Final MA Portfolio

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FINAL MA PORTFOLIO

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A Final Portfolio

Submitted to the English Department of Bowling Green State University in partial fulfillment of the requirements for the degree of

Master of Arts in the field of English with a specialization in English Teaching

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Dr. Sheri Wells-Jensen, First Reader
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Analytical Narrative

In the fall of 2014, I set out on my journey to obtaining my master’s degree. By that time I had been a substitute teacher for one year and a secondary English teacher of sophomore and junior English students for going on four years, and I finally felt ready to take on the challenge of advancing my degree. I knew that it would be difficult to balance the demands of my job while going back to school for a master’s degree, but I also knew that it was something I wanted to achieve for myself and my students so I was determined to be the best teacher and student that I could be. By pursuing a master’s in English, I hoped to increase my content knowledge so that I could better serve my students and potentially teach advanced placement courses or community college courses in the future. The program at Bowling Green perfectly suited my needs and my schedule. Coming to the end of the program, I feel that I have been able to research topics that are relevant to my career, I have worked with instructors who have pushed me to become a better teacher and student, and I have worked with classmates who are also educators that have shared experiences and ideas that I have been able to use in my own classroom.

Four projects are included in this master’s portfolio. It is a compilation of pieces that illustrate my growth as a teacher, student, and writer. Of the four projects, the first is a project written as my final project for ENG. 6040—Graduate Writing with Dr. Robert Wallace. For this project, Dr. Wallace asked us to revise a work-in-progress for the final project, but since this was my first graduate course, I needed to start from scratch. I decided to research and write about the effects of texting and social media on adolescent students. The longer I taught, the more I noticed cell phones and social media becoming a large part of students’ lives. Becoming a teacher also made me notice that many high school students incorporate slang in written assignments and are not as concerned about grammar and writing conventions. I was curious as to whether or not social media and texting trends had any correlation with student academic achievement. In researching this topic for my project, I found several essays linking this apathy and lack of focus to technology, so I decided to focus on how social media and texting affects adolescents (who have not fully cognitively developed). Dr. Wallace encouraged me to include a survey
of my own population of students in which I asked how often they used social media/texting, and how these things affected their lives and academic progress. Students were surprisingly honest and reflective in their responses, some even admitting to being addicted to checking their phones and realizing that they can’t focus on schoolwork because they are so preoccupied by their phones. While I mainly discussed some of the negative effects and dangers that social media and texting can have on students, I also tried to incorporate the positive aspects of technological connectivity and how long-term effects remain to be seen at this time.

Dr. Wallace provided feedback and suggestions which served as the foundation for my revisions. I clarified the sentences that Dr. Wallace suggested, most of which were to eliminate unnecessary wording or to emphasize the main idea. One of the biggest suggestions he made was to suggest that I address the difference between old-fashioned note passing and texting. He was right to point out that teachers have always lamented student apathy in writing and grammar, and that texting, Tweeting, etc. might just be a continuation of that concern. I addressed this poignant question and did some further explanation to address this topic. In my revision I explained that while note-passing and texting are very much alike in terms of student apathy for writing and grammar, texting seems to require less effort in terms of writing conventions with tools such as autocorrect. Smart phones also cause a significant amount of distraction for today’s students. Not only can smart phone users text, but they can check email, play games, scroll through social media, and more. With that many temptations at hand, it’s no wonder students have a difficult time remaining focused. Here I also wanted to point out the many ways that teachers are trying to use phones constructively in class. Remind.com, Kahoot, Padlet, and Socrative are all interactive sites that students can access via phone that teachers have been trying to use to engage their students and use the technology of cell phones to their advantage. With Dr. Wallace’s guidance, I worked to create a piece that explored the many aspects of texting and social media in the classroom.

For my second essay, I have included my final project for ENG 6070—Literary Theory and Criticism with Dr. Labbie. For this project, we were asked to complete an analytical or pedagogical
research paper that incorporated one or more of the theories we studied throughout the course. Initially I wanted to analyze *Frankenstein* through the lens of literary theory and work on a pedagogical project, but in the end I decided to make the project analytical. The course and the theories we studied were incredibly challenging for me to grasp, so I wanted to wrap my mind around at least one theory through a text before trying to incorporate it in my classroom. I chose to examine how dreams, dreaming, and psychoanalysis play a part in furthering the plot of Mary Shelley’s *Frankenstein*. I thought that Psychoanalysis was one of the most interesting theories we studied in Literary Theory and Criticism, and *Frankenstein* is one of my favorite novels to teach, so while this project was incredibly challenging for me, I felt a great sense of pride in completing this project.

For my revision, Dr. Labbie made several suggestions regarding the wording in the introduction paragraphs. Some of my word choices and sentences were a bit awkward and verbose, and her suggestions made those paragraphs read much more smoothly and professionally. She also suggested that I include more comments and information about Romantic poets regarding dreams. While I included connections to Samuel Taylor Coleridge’s “Kubla Khan” later in the essay, I found an essay by Jan Dover called, “Keats and the Dream Tradition,” which I incorporated in my revision. In Dover’s essay, she explores how Romantic poet John Keats was influenced by dreams, as well as William Blake and Edgar Allan Poe. Dr. Labbie also suggested that I incorporate a little more background information about Sigmund Freud to further improve my project. Instead of focusing too much on a biography of his life, I decided to provide an overview of when and where he lived and focus more on his work with dream interpretation since that was relevant to my research. I also included a brief summary of his work with the unconscious as well as his popular comparison of the unconscious to an iceberg since I make reference to Victor Frankenstein’s unconscious throughout the essay. With the help of Dr. Labbie, I feel that I have a firmer grasp of the theory of psychoanalysis, and in the year since I completed this project, I have incorporated a discussion about psychoanalysis in my *Frankenstein* unit with my advanced students.

My third portfolio essay and second research-based project is an essay written as my final project for ENG 6800—19th Century British Women Writers with Dr. Lapinski. This was one of my favorite
courses in my graduate experience because I absolutely loved the content that she chose for us to study. A large part of why I wanted to teach secondary English was because I have always loved to read and study literature. The pieces we studied were interesting, thought-provoking, and suspenseful; a couple of the texts have even become new favorites of mine, especially *Lady Audley’s Secret*. For my final project, I decided to compare and research *Northanger Abbey* by Jane Austen and “The Grey Woman” by Elizabeth Gaskell. On the surface, these two texts differ in many ways; *Northanger Abbey* is much lighter in mood, they were published several years apart, and their subjects are vastly different. Upon closer examination and study of women’s roles in 19th century and Victorian England, I found several ways in which the two were similar, so I decided to make the topic of my research revolve around a commonality in themes of gender fluidity, female relationships, and the powerlessness of females in the 19th century.

Dr. Lapinski was kind enough to provide suggestions for revision that included re-working the phrase “gender fluidity” that I incorporated in my thesis and throughout my essay. In using that phrase I meant to convey that several characters exhibited characteristics that did not adhere to typical societal norms; however, Dr. Lapinski noted that this phrase is a bit too vague, so in my revisions I edited it to say, “subversion of gender norms” to more accurately convey my meaning. Dr. Lapinski also suggested that I incorporate more research about the historical context of each piece more carefully so that the two time periods were not conflated. For my revision, I researched the early 1800’s and 1810’s (when *Northanger Abbey* was published) and provided more research and information about gender roles, the “separate spheres,” and the “Angel in the House,” that would have been prevalent in 19th century England when Catherine Moreland’s story takes place and what Jane Austen would have experienced. I also researched the Victorian Era and the rights and roles of women at that time in order to connect the societal norms of England to those illustrated in Gaskell’s “The Grey Woman.” The harsh Victorian social conditions are illustrated through Anna and Tourelle’s marriage and throughout the novella. These distinctions are important in understanding the texts’ themes and I am glad that Dr. Lapinski suggested that I revisit them. British literature will always be a part of high school English courses, so having a
deeper understanding of influential female authors and their societal conditions will be beneficial to my education and career.

Finally, my fourth portfolio entry is a pedagogy-based project completed for ENG 6200—The Teaching of Writing with Dr. Nickoson. This was an incredibly beneficial course that provided literature and teaching practices that I could use right away in my classroom. For the final project, Dr. Nickoson encouraged us to choose a topic that would be useful in our own instruction that was related to our course-study of writing instruction. I chose to research effective methods of feedback to student writing. In my first three years of teaching, I often felt like I was spending hours commenting and evaluating student work with little student response or improvement. For this project I researched several different methods of effective feedback (by Nancy Sommers, Peter Elbow, and Lisa Lucas) to student writing and how I could align these practices with my instruction and feedback methods. The methods of feedback that I studied for this assignment have changed the way I evaluate my students’ writing. Instead of asking my students to complete a rough draft and a final draft and grading every aspect of each draft, I have been taking the time to allow students to work on their writing piece by piece, and I only focus on two to three criteria per draft. Throughout this course, I discovered that I align heavily with process pedagogy and this method of evaluation aligns with process better than the methods I was using prior to it.

For my revision, Dr. Nickoson made several suggestions in the margins of my project where she wanted me to push an idea a bit further, add deeper meaning, or clarifying a thought. Her comments were very helpful in going forward with my revision because while she offered plenty of encouragement and praise, she also asked tough questions and provided helpful ideas to make writing the best it can be. She also suggested that it might be helpful to include information from Nancy Sommers’ later work on feedback and revision, so I did some research and was able to connect her essay, “Across the Drafts” with my topic. Dr. Nickoson also suggested that I include mention of Brian Huot’s concept of educational assessment in my project. She was right to suggest Huot; I examined his book (Re)Articulating Writing
Assessment for Teaching and Learning, and was able to find many examples and suggested methods of feedback that supported what I was trying to argue nicely.

In the introduction to this narrative, I mentioned that I knew the process of obtaining my master’s would be a lot of work and that it would be difficult to balance my other responsibilities in addition to adding coursework. I also knew then that it was worth it and that an education is something that can never be taken away. Through this process I have met classmates who teach, coach, raise children, and who are pursuing their master’s degree all at once and suddenly my schedule didn’t seem so impossible; their determination encouraged me to keep working towards my own goal, and I am so glad I made the decision to further my education. This process has made me a better teacher, student, and human being, and even though I know there will always be ways to improve and grow, I am very happy that I took this opportunity to work towards my goal of obtaining a master’s degree.
Adolescents are surrounded by social media in their everyday lives. Today there are multiple outlets of social networking sites including Facebook, Twitter, Instagram, Snapchat, Pintrest, Tumblr, YouTube, and more. These sites allow users to create an online “profile” where they may list their interests, likes, dislikes, and post photos of themselves. From there, users can add or follow “friends” whom they may know in the real world, or people who share common interests with them but have never met face-to-face. Users can post status updates to share what they are doing or thinking, post photos and videos, and comment or “like” others’ posts. All of these social media sites are easily accessible to users from smart phones, which have become more and more common, and are typically carried by their owners at all times. Teenagers are not excluded from this information. As of 2013, one in four teens are “cell-mostly” Internet users, who say they mostly go online using their phone, and 95% of teens are online using tablets, laptops, or desktop computers (Madden et al. 1 & 3). With such easy access to the Internet and popular social media outlets, it is no wonder that teens are obsessed with checking online profiles, newsfeeds, “likes”, and photo comments. Social media has become an integral part of our culture, and has changed the way we interact with the world. No matter where a loved one may live in the world, social media makes it possible to keep in touch with them through photo sharing, FaceTime (video chatting), and written messages. Social media also allows us to instantaneously share news and information; this, in particular, can be especially valuable and informative. This is the new norm in our society, and while it does make connection easier and more convenient, it is also taking a toll on the American adolescent. While there may be
benefits to such social media sites, those benefits are sometimes outweighed by their drawbacks, which include, but are not limited to: a decrease in study-time and time dedicated to homework, encouragement of poor grammar and spelling, invasion of privacy, negative body-image, and cyber-bullying. All of the risks associated with adolescents’ use of social media are concerning to parents and older generations simply because the technology is still relatively new to our culture, so we have no idea how it will impact Generation Z as they age. Because the world teenagers live in is so much different from older people’s experiences, we tend to fear the worst: that the reliance upon technology will somehow degrade human experiences. This essay will explore the positive and negative impacts of social media upon adolescents. Adolescents are the primary focus of my research because their brains are not fully cognitively developed, and therefore the results of their actions and habits formed at this stage of their development will have a deeper impact on the development of their self-worth and identity. In addition to a variety of published sources, my research also draws upon ethnographic data from a study conducted with my own students in a survey entitled, “Social Media Survey.” The research will show that while there are many ways social media can be used constructively, there is also an abundance of drawbacks and dangers to staying so connected via social media, and because this is the first generation to “grow up” with social media it is difficult to say how its effects will impact them in the future. Since social media seems to be here to stay, at least in one form or another, it is important to take note if its effects and monitor the potential toll it may take on our adolescents.

Social media certainly has its benefits in terms of socialization and communication. Because there are so many different outlets of social media, it is almost impossible not to find one that fits with each user’s preferences and needs, and many teens have more than one social
media account. With social media, adolescents can keep in touch with family that may live out of town, communicate with friends, share pictures, and exchange ideas. Gwenn Schurgin O’Keeffe’s clinical report, “The Impact of Social Media on Children, Adolescents, and Families” examines the benefits of children and adolescents using social media. O’Keeffe presents the following list that shows how social media participation offers adolescents deeper benefits that extend into their view of self, community, and the world, including:

1. opportunities for community engagement through raising money for charity and volunteering for local events, including political and philanthropic events;
2. enhancement of individual and collective creativity through development and sharing of artistic and musical endeavors;
3. growth of ideas from the creation of blogs, podcasts, videos, and gaming sites;
4. expansion of one’s online connections through shared interests to include others from more diverse backgrounds (such communication is an important step for all adolescents and affords the opportunity for respect, tolerance, and increased discourse about personal and global issues); and
5. fostering one’s individual identity and unique social skills.

Each item presented on O’Keeffe’s list illustrates the amazing benefits that social media is capable of providing to teens who have access to them. Because teens have the ability to connect with almost anyone, the potential for ideas to flourish is limitless, not to mention that social media provides a way for teens to express themselves to the “public” in a way that they would otherwise not be able to do.
Another benefit of social media is that it lends itself nicely to the sharing of information; this information can range from breaking world news to family updates, to homework help. Educators have realized the potential for using social media in the classroom and many have established class Twitter pages, blogs, and discussion forums that students can use to collaborate with each other outside of class. O’Keeffe writes, “Middle and high school students are using social media to connect with one another on homework and group projects. For example, Facebook and similar social media programs allow students to gather outside of class to collaborate and exchange ideas about assignments. Some schools successfully use blogs as teaching tools, which has the benefit of reinforcing skills in English, written expression, and creativity” (O’Keeffe). Using social media to collaborate on assignments can have all sorts of benefits. Young students are able to take responsibility of group assignments without having to leaving their home to work on assignments. With the growing popularity of Google Docs and Google +, students can work on group projects from just about anywhere. They can use the Google “hangout” to video chat with up to ten people, or they can all be working on the same Google Doc at the same time, and it will record each student’s contribution. Creating class “circles” allows students to work and chat in groups, while the teacher is able to monitor and comment as often as needed. Sites like Remind.com allow teachers to send free and safe one-way text messages to subscribed students to remind them of upcoming assignments, tests, or quizzes. The “Social Media Survey” was conducted in three sophomores English classes comprised of 58 students total, aged 15-16, with 27 females and 31 males. The survey asked students how many social media sites they were subscribed to, their approximate GPA, how they primarily check social media, how often they check social media, their perspective on the positives and negatives of social media, and their views on the impact it has on body image and
cyber-bullying. One student explained why he found social media to be so beneficial by saying, “It’s just really convenient because I at least have my phone with me pretty much all the time, so if I don’t understand an assignment I can just find someone I have class with and ask them about it that night rather than trying to email the teacher late at night or waiting until I get to school in the morning. I have practice every night pretty late, so checking with classmates is sometimes faster and easier” (Balla). As this student mentioned, with technology and social media students have the capability to find information they need for school through multiple different outlets, giving them more options and resources to complete the assignments for school.

While social media provides many options for students to assist them academically, they primarily use it to socialize with their peers. Adolescents care deeply about their status among their peers, as well as how connected they are within their social group. Because teens place so much value on social status, academics can sometimes get pushed to the wayside as teens constantly attempt to “stay connected” with their peers by checking in on social media during study time, distracting them from academic work. Text messaging, posting status updates, and having multiple tabs open to chat online with friends causes distractions to high school students whose cognitive development is not fully formed, and thus breaks concentration and takes students longer to process information and complete their work. In “The Social Media Survey”, most students reported that they check their text messages and social media sites anywhere from once an hour to every ten minutes. One student reported that, “If my phone is nearby I just check it every couple of minutes unless I’m doing something super physical. It’s definitely out while I do homework, so I can’t help but check it all the time” (Balla). The effects of this type of multi-tasking on students have been examined by Paul A. Kirschner and Aryn C. Karpinski in their journal article, “Facebook and Academic Performance.” In this article, the authors present
the results of a survey study involving Facebook use carried out simultaneously with other studies and its relation to academic performance as measured by reported Grade Point Average and hours spent studying per week. The results of Kirschner and Karpinski’s study show that Facebook users reported having lower GPAs and spend fewer hours studying per week than nonusers. Kirschner writes:

What people are really suggesting is that the current generation has, through practice, developed the ability to quickly switch between different tasks or different media. Unfortunately, this does not mean that it is beneficial or positive for them to do this or for learning in this way. It has been broadly shown that such rapid switching behavior, when compared to carrying out tasks serially, leads to poorer learning results in students and poorer performance of tasks (American Psychological Association, 2006). This is primarily due to the fact that switching requires a person to juggle her or his limited cognitive resources to accomplish the different tasks successfully. (1238).

While we may see teens working on homework while texting, posting status updates, and checking email, this does not necessarily mean that they are able to effectively process and absorb the information completely for all three tasks. High school students seem to realize that this is an issue and even admit that being online while studying hinders their comprehension and concentration, but they often cannot seem to stop themselves from checking in. The “Social Media Survey” showed that 64% of students admit that texting and social networking sites have a negative impact on their academic studies, with many claiming that studying and homework takes them twice as long because they cannot keep from checking their phones. One student
even admits, “I have my phone out while I am trying to study or do homework, so I either do not get much done or it takes me twice as long to do something than it would if I did not have my phone” (Balla). Another student claims, “When I’m studying and something pops up on my phone I look at that and don’t finish studying” (Balla). These students know that having their phones out while studying hinders their comprehension and productivity, but they continue to check their phones constantly because the decision-making area of the brain is not fully developed at that stage in an adolescent’s life. According to the American Academy of Child & Adolescent Psychiatry, “…the frontal cortex, the area of the brain that controls reasoning and helps us think before we act, develops later. This part of the brain is still changing and maturing well into adulthood” (“The Teen Brain: Behavior, Problem solving, and Decision Making”). The fact that an adolescent’s brain is still maturing seems to suggest that they will have a hard time understanding that having a cell phone out to distract them while studying will mean that their homework and study time will take much longer, and may not be completed as thoroughly as it would be if they completed one task at a time.

In addition to contributing to distraction from studying and academics, social media has also contributed to a trend among adolescents that involves a changing and shortening of the English language. English teachers constantly lament the effect that texting has had upon the writing of their students, noticing that students are beginning to forget how to switch from text-talk to standard English, using phrases like “gotta”, “kinda”, and “sorta” in formal writing, and of course, forgetting to capitalize the personal pronoun “I.” Because adolescents spend so much time communicating via text and social media (where there is no one to correct their grammar, and no desire to do so), neglect for the rules has become the new norm. In his article, “The
Grammar Devolution: Why Social Media is a Threat to Education.” Andrew Randall writes about the grammar decline that is happening with our students today:

Social media websites such as Facebook, Twitter, and Tumblr are becoming increasingly more comfortable to use, and using them has become a common practice, especially in the United States. Unfortunately, the informality of these websites in terms of writing and communication has made it easy for students to forget the importance of proper grammar usage. What was once common knowledge and understanding of the English language has now become foreign. Students have now evolved into social media natives at the cost of understanding how to control the English language. Even Microsoft Word has made editing papers as simple as clicking a button on a mouse, allowing students to take grammar out of their minds and allow it to disappear into the digital abyss. (Randall).

Social media is an integral part of today’s society and economy, but it is also distracting to students, and by ignoring the effect that it has had on students and their formal writing, the benefits of the Internet will be outweighed especially since we expect students to align with the Common Core Standards in order to prepare them for their future careers and colleges. According to the Common Core, by grade 12 students should be able to “Demonstrate command of the conventions of standard English capitalization, punctuation, and spelling when writing,” “Acquire and use accurately general academic and domain-specific words and phrases sufficient for reading, writing, speaking, and listening at the college and career readiness level; demonstrate independence in gathering vocabulary knowledge when considering a word or phrase important to comprehension or expression,” and other language-specific standards.
While these standards may seem very basic and reasonable to expect of our students, they are not expected to follow any sort of rules when communicating via text or social media, so the skills they are honing in their spare time are not the skills that will be assessed for standardized tests that will determine college placement and career readiness. Andrew Randall observes in his article that, “…the College Board found that just last year, ‘SAT reading scores for the high school class of 2011 were the lowest on record, and combined reading and math scores fell to their lowest point since 1995.’ The article went on to state that much of the concern is due to the fact that the score deteriorated the most in the writing section, which is reflective of students’ abilities to control grammar, as well as understand vocabulary” (Randall). While scores have improved since 2011, it is certainly noteworthy that at a time when information can be so easily accessed, students are struggling to grasp and master concepts of Standard English; therefore, with the increasing popularity of social media, it is almost impossible not to connect this decline in grammar and vocabulary acquisition to the increase in use of social media.

Before the advent of social media, teachers and parents could see teenage apathy regarding the “rules” of spelling and grammar in their notes passed in class and other casual writing to friends. However, texting and social media differ from traditional notes passed in class in that the texter does not need to have a firm command of basic spelling and grammatical conventions in order to send a logical message. As long as the author of the text, tweet, or Instagram caption has autocorrect enabled, all he or she needs to do is begin typing a word and it is finished for him or her with very little thought required. Capitalization is also formatted for the author, and often possessives and contractions are identified and suggested. While hand-written notes were often riddled with spelling and grammatical errors themselves, the author at
least had to think about how to construct their message and sound out words he or she was attempting to spell. Additionally, students passing notes could only write the note and pass it to a friend; students today can send a text, scroll through Facebook, Twitter, Snapchat, and Reddit, and get absorbed in their online entertainment and completely miss important class time. Students are so addicted that many teachers and schools have instituted policies that restrict student cell phone use in the classroom. Aside from declining writing conventions, most teachers find texting in class rude and akin to talking while the teacher is giving instruction. Teachers (myself included) are still working to try to find a balance and learn ways to use texting to their advantage in mini-lessons and programs like Remind101 (a one-way teacher text service), Kahoot, Padlet, and many other technology-driven sites. If we can find a way to allow students to use phones and texting respectfully, they might become some of the most effective and engaging tools at our disposal.

While academics are a major part of teens’ lives, one must also remember that adolescence is a time when individuals are developing their own identities; and in this age of digital sharing, they are learning who they are in a very public way. For “Generation Z” there will be a permanent record of photos, status updates, and comments that chronicle thoughts and opinions from their adolescent selves. While in many ways this sort of digital time-capsule may preserve and act as diary to many young people, it may also become dangerous for teens to feel too safe, and potentially share too much online. A study conducted by the Pew Research Center found that for five different types of personal information measured in 2006 and 2012, each is significantly more likely to be shared by teen social media users on the profile they use most often. The study found that 91% post a photo of themselves, up from 79% in 2006; 71% post their school name, up from 49%; 71% post the city or town where they live, up from 61%; 53%
post their email address, up from 61%; 53% post their mailing address, up from 29%; 20% post their cell phone number, up from 2%. In addition to the previous statistics, researchers also asked five new questions about the profile teens use most often and found that among teen social media users: 92% post their real name to the profile they use most often; 84% post their interests, such as movies, music, or books they like; 82% post their birth date; 62% post their relationship status; 24% post videos of themselves. Not only do teens post all of this personal information to social media sites, but upwards of 16% also have posts set up to automatically include their current location (Madden et al.). While teens may feel that this is a way to share and connect with their peers, it also makes them vulnerable to predators and identity thieves. Teens share all sorts of private information to large networks of friends with no concern for potential third-party access to their information. This means that predators and identity thieves could potentially learn, from one social media account, where a teen attends school, their real name, age, email account, and where they are currently located. Not all teenagers take this sort of information into account when establishing profile information; most teens simply think about making their profiles appealing to their demographic and attracting as many friends as possible. Adolescents are prone to making risky decisions like this because the frontal cortex is still developing. This causes them to be more impulsive and take risks without thinking about the consequences, like unwanted access to personal information that can be gathered from social media sites (“The Teen Brain: Behavior, Problem Solving, and Decision Making”).

Because many teens are not thinking about the lasting impacts of their online decisions, they may not consider that future employers often look at social media profiles of job candidates to seek information that may not be apparent on a résumé or in a job interview. In Jacquelyn Smith’s article, “How Social Media Can Help (Or Hurt) You in Your Job Search” Smith
references a survey conducted by CareerBuilder.com that asked 2,303 hiring managers and human resource professionals if, how, and why they incorporate social media into their hiring process. According to the study, they found that 37% of employers use social media to screen potential job candidates, which means about two in five companies browse social media profiles to evaluate a candidate’s character and personality. Smith also reports several other statistics which indicate social media’s impact on the hiring process:

A third (34%) of employers who scan social media profiles said they have found content that has caused them not to hire the candidate. About half of these employers said they didn’t offer a job candidate the position because of provocative or inappropriate photos and information posted on his or her profile; while 45% said they chose not to hire someone because of evidence of drinking and/or drug use on his or her social media profile. Other reasons they decided not to offer the job: the candidate’s profile displayed poor communication skills, he or she bad mouthed previous employers, made discriminatory comments related to race, gender, or religion, or lied about qualifications. (Smith).

High school students may not think of the potential impact a provocative selfie may have, or how their comments and status updates may be construed by scholarship committees, or mothers looking for a weekend babysitter. All of these decisions may be impacted by the choices teens make online and the information that they are so willing to share.

In addition to all of the information teens are sharing, they are also not afraid to share pictures of themselves. In the midst of the “selfie” sensation, we have to ask ourselves, what kind of impact is this having on adolescents’ self-esteem? At a time in life when there is a heavy emphasis on appearance, it is important to think about the impact that photo sharing is having on
teenagers. Many people enjoy seeing photos of family members and friends who live long
distances away, and posting them to social media is much more convenient than mailing them
through “snail mail” or even emailing them as an attachment. However, because teens so often
seek validation from their peers, they may share photos of themselves and place heavy emphasis
upon the feedback they receive from these photos. If the photo receives a lot of “likes” then the
teen feels confident and happy, but if the photo receives negative feedback or ridicule, then the
teen’s happiness may be affected and their self-esteem lowered. In the “Social Media Survey” of
high school sophomores, 72% said that social media definitely affects their self-esteem and
impacts body image. One female student reported that, “If you post a ‘selfie’ and it gets a ton of
likes and comments that makes you feel good about yourself, but if it doesn’t you kinda feel
dumb and ugly” (Balla). As this 15 year-old girl simply stated, a photo can make her feel
“dumb and ugly” if not enough people “like” or validate her photo. Teens place a great deal of
value on how they are perceived, and unfortunately attach their self-worth to their online
profiles. Not only do the comments and likes on their photos have the power to affect teens’
self-esteem, but what others post can also deeply impact the self-esteem of teen social media
users. As another student states, “I think social media does have a major effect on self-esteem.
People post things and you can see how better looking than you they are. It lowers your self-
esteen. It also has an effect on body image, because people can post pictures of models and
people think they have to convert their bodies to look like those models. People want to feel
acceptance and certain things on social media make them feel like they need to be that to get
acceptance” (Balla). In addition to being bombarded by unrealistic body images on television
and advertisements, teenagers now have social media to barrage them with images of the unattainable body-type that they feel is necessary to gain acceptance.

Negative comments on a photo are just one facet of bullying in the twenty-first century: cyberbullying. There is much debate as to whether or not cyber-bullying is as bad as it has been made out to be or if the bullying has always existed, and this is simply a new way of doing it. In Gwenn Schurgin O’Keeffe’s clinical report, “The Impact of Social Media on Children, Adolescents, and Families” O’Keeffe presents the benefits of children and adolescents using social media, as well as the risks of using social media. She defines cyberbullying as, “…deliberately using digital media to communicate false, embarrassing, or hostile information about another person”, and states that “It is the most common online risk for all teens and is a peer-to-peer risk” (O’Keeffe). What makes cyberbullying so much more upsetting is that the bullying does not stop when the child gets home from school. A bully can metaphorically be with his/her victim at all times, as long as the victim has a device, such as a cell phone, with them at all times, as most teens do. Bullies often feel more confident being aggressive online because they are not face-to-face with their victim and can be bolder when making the comments behind the safety of the computer screen. 64% of students who participated in the “Social Media Survey” said that they believed that cyberbullying is as much of a problem as it has been made out to be, and many of them reported that they have been bullied online themselves. One student claims “Cyberbullying is a big problem. Social media lets people hide behind screens and say anything they want. In ways the bullying is worse because everyone can see it and there aren’t consequences. You can bully and embarrass with little punishment. People say very mean things” (Balla). This student makes the point that cyberbullying on social media is worse than
face-to-face bullying for a couple of reasons: It is very public, and there are little to no consequences online. As the student pointed out, there is no one to police Facebook and Twitter who will protect teens from bullies, or punish the adolescents who do the bullying. Schools are struggling to find ways to protect their students from cyberbullying, but when the incidents occur outside of school, they are left with few options in terms of protection without overstepping their bounds. Because cyberbullying is a relatively new manifestation of aggression, our society is still learning how to deal with it and what kinds of measures can be taken to prevent it. However, we do know that cyberbullying can cause profound psychosocial outcomes including depression, anxiety, severe isolation, and, tragically, suicide (O’Keeffe).

Social media has left an indelible mark upon our society; it has changed the way we communicate, share information, make friends, find jobs, and keep in touch with family. With the touch of a button and the scroll of a mouse one can access information from all over the world and experience what others are experiencing no matter where they may be. Social media has allowed teenagers to have a place that is theirs and to create and nurture the identity that they have developed independently. It allows adolescents to get involved in community programs, hone social skills, expand connections, and become aware of global issues. However, with all of the positive features of social media come just as many dangers and drawbacks of maintaining a digital identity. Because high school students are so concerned with staying connected, they often become neglectful of academic priorities/obligations, or become so obsessed with checking their phones for new messages, retweets, or photo comments they cannot focus on studies long enough to sustain a substantial thought. When they are able to focus long enough to put their thoughts to words, the words and sentences themselves have been changed; as Andrew Randall notes, teens seem to be losing the ability to control the English language in their writing,
forgetting most of the basic grammar rules because the majority of their writing is done with emoji’s and hashtag phrases. Not only are teens texting and tweeting without regard for the conventions of the English language, but they are also posting more and more information about themselves without being concerned about privacy or third party viewers; nor are they concerned about how their posts and photos could potentially affect how future employers or scholarship committees view their character and profile. Posting a plethora of selfies and status updates may result in positive and encouraging comments from “friends”, or these posts may be an invitation for cruelty. One negative comment on a photo may destroy a teenager’s confidence and self-esteem, or as one young girl comments, make her feel “dumb and ugly.” For years the advertising industry has been criticized for promoting unrealistic and unhealthy expectations for physical appearance, and now social media has become part of the problem with the advent of filters and apps that can make the user appear more slender. As Richard M. Perloff writes, young women are bombarded with thin-ideal images in advertisements, magazines, television, and now social media. With so much pressure to maintain the perfect image, it’s no wonder that some teens develop eating disorders and body dysmorphic disorder (Perloff). Because of the nature of social media, sites like Facebook, Twitter, and Instagram are accessible from just about anywhere, which means that teens can be harassed or bullied incessantly. While social media is certainly not without its merits, we as a society are still learning about how it is impacting our culture, which means that we should understand the risks involved with blending our lives with technology. Social media has certainly made our world smaller, and adolescents are not the only ones to get distracted by their cell phones and electronic devices. As a culture we must learn to
form an effective and harmonious relationship between ourselves and our technology, because social media seems to be here to stay.
Appendix

Social Media Survey

1. Choose one:
   a. Male  
   b. Female

2. Age:

3. GPA (Approximate)

4. How many social media accounts are you currently subscribed to? Please list them.

5. Which social media sites do you use most frequently?

6. How do you primarily access your social media accounts (phone, home computer, other)?

7. How many times a day do you check your social media accounts?

8. How often do you make a post on your social media account?

9. Do you feel that social media (or texting) has an effect on your study habits? Explain.

10. In what ways do you see social media as having a positive influence on your life?

11. In what ways do you see social media as having a negative impact on your life?

12. Do you believe that cyber-bullying is as much of a problem as it has been made out to be? Why or why not? Examples?
13. Do you think that social media has any impact on body image/self-esteem?
Works Cited


Abstract

The story of *Frankenstein* began as a dream. If we believe Mary Shelley’s preface to the 1831 revised edition of the novel, Shelley claims to have had a dream in 1816 near Geneva, Switzerland that inspired the famous tale of the scientist who desired to outwit death. In this dream she saw a “pale student of unhallowed arts” working over “the thing he had put together” (Shelley 6). In the dream, the “hideous phantasm of a man” is endued with life, and upon its animation the student is horror-stricken and hopes the creation will die on its own, only to awaken and find the creature standing over him. It is this dream that inspired the Gothic novel, *Frankenstein*, and the role of dreams and dreaming does not end there. Robert Walton dreams of becoming the first man to discover passage to the North Pole, and even the creature experiences dreams and nightmares. Victor Frankenstein dreams or fantasizes about bridging the gap between science and humanity by discovering the secret of life and being able to create life himself. His hopeful dream of creating life is described by Victor as he exclaims, “Life and death appeared to me ideal bounds, which I should first break through, and pour a torrent of light into our dark world. A new species would bless me as its creator and source; many happy and excellent natures would owe their being to me… Pursuing these reflections, I thought, that if I could bestow animation upon lifeless matter, I might in the process of time (although I now found it impossible) renew life where death had apparently devoted the body to corruption” (Shelley 73). While Victor’s dream/fantasy of creating life is hopeful, all hope immediately vanishes and is replaced by horror and disgust upon the completion of the creature. Just after Victor abandons the creature, he collapses in exhaustion and experiences a dream that has been the subject of many literary criticisms. In the dream, Victor beholds his cousin and future wife,
Elizabeth, only to find her transformed into the corpse of his deceased mother. “I thought I saw Elizabeth, in the bloom of health, walking in the streets of Ingolstadt. Delighted and surprised, I embraced her, but as I imprinted the first kiss on her lips, they became livid with the hue of death; her features appeared to change, and I thought that I held the corpse of my dead mother in my arms” (Shelley 81).

I will use Freud’s psychoanalytic text, *The Interpretation of Dreams* to explore the contents of Victor’s and the creature’s dreams and how their dreams could be analyzed and interpreted as both “the window to the soul” and Romantic literary devices to further the plot of the novel. I will also explore and implement elements of “The Uncanny” to explain the horror and dread that is aroused in the reader and characters through Victor’s creation and the contents of his dreams, both waking and unconscious. In addition to examining the Victor’s and the creature’s dreams through the lens of psychoanalysis, I will also examine Victor’s three main dreams in response to the Romantic, pre-Freudian view of dreams and dreaming through David Hartley’s *Observations on Man* (1749). *Throughout this essay, I will work to prove that dreams and dreaming play a recurrent role in Mary Shelley’s *Frankenstein*, and that the dreams Victor and other characters experience reveal the neuro-physiological state of the characters as well as further the plot.*

Dreams and Nightmares in *Frankenstein*

The story of *Frankenstein* began as a dream. If we believe Mary Shelley’s preface to the 1831 revised edition of the novel, Shelley claims to have had a dream in 1816 near Geneva, Switzerland that inspired the famous tale of the scientist who desired to outwit death. In this dream she saw a “pale student of unhallowed arts” working over “the thing he had put together” (Shelley 6). In the dream, the “hideous phantasm of a man” is imbued with life. Upon its
animation the student is horror-stricken and hopes the creation will die on its own, only to
awaken and find the creature standing over him. It is this dream that inspired the Gothic novel,
*Frankenstein*, and the role of dreams and dreaming does not end at the story’s inception.

Dreaming pervades *Frankenstein*. In the novel, Robert Walton dreams of becoming the
first man to discover passage to the North Pole, and the creature experiences dreams and
nightmares. Victor Frankenstein dreams and fantasizes about bridging the gap between science
and humanity by discovering the secret of life and being able to create life himself. His hopeful
dream of creating life is described by Victor as he exclaims, “Life and death appeared to me
ideal bounds, which I should first break through, and pour a torrent of light into our dark world.
A new species would bless me as its creator and source; many happy and excellent natures would
owe their being to me… Pursuing these reflections, I thought, that if I could bestow animation
upon lifeless matter, I might in the process of time (although I now found it impossible) renew
life where death had apparently devoted the body to corruption” (Shelley 73). While Victor’s
dream/fantasy of creating life is initially hopeful, all hope immediately vanishes and is replaced
by horror and disgust upon the completion of the creature.

In this essay, I engage Sigmund Freud’s psychoanalytic text, *The Interpretation of
Dreams* to explore the contents of Victor Frankenstein and his creature’s dreams, and to address
the ways in which their dreams may be analyzed and interpreted as both “the window to the
soul” and Romantic literary devices to further the plot of the novel. Elements of “The Uncanny”
will also be used to explain the horror and dread that is aroused in the reader and characters
through Victor’s creation and the contents of his dreams, both waking and unconscious. In
addition to examining Victor’s and the creature’s dreams through the lens of psychoanalysis,
Victor’s and the creature’s most important dreams will be analyzed in response to the Romantic,
pre-Freudian view of dreams and dreaming through David Hartley’s *Observations on Man* (1749). **Dreams and dreaming play a recurrent role in Mary Shelley’s *Frankenstein*, and the dreams Victor and other characters experience reveal the neuro-physiological state of the characters as well as further the plot.**

At the time she was writing her most famous novel, Mary Shelley would have been familiar with the predominant physio-psychological paradigm of *associationism*, which is detailed in John Locke’s essay, *Essay Concerning Human Understanding* and was made popular by David Hartley’s *Observations on Man*. As Hartley explained, there were basically three causes for dreams: Residue of daily impressions, the physical state of the dreamer’s body, and the associations of thoughts and images (Hartley 384-389). Mary Shelley would have been familiar with these common beliefs, and clearly she incorporated them into her novel. In the early 1800s, it was generally assumed that dreams only occurred in incomplete or warped sleep when the brain was agitated. The dominant narrative suggested that dreams were the result of strong emotions, difficult and extensive studying, an approaching illness, or other states that would disturb proper sleep (Hartley 384-389). Throughout the novel Victor and the creature experience dreams after stressful or strenuous events, reflecting the beliefs Mary Shelley’s cultural context.

Romantic literature represented dreams and dream analysis in much the same way that Mary Shelley presents them in *Frankenstein*. Romantic writers placed immense value on dreams and the imagination. This focus is part of what set them apart from other writers. Their attention to individuality, the imagination and its spontaneous overflow in waking and dreaming life allowed them to express their emotions through their art in as creative a way as they pleased. In fact, many Romantic poets made dreams and dreaming the subject of their work. In her essay,
“Keats and the Dream Tradition,” Jan Drover explores how Romantic poet John Keats was influenced by his own dreams and the dreams referenced in Dante’s *Inferno* in his poems “On a Dream,” “The Fall of Hyperion,” and “Endymion.” William Blake also used the subject of dreaming in his poem “A Dream” to explore elements of human nature and the depths of maternal bonds, and Edgar Allan Poe blurs the boundaries between reality and the unconscious in his poem “A Dream Within a Dream,” and his haunting lines, “Is all that we see or seem/But a dream within a dream?” Additionally, Romantic poets and novelists often explored the phases between consciousness and unconsciousness and highlighted these phases in their work.

Although there was no real consensus on the origins of dreams and dreaming during the Romantic period, their investigations helped to produce a discourse about forms of knowing other than the logical, rational, empirical approaches that dominated the Enlightenment. In *Coleridge on Dreaming: Romanticism, Dreams and the Medical Imagination* by Jennifer Ford, Ford writes, “In the late eighteenth and early nineteenth centuries, there was no consensus on the origin and meaning of dreams. Some argued that they were miraculous, potentially divine events. Many believed that dreams revealed the powers of the imagination and that dreaming was a form of poetic inspiration” (Ford 9). This was certainly true for Samuel Taylor Coleridge, whose famous poem “Kubla Khan” was inspired by a dream, much like Mary Shelley’s novel. In Gothic texts, dreams are not always relevant to the dreamer’s previous thoughts, but they often act as an oracle to foretell an impending fate. This is certainly the case throughout *Frankenstein*, especially through Victor’s and the creature’s dreams.

The father of psychoanalysis, Sigmund Freud (1856-1939), believed in the importance of the unconscious mind and believed that it contains a wealth of significant information. Freud famously used an analogy of an iceberg to illustrate the layers of the conscious and unconscious
mind. The conscious mind is represented by the tip of the iceberg, and like an iceberg, the most important part of the mind is the part you cannot see. Aside from the “talking cure,” Freud believed that one way to explore the unconscious is to examine dreams. According to Saul McLeod of Simply Psychology, “Freud (1900) considered dreams to be the royal road to the unconscious as it is in dreams that the ego's defenses are lowered so that some of the repressed material comes through to awareness, albeit in distorted form. Dreams perform important functions for the unconscious mind and serve as valuable clues to how the unconscious mind operates” (McLeod). In 1900, Sigmund Freud published one of his most famous works, *The Interpretation of Dreams*. In this famous text he works to explain that all dreams are important, and that dreams are the “window to the soul” which reveal the unconscious desires and wishes of the dreamer. Even though dreams, as Freud contends, do contain meaningful material, no simple “key” can decode them, and it can be fairly complicated to interpret dreams. “Distortion and disguise fill dreams—or literary texts—because the unconscious wish is in some way unacceptable and must evade censorship” (Norton Anthology 916). Freud often used literary texts to support and illustrate his theories. Perhaps his most famous example is the story of Oedipus, in which the tragic hero unwittingly falls in loves with and procreates with his biological mother. In using this example, Freud explains the common sexual desire for the parent of the opposite sex. In fact, much of what Freud explains in his dream theory is about repressed desires, sexual or otherwise, that seem to manifest through dreams. The desires are hidden beneath dream content that seems meaningless and disjointed because, as Freud believed, the dreamer is ashamed, horrified, or repulsed by the desire that may not be acceptable by society or themselves, so it is masked beneath other “dream-content” that can be decoded and analyzed.
for meaning. Victor’s dreams reveal what Freud would consider repressed desires and latent feelings of guilt and other strong emotions.

The process of repression is almost exactly the same as the process of estrangement of the familiar, which Freud outlines in his essay, “The ‘Uncanny.’” In the essay, he explains the meanings of the words ‘heimlich’ [homely or familiar], and unheimlich [not homely or familiar] or ‘uncanny’. Throughout the explanation of the terms and throughout his essay, Freud explains how something that is uncanny is both familiar and unfamiliar and frightening at the same time—“what arouses dread and horror” (930). He gives several examples of uncanny elements in literature and stories, such as dolls or inanimate objects that might not actually be inanimate at all. This produces an uncanny effect on the reader because, “the uncanny is that class of the frightening which leads back to what is known of old and long familiar” (930). One of the most familiar and unchanged matters is our relation to death. Freud writes, “Many people experience the feeling [of the uncanny] in the highest degree in relation to death and dead bodies, to the return of the dead, and to the spirits and ghosts” (945). This is no different for Victor Frankenstein. In the early chapters of the novel, Victor strives to create a living being from discarded body parts of already deceased men. Throughout the creation of the creature, Victor finds his creation pleasing, and even says, “His limbs were in proportion, and I had selected his features as beautiful” (Shelley 79-81). However, when the creature becomes animate, Victor is distressed and frightened because the creature appears to be both living and dead; he is breathing and animate, but his features remain to be that of a corpse. The creature has, “…watery eyes, that seemed almost of the same colour as the dun white sockets in which they were set, his shriveled complexion, and straight black lips” (Shelley 81). All of these attributes did not bother Victor when the creature was inanimate and “dead,” but they become unnerving and ‘uncanny’
when the creature gains consciousness because it is against human nature for the dead to return to life.

Victor’s first dream occurs shortly after the creation of the creature. He has spent nearly two years creating a being whom he wished to be the first of species that would bless him as their creator, and, he believed, a means of escaping death. As previously mentioned, upon the animation of the creature, Victor is horrified by what he has done and immediately abandons the being. He rushes to his bedchamber and at length falls asleep. In this sleep, he has a dream that can be analyzed in a variety of different ways:

I thought I saw Elizabeth, in the bloom of health, walking in the streets of Ingolstadt. Delighted and surprised, I embraced her, but as I imprinted the first kiss on her lips, they became livid with the hue of death; her features appeared to change, and I thought that I held the corpse of my dead mother in my arms; a shroud enveloped her form, and I saw the grave-worms crawling in the folds of the flannel. I started from my sleep with horror; a cold dew covered my forehead, my teeth chattered, and every limb became convulsed; when, by the dim and yellow light of the moon…I beheld the wretch—the miserable monster whom I had created. (Shelley 81)

When examined through the lens of psychoanalysis, it would appear that Victor seems to be repressing fears and desires that resurface in his dream. Firstly, Victor wants to discover the secret of bestowing life so that he can potentially eradicate death. His fervor to find a way to reanimate the dead and find a solution to death would suggest a fear of death that he has repressed and that comes to light upon the completion of his creation, which causes him extreme anxiety and fear. By creating the creature, he was attempting to understand and escape death, but his
efforts were not successful and were horrifying to him. The failure and horror of his creation and repressed fear are illustrated in this nightmare. In this nightmare, Victor is forced to relive the pain and horror of his mother’s death and his inability to save her, while he also has to witness the blurred line between life and death that he created with his creation and that is illustrated in the image of the living Elizabeth replaced by the dead mother. Secondly, Freud would not fail to notice the representation of Victor’s mother as an object of love and desire. Victor is engaged to his cousin, Elizabeth, but finds himself kissing and embracing the corpse of his dead mother. This image could represent Victor’s latent desire for his mother. Freud writes in *The Interpretation of Dreams*, “Being in love with the one parent and hating the other are among the essential constituents of the stock of psychical impulses which is formed at that time and which is of such importance in determining the symptoms of the later neurosis” (919). While Victor certainly never expresses feelings of hatred towards his father, he does express sadness that has no measure upon her death as he relates her death through his tale:

I need not describe the feelings of those dearest ties are rent by that most irreparable evil, the void that presents itself to the soul, and the despair that is exhibited on the countenance. It is so long before the mind can persuade itself that she, whom we saw every day, and whose existence appeared a part of our own, can have departed for ever—that the brightness of a beloved eye can have extinguished, and the sound of a voice so familiar, and dear to the ear, can be hushed, never more to be heard. (Shelley 53)

Victor was certainly attached to his mother, and her death shook him to the core and prompted him to embark upon the quest that would affect the fate of his life. Psychoanalysts would contend that this first dream is rife with repression and desire, but not all share that theory.
Jonathan Glance, author of “‘Beyond the Usual Bounds of Reverie?’ Another Look at Dreams in *Frankenstein,*” explains how early nineteenth-century scientific studies follow Hartley’s lead in asserting that dream originate in both previous mental associations and existing sensory impressions and are reflected in the fictional representation of dreams, “…as writers referred to these assumptions in order to make their episodes seem more dream-like” (Glance). Victor’s first dream represents the nineteenth-century beliefs in several ways. As Glance contends, Mary Shelley makes a point to establish that Victor has been in a disordered mental state. He admits that in pursuit of his goal of creating life, “I had deprived myself of rest and health” for “nearly two years” and the confusion of thoughts that follow the completion of his project clearly suggest the immense physical and emotional stress he has undergone (Shelley 81). As Glance writes, “Victor’s convulsive waking from the dream, his sweat and chills, are not only medically appropriate responses to his nightmare, but also symptoms of the ‘nervous fever’ which will soon manifest itself and confine him to bed for several months” (Glance). In this way Mary Shelley emphasizes Victor’s dark physiological state as a possible explanation for his dream.

Victor’s first dream also works as a device to further the plot of the story. His dream includes an image of his beautiful, vibrant fiancé, Elizabeth, who transforms into the corpse of his mother. This would indicate that Victor is worried about Elizabeth, and, as we know from the ending of the novel, this foreshadows her eventual demise at the hands of the creature that Victor himself created. His kiss essentially seals her fate to die at the hands of the creature.

The second significant dream of the novel is experienced by the creature. The creature is essentially “born” as an adult-sized infant with no understanding of the world or society and is immediately abandoned by his “father,” Victor. The creature confusedly leaves Victor’s
apartment and finds himself shunned, feared, and abused by all humans he encounters. He flees to the woods and experiences cold, hunger, fear, and loneliness in his first days of life. However, he is able to find pleasure in the brightness of the sun, warmth of a fire, and beauty in the songs of the birds. After days in the woods and a failed attempt to integrate himself into society, he finds sanctuary in a hovel nearby the cottage of a poverty-stricken family in the countryside. He delights in watching their daily interactions and even learns to read and speak their language through his observations. After a year of watching, he finally works up the courage to introduce himself to the blind patriarch of the family (he hopes in doing this he will not be judged by his appearance) and fulfill his deepest wish of becoming a member of their family and sharing in their love and affection towards one another. The meeting did not go as the creature had hoped. As he is speaking to the blind father, the three adult children arrive and are so horrified and disgusted by the creature’s appearance that they drive him away. The creature experiences complete anguish at this rejection and is plagued by horrible nightmares later that night, “I sank into a profound sleep; but the fever of my blood did not allow me to be visited by peaceful dreams. The horrible scene of the preceding day was forever acting before my eyes; the females were flying, and the enraged Felix tearing me from his father’s feet. I awoke exhausted…” (Shelley 260). The creature’s dream reveals his desire for a father, as he mentions Felix tearing him from his own father’s feet. His dream also represents a desire for a female companion, which is manifested by the phrase, “the females were flying” and the pain he feels at his rejection based solely on his appearance. It is human nature to want to feel loved by a parent, and because of Victor’s abandonment, the creature never felt that love and connection. He is more like Victor’s “double”, as described in “The ‘Uncanny’” than his child. Freud describes the “double” in “The ‘Uncanny’”: 
For the ‘double’ was originally an insurance against the destruction of the ego, an ‘energetic denial of the power of death’…Such ideas, however, have sprung from the soil of unbounded self-love, from the primary narcissism which dominates the mind of the child and of primitive man. But when this stage has been surmounted, the ‘double’ reverses its aspect. From having been an assurance of immortality, it becomes the uncanny harbinger of death. (940)

Victor created the creature as a means to escape death, so we can assume that he himself wanted to escape death at the time of the creature’s creation. Therefore, he somewhat selfishly and narcissistically created the creature as his double, and inevitably the creature “reverses his aspect” from that of a benevolent being, to in fact, an “uncanny harbinger of death” as the novel progresses.

While the creature’s dream is certainly revealing from a psychoanalytic perspective, it can also be explained and supported by dream theories in the 1800s. The creature had just experienced an immensely traumatic event hours before the dream occurred (the rejection of the DeLacey family) and thus his sleep was disturbed. Also, the manifestation of the DeLacey family members could be explained by the fact that he had just seen them the day before, so their images in the dream were residual. Additionally, this dream helps further the plot of the story. By having a dream about the rejection of the DeLaceys, it shows the reader that the creature was deeply hurt by yet another failed attempt at companionship, and will change his nature completely. In fact, this dream foreshadows his avowed hatred of the species of man and intimates of his actions later in the novel.

The third significant dream is experienced by Victor after he has endured the murders of his youngest brother, William, his best friend, Henry, and the wrongful execution of his
childhood friend, Justine. After the creature is rejected by the DeLacey family and continues to experience cruelty at the hands of man, he vows eternal vengeance upon the entire species, particularly Victor, who carelessly created and abandoned him. The creature’s first victim is Victor’s youngest brother, William. The creature encounters him in the woods near the Frankenstein home and wishes to take the child and raise him as his companion, but William spurns him and calls him a “hideous monster” and “ugly wretch”, so the creature strangles and kills him. He feels pleasure in creating destruction, so he plants incriminating evidence on Justine’s person, which leads to her execution. All the while, Victor knows the true killer and laments his decision to create him. Later, the creature demands that Victor create him a female companion just as hideous as himself so that he will not be alone. After initially refusing and then beginning to make him a mate, Victor destroys the second creature and the monster vows to be with him on his wedding night and later strangles Victor’s best friend, Henry. Victor becomes incapacitatingly ill upon seeing Henry’s body and is eventually put on trial for his murder. After the trial, Victor gets in the habit of using laudanum to go to sleep, and experiences a chilling nightmare:

But sleep did not afford me respite from thought and misery; my dreams presented a thousand objects that scared me. Towards morning I was possessed by a kind of nightmare; I felt the fiend’s grasp in my neck, and could not free myself from it; groans and cries rung in my ears. (Shelley 353)

In keeping with psychoanalysis, it would seem that the creature has become a harbinger of death in every way. Just as the creature’s transformation is complete, Freud’s ideas about the ‘double’ perfectly describe the creature’s transformation, “The ‘double’ has become a thing of terror, just as, after the collapse of their religion, the gods turned into demons” (Freud 941). The creature
has directly killed Victor’s brother and friend, and indirectly caused the death of a close family friend. This dream would indicate that Victor is feeling guilty about the deaths of William and Henry because if he had not created the monster they would not be dead. Because Victor makes it very clear that he feels responsible for their deaths, this feeling of guilt would not be considered “repressed,” but it is clearly a large part of his unconscious that is manifested in the dream. The dream would also indicate that in dying in the same way as his brother and friend, he would somehow atone their deaths.

Like the other two dreams, this dream is also in keeping with the nineteenth-century dream theories. Shelley makes it clear to the reader that Victor’s thoughts and emotions are disordered and that he is taking large doses of a sleeping aid. Victor explains, “Ever since my recovery from the fever I had been in the custom of taking every night a small quantity of laudanum; for it was by means of this drug only that I was enabled to gain the rest necessary for the preservation of life. Oppressed by the recollection of my various misfortunes, I now took a double dose, and soon slept profoundly” (Shelley 353). Victor experiences this upsetting dream after being ill with fever for several months, suffering the loss of close loved ones, and under the aid of sleeping medicine. This makes sense according to scientific studies from this time period, and, as Jonathon Glance further supports, “One often repeated point is that dreams only occur in imperfect sleep, when the brain is disordered by certain irritants, such as strong emotions, prolonged study, approaching sickness or other states which impair sleeping; not coincidentally, all these irritants are present in Victor's dream episode” (Glance). All of the existing components of Victor’s waking life would lead to the dream he experiences according to nineteenth-century research. This dream also furthers the plot of the novel. Since dreams in Gothic literature often serve as premonitions of future events, this dream would be fairly
accurate in predicting events to come in the novel. This dream certainly foretells Victor’s eventual death which is indirectly caused by the creature. Readers would anticipate that Victor might be killed in the same way that the creature killed William and Henry, but by having him die differently allows there to be an element of surprise in the ending of the novel.

Dreams and dreaming play a recurrent role in Mary Shelley’s *Frankenstein*, and the dreams Victor and the creature experience reveal their neuro-physiological state as well as further the plot. Victor’s dreams are certainly telling in that they occur after instances of emotional duress and during restless sleep. While Mary Shelley would have been familiar with dream theories of the nineteenth-century, she could not have imagined the amount of psychoanalysis that could be applied to her characters’ dreams as well. Both Victor and the creature experience dreams that reveal the desires of their unconscious, and even represent characteristics of the ‘uncanny’ that Freud outlines in his essay, including the idea of the ‘double.’ On top of all the analysis about these dreams, they also serve the practical purpose of foreshadowing events to come in the plot of the story. In each dream, one can spot the premonition that foretells the impending doom of the characters in the novel. These are just a few simple interpretations of the dreams that add to the creativity of *Frankenstein*, but, in the words of Freud, “…dreams, are capable of being ‘over-interpreted’ and indeed need to be, if they are to be fully understood, so all genuinely creative writings are the product of more than a single motive and more than a single interpretation. In what I have written I have only attempted to interpret the deepest layer of impulses in the mind of the creative writer” (923).
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Subversion of Gender Norms, Female Relationships, and the Powerlessness of Females in

*Northanger Abbey* and “The Grey Woman”

*Northanger Abbey* and “The Grey Woman” are two texts written by women of the early 19th century and Victorian era. *Northanger Abbey* was written by Jane Austen and published posthumously in 1817, while “The Grey Woman” was written by Elizabeth Gaskell and first published in 1861. *Northanger Abbey* is a story about a young woman, Catherine Morland, and her introduction to society where she learns about friendship, status, wealth, and class. Catherine travels to Bath with family friends (the Allens) and is introduced to many characters who ultimately shape her experiences throughout the novel, and she learns many difficult lessons about her place in society and the importance of wealth and marriage. Isabella Thorpe, John Thorpe, and the Tilney family, particularly Henry, Eleanor, and General Tilney, make the largest impressions on her. In Jane Austen’s England in the 1810’s, there were distinct gender roles that men and women were expected to adhere to. Her society illustrated usual patriarchal cultural beliefs that men were superior to women in all facets of life. Men were responsible for working and holding positions of power, and women were responsible for overseeing household duties that were carried out by servants, arranging social functions, and making sure daughters married advantageously. These “separate spheres” were believed to highlight the natural advantages of each sex; the women, being morally superior to men, were best suited for the domestic sphere to counterbalance the “taint of the public sphere” in which men occupied (Hughes). According to...
the British Library, the “Angel in the House” meant more than just being able to keep a well-functioning home:

Rather than attracting a husband through their domestic abilities, middle-class girls were coached in what were known as ‘accomplishments’. These would be learned either at boarding school or from a resident governess. In *Pride & Prejudice* the snobbish Caroline Bingley lists the skills required by any young lady who considers herself accomplished:

A woman must have a thorough knowledge of music, singing, drawing, dancing, and the modern languages…; and besides all this, she must possess a certain something in her air and manner of walking, the tone of her voice, her address and expressions…(ch. 8)

As Miss Bingley emphasizes, it was important for a well-educated girl to soften her erudition with a graceful and feminine manner. (Hughes)

These were all ideas that were accepted in 19th century England when Catherine Moreland’s story takes place and what Jane Austen would have experienced.

The actions of Catherine and the characters around her illustrate important themes that are shared with Elizabeth Gaskell’s novella, “The Grey Woman.” “The Grey Woman” is a tale about a young German woman named Anna who finds herself engaged to a man she had no intention of marrying. Friends introduce Anna to the Frenchman, M. de la Tourelle, and because she received his attentions without protest, she finds herself engaged to him despite the fact that she had no intentions of marrying. Her family does not end the engagement, and she quickly discovers that Tourelle means to isolate her and is cruel and mentally abusive to her. Her only companion is her lady’s maid, Amante, who is around forty and who takes care of her. After discovering Tourelle’s involvement with a deadly gang, Amante and Anna escape and live on the run, disguising their looks and pretending to be a married couple in order to hide from Tourelle who continues to hunt them. This story was published in 1861, well into Victorian England. Elizabeth Gaskell would have been all too familiar with the societal inequalities of the time. In
Philip Buckner’s *Rediscovering the British World*, he writes about the inequalities of men and women in Victorian England.

When a Victorian man and woman married, the rights of the woman were legally given over to her spouse. Under the law the married couple became one entity where the husband would represent this entity, placing him in control of all property, earnings and money. In addition to losing money and material goods to their husbands, Victorian wives became property to their husbands, giving them rights to what their bodies produced; children, sex and domestic labour. (Buckner 137)

This story illustrates the harshness of Victorian social conditions through Anna’s horrifying and saddening marriage to Tourelle. “The Grey Woman” exhibits a darker tone than *Northanger Abbey*, with very few moments of lightness and happiness that we periodically see with Catherine’s story, and Anna does not have the happy ending that Catherine does. However, the two tales overlap in many of the themes explored in each. Close examination of *Northanger Abbey* and “The Grey Woman” reveals a commonality in themes of subversive gender norms, female relationships, and the powerlessness of females in the 19th century.

In *Northanger Abbey*, gender norms are subverted subtly in many of the characters. Several of the main characters do not stray from traditional gender roles as were proscribed by society, such as Mrs. Allen who is constantly thinking about her dresses, and John Thorpe who aggressively forces himself on Catherine and talks of nothing but the power and speed of his horses and the superiority of his coach. In contrast, Catherine herself seems to reject typically feminine activities when she is younger, preferring instead all activities that were typically “boy” pastimes. “She was fond of all boys’ plays, and greatly preferred cricket not
merely to dolls, but to the more heroic enjoyments of infancy, nursing a dormouse, feeding a
canary-bird, or watering a rose-bush...she was moreover noisy and wild, hated confinement and
cleanliness, and loved nothing so well in the world as rolling down the green slope at the back of
the house” (Austen 15-16). This is the narrator’s description of Catherine at the age of ten, and
there is no mention of praise (or chastisement) from her parents regarding her behavior, but she
begins to receive praise and compliments when she turns fifteen and begins curling her hair,
writing, drawing and appreciating the fineries that were more specific to her gender. Her parents
begin to comment that, “‘Catherine grows quite a good-looking girl.--she is almost pretty today’”
(Austen 17). Praise like this brings her such delight that she continues to grow into the “heroine”
of the story, and continually exemplifies femininity based on the positive reinforcement she
receives. Exemplifying traditional gender norms and working to fit in her domestic sphere as the
“Angel in the House” would please her parents who likely saw that as her opportunity to meet an
eligible man and marry a man who would be able to provide her with a comfortable and
prosperous life. Other characters exhibit gender-bending characteristics into adulthood. For
example, many of the female characters get wrapped up in novels and Gothic fiction, whereas
Eleanor Tilney prefers to read historical, non-fiction pieces like many of the male
characters. Also, her brother and Catherine’s love interest, Henry Tilney, reads novels like many
of the female characters and takes a particular interest in fashion and fabric that most men do not
take notice of. Henry says, “I always buy my own cravats, and am allowed to be an excellent
judge; and my sister has often trusted me in the choice of a gown. I bought one for her the other
day, and it was pronounced to be a prestigious bargain by every lady who saw it’” (Austen
28). Mrs. Allen even points out that most men do not take notice of such things, but this seems
to make him more appealing to her, and Catherine for that matter. Henry is also more sensitive
and receptive to the needs and feelings of others in ways that the other more “alpha-male” characters like John Thorpe and General Tilney fall short. In “Henry Tilney: The Queer Hero of Northanger Abbey” Sarah Eason explains that Henry is a character who possess many feminine qualities, and who may identify with femininity:

Henry’s ability to perform so convincingly with various female characters, however, suggests that his expertise on ‘feminine’ behaviors goes much deeper than a simple awareness of or familiarity with these behaviors. His knowledge of fashions, fabrics, journal writing, and even feminine internal dialogue are more than just a surface-level parody of women; the fact that Henry is able to accurately depict even the minutest details of femininity proves he relates to and identifies with femininity in these circumstances. (Eason)

Interestingly, where Henry’s gender-bending characteristics make him more appealing to the opposite sex, Isabella’s make her less appealing. While Isabella is flirtatious and coquettish in a very feminine way, she is also aggressive in her pursuits for a profitable marriage to elevate her class. In Linda Gill’s critical essay, “Jane Austen’s Northanger Abbey: Narrative, Empowerment, Gender and Religion”, Gill explains the problem with Isabella’s actions at the time:

Ultimately, Isabella prices herself too high and, having all but dumped the more than suitable James Morland for the higher statused and far wealthier Fredrick Tilney, she is played by Fredrick only to be summarily dumped because of her “want of consequence and fortune” (143), and she is rejected by James because he discovers the subtext of her own narrative: she is overpriced and misrepresented goods. In other words, Isabella learns that women might manipulate the value and definition men give them in the marketplace by means of their own verbal and gestural narratives, but in the end men evaluate and define their real worth. (Gill 45)

She tries to take control of her fortune by seeking men to marry who can raise her societal standing, and because of her aggressiveness and open dismissal of Catherine’s brother for a more profitable option, she is labelled a selfish coquette and is thus punished for stepping beyond female control in relationships. These characters and their actions illustrate the societal norms of
19th century England, and possibly Austen’s feelings towards the restrictions of women as well as the complex conventions of courting in the 19th century.

The subversion of gender norms are much more pronounced in “The Grey Woman.” While the main character, Anna, is entirely feminine, there are two characters whose gender fluctuates throughout the tale. First, Anna’s husband M. de la Tourelle is often described as being more feminine than masculine. When Anna first lays eyes on him she is struck by his beauty, and describes his features as being that of a girl’s. She says, “His features were as delicate as a girl’s, and set off by two little ‘mouches’...I was so lost in admiration of this beautiful young man, that I was as much surprised as if the angel Gabriel had spoken to me” (Gaskell 295). Even his voice is described as having “a soft lisp” that Anna initially finds charming. However, she soon gets tired of “.the affected softness and effeminacy of his manners,” and his exaggerated devotion begins to frighten her. Too late she realizes that she is bound to him by rules of polite society, and she finds herself married to Tourelle. After their marriage Anna finds out that his soft, effeminate exterior masks a cruel, unyielding interior:

For, while M. de la Tourell behaved towards me as if I were some precious toy or idol, to be cherished, and fostered, and petted, and indulged, I soon found out how little I, or, apparently, anyone else could bend the terrible will of the man who had on first acquaintance appeared to me too effeminate and languid to exert his will in the slightest particular. I had learnt to know his face better now; and to see that some vehement depth of feeling, the cause of which I could not fathom, made his grey eye glitter with pale light, and his lips contract, and his delicate cheek whiten on certain occasions. (Gaskell 301)

The text also seems to suggest a sexual relationship between Tourelle and his servant, Lefebvre. Tourelle and Lefebvre seem almost unnaturally close, and Lefebvre seems to see Anna as a rival for Tourelle’s affection. Anna notices that, “...the more M. de la Tourelle was displeased with me, the more Lefebvre seemed to chuckle; and when I was restored to favour...Lefebvre would look askance at me with his cold, malicious eyes, and once or twice at
such times he spoke most disrespectfully to M. de la Tourelle” (302). Lefebvre seems to constantly be at the side of Tourelle, and seems to have a power over him that Anna could never have, suggesting a deeper relationship than that of master and servant. Additionally, Tourelle never allows Anna to come into his rooms, which are “more luxurious” and fragrant than her own suggesting even more secrecy to his affairs.

Another character who exhibits gender fluidity in “The Grey Woman” is Anna’s servant, Amante. While it is out of character for Tourelle to do something kind for Anna, he hires a lady’s maid to keep his otherwise isolated wife company. Amante is described as being, “tall and handsome, though upwards of forty, and somewhat gaunt. But, on first seeing her, I liked her” (Gaskell 302). Amante becomes a true and loyal friend and protector where Tourelle falls short. It is Amante who gives Anna the strength to leave her husband, and helps her carry out the escape. At one point, Anna hides in her husband’s chambers and overhears his boasts that he killed his first wife and is prepared to do the same to Anna if she betrays him. She also sees that he has killed a man, and is in fact the leader of the deadly Les Chauffeurs. She evades his notice and nearly breaks under the weight of the enormity of what she has just heard. Naturally, she turns to Amante for comfort. “I fell upon her neck, grasping her tight, till my hands ached with the tension of their hold. Yet she never uttered a word. Only she took me up in her vigorous arms, and bore me to my room, and laid me on my bed” (Gaskell 316). According to Maureen T. Reddy in her article, “Gaskell’s ‘The Grey Woman’: A Feminist Palimpsest,” Amante’s assistance and physical removal of Anna from her abusive husband solidifies her as Anna’s replacement-husband. Reddy writes, “Anna faints; when she awakens, she finds that Amante has planned out and prepared for their escape. The passage quoted above is crucial, and it marks the point in the story at which Amante takes de la Tourelle's place as Anna's husband. Amante's
carrying Anna to her bed and Anna's subsequent faint are a parodic enactment of a conventional wedding night” (Reddy 189-190). Amante later abandons even the dress of women, and completely transforms herself to a man in dress and behavior in order to work under the pretense that she and Anna are husband and wife:

...finding in one box an old suit of man’s clothes, which had probably belonged to the miller’s absent son, she put them on to see if they would fit her; and, when she found that they did, she cut her own hair to the shortness of a man’s, made meclip her black eyebrows as close as though they had been shaved, and by cutting up old corks into pieces such as would go in her cheeks, she altered both the shape of her face and her voice to a degree which I should not have believed possible. (Gaskell 323)

In “‘The Grey Woman’: Gaskell Sensationalizes the Servant” by Elizabeth Lee Steere, Steere comments on the progression of their relationship, and the new dynamic that is established between them. “Indeed, Anna and Amante’s relationship goes beyond female friendship and becomes a kind of marriage, which progresses from the parodic initial scene identified above to costumed role-playing and ultimately to an unconventionally conventional family arrangement” (Steere 45). Their arrangement is “conventional” in that it appears as if Amante is a man married to a woman, Anna. Anna stays home and cares for her daughter, whom Amante loves as her own, and Amante lives and works as a tailor. Amante is so effective in her male role that she lives the rest of her days as a man, undetected until her death when her sex is observed at the hospital. Interestingly enough, as Steere points out, “M. de la Tourelle and Amante share gender-bending traits and behaviors, although the feminine man is depicted as perverse and monstrous, while the masculine woman is primarily portrayed as heroic and resourceful” (Steere 43). In many examples of 19th century literature, women are punished for their attempts to encroach upon the masculine territory; however, in this case Gaskell seems to provide an example of an instance where the “masculine woman” is heroized for her actions.
Anna and Tourelle’s marriage is an unfortunate example of how marriages could look in Victorian England. As a married woman, Anna had no rights to her property, money, or even her own body; anything that was once hers belonged to her husband. Tourelle is cruel, unfaithful, and violent with Anna, but unfortunately divorce would have been impossible for her at that time. According to Cody Forman’s “The Politics of Illegitimacy in an Age of Reform: Women, Reproduction, and Political Economy in England’s New Poor Law of 1834”, “While husbands participated in affairs with other women wives endured infidelity as they had no rights to divorce on these grounds and their divorce was considered to be a social taboo” (Forman 11). While Anna’s story is often sad and unhappy, she, unlike many Victorian women, was able to escape her marriage with the help of a devoted servant.

Both Northanger Abbey and “The Grey Woman” also illustrate examples of the complexity of female relationships. Courting rituals of the 19th century made it difficult for women and men to meet one another in an acceptable way, so many women relied on friends such as the characters do in Northanger Abbey. A fine marriage ensured security for women, which meant that finding a suitable husband was of utmost importance, as illustrated by Isabella and Catherine. The female friendships illustrated in the novel have the added pressure of marital connections, thus making the friendships secondary to the potential coupling of romantic interests. In Northanger Abbey Catherine Morland shares a close relationship with both Isabella Thorpe and Eleanor Tilney, which reflects the potential marriage match-ups of the two. Initially, the sheltered Catherine does not seem to have many friends outside of her family, and when she is introduced to the older and more experienced Isabella Thorpe, she believes she has found the truest of female companions. The narrator describes the quick progression of friendship:

The progress of the friendship between Catherine and Isabella was quick as its beginning had been warm, and they passed so rapidly through every gradation of
increasing tenderness, that there was shortly no fresh proof of it, to be given to their friends or themselves. They called each other by their Christian name, were always arm in arm when they walked, pinned up each other’s train for the dance, and were not to be divided in the set; and if a rainy morning deprived them of other enjoyments, they were still resolute in meeting in defiance of wet and dirt, and shut themselves up, to read novels together. (Austen 36)

Inexperienced as she is in the marriage market, Catherine does not see that Isabella desires to get closer to her brother, James Morland, whom she hopes to marry. Isabella seems to be almost as eager to push her own brother, John Thorpe and Catherine together in the hope of a blissful union. The closer Isabella gets to James, the more distant she becomes with Catherine, despite her constant claims that she cannot fare without her. This also means that Isabella and James are very forceful in Catherine’s union with John Thorpe--a man Catherine has no desire to be partnered with, and who becomes an obstacle in her path to Henry Tilney. In addition to Isabella’s selfish hypocrisy and fleeting attentions to Catherine, Catherine seems to realize that her attachment to Isabella also means an attachment to John Thorpe, so she attempts to distance herself from Isabella and binds herself more closely to Eleanor Tilney, Henry’s sister.

Like Isabella’s desire to become closer to Catherine in order to bring herself nearer to James Morland, Catherine seeks out the company of Eleanor Tilney to become closer to Henry. Upon meeting her, the narrator describes Catherine’s intentions in saying, “Catherine, interested at once by her appearance and her relationship with Mr. Tilney, was desirous of being acquainted with her, and readily talked therefore whenever she could think of anything to say” (Austen 54). Because Henry Tilney is the intended hero of the story, Eleanor becomes the moral superior to Isabella. According to Linda Gill, “Eleanor functions as a representation of morality insofar as she is, in accordance with the female ideal represented in Conduct Books for Women, frank, candid and unaffected” (Gill 46-47). Eleanor is modest, frank, sincere, and the perfect model of a lady and the perfect companion to the heroine, whereas Isabella falls short on many
of these accounts. Isabella is further discredited after the scandal involving Frederick Tilney while she was engaged to James. Upon receiving a letter from Isabella requesting that Catherine speak on her behalf to her brother, Catherine says, “I see what she has been about. She is a vain coquette, and her tricks have not answered. I do not believe she ever had any regard either for James or for me, and I wish I had never known her” (Austen 204). Catherine removes Isabella from her life in order to bring herself nearer to Henry Tilney. While there seem to be limits to the bonds of female friendship in Northanger Abbey, Austen seems to want the protagonist to enjoy pure and moral friendships between female characters, and she seems to have that with Catherine Morland.

The female bonds also seem to be formed and broken based on survival and self-interest in “The Grey Woman.” In her article, Elizabeth Steere makes the point that, “The character whom Anna most condemns is not M. de la Tourelle, but her sister-in-law, Babette. Early in the tale, she states simply, ‘That Babette Müller was, as I may say, the cause of all my life's suffering’ (292). It is difficult to see the story wholly as a feminist palimpsest when Anna pinpoints Babette, not her own murderous husband, as the source of ‘all [her] life's suffering’” (Steere 41). Anna says, “Babette Müller looked upon me as a rival. She liked to be admired, and had no one much to love her. I had several people to love me” (Gaskell 292). Instead of having a protective sister-in-law to love her, Anna insists that Babette pushed her to visit the Rupprechts, where she is introduced to Tourelle. Tourelle seems to be the most handsome, elegant, and desired gentleman in the room, and an excellent match that was highly appealing to Madame Rupprecht because of his wealth, but not to Anna. Again, Anna does not find motherly protection or affection from Madame Rupprecht, the mother of her friend, instead she claims that Madame Rupprecht, “...liked either Sophie or me to create a sensation; of course she would have
preferred that it should have been her daughter, but her daughter’s friend was next best” (Gaskell 295). She arranges several meetings between Anna and Tourelle, and encourages Anna to accept his gifts and his visits without listening to her protests to the contrary. Eventually she goes so far as to inform Anna’s family of Anna’s engagement without her knowledge or consent, and becomes angry and offended when Anna is shocked and hesitant at the announcement. Again a female “companion” betrayed her for her own sense of power.

The strongest companionship between women is illustrated through Anna and Amante. Even before their flight from Tourelle’s house, Amante protects and is kind to Anna, and they quickly become the closest of companions, some critics even argue lovers. Amante makes Anna feel safe because she “feared no one” while Anna feared everyone. “She would quietly beard Lefebvre, and he respected her all the more for it; she had a knack of putting questions to M. de la Tourelle, which respectfully informed him that she had detected the weak point...And with all her shrewdness to others, she had quite tender ways with me” (Gaskell 303). In their escape from the house of Tourelle, Amante makes all the preparations for their flight while Anna is unconscious in her bed, and calmly directs Anna “like a child” and, like a child, Anna obeys and trusts her, “...for she was human sympathy to me after the isolation of my unspeakable terror” (Gaskell 317). Throughout their journey, Amante feeds Anna, comforts her, risks her own life for her safety, and eventually dies because of her part in Anna’s escape. Amante seemed to have no other motivation in her efforts than her love for Anna and Anna loves her back. She says, “I cannot tell you how much in these doubtings and wanderings I became attached to Amante. I have sometimes feared since, lest I cared for her only because she was so necessary to my own safety; but no! It was not so; or not so only, principally” (Gaskell 325). Anna and Amante’s relationship was strengthened by their mutual need to survive, their
love for each other, and their love for Ursula. It is arguable that their relationship was so strong because Amante was the masculine half of their relationship, which created a heterosexual union and removed the threat of rivalry that was present in other female relationships in the novel.

Maureen Reddy observes that, “Anna and Amante mimic the behavior of a traditional couple, with the major difference being that a woman makes a kinder husband than does a man” (Reddy 190). As Reddy points out, Amante is effectively Anna’s husband, and she proves to be a kinder husband than her male husband, Tourelle.

Both *Northanger Abbey* and “The Grey Woman” illustrate the powerlessness of women in the 19th century and Victorian England. Women maintained very few rights in the 19th century, and their quality of life was often dependent upon the husband they married. According to the article, “Power and Control Over Women in Victorian England: Male Opposition to Sacramental Confession in the Anglican Church” by Rene Kollar, “Victorian England clearly embraced a patriarchy, and women, consequently, occupied certain clearly defined subordinate roles. Psychologically, this society argued, females were naive, fragile and emotionally weak creatures who could not exist independently of a husband or a father’s wise guidance. Until 1882, for example, the property of a woman passed to the control of her husband upon marriage” (Kollar 11). Since all of a woman’s wealth and property belonged to either her father or her husband, it made it very difficult for a woman to leave a bad marriage, as she would have no financial stability. Furthermore, a woman did not have legal rights to her body or her children, meaning a husband could essentially force her to have as many children as he desired, and could take them from her if he chose to do so. Of course, many families and women would have preferred a husband who would provide her with a financially secure lifestyle and to treat her with kindness, but ultimately once a woman was married it was too late to turn back. The
“marriage market” of Bath in *Northanger Abbey* illustrates the courting rituals of the 19th century, and we can see how powerless women were through the characters Eleanor and Catherine. Eleanor Tilney is the daughter of a wealthy General, and sister to two brothers. She is taken here and there to Bath and on travels with her brother, Henry, who it seems occasionally chooses her clothes for her, “…and my sister has often trusted me in the choice of a gown. I bought one for her the other day, and it was pronounced to be a prestigious bargain by every lady who saw it” (Austen 28). He also seems to read aloud to her, as she claims on her walk with Catherine, “…added Miss Tilney, ‘and I remember that you undertook to read it aloud to me, and that when I was called away for only five minutes to answer a note, instead of waiting for me, you took the volume to Hermitage-walk, and I was obliged to stay until you had finished it’” (Austen 103). While it seems that Henry endeavored to spend time with his sister and share in her enjoyment of a novel, he ends up controlling the situation by not allowing her to read it for herself and making her wait until he had read it to read it on her own. He also seems to have a habit of correcting her language. Eleanor explains to Catherine that, “‘He is for ever finding fault with me, for some incorrectness of language, and now he is taking the same liberty with you’” (Austen 103). Again, while Eleanor does not seem concerned by these actions, she seems to face opposition in her choice of dress, her reading, and even her speech. Further, since her family’s wealth is substantial, her father will not allow her to marry a man unless he is able to prove his wealth and status, which is typical of the powerlessness of women at the time. Only after the man she loved was able to attain wealth was she permitted to marry him by her father the General who seems to value her only for her new attainment of status. “…never had the General loved his daughter so well in all her hours of companionship, utility, and patient endurance, as when he first hailed her, ‘Your Ladyship!’”(Austen 234). Despite Eleanor’s
constant companionship and patience, her father values her for the profit she provided and the status of husband she attained—all of which were out of her control.

Likewise, Catherine Morland is powerless against the whims of the men who govern her. Of course, Catherine is the responsibility of her father from the time she is born until the time she is married. He is not described as being unkind, as Austen makes sure to remind us that he is not in the habit of “locking up his daughters” and gives her ten guineas “and promised her more when she wanted it” as she set off to Bath, but the establishment of power is clear (Austen 15 & 20). Catherine continually writes home to request permission to do various activities or keep her parents informed on her whereabouts; none of which is all that surprising considering her age and inexperience, but it is clear that her father has ultimate control over her future. While in Bath, Mr. Allen becomes her chaperon, who is also laid back in terms of her wishes, but ultimately decides when they attend events and when they arrive and leave. But it is Henry Tilney that Catherine has set her sights on for a future husband, and while Henry seems kinder and more understanding than John Thorpe, Catherine’s other suitor, she is still at the mercy of his capricious whims and often patronizing demeanor. The first evening she meets Henry, he subtly teases her and highlights where women fall short in letter-writing in that they have, “‘A general deficiency of subject, a total inattention to stops, and a very frequent ignorance of grammar’” (Austen 27). In other words, Henry is telling Catherine that while women “write such better letters than gentlemen,” their letters contain no substance and they are “ignorant” in terms of grammar. His gentle demeanor and playful attitude mask the condescension of his words, and Catherine becomes infatuated with him. Austen makes sure to point out the danger of falling in love with a man without a promise of the return of that love by saying, “... no young lady can be justified in falling in love before the gentlemen’s love is declared, it must be very
improper that a young lady should dream of a gentlemen before the gentlemen is first known to have dreamt of her” (Austen 29). Austen here reminds the reader that Catherine, or any such young lady, did not have power in sexual relationships, and that the gentlemen held the power to return and act upon their love. Throughout their courtship, Henry seems to endeavor to “educate” Catherine. In his article, “The Secret of Northanger Abbey” by Edward Neill, Neill makes some interesting observations about Henry:

A male chauvinist who patronizes women with apparent authorial indulgence, Henry is also a chauvinist tout court who 'produces' a reassuring England as a climax to his genial, placing wisdom. He seems oblivious to the fact that his 'myth of England' - his ideology - is endangered by the language he has used to evoke and articulate it...In particular, the rather heavy-handed scene of misunderstanding between Catherine and his sister Eleanor in Ch. XTV about whether they are discussing 'fiction' or 'reality', seems to mock Eleanor but is equally ironic about Catherine, and prompts Henry to the reflection that 'Perhaps the abilities of women are neither sound nor acute - neither vigorous nor keen. Perhaps they may want observation, discernment, judgement, fire, genius, and wit' (p. 100). It is difficult to know whether he is being simply ironic here or more complicatedly ironic about the sort of person - i.e. himself in a less complaisant frame of mind - who makes such remarks. (Neill 14)

Despite his constant patronizing “education” of Catherine, she has fallen in love with him and wishes to marry him. Her other option seems to be John Thorpe, who is more obviously cruel and oppressive; at one point he even takes her against her will in an open carriage ride after lying to her about seeing Mr. Tilney. This instance caused Henry to become angry and cold with Catherine, and despite the fact that she was not to blame, she takes on the blame as well, which seems to appease Henry. “...she took to herself all the shame of misconduct, or at least of its appearance, and was only eager for an opportunity of explaining its cause” (Austen 89). Her “shame” and desire to beg for his forgiveness for something she did not do further illustrate her powerlessness.
General Tilney holds control over Catherine, as he has plans to use her for his own gain. He believes, because of misinformation from John Thorpe, that Catherine is exceedingly wealthy and invites her to Northanger Abbey to bring her closer to Henry. While this thrills Catherine, she does not see the selfishness in this, and is often confusedly uncomfortable with General Tilney’s excessive compliments and measures to impress her. She also senses an oppressiveness in the family dynamic, and cruelty on General Tilney’s part that Henry scolds her for. It turns out that she was a truer judge of character, for as soon as he discovered that she was not as wealthy as he believed, he ejects her from his home with no explanation and she has no power to object. As Neill describes, “Tilney senior can be seen to have left an obvious slug-trail across the text, and one of its more piquant ironies is that his rudeness and arrogant insolence are evoked on Catherine's behalf - Catherine is, for him, a matter of socio-economic construction, or misconstruction - before the 'peripeteia' turns these hateful qualities against her, and she is turned out of Northanger as unceremoniously as she was ceremoniously admitted to it, in what might be called a moment of truly 'Gothic horror’” (Neill 17-18). Catherine is then remanded to her home, where she is left miserable and embarrassed to wait and see if Henry will communicate with her. Eventually he does come for her and confirms his attachment to her, despite the fury of his father. He and Catherine wait for the permission of the General before being able to be wed, and the General only gives his consent after learning that Catherine was not poor, and would be the recipient of three-thousand pounds, thus proving his belief that women were mere objects to be used and exchanged without thinking anything of their feelings. While Catherine had her happy ending and married the man she wanted to marry, it was largely due to luck and the whims of the men who governed her that she had her ‘happily ever after.’
In “The Grey Woman” Anna experiences powerlessness on many occasions. As the daughter of a widower, Anna is the mistress of her father’s mill for a short time, and she managed the household of eleven. When her brother married Babette Müller, Babette becomes mistress, and Anna gives up her post. From this point on, Anna has very little control over what happens to her. She must obey Babette Müller and leave the mill to visit a friend, and then she must go along with Madame Rupprecht’s forceful union of herself and M. de la Tourelle. When Madame Rupprecht quickly shoots down her protestations of marriage to M. de la Tourelle, she says, “--what could I do but hang my head, and silently consent to the rapid enunciation of the only course which now remained for me if I would not be esteemed a heartless coquette all the rest of my days?” (Gaskell 297). If Anna were to refuse M. de la Tourelle’s engagement and be labelled a “heartless coquette” her options in terms of marriage and status would be very slim, and she does not have the power to refuse those who govern her. Although her father is describes as being gentle and loving, even he believes that after her betrothal she belongs to her husband. Anna says, “I said to my father that I did not want to be married, that I would rather go back to the dear old mill; but he seemed to feel this speech of mine as a dereliction of duty as great as if I had committed perjury; as if, after the ceremony of betrothal, no one had any right over me but my future husband” (Gaskell 298). Anna’s father subscribes to the expectations of society and considers Anna the property of her husband from the time of her betrothal, and will not help her out of her impending marriage, but claims that she is welcome to his house if she is ever unhappy. Almost immediately following her marriage, M. de la Tourelle asserts his power over Anna and states that she will “move in a different sphere of life” and completely isolates her from her family and anyone who might be kind to her (Gaskell 299). Additionally, Tourelle controls her domestic life by not allowing her to stray from the established boundaries of her
quarters and small garden, and never allowing her to enter his own chambers. He even has servants monitor and thwart her if she ever went beyond the boundaries set for her. While Anna thinks he is fond of her in his own way, she is often afraid of him and his temper: “...I was timid from my childhood, and before long my dread of his displeasure (coming down like thunder within the midst of his love, for such slight causes as a hesitation in reply, a wrong word or a sigh from my father), conquered my humorous inclination to love one who was so handsome, so accomplished, so indulgent and devoted” (Gaskell 302). Additionally, as Maureen Reddy astutely observes, “Gaskell draws attention to the contrast between de la Tourelle's gentle, even delicate, social self, and his violent, actually bloodthirsty, private self. Anna discovers the latter only after her marriage. Symbolically, then, we can read Anna's discoveries about her husband's true nature as the usual discoveries of newly married women writ large” (Reddy 188). Despite the fact that M. de la Tourelle was clearly abusive, Anna would have no power against him, legally or otherwise. Because she vowed to “obey” him at their wedding, she became his to do with as she wished. And when she left, had he found her the law would have been on his side and he could have punished her as he saw fit.

Amante, though seemingly of a masculine nature anyway, realizes that the only way to provide for Anna and Ursula is to become a man in society. By taking on the persona and appearance of a man, Amante secures the ability to earn money and protection for Anna and Ursula, something she could not do had she maintained the appearance and persona of a woman. Still, as Amante’s wife, Anna’s division of responsibility is to care for the baby and tend the home. While Anna claims she is too scared to leave on her own, it is telling that she is still confined to their home as she was in Tourelle’s home. Maureen Reddy and other critics criticize Gaskell for Anna’s subsequent marriage to Dr. Voss after the death of Amante because,
“While Voss is certainly a kind and gentle man, Anna's marriage to him marks her return to the very world that she and Amante had tried to escape. The ending of ‘The Grey Woman,’ then, is extremely pessimistic, as it suggests that women cannot hope to escape the limited place assigned them by their society; the most they can hope for is a benevolent master, such as Voss” (Reddy 191). While Reddy may be correct that “The Grey Woman”’s ending is pessimistic, it may be a more accurate depiction of what life was like for a woman in Victorian England. Anna’s situation, though extreme, illustrates the cruelty that probably occurred in many marriages of the time, and depicts the helplessness and powerlessness of women in a patriarchal society.

*Northanger Abbey* and “The Grey Woman” illustrate common themes of subverting gender norms, female relationships, and the powerlessness of females in the 19th century and Victorian England. In a time of rigid societal structure and tradition, the gender-bending characters of Henry Tilney, Isabella Thorpe, M. de la Tourelle, and Amante would have been shocking and sensational. These characters reveal and comment on constraints of characteristics of the patriarchal society of 19th century Europe. While many women joined together in a community of support in times of oppression, like Anna and Amante and Catherine and Eleanor, many other women saw each other as threats and rivals like Anna and Babette Muller, or used each other for their own gains as Isabella did to Catherine, or Madame Rupprecht did to Anna. The cut-throat nature of some women could be considered as a method of survival in a society where a woman’s happiness and stability depended upon the man who chose to marry her. A woman’s husband could be kind, as Henry seems to be to Catherine (albeit a touch belittling), or cruel and abusive as Tourelle was to Anna. Regardless, the husband was in control, and a woman had very little control over her own life. In many respects, the themes of *Northanger*
Abbey and “The Grey Woman” excellently represent what it was like to live as a woman in 19th century Europe, because their authors were active participants in the complex society of that time.
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When I initially decided that I wanted to be an English teacher, it was mostly because I dearly loved to read. Then through student teaching I discovered that I loved working with students and watching them learn and grow. I could not imagine a better job than teaching English, and as I have been teaching over the last four years, I have found many reasons to love what I do. One aspect of the job that not many English teachers relish is the amount of grading involved in teaching secondary English. We have all spent many an evening or Sunday afternoon hunkered down with a stack of essays to be graded; all for the sake of helping our students become better writers. I (we) knew this going into the profession, and knew that becoming an English teacher meant sacrificing inordinate amounts of personal time to provide feedback to students. In her essay, “Get It Off My Stack” Nikki Baker observes that, “Even those outside the teaching profession know writing teachers have tedious, repetitive, and time-consuming processes to complete each time they collect a set of papers. How often have we received sympathetic responses, as if we’ve reported the death of a pet, from those who ask what we teach?” (Baker 36). In his book (Re)Articulating Writing Assessment for Teaching and Learning, Brian Huot says, “Assessing, testing or grading student writing is often framed as the worst aspect of the job of teaching student writers” (Huot 63). Despite the massive amount of work associated with grading student writing, I (we) wouldn’t choose to do anything else; however, we can’t help but wonder if all this grading is really helping students become better writers. As English teachers we have the opportunity to read student writing, sometimes in analytical pieces and sometimes in very personal pieces. Our students trust us with their words
and ideas, and we do not take that trust for granted. We spend so much time reading and commenting on student work so that our students can present themselves and their ideas in the best way possible. Because we feel that this is such an important task, we want to dedicate the proper time and effort in providing them feedback for their work, and this takes lots of time and lots of energy, which can be off-putting for some English teachers and lead to burn-out in others. In her article, “Write More, Grade Less: Five Practices for Effectively Grading Writing” Lisa Lucas shares an experience that many of us can relate to:

After spending hours correcting, editing, and constructing feedback in order to help them refine their work, the students would glance at their papers, scan for their grade, and then jam the paper into their binder. Even my best students barely glanced at my comments. All of my time crafting feedback was wasted, and my students continued to repeat the same errors. (Lucas 139)

In an effort to learn and understand more effective practices in providing feedback, for myself and my students, this research project explores the question of how students become better writers and best practices in providing feedback to student writing, especially at the high school level. My project will examine current research on those questions and how teachers can make the most effective use of their time and maximize student learning through their feedback. It will explore what constitutes best practices, how different pedagogies (Process and Expressive) could be implemented, highlight some successful strategies, and reflect upon how I can improve my instruction in the future.

Unsurprisingly, there is abundant evidence to support the notion that to become better writers, students must write more. In “Training Advanced Writing Skills: The Case for Deliberate Practice” Ronald T. Kellogg and Allison Whiteford claim, “…that student reported
gains in writing are linked directly to the number of opportunities to compose in writing classes” (Kellogg & Whiteford 255). We have all heard the old adage that “practice makes perfect,” and while perfection may not be an attainable goal in terms of writing, more practice certainly can’t hurt. Kellogg and Whiteford contend that, “Just as high school and college musicians and athletes must practice intensively to compete effectively, so, too, must writers” (Kellogg & Whiteford 251). This makes complete sense. No one becomes an all-star athlete overnight and with no practice. No one becomes a Nobel Prize winner without hard work; the same is true of writing. We can’t expect our students to become better writers without giving them the time and environment to practice.

Often, the problem with assigning more writing is that we feel like we have to grade every facet of the students’ writing. Because it’s an English class, we feel like we have to analyze spelling, grammar, mechanics, formatting, structure, organization, citations, meaning, etc. for every and all assignments, which creates a mountain of paperwork. As Lisa Lucas observes, “Teachers can be identified by the multiple bags of papers they haul out to their cars daily” (Lucas 138). Because writing teachers can have upwards of 75 students on a block schedule and even more on periods, writing sometimes gets pushed to the wayside because teachers simply do not have the time to grade it all. However, students could benefit greatly from more frequent, informal writing assignments that may not necessarily receive a letter grade. Quick-writes are an easy way to develop writing fluency and increase academic engagement. Lucas writes, “…a quick check or minus for effort and written participation. This provides teachers with a tangible record to justify a participation grade and the opportunity to clear up any misconceptions students may have about grading policy” (Lucas 137). This type of activity can be used any time during class and is a low-risk way to allow students to think, reflect, make
meaningful connections, and become more confident in their ability to generate ideas quickly and get them down in writing (Lucas). I love using quick-writes in my own classroom because the students know they are not for a “grade” so they often respond more directly and honestly than they would if they thought I was looking for a “right” or “wrong” answer. Even though some may not take a quick-write seriously, I still believe there is value in getting words on the page and providing an opinion or response to a prompt. A bell-ringer or exit slip can be extremely valuable in obtaining student feedback or assessing student comprehension of a daily objective. These can be used to inform the instructor whether or not students are ready to move on from a topic or whether they need more practice or time to work with the material. If students need another chance to revisit a topic or skill, they have the chance to use the short writing assignment as a practice without punishment in order to apply a new skill, process, or technique.

Of course, if we are assigning more writing, we have to decide how we will efficiently and effectively deal with student writing in terms of assessment and feedback. One strategy that Lisa Lucas offers up in her article “Write More, Grade Less” is the Collins Writing Program. The Collins method slices writing instruction into five specific types of writing, each with a purpose and clear expectation. Each type of writing states explicitly what students must produce and how it will be assessed. In this way, the Collins method eliminates the guesswork from grading, both for students and teachers. Type One writing is basically quick-writes, asking the writer to get ideas on paper, like brainstorming. It’s usually timed and evaluated with a check or a minus. Type Two writing shows that the writer knows something about the subject or topic. It’s still a quick-write, but with a correct answer to a specific question and can be graded as a quiz. Type Three has more substantive content and allows students to refine the way they present ideas in response to focus correction areas (FCAs). It is versatile in form, and could be
an essay, a report, a story, etc. Revision and editing are done on the original, and there should be one draft. The teacher will select a few areas to grade rather than grading everything which allows for focused and timely feedback. Type Four writing is Type Three writing that is read out loud and critiqued by another, and may consist of two drafts. Type Five writing is publishable writing with multiple drafts and extensive time taken to revise and edit. Lisa Lucas asserts that the program “has a sound research base...is easy to implement and makes sense; it provides students with meaningful assignments and teachers with clear guidelines on how to efficiently grade writing.” Another expert in this field, Peter Elbow agrees. In *New Directions for Teaching and Learning* he suggests ways to make the grading of writing “easier, fairer and more helpful for students: using minimal grades or fewer levels of quality, and using criteria that spell out the features of good writing that we are looking for in the assignment” (Elbow 14). By focusing on fewer levels of quality at a time, we may be able to save ourselves more time and help students hone skills at a pace that is best suited to their learning. I like the idea of the Collins method, and I think it gives a name to what many teachers may already do naturally. What I think is unique and helpful about the Collins method is that the expectations are fairly clear-cut, and I think would be easy to explain to students. I also think focusing on one or two areas in each stage of writing instead of every aspect of the writing would allow for more timely feedback and hopefully more meaningful feedback to students. I would like to read more about it and see if rubrics are available and what they look like.

In *Articulating Writing Assessment for Teaching and Learning*, Brian Huot advocates what he calls instructive evaluation, where the students take more ownership in evaluating and revising their own work, while the teacher provides instructive assistance. He notes that when teachers mark up their writing, students often feel like the writing is just a guessing game about
which words the teacher wants to see on their paper. If the writing isn’t there, the student
doesn’t feel ownership of his or her writing and, “assessing the value of writing is completely
erased from the student writing process. Why struggle with assigning value to your work when it
will be thoroughly and often mysteriously judged by someone else?” (Huot 66). According to
Huot, if students have more ownership and responsibility in the evaluation of their own writing
they will learn the concepts of grammar and rhetoric more effectively. Many contemporary
classrooms feature peer evaluations, teacher conferences, and portfolios which require more
student authority and responsibility. I think there is some value to this system, as it allows
students to assess the value in their own work and to see that their writing is not done to please a
teacher, but to serve their own purposes. Huot does address that the major flaw in this method is
that, “many students are ill-equipped to make the kind of evaluative decisions about writing
which our pedagogy expects and often enter writing courses with strict, text-based notions of
how to judge writing” (Huot 66). I can see how this would be problematic, as students may not
know which habits to avoid or how to improve their writing without being told by an instructor.
To make this effective, I envision modeling a writing evaluation as a class before assigning peer
evaluation or self-evaluation, and having frequent mini-lessons and conferences to support
independent learning.

While I like the idea of less time spent on grading, I have always provided feedback and
comments because I want my students to know that I take the time to read their work, and try to
find ways to encourage them to continue their efforts. In my studies through ENGL. 6200, I
have found that in this way I align heavily with Expressive Pedagogy. According to A Guide to
Composition Pedagogies, “Expressivism places the writer at the center of its theory and
pedagogy, assigning highest value to the writer’s imaginative, psychological, social, and spiritual
development and how that development influences individual consciousness and social behavior…Expressivist pedagogy encourages, even insists upon, a sense of writer presence even in research-based writing” (Powell 113). I have always felt that writing is very personal and I know that it is difficult for many of my students to do, so I try to make sure that they know that I care about their progress as writers and I care what they have to say. In my four years of teaching I have found truth in the saying that, “People don’t care what you know until they know you care.” Sometimes it is difficult to verbalize this support in classroom discussions, so I try to encourage them through my comments in their writing. Some of them may never read the comments, but for those that do, I want them to know that I take the time to read their work and value their words.

While I find great value in providing written feedback and responses to my students’ work, I also recognize that teacher comments can be very overwhelming to some students. In her article, “Responding to Student Work,” Nancy Sommers presents her findings after studying the commenting styles of 35 teachers at New York University and the University of Oklahoma, and interviewing their students. All teachers commented on the same set of three student (freshmen) essays, and one student essay was typed in a computer program that identified spelling and punctuation errors, suggested sentence structure and wording, and provided editorial comments. The essay scored a Flesch-Kincaid readability score of 8th grade, which the computer program stated was low for this type of document. Sommers reports that, “The sharp contrast between the teachers’ comments and those of the computer highlighted how arbitrary and idiosyncratic most of our teachers’ comments are. Besides the calm, reasonable language of the computer provided quite a contrast to the hostility and mean-spiritedness of most teachers’ comments” (Sommers 149). Besides some teachers’ comments being hostile and mean-spirited,
Sommers and her team also found that, “…teachers’ comments can take students’ attention away from their own purposes in writing a particular text and focus that attention on the teachers’ purpose in commenting” (Sommers 149). I find myself nodding in agreement because I can think of many instances where students just want to know what I want them to say rather than think of ways to clarify or articulate their own thoughts. It’s hard not to suggest different wording or ideas without running the risk of drowning out the students’ voice; something none of us do intentionally. Sommers also writes about revision and feedback in her essay “Across the Drafts.” In it she says, “…feedback plays a leading role in undergraduate writing development when, but only when, students and teachers create a partnership through feedback- a transaction in which teachers engage with their students by treating them as apprentice scholars, offering honest critique paired with instruction,” (Sommers 250). Again, she makes that point that while teachers often feel the need to comment on every aspect of the essay, those comments don’t mean much if they don’t resonate with some aspect of the student’s ideas.

Sommers and her team found that often students get mixed messages and contradictory instructions through teacher comments. Students are often told to edit a sentence to achieve brevity of style or avoid an error, and then later told to develop a paragraph more deeply. She provides an example to illustrate her point:
In this example the instructor wants the student to edit the sentences so that they are less “wordy” and more precise, yet in the margins insists that the paragraph needs to be expanded to make it more interesting to the reader. Understandably, the student would probably be quite confused upon receiving such feedback. Sadly, I am certain that I have done the same thing and asked a student to “be more specific” while editing sentences to be more concise in wording.

Another problem that Sommers’ research uncovered is that many teachers’ comments are not text-specific, and could be “rubber-stamped” from text to text. Teachers often use vague directives that are not text specific such as, “Think more about [their] audience, avoid colloquial language, avoid passive, avoid prepositions at the end of sentences or conjunctions at the beginning of sentences, be clear, be specific, be precise, but above all, think more about what [they] are thinking about” (Sommers 152). I am guilty of using a few of these vague directives myself, and now I realize the irony of vaguely telling my students to be more specific by using a
vague directive. This sends the message that the teacher is allowed to be vague, but the student must be specific. This problem is worsened if the teacher does not offer any suggestions or strategies for how to fix it. Sommers explains, “In order to offer a useful revision strategy to a student, the teacher must anchor that strategy in the specifics of the student’s text” (Sommers 153). This makes absolute sense. In offering a revision strategy, the teacher is helping the student see how to improve their writing, rather than pointing out a problem and expecting them to figure out how to fix it on their own. While forcing students to learn things on their own may be the philosophy of some teachers, and it may well be the most effective for them, it does not align with my beliefs, and it makes complete sense to me to provide thoughtful and helpful commentary. Since I align heavily with Process and Expressivist pedagogies, I try to treat my students as “real” writers who are learning to enjoy the process of writing. I try to eliminate frustrations often involved with writing by offering help and suggestions when needed rather than having students get frustrated and trying to find the “right” way to write; I think there are many different ways to write a great piece of work and I would hate to stifle students’ creativity.

Nancy Sommers claims that the problem is that we as teachers have been trained to read literary texts for meaning, but unfortunately we do not do that with student texts. Our instinct is to look for what the student should have said, or what he/she did incorrectly, or how it is riddled with grammatical mistakes rather than actually reading their words and studying their meaning. We set out looking for errors and that’s just what we find. By immediately pointing out usage and spelling errors we send the message that that is the priority in writing. She suggests that, “We need to develop an appropriate level of response for commenting on a first draft, and to differentiate that from the level suitable to a second or a third draft. Our comments need to be suited to the draft we are reading. In a first or second draft, we need to respond as any reader
would, registering questions, reflecting befuddlement, and noting places where we are puzzled about the meaning of the text” (Sommers 155). I interpreted this to mean that it is most effective to have the students complete multiple drafts, and with each draft prioritize and determine what kind of feedback you will be providing and how much feedback is necessary to provide.

With the implementation of more drafts, more writing, and various kinds of writing, I can’t help but make a connection to how beneficial it is to honor the process of writing and teach students that writing is often a work-in-progress. According to A Guide to Composition Pedagogies: Process Pedagogy and Its Legacy, “The text of the course should be the student’s own text; the student finds his or her own subject and language; multiple drafts are allowed to encourage the act of discovery; mechanics are relegated to the end of the process; students need plenty of time to refine their papers; and there are no rules or absolutes” (Anson 217). In this way, students are provided the time to fully develop their writing in a safe, low-risk setting that encourages growth and depth of knowledge. While it may sometimes be difficult to find the time to devote to in-class writing, it is worthwhile to make it a priority if improved writing is the goal. I know all too well how quickly time flies in the classroom and how much content we are expected to cover. I also know that sometimes it’s a miracle to get classes to write two drafts, let alone three to four. We are expected to efficiently move through units quickly and cover as much content as we can in our short amount of time with our students, and it’s easy to get swept away in the rush of the year. However, writing is important enough that it deserves time, and our students are definitely important enough to warrant as much time as they need to develop as writers.

Since researching methods of providing effective student feedback and how to help students become better writers, I have been reflecting upon some of my writing assignments and
how I can revise them to align with some of these practices and pedagogies. In my Honors English 10 classes, among other things they read *The Great Gatsby*. This is often a class-favorite, so I typically save it until the end of the semester to leave them with a positive experience from the class (even though the end of the novel is really tragic they still love it!). Unfortunately, this does not leave us much class time to write about the novel. Their concluding essays are often rushed, written in one sitting (I can only assume), and not their best work. Because it’s at the end of the semester, they also do not always get to see my comments on their essays and do not care to pick them up from me at the conclusion of the class. In moving forward, to improve this writing experience I will allot an additional 2-3 weeks of time for the writing process concluding *The Great Gatsby*. I will give them a list of possible prompts to choose from, or they may come up with their own interesting topic, and I will give them several class periods to prewrite and generate ideas both independently and collaboratively. From there, they will have several days to work on a first draft. I will ask them to take turns reading this draft aloud to a partner with whom they are comfortable sharing their work, and ask them to comment on the writer’s message/meaning only. Ideally, I would like the first draft to be devoted to the content of the text only (does the essay arguably “prove” that Gatsby was more in love with Daisy’s status than Daisy herself, for example). I also think I would be able to have one-on-one conferences with students after peer readings so that I could sit down with students and go through their work with them. I like holding one-on-one conferences because it is much easier to address questions and suggest revision plans in person than via comments. Typically my classes consist of about 25 students or fewer, so I can easily meet with them during class periods and during Academic Assist, which is similar to “homeroom.”
After the first draft, which will address content, I would like to ask them to focus on incorporating evidence (quotes) in their second draft. I have found that in-text citations can be very tricky for sophomores, and I think it would be helpful to devote time especially for them to find relevant evidence and practice citing it correctly according to MLA. I will allow them to work collaboratively, and ask them to conduct peer reviews as I circulate around the room to be available for questions and assistance. For the final draft, I would like for them to look over the sentence structure, spelling, punctuation, etc. I think it would be helpful to have at least two other peers review the draft and try to offer assistance in fixing these sorts of errors, along with the use of spell-check. As with before, I will be there to offer assistance and be available for questions should they arise. From there, students may submit the draft to me for a grade. For my part, I will take the time to make sure that my comments are text-specific, that they are not contradictory, and that they do not simply offer vague directives (“be more specific”!). I will also continue to offer words of encouragement, and offer suggested plans of revision rather than simply pointing out errors with no direction as to how to fix them. I will make sure that students know that they are welcome to revise and resubmit their work if they choose to do so. While this still may not be ideal, and I may need more time than planned, I feel that allowing multiple drafts and more time to work on the writing is more in line with my beliefs and philosophy. I could even see myself trying a system with three separate and small grades for each draft that focus on two to three aspects of the writing at a time.

It is so challenging to know the best practices in teaching writing, and sometimes it is even more challenging to know the best practices for the assessment of writing. Through my research I have found that there are many ways to encourage better writing, but the common consensus is that to become better writers, students should write more. If we want them to write
more, then we also need to be prepared to give them the time and space to write. From what I have learned in my teaching experience, not all students have a clean, quiet space to write outside of school. Many of them have the space and the place to write, but do not have the time on top of a busy class/work/extra-curricular schedule. If we want them to understand the importance of writing and the joy that can come from it, we have to give them the time to practice it in a supportive and encouraging place. Additionally, we have to make sure that we provide them with clear criteria that spells out exactly what we are looking for in the assignment so that it does not cause confusion and frustration. Whether they are going into the workforce or heading off to a four-year college, writing is essential to student success outside of high school. I want my students to know that their writing has value, potential, and that it matters. To show them that, I will whole-heartedly implement what I have learned throughout my research and hope that it positively impacts their writing.
Works Cited


