

SEEING THE COMPLEXITY OF CHILDREN'S LITERATURE THROUGH CRITICAL LENSES AND CREATIVE PROJECTS



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SOME UNDERGRADUATE students enroll in children's literature courses with the mistaken idea that reading picture-books and illustrated chapter books will be fairly simple, surface-level work. However, over the course of the semester, they inevitably learn how complex these texts can be. Presenting undergraduate students with both critical and creative approaches to examining children's literature in university-level courses can help them gain a deeper appreciation for these literary works.

This article discusses a qualitative study conducted with undergraduate students in a children's literature course. It found that participants used various critical lenses (i.e., schools of literary criticism) to make sense of children's literature. Through these lenses, the participants critiqued characters and situations, connected literature to real life, and appreciated inclusion and difference. In addition, the participants made meaning as they composed creative projects such as picture-books. These projects were informed by the literature and lenses they had studied, involved personal meaning making, and gave students a chance to learn from each other.

Using Critical Lenses with Children's Literature

Appleman (2009) compares the practice of applying critical lenses to texts as putting on driving glasses that bring out the red and green tones of stoplights. She writes, "contemporary theories highlight particular features of what lies in our line of vision. If used properly, they do not create colors that weren't there in the first place; they only bring them into sharper relief" (p. xii). In other words, a critical lens can help a reader see

a text more clearly, illuminating elements that may have been obscured. Having access to a collection of critical lenses enables readers to choose those that are appropriate for the different texts they encounter throughout their lives as readers.

Many schools of literary criticism can be used to make sense of children's literature. Table 1 details all of the lenses that were presented in the course described in this article. Although visual analysis is not technically a school of literary criticism, I teach it with the other critical lenses because it similarly helps students make sense of what they are reading in visual narratives such as picturebooks and illustrated chapter books.

One of the lenses, Critical Race Theory (which focuses on issues of race and power), has been in the news in recent years. As an example, Tom Horne, Arizona's Superintendent for Public Instruction launched an "Empower Hotline," giving K-12 students, parents, and others a place to "voice their concerns about [K-12] classroom materials...including lessons that 'focus on race or ethnicity rather than individuals and merit'" (Sun, 2023). In Florida, where the ban on Critical Race Theory also extends to universities, there have been reports of professors canceling such courses as Race and Social Media in response to the state's Individual Freedom Act (2022) (Golden, 2023). Idaho's legislature has similarly banned the teaching of Critical Race Theory in its universities, with a sponsor of a bill commenting:

[Critical Race Theory (CRT)], rooted in Marxist thought, is a pernicious way of viewing the world. It demands that everything in society be viewed through the lens of racism, sexism, and power. CRT

tries to make kids feel bad because of the color of their skin, or their sex, or any other category—one group is seen as an aggrieved minority and another group is the oppressive majority (ABC4, 2021).

Those of us who teach literature at the college level may find ourselves on the front lines of these battles.

Teaching our students to dig into texts—to look closely, question, reflect, and connect—is incredibly important work. Using critical lenses such as Critical Race Theory, Feminism, Queer Theory, Ecocriticism, and others in undergraduate courses can give students important tools for literary analysis and for making sense of the world outside of our colleges and universities. These careful readers can also notice racism, poverty, sexism, homophobia, and environmental issues outside of the pages of a book.

Using Creative Projects with Children's Literature

Undergraduate students in children's literature courses can also benefit from composing creative works. When making a picturebook, the storyteller must consider not only the story but also the visual elements that communicate information to readers (Albers & Harste, 2007; Kress & van Leeuwen, 2006; Serafini, 2014). Instructors can support students' visual literacy development by teaching visual elements, analysis, and composition; in fact, students have been known to show great dexterity in transferring knowledge of visual elements from analysis work to their original visual compositions (Williams, 2019). Communication in today's world is becoming increasingly visual and multimodal, so it is important that students of all ages have opportunities to communicate through a variety of modes including language, visuals, gestures, and sound (New London Group, 1996).

Using creative projects in higher education can also open up opportunities for students to draw upon their cultures, languages, experiences, interests, and talents. The cultural assets, or "funds of knowledge" (Moll et al., 1992) that students of all ages bring with them to the classroom deserve to be recognized and honored in formal instruction. This work can also put students in touch with authentic audiences. We know that writing is more relevant and meaningful when there is a real audience to hear, read, or see our work (Williams, 2018). Like other forms of composition, creative projects can support "habits of mind," such as creativity, curiosity, openness, engagement, flexibility, persistence, and responsibility (Council of Writing Program Administrators et al., 2011). Assigning creative projects

in children's literature courses can also help nurture the next generation of authors. Unfortunately, there is still a shortage of literature by and about people of color (Zhang & Wessel-Powell, 2023). Although we are starting to see more diverse authors and illustrators in the world of children's publishing, incorporating creative projects as a component to literary study can be a catalyst for further growth in this area.

The Children's Literature Course

In Spring 2019, I designed a new upper-division undergraduate English course entitled *Critical Approaches to Children's Literature*, giving our students the opportunity to examine children's literature through various critical lenses. This English course typically enrolls English majors, current and future parents, those interested in art or design, or those needing to meet a general studies requirement. Pre-service teachers tend not to enroll, as they are already required to take a different children's literature course in their college.

This course was taught in a 15-week, in-person format in the Spring 2019 term. It consisted of an overview, 13 weeks of literary study (eight weeks matched specific lenses to longer texts; see Table 2 for pairings), and a creative project showcase. Each week, the students came to class after reading a chapter book or its equivalent, as well as background material on the week's lenses. We spent the first part of each 2.5-hour class discussing the assigned book through those lenses. During the second part of each class, I placed dozens of picturebooks around the room. Students spread out in small groups to read and discuss several books together and reported back to the whole class on their discoveries. Each class meeting also contained a sprinkling of other activities, such as read-alouds, videos, quizzes, and extension activities. As an example, one evening we wrote letters to high school students who were also reading *The Little Prince* (De Saint-Exupéry, 2000), which turned out to be an interesting activity to do in a week when we were studying Reader Response.

Study Design

The qualitative study (Merriam, 2009) examined how undergraduate students in this course engaged with children's literature in critical and creative ways. Two key questions guided the research:

1. How did participants apply critical lenses to make sense of children's literature?
2. How did their original creative projects demonstrate meaning-making?

Research Site The course took place at a small campus of a large research university in the southwestern United States, where I work as an Associate Professor of English. The site of a former military base, the campus had approximately 5,000 students at the time of this study, many of whom were studying business, applied sciences, or engineering. The campus has many international students, and some students drive to campus or take the

free intercampus shuttle from another, larger campus in the area. Situated on the edge of town, the site features new buildings and desert landscaping. Occasionally we see wildlife such as desert skunks, roadrunners, and even families of javelina.

Participants This course took place from 4:30-7:15 p.m. one night per week, which allowed working students and those

Table 1
CRITICAL LENSES TAUGHT IN THE COURSE

LENS	DESCRIPTION
Archetypes	Focuses on character types. Examples include the seeker, orphan, caregiver, sage, friend, lover, warrior, hero, villain, destroyer, ruler, fool, trickster, magician, and creator (Nilsen & Donelson, 2009).
Biographical	Focuses on traces of the author's life in a text.
Critical Race Theory	Focuses on race and power, drawing attention to inequities. This lens comes to literary study from legal studies (Crenshaw, et al., 1995).
Ecocriticism	Focuses on nature and the environment.
Feminist/Gender/Queer Perspectives	Focus on gender, sexuality, and power, drawing attention to inequity. Although Butler's (1990) groundbreaking book, <i>Gender Trouble</i> , came out decades ago, it still has relevance for children's literature, texts that encapsulate ideas about gender and family.
Formalism	Focuses on the literary elements that are at work in a text, such as symbol and theme. Formalism is the dominant lens used in primary and secondary education, and its influence can be seen in formal assessments including state reading tests and the AP English Literature and Composition exam (College Board, 2021).
Marxism	Focuses on wealth, class, and power, drawing attention to inequity.
Moralism	Focuses on the moral or lesson that a text conveys, with the idea that texts should have something to teach us and should ultimately make us better people (Purdue University, 2021). This way of reading goes back to Plato, but it is often criticized as an overly simplified way of reading. It is parodied in Carroll's (2002) <i>Alice's Adventures in Wonderland</i> .
New Historicism	Focuses on texts as cultural artifacts. This is an update to the historical lens.
Postcolonial	Focuses on the harm of colonization.
Postmodernism	Focuses on the postmodern elements of texts, such as multiple truths, experimentation and play in form or content, and intertextuality (how texts are in conversation with each other).
Psychoanalysis	Focuses on the ways that concepts from psychology are at work in literary texts. As an example, the characters in Dr. Seuss's (1957) <i>The Cat in the Hat</i> embody concepts like the id, ego, and superego (Wright, 2021).
Reader Response	Focuses on the reader, who brings meaning to any text. While readers' perspectives can assist them in understanding texts, they can also stand in the way; to illustrate, when I first read Yoon's (2017) young adult book, <i>Everything, Everything</i> , as a parent I missed the hints about the mother, whereas most of my undergraduate students were quick to catch on.
Structuralism	Focuses on repeated patterns of storytelling. This lens can be used in really specific ways, such as classifying a story as "AT 311 Rescue by the Sister," "AT425 The Search for the Lost Husband," and so forth (Aarne & Thompson, 1999, pp. 373-378).
Visual Analysis	Focuses on reading images, drawing attention to the ways that art and design choices convey information. For visual analysis resources, see <i>Reading the Visual</i> (Serafini, 2014), <i>Reading Children's Literature</i> (Hintz & Tribunella, 2013), and <i>Picture This</i> (Bang, 2016).

from other campuses to attend. Using IRB-approved consent forms, I invited all eleven students in the course to participate, and eight students joined. This sample represented a significant proportion (73%) of the class. Of the eight participants, three were female and five were male. They came from various programs: Three students were in Graphic Information Technology; three students were in English-related programs (English; English Literature; Writing, Rhetoric, and Literacy); and two students were in Applied Biological Sciences (one in Natural Resource Ecology). The student in the Writing, Rhetoric, and Literacy program was also minoring in Statistics.

The Graphic Information Technology students were accomplished graphic designers (e.g., as the “Mothman” excerpt illustrates later on). These students had electronic drawing tablets and were skilled at using programs like *Clip Studio Paint* (Celsys, Inc.). Other students were less comfortable with art. One student remarked, “I’m not that artistically gifted.” Some students composed picturebooks that worked around such issues by using photographs, basic shapes, or simple figures in pencil that could be easily erased or adjusted. Other students in the class opted to design a lesson or work on a chapter book for their project. All skill levels were welcome.

Data Collection The study took place after the course ended and final grades were posted. At that point, I went into Canvas, a course management program, and downloaded 23 files submitted by the study participants. The files included eight analysis papers, eight creative projects, and seven reflections. In the analysis paper (due in Week Twelve of the term), students analyzed their choice of a chapter book, a graphic novel, and a picturebook using two lenses per book. Collecting these papers was necessary to answer the first research question, which sought to understand how participants applied critical lenses to make sense of children’s literature.

Collecting the creative project and reflection, which were due in Week Fifteen of the term, helped answer the second research question, which focused on how participants had demonstrated meaning-making through their creative projects. Students’ projects included four picturebooks, one graphic narrative, two chapter books, and one lesson. After our in-class project showcase on the last day of the course, students went home and submitted their project reflections online. These reflections included a summary of the project, description of the tools and process used, identification of children’s literature influences, and comments on at least three other students’ projects.

Data Analysis All 23 files were loaded into *NVivo* (Lumivero, 1997), a data management program. To answer the first research question, I used descriptive coding (Saldaña, 2009) with the analysis papers, which involved reducing passages of text to a single term. This illuminated the lenses that were used, including Critical Race Theory, Ecocriticism, Marxism, Moralism, Postcolonialism, Feminist/Gender/Queer, Psychoanalysis, Reader Response, and Visual Analysis. After noting these lenses, I examined the passages further to determine what the reader was actually doing with the lens beyond identification. As an example, the passage about Oompa-Loompas discussed in the next section was initially coded, *Postcolonialism*. With additional analysis, that passage also received the label, *Critiquing Characters and Situations*. This two-step process allowed me to group material both by lens and by the type of meaning-making observed. Additional themes that came to light were *Appreciating Inclusion and Difference* and *Connecting Literature to Real Life*. These themes revealed some of the different ways that participants had used critical lenses to make sense of children’s literature.

To answer the second research question, I examined participants’ creative projects and reflections and initially identified the project features, tools/techniques, influences, and com-

Table 2
LONGER TEXTS ASSIGNED IN WEEKS 2-9

LENSES	TEXT
Moralism & Formalism	<i>The Original Folk and Fairy Tales of the Brothers Grimm</i> , Vol. 1 (Grimm & Grimm, 2014)
Structuralism & Archetypes	<i>The Original Folk and Fairy Tales of the Brothers Grimm</i> , Vol. 2 (Grimm & Grimm, 2014)
Psychoanalysis & New Historicism	<i>Alice’s Adventures in Wonderland</i> (Carroll, 2002)
Visual Analysis	<i>The Tale of Peter Rabbit</i> (Potter, 2002) and choice of two additional books by Beatrix Potter
Reader Response & Biographical	<i>The Little Prince</i> (de Saint-Exupéry, 2000)
Marxism & Postcolonial	<i>Charlie and the Chocolate Factory</i> (Dahl, 2007)
Ecocriticism & Postmodernism	<i>Holes</i> (Sachar, 2000)
Feminist & Critical Race Theory	<i>Ninth Ward</i> (Rhodes, 2012)

ments on other projects. After grouping these components, I looked closer at these passages to get a better sense of how participants were making meaning. This process resulted in three themes: *Learning about Children's Literature and Critical Lenses*, *Making It Personal*, and *Learning from Each Other*. These findings reflect the text-based, personal, and social ways that participants had engaged in meaning-making through creative projects. Findings for both research questions are discussed below.

Making Sense of Children's Literature through Critical Lenses

The participants in this study used critical lenses to make sense of children's literature, critiquing characters and situations, connecting literature to real life, and appreciating inclusion and difference.

Critiquing Characters and Situations The study found that participants employed critical lenses to critique characters and situations. As an example, a student wrote:

In *Voices from the Park* (Browne, 2001), Charles' mother...discriminate[s] [against] Smudge's family...because of preconceived notions about their class. After she notices Charles is gone, she looks disapprovingly at Smudge's father, likely because of the beat-up clothing he wears, and comments, 'You get some frightful types in the park these days!' (p. 6). *Voices in the Park*...allows the audience to get a unique understanding of each of the four main characters and their mindsets, but some of these mindsets have pre-established biases that prevent them from truly understanding each other.

Using a Marxist lens helped this reader pay attention to bias based on social class, and the analysis uses specific examples and language from the text to make this point.

Another participant applied the Postcolonial lens to *Charlie and the Chocolate Factory*, noticing that "the Oompa-Loompas were 'imported direct from Loompaland' to serve as the factory workers" (Dahl, 2007, p. 68). This student commented, "They are described as having lived in a terrible, dangerous jungle with nothing much to eat besides disgusting bugs. Since they prized cacao beans, Wonka offered to have them work in his factory where they could have all the cacao they wanted. They were shipped over in crates and have since learned to speak English." The student also noted that Wonka used

the Oompa-Loompas to experiment on, testing his candies on them. Seeing this story through the Postcolonial lens reveals serious mistreatment of these characters.

The Ecocritical lens draws attention to the ways that humans interact with the environment. A participant noticed:

[In *The Giving Tree*,] the tree is happy when the boy spends time with it. Although, throughout his life, the boy gradually shifts from spending time with the tree to exploiting it, from collecting its fallen leaves to selling all of its apples. The tipping point occurs when the child is a grown man and comes to the tree and wants to make a boat. The tree says he can cut down the trunk to get the wood for the boat, and the man proceeds. After this, "the tree was happy... but not really" (Silverstein, 1999, n.p.). Children should be taught that nature is not there for them to use but to take care of and respect.

This participant, an ecology student, was well versed in the ways that human greed and selfishness can harm the environment, so this book was of particular interest to him.

Connecting Literature to Real Life The study found that participants sometimes used critical lenses to connect literature to real life. For example, a participant used Critical Race Theory to explore issues she had noticed as a Latina living in the Southwest. She was especially interested in the following passage:

In *Carmela Full of Wishes*, Carmela followed as he cut back onto the street at Freedom Boulevard, past the crowded bus stop and fenced-off repair shop, past the old folks' home where two hunched old women waved smiles, past the huge improvement store where her dad used to stand around weekend mornings, waiting for work. (de la Peña, 2018, p. 6)

The participant noted the following about this excerpt from de la Peña's picturebook:

Most labor workers do not have the proper paperwork in order to apply for a decent job. Instead they have to stand around different places asking people if they have any type of work for them. White people typically do not have this problem and will actually hire these workers for the benefit of not paying the full price.

In addition, she noticed that the character's mother is not able to afford to stay in the hotel that she cleans, and the participant pointed out that "this job is very common for females in the Hispanic community." She also observed that a character in the story "get[s] his papers fixed so he could finally be home" (pp. 17-18), and the participant explained, "This usually happens to families who move to America and, due to immigration reform issues, some have to leave the country."

She remarked that she appreciated this story for its realism and its hope, and she shared the book with her daughter. "Despite her father's absence, Carmela is depicted as a happy, hopeful kid. Carmela does not show hate towards the country or racism against anyone even though her dad is not around." This positive perspective on de la Peña's story through a Critical Race Theory lens challenges critics who believe it is not possible for readers to see anything positive from this viewpoint.

Appreciating Inclusion and Difference The participants appreciated having access to inclusive texts. As an example, a male student in the class selected *The Tea Dragon Society* (O'Neill, 2020), a short graphic novel, to analyze through the lenses of gender and sexuality. He wrote, "I think it's important to look at *The Tea Dragon Society* with a Feminist lens in mind because not only is the main character a girl, the rest of the cast in the book are mostly women. [The book] challenge[s] heterosexuality as the norm or default."

Participants also used critical lenses to attempt to understand characters better, trying to figure out their point of view. For example, applying the Psychoanalytic lens to *Where the Wild Things Are* (Sendak, 2012), a participant observed, "Max is trying to get the attention of others (and it could be specifically his mother he's trying to get the attention of) throughout the story." This picturebook could be read as the ultimate "acting out," a sort of imaginative temper tantrum Max had in response to being sent to his room. The student wrote, "Max does have fun being the king of the Wild Things, [but] he does miss his own home and family." As an adult in college, this participant was attempting to get into the mind of this child.

Making Sense of Children's Literature through Creative Projects

Participants' creative projects were also sites for meaning-making of various kinds. These projects demonstrated learning about children's literature and critical lenses, involved personal connections, and gave students a chance to learn from each other.

Learning from Children's Literature and Critical Lenses The participants applied some of what they had learned about the literature and lenses to their own creative projects. As one participant wrote, "I decided I wanted to [make] a picturebook to demonstrate the knowledge I have gained over the period of the course." In fact, the study found that participants were especially mindful about gender, as this seemed to be reflected in many of the works they created. For example, one student created a tooth fairy picturebook that "play[ed] with the fluidity of the main character." Another student constructed a counting and shapes picturebook in which the dog is "gender neutral." One student made sure to have a high proportion of female characters who were not "locked into gendered roles."

Doing visual analysis work helped participants think more about how to use visual elements in their own compositions. One student wrote that examining color in books like *Adventure Time: Princess Bubblegum* (Ward, 2020) and *Harold and the Purple Crayon* (Johnson, 2015) influenced her creation of the tooth fairy picturebook. Another student's graphic narrative was inspired by the "soft-looking, stylized look from picturebooks we read" such as *The Princess and the Pony* (Beaton, 2015). The student who made the Mothman picturebook [see Figure 1 for an excerpt from this work] explained that he appreciated the "limited color palette [of] books" like *Ghosts in the House* (Kohara, 2010) and *Leo: A Ghost Story* (Barnett, 2015).

Interestingly, participants did not always recognize how the literature that was presented in class had influenced their projects. For example, the tooth fairy picturebook mentioned earlier has text that is crossed out for effect, similar to *Chester* (Watt, 2009), a picturebook that was shared in a class read-aloud with a document camera. This participant did not make the connection in her reflection, however. Another student commented about the project, "Taking inspiration from *Chester*—a character editing the book themselves—can allow for a really funny book that kids enjoy." Another participant in this study composed what very much looked like a feminist response to de Saint-Exupéry's (2000) *The Little Prince* (see Figure 2 for an excerpt from this work). However, when I pointed out this connection in class, the student seemed surprised. By the time she submitted her reflection, she acknowledged a possible connection: "In retrospect, *The Little Prince* may be an unconscious inspiration for this picturebook." Students sometimes need assistance seeing these connections.

Figure 1
“MOTHPMAN” (AN EXCERPT FROM A STUDENT’S ORIGINAL PICTUREBOOK)

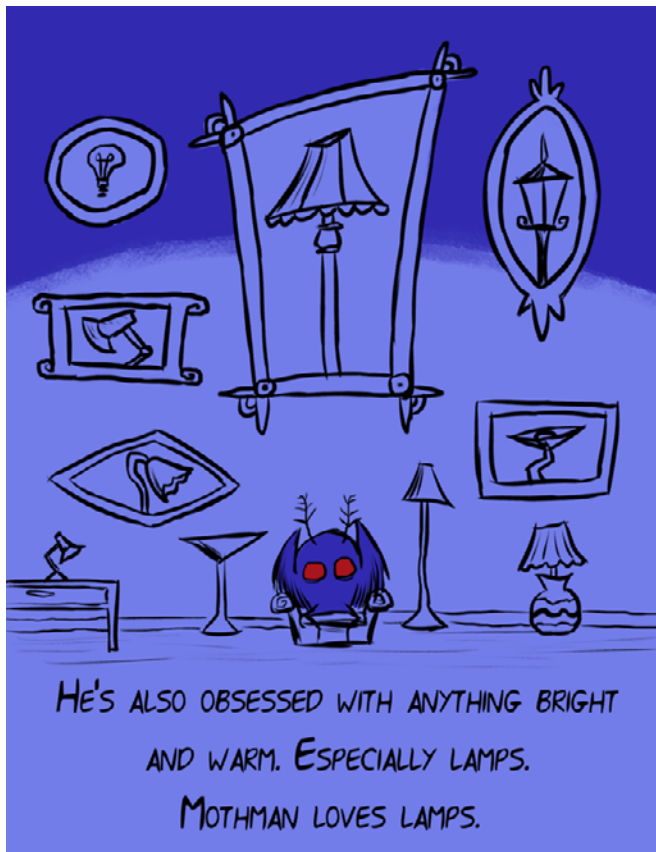
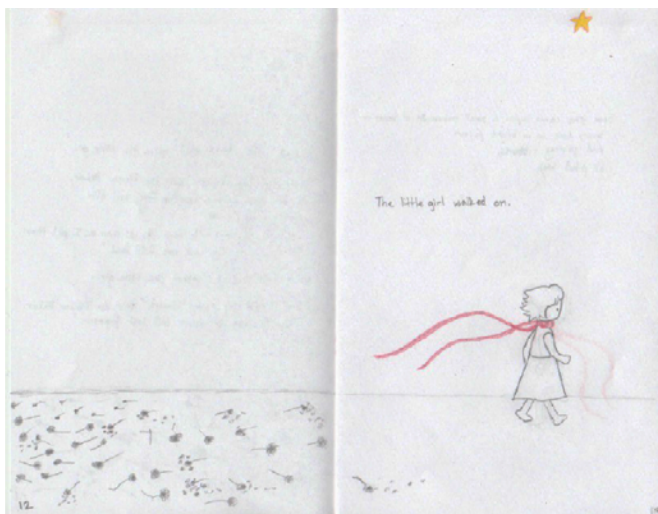


Figure 2
“THE STARLIT JOURNEY” (AN EXCERPT FROM A STUDENT’S ORIGINAL PICTUREBOOK)—THE TEXT READS, “THE LITTLE GIRL WALKED ON.”



Making the Project Meaningful Some participants composed creative projects that were personally meaningful. A participant who was passionate about being in a band created a graphic narrative about his “experience with music and being a musician.” Another student reflected on her larger purposes for the project:

I knew I wanted to do something for my nephews, but I didn’t really know how to go about it...I had the flashback to a dream I had as a kid of a tooth castle and remember[ed] how badly I wanted to be the tooth fairy when I grew up...I decided to roll with that idea, but then my nephews kept popping into my head. How was I supposed to make a story for them with an idea centered around my own interest? Eventually...I was able to come up with *The Tooth Fairy Creature’s Handbook* and felt excited to incorporate my novice graphic design skills in there as well...I spent a tremendous amount of time and effort putting all my creative energy into my project and the amount of satisfaction I feel...is almost indescribable.

She made this project meaningful by working on an idea from a dream she had as a child. In addition, writing the book for her nephews gave her a sense of purpose and audience.

Another participant made a picturebook for her daughter. It included photographs of the child, and she also invited her daughter to help color in the objects. The participant reflected:

This creative project was inspired by [my] daughter’s interest in...shapes and colors. I know this picturebook is very plain, but it means a whole lot to me because my daughter and I had a lot of bonding time creating it, and she’s the one who picked out the colors as well as naming different objects that are triangular or circular. Not only was this a fun learning experience for both of us, but it’s something we can both cherish for a lifetime. It’s more like a keepsake that I can show her as she gets older.

She explained that her daughter was involved in the book’s construction, so “a lot of the images have scribbles.” It was interesting to see how the participants used this assignment to pursue their interests, honor their families, and connect with authentic audiences. They demonstrated agency in the

ways that they adapted the assignment to make it personally meaningful for them and those they cared about.

Learning from Others Sharing projects during a showcase in class created space for students to learn from and connect with each other. Even though students were asked to comment on just three other projects in their reflection, one student commented on all of the other students' projects. She observed her peers' use of mixed media, marginalia, strong visual details, colors, lines, character design and expressions, pacing, straight-to-the-point storytelling, humor, and ingenuity. In addition, she appreciated that students were able to explore multicultural identity and involve their family members. Some students applied critical lenses to each other's projects, pointing out visual, archetypal, feminist, environmental, and reader response observations, even though that was not required.

In their reflections, students acknowledged the skill and creativity they had observed in other students' projects, and they felt a sense of pride in their work as a class. A participant remarked, "I'm so proud of everyone's work. I can really see a bright future ahead of them." Students enjoyed learning about each other through these projects (seeing the "vulnerable parts of themselves"), and they wanted to see their books in print. One student wrote about the Mothman story, "I would not hesitate in purchasing this book. Take my money!" In fact, several participants commented that many of the projects were already publishable.

Implications and Limitations

This section explores some of the implications these study findings have for teaching and research. In addition, it considers ways in which the study and course were limited.

Critical Lenses In regard to the first research question, this study found that participants used a variety of critical lenses to make meaning from children's literature. Through these lenses, participants critiqued characters and situations, connected literature to real life, and appreciated inclusion and difference. Having access to a toolkit of critical lenses equipped these readers to be able to grapple with the complexities of a vast array of works written for children. They cited examples and language from these works and applied lenses thoughtfully.

These findings have implications for teaching, suggesting that undergraduate students can benefit from using critical lenses to look more closely at texts. Therefore, it is recommend-

ed that instructors use a wide variety of lenses with undergraduate students in children's literature courses. This work can be scaffolded through *direct instruction* (e.g., explaining each lens and showing how it can be used with particular passages of text), *guided practice* (e.g., identifying relevant passages in a longer text together as a class), *collaborative learning* (e.g., applying lenses to picturebooks in pairs or groups and reporting back to the class), and *independent practice* (e.g., selecting texts and lenses and putting these together in a paper). I recommend that students define the lens before applying it, quote several passages from the literary text, and explain how that lens sheds new light on their understanding of those moments in the text.

Literacy scholars are encouraged to investigate how critical lenses are being used with different groups and levels of students. It is especially important to explore how lenses like Critical Race Theory are actually being employed in educational settings. In contrast to the widely circulated idea that Critical Race Theory is all about the demonization of white people, this study found that students were observant and critical but also humanizing and respectful.

Creative Projects In response to the second research question, this study found that participants' creative projects were useful for meaning making of various kinds. Participants used literature they had studied in the course as mentor texts that informed and inspired their own picturebooks. They also made their projects personally meaningful, connecting them to people and experiences that mattered to them. The project showcase provided an opportunity for these students to learn from their peers as well. They picked up on other students' uses of techniques, literary texts, and critical perspectives, and they celebrated the quality of the projects they produced as a class. This sharing of projects helped reinforce the idea that students' stories matter, too.

These findings about creative projects have useful implications for education. They suggest that analyzing literature can inform and inspire students as they compose original works of their own. In this way, literature can serve as mentor texts for composition. In addition, composing picturebooks can be part of a larger focus on developing students' visual and multimodal literacies (Kress & van Leeuwen, 2006; Serafini, 2014). This study supports giving students freedom to make their projects personally meaningful and holding project showcases so students can make sense of each others' works together.

Also, project reflections can encourage students to think more deeply about their tools, processes, and influences, while also supporting metacognition and making student decision-making visible.

In previous research (Williams, 2019, 2020), I have observed the strong connection that can exist between analysis of visual works and original creative composition. Systematically analyzing works involves more than close reading or viewing. It also gives students tools and frameworks necessary for communicating ideas and telling stories of their own. Future research should attend more closely to the relationship between analysis and composition, includ-

ing the transfer that exists between such seemingly disparate cognitive tasks.

Limitations This research has some limitations. The small qualitative study examined the course documents of eight participants. Future studies could expand on this work by involving a greater number of students and including additional data sources (e.g., class observations, interviews). While the data types and number of participants helped answer the research questions, larger studies could yield additional insights. In addition, it would be beneficial to examine the teaching of critical lenses in other settings.

Table 3
SOME SUGGESTED LENSES AND TEXTS

LENS(ES)	TEXTS
Archetypes	<i>The Original Folk and Fairy Tales of the Brothers Grimm</i> (Grimm & Grimm, 2014), <i>That Is Not a Good Idea</i> (Willems, 2013)
Biographical/Historical/ New Historicism	<i>Inside Out and Back Again</i> (Lai, 2013), <i>Ninth Ward</i> (Rhodes, 2012), <i>Alice's Adventures in Wonderland</i> (Carroll, 2002), <i>Rosa</i> (Giovanni, 2007), <i>The Snowy Day</i> (Keats, 1996), <i>Bright Star</i> (Morales, 2021)
Critical Disability Studies	<i>El Deafo</i> (Bell, 2014), <i>Just Ask</i> (Sotomayor, 2019), <i>We're All Wonders</i> (Palacio, 2017), <i>Six Dots: A Story of Young Louis Braille</i> (Bryant, 2016)
Critical Race Theory	<i>Ghost Boys</i> (Rhodes, 2019), <i>Nappy Hair</i> (Herron, 1998), <i>Fry Bread: A Native American Family Story</i> (Mail-lard, 2019), <i>Yoko</i> (Wells, 2009)
Ecocriticism	<i>Holes</i> (Sachar, 2000), <i>The Lorax</i> (Seuss, 1971), <i>The Giving Tree</i> (Silverstein, 1999), <i>A Fish Out of Water</i> (Palmer, 1961)
Feminist/Gender/Queer	<i>Melissa</i> (Gino, 2022), <i>The Country Bunny and the Little Gold Shoes</i> (Heyward, 2014), <i>The Little Engine That Could</i> (Piper, 2001), <i>The Story of Ferdinand</i> (Leaf, 1936), <i>Ghosts in the House</i> (Kohara, 2010), <i>And Tango Makes Three</i> (Richardson & Parnell, 2015), <i>Heather Has Two Mommies</i> (Newman, 2016)
Marxism	<i>Esperanza Rising</i> (Ryan, 2002), <i>Last Stop on Market Street</i> (de la Peña, 2015), <i>Sunday Shopping</i> (Derby, 2019), <i>Voices in the Park</i> (Browne, 2001)
Postcolonialism	<i>Charlie and the Chocolate Factory</i> (Dahl, 2007), <i>Curious George</i> (Rey & Rey, 1973), <i>We Are Water Protectors</i> (Lindstrom, 2020), <i>To Be a Drum</i> (Coleman, 1998)
Postmodernism	<i>Sideways Stories from Wayside School</i> (Sachar, 2019), <i>Tuesday</i> (Wiesner, 2011), <i>The Three Pigs</i> (Wiesner, 2001), <i>Harold and the Purple Crayon</i> (Johnson, 2015), <i>I Want My Hat Back</i> (Klassen, 2011), <i>Math Curse</i> (Scieszka & Smith, 1995), <i>The Stinky Cheese Man and Other Fairly Stupid Tales</i> (Scieszka & Smith, 1992)
Psychoanalysis	<i>The Wonderful Wizard of Oz</i> (Baum, 2019), <i>The Cat in the Hat</i> (Seuss, 1957), <i>The Red Tree</i> (Tan, 2010), <i>Where the Wild Things Are</i> (Sendak, 2012)
Reader Response	<i>The Little Prince</i> (de Saint-Exupéry, 2000), <i>The Garden of Abdul Gasazi</i> (van Allsburg, 1979), <i>Cicada</i> (Tan, 2019)
Visual Analysis	<i>Doodleville</i> (Sell, 2020), <i>The Invention of Hugo Cabret</i> (Selznick, 2007), <i>The Arrival</i> (Tan, 2006), <i>Dogzilla</i> (Pilkey, 1993), <i>The Runaway Bunny</i> (Brown, 2017), <i>Fox's Dream</i> (Tejima, 1987), <i>Once a Mouse</i> (Brown, 1989), <i>The Pigeon Needs a Bath</i> (Willems, 2014), <i>Rosie's Walk</i> (Hutchins, 1971), <i>Millions of Cats</i> (Gág, 2006), <i>Peter Rabbit</i> (Potter, 2002)

The course described in this article has limitations as well. I originally taught the lenses largely in chronological order but, since then, have presented the lenses out of order, so I can get to important lenses like Critical Race Theory earlier in the term. I have also added the Critical Disability Studies lens (Purdue University, 2021) and with it, Bell's (2014) graphic novel, *El Deafo*. Another change I made was to assign Gino's (2022) book, *Melissa*, so we could discuss transgender issues. I have given myself permission to drop critical lenses that I find less useful or that students already know from K-12 literary study. In Table 3, I provide some recommended pairings of lenses and texts.

It is worth acknowledging that teaching critical lenses can come with considerable risk. In some settings, instructors may jeopardize their jobs by teaching certain theories or books. In these cases, I recommend consulting with more experienced educators and reviewing applicable policies and legislation.

Conclusion

Teachers can use critical lenses and creative projects in children's literature courses to show students how complex and sophisticated picturebooks (and other seemingly simple works) can be. Critical lenses can be used to read a text deeply and from different perspectives. Composing original picturebooks can show students just how much effort is involved with making a work of their own. Doing both critical and creative work together in a course can give students newfound respect for children's literature.

Using critical and creative approaches with literature supports diversity, equity, and inclusion goals. Critical lenses such as Critical Race Theory, Feminist/Gender/Queer perspectives, Postcolonialism, Marxism, and Ecocriticism provide useful frameworks for interrogating texts and identifying injustice in the world around us. Creative projects support these goals by communicating to students that their stories matter, too.

As one participant in the study said of the creative projects the class shared on the last day, "I wholeheartedly believe that every book presented could be published and could have been shown to the class as one of our in-class readings." Someone else wrote, "Quite frankly, I think everyone's project was fantastic and amazing, and all are publishable. I want those on my shelf!" I couldn't agree more. The future of children's literature is sitting right in front of us! •

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