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'From passive object to active subject': A critical investigation into how use of feminist criticism empowers students in their study of Shakespeare's *Othello*

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Abstract

This study explores the potential of literary criticism in a post-16 setting, specifically, the value of incorporating feminist criticism into the study of Shakespeare's Othello for a class of Year 12 students. It investigates students' impressions (and misconceptions) of feminist criticism, and which specific classroom experiences may facilitate students' critical engagement with, as opposed to imitation of, feminist critics. While current A Level syllabuses do not require students to refer to critics to achieve exemplary grades in examinations, this research highlights the value of introducing literary criticism in the post-16 classroom. I suggest that it facilitates the development of students' own critical voice, empowering them as embryonic literary critics.

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Introduction

This study explores the potential of feminist criticism in the A Level English classroom, and the opportunities it provides for students to hone their own critical voice. The Curriculum 2000 created by the Qualifications and Curriculum Authority (QCA) exposed the contested and ambiguous status of literary criticism for A Level English Literature courses, with no previous formal requirement to study critical theory or multivocal interpretations of texts produced by literary critics. The difficult history of the specifications postdating 2000 has been well documented (Atherton, 2003; Snapper, 2007). As of today, specifications (2015) are effectively ‘sitting on the fence’; implicitly endorsing the use of literary criticism for exemplary marks but shying away from explicitly defining them as mandatory in their syllabuses.

My research was conducted in my second professional teacher training placement school, in an 11-18 girls’ school. From the beginning of this placement, I worked with a mixed ability Year 12 class studying for their A Level English Literature, AQA A Paper 1: ‘Love Through the Ages’. While working with this group, I observed the collateral effect of ambiguous specification guidelines. In lessons I observed, there seemed to be an emphasis on ‘personal response’ as opposed to incorporating voices beyond the classroom door. In conversations with my mentor and Head of Department, concerns emerged over whether to devote pressured lesson time in Year 12 to exploring literary criticism. I also perceived a sense of anxiety over criticism’s potential misuse in written work, replacing the students’ voice as opposed to sharpening their critical response.

My own personal interest in Shakespeare, having studied the playwright during a MPhil in Renaissance literature, made me especially keen to focus on *Othello* as a text with which I could conduct this small-scale study. More importantly, I had accumulated recent nuggets of feminist

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criticism during this degree that I felt would be particularly exciting for students who may perceive Shakespeare, and all associated with this 'cultural icon' as a little rusty, outdated, and obscure. My ambition was to explore students' perceptions of feminism both as a political movement and as a mode of literary cultural analysis. Most importantly, I wanted the students to understand the role of literary criticism not as a hegemonic authority, but simply as another voice, like their own, to be explored, refuted, and negotiated.

Literature Review

Significant research has been published exploring the debates regarding literary criticism in the A Level classroom, with specific recommendations for pedagogic practice. Little research has been published on feminist criticism specifically; however, perhaps its very multiplicity, lacking a seminal figure or core methodology, creates an apt exploring ground for students. The latter half of the literature review focuses on teaching Shakespeare; the playwright's enshrinement in the National Curriculum has particular ramifications for post-16 study, where accepted orthodoxies can, and should, be questioned.

"Perplexed in the extreme": **What is the current status of literary criticism in the A Level classroom?**

Since the publication of Curriculum 2000 (QCA), and the subsequent myriad of reforms (2008, 2015) the position of literary criticism in the classroom has been unclear. The introduction of Assessment Objectives (AOs) (five in 2000, four in 2008, five in 2015) was aimed to make explicit the instrumental skills required of students in examinations; as Bleiman (2019) points out, despite the multiple reforms aimed to create a more holistic approach to assessment, teaching strictly to the AOs is common practice. Atherton (2003) suggests teachers and pupils are condemned to a "constant juggling" of criteria (p.101). In 2015, realising that AO3 and AO4 (connections between texts and alternative interpretations) proved a source of confusion for teachers and pupils alike, AO5 was reintroduced. It is worth quoting at length here:

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> "AO5: Explore literary texts informed by different interpretations.
>
> Produce readings of texts that recognise that they are often complex, with many potential meanings that allow them to be read in more than one way. *Perhaps* also using critical interpretations, or critical positions, to develop one's own reading."
>
> (Bleiman, 2019, p.211)

That small word "perhaps" is the interpretative crux of the matter. With the exception of AQA B (Theory and Independence), a survey across specifications from 2015 (AQA A, Pearson Edexcel, Eduqas, OCR) shows that examination boards provide slippery guidance. They typically praise the use of specific critical material employed judiciously, while emphasising that a candidate's exploration of the inherent debate set up in examination tasks can achieve stellar results. Pearson Edexcel's materials are particularly contradictory. The board provides a critical anthology for study and praises exemplar answers which explicitly integrate critics, concurrently emphasising that this is not essential for the highest marks.

This confusion over literary criticism in the classroom predates Curriculum 2000; the AOs merely provided a concrete focus for pedagogical debate around its practical application in the classroom. As far back as 1983, Goodwyn's small-scale survey in the urban local education authority (LEA) of Coventry provided a survey of opinion about the reading of literary criticism at A Level. The study sent questionnaires to secondary school teachers, tertiary colleges, and the local University's English and Education departments. Although this is a small-scale study, it is particularly insightful as it contains the opinions of the primary stakeholders in the debate: teachers, higher education providers, and in particular, students, going some way to address an imbalance in other studies in which students are a group research is conducted *on* rather than *with* (Flutter, 2007). In the questionnaire responses, quoted at length by Goodwyn (1983), all three stakeholder groups voiced concerns over students' use of literary criticism. Students were fearful of literary criticism, arising from "an uncertainty about *how* to use it" (p.64), teachers were aware of the "danger of 'parroting' by students who simply lifted ideas" (p.60) from critics, and University lecturers suggested "some [students] have used it, some have been abused by it" (p.56), failing to understand its function as problematising the question of meaning, rather than simplifying it. The importance of introducing and clarifying political and cultural concepts such as feminism, Marxism and post-colonialism to students, movements which affect their own contemporary social and political world, have been called essential "cultural equipment" by Scholes (1998), which furthers the "goal of student

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development" (pp.36-38), regardless of which, if any, degree they may pursue. Thinking critically, rather than accepting received ideas, is an important part of being an active citizen in society. This view has been subsequently supported by Atherton (2003), and Gibbons (2010). Snapper (2009) in particular highlights the consequences of students' unfamiliarity with literary criticism in undergraduate study; they adopt a self-protective strategy of resistance resulting in "frequently uncomfortable silences" (p.198) in seminars and an unpleasant learning experience.

Daw (1997), another early advocate for literary criticism in the classroom, outlines ten recommendations to ensure literary criticism will "enrich students' responses to texts rather than in any way replacing them" (p.155), in an attempt to alleviate the anxieties discovered by Goodwyn (1983) and perhaps prevent the silences later reported by Snapper (2009). The method behind Daw's recommendations draws on his 1996 small-scale survey of six schools in Suffolk to identify factors that underlie A Level success, identifying that "significant use was made of published criticism" in these schools, with exposure to "models of high-quality critical discussion and writing" identified as a key factor ensuring examination success (Daw, 1996, p.22). Daw details the comprehensive data collection methods used to identify these factors: lesson observations, interviews with students and teachers, and scrutiny of written work. It is a shame, however, that the interviews with students are not once referred to in Daw's findings. The attainment of high grades (A or B) says little of the students' lived experience of using critical material in the English classroom, especially those students who fall outside of the A/B grade boundary. However, Daw's ten guidelines for practice are substantiated by more recent recommendations for practice postdating the introduction of the Curriculum 2000. In particular, the emphasis on metacognitive awareness, and a 'light touch' approach to literary criticism, has been championed.

Eaglestone (2001) idealistically claims that "all seventeen year olds are natural theorists. They ask the big questions of literary texts because they really care about what they mean" (p.7). This is a tempting claim. However, there is a coded assumption here that all A Level students organically develop a metacognitive awareness crucial to literary study, and arrive in Year 12 brimming with questions such as: "why do we study literature?", "why do we study literature in this way?", and "why do we study these particular texts?". There is also little consideration in his statement for students who are low attainers, already struggling cognitively with the demands of a knowledge-led General Certificate of Secondary Education (GCSE) curriculum. Snapper (2011) suggests that students' capitulation to the demands of the curriculum pre- and post-16 effectively quash the

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fascinating areas of cultural enquiry that may be burgeoning in students' minds. Furthermore, the uncomfortable silences described by Snapper (2009) indicate that these questions were not so readily at hand, even by undergraduate level. Snapper's wealth of experience as a sixth form teacher and his position on The National Association for Teaching of English (NATE) post-16 committee means he is particularly attuned to the effects of curricular demands on students' independent thought, unlike Eaglestone, who holds a position within Higher Education. Perhaps, Eaglestone has an understandable vested interest in arguing that undergraduates will have already explored these metacognitive questions, thereby pushing the responsibility of exploring these questions away from Higher Education practitioners towards A Level teachers.

Atherton, Green and Snapper (2013) provide practical pedagogical strategies to realise Eaglestone's belief that literary criticism in the A Level classroom should not be related to a specific body of knowledge, but a specific way of thinking: "One cannot simply make a list of everything 'a critic' should know: an attitude is not a list, a map is not a territory" (Eaglestone, 2016, p.11). Their publication, comprehensively covering the conventional -isms (Marxism, feminist, postcolonialism) within a classroom context, emphasise that "what is important is not the theories and interpretation they explore, but the *act* of theorising and interpreting itself" (Atherton et al., 2013, p.117). Barry (2009) and Bleiman (2019) similarly advocate this approach, as a way to mitigate students 'parroting' critics; criticism is not a "decorative 'frill" to make essays sound scholarly (Bleiman, p.216). Process, as opposed to end point, is paramount. With this view in mind, focus on providing students with a taste of areas of debate to chew over, rather than providing them with chunks of dense critical material to swallow, is the recommended approach. In line with Daw's (1997) guidance to deal with short, manageable pieces, carefully selected by the teacher, Bleiman (2011) advocates a "light touch": "A more pluralist and eclectic use of theories, that keeps literary texts in the foreground, can be highly illuminating and avoids the pitfalls of 'theory for theory's sake'" (p.31). Here, responsibility falls on the teacher to allow students the independence to navigate a new metacognitive minefield, while gently guiding students to refine their own interpretations.

My own study's focus on feminist criticism is in line with Atherton et al.'s (2013) belief that feminism is an excellent introduction of literary theory, inextricably associated with issues of representation (2013). Indeed, the English classroom may provide a unique context in which to discuss issues around gender and sexuality, not always encouraged in other subjects (Bomford, 2019). Furthermore, since its inception, feminism has been characterised by the sheer range of

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positions within it, crystallising Eaglestone's (2016) belief that any body of criticism is "a map…not a territory" (p.11). As Neely (1987) notes, "unlike, for example, Marxism or psychoanalysis, it lacks the single seminal figure and the core theoretical texts from which basic assumptions and methodology derive", suggesting a feminist critic is "a role too nebulous" to be easily defined (pp.15-18). If the English classroom is a setting which needs to tolerate, invite and interpret uncertainties within a text, focusing on ambiguities and contradictions, it is well suited to a theoretical concept that has been variously contested, explored and negotiated.

'*Reputation, Reputation, Reputation*': Why Shakespeare at A Level? Beyond the National Curriculum

An aspect of secondary school teaching which marches on relatively uncontested is the study of Shakespeare. The playwright's enshrinement in the National Curriculum (1988) furthered his position as a cultural icon, with the implication that study of his plays was essential to receive a 'proper' English education. As Coles (2013) points out, the notion of 'entitlement' has been endemic in discourse about school Shakespeare from the 1989 publication of the Cox Report. The playwright, according to the Cox Report, conveys 'universal truths'. Although the requirements for the teaching of Shakespeare in the National Curriculum have undergone frequent revision, his inclusion in multiple forms has remained mandatory; vigorous debate has tended to focus not on *whether* he should be taught but *how* he should be taught. Blocksidge (2003) attests to Shakespeare's singularity: "Shakespeare was the only author compulsorily prescribed for study by all the nation's children" (p.2). Blocksidge's linguistic slip in referring to Shakespeare as an "author" as opposed to a "playwright" forwards an image of Shakespeare as a sole writer of books, who never blotted a line, rather than as a writer of plays which were ever changing, born of multiple collaborations, ephemeral and exploratory. The etymological root of "author" as *auctor*, originator or creator, from which the word "authority" derives, places the power of meaning solely with Shakespeare. In this schema, students' interpretive independence is minimized; study of Shakespeare becomes a game of working out what the playwright 'meant'. This strikes at the heart of Gibson's (2016) major pedagogical project known as "active methods", comprising of a range of creative, dramatic and expressive activities which place the learner at the centre of the experience. Personal response is key. Gibson (2016) is clear that the approach "acknowledges that every student seeks to create their own meaning, rather than passively soak up information" (p.10). Through his leadership of the Cambridge Shakespeare and Schools project he championed active methods which

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are social and collaborative. Recognising that Shakespeare wrote his scripts for performance, not for desk-bound literary critical analysis, Gibson encouraged students to explore their own critical voice in which there is no ‘right answer’.

While Gibson’s mode of Shakespeare teaching has been championed in pedagogic literature, multiple studies have shown that traditional desk bound literary study is still a default position for many schools (Wade & Sheppard, 1994). Furthermore, the enduring influence of Leavasite literary criticism, which implicitly suggests that each play is a treasure trove of truths to be discovered, has left its legacy on today’s classrooms, exacerbated by the assessment objective mode of assessment. Jane Coles’ (2009) small-scale study which closely analysed two Year 9 lessons on Macbeth in preparation for the Standard Assessment Tests (SATS) corroborates this assertion. Coles’ research showed that while drama activities may open up opportunities for students to “create their own meaning” as Gibson wishes, active methods are an “inadequate antidote” for the examination discourse of the SATS (Coles, 2009, p.47). While this mode of assessment no longer exists, Coles’ argument is still relevant: the pedagogical methods of desk bound analysis in preparation for GCSE exams still tend to be the *modus operandi.* In this sense, tests ultimately shape the pedagogy. Gibson’s (2016) emphasis on students’ “personal response” (p.73) has also come under scrutiny, with Bottoms (1995) conceding that the “cultural baggage ‘Shakespeare’ carries’ with it” and the “requirement of the educational system” combined “cannot help but impose some constraints” (p.370), inhibiting an ‘authentic’ response. Sinfield (1985) in particular, interrogates this ideal, suggesting that the “authentic response…can in actuality be only a combination of pressures from society at large and from the teacher in particular” (p.149). This is relevant especially in a classroom environment as described by Coles (2009), in which the teacher’s classroom discourse positions them as the ultimate arbiter of authority.

Blocksidge’s discourse of prescription (2003) seeps into post-16 study; Shakespeare is included on A Level English Language and Literature courses, and compulsory on all English Literature A Level syllabuses. Indeed, King (2005) compares Shakespeare’s inclusion in assessment “like those childhood doses of cod liver oil, nasty but ‘good for you” (p.18). Jacobs (2017), a previous head of English at a Sixth Form College, points out that the sixth form classroom can be differentiated from GCSE study by a growth in critical literacy, a questioning, rather than swallowing, of received information. This may present a particular challenge for students in relation to Shakespeare study, which has formed an integral part of students’ educational hinterland, championed as vital to their

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English literary heritage and formative education. Sean McEvoy (1991; 2003) has written extensively on Shakespeare studies post-16; far from arguing for his removal, he (2003) believes that as long as "Shakespeare remains high-status cultural capital, for good or ill", it is crucial that he is studied (p.114). Using his experience teaching a Shakespeare at Varndean College in Brighton, he (1991) places emphasis on teaching strategies that will allow plays to become a "site of conflict" (p.75), where dominant readings are challenged. Of particular importance to McEvoy (2003) is exposing the unspoken attitudes that lead to students believing Shakespeare study is a "rite of passage" (p.113). Aware that the idea of 'personal response' encouraged and valued by exam boards is not "the innocent reaction of some *tabula rasa* but conditioned by ideological preconceptions about Shakespeare and about culture in general" (McEvoy, 1991, p.75), he stresses that students should question their inherent assumptions during their study. Leach (1992) agrees that Shakespeare's plays, by virtue of their critically acclaimed status, should become a contested multivocal site, where traditional liberal humanist readings are challenged by students, exposing the "negative gender and race perspectives which appear to be operating in the Shakespeare texts" (p.72). Study of the playwright in a post-16 setting should, it seems, encourage a hyper-critical awareness of textual authority and interpretation.

Methodology, Methods and Ethics

Methodology

This research project took place at my second professional placement school: an 11-18 girls' school in Hertfordshire, with academy status. The research was conducted with a mixed ability Year 12 class, which included a small number of male pupils from the boy's school within the same consortium. Their predicted A Level grades ranged from A*-D. The class had just completed their study of Shakespeare's *Othello* (1609) as part of their A Level English Literature course: Paper 1: 'Love Through the Ages' (AQA A7711, 7712). An exam which is focused on "representations of love over time" (AQA) inevitably involves discussions of gender and sexuality, so it seemed an apt exploring ground in which to introduce feminist criticism to the students.

For this small-scale, context-directed investigation, action research was chosen as the most appropriate research method. Taber (2013) has significant reservations regarding Postgraduate Certificate in Education (PGCE) trainees' use of action research, suggesting that the methodology's

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emphasis on self-reflective cycles of planning a change, then implementing, observing, and reflecting upon it before responsively replanning is not possible within a PGCE course timescale (Kemmis & Wilkinson, 1998, p.21). This is a significant drawback and it is a shame that timescales did not allow for multiple reflective cycles. However, Denscombe (2017) reports that the notion of research as constantly ongoing is “something of an ideal and that, in reality, action research often limits itself to discrete, one-off pieces of research” (p.150). Although my research was not strictly cyclical, my intervention fulfils significant tenets of action research. As both the teacher and researcher, the project involved the active participation of practitioners (p.129). It was also “characterised by a preoccupation with practical issues” in exploring appropriate use of literary criticism in a classroom context (Taber, 2013, p.143). Crucially, it was not the study of current practice, but specifically geared to changing matters to improve practice (Elliott, 1991). In discussion with the Head of Department, I was made aware that while this year group had already discussed different interpretations of *Othello,* no structured lesson time had been devoted to the exploration of specific critics’ responses to *Othello*, or explicit exploration of gender dynamics in the play. The generalisability of action research has occasionally come under scrutiny; a drawback of the methodology is that “data collection is limited to specific context of the intervention”, leaving it open to criticism that findings “relate to one instance and should not be generalised beyond the specific ‘case’” (Denscombe, 2017, p.154). Conversely, Simons (2009) convincingly highlights the multiple ways a case study can be applied to other contexts; as a similar small-scale context directed investigation, her arguments are relevant to action research. Small-scale studies, she suggests, may provide a fruitful paradox in “the tension between the universal and particular”, an opportunity for gaining “insights developed through the in-depth exploration of the particular” (p.167).

Teaching Sequence

I taught three lessons specifically on *Othello* for this investigation, interspersed with a number of lessons on the AQA ‘Love Through the Ages’ poetry anthology. The intervening lessons seemed to be important pedagogic spaces in which I could both establish my position within the classroom as a teacher knowledgeable of their specification and develop relationships of “trust and respect” with participants, necessary for an ethical research process (Simons, 2009, p.97). The focus and outline of these three lessons are detailed in the table below.

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Lesson	Lesson Outline
Lesson 1 Establishing current knowledge base: Female Representation in *Othello*	▪ In groups of three, students discuss response to the open statement: 'Gender dynamics in *Othello'* ▪ In groups of three, students analyse textual extracts for three female characters. Each student fills in one box on linguistic techniques, structural techniques, or personal perspectives ▪ Students present the extract to the rest of the class
Lesson 2 Analyse and debate a range of feminist perspectives on *Othello*	▪ Students discuss and debate a series of questions revolving around: '*What is gender? What is feminism? What is feminist criticism?'* ▪ Students analyse feminist criticism extracts individually and in groups, stating points for agreement and disagreement, and providing summary ▪ Students discuss findings to home group (jigsaw activity) and then share with rest of class, justifying their opinions
Lesson 3 Students evaluate feminist perspectives in their own analysis	▪ Students participate in student-led debate in response to an exam question ▪ Students analyse an exemplar paragraph in response to the exam question, identifying strengths and weaknesses in the response ▪ Students write a critical response

Table 1: Outline of Teaching Sequence

Research Questions

The teaching sequence was designed to answer the following research questions (RQs) presented in Table 2. This table also details the different data sources against the relevant RQ; the choices for the data collection methods associated with each of these sources are detailed in the following section.

Research Question	Data Sources
RQ1. What are the students' impressions (and misconceptions) of feminist criticism and its value within the English classroom?	Lesson observations A questionnaire to establish students' views and opinions on literary criticism, specifically feminist criticism
RQ2. Which classroom experiences appear to encourage critical engagement with feminist criticism when studying Shakespeare's Othello?	Lesson observations Document analysis of students' work
RQ3. What do students appear to gain from use of feminist criticism in their study of Shakespeare's Othello?	Interviews

Table 2: Research Questions and Data Sources

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Data Collection Methods

Questionnaire

I designed a questionnaire (Appendix 1), which I distributed to the class prior to the start of the lesson sequence. It opened with two closed questions, but the majority of the questions were open, in an attempt to mitigate a disadvantage of closed questions in which "there is less scope for respondents to supply answers which reflect the exact facts or true feelings on a topic" (Denscombe, 2017, p.166). The questions were designed to establish students' perceptions of 'literary criticism', its role in their own study, and their current confidence levels in using it. As my specific teaching sequence aimed to explore feminist criticism, I asked them for their own definition of a 'feminist approach' to literary, and specifically Shakespearean, texts. Asking them to create their own definitions, as opposed to relying on a 'tick box' approach, meant that the raw data was more time consuming to collect and analyse (Taber, 2013, p.266). However, as I wanted to establish students' unique perceptions (and perhaps, misconceptions) about feminist criticism, the open question design was valuable in that it allowed students "to express themselves in their own words" (Denscombe, 2017, p.215).

Lesson observations

I used structured observations of my colleagues in previous lessons with this class while they were working on the 'Love Through the Ages' unit, which provided an informed starting point for my scheme. I was attentive to the teacher-pupil discourse surrounding issues of gender, sexuality and representation in their set texts. Mindful of Simons' (2009) warning that a significant drawback of observations is that I would inadvertently "add a layer of meaning in writing a portrayal" (p.105), my mentor was given the opportunity to respond and discuss these observations with me. I also used my formal observations from the two teachers observing my lesson sequence with this group; these were valuable as the "distinctive feature of observation as a research process is that it offers an investigator the opportunity to gather 'live' data from a naturally occurring social situation", the use of "immediate awareness" a unique strength as opposed to inferential methods of data collection (Cohen, Manion, & Morrison, 2011, p.456).

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Document analysis of students' work

Three pieces of students' work from the teaching sequence were analysed: 'Textual extracts' (Lesson 1), their annotation of the 'Critical extracts' (Lesson 3,) and their 'Critical response' (Lesson 3) writing. These three documentary pieces of evidence would provide a trajectory from which I could interpret the apparent evolution of students' thought. I analysed these sources, mindful of the potential problems of using student's work as data, highlighted by Taber (2013): "the things that students write…only provide indirect evidence of what they think, know and understand" (p.264). Therefore, it is "one slice" of data to be triangulated against other data sources (ibid.).

Semi-structured interview

The small-group, semi-structured interview was conducted with four students after completion of the teaching sequence. I purposefully chose both boys and girls to interview with a varying range of attainment, to provide feedback on the lesson sequence. Guide questions were prepared before the interview to provide structure, but they were open-ended which allowed for a discussion appertaining to an informal conversation. In an attempt to ensure that I documented participants' stories, as opposed to confirming my previous theories' (Simons, 2009), I attempted to intervene minimally, so there was "more emphasis on the interviewee elaborating points of interest" (Denscombe, 2017, p.225).

Data analysis approaches

In contrast to the traditional 'social science' approach outlined by Taber (2013), which involves analysing themes and identifying emergent codes or patterns across multiple data sources, I decided this would not be well suited to my small-scale contextual driven project. As my research centres around nuances of interpretation and the value of multivocality in literature study, it felt suited to the approach advocated by Marshall and Gibbons (2015), which focuses on a close reading of textual material, a practice well suited to English practitioners. This approach may provide a "myriad of different points of view" (p.201) which is messy and complex, rather than unifying conclusions. Drawing on Eisner's work, Marshall and Gibbons envision this mode of investigation as part of a larger project of a "more complex, subtle and experiential mode of inquiry" (Marshall & Pahl, 2015, p.481) within one's reflective practice. While problematic from a social science

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perspective, perhaps appearing idiosyncratic and subjective, Simons (2009) makes the valid point that it is impossible to eliminate your own subjectivity in fieldwork you are personally involved in; better instead to recognise the unique way in which it contributes to insight and understanding.

Ethics

In compliance with the British Educational Research Association (BERA) Ethical guidelines (2018), which states that 'participants' voluntary informed consent to be involved in a study will be obtained at the start of the study. I sought informed consent from my research participants, both students and my mentor, who was one of their teachers, (the "gatekeeper"), before conducting the research (BERA, 2018, p.9). Providing students with a handout explaining what the study involved helped to "ensure that all potential participants understand, as well as they can", the nature of the study (ibid., p.9). The handout also provided an opt out clause, so students had the autonomy to be removed from the data collation (ibid., p.15). It was relatively straightforward to ensure what Glen (2000, p.21) refers to as "simple integrity" in the project, in this case, the transparent commitment to abstract BERA ethical principles. In the process of conducting the research, concrete ethical dilemmas came to the fore which required ongoing and sustained reflections of my own practice, recognising that occasionally there may be no 'right' way to proceed (ibid., p.13). The questionnaire included open questions on the students' previous experience of literary criticism and whether they felt it had helped them in their study, purposefully designed to maximise their honesty before teaching my sequence. In collating the questionnaire data, it became apparent that a few students were openly critical about their previous teaching in this regard, expressing their frustration that my colleagues, their teachers, had not told them "how to use it", leaving some students confused.

I was left with an ethical dilemma: having inadvertently elicited this specific and open critique from students, could I share this with my professional colleagues while remaining respectful of their position as the regular teachers of that class, of which I was a visiting teacher researcher? As Simons (2009) notes, we frequently encounter no-win, no-win ethical situations where we have to acknowledge and balance "mutually conflicting principles" (p.110). In deliberating the best course of action, I was reminded of Elliot's warning in relation to action research; he challenges trainee teachers to reconsider their assumption that their "activity affects them only as they operate in the confines of their own classroom" (Elliot, 1991, p.58). Research that openly asks students to

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critically reflect on their teacher's practice needs expert negotiation to ensure that it remains constructive, as Flutter attests (2007). After reflection, I decided to share the students' feedback with my mentor, but I purposefully limited the form and content of the critique, framing the conversation constructively in terms of students' progress. In doing this, I aimed to simultaneously provide information that could be used to improve professional practice, while ensuring the feedback did not appear as a personal attack. Furthermore, in the beginning of my next lesson in the sequence with the Year 12s, I addressed concerns raised in the questionnaire, but conscientiously tried to frame my discussion in the context of their progress, shifting the focus away from previous lessons taken by their regular teachers. In doing so, I hoped to maintain the double-mindedness of not only a "single" but "complex integrity" in in my study, while recognising that situated ethics in the field rarely present an easily resolvable course of action (Glen, 2000, p.14).

Findings and Discussion

RQ 1: What are students' impressions (and misconceptions) of feminist criticism and its value within the English classroom?

The students' responses to the questionnaire (Appendix 1) provided data on their opinions of literary criticism, as well as specifically feminist criticism; I felt it was important to gauge their understanding of the umbrella term before focusing specifically on the feminist viewpoint. It was striking that 80% of correspondents said they were confident about "writing about different interpretations of a set text" (Question 1), which is perhaps the essence of literary critical study: multiple voices debating textual meaning. Later questions which explicitly included the term 'literary criticism' provided less unanimous responses, with 65% unsure whether they had used literary criticism in the classroom, perhaps suggesting students are confused or intimidated by the term which has not yet been explicated; one participant wrote explicitly: "it wasn't clearly explained to me". This corresponds to my own observations of the class, where links to critical material were given as independent tasks to be completed outside the lesson; as Daw (1996) suggests, the "mere urging of all students to look at criticism" outside lesson time can bewilder students (p.22). Many students struggled to articulate how literary criticism has helped them in their study thus far (Question 2); 30% of students left the question blank or wrote "I'm not sure". However, some students' responses conveyed a tone of confidence: "Yes, it helps me to understand

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the text from different perspectives". Other students' responses felt stereotyped, pointing towards what they felt they *ought* to think; "it helps one to hone their views and promote their thoughts conscientiously". Responses such as these, couched tentatively in the third person, appeared less than sincere. In those who did respond to the question, there was an emergent divide between those who saw literary criticism problematising meaning: "give alternate interpretations", as opposed to those who appeared to see it as simplifying meaning: "to understand the underlying message of the text", the latter a common misconception (Atherton et al., 2013).

It was striking that their definitions of a 'feminist approach' to a literary text (Question 3) appeared more assured than their responses in relation to 'literary criticism'; perhaps, 'feminism' as a political concept as opposed to a mode of cultural analysis is something they are more accustomed to (this was evident in my other observations of the school as a whole). Furthermore, perhaps my emphasis on 'approach' rather than 'criticism' in the wording of the question seemed more accessible to students. It may have implicitly orientated the students towards an answer which codes meaning as extrinsic to the text. Remarkably, 70% of responses uses the verb "looking" in their response, for example: "looking at the representation of women in the text"; "looking at the experience of women"; "looking at the text from a feminist perspective", thereby reorienting the power of interpretation towards the reader, while conveying an understanding of conventional -isms as a particular lens through which to study a literary text. While 20% of students repeated the term 'feminism' in their response without explaining their definition of the term, other responses sophisticatedly explored feminism in terms of equality, challenging patriarchal domination, and as a standpoint theory for women: "looking at the text through a point of view that is equal and fair"; "an approach which goes against specific gender roles"; "looking at the text from the point of view of a female character".

The change of one word in the next question asked them how they would define a 'feminist approach' to a Shakespeare text, as opposed to a literary text (Question 4) appeared to have a marked effect on students' responses. A striking 25% of answers had text that was subsequently crossed out, perhaps indicating an insecurity or a fear of getting the question "wrong". Only 35% of answers used the verb 'looking' on this occasion, keeping the power of interpretation with the reader, and tended to focus on issues of representation. Some students' answers only addressed context (A03) position of women in Elizabethan court", others distorting female representation: "perceiving women as a higher power". Some used the term "feminism" anachronistically:

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“critically analysing how Shakespeare approaches feminism in his work”. One answer that particularly shocked me used dogmatic language: “Exploring Shakespeare’s ideology and seeing whether he ever promotes equality”. This implicit nod to Shakespeare’s ‘ideology’, the playwright as exulted cultural icon reminded me of McEvoy’s (1991) claim that “it is the function of ideology to mystify rather than make plain …the exercise of power” (p.72). This sense of mystification presented itself in the questionnaire responses, with students more tentative and hesitant because they were discussing Shakespeare, as opposed to another writer. From the questionnaires, it seemed that while many in the class were confidently negotiating the role of a feminist critic in their responses, misconceptions and possible confusions centred around ‘literary criticism’, especially when applied to Shakespeare, as two subject areas that can appear daunting in the post-16 classroom (McEvoy, 2003).

RQ 2: Which classroom experiences appear to encourage critical engagement with feminist criticism when studying Shakespeare’s *Othello*?

In response to the data collected in the questionnaires, the initial lesson of the teaching sequence was designed to harness the students’ declared knowledge of what a ‘feminist approach’ to a literary text might entail. I hoped for different interpretations to come from them first, so their own voices were confidently established before bringing any specific feminist critics to the conversation. As Daw (1997) recommends, criticism in the classroom should be “clearly linked to the outcomes of previous discussion, so that reading critics serves to challenge, augment or clarify already identified issues and views” (p.156). After discussion of an open statement: “Gender Dynamics in *Othello*”, groups of three were given one of three textual extracts from *Othello* on Desdemona, Bianca, and Emilia, with boxes to fill: language techniques, structural techniques, and personal perspectives. The majority of the lesson was given to group discussion on this task, before each group presented to their peers; in this succession of debating tasks, I aimed to create a ‘Russian Doll’ of discussions, with students building upon one another’s perspectives throughout. The teacher observing commented on this aspect: “students are giving confident and clear responses and the resources you’ve chosen have given them excellent support in forming their feedback”. The teacher also commented on the mutuality of the dialogue between me and the students: “you show that you appreciate their responses and listen to them sensitively before drawing out ideas, which is in turn really appreciated by the class”. This reciprocity is one of the key tenets of dialogic discussion (Alexander, 2017); “there is no substitute for the teacher actually being interested in

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what the pupils have to say" (Marshall & Wiliam, 2006, p.5). Here, this dialogic approach seemed crucial in encouraging students' articulation of their own critical thought in relation to the Shakespearean text.

The second lesson in the sequence aimed to build on students' own critical thought, while bringing them into dialogue with named feminist critics writing on *Othello.* The lesson opened with a visual stimulus with a boy and a girl playing with childhood toys stereotypically ascribed to one gender; I thought that if students are "allowed to talk about issues that arise from social reality rather than from a literary text" they could return to *Othello* with a 'with a stronger sense of the value of debates about literary representation' and a 'more confident and independent critical voice' (Snapper, 2011, p.36). The main jigsaw activity on extracts from feminist critics, no longer than half a page each, was also designed to encourage an independent critical voice from students. In groups, the students were required to annotate their extract for points of agreement and disagreement, before summarising the argument, to be reported to the 'home group', meaning each 'new group' would have five summaries of the five critics. A plenary debate at the end of this lesson, which considered each extract in turn, seemed to demonstrate that prompts of agreement/disagreement had prompted an 'active' reading as opposed to the parroting of the critics under discussion, as some students began to see themselves as critical agents within the space, able to argue and reject critics' interpretations. My mentor picked up on this in her structured observation of the lesson. Students who initially examined the French (1983) extract took the critic to task claiming she was "suppressing Bianca under the label of prostitute" (Student A) and disregarding her position as a high-status courtesan. Student B accused French's demarcation of characters when the critic writes that thy come from "three moral levels: the 'divine' Desdemona from the superhuman; Emilia from the realistic world; and Bianca from the subhuman". This student said that French was guilty of "reducing women to stereotypes" rather than seeing them as complex characters. These were nuanced refinements which indicated that some students' confidence had grown as they evaluated critics' interpretations which were not 'hallowed guides' but another voice to be potentially contested (Atherton et al., 2013).

These classroom observations were triangulated against written data from the students from the plenary task, which asked the students to analyse a written critical response to the question: '*Typically, texts about marriages show that women become a stereotype of female passivity'.* This critical response had used Smith (2019) in their argument. I was the writer of this piece. However, I

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initially introduced this written response to them as an anonymous critical voice, only revealing the writer's identity after the task was completed, hoping to re-emphasise that as readers of literature we all have 'critical stances': it is not a label to be applied only to apparent experts who are an unquestionable authority (Daw, 1997). Marking their responses, I was struck by the students' metacognitive awareness of how Smith is used in the extract, which seemed to be encouraged by the type of task set. It was apparent that students were building a 'critical toolkit' in this sense, and this was apparent across a sample of attainment ranges: "the use of Smith provides a springboard for the writer to establish a new line of thinking to take a paragraph in a new direction" (Student C); 'the interpretation of the writer is clear but not dependent on the feminist theories" (Student D); 'through her expanse on Smith's initial quote, she creates her own feminist critique of Othello, building upon another person's perspective' (Student E).

Students' responses also indicated that they were eager to take the critic (myself) to task on particular elements of the argument, using quotations from *Othello* to support their points. The main objection from students was that Desdemona doesn't move from 'active subject to passive object'; this was grappled with in 20% of students' responses. for example, student F dissected the term "passive object": "although she is treated as an object, she is certainly not passive as she argues and says to Othello 'I did not deserve this'". Other responses probed the term "woman's tragedy": "I would change this criticism by developing more on the 'woman's tragedy' as the writer hasn't said why Desdemona's story is such a 'tragedy' for females". Admittedly, this last challenge made me reconsider my use of the term in the writing, reflecting on what a reclamation of that stereotypically masculine dramatic form would be defined by. What was inherent in the majority of the responses was the evidence that they were honing their own critical perspective through evaluating and fine-tuning my writing, taking myself as critic to task in multifarious and complex ways.

RQ 3. What do students appear to gain from use of feminist criticism in their study of Shakespeare's Othello?

The semi-structured interviews conducted with four students provided a platform for students to express their thoughts on the teaching sequence (student G, H, J and K). I was eager to hear from the members of the class, as "listening and responding to what pupils say about their experience as learners can be a powerful tool in helping teachers to investigate and improve their own practice" (Flutter, p.344). Furthermore, it provided the vital space for pupils to reflect on what they felt they

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had learnt. Keen to establish the interview as a mutual conversation as opposed to any kind of test, I first asked them if they enjoyed the lessons on feminist criticism; student G replied "I really enjoyed it. It was different to our other lessons". It was gratifying to hear that the teaching sequence had fulfilled the main tenet of action research in that it introduces a significant change. Student H said "It is useful because I didn't really know anything about it before. So being taught it is very useful. I wouldn't say I *know* loads about it now though". This last response focuses on acquisition of knowledge suggests that, for some students, feminist criticism still presents itself as a body of content to be learnt, as opposed to a particular lens through which to look at a text: "one cannot simply make a list of everything 'a critic' should know: an attitude is not a list" (Eaglestone, 2016, p.11). In the context of AOs and closed book assessments it is challenging for students to move away from this knowledge driven mode of thinking. Furthermore, students were eager to know where the extracts had come from: Student K: "those sources were really good and helpful"; Student G agreed, asking: "How would I go and find them myself? And how can you tell the good from the bad on the internet?" What was evident in these responses was both an intellectual curiosity, and the need for guidance. Their questions made me reflect on the value of providing students with nuggets of criticism from a certified source, as opposed to the oftentimes murky world of the internet, which can supply unreliable material. Furthermore, it seems that devoting lesson time where critical material can be evaluated, with the teacher as a guiding influence, is preferential to potentially bewildering students by telling them to look for criticism indiscriminately outside of lesson time (Daw, 1996). Perhaps this speaks to the larger issues with which I opened this study; if literary criticism has an indeterminate position within the mode of assessment, teachers may feel reluctant to devote extended lesson time to the matter in a time pressured timetable.

In relation, another concern voiced by the students was that it would have been helpful to have more lessons on "how to incorporate those criticisms" into their writing (Student K). Time constraints of the sequence meant that I prioritised their analysis of my critical response as opposed to setting them an extended writing activity. If I had been provided another lesson this may have ensued, but their teacher understandably needed to move onto their next set text for their assessment. Student H replied to student K's comment that they "preferred critiquing the exemplar paragraph, because then you really got a sense of what the writer was doing with the critic". Gaining a "sense" of the writer's action, the "doing" suggested that the lessons the students' metacognitive awareness of how alternative interpretations on *Othello* can be debated and refuted,

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not merely accepted or used as a "decorative 'frill" to sound scholarly (Bleiman, 2019, p.216). Student J spoke of the value of reading feminist criticism as a springboard through which one can articulate a personal response: "when we studied the extracts you find bits you disagree with, that is when you find your own perspective". Student G elaborated on this comment: "It has sparked me in my opinions. In the lesson when we all reacted to that extract which called Bianca subhuman and got a bit cross about it. That reaction taught me a lot about how I see *Othello* as a text". Perhaps, this last suggests to the importance of verbal debate in the classroom when studying literary criticism. One low attaining, student, who I had been teaching regularly, spoke in my classroom for the first time to offer her opinion on Bianca; maybe, in a debate where there was no 'right' or 'wrong', she felt more confident. Allowing students to disagree and react to critics in a form that is not tied to a particular grade or mark, as with written work, may embolden them to assert their own voice.

This action research project highlighted the value of introducing feminist criticism in the post-16 classroom. Introducing literary theory to the Year 12 class through a focus on feminist criticism appeared to work well, as 'feminist approaches', and the issues of gender, sexuality, and representation that it inevitably involves, was ground the students were seemingly familiar with. The structured debates across the teaching sequence allowed students the space to test out and experiment with their own critical voice as they discussed the female characters in Shakespeare's *Othello,* moving away from an anxiety about the "right" or "wrong" answer which can plague studies of the playwright who supposedly contains "'universal' truths and wisdom, usually about 'human nature'" (McEvoy, 2003, p.103). It seemed important to establish their own voices on the text, empowering them as critics in their own right, before inviting the voices of feminist critics into the classroom. From the data I can surmise that a "light touch" approach to literary criticism, as advised by Bleiman, using manageably sized extracts struck the balance between one-line opinions which may be used "simply because it sounds good" (Atherton et al., 2013, p.135) and dense critical essays which might overwhelm students. This appeared to enable students to evaluate and grapple with the feminist viewpoints. Atherton et al.'s (2013) suggestion that the use of models can be an invaluable learning tool for students "so they can look at how critical arguments are constructed" (p.140) was demonstrated in the final critical response exercise; students' writing showed a nuanced metacognitive awareness of how to read and respond critically to alternate points of view.

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Conclusions

This research has shown the rich potential of literary criticism in a post-16 setting, specifically, the value of incorporating feminist criticism into the study of Shakespeare's *Othello.* Specific pedagogic strategies appeared to empower students in this small-scale study. Apportioning significant lesson time for multiple student debates on issues of representation, gender and sexuality, both as isolated topics, and in relation to the set text seems key. Furthermore, the adoption of a "light touch" approach to critical material, selecting passages judiciously for students to grapple with, while providing them with a "critical toolkit" in the use of activities which heightens their metacognitive awareness of *how* to read critically, appears to be beneficial. This seems particularly important in the study of Shakespeare, as students, perhaps conscious of the playwright's status as the apotheosis of literary study, may see critics as a way to clarify, rather than complicate meaning. Although this is a context-specific study, I tentatively suggest these pedagogic approaches would be of value to other practitioners when introducing literary criticism in the post-16 classroom. In the course of this study, several questions have emerged: How can adequate space be made for the study of literary criticism in post-16 study across schools, when exam boards remain ambiguous as to the necessity of its inclusion for exemplary grades? How might teachers feel about a shift towards its explicit inclusion in the curriculum? To hear from the multiple exam boards, and from teachers on this issue, would be helpful in establishing answers to these questions. While I believe its study is of value in its own right, for the larger questions concerning the contemporary social and political world it forces students to confront, it is hard to envisage a widescale shift in pedagogic practice until it takes on greater significance in examinations.

It would be interesting to conduct the study with Year 12 classes who are in set attainment groups, as opposed to my class, which was mixed ability, to see if the nature of critical debate differed significantly, and to discover the potential challenges of assisting students who might be grappling with understanding the content, as opposed to refuting the argument. I would be especially curious to run this study with Year 13 students, to see whether the pressure towards the final exam, and the hallowed assessment objectives that can dictate lesson time, has any hampering effects on the reception of the lesson sequence. In teaching the Year 12s, I felt the pressure of terminal exams and "getting through the content" due to its effects on my teaching sequence design, which limited my sequence to three lessons; if I could have had the opportunity to teach more lessons on the topic, I would have been very intrigued to see if, and how, the students took the five feminist critics to task

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in their own writing on *Othello*. Aware of the small-scale, context-driven nature of this study, I argue that there is great value for the introduction of literary criticism during A Level study. Using careful and nurturing pedagogical strategies that does not overwhelm students and helps them learn not *what* but *how* to think can facilitate the development of students' own critical voice. My study was an "in-depth exploration of the particular", but I believe that it captured the paradoxical "essence of the particular in a way we all recognize" (Simons, 2009, p.167). Giving students the space, time, and tools to experiment with and strengthen their own critical voice in the classroom helps them to take literary critics to task, and in doing so, refine their own literary interpretations. Ideally, students should not see literary critics as alien authoritative icons, but simply as another voice in the classroom.

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Appendix 1: Questionnaire

This is a short questionnaire which aims to find out more about students' experiences of Shakespeare and gender studies in the English classroom.

It is confidential so there is no need to put your name, and you can answer honestly.

1. Do you feel confident writing about different interpretations of a set text?

☐ Yes ☐ Sometimes

☐ No ☐ It depends on the text being studied

2. a) Have you used literary criticism in the classroom before?

☐ Yes ☐ No ☐ I'm not sure

b) If yes, has it helped you in any way?

____

c) If yes, do you feel confident about using it?

____

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3) What would you define as a ‘feminist approach’ to a literary text?

____

____

4) What would you define as a ‘feminist approach’ to a Shakespeare text?

____

____

5) I think Shakespeare characterises his female roles as:

____

____

Thank you for completing this!

If you do not want me to use your responses as part of a research study that I am conducting for the University of Cambridge, please tick this box ☐

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