Overview

I have chosen to use the Multiple text format because this type of text set is particularly applicable to my overall agenda. In attempting to figure out how I might use outside texts to enrich an English classroom, I came to realize that I was constantly asking myself, “what exactly is a text?” Because it is already typical to use non-textbook texts for instruction, I had to think creatively about what items might be incorporated as “new” or “unconventional” texts. So, this initial dilemma of defining a “text” led to my text set’s theme, which is, “what makes a text a piece of literature?” or, as one of my text selections puts it more succinctly, “what is literature?” Since one of the purposes of my text set is to, in a way, redefine literature itself, my text set might also be considered a Literature-based set.

The idea behind this text set is that term “literature” has come to defy definition, and in my opinion, the only difference between any collection of words and a work of “literature” is how the reader reads the piece. So, by introducing this text set, I hope to help students understand how to approach a piece of literature – to read it critically, to appreciate its role as a work of art, and to pay close attention to the manipulation of language. For example, if I were to set a cookbook in front of the students and ask them to read a section, they would be reading a cookbook (arguably, not literature). But if I were to give them a cookbook and ask them to consider the cookbook as a piece of literature, they would approach it differently in order to understand how or why I might argue that the cookbook is actually literature. So, the classification of something as “literature” lies not in the work itself, but in the readers approach to the work.

I imagine that this text set could be used to accompany a lesson that I could teach at the beginning, middle or end of a school year, depending on the students’ familiarity with – or
reaction to – the pieces of literature that we read in class. The text set is not meant to replace official texts or augment specific texts. It is meant to enrich any texts that we are reading in class in an indirect way. The subjects of my selections are less important than the selections’ structure.

My main objective is to get students engaged and interested in the class’s regular reading material. I hope that, by giving them the opportunity to define literature for themselves, I will be encouraging my students to feel a sense of autonomy in approaching each new text in the class. Because the class is an 11th grade American Literature class, I have tried to use pieces in the text set that are by American authors or printed in American publications.

All of the items in my text set were evaluated for readability using the Fry formula. I am skeptical about the usefulness of applying these formulas to works of literature because the techniques for measuring readability do not consider style or figurative language. Interestingly enough, I did end up with a wide-range of readability. I wanted the more conventional pieces of literature in the set to be on a lower level since I chose items that students were likely to have read in earlier English classes. Additionally, I was hoping that some of the theoretical pieces would be particularly challenging and useful for lessons where I would be more involved instructionally.

The Text Set

1. To Kill a Mockingbird, Harper Lee: novel

Readability: grade 8

This book is an American novel about a small town in the 1930’s South. The story primarily follows a young girl and her father, so the students will be able to understand Scout’s (the little girl) point of view throughout the story. I am assuming that most students have read this book, so it should be one of the more accessible pieces in the text set for those who struggle
with reading – or even those who struggle with an interest in new texts. This book is separated from normal texts in the class because it will be something that we would not typically read in this grade or at this level.

I chose this book because it is a well-known novel – especially for most high school students – and I feel confident that almost every student will identify the work as a piece of literature. It will be interesting to see if any student denies that this book is literature, but I would welcome the argument because it would only lead to productive discussion in how we do, or do not, recognize certain pieces as literature. For the students who do see this book as literature, I will ask questions like, “why do you think this is literature?,” “what alerts you to the fact that this work is literature?” This would be a good introductory piece for the text set.


2. The Road Not Taken, Robert Frost: poem

*Readability*: grade 9

This is a poem, which has come to be known as an American classic. The themes are universal and deal with ideas of determination and self-efficacy. The poem is rather simple and one of the easier pieces to analyze and dissect.

Again, this text lies outside the normal set of the classroom because it is on a much lower reading level, and I am almost certain that students will have been exposed to this poem in earlier grades. I want the conventional pieces of literature to be easily accessible so that we focus less on understanding actual content and more on figuring out why or how we view these works as incontestable pieces of literature. For this poem, I will ask similar questions as I did for the novel. I will then ask the students to compare the structure and language of the novel and poem.
in order to distinguish between different kinds of literature as well as consistencies between forms.


3. **Mother and Child Reunion, Paul Simon: song**

*Readability*: grade 9

*A note on the readability*: The printed lyrics for this song did not include sentences, so I used the "-2.0" line on the Fry scale in order to map the readability on the chart.

This is a song, written in 1972, by an American songwriter who is often thought of as one of the more poetic musicians in history. He writes and performs all of his songs, so, in this sense, he can be considered as an “author.” The song is slightly ambiguous, but most listeners believe that the song is dealing with death and a spiritual reunion.

I will not play the song for the students – I will only show them the lyrics printed out on a page without the “author” listed. Once we have discussed the work as though it were a poem, I will tell the students that it is actually a song and see how their ideas change (or don’t change) about whether or not this should be considered literature. Does literature have to be something written? Or can we listen to literature?

This activity should be engaging because, although we are not actually listening to music, students will be able to think about music in a critical setting. It will allow them to think about songs as poetry based on their own musical backgrounds.


4. **Narrative of the Life of Frederick Douglas, Frederick Douglas: autobiography**

*Readability*: grade 9
This is a relatively short book, in which an American slave tells the story of his life. This book has become well known in American history but stirred up much controversy at the time of its release since people refused to believe an African American, ex-slave would be capable of creating such a work.

I would like to bring up two issues in using this book. First, I will talk about the idea of non-fiction and/or autobiography in relation to literature. Is this not literature because it is a true story? Even though it is “true,” does the use of carefully constructed and eloquent language make the book a piece of literature? Even though it is an autobiography, the title claims that it is a “narrative” (i.e. a story). Does identifying the text as a story make it more a part of literature than other autobiographies are?

The second issue I would address is the idea of time. This book was not always well received, but does the fact that it has withstood time make it a piece of literature? If something is somehow “non-conventional” as literature, does it have to stand the test of time in order to be called literature?

The idea of an autobiography might be interesting to students because it gives them a chance to relate to the author in a way that they may not relate to someone writing fictional prose or poetry. They can relate in the sense that they can more easily imagine being the author of something about themselves. If they were in this position, would they consider what they are writing to be literature or just a collection of facts, sentences, etc. Would they tell their autobiography in a narrative form or some other style?


5. *Barefoot Contessa Family Style, Ina Garten: cookbook*
This selection is a cookbook, published by the chef, Ina Garten. She is probably well known by American adults, but perhaps not by adolescents. Cookbooks and recipes, however, should be familiar to all students. Garten’s cookbook is slightly different than some because it is more than just a collection of recipes. She introduces the book with quite a bit of rhetorical text and infuses each recipe with her own “authorship” – adding tips and personal messages.

This will be the first text, for which I am anticipating the most contention in recognizing the piece as literature. Can a recipe be literature? The main issue for this text will be the presence of a “narrator.” There is a sense the recipes are non-fiction, but in cookbooks by one chef/author, there is a great deal of personality throughout the book. So, this poses the question, can recognition of personality and/or style warrant something to be labeled as literature? A recipe certainly manipulates language because it works against the conventional format of prose. Can we then consider it to be a work of art and/or a piece of literature?


*Readability*: grade 10

_A note on the readability_: Because I was not sure of how to measure readability, I used the movie’s synopsis on the back cover for the Fry formula. The language in the synopsis is similar to that in the movie, but I do think that the readability is actually showing a higher level than is necessary to “read” and understand the actual movie narrative.

This movie was made in the 1990’s and was quite popular at the time. Although most adolescents do not realize this (I did not in 1995), *Clueless* is an adaptation of the Jane Austen novel, *Emma*. In this updated version of the story, the main character, “Cher” (a play on the “single-name” title of the book), lives through the trials and tribulations of love, social life, and
high school. This movie will hopefully be entertaining and accessible for the students, which will create an inviting atmosphere for thinking critically about it.

This movie will serve as another opportunity to answer the question, “does something have to be in print to be considered literature?” Watching this movie might give students a chance to see that film is just another medium included in literature. Since this movie is an adaptation of a classic novel, the students can consider how the movie (as a work of art) is different from the book. In other words, if the story is the same, and the narrative structure is the same, is it fair to say that the book is literature, but the movie is not?

Amy Heckerling wrote (adapted) and directed this movie, so the element of authorship is present as well. There are not separate writers, so the images on the screen are, essentially, coming from the same “place” as the corresponding words on the paper. Just as Austen is the author of *Emma*, Heckerling is the author of *Clueless*.


*Readability*: grade 14

*A note on the readability*: The ideas in this text may be challenging, but I do think that the readability level is misleading. In fact, when looking at the title of this section, “World Literature, Philosophy, and Religion,” I think it is obvious that the terms used just happen to have a lot of syllables, yet they are not extremely difficult words to comprehend.

In *The New Dictionary of Cultural Literacy*, I will focus primarily on the introduction to the section called, “World Literature, Philosophy, and religion.” In this introduction, the authors attempt to create a definition of literature. Interestingly, they seem to bend the definition in order to fit the organization of their own reference book. They explain why it is necessary to include
these three elements in the same section, arguing that philosophical and religious documents (as well as oral tradition, symbolism, etc.) should be considered literature.

I want to use this piece in order to show that the definition of literature is not cut and dry – that different people define it in the way that they see appropriate. This text also has sections on English literature and language that, if time allows, would be interesting to introduce to the students. By reading this text, students can consider whether or not historical, religious, etc. documents can be read as literature. And if they are read as such, what does that do to the meaning of the pieces? Does it change either the message of the piece or the way the reader interprets the text?


8. Richmond Times-Dispatch article, Stephen Ohlemacher: newspaper

Readability: grade 11

This article is titled, “College Graduates seek jobs, culture in cities.” The subject of the article is not particularly important. I chose it because it seemed like a topic that 11th graders might have some interest in, so that the reading process might be less arduous. The story looks at the percentage of college graduates living in American cities and compares that percentage with the livelihood and stability of the cities.

I wanted to incorporate a newspaper article in order to address the idea of context and varying formats. Typically, students may assume that something printed in a newspaper is simply dry, factual information. However, if students consider reading a newspaper article as literature, it will give them the chance to read it critically and investigate how a newspaper writer
can manipulate language and incorporate style in the same way that the author of a poem or novel might would.


9. Dyson and Mercury Magazine Advertisements, Domino: magazine

Readability: grade 11

I have selected two magazine advertisements (both at the same readability level) in order to show that virtually anything can be seen as literature. The first advertisement is for Dyson vacuum cleaners, and the manipulation of words and language in this piece is quite provocative. The advertisement uses both conventional form (a short paragraph of prose) as well as an extensive list of words going down one side of the ad. The second advertisement is for a Mercury car, where the advertisement is telling a short narrative about two “characters” and their experiences with this car.

These pieces will allow students who are usually disengaged from reading to feel like they have a break from the “normal” reading in the class. The advertisements should be easy to understand for 11th grade students. However, it is interesting to note that the Fry formula set both advertisements at an 11th grade level when most ads are geared toward a mass audience, who may not be at this level of reading, especially at the instructional level. It is safe to assume that most magazine readers are reading independently.

These are the most interesting texts in the set because they are unconventional as both texts and as pieces of literature. When first looking at either of these selections, students will probably deny that they are works of literature, but I would encourage them to think about why they have made such a quick decision. In fact, looking at the Dyson ad, the long list of words might look similar to some modern or postmodern authors, who completely abandon
conventional syntax and format. In the Mercury article, there is actually a short narrative incorporated, so how is that any different from a short story? Does there have to be a famous author’s name attached to a piece in order to consider it as literature? How do the images in the advertisements play into the idea of literature?


10. Introduction: What is Literature?, Terry Eagleton: literary criticism/theory

*Readability: grade 13*

This text is the introduction to a literary theory book that I read my freshman year of college. The book is meant to introduce students to the genre of literary theory, so although it is at a high readability level, I think students (especially those who are advanced) will be able to comprehend the material. In the introduction, Eagleton asks the question that my text set is attempting to answer (or at least leave an open-ended question), “what is literature?” Eagleton gives an overview of the historical and theoretical evolution of literature and provides the reader with a solid foundation for understanding what literary theory is trying to accomplish. There is a lot of information in this piece, and my goal is just for students to pick out some main ideas, not focusing on understanding each movement or body of theory.

I chose this text because it will be a good challenge for students who are planning to move on to study English in college. I did not have any exposure to theory in high school, but the theory was my favorite part of my college curriculum, so for me, it was definitely helpful in engaging me as a critical reader. I am not expecting students to have an in-depth understanding of theory. I only want to introduce the ideas and show that “literature” is a term and idea that
brings about debate and controversy. My hope is that this will make English a more intriguing subject for those students who have trouble finding excitement in works of literature.