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## **If Music Be The Food Of Love, Play On: Using Music As A Text To Explore Love In A Secondary English Classroom**

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**Abstract:** An English teacher in a secondary STEM school and her former English education professor collaborate on an article about their experience using music as a text to explore the concept of love in a secondary English classroom. Using the principles and practices of critical literacy and backwards design, the teachers broaden the notion of reading and writing to include non-print texts such as music to help students negotiate love and gender in Shakespeare's "Romeo and Juliet" and popular music. Students used the essential question, *How does love influence us?* as a framework for their investigation. Once students studied love and gender in the play and in popular music, the students synthesized their new understandings into their own song lyrics. The authors found that when the students were given the chance to read and write music, "great and untapped creative potential simmering inside" was "let out and given a chance to thrive."

### How Do Love And Music Influence Us?

I knew that I wanted to talk about love with my students. I wanted the entire unit to be devoted to the investigation of love—the different *kinds* of love, the way media and pop culture each portrays love, and—most importantly—the influences of love. That was our essential question: How does love influence us? It was there above the aim at the start of every lesson, it was there on our class discussion board (always a question that needed answering), and it was the first question that my students thought of whenever new case studies were introduced<sup>1</sup>. But we'll get to that in a minute.

I work as an English teacher in a small Queens high school where admission is based on the Specialized High School Admissions Test (SHSAT), which is very much like the SAT. We're the only school of our kind in Queens and we have an extremely small student population. Just over 400 students in total. We occupy one floor of a building on the campus of York College, and while space is always an issue, for this English teacher, the broader struggle is capturing the attention of kids who've come to our school because of its concentration on the sciences. From the moment they enter the building in freshman year, it's about doing all they can to get into the college of their dreams. When they're here because of an aptitude for math and science, that's predominantly where their focus and energy is channeled, so the idea of spending valuable time looking for the deeper meaning, the bigger idea, or the applicable messages is initially abhorrent.

Currently, this is my second year in the school, and I'm learning the ebbs and flows, quirks and traditions as I go along. High academic expectations are a given both from the teachers, as well as from the parents. We have a very high population of Asian and Middle Eastern students, almost all of whom come from a cultural background that brooks no argument with success. Which is part of why I felt it was so important to step back from the rigidity and regimentation and embark upon an exploration of the very aspect of their education that is often deemed less important until it's time to write the all-important college essay—humanity.

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<sup>1</sup> For more on using big, "essential questions" to frame a unit of study, see Wiggins and McTigh *Understanding by Design* (1998).

When we began the unit, I explained to them that we weren't going to be doing the "*Romeo and Juliet* unit," or the "Ovid unit," or the "poetry unit." No; we were going to be investigating love using the evidence available to us (the various texts with which we worked). I explained that a *text*, despite how it may sound, was not limited to the written word; rather, it was any artifact that could be analyzed for meaning—a distinction that derived not just from my Adelphi education, but from my classes with Laraine Wallowitz herself. In *Youth Literacies: Literature, Culture and the Arts*, we learned how to read texts of all kinds—everything from the art and text of graphic novels or cereal boxes to the language and movement of bowling or dance. The blend and balance of traditional written texts and these other texts (as we have now come to understand them) enrich a classroom and engage learners of all types, skill levels, interests, and aptitudes. These artifacts were the aforementioned case studies, and they came in all shapes and sizes: short stories, excerpts from Ovid's *Metamorphosis*, poems, plays (*Oedipus*, *Antigone*, William Shakespeare's Star Wars, *Romeo & Juliet*, and *A Midsummer Night's Dream*), *Psychology Today* articles, popular music and music videos, and a special offshoot on domestic violence using Chris Brown and Rhianna as an entry point. Yes, a text is the product and arrangement of the written word, but we limit ourselves when we stop thinking that anything that doesn't use words in a customary fashion holds no value in an investigation of meaning. Music, in particular, both the arrangement of notes in the orchestration, as well as the lyrics (if they be present) makes for an incredibly rich text, and, as you will see, is made all the richer when expanding our analysis to music videos, as well. The integration of these alternative resources is what made this unit, and many others since its inception, a successful pedagogical experiment.

### Reading The Word And The World

The work from Laraine Wallowitz's class was inspired by her work in critical literacy. Critical literacy aims to challenge the status quo by disrupting commonplace notions of socially constructed concepts such as race, class, gender, and sexuality. The critical reader understands that *how* we read is as important as *what* we read and asks questions about the

construction of texts/knowledge and power relationships: Who is the intended audience? What is the hidden agenda? How does the text reflect and shape notions of power and privilege? What is included? What is excluded? How is the text trying to position the reader? As such, critical literacy interrogates texts in order to identify and challenge social constructs, ideologies, underlying assumptions, and power structures that intentionally and unintentionally perpetuate social inequalities and injustices.

Additionally, critical literacy invites reading “the word and the world” (Freire and Macedo, 1987). That is, critically reading both print and non-print texts such as media, music, art, and other sign systems students negotiate and subvert every day. Literate students in a post-modern world, wherein reality is understood to be socially and culturally constructed and all understandings highly contextualized, must be able to participate in a variety of literacy practices pulling from different sets of skills and discourses in order to read beyond the printed word.

The authors of the article suggest a more inclusive expansive notion of text offered by traditional literacy across the curriculum programs. We also argue that the narrowed definition of literacy – reading and writing the printed word – has often resulted in excluding marginalized populations by invalidating their home literacies and cultural identities. Today’s literacy teachers should think in terms of multiple literacies, including music as a text worthy of study, particularly from a feminist or gender lens.

### **Gender And Music**

Gender, while not explicitly the focus of the unit, became a reoccurring motif, a conversation piece to which the students kept returning time and time again. To get a handle on love, I asked the students to define it in their own words, noting that they would have to do so again at the end of the unit—the purpose, to see if their original ideas had changed or not. We got our feet wet by analyzing how psychology looks at love—those *Psychology Today* articles. Here, students debated the veracity of the claims made about how male and female reactions to love differ. Generally, guys hurt more, but keep it bottled up, while girls let it out—usually to their friends, to whom, the texts noted,

girls show more affection than their male counterparts. The results were varied, with some conversations splitting along gender lines, and others finding their most ardent debaters in the opposing sex. In trying to navigate the gender discussion, we realized we needed to map the boundaries first. I polled my students, asking questions about who had or hadn’t even heard certain phrases typically associated with men and women. Phrases such as “you throw like a girl,” “boys don’t cry,” “that’s man’s/woman’s work,” etc... My students reported having some of these said to them, while at the same time noting that there were others that they were more apt to hear because of their social, religious, and cultural background that so greatly differed from mine—the exceptionally *white* perspective from which these questions came. Of predominantly Asian and Middle Eastern descent, my students said they were more likely to hear things like “act like a man,” “act like a lady,” “respect your father/brother,” “be honorable,” etc... And then there were the biases in my perspective that came, not from race, but from a place my still-wet-behind-the-ears self had not even thought to take into account: my age. I focused on statements about girls being good at cooking and boys being good at sports. What I found?—boys are much more likely to be associated with video game prowess these days. Sports have taken a back seat to a “guy” being adept with a game console, controller, or role-play. And why not? These games are focused mainly on two things: being an epic hero locked in battle, or being a criminal set loose upon a city with a mandate to cause as much damage and destruction as possible.

In the latter, criminals are muscled, leathered, bling-wearing thugs armed to the teeth and surrounded by women only in two forms: victims or hookers. A woman in a role-playing game like that is either going to be beaten, raped, murdered, or is there to sell her body to the highest bidder.

In the former, students deconstructed those games (going back as far as Super Mario Brothers) to have a basic story and reward system that revolves around money (the acquisition of gold coins, gems, weapons, treasure, etc...) and the prize of a woman, usually the one around which the story (typically, a kidnapping) revolves. Students drew connections to a story we had read in a previous unit called “The Princess and All the Kingdom.” There, a prince comes

to a kingdom simply because he wishes to marry the princess. He wins her hand valiantly—with skills showcased in battle—and must ultimately take responsibility for the crown, the vault of jewels and gold, and the entire kingdom’s welfare (much to the prince’s chagrin). Here, the arguments made by the students surprised me: the girls were naturally indignant at the idea that a woman should be any sort of prize, that she should be forced to marry any man (even though in the story, the princess seems eager to marry—if only because of the sexual appeal attached to an alpha male), and that it should be this interloping prince who gets to rule a kingdom that should be rightfully the princess’s—it is *her* home, after all. The boys, for the most part, agreed with the points the girls were making, but kept coming back to another point: they kept wondering whether either of them really loved the other. I was surprised that it was the boys, and not the girls, who wondered with such heartfelt sincerity about the idea of true love, and upon that realization, admitted as much to my class—calling attention to my own gender bias in the process.

The title of the whole unit was inspired by a song from the ‘70s by a group called 10cc—“The Things We Do for Love.” It is that very song that kicks off the unit each time. Students preview the lyrics and then turn and talk about the mood and tone of the piece, as well as what themes are present with regard to the topic at hand: love. I find that having the students complete an initial reading and analysis of the text sans orchestration is helpful for scrutiny on multiple levels:

1. Students can begin their work with an artifact in a familiar form: words. They’re always going to look for what the text says to them explicitly, first, so it is beneficial to start off the discussion in a manner in which they’re exceedingly conversant.
2. Once the students have gleaned whatever explicit meaning they can, the conversation will naturally move towards the implicit suggestions, metaphorical language, and messages beneath the surface that they know are the next phase of investigation. Here is where students begin to opine on what they believe may be the case, asking and answering questions such as: What’s going

on with this couple? Is it actually a specific couple or is the song about relationships in general? And, of course, the question that both the title and the chorus conspire to get audiences to ask: What *are* the things we do for love? How far are we willing to go? And, as the essential question continually examines: How does love influence us?

3. When the students listen to the recording of the song with full accompaniment, the orchestration adds another layer of meaning and yields additional aspects of understanding. Students now have to ascertain whether or not the mood and tone of the full piece match what they determined to be the mood and tone of the lyrics. Furthermore, in analyzing mood and tone, they are dealing with the *aesthetics* of the piece and have to treat said aesthetics like character traits—all furthering their understanding of the character created by 10cc in the speaker of the song.

This process is the same method I use whenever I introduce a musical text into a unit: previewing the text for explicit and implicit meaning, determining mood and tone, questioning the text, discussing the possibilities, then introducing the full arrangement and repeating the process in comparison with the first-round conclusions. Students become accustomed to the process, as well as the questions to prompt analysis, and after repeated exercises, their academic interrogation of the music (on all levels) becomes second nature. The same was true of our other musical texts: John Mayer’s “Dreaming with a Broken Heart” and Train’s “When I Look to the Sky,” which link thematically with issues of love and loss (death); Taylor Swift’s “Love Story” and its allusions to *Romeo and Juliet*; and, of course, Eminem and Rihanna’s “Love the Way You Lie,” which introduces the topic of domestic violence, violence in relationships, the sexualization of violence, and how music videos allow for even more layers of meaning and facilitate increased levels of understanding.

I had them read and watch some of the press coverage of Chris Brown’s initial attack on Rihanna. They read through the entire history of their relationship as documented in the media. They read

and watched the follow-up interviews with both of them, and they discussed the issue of whether or not Chris Brown was really sorry, if he'd really be able to change, and if Rhianna was right to still love him and want to be with him.

We discussed the irony of Rihanna's life considering her collaboration with Eminem on "Love the Way You Lie" parts one and two. We watched the videos, read the lyrics, and discussed how it wasn't just one-sided abuse in the relationship they depicted. I asked them how the music was manipulating their mood, and how the editors of the video were doing the same. How are they attempting to influence you? They noted that the videos made the violence the basis of sexual appeal and attraction between the two—one moment he's throwing her against a wall violently and the next they're making out. They're lying in bed together peacefully, lovingly, then she sees evidence of another girl on his body and she lashes out violently before they're rolling around together in bed again. And then we looked at nationwide domestic violence statistics from where the most surprising lesson for them came: men are victims of domestic abuse, too. They are attacked, they are abused, and they, too, are victims, although not nearly as often as women. But men are less likely to report it. When I asked the class why men do not report rape as much as women, they came back at me with two very powerful answers: 1) who would believe them? 2) shame.

We analyzed the Red Jumpsuit Apparatus song "Face Down," which discusses an abusive male character and his, presumably, victimized girlfriend. Here is where the importance of orchestration, lyrics, message, and images all culminate in ultimate understanding. We discussed domestic violence as a nation-wide issue, and as it relates to teen relationships. We watched clips from ABC's *General Hospital* when it was featuring a storyline between a 17-year-old Kristina and her seemingly-perfect boyfriend Kiefer, who was, of course, abusing her. First emotionally (controlling her, manipulating her, verbally attacking her), and then physically—going so far as to put her in the hospital. Kristina's lies to cover for her abuser are extensive, and, as a result, the answers students gave to our essential question were bountiful and outraged. A fan-made video on YouTube juxtaposes the images of the aforementioned *General Hospital* storyline with the recording of the song.

Students discussed the images that came to mind for them when reading the lyrics, when hearing the song, and how they lined up with or differed from the images of the teen abuse featured on *General Hospital*.

### **From Reading To Writing Love And Lyrics**

And then I asked them to redefine love and prove it in one of many different possible projects—the most relevant of which, of course, was the opportunity to write and record an original song. I received 15 original musical compositions that varied in composition, lyrics, theme, style, and aesthetics.

In one class, two young women teamed up to write a love song that ended up inspiring a project of my own. One of the young women, let's call her Mia, is a talented musician (she plays guitar and piano), and the other, let's call her Dana, is an aspiring songwriter. Dana wanted to write an original love song badly, but found that she was limited because she can't write music—she's a lyricist. Mia stepped up to help her create a composition out of the goodness of her heart. She'd already completed her own musical composition with another song-writing team, but was so passionate about the topic and the music, that she jumped at the chance to compose another piece. Not only was the music wonderfully passionate and full of youthful ideas and narrative storytelling, but the energy of its composers shone through completely.

Xander, a young man who sat in my class all year long and very rarely spoke aloud to the whole class, came out of his shell completely during his project presentation. He wrote original music and lyrics, sang and recorded the song, and played it aloud in class. Not only were we seeing a side to Xander we had never before been given opportunity to set eyes on, but we learned what an incredibly beautiful singing voice he had, as well as the wonderfully quiet talent he possessed for music. Prior to this, I had only been privy to Xander's beautiful voice in the form of his writing: articulate arguments with clear ideas and a strong, distinct writer's voice. Hearing his actual voice so steadied during a time of obvious vulnerability was humbling for me as an educator. He had such a passion for the music that it overpowered his fear of public speaking. He based the song on an Anime series and talked about the perseverance of love, its strength, and power to withstand separation and distance. His high-soaring voice is accompanied only by a bare piano and

the “ping, ping, ping” of the keys and high notes create this otherworldly setting—which aligns with the series that inspired the piece. the chance to experience something again like it’s the first time. And that is worth everything.

Some boys banded together to create small hip hop groups. They’d lay down a beat, have a set of lyrics that told a story, and add some background instrumentals to boot. Other groups came together in orchestral quartets to compose and perform classical pieces and then explain how the aesthetics of the pieces proved their definitions of love true, as well as answered the essential question. They spoke of how the arrangement was written to create and manipulate mood—to make us feel, in some cases hopeful, and in others woefully pessimistic. Love was either an amazingly strong emotion that could survive and “lift us up where we belong” (to borrow some words from professional lyricists), or it was something for which we fought, but whose loss we had to fight to survive.

I even had a Christian folk group break out to create a quiet, catchy, near-pop-song quality tune with an accompanying music video. It was catchy, too! I and several other students could be found humming it in the hallways for days after. Here, though, the themes were softer and gentler—less melodramatic in the “life or death” of love, and more about the sweetness and innocence of holding hands and being around the other. For them, love was celebrated by just being in the other’s presence and being happy.

I was so thoroughly impressed with these young people whose musical talent is often limited, in a school of our small size and means, to the semi-annual school concerts. I could see then that there was a not-small population of our school that, despite (or maybe because of) our school’s focus on STEM subjects, there was a great and untapped creative potential simmering inside and nearly begging to be let out and given a chance to thrive.

Though I’d appreciated and relied on the versatility and universally topical nature of music to help further discussions, get the ball rolling, and open up avenues of discussion, I knew then that I had to provide more opportunities for music to thrive in my classroom, and specifically, for it to be created. Formal, informal, recorded, planned, or improv, music is a necessity in education because of what it provides for our children, but also because of what it allows our children to provide us: the ability to be surprised, and

## References

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