BEYOND ADAPTATION
USING FILM TO ENHANCE THE TEACHING OF LITERATURE IN THE
SECONDARY ENGLISH LANGUAGE ARTS CLASSROOM

by

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ABSTRACT

In this paper, I will argue that the use of film in the English classroom can (and should) go beyond the showing of movies adapted from literature studied in the classroom, and instead focus on the many thematic connections—both broad and focused—between literature and film. I will begin by presenting a brief justification for the use of film in the English classroom, followed by a review of the literature—both theoretical and practical—focused on the use of film in the English classroom. I will conclude with examples from both my own practice, as well as that of my colleagues, of how film can be used on a thematic level in the teaching of literature.
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INTRODUCTION

The use of film in the classroom is a practice that began with black and white film strips, and has become more common as Video Cassette Recorders and then DVD players have become affordable enough for (most) schools to purchase in large quantities. Still, some question the role of film in the English language arts classroom, and teachers may be required to justify their decisions to include film as part of the curriculum. Two of the most often asked question are: “Why is film used?” and “How is film used?”

Film is a large part of our popular culture; it is an art form that is familiar to almost every student, and one with which students will (more often than not) be engaged. Subsequently, many educational theorists argue that popular culture is an essential component of any school curriculum. Giroux and Simon (1989) caution:

[E]ducators who refuse to acknowledge popular culture as a significant basis of knowledge often devalue students by refusing to work with the knowledge that students actually have and so eliminate the possibility of developing a pedagogy that links school knowledge to the differing subject relations that help to constitute their everyday lives...[including popular culture in the curriculum] provides the opportunity to further [teachers’] understanding of how students make investments in particular social forms and practices. (p. 3)

It is this “devaluing” of the lived cultural experiences and sources of pleasure of students that educators must strive to avoid. Stressing the connection between literacy and popular culture, Freire and Giroux (1989) observe:

[I]f the question of literacy is linked to questions of purpose and meaning
that take seriously the imperatives of educating students for critical
citizenship in a mass society, it will have to be concerned with the issue
of how students actually become self-reflective about the spheres of
popular culture as part of the very process of learning. (xi)

Unfortunately, it is the popularity of film that often leads some to question its place alongside
literature in the English classroom. Debates in which the value of studying films is compared to
the value of studying literature are somewhat futile, because, as Sommer (2001) observes:

[T]he two are different experiences...[I]t is because film is so richly,
immediately, and essentially a product of popular culture that its study
in the English classroom has the potential to open up important questions
about students’ understanding of and place in their world...[F]ilm is
dense in the amount of information conveyed, yet is accessible...to
almost all students. (p. 487)

Like literature, film can be both a form of mindless escapism, or a serious inquiry into the deeper
questions of society and identity. Since teachers often struggle to get students engaged in
literature, and since the narrative styles and thematic underpinnings of both literature and film
are so similar, it is quite clear that—when used thoughtfully and effectively—film can be a
valuable tool in the teaching of literature.

From as far back as I can remember, I have been a reader of books and a watcher of films. My
passion for literature is what led me to a career in education, specifically in secondary English
Language Arts. Even before my teacher training had started, I was entertaining ideas of how I
would incorporate film into my classroom; this was a practice I had witnessed numerous times in
both elementary and high school, and one which elicited both positive and negative memories.
As I started my teaching career in 2000, it was encouraging to see that not only had the practice of showing films remained in the seven years since I had graduated high school, but it seemed to be more prolific than ever. In the first three schools in which I taught, almost every department (with the exceptions of Science, Math and Physical Education) was using film.

However, as I became more critical (in the most constructive and professional sense of the word) of how and why films were being used by both me and my colleagues, I came to the uncomfortable realization at which other educators (Golden, 2001; Teasley & Wilder, 1997) had already arrived: in most cases, film was being used as a “break” for both teachers and students at the end of a unit of study, a time in which students could sit and watch passively (or not all), and teachers could get caught up on their marking. In other cases, film was simply a means to keep students occupied in the days leading up to vacation. Discussion of films—if any—did not go beyond identifying what aspects of the novel (plot events, characters, dialogue) had been left out of the adaptation. These practices are not only too common, they are a great disservice to the students and to the films themselves: they imply that students do not want to be, or are incapable of being, critical viewers of film, and that films are a “prize” that students have earned after completing hours of real work (i.e. reading novels, writing essays, taking tests), rather than a legitimate, complex and significant art form. Lest my observations seem too harsh, I am the first to admit that I have—far too many times—used film in the ways described above.

I soon began to re-think why and how film has been used in the English classroom, and how it could be different in my classroom. One of the first catalysts of my reinvented perspective(s) on film in the classroom was when I began to notice what can be termed “gaps” in the literature I was asking my students to read and analyze. Let me be clear: I do not use the term “gap” to mean a flaw in the narrative(s); instead, I use it to describe the moments of indeterminacy, the
unanswered questions, that inevitably arise when students (and teachers) read complex, layered literary works. As my students began to question these gaps, often focusing on issues of character motivation, I began to use analogies to popular culture—namely film and television—in my explanations. While these comparisons often were useful for the students who had watched these movie and/or television shows, they rarely—if ever—served any meaningful purpose for the students who had not seen them. At this point, I began to keep track of the most frequently asked “gap questions”, and started to compile a list of possible films to show in the classroom as an enhancement of our study of literary texts.

I will elaborate more on the specific texts and films that first got me focused on different—and more effective—ways of using film in the English classroom later in this paper. For now, I would like to focus more specifically on the question, “Why use film?”

In my classroom, I tend to focus on a reader-response approach to literature. This is by no means the only theoretical framework which informs my practice, but acts more as an “umbrella” perspective under which many other literary theories (e.g. feminism, social justice, deconstruction) find space. One theorist with whom I share a great deal of ideas and passion about the teaching of literature is Louise Rosenblatt (2005), who makes the following observation:

[I]n a turbulent age, our schools and colleges must prepare the student to meet unprecedented and unpredictable problems. He [stet] needs to understand himself; he needs to work out harmonious relationships with other people. He must achieve a philosophy, an inner center from which to view in perspective the shifting society about him; he will influence for good or ill its future development. Any knowledge
about humankind and society that schools can give him should be assimilated into the stream of his actual life. (p. 3)

It is the study of literature, Rosenblatt (2005) argues, that is the most effective place for these understandings to occur; the study of literature "affect[s] the student’s sense of human personality and human society" and "foster[s] general ideas or theories about human nature and conduct, define moral attitudes, and habitual responses to people and situations" (p. 4).

Dennis J. Sumara (2002) shares a similar belief in the importance of what he terms "literary engagement":

[B]ecause schools support intergenerational relationships developed explicitly around representing, imagining, and interpreting knowledge, they continue to function as important sites for creating insights into human experience. By creating pedagogical structures that include shared interpretations of literary engagements...schools can continue to push the boundaries of what is considered true about the world. [L]iterary engagements, and the practices of interpretation that are conditioned by those engagements, can become useful ways for people not only to maintain a sense of personal coherence but, as well, to expand their imagined world of possibilities. (xiii)

Of course, Rosenblatt’s and Sumara’s perspectives on the value of literature and its study are not entirely new, nor is it likely that one would find an English teacher who disagrees with their observations. The question we must ask is, “Do these same theories apply to the study of film?”

For some, as Teasley and Wilder (1997) observe:
Reading is considered a highbrow activity, while movies are for the masses. And if part of the function of school is to raise the general level of the nation’s intellectual life, then it’s no wonder English teachers seek to raise students’ taste in reading and discourage consumption of lowbrow entertainment. (p. 3)

Anticipating such attitudes, philosopher and scholar Andrew Light (2003) makes a case for the place of film in academic study:

Films show us complex portrayals of how people see themselves and interact with each other on whatever subject, real or imagined, that they are about. They do not do this by simply holding up a mirror of the world as it is; they assume certain things...and then construct a narrative that we can understand and in which we recognize others as like ourselves or come to appreciate that other people can live in very different ways than we do and still be people like us. When films do this they represent and then investigate the variety of ways that people understand themselves and relate to both social groups and the larger society...Films do not merely represent individuals and groups but also help to actually create understandings of who we think we are [and] how we regard others. (p. 8-9)

Taken together, the perspectives of Rosenblatt (2005), Sumara (2002) and Light (2003) make a compelling argument for the value of critically examining literature and film in tandem. After all, as Freire and Giroux (1989) observe, “learning is not merely about the acquisition of knowledge but also about the production of social practices which provide students with sense of place, identity, worth, and value”(ix). Both art forms create spaces for individuals to examine their own identity, and their relationship(s) to the larger society/world of which they are a part. As Sommer
(2001) notes, films “are not somehow second-order texts or diversions, but are part of [the] core business [of teaching]” (p. 485).

The uses of film in the secondary English classroom are quite diverse. A few examples of the variety of ways film can be used in the English classroom can be described as follows:

- Critically viewing film prior to studying literature (novels, poems, short stories, plays), thereby enhancing students’ critical reading abilities. (e.g. Eken, 2002; Golden, 2007; Golden, 2001; Vetric, 2004;)

- Watching adaptations of Shakespeare’s plays with the closed-caption feature, so that students are both watching and reading the play simultaneously, thereby enhancing the students’ grasp of the characters and themes, as well as increasing their level of comfort and confidence with Shakespearean language. (Walton, 2006)

- Using film to help students visualize concepts of literary theory. (Muller, 2006)

- Using film to help students recognize new and evolving definitions of literacy. (Hurrell, 2001)

- Using film with urban youth as a means to “deconstruct dominant narratives and contend with oppressive practices” (Morrell, 2002: p.72)

- Using film as a way for students to critically analyze the way literacy is (re)presented in films about school. (Copeland & Goering, 2003)

- Using film as a way to get students to critically analyze popular culture representations of literacy and identity. (Williams, 2007)

- Using film to increase the literacy and critical thinking skills of “at-risk students.” (Vetric, 2004)
While there are clearly many ways to use film in the English classroom, a disproportionate amount of the literature and research focuses on only one of two possible approaches: (1) teaching film as an artistic genre separate from the study of literature, or (2) teaching film adaptations of literary works studied in class. The purpose of this paper to is to focus on a third possibility: incorporating films that have thematic connections to the literary works being studied. Using as examples films shown in my own classroom, as well as the classrooms of two colleagues, I will demonstrate how the use of film in literary study and analysis has enhanced students' understandings of the central themes of the literary works they have studied.
LITERATURE REVIEW

The following review of the literature related to the use of film in the English classroom focuses on three approaches: (1) the teaching and use of film as an artistic genre separate from literature; (2) the use of films adapted from the literature studied in the classroom; and (3) the use of film to teach and enhance students' critical literacy skills.

Reel Conversations

Alan B. Teasley and Ann Wilder's (1997) book *Reel Conversations: Reading Films With Young Adults* is cited in numerous books and articles examining the many possible uses of film in the English classroom. In a mere two hundred pages, Teasley & Wilder pack in over two hundred movies suggestions, divided by both genre and theme; there are also numerous lessons and strategies for implementing a variety of films for a variety of purposes, and several blank templates that can be used (or modified) for student use in the classroom.

*Reel Conversations* is divided into two parts, ten chapters, and three appendices. Part One focuses primarily on the rationale for using film in the English classroom (Chapter 1); teaching technical film language (Chapter 2); using a “viewer-response” approach to the study of film (Chapter 3); teaching film genres (Chapter 4); and using films across the curriculum (Chapter 5). In the section “Principles for Selection of Films”, Teasley & Wilder (1997) note that they personally select films that “students are not likely to have seen multiple times...foreign films, classics, and critically acclaimed films that didn’t reach a wide audience”(9). This is a different approach than other educators (Golden, 2001; Morrell, 2002; Sommer, 2001) who prefer to use films that are familiar to students—thereby almost guaranteed to be engaging—but use the films in such a way that students will view them with a more critical and analytical eye. Both approaches have merit. For students who struggle academically, a familiar film may alleviate anxiety around
assessment expectations; for students who are stronger academically, something artful and obscure may present a much-desired challenge.

Part Two is focused on using/teaching films that are targeted at a young adult audience. Each chapter in Part Two focuses on a particular theme: coming of age (Chapter 6); families (Chapter 7); belonging (Chapter 8); dreams and quests (Chapter 9); and love and romance (Chapter 10). Appendix B (197-200) lists fifteen to twenty possible young adult novels under each thematic heading which could be used in tandem with the films identified and discussed in chapters six to ten. Within each of the last five chapters, Teasley and Wilder (1997) identify several key attributes common to the theme of the chapter. These key attributes are:

**Chapter 6 – Coming of Age:** growth through loss of innocence and acquisition of knowledge; the role of a parent, mentor or guide; rituals or rites of passage (p. 155-156)

**Chapter 7 – Families:** What constitutes a family?; family conflicts; the expression of love in families; adolescents see their parents as human beings (163-166).

**Chapter 8 – Belonging:** individuals in conflicts with groups; seeking acceptance; making accommodations (p. 173-175).

**Chapter 9 – Dreams and Quests:** dreamers and dreams; obstacles and opportunities; dream keepers and guides; developing character to achieve the goal; achieving the dream (p. 183-186).

**Chapter 10 – Love and Romance:** What is real love?; finding and keeping “the right one”; best friends and confidants; stages in the relationship. (p. 190-192).
In the introduction to Part Two, Teasley and Wilder (1997) outline the five criteria they used as guidelines in selecting films for each thematic category: (i) The protagonist of the film is ten to nineteen years old; (ii) the film deals with issues of concern to adolescents; (iii) the film is “teachable,” that is, artful enough to warrant class time or student study; (iv) the film is not an adaptation of a “classic” literary work or widely read young adult novel; (v) as a group, the films present a wide variety of protagonists, settings and issues (148). One could argue that guideline (i) is a bit limiting in terms of film selection, and works on the assumption that younger viewers cannot connect with characters different than themselves. Guideline (ii) is a logical one, but teachers must be careful to avoid essentializing their students into a homogeneous group, in which it is assumed the majority of students will find particular themes engaging. Guideline (iii) is quite subjective, since what one viewer deems “artful,” another viewer might see as merely pretentious; furthermore, critically analyzing a popular and (seemingly) simple film might be revelatory for the students when they find themselves able to see things in popular films that their peers—and perhaps even parents—may have overlooked. While guideline (iv) is understandable given the (unfortunately) common teacher penchant of showing film adaptations of novels studied in class as a “break” for both students and teacher (Golden, 2001; Teasley & Wilder, 1997), there are ways in which watching film adaptations literary texts can develop students’ critical reading—and viewing—abilities (Golden, 2007).

While these guidelines and categories fit well with the films and novels Teasley and Wilder (1997) select, they are suited more for the younger of “young adult” readers and viewers. Teasley and Wilder intended the audience for their book to be teachers of Grades 6-12, yet much of the suggested materials would likely not be appropriate or engaging for senior level English classes. However, the suggested writing assignments at the end of each of the thematic chapters—
although a little simplistic—could very easily be adapted for older students studying more complex and mature novels/films. Also, current teachers may want to seek out alternative titles to the ones suggested by Teasley and Wilder. There are have been countless excellent films released in the twelve years since *Reel Conversations* was published, many of which tie in wonderfully with the literary texts of senior level English classes.

**Reading in The Dark**

Like Teasley and Wilder (1997), John Golden (2001) laments the (mis)use of film in the English classroom. In *Reading in the Dark*, he proposes several different ways to "actively...[incorporate film] into our traditional ways of teaching reading and literature (xiii). However, where Teasley and Wilder specifically encourage selecting films that students will not likely have seen (e.g. classics, foreign films, independent films), Golden prefers to work with films that are “popular or at least fairly well-known...films that come fairly easily to [students] in terms of recognizing the actors, the directors, or even the movie itself”(xv). *Reading in the Dark* is divided into four chapters: (1) Film Terminology and Cinematic Effects; (2) Film and Reading Strategies; (3) Film and Literary Analysis; and (4) Teaching a Complete Film.

Chapter One is similar to Chapter Two of Teasley and Wilder’s (1997) *Reel Conversations* in that it instructs teachers on how to effectively teach the most basic elements of film language and technique (e.g. framing, focus, angles, lighting, sound, editing), and offers several examples of clips from both classic and contemporary films which illustrate the different elements within each cinematic technique.

Chapter Two (*Film and Reading Strategies*), however, presents a unique approach to using film in the English classroom. Golden (2001) proposes that film can be used *prior* to the study of literary texts in a way that hones students abilities to *predict, respond* and *question* written texts.
Golden explains his approach by noting how “the very things that films do for us, good and active readers of literature have to do for themselves”(p. 36). As a result, teachers should consider adopting a practice of “isolating particular skills that [teachers] want active readers to possess and demonstrating how they can be introduced and practiced with film and then transferred to [a] written text”(p. 36). Golden explains how this approach effectively “reflects most classroom teachers’ approach to reader-response theory in that students should try to put themselves into a text before beginning the formal analysis and synthesis. All film does in make this leap easier”(p. 36). One logistical concern for classroom teachers may be the amount of time necessary to implement such pre-reading strategies effectively. Showing one (or more) movie clips of three to twelve minutes in length, followed by time for question response and discussion, may significantly cut into the allotted time a class has for a novel study. This is not to suggest that Golden’s approach could not be used, but the time commitments are such that not every English class in every school has the luxury of taking extra time to devote to watching and discussing film clips.

Chapter Three (Film and Literary Analysis) is an extension of Chapter Two. Golden (2001) explains how once students have learned (via viewing and critiquing film clips), they are now ready to move on to developing and practicing more “analytical skills,” and eventual apply those skills in the analysis of literary elements such as “characterization, setting, point of view, symbol and irony”(p. 61). Curiously, Golden does not explicitly mention theme as one of the elements students will be able to analyze more critically, though he does imply as much later in the chapter.

Golden (2001) has put a great deal of thought into how and why film has a place in the English classroom, and he offers more than enough examples to support his ideas. The questions
teachers need to ask if they are planning to incorporate Golden’s approaches into their own classrooms are: (1) Is it necessary to teach film techniques and terminology first, before using/teaching film as a pre-reading activity and precursor to understanding and practicing literary analysis? (2) How much time will be required to implement some (or all) of Golden’s ideas in the classroom? It seems reasonable to assume that the practice of showing short film clips to teach reading skills such as predicting, questioning and responding to texts is possible without giving students background knowledge in camera angles and shots, elements of lighting and sound, and editing techniques. Still, whether or not one could implement Golden’s ideas comes down to a question of time: how much will it take, and how much does one have?

**Teaching Adaptations: How and Why?**

Adaptations of novels to the screen often come under fire from both the literary and cinematic world; reviewers frequently use terms such as “betrayal...bastardization...vulgarization [and] desecration” when describing adaptations of literary works”(Stam, 2005: p. 3). In addition, as some educators have already noted (Golden, 2001; Teasley & Wilder, 1997), showing film adaptations of literary texts studied in class is often little more than an opportunity to keep students quiet and to give teachers time to get caught up on marking. Though such practices do occur, there are nevertheless ways to incorporate adaptations into the English classroom that will provide students with an opportunity to be both critical readers (of texts) and watchers (of film).

Lawrence Baines (1996) takes an unusual approach to studying and teaching films adapted from works of literature. Rather than focus solely on theme or characterization, Baines opts to compare and analyze the use of language in literary texts and their subsequent cinematic adaptations. In examining *To Kill A Mockingbird, Of Mice and Men,* and *Wuthering Heights,* Baines concludes that the film adaptations of these three novels are significantly lacking in terms
of (i) the use of polysyllabic words; (ii) the use of complex sentence structure; (iii) lexical diversity; and (iv) the complexity of dialogue, plot, character, and theme. The first three observations, while interesting to scholars and educators, are not likely to pique the interest of adolescents. The fourth point, however, provides valuable opportunities for close textual and visual analysis.

Baines (1996) notes that any film adaptation of any novel will involve significant omissions. Regardless of the length of the novel, the film(s) will generally run a little more or less than two hours in length; as a result, “as dialogue is simplified for film, plot, setting, theme and characterization become correspondingly less complex” (p. 618). The obvious question is that since film adaptations are so deficient in terms of literary elements, how would showing them in class benefit students in any way? Baines explains:

> Lesson plans that capitalize on students’ well established sense of the visual and aural world seem especially effective places to spark enthusiasm for reading. Once students get hooked on topics via non-print media, the chances are much greater that they will actually pick up the printed page and read. (p. 619)

While Baines’s approach may appear practical and sound in theory, the value of its implementation in the classroom is questionable. Baines’s perspective serves to reinforce the (now cliched) notion that “The book is always better than the film.” If students perceive that this idea of the superiority of literature to film is being presented by the teacher, it is likely to hinder the possibility of any meaningful analytical discussion, and further diminish the reality that “there is power in looking closely at film versions of literary works” (Golden, 2007: p. 24). True, films do not possess the linguistic strength and diversity of written texts, but focusing only on
these shortcomings prevents virtually any possibility of meaningful discussion about how these differences affect the reader/watcher’s experience with the text(s).

John Golden (2007) agrees that there is value in showing film adaptations of literary works, but his approach is—in some ways—quite different than that of Baines (1996). Like Baines, Golden is quick to point out that while “film and literature are different animals,” educators have to be careful to avoid “the notion of a rivalry between print and film” (p. 24-25). Teachers must also go far beyond discussions that focus only on “scenes that were cut, the changes made, and the ridiculous casting” (p. 24). Instead, Golden proposes that teachers should acknowledge one—though certainly not the only—reason why film adaptations are shown in classrooms: to use an artistic medium (film) familiar to students as a means to help them become more analytical in their reading of literary texts. He explains that teachers and students:

[T]ypically analyze print texts for characterization, theme, tone, setting, symbol, and so on. The kids who will never think about characterization in a novel have no trouble listing all the defining traits of James Bond or Batman. Looking for literary elements in film helps students understand these terms, and improves their analytical abilities with print text. (p. 25)

From this perspective, discussions can move beyond questions of “why changes were made” (p. 27) in an adaptation, to more valuable conversations around “what is gained and lost in translation” (p. 28).

Golden (2007) points out the futility in engaging students in discussions about why directors and script writers made the changes they did in adapting a novel into a film, or, as Stam (2005) observes, the popular “and rather subjective question of the quality of adaptations” (p. 4). Instead,
he acknowledges that “anyone who has read both texts—film and print—is in a unique position to talk about the effect that these changes have [on the reader]”; therefore, a better question to pose to students would be, “How does the audience feel differently about character, theme, plot, and so on because of certain changes that were made?” (p. 27). Faced with this question, students will offer answers that go far beyond the issue of “time constraints” (p. 27). By examining how film is not just an adaptation but a transformation of a literary text, students become more skilled in their critical literary analysis of written texts.

Golden (2007) adopts and alters Baines’s (1996) notion of the shortcomings of certain film adaptations of literary texts. Rather than focus on the technical linguistic elements of sentence complexity and lexical diversity as Baines, Golden opts instead to have his students select passages from the novels they are studying and identify which passages are either “directly filmable...which are words and phrases that can be readily translated to film with little interference from the director” or “indirectly filmable aspects of a print text, where a director needs to rely on a variety of cinematic and theatrical elements to translate the print text to the screen” (p. 26). Golden finds that this activity requires students “to do a close reading of the print text and to visualize it [which] will lead to stronger analyses when they begin their comparisons [of the text and the film]” (p. 26).

Baines (1996) may be accurate in his assertion that film possesses “an imagistic superiority over novels” (p. 613) and nothing more, but Golden (2007) demonstrates—quite convincingly—that for all their perceived deficiencies, film adaptations of literary texts have the potential to be a valuable teaching tool in the English classroom.
Using Film to Increase Literacy Skills

Following Golden (2001) and Teasley and Wilder (1997), Michael Vetrie (2004) is quick to point out the many ways film is misused in the English classroom; however, he also acknowledges—and refutes—the idea that students “should [only] be reading in the language arts classroom, not watching films” (p. 40). As Vetrie points out, film today is akin to “classical Greek and Elizabethan [drama],” but instead of an audience finding “its popular culture on the stage [today] it can be found in film” (p. 40).

In terms of film selection, Vetrie (2004) echoes Golden (2001) in his notion that teachers should select films “that engage students in creating an environment to think” (p. 41, emphasis in original) and also “give the students a reason, need, or strong desire to communicate” (p. 42). Furthermore, Vetrie explains that:

[C]hoosing a film that strongly fits within the experience of the students and has relevancy for their lives creates a dynamic environment in which the students think about the film critically, express their opinions orally, and write profusely. (p. 42-43)

Incorporating films that are both engaging and relevant to students’ lives and “around which students have already built strong interconnected structures is much easier than trying to build a new knowledge base or schemata from scratch” (p. 43).

Vetrie (2004) proposes “film can be used to increase literacy skills if it is taught as literature” (p. 41). In order for this approach to be successful, Vetrie suggests that teachers “use film as other literature is used: as a basis for anchoring most writing and critical-thinking activities” (p. 41). Building on Golden (2001) again, Vetrie explains:

[R]eadings...cannot be taught in isolation. Students who can listen, discuss,
and think are going to learn to read more effectively...students who gain experience in listening, speaking, and writing through interaction with film begin to radically improve their reading and writing proficiency. (p. 42)

Citing his own classroom as an example, Vetrie describes how “when the students are caught up in a film...they are more successful with their writing and discussion prompts. They write more and express themselves better. The discussions are heated and intense”(p. 44).

Lest Vetrie (2004) be accused of being led solely by the desires and interests of his students in his selection of films, he clarifies that once more accessible films have been viewed, analyzed and discussed, “the [eventual] goal of the film-as-literature teacher should be to undertake increasingly complex projects as the students’ sophistication and knowledge base increase”(p. 43); however, Vetrie cautions against starting off with complex and challenging films, and reiterates that “the first step is to find engaging films”(p. 44). Once such films have been selected, students are given “challenging writing and discussion prompts” that will enable them to “transfer their interest in the film [and] need to listen, write, discuss, and utilize critical-thinking skills”(p. 44).

As with other approaches to using film in the English classroom (Golden, 2001; Teasley & Wilder, 1997), the only challenge to Vetrie’s (2004) approach is time. Engaging students in the materials they are studying, while at the same time honing their literacy, critical-thinking and writing skills, is the goal of any English teacher. Following Vetrie’s example is a fine place to start.

Clearly, the uses of film in the English classroom are quite diverse. Film can be used to enhanced critical literacy skills—both reading and writing—as well as present opportunities for students to examine the social norms inherent in contemporary popular culture. Film acts not
only as a catalyst for the creation of personal pleasure and engagement, but also as means for students to investigate aspects of their own identity. I believe that it is through the critical examination of common themes (in both literature and film) that all of these goals can be reached.
I have taught Harper Lee’s novel *To Kill A Mockingbird* (1960) for all but one of my first seven years as a teacher. Like all of my colleagues (at three different schools), I show the 1961 film adaptation at the end of every unit. Students generally enjoy both the novel and the film, and up until fours years ago, our class discussions were limited to an analysis of what parts of the novel were included in the film, and which were left out. Other than the occasional discussion delving into how the removal of certain characters and/or scenes affected the story as a whole, our discussions lacked any real depth.

Four years ago, early on in one of my many units on *Mockingbird*, I was asked a question I had been asked many times before, but until that day had never really pondered. As I was explaining to the class about the history of slavery and racial segregation in the southern United States, a student asked, “How do people become racist?” (This is a valid question, as the novel never explicitly addresses how or why any of the prejudiced characters became prejudiced.) As I had replied many times before, I explained that no person is ever born prejudiced; rather, racism is something that is learned. The majority of the class nodded their understanding, and no further questions followed. Following that class, I began to wonder how the theme of racial prejudice and its consequences was being understood by my students. After all, Alabama in the early 1930s is very different than the suburbs of Vancouver in the early years of the twenty-first century. It was then that I first entertained the notion of showing my class Tony Kaye’s film *American History X* (1998). My first thought was that the content was too graphic for a group of
fifteen and sixteen year-olds; however, after careful consideration—and a detailed disclaimer signed by every parent—I decided to show the film.

The film chronicles the life of Derek Vinyard, a charismatic and intelligent young skinhead who is imprisoned for the murder of a young African-American male. Upon Derek’s release, he learns that his younger brother, Danny, has become immersed in the local neo-Nazi gang to which he had once belonged. Derek struggles with both overcoming the reputation he earned with friends and family in his younger days, and with trying to prevent his younger brother from following the same destructive path.

The audience learns (via several flashbacks throughout the film), the source(s) of Derek and, subsequently, Danny’s prejudiced beliefs. In one early scene, we see old news footage of a young Derek being interviewed on the evening news; his father—a firefighter—had been shot by gang members while putting out a fire at a rival gang member’s home:

Reporter: I know this is hard, but how do you feel?

Derek: How do you think I feel? I think it’s typical.

Reporter: Typical how?

Derek: Well, this country is becoming a haven for criminals, so what do you expect? You know, decent, hard-working Americans like my dad are being rubbed out by social parasites.

Reporter: Parasites?

Derek: Blacks, Browns, Yellow. Whatever.

Reporter: I don’t understand. You’re saying that you think maybe your father’s murder was race related?
Derek: Yeah it’s race related! Every problem in this country is race related, not just crime. It’s like....immigration, AIDS, welfare. Those are problems in the Black community, the Hispanic community, the Asian community. Those aren’t white problems.

Reporter: Derek, aren’t those really issues that deal with poverty?

Derek: No. You know, no. They’re not products of the environment either. That’s crap. Minorities don’t give two shits about this country; they’ve come here to exploit it, not embrace it.

Reporter: What does this...

Derek: I mean millions of white Europeans came here and flourished, you know, within a generation, so what the fuck is the matter with these people who go around shooting...a fireman? [cries]

Reporter: What does this have to do with the murder of your father?

Derek: Because my father was murdered doing his job! Putting out a fire in a fucking nigger neighborhood he shouldn’t be giving a shit about. He got shot by a fucking drug dealer who probably still collects a welfare check!

Towards the end of the film, it is Danny who recalls a dinner conversation between Derek and their late father. Derek is explaining how he has major test coming up in English class on Richard Wright’s novel Native Son, a major component in the class’s unit on Black literature (Derek’s instructor, Dr. Sweeney, is African-American). Derek’s father begins to question the rationale and necessity of an entire unit on Black literature, a conversation which quickly leads to the father’s personal experience with—and vehement objection to—affirmative action. Derek’s father questions why positions are no longer given to “the best man for the job,” but instead are often given to people based not on their qualifications but the colour of their skin. Initially,
Derek seems to be in agreement with his father, but then quickly explains how some of Dr. Sweeney’s observations and criticisms of race relations appear to be valid.

Father: “It’s bullshit.”

Derek: “Yeah, I guess so.”

Father: “No. No. It’s nigger bullshit. You see that, don’t you?”

Derek: [pauses] “Yeah.”

Father: “You gotta watch out for that.”

Derek: “Yeah, I get what you’re saying. I will.”

Father: [pats Derek’s arm, smiling] “Good boy. I’m proud of you.”

Derek: [smiling] “Don’t worry about it.”

The audience is given the impression that while Derek and Danny’s late father was a good, hard-working man who cared deeply for his family, he clearly held some racist beliefs that—in the eyes of both Derek and Danny—he was able to justify with some persuasive rhetoric. Derek idolized his father and valued his approval above all else, just as Danny does with Derek.

Prior to starting the film, I give my students a series of discussion questions which focus on literary aspects such as character motivation and, more prominently, theme (see Appendix A). Students are required to identify as many traits of the key characters as they can: Derek, Danny, Stacey (Derek’s girlfriend), Seth (a fellow skinhead), and Cameron (the aging “leader” of the white supremacist group to which Derek and Danny belong). Students are then asked to analyze and discuss how each character is racist, and speculate why they may have been drawn to such a group. While no detailed information is given about Stacey, students nevertheless come up with some thoughtful theories as to why she may have joined the group: she fell in love with Derek,
and went along with whatever he believed; she came from a racist family; she has a poor home life and is simply searching for something that will satisfy her desire to belong.

The last few questions focus on addressing the central themes of the story as they relate to society as a whole, and not just the characters in the film. Students are asked to identify how the film illustrates how any prejudice, not just racism, is learned (i.e. how people are often a product of their environment); what it takes for people to overcome learned beliefs, be they prejudiced or not; how prejudice can be subtle, rather than overt (e.g. Derek’s father’s complaints about affirmative action, or Derek’s monologue about the dangers of illegal immigration). Finally, students are asked to compare and contrast the representation of prejudice and its consequences in both To Kill A Mockingbird and American History X. Once students have answered the questions individually, I have them work in small groups of three to four students to share/discuss their responses; we then come together for a final discussion as a class. Every time I have shown this film, the overwhelming majority of students have provided thoughtful analysis of both their initial viewing of the film and their subsequent revisiting of the novel.

I am often asked by my colleagues whether I think American History X is too violent for Grade 10 students. I explain that violence, when used thoughtfully and effectively, is a valuable element of both film and literature. As Vetrie (2004) explains, even the ancient Greeks:

[R]ecognized that violence was a popular subject for the stage because it was a common occurrence in life. Today, it is popular subject in film for the same reason...The Greeks took violence, focused on the effects on the lives of the characters, and turned it into a moral force. The better films that feature violence, those that are sometimes the most engaging [to students], are the ones that neither romanticize nor
glamorize it. They focus on the effects of violence on the lives of the characters...Sometimes, like the Greeks, we cannot keep the violence offstage (off the screen). When we choose films that feature violence, we must deal realistically with it, focusing our discussion...on the awful consequences of the violent acts. (p. 44, emphasis added)

Echoing Vetrie’s observations, many of my students often comment on an excerpt from Danny’s closing monologue, which (they argue) summarizes the central message of the film: “Hate is baggage. Life’s too short to be pissed off all the time. It’s just not worth it.”

**Child’s Play: Lord of the Flies and Mean Creek**

At first glance, Jacob Estes’s film *Mean Creek* (2004) might seem to have very little in common with William Golding’s novel *Lord of the Flies* (1954). Granted, it doesn’t address the central theme of the novel, namely the struggle—both internal and external—between civilization and savagery, order and chaos. No character in the film is analogous to any character in the novel, in either traits or motivation; there is no Christ-like Simon or sociopathic Roger. So, one may ask, how do the two works connect? Why not simply show one of the two adaptations (Brook, 1963 and Hook, 1990), and—as Golden (2007) suggests—critically discuss how the changes in the films affect our responses to the characters and themes we encountered while reading the novel?

First, from a purely aesthetic-cinematic perspective, both adaptations are terrible; as one of my colleagues once phrased it, Hook’s (1990) version is nothing but a “cinematic abortion.” The vast majority of my former students have wholeheartedly agreed. Secondly, the majority of students have no need to revisit either the themes or the characters. In terms of characterization, theme, symbolism and allegory, Golding is not subtle; even the weakest of my students
understand what the characters and objects represent, and can identify Golding’s (somewhat) pessimistic assessment of humanity. As a result, I see no point in showing either adaptation. Instead, I chose a film that addresses some of the minor themes of the novel (e.g. conformity, peer pressure, bullying and individual vs. collective conscience) and—perhaps most importantly—brings these subjects into a more familiar time and place.

*Mean Creek* (2004) tells the story of Sam Merrick, a physically small and somewhat introverted adolescent, who one day at school is beaten up by George Tooney, the angry and overweight local bully. After hearing of his younger brother’s attack, Sam’s older brother, Rocky, and two friends, Clyde and Marty, devise a plan to exact revenge on George. Rocky instructs Sam to invite George on a boat trip down the local river, a birthday excursion for Sam. Once the group is deep enough into the wilderness, they plan to dare George to strip and jump into the river; once he is far enough away, they will quickly gather his clothes and paddle away, leaving him to find his way home, naked and humiliated.

Everything goes according to plan, until Sam, his girlfriend Milly, Rocky and Clyde begin to see George in a new light, not as a belligerent bully, but as a lonely kid desperate for friendship and attention. They decide they will not pull their intended prank, but Marty (quite aggressively) refuses. When Marty attempts to force George to strip and jump in the river, George refuses. The two boys struggle, and, as George is pushed overboard, he strikes his head on the edge of the boat. Despite the frantic attempts of the other kids to rescue George, he drowns. The remainder of the film focuses on the conflicts that erupt between the friends as to what story they are going to tell the authorities: Do they confess their plan and describe the event for what it was, a tragic accident? Do they say that George simply fell overboard and drowned, leaving out his struggle with Marty? Or do they leave George’s body to be discovered, and say nothing to anyone?
One inspiration behind my decision to show *Mean Creek* as part of our unit on *Lord of the Flies* was an activity used by some of my colleagues who teach the same novel. At the end of the novel, they hold a mock trial for the surviving boys who are rescued. What the students must determine is what characters will confess as to their involvement (if any) in the deaths of Simon, Piggy and the un-named boy with the birthmark who (presumably) dies in the forest fire in the early part of the book. Students must draw on what they have learned about the characters while reading their novel and, taking on the roles of various key characters, write up a testimony that they feel the character(s) would likely have given when questioned by the authorities.

*Mean Creek* addresses this very question: what happens after events such as these? What pressures do people face? To whom are they loyal: their friends, themselves, or a sense of what is “right” and “just”? How do people interpret and respond to their situation, and what motivates them to act this way? Prior to starting the film, I distribute a question sheet (see Appendix B) which students answer during and after the film. Subsequent discussions are always lively and engaging. Students raise such issues as the subjectivity (or lack thereof) of our definitions of “right” and “wrong”; the pressures of conformity and their influences on people’s decisions; moral obligation and responsibility to criminal situations, be they intentional or accidental; and real-life experiences with bullying and responses to it, as well as circumstances in which there is group pressure to do/say (or not do/say) something (e.g. A house party gets out of control and things start being damaged; who steps in to do something, or who doesn’t? Why?).

In my experience, the thematic links between the films and the novel provide an opportunity for thoughtful (and challenging) discourse about subjects that students can relate to their own lives and experiences.
Turning a Blind Eye: *Speak* and *Elephant*

Laurie Halse Anderson’s novel *Speak* (1999) and Gus Van Sant’s film *Elephant* (2003) are similar in that neither are a common sight in a secondary English classroom. Anderson’s novel is difficult to place in the secondary English curriculum: its ease of readability makes it more suited for Grade 8 or 9, but it’s mature content makes it more appropriate for Grade 10 (the grade at which I have taught the novel) or higher. Similarly, Van Sant’s film is a lesser-known independent film which—despite garnering much critical praise—is mostly unknown to not only high school students, but most teachers as well.

Anderson’s *Speak* tells the story of Melinda, a high school student who calls the police during a summer party after she is raped by an older student. The police arrive and break up the party, and several of Melinda’s peers—who saw her on the phone but do not know what happened to her—are furious. September rolls around, and Melinda’s friends have all but abandoned her. Virtually no one in her school will even speak to her. Melinda responds to both the trauma of the rape, and her ostracization, by choosing not to speak. It is only after Melinda’s art teacher, Mr. Freeman, senses that something is wrong and coaxes her to express herself through her art, that Melinda finds the strength to speak about what happened to her and confront her attacker.

Van Sant’s *Elephant* can best be described a cinematic re-imagining of the shootings at Columbine High School in Littleton, Colorado in 1999. Van Sant’s film is shot in Oregon, and uses a cast of young, unknown (and in some cases untrained) actors who improvise almost all of the dialogue in the film. The film follows the lives of several students over the period of one school day, though there are several scenes which are flashbacks in the lives of the two protagonists, Eric and Alex, identifying their planning of a shooting rampage at their high school, a retaliation for the bullying their have experienced from their peers.
While the film gradually builds to the shootings as the climax of the film, it also follows the lives of other students, some who manage to escape the shootings, and some who do not. The audience is shown that even the attractive and popular students have struggles of their own. For example, three girlfriends—Nicole, Brittany and Acadia—share gossip and diet tips as they walk to the washroom together; once inside, each girl takes a separate stall and proceeds to induce herself to vomit up her recent lunch. John, a popular but quiet boy, is given detention for being late for his first class. His oblivious principal does not take the time to ask why he is late; if he had, he would have found out that John was being driven to school by his intoxicated father. After their car crashes into a parked car, John is forced to drive the rest of the way to school, and then must call his older brother to come and drive their father home. Michelle, a shy and awkward girl, volunteers at the library, and is grilled by her physical education teacher about why she won’t change with her peers after gym class. Michelle’s homely appearance and less-than-modelesque figure makes it clear to the audience—but unfortunately not her teacher—as to why she is so anxious about undressing around the other girls.

Our class discussions are rather straightforward, and I don’t hand out any discussion questions for the film. I prefer to let students express their own thoughts on the film, rather than lead them down a pre-arranged path of ideas. I do, however, conclude our discussion of the film by distributing a review of *Elephant* by *Rolling Stone* movie critic, Peter Travers. I quote Travers (2003) at length here, because I feel his observations and analysis are the most insightful and valuable of any I have read:

The title [of the film]...refers to something metaphorically huge that we all see and we all choose to ignore. What Van Sant sees with piercing clarity are the bruises that come with being young in
America...[Are the characters] stereotypes? Not as Van Sant presents them, sometimes showing the same seemingly casual encounter from different angles, inviting us not just to look but to look closely. It’s the closer look that gets at the problems no one, at school or at home, is noticing. Van Sant wonders, and if you watch Elephant closely, so will you. This isn’t a film about what turns kids into killing machines. It is a film that gets at the small things that can drain a heart of feeling...To those who see no purpose to this film, I say the purpose is learning not to turn a blind eye. (www.rollingstone.com)

After they read this review, students begin to see the film in a new light. Immediately following the film, many male students criticize the portrayal of the shooters as avid players of violent video games. As Travers notes in his review, “all the glib excuses for violence are laid out,” but Van Sant’s purpose is not to provide answers, but to force us to ask questions, questions like, “[W]hy parents, teachers, and peers never noticed what made these two boys outsiders in the first place? [When did it become] so easy not to pay attention?”(para. 7). And it is not just the shooters who are ignored by the adults in the film; it is every student with every kind of problem who goes unnoticed.

Students eventually begin to make more meaningful connections between the novel and the film. They look back and see that so many people in Melinda’s life—friends, teachers, parents—interpreted her silence as simply a stage of adolescence, that of the moody teenager. Some of the bolder and more observant students reveal that they have seen many things at their own school ignored, or treated with indifference. Though the novel may be simplistic in its style and predictable in its story, it is nevertheless one that students find engaging. And while the film is
very uncomfortable and emotionally intense for many students, they walk away with a new perspective on their lives and the lives of their peers.

Privileged Phonies: The Catcher in the Rye and Igby Goes Down

Despite a popularity and appeal that spans more than six decades, J.D. Salinger’s novel, The Catcher in the Rye has never been adapted for the screen. Perhaps the reclusive Salinger has refused to allow his book to be adapted, or perhaps no film-maker wants to tackle an adaptation of a book that is so revered and iconic in popular culture. Regardless, there are several films that address the same themes of teenage angst and rebellion that are so prominent in Salinger’s novel. One such film is Burr Steers’s Igby Goes Down (2002).

Like Salinger’s famous protagonist, Holden Caulfield, Igby Slocumb is the child of a wealthy New York family; and, like Holden, Igby has been in and out of numerous private boarding schools. Igby’s boredom and occasional disgust with the people in his life is evident. Though he never spouts Holden’s famous catch-all adjective “phony” to describe his peers and family, Igby clearly sees through the hypocrisy of the world in which he lives. He explains to an attractive young girl that his older brother, Oliver, is studying fascism at university; when Oliver corrects him and explains that his major is economics, Igby shrugs and replies, “Semantics.” He happily lives at his godfather D.L.’s beachfront Hampton estate, but is vocal to anyone who will listen about how D.L. is insensitive enough to invite his mistress to a cocktail party where D.L.’s perpetually medicated wife is wandering around in a daze, oblivious to both her husband’s adultery and the fact that every single party guest knows about it.

The irony of Igby Slocumb is very much the irony of Holden Caulfield: both adolescents are fond of criticizing and belittling their upper-class friends and family, but neither seems to have any moral objection to taking advantage of the excessive wealth and privilege at their disposal.
Holden leaves school early for Christmas break, and gets a room and one of the most expensive hotels in New York City. Igby does likewise. Holden drinks, Igby smokes pot. One key difference in the two is their sexuality and sexual appetites. Holden gives the impression of wanting to be intimate with women—and he certainly has no shortage of opportunities—but he never seems to be able to actual commit himself to the act of making love. Igby, on the other hand, is smitten with Sookie, though—due to what Sookie perceives to be a significant age difference—will not be anything more than Igby’s friend. While pining for Sookie, Igby has no qualms about sleeping with Rachel, his godfather D.L.’s mistress. It is a moment of physical desire and convenience, void of any sort of emotional connection. Another significant difference between Holden and Igby is their relationship to their parents. Though Holden’s parents are never actually physically present in the novel, he nevertheless describes them with a tone of polite—yet somewhat removed—affection. Igby is quite different. His father is in a mental institution after suffering an emotional and mental breakdown when Igby was 10 years old, and Igby’s mother merely drifts from social event to social event, pausing only to berate Igby for his laziness and find him yet another school he can attend. Even when she is diagnosed with terminal breast cancer, Igby’s reaction is one of indifference.

In terms of activities with The Catcher in the Rye and Igby Goes Down, I usually divide our class-work into two parts: discussion and writing (see Appendix C). Since we discuss the novel in depth as we read, we begin our discussion with analysis of the film on its own, and then gradually begin to make connections between the novel and the film. Student responses to the central themes of both The Catcher in the Rye and Igby Goes Down evolve well beyond the cliche “Money can’t buy happiness,” and explore such issues as materialism, the excessive desire for money in North American society, and the difficulties that people with so much wealth have
to deal with. They are able to draw examples from popular culture (e.g. the television program *The O.C.*) and prominent figures in the world of business (e.g. Bill Gates, Donald Trump), and thus extend their discussions from just the book and film and into contemporary society.

**The Existentialist Next Door: The Outsider and American Beauty**

The final literature-and-film connection I will discuss is not one that I have ever taught, but is part of the English 12 curriculum at my school and is taught by two colleagues of mine who have generously shared their lessons with me. They make a point of selecting texts for their class that can be tied thematically to almost all of the other texts in the course. As an extension of their unit on Albert Camus’s *The Outsider*, my colleagues show Sam Mendes’s film *American Beauty* (1999). In the handout students receive for their analysis of the film (see Appendix D), the questions connect the film not only to Camus’s novel, but to other works, such as J.D. Salinger’s novel *Franny and Zooey*, the philosophy of Friedrich Nietzsche, Mark Twain’s essay “Two Ways of Seeing a River,” and the poems “Pretty” (by Stevie Smith) and “Pied Beauty” by Gerard Manley Hopkins. In an effort to be both focused and succinct in my discussion and analysis, I will only examine *The Outsider* and *American Beauty*, with a brief references to Nietzsche’s philosophy.

In their English 12 course, my colleagues introduce a basic introduction to the philosophic ideas of existentialism and nihilism, making frequent—but not exclusive—references to the writings of Friedrich Nietzsche. Specifically, the focus is on Nietzsche’s notions of Apollonian reason and Dionysian ecstasy (see Appendix E for definitions and characteristics of each). It is these philosophic notions which they use to tie together Camus’s novel and Mendes’s film.

Albert Camus’s *The Outsider* is an existentialist novel. The protagonist, Meursault, is a man who goes through the motions of daily life, but finds very little meaning or substance in his
existence. For example, his response to his mother’s death is void of any emotional response whatsoever, and he voluntarily associates with his neighbour, whom Meursault has heard (and seen) physically abusing his girlfriend on several occasions. It is Meursault’s existentialist and nihilistic perspective on life that eventually drives him to commit murder. While Meursault claims the act was one of self-defense, the reader can clearly see that such drastic action was unnecessary.

Lester Burnham, the central character in *American Beauty*, is a man who seems to have an ideal life: a well-paying job, a nice house, a nice car, a beautiful and successful wife, and a well-behaved daughter. On the outside, he is living the American dream; inside, he is more miserable than he has ever been in his life. Like Meursault, Lester sees the emptiness of the world he inhabits, a world that is superficial and void of any real passion. He masturbates daily because his wife, Caroline, never seems to want to make love (she later has an affair); his daughter, Jane, rarely even acknowledges his presence, and seems to be embarrassed by his pathos; and he is treated as a faceless cog in the corporate machine for which he works.

When a new family moves in next door, Lester meets Ricky Fitts, an eccentric social outcast with a strict and abusive retired-Marine father and a mother who is home in body, but nothing more. Ricky is content with being shunned by his peers at school—though he soon begins to date Jane—and soon strikes up a friendship with Lester after they meet at a banquet where Ricky is a server for the catering company. Lester is stunned by Ricky’s total lack of concern for what others think of him, and makes the decision to lead his life in a similar fashion. Within a few short days, he quits his job (but only after blackmailing the company for one year’s salary); trades in his station wagon for a 1970 Pontiac Firebird, the car he dreamed of owning as a young boy; starts working out religiously in his garage to improve his physique; begins to smoke pot,
which he buys from Ricky, the most prominent dealer in town; and openly flirts with Angela, Jane’s best friend, about whom Lester has had very vivid sexual fantasies. Both Caroline and Jane are aghast, interpreting Lester’s actions as nothing more than an embarrassing and reckless mid-life crisis. Despite Lester’s unbridled exuberance for life, his behaviour sets in motion a series of events that eventually lead to tragedy.

Lester is a contemporary existentialist. He lives life according to his rules and standards, not the expectations of those around him, or of society. He evolves from an Apollonian lifestyle to a Dionysian one. My colleagues have described how many students struggle with grasping the notions of existentialism and nihilism, and Apollonian reason and Dionysian ecstasy. However, after reading The Outsider (as well as the other texts described above) and watching American Beauty, their understanding begins to deepen. As the year progresses, not only are they able to connect these thematic concepts to the works they study, they are also able—in both discussion and written form—to connect the works (and the philosophies behind them) to their world and their lives.
CONCLUSION

I began this examination of the marriage of literature and film in the English classroom by asking how and why is (and should) film be used. Unfortunately, film has been—and continues to be—used merely as a means to occupy time and keeps students quiet while the teacher busies himself/herself tending to other matters. However, as the literature has shown, film has the potential to serve far more valuable purposes. It can be used to both create and enhance critical thinking/reading skills; to bring about student awareness of the world/society they inhabit; to critically examine the positive and negative social norms represented in popular culture; and to connect the central themes of literary works to the lived experiences of students.

A defense of the use of film in the English classroom should not be misconstrued. As Freire and Giroux (1989) explain, the inclusion of materials that students’ value, like film, in the classroom is not:

[A] romantic celebration of popular culture, but rather a call for situating any debate about what constitutes meaningful knowledge in relationship to considerations that will expand rather than limit the potentialities that various students have to be literate not only in the language of their community, but also in the language of...

the larger world. (xi)

It is the very themes inherent in the literature we study in the English classroom that contain this “language of the larger world,” and it is these same themes that appear countless times in quality films. In my own classroom, and the classrooms of my colleagues, I have witnessed students’ experiences with literary texts be enhanced and transformed when paired with the critical analysis of film. Furthermore, I have sensed—on many occasions—both surprise and gratitude
from students when they see that an art form that is so much a part of their lives is valued in their classrooms as having sufficient validity and worth to be studied alongside established works of literature. While Giroux and Simon (1989) caution that incorporating popular culture into the curriculum may violate what students deem to be “pedagogically acceptable and properly distant from their lives outside of school” (p. 18), I have neither witnessed nor heard of such a response.

Literature has been an integral part of our society—and much of Western civilization—for centuries. The role and status of film is, comparably, still in its infancy, and its impact is steadily evolving along with us. Film is unquestionably a prominent artistic genre in the lives of adolescents: they seek out films to make them laugh, cringe, swoon, think, even weep. For an educator not to see the advantage of using film in a classroom would be to miss a valuable opportunity. Perhaps more significantly, as Giroux and Simon (1989) note:

[B]y ignoring the cultural and social forms that are authorized by youth and simultaneously empower or disempower them, educators risk silencing and negating their students. (p. 3)

Does literature require film to makes its point? No. Can literature be taught—and taught effectively and memorably—without the use of film? Certainly. But the possibilities offered by film are too numerous, and too valuable, to go untapped.
REFERENCES


Appendix A: Discussion questions for American History X.

1.) Describe each of the following characters. Give references from the movie to support your answers: Derek, Danny, Seth, Stacy, Cameron.

2.) Each of the characters listed in question #1 is racist. How are they different in both their reasons for (and ways of expressing) their beliefs?

3.) What makes Derek such a good leader?

4.) Dr. Sweeney tells Murray that Danny “learned” his racism, and “he can unlearn it.” How does a person learn (and teach) prejudice, either intentionally or unintentionally?

5.) How does Cameron use/manipulate young people’s emotions to get them to join his racist organization?

6.) What about Derek’s experience in prison do you think caused him to change his beliefs?

7.) The characters in this film are very open about their racist beliefs. What are some ways in racism and prejudice can be subtle and, as a result, unnoticed by most people?

8.) Think about the characters in To Kill A Mockingbird who hold racially prejudiced beliefs. What are some possible reasons why they believe what they do? (Think about what we learned about the characters in American History X.)
Appendix B: Discussion questions for *Mean Creek*.

1.) What are your first impressions of George? What are your initial thoughts about his motivations for being a bully?

2.) Describe Sam’s relationship with (i) his brother, and (ii) his friends. In your opinion, are these relationships healthy, or are their suggestions of underlying conflicts?

3.) Do you think the group’s (attempted) prank on George is harmless, or mean-spirited? What are some other ways they could have “gotten back” at George for beating up Sam?

4.) Describe each character’s reaction to George’s death. What do they think should be done? How do their different ideas on the “appropriate” plan of action create tension in the group? How does each person respond to this newly-created tension?

5.) Compare and contrast the responses of Sam and his friends to George’s death to the responses of the boys in *Lord of the Flies* to Simon’s death.

6.) Discuss how *Mean Creek* addresses the following themes: conformity, retribution as justice, moral/social responsibility, the pressures of group dynamics, the subjectivity of morals/ethics (i.e. what we consider “right” and “wrong”).

7.) What are some examples of how people behave differently in groups than they do alone? Why do you think this difference occurs? Is it simply human nature, or is it learned? What makes it hard for a person to stand up for what he/she feel is “right” when everyone else thinks (or at least *appears* to think) differently?
Appendix C: Discussion questions and writing topics for *Igby Goes Down*. (Note: I use all of the following questions for discussion first, and then ask students to select either question 3, 4 or 6 for a short composition assignment.)

1.) What are your first impression of Igby? What are his positive and negative traits? Use specific references to the film to support your answers.

2.) Describe the nature (and causes) of Igby’s conflicts with those around him. Who is the cause of these conflicts, or are both people to blame? Explain.

3.) Compare and contrast Igby and Holden. Who do you like better? Who is more sympathetic? Why?

4.) Compare and contrast the portrayal of the “wealthy upper class” in both *The Catcher in the Rye* and *Igby Goes Down*. How does the 59 year gap between the book and the film influence the two portrayals? In other words, what aspects of society are the same, and what has changed?

5.) What are some of the negative consequences of having excessive wealth? Are these difficulties different for people who have earned their wealth, compared to those who have inherited it?

6.) Describe the portrayal of the “wealthy upper class” in popular culture (e.g. literature, television, film). Are their common themes and stereotypes in these portrayals, or do they depict the wealthy as individuals, each with their own set of circumstances and challenges?
Appendix D: Discussion questions for *American Beauty*.

Works and ideas to consider when responding: nihilism vs. existentialism (Camus); ressentiment vs. will to power (Nietzsche and Salinger); two ways of perceiving (Twain, Smith and Hopkins); Dionysian vs. Apollonian.

1.) Names a character for each category/perspective and explain how/why they belong there:

**Nihilist, Existentialist, Dionysian, Apollonian, Ressentiment, Will to Power.**

2.) Lester and Caroline Burnham are a successful, middle-class American couple, living in an anonymous suburban neighbourhood, whose marriage and lives are slowly unraveling. Discuss how each character displays the attributes of **nihilism** and **ressentiment**.

3.) The Fitts move in next door. Ricky is the classic “outsider” who sees what others do not because their habits blind them. How is Ricky an **existentialist**? How does he “save” Lester? Why is he the kind of person Twain or Smith would admire?

4.) Zooey says that “there are nice things in the world.” What is the most beautiful thing Ricky sees, and why does that show he can “save” Lester?

5.) Lester’s infatuation with Angela is both unethical (illegal and immoral) and indicative of his failure to integrate the “two ways of seeing a river” described by mark Twain, **OR** the two ways of acting (Dionysian and Apollonian). Explain.

6.) Buddy, Franny and Zooey’s brother, suggests that “a man should be able to lie at the bottom of a hill with his throat cut, slowly bleeding to death, and if a pretty girl or an old woman should pass by with a beautiful jug balanced on the top of her head, he should be able to raise himself up on one arm and see the jug safely over the top of the hill.” Why would this ability represent humans at the peak of their abilities, or as the ideal for of consciousness? How is Lester like this at the end of the movie?
Appendix E: Definitions and attributes of the Apollonian and the Dionysian.

**Introduction**

In Nietzsche’s designations of two different Greek art forms and artistic tendencies, reflecting two fundamental human and natural impulses, he invokes the names of the gods Apollo and Dionysus to identify and distinguish them in his discussion of the origin of the tragic art and culture of the Greeks (which he traced to their confluence). He associates Apollo with order, lawfulness, perfected form, clarity, precision, self-control and individuation; he associates Dionysus with change, creation and destruction, movement, rhythm, ecstatic and oneness.

(See *The Birth of Tragedy* (1872), sections 1-5; and *The Will to Power* (1901), sections 1049-1052.)

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<th><strong>Apollonian</strong></th>
<th><strong>Dionysian</strong></th>
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<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Reprehensive Divinity</td>
<td>Apollo: god of sun, prophecy and healing</td>
<td>Dionysus: god of wine</td>
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<td>Cultural Prototype</td>
<td>Classicism</td>
<td>Romanticism</td>
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<td>Abstract, Formless, Music</td>
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<td>Individuation</td>
<td>All encompassing Oneness</td>
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<td>Horror of Existence</td>
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<td>Will, controlled energy</td>
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