A Whodunit Teaching Unit:
The Underworld of Victorian London and Social Contexts in the Mystery of Edwin Drood

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I am one of those English teachers who had to come at teaching the long way around. After college, I reluctantly searched for a teaching job and even more reluctantly took on a long-term substitute teaching position at a local middle school. I was the fifth in a long line of long-term substitute teachers (some of whom lasted only a day) to take on this class. I was determined to stick out the job and offer these students some consistency. By the end of the year, we had completed units covering *Romeo and Juliet*, literature of the Holocaust, and poetry. While I felt that I'd accomplished much with this class, I still looked on teaching with dread – I hated classroom management and felt ill equipped to continue. After completing the semester, I vowed I would never teach again.

Cut to ten years later.

I was back in school working on my MA in literature and serving as a teaching assistant for the English department. With ten more years under my belt and more confidence, I began teaching a section of composition. While I still worried about aspects of my teaching, my experience at the university taught me much about myself as an educator. I found myself thinking

about methodology and less about what my students thought of me. By the end of the second year, with a thesis to complete and graduation staring me in the face, I began to look back on my university teaching experiences. I made a laundry list of discoveries about myself. I no longer looked at my students as the enemy – the cold war was over. Also, I realized that I actually enjoyed planning my units and lessons. Perhaps the greatest lesson I'd learned was that I needed to have a personal stake in what I was teaching, that I couldn't fake interest. I initially thought that this was going to be a hurdle for me – my area of literary study seemed at odds with the lightning-fast micro-trends my students were discussing casually in class. Could we find common ground?

My resume of literary interests is woefully stereotypical: I have always been a fan of Victorian literature. I'm one of those annoying people who did not mind reading Dickens in school, who continued to hang on to the Pre-Raphaelites long after everyone else who'd read *Possession* moved on to Vermeer and his pearl earringed girl, and who felt that he could relate to the stereotype of Victorian repression on an uncomfortable level. I'm like the guy stuck in the 1980's who just can't stop wearing thin ties and pinning his acid washed jeans. But even worse, I'm a Victorian wannabe.

I realize that this is a rather strange preamble to an essay on teaching *The Mystery of Edwin Drood*, but I think it is valuable to understanding my approach. When one becomes semi-obsessed with a subject – even if that obsession is still in its early stages – it becomes very easy to attempt the impossible. In other words, because I love reading Victorian novels, I can, in my fevered imagination, envision teaching a work that is not often considered for most classrooms, and be daft enough to believe that one may wish to incorporate it into his or her high school English or college literature curriculum. I am well aware that most people do get a taste of Dickens on the high school level - mine was actually in junior high, when we read *A Christmas Carol* – and I realize that *Edwin Drood* generally doesn't leap to the forefront of one's mind when choosing a Dickens novel for the classroom. Nevertheless, I would invite

you to consider this work seriously. Beyond the fact that as an unfinished work it is a shorter novel, *Edwin Drood* has much to tell us about England at the end of the century. Moreover, it serves as tantalizing fodder for the developing critical thinker – who can resist attempting to answer the unanswered? While I designed this unit for the college level, with a bit of tweaking it could easily be adapted for the high school English class.

The Usual Suspects

This unit is intended to be incorporated into a 200-level general education literature course at a four-year college or university. I envision a classroom made up both of English and non-English majors who are taking the course either to fulfill a humanities credit or a literature credit. The only prerequisite for this course will be that the student has taken both a general composition course as well as an introduction-to-literature course. Because of this, I imagine the classroom will be quite diverse. While students may range from freshmen to seniors, I will assume that most students taking a class at this level have only a rudimentary knowledge of literary analysis. I want, therefore, to approach the literature from a reader-response school of criticism combined with new historicism. This approach allows my students to both interact with the literature on a personal level as well as evaluate the work within the socioeconomic and historical framework out of which the piece emerged.

Having experienced teaching in this type of classroom by interning in a general education literature course, I am familiar with the types of students that may take such courses, their knowledge base, and their comfort level discussing literature. I do not want to assume too much or too little in this regard; thus the work we will accomplish in this unit will largely be focused on discovery. Students will use resources provided in class to become experts on one aspect of the culture being studied. This knowledge will be shared with the entire classroom and connected to the literature so that students in essence teach each other and themselves. To accommodate various learning styles (visual, auditory, kinesthetic), I will use several types of

media. Students will also have an opportunity to use their own particular creative talents in their presentation of their research.

Casing the Joint

This unit was designed for a course entitled "Mystery." I want to explore the idea of mystery in the broad sense, using both fiction and non-fiction texts. Primarily I want the course to attempt to answer the following questions: What is mystery? Why do we enjoy mysteries? What is this insatiable need to know, to figure out? How does this play out in literature? In life? To answer these questions, we will look at various texts that examine mystery. Although the course will include one novel and a handful of short stories that would be considered classics in the genre, I want to challenge my students by presenting them with unorthodox texts that explore the nature of mystery. Texts will include Agatha Christie's *And Then There Were None*; Charles Dickens' *The Mystery of Edwin Drood*; short mystery stories of Poe, Dickens, Doyle and Collins; two film texts, *Picnic at Hanging Rock* and *A Passage To India*; Kazuo Ishiguro's novel *When We Were Orphans* (which uses the mystery genre to explore identity); Lillian Hellman's "Julia" from the memoir *Pentimento*; and several primary source police and press accounts of the Whitechapel murders of 1888.

The title of this two-week unit is "Mysteries of Edwin Drood." By the time the first class of this unit meets, the expectation will be that the novel has been read (for high school classes, I would divide up the novel into reading sections with discussion activities incorporated along the way). Our discussion for the two weeks will center on supplementary material that deepens students' understanding of Dickens' work. Although the main action of the novel takes place in and around Cloisterham, Jasper's (Dickens' "could be" villain) dark associations with the opium dens of London provide fertile ground for exploration. Jasper's journey moves him between the urban and the rural twice in the novel. This move seems to represent a larger issue, one of geographies: Jasper represents an evil that almost

emanates from the larger urban center and into the smaller town of Cloisterham. In order to understand the importance of London in the context of this novel, students will spend the two weeks investigating several aspects of the underbelly of Victorian London society in a variety of media. In addition, students will explore the possibilities mysteries represent by practicing devising stories based on primary texts from items found in *The Times* as well as trying their hands at creating an outline for their solution to the mystery of Edwin Drood's disappearance.

Alibis and Cover Stories

By the end of this two-week unit, I want my students to come away with the following:

- An understanding of the darker aspects of the Victorian culture in which Dickens was writing.
- A beginning sense of how one can approach analysis of a variety of texts (literary, non-fictive, artistic, and cartographical).
- A broader understanding of *mystery*.
- Tools for personal and academic research – investigative skills.

As a final piece, I would have them write an assessment of what they learned from the unit.

Choose your Weapon

For this unit, I've chosen a variety of sources to add verisimilitude and interest to the study of *The Mystery of Edwin Drood*. Each source was chosen in order to engage students in various ways. As a class we will look at several commentaries on Victorian life in London. Peter Quennell's condensed version of Mayhew's fourth volume of *London Labour and the London Poor* focuses on London's underworld, highlighting various classifications of prostitutes, beggars, and swindlers.

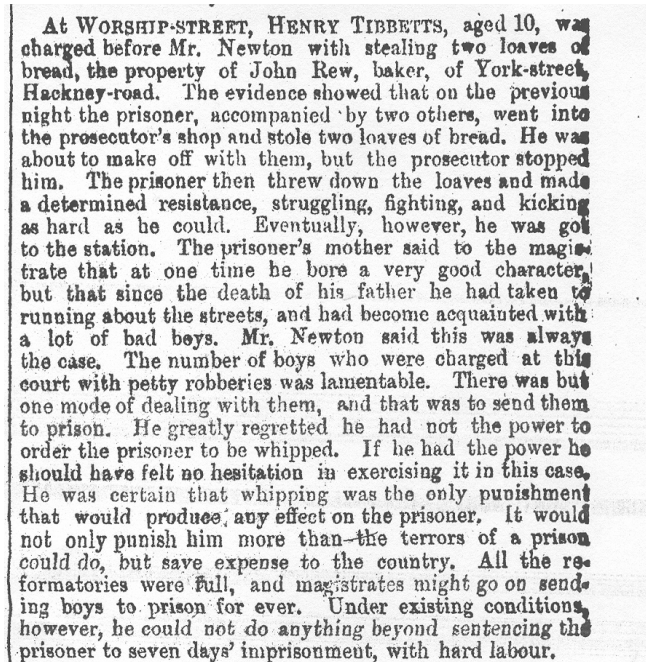
Kellow Chesney's work on the same subject broadens the discussion to include the geographical layout of criminal London. Simon Joyce's *Capital Offenses* looks at geography as a means of exploring character in literature. Students will also use Internet sources such as The Victorian Web and VictorianLondon.org to research several aspects of the darker culture of the city. In addition, students will study sections of maps of Victorian London, tracing Jasper's journey, locating opium dens, and making sense of some of the more prominent dens of iniquity. VictorianLondon.org provides several nice on-line contemporary maps that can be zoomed in on to better get the lay of the land. Maps give us a better idea of the size of this city, allow us

to mark the parameters of crime, and make connections between economic conditions and crime rates. They also give the students a context when discussing both Dickens' novel as well as the locations they uncover in their research.

Another compelling way for students to understand the look of Victorian London is by examining the art that was produced at the time. Works by such artists as Gustave Doré pro-

vide us with clues to the living conditions of London's poorest citizens. Such pictures are peppered throughout his collection of London engravings, providing a sharp contrast to images of London's leisure class also included. Doré's unique position as a foreigner helps the modern student of Victoriana (a foreigner of sorts as well to this fascinating world) see a London many Londoners were most likely unwilling to face themselves.

Excerpts from *The Times* (locally, I could only find editions that went back far enough—1880s—on microfiche in one academic library in St. Paul) allow the class to look at contemporary accounts of cases of criminal activity in the city. On a daily basis, *The Times* recorded arrests and prosecutions under the heading "Police" in the court circular section of the paper (see excerpt). We know little more than what we are given in the short articles (unless, of course, a high profile case was being covered), but this lack of knowledge allows me to develop class activities that stimulate the imagination. In the example here, from the November 2, 1868 edition of *The Times*,



At WORSHIP-STREET, HENRY TIBBETTS, aged 10, was charged before Mr. Newton with stealing two loaves of bread, the property of John Rew, baker, of York-street, Hackney-road. The evidence showed that on the previous night the prisoner, accompanied by two others, went into the prosecutor's shop and stole two loaves of bread. He was about to make off with them, but the prosecutor stopped him. The prisoner then threw down the loaves and made a determined resistance, struggling, fighting, and kicking as hard as he could. Eventually, however, he was got to the station. The prisoner's mother said to the magistrate that at one time he bore a very good character, but that since the death of his father he had taken to running about the streets, and had become acquainted with a lot of bad boys. Mr. Newton said this was always the case. The number of boys who were charged at this court with petty robberies was lamentable. There was but one mode of dealing with them, and that was to send them to prison. He greatly regretted he had not the power to order the prisoner to be whipped. If he had the power he should have felt no hesitation in exercising it in this case. He was certain that whipping was the only punishment that would produce any effect on the prisoner. It would not only punish him more than the terrors of a prison could do, but save expense to the country. All the reformatories were full, and magistrates might go on sending boys to prison for ever. Under existing conditions, however, he could not do anything beyond sentencing the prisoner to seven days' imprisonment, with hard labour.

describing the arrest and sentencing of a ten-year-old boy who stole two loaves of bread, we can make economic inferences as to some of the conditions and causes of criminality.

In addition, I will provide students with a casebook of sorts to the era's most high-profile series of crimes: the Whitechapel murders. This last element is important on two levels. First, it seems to represent the worst of the era – a horrendous product of a society that valued Christian morality, yet failed to put the axiom of "love thy neighbor" into practice on a practical level. Second, it is (like *Edwin Drood*) an unsolved mystery. This latter point allows us as a class to both explore Victorian detection methods, as well as reflect on the nature of mystery itself. The materials we will use here will be newspaper accounts, official police records, letters purported to be written by the murderer himself, as well as crime scene photos. Students will have the case described to them over the course of the two week unit; together we will form a dossier on the case including information on our favorite suspects.

The Game Is Afoot!

I want to briefly explain here the overall flow of the two-week unit, and offer some method to my madness. We will be working under the assumption that at the outset of the unit, all students will have read the novel and have engaged in preliminary discussion of the novel on the previous two class days. Each day the class will examine one or two aspects of the Victorian underworld in London, connecting it to our understanding of the novel. As we progress through the unit, students will be asked to interact with the materials in various ways that will (hopefully) make the connection to the literature more compelling. I want to move from crimes and conditions into social and economic boundaries so that we can make some sense of the world Dickens is describing. The final part of this aspect of class will be to draw some conclusions about literary geography (exploring the major role of place in the literature). Threaded through the two-week unit will be an exploration of Victorian England's most famous

true-crime case (and unsolved mystery), the Whitechapel Murders. Here we will tie this exploration to our study of the Drood case, applying our knowledge of Victorian detection to Dickens' novel. The following section will describe the unit in detail.

Brief Lesson Plans for a Two-week Unit on the Victorian Underworld of Dickens' London

Week 1

Monday

Opener: Read newspaper account of the first Whitechapel murder from *The Times*.

•Students encouraged to take notes on the case as it unfolds.

•Include visual of morgue photo of Polly Nichols (victim #1)

•Introduce the idea of this as a case-building project over the course of two weeks.

Class project: Gustave Doré and artistic depictions of outcast London - Analysis

Purpose: To give students a chance to "read" a piece of art and offer commentary and critique. To help students learn to look at art as a medium for social commentary.

As a class, look at Doré's engraving of the opium den from *Drood*. Compare to Dickens' depiction.

Assignment: Students will choose a piece of art by Doré depicting outcast London. In class we will look at supplemen-

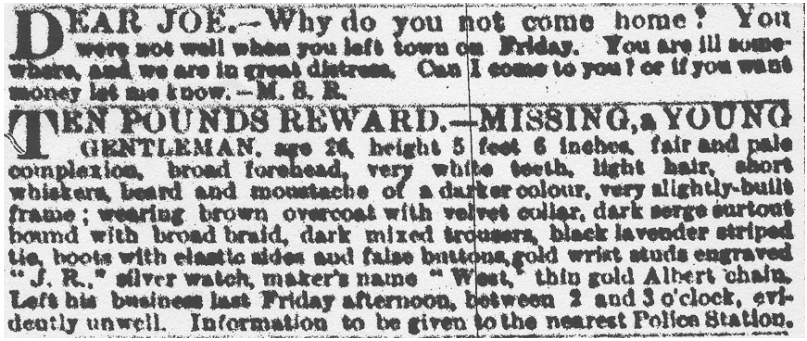
tary texts as well as the Jerrold texts (which accompany Doré's engravings) to determine if the work accurately depicts Victorian London. Students will take images with them overnight and compose a one-page analysis of the painting. In this analysis students will provide answers to the following questions: What aspect of London life does Doré depict? How does he depict it? What role do light and dark play in these pieces? Is there any symbolic meaning expressed? Based on your research, does it accurately portray a cross-section of London life? Compare/contrast to Dickens' written descriptions of London's East End. Is Doré making any social statement? What is it? How successful is the statement in this medium? Due Tuesday.

Tuesday

Collect analyses of Doré engravings.

Opener: Second Whitechapel murder. Read account of official inquest, providing any visual clues that help our understanding. Students again take notes.

Activity: Creative writing project. Using the personal section of *The Times*, students will choose a notice, such as this one from December 25, 1868:



DEAR JOE.—Why do you not come home? You were not well when you left town on Friday. You are ill somewhere, and we are in great distress. Can I come to you? or if you want money let me know.—M. S. R.

TEN POUNDS REWARD.—MISSING, a YOUNG GENTLEMAN, age 26, height 5 feet 6 inches, fair and pale complexion, broad forehead, very white teeth, light hair, short whiskers, beard and moustache of a darker colour, very slightly-built frame; wearing brown overcoat with velvet collar, dark serge surtout bound with broad braid, dark mixed trousers, black lavender striped tie, boots with elastic sides and false buttons, gold wrist studs engraved "J. R.," silver watch, maker's name "West," thin gold Albert chain. Left his business last Friday afternoon, between 2 and 3 o'clock, evidently unwell. Information to be given to the nearest Police Station.

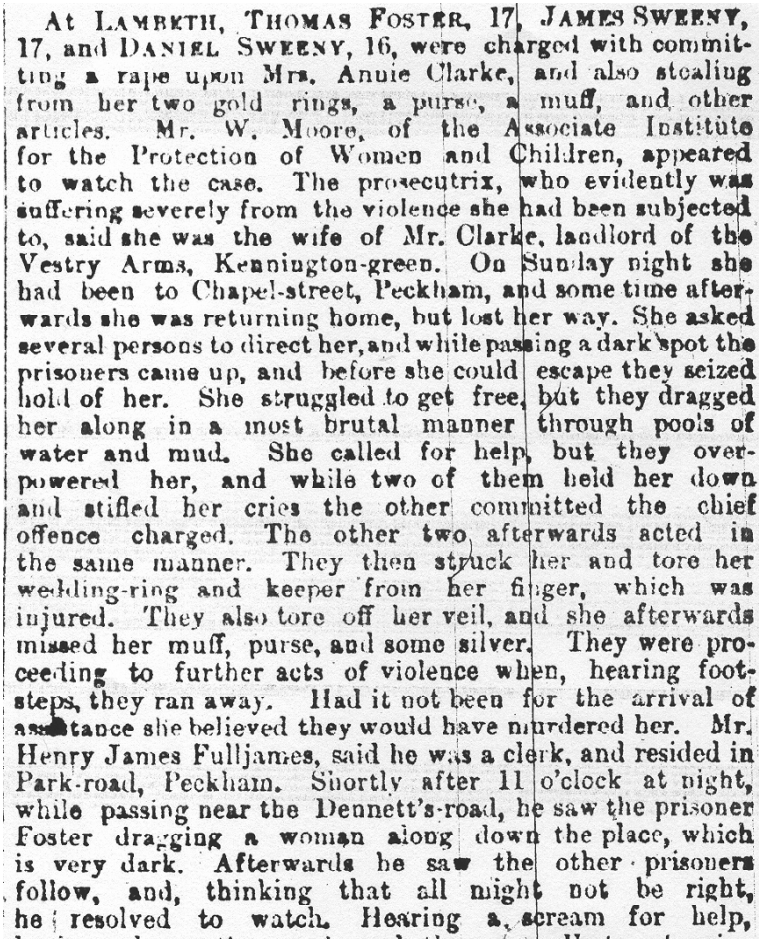
Students will create a short story that they develop out of the bare details of the ad. Students will "research" their mystery in order to provide verisimilitude to the story. In addition, students will choose one aspect of the Victorian underworld - such as prostitution or petty theft - from one of our classroom sources (Mayhew, et.al.), and become an expert on the subject. They must incorporate this element into the plot of their story. The story may be a short mystery, a character sketch, or a fictitious news account of a criminal event. The paper must be at least three pages long, and is due on Monday of the second week of the unit.

Class discussion: Discuss the facts of the disappearance of Edwin Drood.

In class project: Groups write a personal ad for *The Times* in the voice of Jasper, seeking information on Edwin Drood. The ad must include any clues (i.e. objects Drood was carrying on him at the time) that might help identify him, as well as where he was last seen.

Wednesday

Opener: News account of a double event – two murders in the East End in the course of one night. Students keep notes of the facts of each murder. Exploration of conflicting accounts.



At LAMBETH, THOMAS FOSTER, 17, JAMES SWEENY, 17, and DANIEL SWEENY, 16, were charged with committing a rape upon Mrs. Annie Clarke, and also stealing from her two gold rings, a purse, a muff, and other articles. Mr. W. Moore, of the Associate Institute for the Protection of Women and Children, appeared to watch the case. The prosecutrix, who evidently was suffering severely from the violence she had been subjected to, said she was the wife of Mr. Clarke, landlord of the Vestry Arms, Kennington-green. On Sunday night she had been to Chapel-street, Peckham, and some time afterwards she was returning home, but lost her way. She asked several persons to direct her, and while passing a dark spot the prisoners came up, and before she could escape they seized hold of her. She struggled to get free, but they dragged her along in a most brutal manner through pools of water and mud. She called for help, but they overpowered her, and while two of them held her down and stifled her cries the other committed the chief offence charged. The other two afterwards acted in the same manner. They then struck her and tore her wedding-ring and keeper from her finger, which was injured. They also tore off her veil, and she afterwards missed her muff, purse, and some silver. They were proceeding to further acts of violence when, hearing footsteps, they ran away. Had it not been for the arrival of assistance she believed they would have murdered her. Mr. Henry James Fulljames, said he was a clerk, and resided in Park-road, Peckham. Shortly after 11 o'clock at night, while passing near the Dennett's-road, he saw the prisoner Foster dragging a woman along down the place, which is very dark. Afterwards he saw the other prisoners follow, and, thinking that all might not be right, he resolved to watch. Hearing a scream for help,

In class project: Examination of criminal behavior in accounts from *The Times*. Using excerpts from the court circular section of *The Times*, students will examine different aspects and types of Victorian crimes contemporary to the time that Dickens was writing *Edwin Drood*. Students will begin to examine London locations and their relationship to crime. In addition, we will use computer and paper sources to find out as much information about these crimes as possible. We will attempt to find out if any patterns emerge in our study.

Thursday

Opener: Description of the inquest of the fifth and final Whitechapel murder. Students will take notes and we will discuss the crimes as a progression and see if there is any correlation to an increase in the crime rate in London. How might this series of murders represent London at its worst? How do we reconcile it to the accomplishments and cultural advances in other aspects of Victorian society?

Class discussion: Suspects. We will examine the characters in *Edwin Drood* and develop a list of suspects, looking for motive and opportunity as we do so. Students must cite textual material in their defense of one particular suspect.

Workshop: Students will work in pairs on drafts of their creative writing piece. I will circulate and work with them as well.

Week Two

Monday

Creative writing assignment due.

Opener: Letters from Hell. Examine three significant letters purporting to be written by the Whitechapel murderer. What clues can we glean from them?

In class project: Maps. Maps can tell us a great deal about society, economics, crime, and culture. Using maps of Victorian London and Rochester, we will map Jasper's

journey to London, pin-pointing areas of interest along the way. Students will try and locate the Lascar's opium den in London's East End, as well as areas of interest in Rochester. In addition we will map out the boundaries of crime in the big city.

Lecture: Literary geography. Discuss Joyce's exploration of the importance of place in fiction.

Group discussion: How does Jasper's physical journey mirror his interior journey?

Tuesday

Presentation of creative writing stories. Students will summarize the plots of their stories, share a portion that they are most pleased with, and discuss their area of expertise on Victorian London. Whole hour.

Wrap up: Discuss Dickens' writing process and compare to students' own approach to fiction.

Wednesday

Opener: I will outline for the class three to four major suspects in the Whitechapel case.

Group work: Each group will take one Whitechapel suspect and read through material provided.

Whole group debate: Each group will have a chance to give evidence tying their suspect to the crimes. As a class we will try and determine which (if any) is the most likely suspect.

Discussion of crime in general. Tie in to Dickens' exploration of criminal behavior in his last novel. Is it significant that

his final novel is a murder mystery? How so?

Assignment: For class tomorrow, create an outline that attempts to finish Dickens' novel. Offer the class your theory as to the solution to the mystery of Edwin Drood's disappearance. Each solution must be supported by evidence from the novel as well as contemporary understanding of the culture at this time (i.e. it must be within the realm of the possible).

Thursday

Solutions: Each student will present his or her solution to the mystery of Edwin Drood. As a class we will vote on the solution we think is the best, or formulate a new solution based on the suggestions from the presentations.

Lecture/Discussion: We will wrap up our discussion by examining the nature of mystery in this novel. How does the lack of an ending play on our imaginations? How does our deepened understanding of the Victorian underworld help us to make sense of the novel? How does Dickens explore the underbelly of his culture in the novel?

The Solution

I look now at this unit, developed months ago, and cannot help but smile a bit at the over-ambitiousness of it. In many ways it reads exactly as I composed it – it is idealistic, rigorous, and its success is somewhat dependent on the class into which it is incorporated. Yet the thought of teaching it one day still excites me. I look at this unit as a representation of possibility, both for me and for my students. In the end, I am less concerned with whether my students emerge from *Edwin Drood* with the skills to interpret a piece of art, or understand geographic symbolism, but rather I am much more interested in their experience – using these ma-

terials – interacting with text, exploring, figuring out, thinking.

I also hope that there is another teacher or two out there interested enough (or overly idealistic enough) to implement, adapt, or steal from this unit for their own classrooms – teachers who don't mind jumping in headlong into the depths of possibility, who gushingly model engagement with a body of texts, who are willing to share their own peculiar literary passions with their students with the very insistent belief that they are activating their students' imaginations and critical thinking skills.

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