

2020

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Recommended Citation

Meixner, Emily S. and Peel, Anne (2020) "Helping Students Choose a Reading Frame: Three Ways of Teaching Jacqueline Woodson's Harbor Me," *New Jersey English Journal*: Vol. 9 , Article 13.
Available at: <https://digitalcommons.montclair.edu/nj-english-journal/vol9/iss1/13>

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Helping Students Choose a Reading Frame: Three Ways of Teaching Jacqueline Woodson's *Harbor Me*

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In Wallace Stevens' poem "Thirteen Ways of Looking At A Blackbird," Stevens asks readers to consider what it means to really look at something—to imagine and contemplate an object until it is deeply understood. In many ways, Stevens' poem is the perfect metaphor for thinking about teaching and unit planning. The more familiar we become with a text we intend to teach, the more ways in which we read and understand it, the more likely it is that we will be able to use it in service of our students' learning.

In the last two decades, what teaching "English" means for middle and high school English teachers has continued to shift. Teachers are constantly evolving as they incorporate new technologies, read and write using multimodal texts, diversify their curriculum (often challenging the canon), implement standards-based grading, and experiment with classroom design. Yet despite these transformations, there are aspects of English instruction that remain remarkably static. One of these aspects is our orientation toward teaching whole-class novels. Despite all of the innovation, and despite changing school demographics as well as an intensified awareness of the increasing social-emotional needs of secondary students, the way in which English teachers "teach books" looks very much like it did a decade (or two or five) ago.

One influence of the Common Core is the pressure many teachers feel to teach canonical texts in canonical ways (Peel; Watkins and Ostenson), reading *with* the

text, as opposed to a critical literacy approach which supports reading *against* the text. Reading with the text emphasizes "familiar approaches of comprehending storylines, analyzing literary devices, making personal connections, understanding historical contexts, and developing thematic interpretations" (Borsheim-Black et al. 124).

Although many teachers approach novels thinking about literary elements (Gordon; Smith and Wilhelm) or, in the case of middle grade novels, signposts and reading strategies (Beers; Beers and Probst), there are many other possibilities. As Kate Roberts argues in *A Novel Approach*, "...choosing which course of methodology to set for your class should, well, *depend*. It should depend on your goals for your class, on your kids and what they bring to the table, on the resources you have at your disposal" (5). As we consider how to "embark upon a new decade of English Language Arts," if we are to meet and respond to the needs of our students, we need to think more broadly about what novel instruction could be. To quote Stevens, we need "thirteen ways of looking at" (and teaching) a novel. In this article, we will explore what three of those possibilities look like using Jacqueline Woodson's middle grade novel *Harbor Me*.

Teaching *Harbor Me*

Published in August of 2018, *Harbor Me* depicts the experiences of six middle grade students who spend every Friday afternoon together (unsupervised) in a classroom in their school sharing stories about their lives.

Their stories are recorded by one of the students—Haley, the narrator of the novel—and reveal the various problems they are struggling with, problems that include deportation, bullying, racial profiling, grief, and parental incarceration, among others. Written in accessible, lyrical prose, the novel encourages its readers to think about the individual impact of the aforementioned social problems as well as the healing power of family, friendship, storytelling, and self-advocacy. A hopeful novel, *Harbor Me* doesn't offer easy solutions.

As members of an event team that included representatives from The New Jersey Center for the Book, New Jersey Association of School Librarians, and The College of New Jersey's School of Education, we (Anne and Emily) had the opportunity to consider instructional options for this novel last summer when planning for an October campus visit from Jacqueline Woodson in her role as Young People's Ambassador for Literature. Middle grade teachers and students from several surrounding schools were invited to TCNJ to attend Ms. Woodson's keynote and each participant received a copy of *Harbor Me*. To prepare for her visit, TCNJ faculty on the planning committee hosted a summer book club workshop with the teachers to study the book and discuss approaches for exploring the novel with their students. As the two literacy specialists on the committee, we wanted to share the reading frames that have emerged from our own work embedded in secondary English classrooms. In this case, we wanted to model how *Harbor Me* might serve a variety of reading purposes, for example as a mentor text if the teachers were working in a reading/writing workshop environment or as catalyst for discussion if using book clubs to explore social issues. To demonstrate how each model might disrupt traditional content-driven "with the text"

instruction, we introduced the teachers to the reading frames that follow.

Teachers interested in teaching *Harbor Me* could, of course, read it and explore Woodson's characters, their individual and collective conflicts, the school setting, and the book's rich themes. This approach to teaching a novel, however, often positions the teacher as the expert in the classroom who (already) has a well-developed understanding of the meanings of the text. The teachers teach what they (already) know, and the students attempt to discover meanings that align with the teacher's determination. But there is another way for a teacher to share their expertise. Rather than teaching what they know, *they can teach what they do*. In other words, an English teacher's role can be to model for students the many different ways that they read and make meaning from text. This could, as mentioned earlier, mean an emphasis on metacognition and reading strategy instruction, modeling strategies readers use to make sense of challenging texts. But there are also many other options. For example, teachers might read like a writer and show students how to adopt the craft moves of a mentor text; or, they might read like a critic, demonstrating for students how to identify injustice and resist oppressive ideologies such as white supremacy or heteronormativity.

We call these ways of reading *frames* rather than approaches because we want to differentiate between an approach to *teaching* a novel, and a frame--an orientation--for *reading* a novel. Teaching approaches and their requisite methods are the terrain of the teacher (activities, graphic organizers, mini-lessons), but reading frames are the work of all the class participants who, together, co-create meaning as they read. Reading frames are stances readers take up that can be named and made explicit to students. By providing

intention, they make the purpose of reading clear. Once students understand what they are and how they work, they can then adopt specific frames for different texts.

Choice and autonomy in ways of reading are just as important as choice and autonomy in what to read. If the past twenty years has seen a surge of interest in diversifying students’ reading choices and creating more inclusive classroom libraries, the next twenty years must make progress towards equipping adolescent students with more diverse and inclusive reading frameworks from which to choose.

Reading Frames: Choosing *How* to Read

Mentor Frame: Reading to Borrow

This frame is most often used in a literacy workshop unit in which readers read as writers: to notice what authors are doing, to name the craft moves they identify, to replicate or “borrow” these moves in their

own compositions, and to evaluate the effectiveness of a text given its audience and intent. To read *Harbor Me* with a mentor frame, an expert reader would ask, “What makes these stories important to me and valuable to a broader community? Who cares about these stories and why? How might I adopt Woodson’s craft moves in my own story?”

A teacher who apprentices students in the mentor frame is showing students how to use the text to discover storytelling techniques by reading with careful attention to Woodson’s writing and by starting with a good question about what storytelling skill they want to improve. The frame informs how they introduce the text, how the students engage with it, and the meaning-making that occurs as a result of having read it (see table 1).

Table 1

Curriculum Map for Reading with a Mentor Frame

<p>Essential Questions: (Reading) What makes a story matter? What does it mean for a story to matter? (Writing) How do I figure out what story I can tell that matters enough to me to tell it? How do I tell it?</p>		<p>Assessments: (Reading) Story that Matters, Selection + Analysis (Writing) Personal Vignette</p>
<p>Pre-Reading Lessons Guiding Questions: (1) How do you look inside and figure out what matters to you? (2) How do we keep track of important moments?</p> <p>Modeling of Territories, Heartmaps, Neighborhood Maps, Use of Photos, Artifacts (Idea Generation)</p>	<p>During Reading Lessons Guiding Questions: (1) What’s Woodson doing? How is she telling this story? (2) What information does she provide? When does she provide it? (3) How does Woodson play with voice? With time? (4) Do these stories matter?</p> <p>Modeling Writing (Structure, Plot, Character, Style); Beginning Critical Evaluation of Text</p>	<p>Post Reading Lessons Guiding Questions: (1) What makes a story matter? (2) What stories matter?</p> <p>Modeling and Creating Categories for Evaluation; Identifying and Defending Texts of Significance</p>

Critical Frame: Reading to Challenge

Reading with a critical frame asks students to consider stereotypes, assumptions, individual behaviors and inequitable relations of power that are reinforced by “common sense” institutional practices. The most engaged readers do more than understand the world created by an author; they also take a position about the fairness and consequences of the author’s ideas. A skilled reader asks, “What does this author believe?” An engaged, critical reader further asks, “Is this belief fair? Equitable? Just?”

A teacher who teaches students using this frame intentionally provides students with tools for engaging in social critique.

Framing possibilities for *Harbor Me* might include Critical Race Theory, Gender Studies and Queer Theory, and/or Critical Disability Studies. While literary theory may initially seem too advanced for a middle grade curriculum, we argue that the kinds of questions literary theory invites are actually more engaging and exciting for young adolescents to ponder. Emily and eighth grade teacher Rachel Scupp, for example, have discovered that Rachel’s students can capably use gender and queer theory to examine the effects of heteronormativity on teen thinking and behavior (Meixner and Scupp).

Table 2

Curriculum Map for Reading with a Critical Frame

<p>Essential Questions for Critical Race Theory: (Reading) How does race impact the characters in <i>Harbor Me</i>? How is race present in their day-to-day experiences as well as in their interactions with each other? How can examining race in <i>Harbor Me</i> deepen our understanding of the role of race and racial bias in our own lives? (Writing) How do I analyze a text using critical race theory?</p>		<p>Assessments (Reading & Writing): Text analysis using vocabulary and text evidence (a paper, screencast, and/or presentation) on <i>Harbor Me</i> or related text.</p>
<p>Pre-Reading Lessons* Salient Vocabulary (“Critical Race Theory”): Whiteness Microaggressions Social Construction Institutional Racism Intersectionality Metanarrative Counternarrative</p> <p>Defining terms, Applying them to short texts (poems, short stories, articles, videos)</p>	<p>During Reading Lessons Guiding Questions: (1) How do the characters in <i>Harbor Me</i> describe and experience their racial identity? (2) How are their experiences both affirming and oppressive? (3) What role does school play in maintaining or challenging racial bias?</p> <p>Close Reading, Comparing and Contrasting, Analyzing Conflict, Identifying and Selecting Text Evidence</p>	<p>Post Reading Lessons Guiding Questions: (1) What terms seem most important for understanding race and racial bias in <i>Harbor Me</i>? (2) How does reading the characters in <i>Harbor Me</i> using Critical Race Theory help us read other texts similarly?</p> <p>Evaluating Using Text Evidence, Writing an Analysis, Applying Vocabulary Independently to an Unfamiliar Text</p>

*These terms could also be dispersed throughout the reading of the text instead of frontloaded.

Critical Race Theory, Critical Disability Studies, Post-Colonialism, Queer Theory, and Gender Studies -- all of these theoretical stances can be introduced to younger readers with the same basic questioning tools:

“What does the author take for granted as normal here? What/Who is being treated as “other”? What impact do these beliefs have on people’s behavior? How do they expand or diminish someone’s safety and freedom?” (see table 2)

Problem-Based Frame: Reading to Solve

This frame begins with authentic questions readers have about why things are the way they are in the world. Usually these questions are interdisciplinary in nature and

inherently tied to students’ thinking about broad topics such as identity, justice, democracy, history, compassion, and equity (Apple and Beane; Daniels and Ahmed). In this frame, the novel isn’t necessarily at the center of the unit, but one of several texts students would use to answer their specific question. An expert reader who adopts a problem-based frame approaches texts as resources that can help answer questions like, “How can this text help me solve this problem? What perspective does this text add that I haven’t encountered before? What guidance does this text provide for taking action or enacting change?”

Table 3

Curriculum Map for Reading with a Solution Frame

<p>Essential Questions: (Reading) How can we become better able to listen to and learn from each other in a time of uncivil conduct and discourse? (Writing) How can I engage in civil discourse with others?</p>		<p>Assessments: (Reading) A multi-text synthesis (Writing) A letter to the editor (school/local newspaper) or a podcast on ways to engage in civil discourse.</p>
<p>Pre-Reading Lessons Guiding Questions: (1) What questions do we have that might help us understand this problem? (2) What information might we need to help us understand this problem? (3) In what texts might we find solutions to this problem?</p> <p>Brainstorming Questions, Identifying Texts (one of which would be <i>Harbor Me</i>)</p>	<p>During Reading Lessons Guiding Questions: (1) What helps people listen to and learn from each other? (2) What similarities and differences am I noticing in the texts I am reading? (3) Which ideas seem to make the most sense? The least sense? (4) Do the texts I have identified provide me with diverse perspectives? (5) How do I evaluate the merit of the answers I am accumulating?</p> <p>Paraphrasing, Summarizing, Comparing and Contrasting, Evaluating Value</p>	<p>Post Reading Lessons Guiding Questions: (1) How can I share what I have learned with others? (2) How can I not only promote, but model civil discourse?</p> <p>Identifying Audience, Identifying Response Genre, Organizing and Presenting Ideas</p>

A teacher who frames instruction in this way is explicitly modeling process: how to develop a research question, how to engage in research, how to evaluate text usefulness and credible sources, how to synthesize information, and ultimately how to formulate a response. In terms of *Harbor Me*, a teacher might consider how the novel would contribute to a larger exploration of civics, empathy, and social conflict (see table 3).

Reading Frames: Next Steps

In this article, we have suggested a future direction for secondary ELA curriculum that makes spaces for more types of choice. Students’ engagement in literacy increases when they have autonomy over what to read, and also when they are taught

different options for how to read. Imagine, for example, a literature circle unit in which students can volunteer for groups based not just on the book that is being read in that group, but the reading frame a particular group wants to adopt.

The English teacher who apprentices young readers into different frames for reading will explicitly model how to read like a storyteller, like a critic, and/or like a problem-solver (see table 4). Once students have taken up and mastered these ways of reading, the frames can become reading tools that align with effective reading strategies such as summarizing, annotating, etc. They also allow for students to continue to explore literary elements such as character, setting, conflict, and theme.

Table 4

Scaffolding Questions for Expert Reading

Scaffolding Questions for Expert Reading		
<i>Reading to Borrow</i>	<i>Reading to Challenge</i>	<i>Reading to Solve</i>
<ul style="list-style-type: none"> ● What is this author doing in this text? ● What decisions are they making as a writer? ● Why are these moves effective? ● How might learning or replicating this author’s craft moves help me improve my own writing? 	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> ● What does this author (or these characters) believe? ● Is this belief fair? Equitable? Just? ● What is taken for granted as normal or belonging in this text? ● What/Who is treated as other? ● Who has power and what is the power based on? 	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> ● How can this text help me solve this problem? ● What perspective does this text add that I haven’t encountered before? ● What guidance does this text provide for taking action or enacting change?”

Finally, each reading frame option suggests its own authentic writing pairing. In the examples provided for *Harbor Me*, as students read, they would also compose in each of the writing genres required by the New Jersey State Learning Standards in English Language Arts. Depending on the frame, they might construct powerful

narratives, formally analyze texts, or produce a variety of informative multimodal forms of writing (Meixner and Peel et al.).

As English Language Arts teachers we have worked diligently to provide students with increased choice in *what* they read and write. In this way, English Language Arts instruction has been forward thinking and

flexible in response to students' diverse literacy needs. We now need to provide as much choice in *how* students read and write. For us, this means continuing to talk about reading frames with teachers and teacher education students, exploring how frames might make reading more purposeful in literacy planning and practice. This is our charge.

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