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## Avoiding heteronormativity: Breaking barriers in the English classroom: A potential model for a teaching workshop

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AVOIDING HETERONORMATIVITY: BREAKING BARRIERS IN THE ENGLISH  
CLASSROOM  
A POTENTIAL MODEL FOR A TEACHING WORKSHOP

A Thesis Submitted  
In Partial Fulfillment  
Of the Requirements for the Designation  
University Honors with Distinction

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This study by: Jessica Morris

Entitled: Avoiding Heteronormativity: Breaking Barriers in the English Classroom — A

Potential Model for a Teaching Workshop

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## Purpose

English Language Arts has typically been characterized by the texts taught in the classroom. The traditional English classroom is filled with a combination of texts from the British canon and classic American works. I recognize that English teachers now are striving to include current texts, but the traditional curriculum still thrives today. Students still read Shakespeare and *To Kill a Mockingbird* and *Frankenstein*. Given that fact, we should also teach students how to find themselves within those texts.

Within English education, we tend to interpret literature in a very “standard” way. We stick with what we know and what we have been taught. Typically, this means that literature is interpreted with only “majority” groups in mind. Characters, their actions, themes, and many other aspects of literature are analyzed and interpreted with the white, heteronormative, cisgender, male-created power structure in mind, even if we do not realize it. This type of interpretation means that many students have trouble recognizing themselves in classical texts. Students who identify as LGBTQ+, specifically, struggle with finding characters like them in those texts. Heteronormative interpretation assumes that all characters are heterosexual and, in some cases, assumes that characters cannot be anything but heterosexual. However, it is integral that we, as teachers, open up our minds using various lenses of interpretation to include possibilities of other sexualities within literature so that we can help our students do the same.

As Michael L. Cobb states in “Literary Criticism and Theory,” “Literature's impact on LGBT people, culture, politics, and history cannot be overestimated” (179). Existing explicitly stated representation is integral to helping those in the LGBTQ+ community feel like they are respected and that they belong in our society. However, it is also important to address literature that does not explicitly state whether a character belongs to the LGBTQ+ community or not.

Using a variety of critical lenses, we can create representation that may not appear to exist at first glance. Both explicit and implicit representation “giv[e] audiences opportunities to identify with, enjoy, identify against, and criticize what they discover on the page” (Cobb 179). If students—or any readers—are given the opportunity to find a character with whom they can identify, they can relate to the text on a deeper level. According to Lindsay Aegerter in “A Pedagogy of Postcolonial Literature,” “Students are more able to understand the literature they read ... if they find points of identification or congruence between their own lives and those being represented in their reading” (143). Identification is simply a starting point for both enjoyment and understanding. Once students have the ability to both enjoy and understand a text, they are able to analyze and discuss it effectively in a classroom setting.

Perhaps even more important than creating representation in the texts, this type of openness also creates a protected space for students. Students who identify as LGBTQ+ often feel unsafe or unwelcome in the classroom. When that happens, they feel unable to share their thoughts or ideas without being ridiculed. They become shut out of the classroom community. Being open to a variety of interpretations and teaching students how to find themselves in a text can demonstrate to them that their teacher will try to make this community a protected one. Explicitly introducing alternate ways of interpreting literature—perhaps even using the term “queer theory” in class discussions—directly acknowledges that the LGBTQ+ community has a place in the classroom. Being open about literary terminology that welcomes all people into literature creates the essential protected space. Ideally, after participating in a professional development workshop following this model, teachers will feel confident in their ability to open their queer theory toolbox and develop a space safe for their LGBTQ+ students.

Of all the things teachers need to accomplish in their classrooms, making students feel safe and comfortable should be the ultimate goal. For the purposes of this paper, I focus on using queer theory and literature to create a protected space. The goal of a workshop using this model is to give teachers the information and tools needed to broaden their lenses of interpretation and thus help create a safe environment for students. Often when we discuss these issues, the space turns into a highly emotional and volatile place. It is my goal to avoid such a tension-filled, angry space. I want all students to feel safe and welcome in the classroom. We need to create classrooms that do not turn into battlefields as soon as someone mentions LGBTQ+ groups.

Throughout the course of this paper, there will be information presented about social perspectives, historical context, and background about queer literary criticism. This background information is essential to help create a foundation for analyzing literature using queer theory. After the background information, there will be a discussion of sample queer analyses done on a couple of classic works of literature. Then, there will be a “practice” analysis using Arthur Miller’s *The Crucible*. The paper will conclude with an overview of the structure of the potential workshop.

## **Background**

Throughout the workshop, there are a variety of historical contexts that will be covered, but I would especially like to cover some background on societal perspectives of varying sexualities. In “Revolutions, Universals, and Sexual Categories,” John Boswell examines three theories about sexual taxonomy. These taxonomies examine the societal perspective on sexualities and also the levels of social acceptability of those sexualities. Boswell names the categories, for simplicity’s sake, as Types A, B, and C. To put those categories on a spectrum, Type A would be the most accepting of varying sexualities and Type C would be the least.

Societies that follow the Type A taxonomy believe that “all humans are polymorphously sexual, i.e., capable of erotic and sexual interaction with [all] gender[s],” but the expression of those interactions and desires varies from person to person and society to society (Boswell 23). In other words, Type A refers to a society without labels defining sexuality. Everyone has the capability to be what would be labeled as pansexual in our society. Type B, on the other hand does have labels: “Type B theories posit two or more sexual categories...to which all humans belong” (Boswell 23). Essentially, there are labelled categories into which people place themselves. Finally, Type C—the most restrictive of the taxonomies—“consider one type of sexual response normal (or ‘natural’ or ‘moral’ or all three) and all other variants abnormal (‘unnatural,’ ‘immoral’)” (Boswell 23). In many societies, the “normal” response is heterosexuality.

These taxonomies are important to consider when interpreting literature because society’s perspective on sexuality largely determines whether it will be overtly presented in the literature. Thinking about our current Western society and the amount of literature we have with explicit LGBTQ+ representation and then comparing it to past Western societies, it is clear that there is more—not enough, but more—explicitly LGBTQ+-friendly literature now than in the past. This is because our society is shifting taxonomies. Up until very recently, our society has followed the Type C taxonomy. All sexualities outside of heterosexuality were deemed unnatural and inappropriate. Now, parts of our society more closely follow a Type B society. We are more accepting of varying sexualities and believe that everyone falls under some sort of label.

### *Historical Context*

In order to examine the possibilities of widening the lenses of interpretation within the classical canon, it is important to explore the historical context for such interpretations. Since

much of the classical canon begins in the Renaissance and develops through to more modern eras, an examination of the historical implications of same-sex relationships within the Renaissance era is helpful for establishing context.

Throughout many Renaissance-era texts, there is a heavy emphasis on male relationships and male bonding. Through a twenty-first century lens, these relationships may be construed either as gay romantic relationships or very close friendships. Looking at the historical implications of such an interpretation, both perceptions may be correct. Both Jean E. Howard in “The Early Modern and the Homoerotic Turn in Political Criticism,” and Rebecca Yearling in “Homoerotic Desire and Renaissance Lyric Verse,” discuss the historical implications of same-sex relationships in the Renaissance era. In the Renaissance, same-sex relationships and, specifically, same-sex sex acts were not inherently sodomitical and therefore not inherently illegal. The act only became illegal when it disrupted the social order: “In a social crisis involving the breakdown of order, ‘sodomites’ could become the scapegoats; or if sexual relations between men disrupted the sexual relations of husband and wife, such behavior might also be labelled sodomitical” (Howard 293). Essentially, the illegality of homosexual relations depended largely upon the context of the act, rather than the act itself. In literature, the perceptions of same-sex relationships are much the same. However, rather than depend upon the specific context of the relationship, the evaluation or judgment of the relationship depends upon how it is presented: “The same-sex relationships of literature, when they are presented sympathetically, are almost invariably ones that do not pose a threat to established social structures” (Yearling 154). If a relationship between two men—or two women—is presented non-judgmentally by the author, then it can be assumed that the relationship is non-threatening to



society. Of course, this does not necessarily mean that the relationship is romantic, but it could be.

Yearling argues that same-sex desire and love—in male relationships, in particular—can be sorted into three categories: homoerotic, homosocial, and homosexual<sup>1</sup>. The simplest one to define is homosexual. Homosexual relationships are ones in which two men are involved in a sexual relationship. Depending upon the context of the relationship, this type of relationship would be labelled “sodomitical” in Renaissance times. Homosociality, on the other hand, is defined by Yearling as a type of male friendship. She states that a homosocial relationship was “a passionate yet chaste relationship, in which the friend was a figure both of emulation and competition” and that homosociality was considered “a healthy, natural way for men to strengthen social bonds and assert their masculinity” (Yearling 154). These relationships were often intensely passionate, leading the men to interact in a way that could be perceived as a homoerotic relationship. Men involved in a homoerotic relationship—which was legal in the Renaissance—“might declare their devotion to one another, kiss and embrace, and even share a bed” (154). On the spectrum of same-sex relationships, homoeroticism might fall somewhere between homosexual and homosocial. A homoerotic relationship might never evolve into a homosexual or a romantic relationship, but it might. In terms of literature, it would be up to the reader to interpret whether the relationship was sexual, erotic, or romantic. As Yearling states, one cannot necessarily claim that the relationship is sexual in nature, but one also cannot say that it is not (154).

### *Queer<sup>2</sup> Literary Theory and Criticism*

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<sup>1</sup> These terms, of course, are modern terms and were likely not in use during the Renaissance period.

<sup>2</sup> Queer, in this case, is being used as an overarching term for all members of the LGBTQ+ community

Outside of the basic historical information, it is also important to understand the appropriate critical lenses used to examine texts in the classroom. As discussed by Lois Tyson in “Lesbian, Gay, and Queer Criticism,” queer criticism is titled as such to encompass a broad range of sexualities and identities, rather than just discuss the dichotomy of homosexuality vs. heterosexuality. Tyson broadly defines queer criticism as “any piece of literary criticism that interprets a text from a nonstraight perspective” (334) and narrowly as a way “to read texts to reveal the problematic quality of their representations of sexual categories, in other words, to show the various ways in which the categories homosexual and heterosexual break down, overlap, or do not adequately represent the dynamic range of human sexuality” (334). For the purposes of this workshop, I will primarily be using the first definition. However, it is important to acknowledge the second, as well. Sexuality is indeed an indefinable spectrum, and a huge part of queer criticism is understanding this fact. For example, in Tyson’s “Will the Real Nick Carraway Please Come Out?,” she argues “that the novel’s treatment of sexual transgression and its proliferation of gay and lesbian signs work together to create a homoerotic subtext that disrupts and destabilizes the heterosexual narrative, creating, in the process, a sexually ambiguous novel” (342). With this argument, Tyson combines her two definitions of queer criticism. She establishes that she will be using a nonstraight lens to examine the novel and then discusses how the supposedly heterosexual narrative does not adequately acknowledge the range of sexualities that could be present in the novel.

In Valerie Rohy’s “Ahistorical,” she discusses the aspects of queer theory that many have labelled as anachronistic or ahistorical. She explains that, in queer criticism, critics have a tendency to historicize the content, meaning that they tend to project present ideals onto the past. Rohy states: “Inspired by visions of those silenced in former ages, queer scholars sought to

discover loves... ‘hidden from history’” (237). Historicizing allows scholars to view texts with a new lens and to discover those hidden loves. However, one must be wary of assuming the “commonalities between present and past same-sex desires” (Rohy 237). This warning is crucial to consider in the context of literary interpretation. One cannot assume that the past is equal to the present. However, in order to find representation—or perhaps create it—where there is none, one must use all the resources available. As modern readers, we use what we know now to analyze and interpret literature from the past. Though we must be cognizant and wary of projecting present values onto the past, we must also note that our experiences and values shape how we view and see the world—literature included.

### **Sample Analysis**

Using the queer lens is sometimes a difficult task due to preconceived biases created by a Type C society. Our culture is still ingrained with heteronormative ideas of what romance looks like. In order to demonstrate how to use the lens, I have included summaries of two expertly crafted analyses using the queer lens. These analyses discuss texts from Shakespeare and F. Scott Fitzgerald, two authors traditionally taught in English classrooms.

Of the texts traditionally taught in the classroom, Shakespeare’s works firmly reside in the canon, a fact which will likely not change any time in the near future. Within “Rethinking Sexuality and Class in *Twelfth Night*,” Nancy Lindheim discusses the homoerotic—and perhaps homosexual—implications of several relationships in *Twelfth Night*. To start, Lindheim briefly discusses the relationship between Olivia and Viola (Cesario). This relationship is tricky because Olivia is under the impression that Viola is a man. In that sense, their potential relationship would be labelled as heterosexual. However, the audience knows that “Cesario” is a woman, which creates homoerotic implications. Lindheim states that:

the plot teases us with homoerotic attractions, but Viola's soliloquy denies that they are satisfying in any way; as a man, she says, her state is desperate (the love she can achieve with Orsino as his page cannot match her hopes) and, since she is a woman (not, we note, because she loves another), Olivia's sighs are "thrifless." (314)

That is to say, Olivia's attraction for Viola (as Cesario) exists but cannot be acted upon. Viola does not deny attraction to or from Olivia but rather laments that it cannot develop. In the era in which the play is set, it is not socially acceptable for two women to engage in a relationship—unless, of course, it did not disrupt the social order, as discussed earlier. Therefore, it is logical—historically—that she would not be able to act upon Olivia's attraction to her. That, however, does not mean that Viola does not have an attraction to Olivia. It simply means that she is unable to act upon it.

Lindheim also touches on the relationship between Orsino and Cesario. In some ways, this relationship creates larger implications of homosexuality than that of Viola and Olivia. Because Orsino is under the impression that Cesario is a man to start with and because there is a clear sexual tension between the two at the start of their companionship, it can be implied that Orsino holds some degree of attraction to other men. As Lindheim argues, "Shakespeare's core fable can insinuate Orsino's sexual interest in his page [Cesario]" (315). Orsino's attraction did not begin as soon as Cesario was revealed as Viola, but earlier. He discovers "that the quality of affection he feels for Cesario... forms the groundwork of a more real and satisfying love than his Petrarchan desire for Olivia" (315). Though the relationship becomes heterosexual—and therefore socially acceptable—it begins as a homoerotic relationship with the potential to evolve into a homosexual relationship.

Even though there is a large emphasis on the relationships within *Twelfth Night*, Lindheim makes one comment that is perhaps most effective in the argument against heteronormativity. When discussing the unveiling of Viola and the arrival of Sebastian as partners for Orsino and Olivia, respectively, she states, “This unscrambling [of] the lovers depends upon Elizabethan assumptions about binary gender designations and normative expectations of male and female behaviour” (Lindheim 316). This statement implies that the homosexual attractions among the four principal characters are resolved simply to cater to the Elizabethan audience. If we take that into consideration, it could be implied that Shakespeare intended his characters to have homosexual attractions. Therefore, the play could be analyzed with the queer lens to say that each character has—at the very least—slight homosexual attractions for the other characters.

The classic British canon is filled with works from historically distant time periods such as the Renaissance and the Victorian era. However, in English classrooms in the United States, we have widened the canon to include classic American works, as well. *The Great Gatsby* is one such work that is often taught in English classrooms. As previously discussed, Lois Tyson employs the queer lens to analyze the novel in “Will the Real Nick Carroway Please Come Out?” Tyson argues throughout the essay that the gay and lesbian signs throughout the novel underline its homoerotic subtext. These signs are the core of Tyson’s analysis. Rather than solely focus on one character, she examines many of the novel’s central characters and how they—or their actions—serve as gay signs. As seen through the title, however, she examines the characters and their signs through the lens of Nick Carroway’s sexual ambiguity.

Tyson claims that the homoerotic subtext throughout the novel is heightened because Nick is a closeted gay man: “*The Great Gatsby*’s sexual ambiguity results from the delivery of a

heterosexual plot through the medium of a closeted gay sensibility” (Tyson 343). Anyone familiar with *The Great Gatsby* might consider this claim to be absurd. As she delves into the text, though, this claim shifts from outlandish to plausible. Tyson discusses Nick’s descriptions and perceptions of Jay Gatsby, as well as his interactions with other male characters. At one point in the novel, Nick describes Gatsby’s pink suit “quite romantically, as if the clothing of a desirable woman were being described: ‘I could think of nothing but the luminosity of his pink suit under the moon’ (150; ch. 7)” (Tyson 345). Luminosity under moonlight is not typically how our society thinks of a man describing another man’s clothing. Tyson argues that Gatsby’s pink suit is a gay sign in and of itself, but Nick’s description of the suit highlights his potential as an LGBTQ+ character. His descriptions of the suit—and Gatsby, himself—sound like someone pining for an unrequited love. Tyson suggests that Nick’s affection for Gatsby is somewhat homoerotic, which—as we know from *Yearling*—means he certainly wants an element of a romantic or sexual relationship with Gatsby. He is attracted to the mystery behind Gatsby, but he is also erotically attracted to the man himself. She states:

that Nick’s attraction to Gatsby is homoerotic is suggested by his focus on Gatsby’s feminine qualities...; his intense appreciation of Gatsby’s “gorgeous” appearance and “romantic readiness” (6; ch. 1); his frequent, passionate, and often blind defense of Gatsby as the victim of others’ selfishness and corruption; and the deep bond he feels with Gatsby after the latter’s death, when it is “safe” to feel love for him. (347)

In other words, Nick thinks of Gatsby as physically and emotionally attractive, which might explain his ridiculous need to protect Gatsby from everyone else’s judgment. However, as might be expected from the novel’s time period, he can only express even a fraction of his sentiments after Gatsby dies.

Moving away from Nick's attraction to Gatsby, Tyson also examines his thoughts about his new home. After fighting in World War I, Nick moves to New York, which he "associate[s] with transgressive sexuality" (348). New York City has long been perceived as a hub of LGBTQ+ activity and representation. The fact that Nick moves to such a place is not insignificant, given his ambiguous sexuality. He chooses a location that he knows will likely bring him into contact with an environment of sexual difference and freedom. Throughout the novel, Nick often implies "that he inhabits a transgressive subculture," which makes him both nervous and excited (Tyson 368). He enjoys "'the racy, adventurous feel of it at night' (61; ch. 3)" (Tyson 368). Nick likes exploring new avenues of relationships, and New York gives him just that.

Other than just Nick, Tyson also analyzes Jordan Baker. She states that Jordan exemplifies many lesbian signs, which may be why Nick takes such an interest in her (346, 347). Jordan is described—by Nick—in "frequently masculine terms" (346). However, it is her relationships with men that I am primarily interested in<sup>3</sup>. Tyson states that "Jordan doesn't want to be seen through. She doesn't want to be thought to have a private life that 'diverges' from the code, so she dates men she can manipulate" (346). Jordan does not want her sexuality questioned, so she surrounds herself with men she can easily distract. Basically, she wants to appear heterosexual and she does not want anyone to interfere with how she does so. By dating men of inferior intellect, she can convince them of whatever she wants about herself and her sexuality.

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<sup>3</sup> Though a masculine presentation may connote a lesbian sign, it is necessary to accept that women have many ways of presenting themselves. As we are readers with modern perspectives, it may be more difficult to read such a description as a lesbian sign.

Tyson's analysis of *The Great Gatsby* covers many gay and lesbian signs in the novel, but her discussion of Nick and Jordan are, I believe, the most persuasive. Using the queer lens, it is evident that Nick and Jordan both have, at the very least, ambiguous sexualities. It is possible to claim that both are gay, especially given that the novel is full of behavior that, by the 1920s' standards, is transgressive. As Tyson questions, "Is the atmosphere of sexual freedom, even sexual license, that pervades the novel limited to the heterosexual domain, or does it include the gay world, and if so, in what ways?" (349).

### **Practice**

Though the samples above are a couple of examples of how to use the queer lens, I would like to examine a text in a slightly different manner. Finding specific signs and moments of queerness is definitely an effective use of the lens, but I also want to examine a text using a wider, more metaphorical point of view. *The Crucible* by Arthur Miller certainly lends itself to this sort of interpretation.

Starting with a bigger picture, it is possible to use Boswell's societal types to discuss the play as a whole. If we open up Type C society to examine the morality of all behavior, rather than just sexual behavior, it perfectly represents Miller's Salem. As Miller writes, "It is still impossible for man to organize his social life without repressions, and the balance has yet to be struck between order and freedom" (7). Type C societies repress those who disrupt social convention and those who go against behavior deemed to be moral. In Salem, many behaviors—such as plowing on Sundays, not going to church, dancing, or sewing dolls—are seen as immoral and immediately warrant suspicion of witchcraft. Those activities—and others—are subversive to the community's ideals. If we think about these attitudes in a queer context, it is easy to see how Miller's Salem could just as easily be about the persecution of queer people as it is about the



persecution of women. Historically, Type C societies have viewed queer behavior as immoral because it is subversive to the heteronormative power structure. It breaks rules, whether they are written or unwritten.

Diving in a little deeper, the characters' actions in *The Crucible* also demonstrate how the play can be mapped onto the metaphorical queer interpretation. Miller states that “[the witch-hunt] was ... a long overdue opportunity for everyone so inclined to express publicly his guilt and sins, under the cover of accusations against the victims” (7). In the play, characters turn on one another very quickly. Abigail and her cohort of young girls admit their fault in dancing, only to immediately blame another for sending her spirit into them and forcing them to dance. In Act One, Abigail admits that many signs of witchcraft (dancing around a fire, a witch's brew, etc.) occurred during their dance in the woods, but as soon as she starts being accused of witchcraft, she turns on Tituba, a slave: “She made me do it! She made Betty do it! ... She sends her spirit on me in church; she makes me laugh during prayer” (Miller 43, 44). She is quick to express her own supposed sin, but she quickly puts it onto someone else. This decision spirals out of control as member after member of the community begins to confess being “bewitched” and immediately points to another member as the one who did the bewitching.

This attitude is very similar to one that has been taken by LGBTQ+ people. Sometimes, if a person was very private and repressed about their sexuality, they would blame another person when they acted on their sexual desires. We have seen this function as a trope in modern TV shows, books, and movies. One individual will kiss another person of the same gender, but they will immediately attack the one they kissed. They call the other person out for being “disgusting” or say any number of insulting slurs. This usually leads to the insulted person being outed to the entire school or community. This type of attitude is caused by Type C societies or environments.

One type of sexuality or behavior is regarded as so reprehensible that some feel the need to repress their desires or map them onto others.

As seen in *The Crucible*, this type of attitude does not go over very well. It leads to fear, shame, and misunderstanding. When Abigail turns on her friend, Mary Warren, in Act 3, she causes Mary so much fear and shame that she starts to break down: “Mary Warren, utterly confounded, and becoming overwhelmed by Abigail’s—and the girls’—utter conviction, starts to whimper, hands half raised, powerless” (116). She becomes so afraid of their accusations that she loses all ability to protest. Since they had all worked together earlier in the play, Mary does not expect her friends to turn on her so quickly. They are so quick to place blame on her for supposed witchcraft that she loses all control: “Mary, as though infected, opens her mouth and screams with them...only Mary is left there, staring up at the ‘bird,’ screaming madly” (Miller 118). The poor girl breaks down into an hysterical fit. The shame caused by the accusations sends Mary into a panic until she finds a way to turn the blame onto someone else. She decides to blame John Proctor, furthering the misunderstandings. This cycle of fear, shame, blame, and misunderstanding fuels the witch trials.

This cycle is the very essence of socially-induced repression and is what drives LGBTQ+ people to hide who they truly are, as well. This is what I like most about a metaphorical queer reading of the *The Crucible*. It shows students a distant example of what they—potentially—have gone through. The distance makes the experience less triggering for them. The story gives them words for the experience through someone who is not them. The subject matter is also just distant enough so that the students do not feel like they are going through it again. It is a play about ridiculous Puritans in the 1600s, after all. At first glance or even first read-through, it does

not seem like something they could relate to. However, with the right lens, it is possible that we can give our students the words—through Arthur Miller—to explain an experience of repression.

### **Workshop Overview**

All of the above research and sample analyses have culminated in the construction of a model for a professional development workshop. Since this workshop is intended for teachers' professional development, I imagine that it will be given to teachers in small roundtable groups. I envision that the workshop will use the same structure presented in this paper. It will start with an introduction to queer theory that explains both historical context and the basics of queer literary interpretation. The introductory material is intended to provide teachers with the necessary information and resources to incorporate queer theory into their classrooms. Then, there will be examples of queer analysis. I intend on using the examples summarized above, as well as my practice analysis of *The Crucible* to showcase the different ways to utilize queer literary analysis. It can be difficult to envision utilizing a certain lens without examples of how to do so. After some time to examine the example analyses, there will be time to practice using the queer lens. It would be interesting to practice after reading shorter texts—like poems—on the spot, but I think it would also be beneficial to practice using texts with which the teachers have extensive experience. I would be interested in seeing their perspectives on other Shakespeare plays and a wider range of canonical texts. Regardless of the texts used, I think the teachers should work together with their roundtable groups to construct some sort of queer interpretation of the text. Ideas are often more easily constructed with others, especially when using a new approach. As a whole workshop, I hope that teachers leave with the tools they need to utilize the queer lens and with the lesson that literature can be interpreted in a variety of inclusive manners.

### **Conclusions**

Safe spaces are an interesting topic in today's political atmosphere. Some attack them for being limits on free speech, while others advocate them for their mental health benefits. Earlier, I used the term "protected space" instead of safe space to help alleviate some of this controversy and to imply that LGBTQ+ students—and all students—should be protected in the classroom. I think that protected and safe can be used interchangeably when discussing students and their comfort levels in the classroom. Regardless of the label given to any space, I argue that schools need to be safe for our students.

Classrooms need to be physically and emotionally safe, but they also need to be mentally challenging. In order to facilitate such an environment, we—as teachers—need to be willing to challenge ourselves, as well. We need to challenge ourselves to think outside the box and use more than just a standard interpretive lens. The queer lens is a way to challenge ourselves. It is not an easy lens to use, and it isn't used very often in the classroom. It takes a lot of digging and interpreting and modern perspective to find the evidence to support it. It is a challenge, but it is a necessary one. Our students need to feel like they can come into our classrooms and be welcomed as they are. No matter what place they are in when they enter, it is our job to help them discover who they will be when they leave. The queer lens can help them identify with characters from long-ago texts. It can help them find the words to describe their experiences. Best of all, it can give them hope that their teachers love and support them. Being open-minded with interpretation can go a long way in showing the students that we care.

The driving purpose behind English education is to encourage a lifelong love of reading. The queer lens can help English teachers encourage that love by providing a point of identification and understanding for students in the LGBTQ+ community. If we are going to read canonical texts, they need to be accessible for everyone. By searching for queer signs—as Tyson

and Lindheim do—or by looking for a metaphorical queer interpretation, students will be diving deep into a text. They will be using the text to inform their lives and using their lives to inform the text. The literature becomes accessible either through identification with a character or through the deep view of the text.

By diving deep into a text using the queer lens, we not only help students access the canon with their modern perspective, we also break down the heteronormative power structure. We showcase that characters of unspecified sexuality do not have to be straight by default. We demonstrate that all students can relate to the works of the classical canon. Most importantly, we create representation where it could not be found before. We open up avenues for interpretation and connection that did not previously exist. There is no better start for breaking barriers in the classroom.

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