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Using Walt Whitman As Part of a Social Justice Language Arts Curriculum

Making schooling more applicable requires that secondary language arts teachers venture beyond traditional school practices and common educational outcomes, and design curriculum emphasizing critical literacy and social education. One possible teaching strategy involves using poets such as Walt Whitman to enhance language arts social justice pedagogy. Those interested in teaching secondary students about Whitman can use his poetry not only to examine his brilliance as a poet, but also to show that his work fits into discussions on relevant historical, political, and social issues in America, such as race, slavery, and the African American experience. Ultimately, by challenging students to critically examine Whitman's views on slavery and his representation of African Americans, language arts teachers not only move a step closer to connecting classrooms to students' lives, but they also prepare students for real-world pressures and societal discourse regarding complex social issues such as cultural identity, communication, oppression, and marginalization.

Social justice education is about discovery and emancipation. Relying heavily on student-centered teaching strategies such as problem-posing, observation, reflection, and discussion, social justice educators attempt to tap into students' perceptions of their surrounding

world and, most importantly, focus their attention on the economic and political forces shaping society. To social justice educators, all of society's groups are seen as equal participants in a collaborative setting designed to meet the needs of everyone; their curriculum stresses the

importance of social justice processes that include sharing resources, taking responsibility for developing one's capacity, and providing societal surroundings that are physically and psychologically safe. Ultimately, they do not consider power, oppression, or domination effective methods for affecting change.

In fact, social justice educators go out of the way to promote schooling strategies that define and investigate forms of social oppression so students can recognize how it operates at various individual, cultural, and institutional levels. As British philosopher of science, Roy Bhaskar explains, social justice education acknowledges the "needs of different groups as quite different" (Corson 30). According to Bhaskar, these differences arise from "different group interests" and require "different forms of treatment" (31). Significantly, social justice educators accept this idea - the idea that different groups have different needs, and that treating people equally and fairly means not treating everyone the same, or even "potentially the same" (31). Moreover, they recognize the need for providing students with curriculum that stresses the importance of interpreting societal forms of oppression and, as Paolo Freire points out, learning experiences that enhance student awareness of people living in cultures of silence.

Like Bhaskar, there are other social justice educators such as Randy and Katherine Bomer who support this approach to teaching, arguing that this type of schooling enhances and refines

the student's sensitivity to the abundance of oppression in the world. This sensitivity, of course, is seen as an important first step toward finding ways to reduce society's oppressive forces.

Bomer and Bomer, for instance, feel that teachers must connect students' interests to socially significant themes, social justice, and critical action. As supporters of the National Writing Project, both agree that too many traditional reading and writing teaching strategies focus on "the

individual (to the exclusion of collective social knowledge and action) and end up reproducing the same old dominant culture and social divisions" (Bomer and Bomer 1).

Solving the problem, according to Bomer and Bomer, requires that language arts teachers pay attention to "the social and political importance of what kids contemplate as writers and readers" (9), and help students develop a habit of "thinking in dialogue" about political and social realities (8). To Bomer and Bomer, teaching students how to read critically - how to identify, interpret, and reflect on critical concepts such as power, race, language, gender, and flow of money - not only helps learners relate critical concepts to one another, but also encourages them to participate in critical conversations "about books they read or about the world they live in" (45). This can lead to student writing assignments promoting social action, and classroom dialogue centering on student impressions of history, social and political structures, and human rights. For this to happen, teachers must be willing to reconsider how students are traditionally taught reading and writing. Once done, Bomer and Bomer feel that language arts instructors will be in a better position to provide students with plausible curriculum that helps teach the importance of social justice as well as how to read and write critically.

Certainly, Bomer and Bomer would agree that representative themes in several of Whitman's better-known pieces of work could bolster any language arts curriculum emphasizing social justice. However, as they make clear, discussions on social justice pedagogy must also include discussions on traditional methodology involving language arts teaching. This means that before tackling social justice issues or writers like Whitman, language arts teachers should first be willing to scrutinize how students are being taught to read and study literature in today's public schools. For many, recognizing the limitations of teaching strategies that call for using

literature textbooks, publisher-supplied "teacher's editions" of classroom texts, and publisher-created supplementary teaching materials, is a good place to begin.

At some point, all language arts teachers should become more familiar with this country's highly politicized textbook debate and exactly how the issues surrounding the debate negatively affect curriculum and classroom instruction. For instance, it is no secret that textbook publishers generally "try to avoid controversy that might hurt sales" (Spring 249). Publishers cater to school administrators who are unwilling to purchase textbooks that could upset parents or communities. After all, buying a potentially controversial text could negatively affect an administrator's employment status. So, as Joel Spring argues, textbook publishers interested in selling their product to local schools avoid controversy by downplaying or eliminating ideas that are commonly "criticized by censorship groups" (249). As a result, Spring believes that America's textbooks have become "bland and boring compendiums of facts containing no political messages" (250).

In addition to Spring, James Loewen also doubts today's boring, bland, and politically barren textbooks, especially how they seem to discourage critical inquiry and active teaching. Loewen found that teachers use textbooks 70% of the time in America's schools (Loewen 288). To him, many textbooks contain the "usual standards of discourse" (287) that make it easy for teachers and students to "put forth minimal effort" (289). Specifically, he points to the inclusion of "innumerable lists" often found in textbooks -- lists of "main ideas, key terms, people to remember, dates, skill activities, matching, fill in the blanks, and review identifications" -- that help to create the illusion that course content is "rigorous and factual, so teachers and students imagine they are learning something" (289-90).

For Loewen, the publishing industry's interest in perpetuating uniformity and a "rhetoric of certainty" (288) makes life frighteningly simple and risk-free for educators. For instance, textbooks make lesson plans "easier to organize" and develop; the videos, teaching manuals, and teacher's editions sent by publishers allow teachers to "hide behind them" when parents or administrators question content decisions (290). Further, textbooks afford teachers the security that they are "covering the waterfront, so their students won't be disadvantaged on statewide or nationwide standardized tests" (288). Admittedly, there are exceptional teachers across the country: teachers who challenge students to be critical thinkers; teachers who sometimes teach against the text. However, by and large, Loewen believes that most teachers tend to play it safe and avoid unnecessary risks by choosing to remain "locked into" the comfort of teaching with traditional textbooks (291).

To develop Spring's and Loewen's arguments, and to better illustrate the one-dimensional nature of various literature textbooks, consider the following summary of a teaching unit on Walt Whitman in an annotated teacher's edition of a popular 11th grade language art text: Prentice-Hall's 1994 teacher's edition of *Literature The American Experience*. Tellingly, a close examination of this unit reveals how little attention Prentice Hall gives to social justice or critical pedagogy. There is, for example, no mention of the deep, often radical nature of Whitman's political and social insight, especially his views on the African American experience in America during the 1840s and 1850s. Rather, the publisher's primary goals for this teaching unit center on fundamental learning outcomes, such as: increasing students' awareness of the language, imagery, and structure of Whitman's poetry; heightening their knowledge of Whitman's idealistic views of America and its people; and, analyzing Whitman's work and

explaining how/why it connects to the theme of "Division, War, and Reconciliation" ("Literature" 396).

To begin with, the publisher provides a brief biography on Whitman for teachers to read and discuss with students. Located in the unit's introduction, the biography refers to Whitman as "one of the most gifted poets his country has ever produced" (396). Beyond this, the biography offers readers general pieces of information including: a brief mention of where Whitman was born and raised; a few lines indicating that he worked as an editor for the *Brooklyn Daily Eagle*, a "respected newspaper" (396); and, a small passage saying that Whitman traveled around the country, "observing the diversity of the American landscapes and people" (396). Outside of

mentioning Whitman's firing from the respected Brooklyn Eagle due to his strong "opposition to slavery" (396), there is nothing in the biography that indicates Whitman's political or social leanings, in particular his empathy for slaves and his interest in ending slavery.

By and large, the biography mostly focuses on Whitman's passion for writing poetry, most notably his poetic masterwork, *Leaves of Grass*. The biography implies that Whitman spent a great deal of his life revising, reshaping, and expanding *Leaves of Grass*. In a rather cursory description of *Leaves*, the biography states that Whitman viewed *Leaves* as "one long poem, expressing his evolving vision of the world" that included his "belief in democracy, equality, and the spiritual unity of all forms of life" and his interest in conveying "the potential of the human spirit" (396). In addition, the biography also briefly mentions how Whitman relied on his familiarity with Transcendentalism to help shape "his unique ability to absorb and comprehend everything he observed" (396), and to help capture the "diversity of the American people" by conveying the "energy and intensity of all forms of life" (396). Ultimately, according

to the biography, Whitman's *Leaves of Grass* stands as one of the most influential collections of poetry ever written and there is "little doubt" that Whitman proved "himself as a poet" (396).

In addition to the biography, under a subheading entitled "Guide for Interpreting," the introduction also suggests that teachers focus students' attention on "Writer's Techniques": on the "style" of Whitman's poetry, and on his use of "free verse" (397). Apparently, before they begin reading Whitman's work, students should know that the "Literary Focus" of the unit is to "help students appreciate the concept of style," and to understand that free verse is a "dominant poetic

form in modern and contemporary poetry" (397). As for any thematic concerns, the "Guide" also points out that teachers should "tell students that self-reflection plays a central role in many of Whitman's poems"; they should ask students about some of the "benefits" of self-reflection, and some of the "potential drawbacks" (397). Yet again, like Whitman's biography, the "Guide for Interpreting" section carefully avoids mentioning Whitman's interest in politics, race relations, slaves, slavery, or slavery's effect on society.

It appears that after teachers help students work through the unit's introduction, Prentice-Hall assumes that students will be in a better position to read and discuss Whitman's work. Speaking of Whitman's work, the publisher includes the following prose and poetry to teach to students: two paragraphs from "Preface to the 1855 Edition of *Leaves of Grass*"; stanzas 1, 6, 9, 14, 17, 51, and 52 from the poem, "Song of Myself"; and the poems, "Beat! Beat! Drums!"; "When I Heard the Learn'd Astronomer"; "A Noiseless Patient Spider"; and "When the Lilacs Last in the Dooryard Bloom'd." When it comes to helping students comprehend each piece, Prentice-Hall offers several suggestions. For example, when reading Whitman's "Preface," students should think about "how they would describe the United States and its people" and the

type of "impression" they would want to convey to others (398). Moreover, students should consider whether Whitman's view of the United States is still accurate or if his attitude would be different if he were living in "Today's America" (398).

As for Whitman's poetry, the publisher provides teaching strategies that include:

_ For “Song of Myself,” teachers are to mention that Whitman grew up in a family that “expected equal rights and democracy” to prevail in America. Teachers are to focus students’ attention on the poem’s “youthful optimism.” They should also highlight the “Multicultural Focus” of the poem and say that this poem has “much in common with Eastern philosophy and thought” and Taoism. Further, teachers should ask students to analyze the poem’s style, its use of “catalogs and parallelism.” Finally, teachers should ask students to ponder how this poem illustrates Whitman’s “affection for people who work outdoors” (399 - 403).

_ For “Beat! Beat! Drums!” students are to focus on the speaker’s “attitude toward the war,” and on how alliteration contributes to the poem’s impact. Moreover, students should learn that Whitman was a “staunch supporter of the 405).

_ For “When I Heard the Learn’d Astronomer,” teachers should mention the poem’s use of parallelism and how this technique helps to emphasize

the message. Students should also consider why the “mystery of the heavens” is sometimes served better “by silence than by ‘charts and diagrams’” (406).

_ For a “Noiseless Patient Spider,” students should be asked to “describe their attitudes toward spiders”; students should also discuss how the

speaker conveys the fact that he "is lonely even though he says he is "surrounded'" (407).

_ Before reading the poem "When the Lilacs Last in Dooryard Bloom'd," students are to consider how the loss of a leader affects citizens. Teachers can address the multicultural aspect of the poem by: mentioning Mohandas Gandhi and his assassination; talking about the racism in Gandhi's country; and by asking students from "different cultural backgrounds to name an additional hero from their homeland and discuss his or her achievements." Students are also to examine Whitman's use of free verse, parallelism, cataloging, and other techniques he uses to create "rhythm and unity" in the poem. Finally, for "Thematic" responses, students should think about the "self-realizations" that the speaker comes to in the poem (408 - 417).

Admittedly, there is valuable information about Whitman's life and his work in this teaching unit. Sure, students should know that besides being a fisherman, editor, and journalist, Whitman was a brilliant poet who championed the common man and revolutionized poetry by pushing the traditional limits of poetic form and style. And yes, the publisher does provide several questions that teachers could use to advance discussions about the United States and its

citizens. However, as a whole, this unit provides little opportunity for students and teachers to think in complex or interesting ways about America, its history, Walt Whitman, people's lives, or

any relevant cultural or social movement. Plainly, as Spring and Loewen attest, there is nothing the least bit controversial in this unit, and there are no stimulating critical strategies teachers could use to connect Whitman's literature to issues related to ethics, morality, or social justice. For instance, not once does Prentice-Hall ask teachers or students to think about how Whitman's work could function as political and social commentary on the historical repression of marginalized groups like African Americans. In the end, Prentice-Hall's instructional unit on Walt Whitman is undemanding, and fails to go beyond the conventional instructional discourse often associated with teaching Whitman, poetry, literature, and language arts in many public high schools

Could this particular teaching unit on Whitman be more worthwhile and socially significant? Could a secondary language arts teacher use this unit and make it more reflective of Whitman's uncompromising ideology and his tussle with the slavery controversy? The answer, of course, is yes. However, enriching this unit would require a willingness to go beyond the relative safety of this classroom textbook. According to Alan Webb, to really help students find the "historical in the contemporary, and the contemporary in the historical" (Carey-Webb 143), language arts teachers should eagerly explore "controversies in open, constructive, and pedagogically sound ways" (143). To Webb, teaching must be about challenging "established ways of knowing, to contrast viewpoints, and to broaden perspectives" (122). To do this, Webb agrees that language arts teachers need to reexamine teaching methodology requiring textbooks, emphasizing that it is better to use texts as "entry points" to critical language arts teaching (98).

Again, as the earlier summary of Prentice Hall's instructional unit on Whitman makes clear, classroom texts commonly give little to no perspective on his commitment to the liberation of slaves and the abolishment of slavery. Therefore, as Webb would undoubtedly agree, supplying students with additional information and resources more reflective of Whitman's emotional involvement in the slavery debate would go a long way toward improving this particular teaching unit on Whitman, and toward making it more socially informed.

To begin with, any discussion of Whitman's life, his work, and his views on slavery needs to go beyond mentioning that he was fired from the *Brooklyn Daily Eagle* due to his strong "opposition to slavery" ("Literature" 396). Students should know, for example, that many critics consider Whitman's attitude about race and slavery contradictory and difficult to pin down. Leadie Clark, for one, argues that Whitman was not a "deep or consistent thinker" when it came to race and was quite ignorant to the "ways of slaves" (Clark 14). According to Clark, Whitman cared little that the "Negro had spent two and a half centuries in involuntary servitude in this country" (59). In fact, Clark says that if "Whitman had not been constantly promoting the cause of the white workingman, actual Negro slavery would have caused him few qualms, for on the question of Negro slavery he was as often pro-slavery as anti -slavery" (13). During his life, Clark feels that Whitman never changes his "point of view" (13) on slavery, and at best, Clark feels Whitman's overall commentary on slavery is marked with "equivocation" (13) rather than eloquence.

Like Clark, Martin Klammer acknowledges that when it comes to slavery, Whitman's views appear ambiguous. Klammer says that a "number of Whitman texts show that he [Whitman] thought blacks inferior to whites and that his opposition to the extension of slavery

had little, if anything, to do with sympathy for slaves" (Klammer 3). According to Klammer, critics continue to struggle with trying to account for "Whitman's contradictions between his conservative, prejudiced views as a journalist, rooted in the mainstream Northern attitudes of his day, and his visionary, egalitarian ideas as a poet, inspired by the hope of a multiracial and inclusive America" (3). Admittedly, Klammer recognizes that some of Whitman's work is uninformed when it comes to slavery and race relations.

However, Klammer also says that it is a mistake to completely dismiss all of Whitman's work as racially prejudiced. In fact, he believes that Whitman's baffling attitudes on slavery were crucial to his development as a poet. Specifically, he considers Whitman's personal struggle with the issue of slavery to be a "compelling force behind his quest for a new form of expression that culminates in *Leaves of Grass*," a "major text dealing with race relations in the mid-nineteenth century" (3-4). Yes, Whitman was a pro-slavery apologist during his journalism career; true, his strong "Free Soil" stance in the late 1840s was probably motivated "more by his concern for the opportunities of white laborers than sympathy for African Americans" (4). However, as a response to reading essays by Ralph Waldo Emerson, and as a reaction to mounting frustration with the "national and local political developments on the issue of slavery" and the "racial attitudes and ideologies" prevalent in American culture (5), Whitman's perception of himself, his vocation, and slavery changes radically by the mid-1850s. Ultimately, it is Klammer's opinion that during his lifetime, Whitman effectively settles the "tensions within his position on slavery" (4). To Klammer, Whitman's ever-increasing distaste for slavery ultimately manifests itself in his poetry,

particularly in the "eloquent passages about African American dignity and suffering" found in 1855's *Leaves of Grass*, Whitman's "stunning and novel

portrayal of African Americans and a modeling for whites of the response of imaginative entry in the slave's experience" (5).

If what Klammer is saying is true, then any discussion of Whitman's biography must include an investigation of the paradoxical nature of Whitman's views on blacks and slavery. Once more, using Whitman to enhance critical pedagogy on the African American experience demands that teachers be open to promoting critical thought and classroom discussion about how his life and his work connects to questions involving race and the African American experience in America. In truth, it seems obvious that students should know that Whitman tussled with race and prejudice. As Langston Hughes points out, Whitman's struggle makes him all the more human because many "great artists and leaders 'have not always been great men and women in their every day thoughts, speech or ways of living'" (2). To Hughes, great people "are not gods: 'They are mortal human beings subjected to all the currents and evils, sins, and stupidities'" of the times (2). Therefore, it stands to reason that part of providing students with a meaningful learning experience on Whitman means that teachers should be willing to trace Whitman's "times": his "every day thoughts" on blacks and slavery, both good and bad; his struggle with a life blighted by bigotry, evils, sins, and stupidities; and, most importantly, his ability to overcome his ignorance to grow and mature as a human being.

In addition to augmenting Whitman's biography, teachers should also be choosy when it comes to deciding on pieces of literature that express Whitman's dedication to portraying the black experience and African Americans as "equal partners with whites in a democratic future and as beautiful and dignified people" (115). As previously mentioned, Prentice Hall suggests using poems, such as "Beat! Beat! Drums!", "When I Heard the Learn'd Astronomer,"

"Noiseless Patient Spider," and "When the Lilacs Last in Dooryard Bloom'd." While these are fine examples of Whitman's poetry, they are not particularly useful for calling attention to his interest in important issues associated with race, slavery, or the black experience in America. Consequently, teachers are better off supplying students with poems representative of the "transforming influence of slavery" (116) on Whitman's political and social beliefs, poems such as "Song for Certain Congressman," "A Boston Ballad," "I Sing the Body Electric" and, of course, the runaway-slave passage in "Song of Myself."

"Song for Certain Congressman" stands as Whitman's first real foray into satirical verse. First published in 1850 by the *New York Evening Post*, "Song" reveals Whitman's anger over the willingness of the Democratic Party and the North to give in to Southern slave-owners by compromising on the "issue of slavery" (Erkkila 53). Assuming the voice of the congressmen he belittles, Whitman writes, "We are all docile Dough-Faces,/They knead us with the fist,/They, the dashing southern lords,/We labor as they list;/For them to speak - or hold our tongues,/For them we turn and twist" (Murphy 661). Fervently, Whitman condemns "creamy" and "meek" Northern congressman such as Daniel Webster, Robert J. Walker, and Donald S. Dickinson. Each,

according to Whitman, enthusiastically surrendered their anti-slavery principles to "howl against Free soil and 'abolition'," to "put down 'agitation'," and to "damn all 'northern fanatics'" (661).

1. During the summer of 1849, a series of events took place that angered Whitman, such as a "stricter Fugitive Slave Law, the continuation of slavery in the District of Columbia, the extension of slavery in the new territory, and a prohibition of congressional interference with the interstate slave trade." See Betsy Erkkila, *Whitman the Political Poet* for more background information on specific historical and political events leading up to and affecting Whitman's, "Song."

Clearly, a close reading of Whitman's raging "Song for Certain Congressman" hints at his increasing displeasure with slavery and the politics of compromise. As Betsy Erkkila suggests, the poem voices Whitman's sense of "personal and communal betrayal"; its tone "arises out of the experience of fracture and incongruence in the political sphere" (Erkkila 54). Moreover, as Klammer argues, by submitting "Song" for publication in a daily newspaper rather than a literary magazine, Whitman was clearly "hoping to reach" and affect a much "broader audience" (Klammer 75-76) with his condemnations and anti-slavery principles in an attempt to elevate sympathy for slaves.

Like "Song for Certain Congressman," Whitman's poem "A Boston Ballad" also displays his dedication to social and political issues, and his interest in publishing ideas about blacks and slavery. Specifically, 1854's "Ballad" is Whitman's radical reply to the "arrest, trial, and return of fugitive slave, Anthony Burns" (Erkkila 63). According to Erkilla, the poem is Whitman's "poetic burning of the constitution" (63) – it is his protest of the Fugitive Slave Law, the "politics of

compromise, as well as the larger betrayal of republican values in an orderly, complacent, but ultimately dead America" (63).

From start to finish, the poem focuses on a character named "Jonathan" who appears to represent the past successes and present failures of American democracy. Ordered to "Clear the Way," for the "President's marshal - way for the government cannon!/Way for the Federal foot and dragoons" (Murphy 292), throughout the poem it is obvious that although Jonathan's freedoms are being ravaged by an invasive federal government, he cares little and appears quite indifferent. For instance, "bandaged and bloodless" (Murphy 293) ghosts from the revolutionary past – apparitions from the fog to chattering "bare gums" (292) and protesting the "violation of

the republican ideals for which they fought and died" (Klammer 107) -- quickly engulf "Yankee Doodle" (Murphy 292), the American flag, the parade, and all images of America's present. All that the "orderly" and "cute" (Murphy 293-294) Jonathan does is stick his hands in his pockets and watch as the parade rolls by. Representing America's willingness to "sacrifice the principles of liberty, self-sovereignty, and inalienable rights for personal comfort and material wealth," Jonathan symbolizes America's increasing lack of "revolutionary vitality" (Erkkila 65). To Whitman, this slipshod attitude was troubling because he thought it was causing the nation to lose its republican identity. Furthermore, Whitman also felt that America's apparent loss of interest in its freedom-fighting roots made the country vulnerable to the reemergence of a totalitarian government. When Whitman writes, "Dig out King George's coffin, unwrap him quick from the grave-clothes, box up his bones for a journey,/Find a Yankee-clipper - here is freight for you,/black-bellied

clipper" (Murphy 293), he is obviously recalling the monarchy to show readers what can happen if they continue to be apathetic like Jonathan, and if they fail to address their nation's increasing inability to "respond to challenges to liberty and self-sovereignty" (Erkkila 108).

To Whitman, one of the biggest challenges to the American idea of liberty at that time was, of course, slavery. The previous explanation notwithstanding, the impression of King George arriving on a clipper in "Ballad" (an image associated with the "middle passage," "black-bellied slaves," and slavery) also suggests an association between the king, America, and the institution of slavery. As Klammer argues, the ship serves as a sign of "technological progress and the traffic of slaves" in America (Klammer 65). Moreover, it also illustrates the "paradox of

American progress in the mid-nineteenth century: The advance of America had become bound to the advance of the institutions of slavery" (65). No doubt, when Whitman penned "A Boston Ballad," he was thinking of slavery and less-than-American-like laws such as the Fugitive Slave Act. To him, the American slave-system reflected the nation's growing indifference to independence, and its eagerness to sacrifice liberty for economic attainment. Ultimately, like "Song," Whitman's "A Boston Ballad" underscores his growing aversion to the nation's connection to the advancement of slavery.

Another poem reflective of Whitman's transforming thoughts concerning slavery is "I Sing the Body Electric." Deeply political, this poem takes aim at the heart of America's body politic. It

is, by far, Whitman's most-developed piece of poetry focusing on the issue of slavery. "I Sing the Body Electric" is a rousing celebration of the black form, and like "Song" and "Boston," a close reading of this poem will certainly reveal a great deal more about Whitman's attitudes on slavery, race, class, and the idea of racial inferiority.

To help intensify his challenge to some of the negative racial attitudes swirling around America, "I Sing the Body Electric" makes the most of a series of rhetorical questions and self-assured declarations regarding the black, body electric. Questions that Whitman asks early on in the poem frame the poem's meaning. Some of the more important questions include the following: "Was it doubted that those who corrupt their bodies conceal themselves?/And if those who defile the living are as bad as they who defile the dead?"; "Is it a slave? Is it one of the dull-faced immigrants just landed on the wharf?"; "Do you know so much yourself that you call the meanest ignorant?/Do you suppose you have a right to a good sight, and he or she has no right to a sight?" (Murphy 132). By scrutinizing questions such as these, and by analyzing the poem's

rhetorical strategies, student readers will undoubtedly unearth several important political and social messages from Whitman. For instance, Whitman uses his poetic expertise and suggestive skills to challenge narrow-minded racial attitudes, and to mock citizens participating in and supporting the "institution of slavery" (126). Boldly, like a lawyer during cross-examination, Whitman grills and dares readers to ponder the contemptible idea of selling other human beings -- the crime of "buying and selling human lives" (126) -- as well as America's societal and political interest in pandering to the economics of slavery. Clearly, Whitman wants explanations and

answers from America: a nation supposedly founded on ideals, such as "All men are created equal," and "liberty and justice for all."

Just as important, Whitman also uses his capacity to question and think logically to promote the value of black humanity. As Erkkila proposes, Whitman's intention in this poem is to enlist the audience "in the defense of black personhood that is the core of the poem" (Erkkila 126). As proof, consider the following passage in the poem:

> A man's body at auction/ . . ./I help the auctioneer, the sloven does not know half his business/Gentleman look on this wonder,/Whatever the bids for the bidders they cannot be high enough for it,/For it the globe lay preparing quintillions of years without one animal or plant,/For it the revolving cycles truly and steadily roll'd. (132-133)

By becoming the poem's auctioneer, Whitman places himself in a position to speak directly to his audience about the brilliance of the black slaves. With vigor, he uses the opportunity to

humanize male blackness – the fathers "of those who shall be fathers in their turns" (133). Likewise, he also affirms the virtues of black women, "the bearers of them that shall grow and be mates to the mothers" (133). Ultimately, by the time he asks the question, "Have you ever loved the body of a women?/have you ever loved the body of a man?/"Do you not see that these are

exactly the same to all in all nations and times all over the earth?" (134), it is clear that Whitman is trying to establish the worthiness of black men and women.

In the end, Whitman's point about the importance of racial equality is unmistakable in "I Sing the Body Electric." Eagerly, he yearns for his audience to embrace the idea that whether a person's limbs are "red, black, or white" (133) each is equally as important as the other because each shares the "same old blood! The same red-running blood!" (133) inside.

The last piece of work from Whitman that teachers could use in this teaching unit is the runaway-slave passage in Whitman's "Song of Myself." Like "A Boston Ballad," this passage is another worthy statement of Whitman's political defiance and his intolerance of slavery, particularly his detestation of the Fugitive Slave Law.

Contrary to those who categorize Whitman as uncaring and unsupportive of blacks, slaves, and the slave revolt, the slave passage from "Song of Myself" appears to support the notion that Whitman was willing to "assist individuals who flee their oppressors" (Erkkila 67). As proof, consider that when the runaway slave in the poem comes to Whitman's house and stops outside, Whitman seems more than ready to lend a hand. Appearing as "limpsy and weak," the runaway slave receives assurance, a tub of water to soothe his "sweated body and bruis'd

feet," and "coarse clean clothes" to wear (Murphy 72) from Whitman. During a week together, Whitman not only tends to the "galls of his [the slave's] neck and ankles (72), but he also feeds

the runaway. Further, before sending the slave north, Whitman also provides the slave with the "fire-lock lean'd in the corner" (72). Having a gun in the corner of the room to begin with is a

gesture that suggests that Whitman "will defend his [and any slave's] flight to freedom at gunpoint if necessary" (Erkkila 62).

These things in mind, it is difficult to acknowledge arguments from critics such as Clark who contend that Whitman "disliked the Negro," that he saw "no place for him in America," and that he never "accepted the free Negro" (Clark 71). On the contrary, the passage again substantiates Whitman's interest in addressing the conditions of "oppressed persons'" and their "transformation to liberation" (Klammer 139). As important, the slave passage in "Song of Myself," like many of Whitman's slave poems, also provokes understanding from America's white community. As Klammer suggests, Whitman knew that to "sympathize with the black experience," white readers must "imaginatively , passionately, enter into it" (131) to see oppressed people. Plainly, this passage helps readers to do this, and like much of Whitman's slavery-themed poetry, the slave passage from "Song of Myself" can fit nicely into a social justice teaching unit designed to challenge young adults to think critically about social and cultural assumptions. Importantly, this passage can help to illustrate the important role empathy plays in providing justice and equity for all people who suffer from sexual, racial or economic oppression.

Sadly, far too many African Americans and other minorities continue to be misrepresented and/or completely ignored by today's schools and by American society. More than anyone involved in the education enterprise, secondary language arts teachers are in the best position to address this problem. As previously discussed, with a little courage and creativeness,

language arts teachers can, for instance, turn to poets such as Walt Whitman to help bolster critical pedagogy that focuses students' attention on social justice issues connected to oppression and the black experience. No longer can teachers use marginal support from administration, fear, ignorance, or lack of curriculum as reasons for not teaching students about all forms of discrimination and injustice. In the end, language arts instructors must be willing to embrace the challenge of creating social justice pedagogy that helps students explore America's minority cultures, the levels of social inequality in this country, and ways to affect positive change.

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