions Do Inform Against Me"
(Hamlet, IV, iv, 34)

What Is Cultural Studies?

While no one definition of cultural studies exists, it does possess certain characteristics that cause it to be distinct from other disciplines, practices, theories and methodologies. With its origins in British post-World War II class politics (Sardar & Van Loon, 1997) and in French literary theory (Culler, 1997), the goal of cultural studies has always been to expose the power relations that shape cultural practices of society. To accomplish this task, culture must be seen as a complex entity that manifests itself through political and social activity. For this reason, cultural studies has focussed on an exploration of the following: the construction of meaning; the identification of roles and positions within society; the representation of what ought to be known and valued; and the agency of people, or the extent to which each individual is able to act under the influence of his/her own choices in comparison to the effects of societal conditions (Culler, 1997). In short, the notions of difference and power are characteristic of what cultural studies aims to explore.

One source for understanding cultural studies offers the following characteristics as distinguishing features of this discourse.

1. Cultural studies aims to examine its subject matter in terms of *cultural practices* and their *relation to power*. Its constant goal is to expose power relationships and examine how these relationships influence and shape cultural practices.

2. Cultural studies is not simply the study of culture as though it was a discrete entity divorced from its social or political context. Its objective is to understand culture in all its complex forms and to analyse the *social and political context* within which it manifests itself.
3. Culture in cultural studies always performs two functions: it is both the *object of study* and the *location of political criticism* and action. Cultural studies aims to be both an intellectual and a pragmatic enterprise.
4. Cultural studies attempts to *expose and reconcile the division of knowledge*, to overcome the split between tacit (that is, intuitive knowledge based on local cultures) and objective (so-called universal) forms of knowledge. It assumes a common identity and common interest between the knower and the known, between the observer and what is being observed.
5. Cultural studies is committed to a *moral evaluation of modern society* and to a *radical line* of political action. The tradition of cultural studies is not one of value-free scholarship but one committed to social reconstruction by critical political involvement. Thus cultural studies aims to *understand and change* the structures of dominance everywhere, but in industrial capitalist societies in particular. (Sardar & Van Loon, 1997, p. 9)

With these characteristics in mind, then, a cultural studies approach would put students and teachers in a position to reconsider the reading of literary texts. Together, they can examine the varied approaches of reading texts that range from a strict structural analysis of the elements of a story to those that focus completely on students' responses. Along with exploring these varied approaches, cultural studies invites the reading of texts from a variety of philosophical stances such as those of feminism, critical analysis, and poststructuralism.

In general, however, a cultural studies approach to reading texts at the high school level should speak to the frustrations being presently experienced by students because of its emphasis on difference and its consideration of the presence of power in society's cultural relations. "What cultural studies pedagogy makes possible is a chance to explore with students the network of signifying practices that inform their identities-under-construction" (Barrell & Hammett, 2000, p. 29). That is, the emphasis of a cultural studies approach is one that moves away from a focus on the application of the necessary isolated skill, the search for the correct universal theme, or the rational humanist search for a pre-existing human self. Instead, cultural studies moves towards a look at the particular and differences within the reading of texts. For students, this is empowering because they are no long preoccupied with searching for the correct pre-established response.

In addition, approaching English language arts from the stance of cultural studies would provide the possibility for examining past and present practices of studying English literature. Students, then, would be afforded the opportunity to see that the ways they read literary texts reveal the prominent social values of various times in history. Taking the time, perhaps, to examine past curriculum guides and mandatory texts in comparison to what is prescribed in the present would encourage students to see these artifacts as social constructions (Barrell & Hammett, 2000). In this way, students are again empowered because they are encouraged not only to consider the possibilities for meanings in the literary texts being read, but also to discern

what might be problematic about which texts have been chosen and how these texts are being read in the classroom. By undertaking this exploration, a cultural studies reading of literature and other textual productions can assist students in uncovering, understanding, and eventually resisting the mechanisms of cultural power that exist within society (Sardar & Van Loon, 1997). With this as an aim, student resistance can be re-focussed into seeing how the reading of literature and other texts constitute the self within particular cultural and historical boundaries. For students, then, universal truths would be replaced by the realization that there are no grand narratives upon which they can anchor themselves. Rather, the self is a constant social negotiation of multiple and competing discourses.

The question that comes to mind immediately is whether or not the study of literature is compatible with a cultural studies approach to learning about the world. That is, some suggest that a cultural studies approach would not allow for the study of literature, per se. In other words, there is the belief that a broad definition of text is contrary to the rational humanist conception of interpreting worthwhile literary texts to provide the reader with insight into the universality of the human condition and, as a result, the reader's own personal development. This is not because cultural studies rejects the study of literary texts, but rather that it embraces more than written forms of language production identified as literature (Hipple, 1973). In response to these barriers, it must be noted that the recently developed *Program of Studies for Senior High Language Arts* (Alberta Learning, 2000) acknowledges the notion of text

as being broader than that which features a literary canon. More specifically, it encourages the exploration of "works of literature and other texts in oral, print, visual and multimedia forms ... [to] include storytelling, speechmaking, journals, ... collages, diagrams, tableaux, ... oral presentations, videos and films ..." (Alberta Learning, 2000, pp. 4-5). In addition, the canon has expanded in Alberta to include an emphasis on contemporary and Canadian literature (Oster & Johnston, 1997). For this reason, I feel that a cultural studies approach to reading literature could easily incorporate literary texts as one form of text that represents a larger collection of cultural artifacts produced by society (Culler, 1997).

A Cultural Studies Reading of Literary Texts ... All Texts

With all of the above in mind, what then would a cultural studies approach to teaching look like? Perhaps, we can begin with what it would hope to do.

In its broadest conception, the project of cultural studies is to understand the functioning of culture ... how cultural productions work and how cultural identities are constructed and organized, for individuals and groups, in a world of diverse and intermingled communities, state power, media industries, and multinational corporations. In principle, then, cultural studies includes and encompasses ... examining literature as a particular cultural practice. (Culler, 1997, p. 44)

In other words, a cultural studies approach to reading literature would encourage the reading of literary texts alongside other textual representations of language for the purpose of uncovering the cultural images layered within the text. The next step would be to take these layered images and analyze the

ways in which society's norms have been historically shaped and culturally located within them. That is, instead of presenting literature to our students as transcending all of time, with certain selections being of more literary value than others, we ought to consider looking at literature, or any textual form, as an instance of meaning making created within a specific moment in historical time. Hence, the goal would be to "mak[e] sense of the ways we make sense of the world" (Baldick, 1996, p. 139). It would be important as well to keep in mind that while universality in meaning is not a goal of cultural studies, a cultural relativism is also not the intention either. The presumption in the latter case would then be that one culture would not be able to understand another because a common ground would not be possible. Thus, the text being read, viewed, or listened to needs to be taken up from positions that go beyond our students' own cultural perspectives (Applebee, 1996). In this way, students would not only acquire the appropriate background knowledge needed for operating within public discourse and the dominant traditions of society, but they would also become aware of these behaviours and norms as cultural productions. In other words, they would be able to reflect on their reading to determine the underlying manifestations of power reflected in the text; consider the subject positionings that result from these manifestations; reflect on the ways these texts constitute the self, and endeavor to foster possible changes. Without this possibility for discernment and acceptance of difference, "people would be doomed to misunderstand and to be misunderstood" (Applebee, 1996, p. 89). Thus, the aim here is to consider the

extent to which cultural forms manipulate people, the subject positions they then occupy in this use of power, and the tensions that affect the formation of identity. Therefore, the student would benefit from reading texts as cultural artifacts so that these texts are seen as one form of cultural practice that can be related to other discourses: historical, psychological, feminist and linguistic, to name a few. This approach would extend beyond past practices that focus on the reading of texts for the purpose of interpreting the author's ideas in order to gain insight into the universality of meanings represented by particular literary works deemed to be of benefit to readers (Culler, 1997). That is, students would be encouraged to see language as pivotal to unearthing the multi-layered discourses that constitute how they come to understand the world that shapes their conceptions of self. For instance, classroom activities could explore the varied connotations of words and even the ways language has changed over the years (Trask, 1994) in order to demonstrate that language is anything but fixed and standard. As a result, it is important to consider how language is used to shape its forms of production (Sardar & Van Loon, 1997).

Cultural Studies and Shakespeare

Let us consider how the study of Shakespeare might be taken up within a cultural studies approach. To begin with, the context of his works would be couched as representative of the Elizabethan Era as opposed to, for instance, a representation of what it means to be human, as suggested by Bloom

(1998). From this, an exploration of the ways in which his works are appropriated by other authors as well as today's media would encourage students to consider how certain cultural practices become privileged and inform further cultural productions within a particular society. For instance, after reading *Romeo and Juliet*, students could compare Shakespeare's text to the 1996 cinematic version that starred Leonardo DiCaprio (a 20th Century Fox Production), a popular teen figure of the media. This version could be contrasted with the Zeffirelli (1968) production that had been used in classrooms for decades prior to the 1996 release. Other texts that could be explored come from the inclusion of non-Shakespeare stories that feature excerpts of Shakespeare's texts. One example is found in the movie "Renaissance Man" starring Danny DeVito. In this movie, an army officer is required to prepare a group of soldiers for combat. To achieve his goals, DeVito's character teaches students about *Hamlet* in order to have his soldiers learn how to *think*. For students, a consideration of these cultural productions would assist them in questioning this privileging of particular texts and, thus, the modes of being that a society accepts as truth.

Along with challenging the ways that literary texts are read in the classroom, there would also be a shift in the locus of power. No longer would the teacher be the sole authority to determine what ought to be learned and explored within the classroom. Instead, more responsibility could be turned over to the student. In this sense, the subject positions of teacher, student, and text would be modified. That is, past subjectivity could be altered into new

possibilities that include teachers as consultants instead of purveyors of knowledge and students as researchers instead of simply receptacles (Willinsky, 1990). While these examples are only the beginning of many possibilities, the main need is for a shift in the locus of power and in the nature of knowledge. This shift is integral to a cultural studies approach to reading in the high school English language arts classroom.

Reading the Diploma Examination as a Cultural Text

A cultural studies approach to reading texts could also be used to help students face an established political practice of objectification and standardization in Alberta: the use of common tests. Alongside a reassessment of the diverse approaches that teachers have incorporated into their practice of high school English language arts, the provincial diploma examination must also be considered for its influence on the high school classroom. Through a cultural studies approach, the power that this examination holds over teachers and students, particularly through the public pronouncement of their results, could be analyzed for the ways in which the discourses of competence and rational humanism are perpetuated. That is, students and teachers could investigate the reductionist ways in which competence and rational humanism define the making of meaning and, consequently, position those involved in reading literary texts in preparation for writing the diploma examination. By approaching the reading of texts in this way, perhaps students would no longer be subjected to a barrage of pre-

designed handouts, and classroom practices would not involve having students create their own multiple choice questions in preparation for deciphering the ones they would likely face on the diploma examination.

Well do we remember our first years of teaching using the [time-honoured, traditional, exposition/assimilation model of teaching/learning]: we marched into our classrooms, chalk in hand, diligently expounding and listing on the chalkboard (for students to copy into their note books) such things as the thirteen (or was it fourteen ?) characteristics of the ballad. We expected our students to memorize these (and we tested them to ensure that they did). Later, we gave our students another ballad we had selected and asked them to find these characteristics. (Lavery & Watson, 1993, p. 4)

Instead, the methodologies employed as part of a cultural studies approach would reject leading students to a particular end that could be objectively evaluated in order to compare students not only to their classmates but also others in the school, the district, the city, and the province. It is for this reason that attention must be paid to the discourses that shape how literature is being read in the classroom. Otherwise, it is very likely that the interactions that take place in the high school English language arts classroom will continue to focus on the acquisition of a particular set of knowledges, skills, and attitudes.

Therefore, students must, at the very least, be shown how to read these cultural, political, and historical texts/texts for the ways in which they shape students' reading of literature. In this way, standardized testing could be brought to bear against the characteristics of cultural studies that emphasize a particular understanding of society. This conception of the workings of society is one that considers social and political power as discursive productions that have an immediate impact on the ways in which society is set up to operate

(Selden, Widdowson, & Brooker, 1997). At the same time, however, there is a need to advocate for change. Unfortunately, it is not realistic to expect the immediate elimination of a well-organized diploma examination program given the countless years of preparation, the funding allocated to set up this examination program, and the support it receives from the general public. Nevertheless, it is also not improbable given that the examinations have been abandoned previously in Alberta's history.

Locating Power and Knowledge within a Cultural Studies Approach

There is a dual task within a cultural studies exploration of reading literary and other texts in the high school English language arts classroom.

On the "macro" side, it looks at the culture as a system of values, rights, exchanges, obligations, opportunities, power. On the "micro" side, it examines how the demands of a cultural system affect those who must operate within it. In that latter spirit, it concentrates on how individual human beings construct "realities" and meanings that adapt them to the system, at what personal cost, with what expected outcomes. (Bruner, 1996, p. 12)

This approach encourages knowledge to be located in the student, in his or her fellow students, family members, or other sources not usually taken up in the classroom such as magazines or music videos. Of importance here is that knowledge does not reside only in the teacher and other individuals labeled as authorities in a particular field or in sanctioned sources such as curriculum guides and other official texts. Moreover, knowledge is no longer solely acquired through a canon of texts or the skills of an expert (Bruner, 1996). Instead, a cultural studies pedagogy incorporates all of these by considering

them within their historicity, placing one against the other. In this way, the knowledges of the past and those of the present can be taken up so as to negotiate additional possible meanings or avenues of thought.

The question that comes into play here is to what extent this engagement of the student is intentional, that is, whether the active reading of texts supports individual realization as opposed to the reproduction of the culture that has created the existing system of education (Bruner, 1996). In response, what becomes crucial is a practice steeped in awareness and a classroom that welcomes reflection with attention to the hegemonic undertones in whatever is being read, in how it is being read, and for what purpose it is being read. In this way, perhaps the student and teacher become involved in an anthropological pedagogy. That is, let us see the notion of culture as a way of talking about human society and particular instances of it from a particular viewpoint (Anderson, 1995). What follows, then, is the reading of literary texts that enables teachers and students to experience the text as a distinct entity. It is from this distinctiveness as placed against the reader's understanding of his or her own culture that a particular view is acquired of the culture that produced the text and the text produced within it. Through this interaction, the reader and teacher each take on the role of the anthropologist who, in "the act of inventing another culture, ... invents his own, and in fact ... reinvents the notion of culture itself" (Anderson, 1995, p. 57). This process can inform the student not only about the diverse nature of culture, but also its place in our global civilization – one that was created

through the modern values of rationality, scientific discovery, technological exploration, and expansive commodification (Anderson, 1995).

It is hoped, therefore, that by pursuing an exploration of the mechanisms of cultural power, students will become better able to expose ruling power structures within specific cultures as well as our global community. From this exposure, then, students can effect change and gain a deeper understanding of the spirit of culture and the human condition as it is experienced in each social locality. Giroux (1995) describes this approach to learning as a critical pedagogy indivisible from cultural democracy. In fact, he advocates

making the pedagogical more political by reconstructing the very concept of pedagogy as a social practice that generates new knowledge, opens up contradictions, and challenges all hierarchical structures of power that demand reverence at the expense of dialogue and debate. (Giroux, 1994, p. 64)

Students, here, would be engaged in a Foucauldian project of demystifying the power of discourse to construct particular understandings of the self and the other in society. For Giroux, schooling thus becomes essential to unpacking the various divisions of society, for instance, race, ethnicity, class, and gender, that create destructive opposition, violent tension, and insensitive capital accumulation.

The importance of pedagogy to the content and context of cultural studies lies in the relevance it has for illuminating how knowledge and social identities are produced in a variety of sites, including schools. Pedagogy, in this sense, offers an articulatory concept for understanding how power and knowledge configure in the production, reception, and transformation of subject positions, forms of ethical address, and ... desired versions of a future human community. (Giroux, 1994, p. 132)

Thus as a cultural practice itself, the reading of texts for commonly established curricular purposes needs to be undertaken with the intention of taking students beyond the world they know of fixed meanings and into one where human agency and social justice guide cultural practice (Giroux, 1989).

For English language arts, this would require a process of identifying and interrupting the ways in which literary texts are taken up in the classroom is counterproductive. As an English language arts teacher, then, the process of reflecting upon classroom practice becomes critical for coming to understand the potentially alienating positionings that can be created within the high school English language arts classroom (Beach et al., 1992). In other words, let us recall that the diploma examination presently shapes how a teacher organizes the delivery of the English 30 course. While this examination could compromise a cultural studies approach to reading literary texts by stifling alternative thinking given that the *correct* answer would still be privileged by the existence of this standardized test, it could also serve as an instance of how meaning is produced as a construction of power. As another example, Giroux (1989) points to an example from Ryerson's attempts at shaping the direction of reading literature in Canada's classrooms by calling for the prevention of popular texts such as *Tom Sawyer* from entering the classroom. Within a cultural studies approach, this historical occurrence could be placed alongside a reading of this text so as to question the social vision that Ryerson's actions were promoting. Through cultural studies, then, a variety of texts could be read with the purpose of embracing difference. This

approach would come up against the notion of sameness within the dominant discourses of competence and rational humanism. Some even suggest that cultural studies would require such a radical shift in the ways that literary texts ought to be taken up in the classroom that the demise of English language arts as we know it is inevitable (Lucy, 1997). In its place, perhaps a cultural studies approach to reading literary texts as one set of cultural productions within the broader notion of text could find its place within a world of ambiguity. That is, instead of being constricted by having to find the *correct* answer, students could be encouraged to read texts with the intention of considering not only what is written, but also what is not represented. They would be undertaking the practice of becoming aware of the ways in which they, as readers, are being shaped by the reading of particular texts in particular ways. Above all, however, it is imperative that students are empowered to occupy the spaces in-between the historical location of literature and its presence in today's society (Bhabha, 1994).

ACT FOUR

SCENE II

"This Thing's To Do"
(*Hamlet*, IV, iv, 46)

Cultural Studies Enacted in the Classroom

In an attempt to negotiate meaning by considering past, present, and future practices, a cultural studies approach to reading texts, especially those of a literary nature, calls for significant change to the ways in which we think about engaging our students. Thus, it is my suggestion that the implementation of the *Program of Studies for Senior High Language Arts* (Alberta Learning, 2000) and the diploma examination be revisited. At the same time, I am advocating a cultural studies framework for the reading of literature at the high school level. Given that these changes would not be possible over night, I am also advocating the incorporation of cultural studies into the existing system in an effort to bridge toward revolutionary change. This measure of change is essential in order to, at the very least, begin to interrupt our present ways of being in high school English classrooms.

Is Cultural Studies Possible in the English Language Arts Classroom?

At first, it might be suggested that a cultural studies approach would not ever be possible, particularly with standardized testing always looming in the distance. In response, I point to the critical awareness promoted by cultural studies (Barrell & Hammett, 2000). That is, if in fact the goal is to be able to

expose, consider, and possibly change existing power relations based on an examination of what and whose knowledge is being privileged, then it ought to be possible to disrupt present practices in reading literature in the high school classroom. In doing so, students would be exposed to the curricular objectives set out by Alberta Learning and would, at the same time, be asked to consider the absences in these curricular goals and their underlying motivations. "In mastering such traditions, students learn not only how to operate within them, but also how to change them" (Applebee, 1996, p. 9). With the reading of literary texts in mind, the following statements could be used to guide the process of achieving such change.

What is called 'reality' (by an individual, a culture or an epoch) is structured, therefore, as a language: reality is simply what is able to be classified as such according to a system – to structures – of regulations and prohibitions which produce objects, knowledges, feelings, values and events 'in' the world. But the very notion of a world is always going to be culturally and historically specific to specific language communities since the structure of structures, as it were, is language, and so the very concept of 'structure' itself is a linguistic metaphor. Consequently, ... language can be seen to be a *condition* of culture.... (Lucy, 1997, p. 7)

In other words, much like the language of modernity had an impact on how literary texts were taken up in the classroom by privileging the discourses of competence and rational humanism, the language of cultural studies would privilege other discourses and other notions. However, with attention to this aspect of language, cultural studies can be aware of its own constructions of reality, effects of power/knowledge, and regimes of truth. In this way, the

English language arts classroom provides an advantageous environment for attempting to engage in a cultural studies approach to reading.

Where Do We Start with Cultural Studies?

With an openness to language awareness and the productions of language, it is important to consider that with which the student will be interacting most in order to achieve a cultural studies friendly environment. With one goal being to consider how language structures reality, attention to the spoken and written word is essential. In the high school English language arts classes of the past, attention would have focused on being able to understand and respond to a chosen literary text (Marsh, 1987). For a cultural studies approach, a selective canon of writings based on a set of defined criteria is not acceptable. Instead, any text – or cultural production of language – needs to be open for examination within the classroom. The argument of some teachers in opposition to this broad definition of text is that bringing everything and anything into the classroom would cause Shakespeare, for instance, to be replaced by Shania Twain. These colleagues of mine would maintain that our students would be more attracted to the texts of popular culture than those that have withstood the test of time. Furthermore, they would exclaim that, in wanting to win over their students, teachers would be in danger of gravitating towards whatever held their students' attention, regardless of the text's literary merit.

In response, I would suggest that it is crucial to legitimate all possible forms of text as worthy of being taken up in the English language arts classroom. For, "to critique an ideal is not necessarily to cause it to disappear" (Lucy, 1997, p. 236). At the same time,

[i]t is one thing to study popular culture. It is quite another to romanticize junk and give it academic respectability. (Sardar & Van Loon, 1997, p.169)

That is, meaningless textual criticism weakens the cultural studies aim of exposing power structures and seeking change (Sardar & Van Loon). It would also be impossible to study absolutely everything in one course; therefore, it would be necessary for teachers and students to negotiate what *would* be read instead of what *ought* to be read.

Cultural Studies and the Nature of the Author

In taking up various texts, it is also important to reconsider the nature of the author along with the nature of the text. The reasoning behind this line of exploration resides in the stance that the notions that govern authorship also influence the meanings associated with the notion of text. It becomes necessary, then, to accept that, as individuals and as part of a socially defined group, we are subject to the production of language to create particular meanings and effects. With this understanding, it is possible to attribute the meaning of a text as representative not necessarily of a particular author, but rather as a cultural phenomenon of language production. In this way, a text does not take on a static identity to be consumed by the reader as it might

have when it was deemed to be of literary worth (Jay, 1987). Instead, literature becomes one source of cultural production (Harris, 1996). Rather than being interpreted as literary truth, a text is examined for its intermeshing and colliding layers of meaning. Instances of text then include cultural productions from early Greek writings to the most recent music videos. In this sense, there could be an exploration of not only the original form of Shakespeare's plays, but also the film adaptations that have been produced over the years, the spoofs that have been likewise created, and the websites that now exist in multitudes.

Agency within Cultural Studies

Along with the reconsideration of the notions of text and authorship, a cultural studies perspective encourages a reappraisal of the roles of the subjects involved. This can begin with seeing both teachers and students as imposters. That is, all of us have assumed particular roles as teachers and students such that certain attitudes, stances, utterances, and other forms of communication position those who teach and those who study in particular ways. Through a cultural studies approach to English language arts, teachers and students would be empowered to reveal the regimes of truth that have become sanctioned over time. This would foster social reconstruction by questioning the pedagogical approaches of the past that have been shaped by the discourses of competence and rational humanism. In this way, teachers would not simply pass on knowledge to students, but, in return, would receive

it too. Teachers and students would also engage in taking up their resistances to knowledge. More specifically,

[o]ne can tell students the truth, the facts, until the final bell rings, and little of it penetrates, even when students are adept at repeating answers on exams. As long as the student continues to occupy the same position in relation to the information involved – a position in which he or she “knows” by virtue of identification with the position of the teacher as the subject who knows – then there is no knowing in any productive sense. Pedagogy should aim to undo the “subject of certainty,” including the teacher’s subjective position as well as the student’s. (Jay, 1987, p. 790)

In summary, students and teachers need to suspend dependency on finding out the correct answer or the intended meanings when reading literature. In fact, the reading of any text needs to be undertaken so as to open up the possibility for otherness, that is, considering what a text has to offer its reader from positions within and outside of the dominant discourses that have historically influenced the production of meaning.

Cultural Studies Enacted in the Reading of Shakespeare

In choosing a text to read within a cultural studies approach, I decided to take up Shakespeare. There were two reasons for this. Firstly, his plays continue to occupy a central place in the Alberta English language arts curriculum (Altmann, Johnston, & Mackey, 1999). Secondly, Shakespeare has become prevalent within popular culture (Altmann, Johnston, & Mackey, 1999) as well as other manifestations of society. For instance, in this latter case, it was initially surprising to me to learn that Shakespeare is often quoted during court cases. In fact, references to Shakespeare’s texts have doubled in this

century (Garber, Franklin, Walkowitz, 1996). Even in this thesis, there was a conscious decision to organize the overall work according to acts and scenes as well as titling each section using an excerpt from one of his most well known plays, *Hamlet*. My intention in choosing this approach was to emphasize the extent to which particular literary pieces and particular authors are privileged in society, most noticeably, Shakespeare. While particular literary texts and authors might have much to offer our students, the issue rests in the knowledge that their use has been pre-determined according to the dictates of those who occupy positions of power, those who decide what and whose knowledge is of most worth (Block, 1995). Thus, I suggest that reading one of Shakespeare's texts from within cultural studies offers us an opportunity to consider a text that is a prime example of the mechanisms of cultural power (Sardar & Van Loon, 1997). It would then be the goal of teachers and students to interrupt the assumptions that are often perpetuated in the high school classroom about the Bard's works.

One of these assumptions is the unquestionable universality of Shakespeare's themes (Bloom, 1998). Such a totalizing claim is ripe for being brought to bear against the particularity of individual experiences. The challenge in the high school classroom, then, becomes to reposition students such that they are present to the reading of literature, not absent as was often the case within competence and rational humanism. In other words,

[m]any students have not problematized the ways in which traditional schooling has shaped their perceptions of power, learning, and identity. Many students ... [believe] that either their own voices did not count for much or that the only role for

students in the class was to accept what was dispensed to them as knowledge rather than either raise questions about taking control over the conditions of the production of knowledge or approach the classroom texts critically in light of their own experiences, histories, and concerns. (Giroux, 1994, p. 134)

While students still need to be able to manipulate and reproduce language in order to participate in society by being able to read and write, the ways in which these skills are developed are opened up within cultural studies. The caution, however, that must be remembered is that the emphasis of cultural studies is to disrupt past and present practices. The intention, here, is not to establish yet another standard.

Let us now consider how *Hamlet* could be taken up within cultural studies. With numerous avenues of exploration available, for the purposes of example, I will consider one approach to reacquainting grade twelve students with Shakespeare. I refer to this process as one of re-acquaintance given that students would have already been exposed to his works in previous years. I also choose to consider the introduction of Shakespeare because so often teachers present this topic in a standard way. That is, usually teachers preface his works by providing students with background information about the Elizabethan worldview, the Elizabethan society, and significant events of the times. Some justify this approach by taking the stance that without an understanding of the historical times during which Shakespeare wrote his plays, only a limited understanding of *Hamlet*, for instance, could be possible (Costello, Jacobs, & Neelan, 1988). While attention to the historical and cultural milieu within which a text has been produced is supported by a cultural

studies approach, the intention would not be to simply pass on information. Rather, this pursuit would need to foster an examination that would consider how the Elizabethan world contributed to Shakespeare's production of texts instead of the rational humanist view that Shakespeare's texts transcend time.

As another introductory approach – one that veers away from the previous more standard approach, I would have students research the ways in which Shakespeare's texts surface in society. Students would be encouraged to locate instances of the presence of Shakespeare's plays – their characters, settings, images, and phrases, for instance – in other literary works, feature films, advertising, and on the Internet. Following this exploration, students would be asked to present their findings to their classmates. Based on their discoveries, a discussion would ensue about how Shakespeare is represented in society. The goal here would be to focus on the *how* of this discussion.

This emphasis would include the use of his texts as a shaping force of language. With this in mind, students would be introduced to the notion that

an individual observes and reflects on the world, transforming this consciousness experience into words that will express these perceptions and thoughts to others.... [L]anguage is a system unto itself, a social format that is shaped by a community of participants. However, the cultural agencies with power and authority not only influence how conscious events will be communicated but how they will be experienced. (Anderson, 1995, p. 168)

This initial research activity would also serve to provide instances of cultural production that could be placed against Shakespeare's *Hamlet* as it appears in the text used for English 30. Through this activity, two explorations would be juxtaposed: the larger-than-life effect of canonizing literature and the broad

notion of text that embraces numerous cultural productions. From this examination of text, students would then be in a position to reconsider the grand narratives that are perpetuated when Shakespeare's plays are taken up only as a worthwhile canonical piece of writing. As an example, students would look at the idea of revenge as a universal theme that is often presented to students as a common cycle in the behaviour of people. In the past, for instance, I would have used the *Hamlet: A Teacher Resource Unit* as a guide in showing students that "[o]nce an act requiring vengeance is performed, a chain of reaction begins and continues in a nearly infinite series, like a pebble thrown in a pond causes countless, ever-widening ripples" (Costello, Jacobs, & Neelan, 1988, p. 53). Within a cultural studies approach, this idea would be presented to students as a conventional notion that has been reproduced through texts such as Shakespeare's to support particular views of how human beings operate in the world. The next step for students would be to find instances that both support this view and disrupt it. With each of these instances, the objective would be to look at the discourses that are revealed. In order to peel away at the layers of meaning and reveal these discourses, students would need to keep the following questions in mind. What is valued in the cultural production being examined? What is assumed? What is privileged? How is the reader positioned? As one possibility, Mel Gibson's portrayal of Hamlet in the well-known "To be, or not to be" soliloquy could be taken up in the classroom and could be compared to Kenneth Branagh's interpretation. In fact, even an exploration of the prevalence of this one line

within North American society alone would provide a wealth of possibility for discussion. The search could even extend to its presence and absence in other areas of the world. In this way, students would need to probe how the phrase is used and what its use reveals about each particular society. While looking at the particular, students could search for common meanings that have been perpetuated in more than one society. What does this commonness reveal? How is the particular shaped by the general and vice versa? Through an examination of questions such as these, it is hoped that students will realize that literature and all texts in general need to be read with an openness to difference and an awareness of the sometimes overt, sometimes subtle power structures that each text reveals about that particular historical and cultural production.

Therefore, the goal of approaching a text such as *Hamlet* in the way described above is to demonstrate that both the universal and the particular need to be examined when considering any text. The reason for taking this stance is to encourage students to understand that the privileging of Shakespeare and the reading of his plays in particular ways shapes what and how they, positioned as students, learn. This process would begin with the aim of having students un/discover their own reading practices in order to heighten their awareness to "their own modes of appropriation, reading, and interpretation" (Barrell & Hammett, 2000, p. 30). In other words, our students would be able to reconsider how they have been shaped by the ways in which Shakespeare has been taken up not only in their English classes, but also by

society at large. The hope, then, would be that students would realize that knowledge could be used to create a common identity that potentially stifles the individual experience. Opening up this view of knowledge is significant if we, as teachers, hope to facilitate the reconsideration of the structures of dominance that exist not only with the reading of literature, but in the larger social realms of society. If a goal of cultural studies is to effect change within present power structures, then students and teachers need to actively engage in exposing these structures.

Summary Thoughts

In essence, therefore, a cultural studies approach to the reading of literary texts in a high school English language arts classroom is one that would work at interrupting the existing educational structure. I feel this is significant because it is important for students to come to understand how the system operates – who does what, where, when, and why – in order to be able to consider the otherness of the system. That is, students and teachers, together, need to maneuver through and around the existing landscape of reading. Their goal must revolve around an examination of the positionings that exist between the reader and the text. In this way, the tensions that are created as a result of these positionings for students and teachers could lead to an understanding of what they, as individuals and members of a particularly culturally-defined society, can do with the differences that arise from these explorations.

ACT FIVE

SCENE I

"We'll Put the Matter to the Present Push"
(Hamlet, V, i, 299)

A Process Review

At this point, we have travelled through the past, present, and future. My journey has been a troubling one. In an attempt to analyze how my practice has been shaped over the years, I began my research by considering the official document that informed how I chose to organize my language arts program: the *Senior High School Language Arts Curriculum Guide* (Alberta Education, 1982). Then, because of recent directives from Alberta Learning announcing the need to implement a new program of study, I compared the 1982 guide with *The Common Curriculum Framework for English Language Arts* (1998) and the *Program of Studies for Senior High School English Language Arts* (Alberta Learning, 2000). At the same time, the English 30 diploma examination became another important source of analysis for me given the preoccupation that I, my students, my colleagues, and society-at-large seemed to have with this examination. While exploring these textual artifacts, I was reminded of the supplementary resource guides that I had employed over the years. I often looked to these resources with the hope of discovering the ultimate handout, strategy, or technique that would help my students read literature without feeling frustrated or disinterested. All of these searches afforded me the opportunity to consider the similarities, differences, and general patterns that revealed the

discourses being privileged in these documents. This search was undertaken, keeping in mind the historical background to the production of these documents, in order to determine the extent to which my present practices were being informed by those of the past.

While I considered the above documents, I also reflected on my own practices and interactions with students. These reflections began with the realization that I was often left with a feeling of frustration when my students left my class. Although we might have carefully read one of the scenes in *Hamlet* and though my students might have been able to identify the imagery in that scene, I felt we were simply going through the motions of reading the text and, ultimately, in order to prepare for the diploma examination. I did not, however, experience these feelings during my first years of teaching – probably because I was too consumed with figuring out what I was required to cover with my students. As time passed, though, the frustrations surfaced more regularly. It also became increasingly apparent that the literature we chose to study in class did not often appeal to my students. Even efforts to spice things up by incorporating television, movies, and music videos became stale when this motivational technique became popular amongst teachers. The result was the overuse of what had previously been a novelty for students. While I was mulling these observations over, I pondered the questions with which my students often bombarded me. In general, these questions can be summarized by one: “Why do we have to do this?” My usual response explained that I was bound by a curriculum guide mandated by Alberta Learning. For students, this essentially

translated into, "Because you have to; because I said so." However, more recently, I wondered about whether, for instance, it was necessary to study Shakespeare. Why do students have to be able to write a literary analysis essay? Why do they have to be able to identify a simile or the use of irony?

As a result of this questioning, I delved into the history of education and realized that political and societal concerns often dictated how literature was read in the classroom. For instance, I was shocked by the discovery that, at one time, Shakespeare was considered popular literature and not suitable for study at the post-secondary level. This realization caused me to feel disillusioned about what I was doing with students, especially since I had trusted in the documents that outlined what students ought to learn and how they ought to learn it. It never occurred to me that it might be wise to question what had been mandated. In addition, when I began to compare the curriculum guides that had been published over the last twenty years or so, I was surprised at the similarity of their content. While some of the headings might have been changed or elements added – for instance, *representing* as another language arts strand, the general philosophy and rationale had not deviated significantly over time. It was at this point that I began to be suspicious of the documents that I had previously and unquestioningly used to direct my daily practices.

In order to frame this questioning, I then considered the work of Foucault whose ideas have been identified as a way of considering society's practices with attention to the power structures that shape the discourses, knowledges, and truths that arise out of the interactions people have with one another. With a

Foucauldian perspective in mind, I was able to reconsider my original questions and review my historical findings from another perspective. Most important in this thinking for me, however, was being able to realize that what eventually took place in my classroom was the result of a complex layering of interactions. These interactions involved those who possessed the authority to mandate curriculum, the teachers who were expected to implement it, and the students who were required to demonstrate an understanding of it. While I chose not to pursue a detailed analysis of the student's perspective and experience in the English 30 classroom, I have become much more aware of my students as embodied subjects participating, passively or actively, in the production of meaning through the reading of literary texts. As a teacher, this insight provided me with a great sense of relief in the sense that the learning experience became a shared experience. Without this possibility for exploring options to currently privileged English language arts practices, a solely teacher-directed or student-driven approach, or even superficial mixture of the two, would have left me feeling empty. In other words, I felt the need for the reading of literature to be a negotiated practice between my students and me.

Using Foucault's constructs, I was able to examine this need from a theoretical basis, specifically, through the notions of discourse, power/knowledge, subjectivity, and regimes of truth. That is, if present practice was a manifestation of a variety of discourses shaping the reading of literature in particular ways, then there existed the possibility for other ways of reading literary texts in the English language arts classroom. What was most significant

in this latter realization was that I became aware of the presence of the other.

This could be rephrased as the gaining of insight into the need to consider what is absent in how we presently read literature at the high school level.

Consequently, my past pedagogical choices took on new meaning. I reflected on these practices not for the purpose of ensuring that I met all of the mandated objectives, but instead to determine how my choices affected how students were being asked to read literature in my classes. After all, if, as an educator, I truly believe that my role is to do more than simply reproduce existing cultures and perpetuate privileged ways of knowing (Bruner, 1996), then a cultural studies approach to reading literary texts at the high school level is necessary. In order to "expose and reconcile the division of knowledge ... [so as to] change the structures of dominance everywhere" (Sardar & Van Loon, 1997, p. 9), teachers and students must embark on a shared learning experience. This experience is one that embraces the exploration of that which is problematic, discursive, sanctioned, privileged, located within historical and cultural boundaries, and appropriated by present society as truth. For English language arts, this requires a broader acceptance of the notion of text, a search for that which is absent in the practices of teachers, and a consideration of how literature might be taken up in order to consider the differences alongside the similarities.

ACT FIVE**SCENE II**

**"The Readiness is All"
(*Hamlet*, V, ii, 221)**

Possibilities for Further Research

The focus of this study has been the discourses that have informed the reading of literary texts in the high school English language arts classroom in Alberta. At the same time, while the various positions that both teachers and students have occupied within these discourses have been considered, the direct voices of teachers and students in conversation about reading texts were not included in this study. A follow-up study, then, is needed to address the experiences of students and teachers as they live within the mandated curriculum. Therefore, two areas are in need of further research.

First we need to examine how both students and teachers perceive the ways in which literary texts are taken up in the classroom. In other words, a study of the present voices and current experiences of our students and teachers would provide insight into the absences that exist in the high school English language arts classroom. An analysis of the ways that these two groups perceive their positionings within the high school English language arts classroom would reveal much about how they are being shaped by the pedagogical practices at work in their classrooms. Research into the subjectivity of students and teachers could

reveal the rules that shape educational dialogue and identify the specific features of language that send messages about how

knowledge should be defined and structured ... and what constitutes reason and authority ... to reveal the mechanisms that form students as subjects. (Henrickson & Morgan, 1990, p. 31)

Thus, research would need to concentrate on the subject positions of both students and teachers given that the image of the English teacher often shapes particular notions about what it means for students to learn in the presence of such a figure (Miller, 1970).

A second area of future research would then involve a consideration of how cultural studies, as a pedagogical approach, shapes the practice of teachers and the experience of students. In other words, to what extent are students agents of learning in the reading of literary texts? To what extent are they responsible for their choices in the classroom? To what extent are students constrained by the cultural productions of society? To what extent would a cultural studies approach to reading texts speak to the tensions experienced in the high school classroom? Each of these questions attempts to frame a query around the regimes of truth that have been sanctioned and, thus, shape the ways that students experience literary texts in the classroom. Henrickson and Morgan (1990) suggest that an examination of the exchanges that take place between teachers and students would uncover the hidden "exchange systems" that persist in the classroom.

Do we offer knowledge in exchange for respect or in exchange for measurable labor? Do we promise future success in exchange for present obedience? Does the exchange system tend to prefer and reward students of certain class, cultural, ethnic, or religious backgrounds? Is the exchange system gender biased? Which type of student decides the exchanges are not worthwhile and why? What are the agreements by which cultural difference

becomes encoded as cultural deprivation? (Henrickson & Morgan, 1990, p. 32)

There are two important functions of a line of questioning as demonstrated above. Firstly, the hidden dialogues need to be exposed in order to take up the multi-layered discourses that produce and are produced by these dialogues. Secondly and most importantly, the discourses of students and teachers need to be unraveled, as much as possible, from their own perspectives. Of course, this would be difficult given that an adult researcher would filter the proceedings; however, the data being collected would need to reflect the students' voices as well as the teachers' voices.

Thus, perhaps, an informed negotiation of the power/knowledge relations that drive the reading of texts in the high school classroom can be undertaken. In this way, instead of lulling our students into the acceptance of yet another approach or discipline, through cultural studies, they can meet the reading of a text head on, remaining open to the unexpected, the unimagined, and the uninvited possibilities that present themselves (Sardar & Van Loon, 1997).

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