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Reputation and Rurality: Using a Montana-Authored Text to Talk About Agency and Language in the Secondary English Classroom

The author shares a standards-aligned unit plan to help students investigate agency in Debra Magpie Earling's Perma Red.

Introduction

In the fall of my first year of teaching, I did not initially intend to teach a unit on sexual assault, language, and agency all under the umbrella of rurality. A combination of topics that specific does not necessarily happen through careful planning. Teaching Debra Magpie Earling's novel *Perma Red* fell into my hands spontaneously. I had just finished a unit on the Youth Lens with my seniors, where they were challenged to analyze young adult literature for how it may assert or subvert dominant discourses of youth. While students articulated that they were interested in this topic, we were not having the conversations that I thought we should be having; open-ended questions about what students thought of chapter ten of *The Catcher in the Rye* were often met by blank stares, as students were not provoked to argue with one another and work toward the dialogic model of learning that I wanted them to experience. I knew that I needed something edgier.

I found Earling's novel buried in the English department book closet at my rural, Class C school, read it quickly, and decided that that was what we would be reading next. A fellow English teacher and friend of mine remarked that *Perma Red* is "incredibly banned" in her district, and that she was surprised that I could teach it in a school even more rural than her own. Set on the Flathead Indian Reservation in the 1940's, Earling's novel details the life of Louise, a half-Native, half-white

adolescent negotiating marginalization and sexualizing by her peers. From the moment that Baptiste, a boy of her age known for his traditional medicine blows a powder in her face when they are children, their lives intertwine in sexually unhealthy ways. Louise is also chased by other men on the reservation who use their power to rob her of agency in several situations, providing students with the framework for closely deconstructing language. When her peers begin calling her "Perma Red" due to her supposed promiscuity, her agency is questioned as she grapples with how her reputation is imposing itself upon her identity.

Unit Overview

One of the benefits of not initially having planned this unit prior to teaching it was that all essential questions that were discussed were developed by students. The second year that I taught this unit, I was able to use these original essential questions and allow students to develop new ones, and this year, I plan to allow students to further refine them. However, I do not provide these essential questions at the start of the unit; rather I allow students to come to them naturally through discussion as they progress in their reading of *Perma Red*, which is why I provide them later in this article underneath when I address summative assessment. Drawing on the Harkness model, I give students discursal freedom and try to intervene as little as possible so as to allow my students to reach conclusions on their own as often as possible.

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Class discussions are the bulk of what is done in this unit, along with exercises that help students deconstruct language.

While reading the novel, students complete a series of formative assessments that require them to compile and deconstruct the linguistic choices that Earling makes. In doing so, students are learning how authors use creative elements in their writing to create tone and contrasting points of view. The novel also gives students the room to analyze how central ideas interact with one another to create complexity in literature (for example, how Earling contrasts Baptiste's medicine with the imperialistic powers of Harvey Stoner, a wealthy white landowner who gradually accumulates more property on the Flathead Indian Reservation), all while opening the space to teach several IEFA Essential Understandings. The unit culminates in a literary analysis essay in which students are required to articulate some kind of argument about the novel and defend their ideas with relevant evidence and detailed analysis.

When the Context is the Rationale

Perma Red is one of the few novels that is authored by a Montanan, takes place in rural Montana, and articulates both an adolescent and Native American perspective on the human experience: a unique combination that can be tough to find. When teaching rural students, it is not only important that they see themselves in the literature that they are reading, but that the literature which they are reading comment directly on the issues with which students are faced while also giving them a new perspective that may challenge them. Earling's novel does exactly this.

As various men in the town of Perma prey on Louise, she navigates her coming of age as she accepts and rejects certain suitors; in the process, those around her label her as promiscuous, reducing the complexities of her life to what they see happening from an outside perspective. Thus, the title of the novel summarizes a central idea of the novel: one's reputation in a rural setting. Through this narrative, my rural students are given

the license to discuss reputation as it relates to rurality; growing up in a town of less than 1,500, they understand how the labels that are imposed on them are developed from a young age, and Earling's novel may just help them understand and articulate how they negotiate their own labels.

Key Activities, Assessments, and Content Standard Alignment

While I have been developing this unit, I have been working under an administration that was looking to adopt a standards-based grading model; that said, most of what is done here is hyper aligned to standards. I do activities in class that give students the skills they need to complete a formative assessment. Then, after completing anywhere from four to six formative assessments, they are ready to begin their summative assessment.

Opening Activity: Deconstructing Poetry

To kick off the unit, I always have students read and deconstruct M.L. Smoker's poem "Crosscurrent," which can be found in Dottie Susag's *Birthingright – Born to Poetry: A Collection of Montana Indian Poetry*. Through reading and discussing this text, students are not only introduced to the key concept of connection to land in Native American literature, but having students read poetry helps get them acclimated to Earling's mystical, romantic style of writing. I direct them to mark up the poem as they read, looking especially at Smoker's linguistic choices; what is her tone? What specific words or phrases seem especially important? Why does she choose to break certain lines at certain places? How does she provoke emotion or thought in her reader? What images does she include, and how does she describe them vividly? We then discuss the meaning of the poem, and I make sure to consistently ask students to point to the spots in the text that provide them with the evidence that they need to understand the text more vividly. Through grappling with these

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questions, we are covering two Montana Common Core State Standards: RL.12.4 and RL.12.6. Students are also given the room to better understand assimilation and identity as they relate to the Native American experience (IEFA Essential Understanding 2), topics which Earling addresses in her novel through each of her unique characters.

Key Activity #1: Deconstructing Figurative Language

After asking that students come to class having read the first two chapters of *Perma Red* on their own, I begin by modeling for students how I would like for them to close-read and deconstruct language in a text. While I try to do this at all grade levels, I find that doing so with seniors in particular is especially important; when they learn to closely read the writing of others, they become better equipped to become all the more purposeful when they write on their own, a concept that I stress heavily in my rhetoric unit later on in the year. I usually choose a quote from one of the first few chapters that I find to be particularly thought-provoking, such as the novel's opening line: "When Louise White Elk was nine, Baptiste Yellow Knife blew a fine powder in her face and told her she would disappear. She sneezed until her nose bled, and Baptiste gave her his handkerchief. She had to lie down on the school floor and tilt back her head and even then it wouldn't stop. She felt he had opened the river to her heart" (Earling 3).

I project this quote on my SmartBoard, and I begin deconstructing it; underlining key phrases that I find interesting, circling words that highlight Earling's specific word choices, and noting the repetition of "she" as the first word of the last three sentences. After I have done that, we discuss our findings from the language as a class; what specific words/phrases create a unique tone or style in this passage? How does Earling go about introducing two key characters in an engaging manner? After modeling this one more time with another quote, I have students try this on their own in groups with excerpts of their choosing.

MT CCSS: RL.12.3 and L.12.3; IEFA Essential Understanding 2.

Key Activity #2: Miniature Argument Writing: Analyzing Agency

This activity was developed for a very specific purpose: to help my seniors score higher on the writing portion of their ACT retakes, a task with which they specifically asked me to help them. That said, this activity requires that students come to class having read the required chapters of *Perma Red*, have a discussion in response to a specific question that I ask them, and prepare to write a timed, 40-minute essay in response to that question.

In the chapters that students have read up to this point, Louise is blamed for being sexually harassed by her peers at the Catholic school in Perma and is sent away to a boarding school in another town. Upon escaping and returning home to her grandmother's, Baptiste, the boy that has preyed on her since she was young, comes to find her. In a series of uncomfortable interactions, the two characters attempt to dominate one another; an intoxicated Baptiste both literally and figuratively marks Louise as his own when he urinates in a circle around her. In another scene shortly after, Earling writes:

She could see the outline of Baptiste in the murky light. He was stretching his arms behind his head. She knew he was smiling. Suddenly she wanted to go back inside. Pull the smoky blankets over her head and close her eyes. She felt the edge of her teeth clicking. She wondered what he would say to her. She feared his sudden mean nature. Louise unbuttoned the top of her nightdress and pulled it over her head. She would play with Baptiste. She would gain the power. (Earling 110)

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After pointing to these passages, I have students discuss the following question: In the interactions between Louise and Baptiste in these two chapters, how does each character go about asserting their agency, and which of the two, so far in the novel, has more agency? The next day, I give students this question as a writing prompt, which I structure as if it were an ACT Writing prompt with three perspectives on the issue. Then, students have 40 minutes to write an argumentative essay in response to the question.

MT CCSS: RL.12.3, RL.12.4, and W.12.1; IEFA Essential Understanding 5.

Consistent Class Discussions: Getting Comfortable with Discomfort

As students begin to understand agency and power dynamics as they apply to the relationship between Louise and Baptiste, they continue reading the novel and are presented with other situations in which Louise's agency remains at times unclear. Take for example an interaction between Louise and Jules Bart, a white cowboy living on the Flathead Indian Reservation who helps Louise retrieve her sister's body after she drowns in the Flathead River:

The night [Louise's] sister died [Jules] had crushed her with the weight of his body, his insistence, but he had not let her touch him. He had pressed his palms to her shoulders to keep her at a distance, even as she felt the heat of his legs against hers. The sharp edge of his lower rib cage had been hard against her own, unyielding, almost painful. She had to push him away to catch her breath and she realized he had been inside of her and she had not even felt his heart beating. (Earling 194)

This particular passage is one that explains why *Perma Red* is so widely banned in districts around the state: Earling describes a sexual encounter between two characters in specific

detail. However, I always note that while the details are specific and unsettling, the language itself is not explicit or unnecessarily vulgar, and it provides students with a question that constantly sparks a timely and critical question: was this a consensual interaction? Although uncomfortable, I have my students deconstruct and examine the above passage as a class. Through this simple exercise of getting students to deconstruct language and challenging students with the mature task of discussing this interaction, students are now using the classroom as a space to discuss consent and sexual assault. With the recent #MeToo movement, these conversations are not only timely, but necessary. Additionally, students are being scaffolded in their efforts to examine points of view in writing and language, a task required of them by the standards.

MT CCSS: RL.12.2, RL.12.4, and RL.12.6

Summative Assessment: Literary Analysis of Perma Red

As students consistently collect passages from Earling's novel, the central ideas of rurality and reputation become apparent to them: as Louise finds herself in a series of uncomfortable sexual situations like the one mentioned above, her peers in the small town of Perma begin to take note of her supposed behavior and dub her with the label of "Perma Red." In a sort of cyclical manner, more men prey on Louise as she becomes known as a sex object in her community, and the more she is told that her body exists for the purpose of pleasing men, the more she struggles to develop her own sense of self. Thus, students begin to understand the complex relationship between rurality and reputation; does how we act "earn" us the labels that are imposed upon us, or do those labels determine our identity first, forcing us to live inside the confines of our reputation?

Underneath this overarching discussion question, students also begin to generate their own questions as well:

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1. How do people assert agency in their relationships?
2. When are we given agency, and in what situations is it taken from us?
3. How does our reputation affect how we see ourselves and influence how we act?
4. What are the elements that make up our identity, and to what extent do we determine our own identity?

As a summative assessment to this unit, I have students write a literary analysis essay in which they use Earling's novel to examine some kind of central question like the ones listed above. While I would eventually like to come up with some other kind of writing assessment that is perhaps more creative and better suited to students' needs as individual writers (I have had only a handful of students who go on to become English majors and will therefore write literary analysis essays often), I do appreciate the critical thinking, argumentative, and close-reading skills that writing a literary analysis can cultivate. I often remind my students that while they may not read novels and closely analyze them in the future, they will often be challenged with the task of reading situations closely and drawing conclusions accordingly.

Conclusion

When I have asked students for their feedback on this unit, their answers fall on either side of the spectrum; they either demonstrate enthusiasm for the unit and the chance to have "adult" conversations, or they grimace as they recount the tension in the room when that one student remarked that Louise "asked for it." As a passionate reader and advocate of both discursive pedagogy and teaching social justice, I am pleased with how this unit challenges students to read and deconstruct language closely so that they may become more informed citizens who know how to read situations closely. That is, after all, what I see as my purpose for teaching high school English. This novel accomplishes that goal while giving

students room to talk about timely issues like sexual assault and assimilation, all under the overarching ideas of reputation and rurality.

Do all students enjoy the novel? No. And am I typically opposed to the "one size fits all" approach to teaching literature? Yes. I prefer to give my students as much choice as possible in what they read so that they are more inclined to become lifelong readers. However, Earling's novel provides the language and opportunities for students to explore the unique, place-based, incredibly specific intersection between reputation and rurality, all while discussing social issues like sexual assault, assimilation, identity, and agency. While all students may not enjoy the novel, I am confident that the conversations that the novel fosters prove useful to them as they finish their last year of high school.

References

Magpie Earling, Debra. *Perma Red*. BlueHen Books, 2002.

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