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Literary reading as a socially responsive practice: Implications for literature pedagogy at higher education

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ABSTRACT

As university teachers of literature, we tend to accept the rhetoric that students lack the capacity to interpret texts meaningfully, without questioning our own biases about the kinds of meaning we expect them to elicit from texts. Often, these are meanings that have little relevance to students' own social or professional lives. In this article, we report on a research project on literary reading at a South African university in which we set out to find out how our second-year English literature student teachers were reading or making sense of Shakespearean plays and how in turn their readings inform new thinking about literary reading. We found that our students were interpreting Shakespeare's *Macbeth* in ways that both explicate social problems in present-day South Africa and offer possible solutions to remedying these problems. Therefore, our knowledge contribution in this article is the proposition of socially responsive literary reading as a relevant, empowering and viable approach to literary reading that has potential to decolonise literature education in African universities.

Introduction

Statements like "students cannot read texts meaningfully" that we pass around in our office corridors beg the question: whose meaning? The idea that students cannot do close reading of texts is "so often discussed among teachers of English" (Carter et al., 2022, p. 349) that we tend to accept it as truth and circulate it in our networks. Globally, students are labeled as persons who cannot read for meaning, write for meaning or articulate meaningful interpretations of literary texts (Winograd, 1985; Scholes, 2002). They are described as lacking critical reading skills expected at university level (Din, 2020). However, these negative verdicts on students' reading abilities fail to take into consideration that students are often made to read literary texts in English which is not their everyday language of use (Janks, 2011). Moreover, they are made to read English literary texts located in cultures and belief systems that are foreign to them, as is the case of Latino students reading Shakespeare (Espinosa, 2016). We tend to forget too that the ability to read texts with understanding is the product of social privilege where children learn to read early because their parents could afford books for them or their societies could provide libraries for their self-education (Allen, 2011). This privilege is not the childhood experience of many students who find themselves in African universities. Lastly, "reading" in academic literary circles often means "close reading," an approach to reading that is fundamentally a western critical tradition. That this one approach tends to invisibilise

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other reading approaches due to its dominance, is something we tend to overlook in our evaluations of students' reading abilities.

We, the authors of this article, are scholars of English literature and literature pedagogy working in a metropolitan, privileged university in South Africa. We experienced Emergency Remote Teaching (ERT) during the Covid-19 pandemic in 2021 as a challenge and an opportunity, because we were forced to become more aware of how we teach literature and why we teach it this way. We realized that to a large degree our why is simply because we were taught that way ourselves. Having received a predominantly Anglo-Saxon education, we handed down to our students modes of literary reading that we ourselves had religiously followed without question. Both theories of culturally responsive pedagogy (Bomer, 2017) and of literary reading (Allington & Swann, 2009) emphasize that effective teaching of literature is rooted in knowledge of the students, their cultural contexts and their personal reading repertoires. Yet, as 40-something female lecturers—a second-language English speaking Cameroonian and a white English-speaking South African, we were largely ignorant about the reading repertoires and lived experiences of our students. We therefore had need to confront our ignorance and critically reflect on our teaching practice, in order to transform our pedagogy to better serve our students during and beyond the pandemic.

In many South African universities, the English literature classrooms are populated by diverse student bodies that are multicultural, multilingual, multi-ethnic, multiracial and multinational. The literature courses that we teach in our Bachelor of Education programme specifically have a high number of Black African students and smaller numbers of White, Indian, Colored and immigrant students.[1] These students come from various social contexts in which different social problems exist. South Africa, like many countries in the global south, is plagued by a high level of problems such as sexual violence, poverty and violent crimes. The baggage that students bear includes thinking about these social problems, because they cannot separate themselves from their contexts. As Freire (1970) argues, education is not separate from the community as students are part of the communities they come from. Considering all of this, it is helpful to see students' literary reading, not as weak or meaningless, but as different, as having a different orientation towards meanings that are socially relevant.

As teachers of literature, it is important for us to recognize the novel ways in which students are reading literary texts rather than imposing our own inherited, often colonial, ways of reading on them. Decolonising literature education means prioritizing what Ngugi wa Thiong'o (1987, p. 87) calls the "quest for relevance." This means students need to see the relevance of the information in the literary texts they read to their own lives, especially in terms of addressing social ills that may affect them directly or indirectly. Moreover, in a decolonial context we must acknowledge that what students value as meaningful interpretations of texts positions them as producers of indigenous and local knowledge that must be given a place in the organogram of knowledge production in higher education institutions. Traditionally, western knowledge has occupied the highest point in this organogram, while African knowledge remains at the bottom of the scale. For us to truly transform higher education, we must rearrange the knowledge organogram to place African knowledge at an equal level with western knowledge. In the field of literature education, this means that we need to allow in our courses the voices of our students to come out strongly as they engage with literary texts from the unique perspective of their varied social realities.

Beyer (2022, p. 8) notes that talks of decolonising the literature curriculum often create panic among English academics because of the potential of decolonisation to "radically challenge Western knowledge and education." However, rather than resisting decolonisation, we as literature teachers ought to embrace it and demonstrate that acceptance in our courses in terms of renewing how we think about students' literary reading practices. Embracing students' own social responsiveness to the texts they read will enable us not only to rethink our own habitual ways of reading but also to adopt new pedagogies that better support our students' literary reading. The discourse of decolonisation offers us an epistemological gateway to reflecting critically on dominant literary reading approaches in our universities in South Africa and what these might mean for our students' future as literature teachers. In particular, we are influenced by the work of Sayed et al. (2019) who argue that the decolonisation agenda in higher education must begin with the preparation of teachers since schools and universities share an interdependent relationship.

In a study we conducted in 2021, we set out to find out how our second-year students, who are pre-service teachers of English, were making sense of the literary texts we taught them. We wanted to know how they were reading against the grain, if they were moving beyond understanding textual content to make applications of knowledge to wider society, and if their readings were indicative of empowering possibilities in their training as future teachers of literature. Our key finding is that students were reading the prescribed literary texts in what we term *socially responsive* ways that highlighted, questioned or explained the root causes of social ills present in their societies as well as offering possible solutions to these social problems. In this article, we draw on students' written work in a Shakespeare module to conceptualize socially responsive literary reading as a viable approach to literary reading at higher education.

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The Complex Terrain of Literary Reading

Literary reading is a broad term used to refer to acts of reading, analyzing, and interpreting literary texts such as poems, short stories, novels and plays, often through the application of literary theories. It encompasses both the private context of individual reading and the public context of classroom reading. The literature on literary reading reveals several different terms that are used as synonyms of literary reading, including literary analysis, literary criticism, critical textual interpretation, critical textual reading, textual analysis, and literary evaluation (Allington, 2012; Allington & Swann, 2009; Swann & Allington, 2009; Tomasek, 2009). All these terms suggest deep engagement with the linguistic structures, aesthetic features, narrative voices, thematic concerns and stylistic aspects of literary texts.

Literary reading at higher education is a terrain littered by contradiction, paradox and short-sightedness. At universities, students' literary reading is constrained by what is prescribed within the literature courses on offer, and what is prescribed is largely determined by institutional culture, curriculum planning, and lecturers' preferences for particular genres and texts. Students' own choices of what they find worthy of reading is for the most part untapped. There is an apparent contradiction here in that while lecturers often expect students to relate prescribed texts to their everyday lives (Carter et al., 2022; Tomasek, 2009), these everyday lives are often not reflected in the texts students are made to read in class.

In addition, a notable paradox is that while university teachers often ask students to provide personal responses to the texts they read, the students' personalized readings can be suppressed through carefully choreographed teaching that directs students towards particular meanings of texts (Allington, 2012), thus resulting in depersonalized rather than personalized readings. This scenario illustrates the observation by Allen (2011, p. 99) that there "there seems to be a tension between how academics do read and how we—especially in English departments—talk about wanting our students to read." That we often want our students to read literary texts the way we read them is problematic in that we are privileging our own ways of reading over students' own self-fashioned ways. We are assuming that students want "to substitute what they generally think a text should be saying for what it actually says" (Katz quoted in Scholes, 2002, p. 165), as if there is a fixed "thing" that a text usually has to say.

An example of teachers' short-sightedness is that whereas we label students as poor readers, uncritical readers or unresponsive readers, students have their own preferences for particular genres of texts. Some may prefer poetic texts owing to their brevity and density of language, while others may prefer fictional texts for their simple language and/or complexity in plot development, and still others may opt for dramatic texts because of their performance appeal. Even students who love fictional texts do not all like the same subgenres as some may prefer science fiction texts to social issue texts that may invoke discomfort, whereas others may dislike science fiction for its abstractedness or lack of realism. Thus, the effort students will put into getting meaning out of the texts they read will depend largely on whether they like or dislike the genre and the particular text. These complex problems with literary reading suggest that we need to be guided by flexibility and contextual clues in our approaches to teaching literary reading and not insist on teaching our students to read texts following dominant approaches in literary studies.

Close Reading as a Dominant Approach to Literary Reading

A dominant approach to literary reading that university teachers practice and also teach their students to adopt is close reading. As Love (2010, p. 373) states, "close reading is at the heart of literary studies, a key credential in hiring and promotion, and the foundation of literary pedagogy." Carter et al. (2022, p. 349) state that "many in English departments regard the practice of close reading as crucial to the discipline's identity." These claims suggest not only the dominance of close reading in literary studies but also its role in defining the identity of a "good" literature teacher and student.

Close reading is a formalistic analysis of literary texts that focuses on minute linguistic details for meaning making. McConn (2018, p. 67) defines close reading as "reading with a focus on the details" and adds that "these details include the analysis of vocabulary, word choice, syntax, and structure, as well as how these elements and other literary and rhetorical devices contribute to the layers of meaning that make up the text." In close reading, students are typically given short extracts from literary texts and asked to analyze and interpret them by looking at the possible meanings emerging from the diction and linking that to the structure and style. This mode of reading literary texts has dominated English studies education in South African and African universities as part of the colonial baggage left on the continent and as a well-packaged product of global neo-liberalism. Similarly, in South Korea, close reading dominates literature education as part of the elaborate western-style liberal arts education that Korean universities have adopted in recent years. Walsh (2017, p. 129) argues that the reason for this adoption is a widely held belief that "Korean students, despite their excellent performance on standardized exams, lack the creativity and critical thinking skills needed for the country to produce its first Nobel laureate." Thus, close reading is

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assumed to be the key to turning literature students into critics.

However, scholars are beginning to see the flaws in close reading as a literary reading practice: it trades metacriticism for the mining of textual facts, creates disengagement of literary studies from other disciplines, and stifles student debates on race, gender and sexuality as represented in texts (Carter et al., 2022; Love, 2010; Tomasek, 2009; Walsh, 2017). These scholars recommend alternative reading approaches or a combination of close reading with other approaches in tune with students' contextual needs. This is particularly necessary in the teaching of Shakespearean plays, which has often relied on close reading for meaning making. Where the teaching of Shakespeare's plays is of a feminist orientation, close reading can become a handicap in the harnessing of feminist meanings in plays. Downing (2002, p. 117) found this to be true in their Shakespeare class: "I had prompted close readings from my students that masked the forces of oppression reflected in the plays." For this teacher scholar, close readings of Shakespearean drama in the English classroom have the danger of becoming *closed* readings, or "finalized readings," which shut down possibilities of students initiating their own "becoming" as feminist Shakespeare critics (Downing, 2002, p. 121). As literature teachers, we share Downing's self-reflexive practice in questioning our own uses of close reading over the years, uses designed to fit what we perceive as meaningful readings of Shakespearean texts. We find close reading as limiting the possibilities of meanings that texts can produce owing to the focus on analyzing short passages in texts rather than analyzing the texts holistically, as well as the heavy emphasis on form—syntax, diction, imagery and symbols—for meaning making. What tends to happen in the teaching of close reading is students' reproduction of already established meanings of texts—meanings generally available in print or online course materials. By contrast, what we present in this article is an alternative, decolonial approach to literary reading that speaks to students' autonomy and voice affirmation in meaning making. Socially responsive literary reading is a literary reading approach we have conceptualized out of our students' own readings of Shakespearean plays in a module we have been teaching in the last 6 years.

We understand decolonisation here as an affirmation of the voice of the colonized in knowledge production at higher education (Sayed et al., 2019). Socially responsive literary reading as we present it in this article is an affirmation of our students' voices as they learn to teach. In the context of teacher education, this approach to literary reading is valuable in illustrating how students think about social realities and it reflects on their thinking as future teachers of literature. Pillay (2021, p. 293) found in her Shakespeare research with pre-service teachers of English that her students "had a very clear knowledge of the realities of the world around them and, on a very personal level, they could see themselves as persons fighting their own battles of oppression." This consciousness of the world and desire to make a contribution to social change is what socially responsive literary reading speaks to, and this is especially relevant to teachers who, according to Freire (1970), are facilitators of transformative thinking. Socially responsive literary reading then is about teacher agency in the classroom. In the context of this article, it is about pre-service teachers preparing to teach Shakespeare meaningfully in schools where the resistance to Shakespeare is already a challenge (Pillay, 2021). While close reading may have a special place for literature students in departments of English, for English teacher trainees close reading is ideational rather than pragmatic. As Thurman (2021, p. 3) notes, high school teachers have the unenviable task of "actually tackling Shakespeare in the classroom." They have to teach Shakespeare in ways that enable learners to locate themselves socially within the texts, not offer ready-made readings of the texts. We acknowledge that decolonial ways of reading and teaching Shakespeare in South Africa are not new, as work has been done in this field even in apartheid times (see, e.g., Orkin, 1987). Nevertheless, what we offer in this article is an important additional layer of building that knowledge body. We come into the knowledge body as teacher educators, and for us the socially responsive literary reading approach is about extending decolonial epistemologies into critical pedagogical practice.

The Shakespeare Module

The Shakespeare module is part of our English II course in our Bachelor of Education programme for students specializing in Languages, Literacies and Literatures. As scholars have argued, within the education context, the teaching of literature is geared at both enhancing students' content knowledge of literary texts and training students to become critical teachers of literature (Douglas et al., 2016). While we aim to do exactly this, the unique challenge we experience every year in this course is the disparity in students' knowledge of Shakespeare. On the one hand, we have students who did English as Home Language (HL) in high school and therefore had studied Shakespearean texts in class, since these texts are a compulsory part of the English HL curriculum. On the other hand, we have students who did English as a First Additional Language (FAL) and thus had had little or no encounter with Shakespeare, since Shakespearean texts are an optional offering in the English FAL curriculum.[2] Therefore, in 2021, we had to design our teaching to be *responsive* to the learning needs of our students in terms of not only what we taught but also how we taught it (Moll, 2004; Ogude et al., 2005).

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The two Shakespearean plays taught in the module were the tragedy *Macbeth* (Shakespeare, 1979) and the romantic comedy *A Midsummer Night's Dream* (Shakespeare, 1977). *Macbeth* tells the story of the eponymous hero Macbeth who ascends to the Scottish throne by killing his predecessor, King Duncan, but is himself killed in the end by Macduff, and Duncan's son, Malcolm, retrieves the throne. Being a romantic comedy, *A Midsummer Night's Dream* starts off with discord as Hermia is being forced by her father, Egeus, to marry Lysander whereas she loves Demetrius. The play ends up with three celebratory weddings of Hermia and Demetrius, Helena and Lysander, and the Duke of Athens and Hippolyta his queen. Our module design was shaped by the personal relevance and social relevance–reform orientations to curriculum discussed by Roberts (2015). About the personal relevance orientation, Roberts (2015, p. 547) states that the goal is "to make learning personally meaningful to students." Similarly, the social relevance–reform orientation "aims to engage students with social issues and develop their skills to critique everyday experiences and assumptions" (Roberts, 2015, p. 548). Consequently, it was important for us to give our students tasks that would allow them to read Shakespeare in ways that highlight the personal and social relevance of the texts for them.

In 2021 the Shakespeare module ran for 7 weeks, from May 3 to June 17, 2021. Because of the global Covid-19 pandemic which restricted face-to-face classroom interactions, lectures were presented to students asynchronously, with weekly online tutorial sessions to answer students' questions, debate important aspects of the lectures, and engage students on their understanding of the plays as they relate to their own lived experiences. Although students could not do in-contact dramatic readings of the plays, as was the case in pre-Covid times, they were still able to perform dramatic readings of selected short scenes within the limited time of their online presence. Recordings of additional dramatic readings of scenes were placed on the course site for students to download and listen to. A specific topic was covered each week, including gendered representation in the plays, and students also watched short YouTube videos that were related to each week's topic. Our focus on gender in the plays was prompted by feminist understandings that gender representation remains a vexing matter in Shakespeare's plays (Novy, 2019; Rackin, 2005) and by the need to help students excavate the multi-layered meanings related to gender stereotyping in these plays.

In the absence of face-to-face teaching, a particularly noteworthy form of support offered to students to be able to read the play in personally and socially meaningful ways was the opportunity given to the class of 201 students to watch a performance of *Macbeth* at the Joburg Theater in April 2021, prior to the commencement of the module. The performance was a collaboration between the Duma Ndlovu Academy and the Joburg Theater as part of its youth development programme and it utilized a workshop approach to engage young actors in reading and interpreting Shakespeare from a fresh, cosmopolitan African perspective (The Joburg Theatre, 2021). The performance was done almost exclusively in South African indigenous languages; only key statements were uttered by the performers in English now and again. As a result, the majority of students were able to see and hear *Macbeth* from the purview of their linguistic registers. And because the play was re-interpreted by the performers to foreground current political machinations in South Africa, students could easily deduce its relevance to their immediate present context. Sarah Roberts, one of the director-facilitators of the performance, notes in her scholarly reflection on it that during rehearsals they allowed the performers to make their own meanings of the play rather than give them fixed meanings to work with, and the result was the performers' "commitment to joint action" which, in her view, "aligns with decolonisation by focusing on the implications of interpretive choices" (Roberts, 2022, p. 5). After our students had watched the performance at the Joburg Theater, we had a post-production discussion with the performers (we asked the students to stay back for this purpose). The performers engaged students on aspects of the performance that they found meaningful or irrelevant to them and the discussion soon morphed into a vibrant debate about whether or not Macbeth could be seen as a victim of women's manipulative schemes. We found this theater visit an important part of our pedagogy in harnessing students' personalized reading of the play.

The Shakespeare module built on groundwork we did with the students in their first year where we introduced them to feminist readings of South African literature, specifically the poetry of South African writers such as Lebo Mashile, Sindiwe Magona and Lauretta Ngcobo. We taught them to think critically about the role of poetic texts in shaping our views of femininities and masculinities. Students were conscientised to understand gender as socially constructed and patriarchy as underpinning gendered differentiation. They learned that "all texts are socially constructed, are of a time, reflect an agenda, and thus need to be interrogated and challenged, if necessary" (Pillay, 2021, p. 294). At second year, we aimed to advance students' feminist knowledge by exploring gender stereotyping in the Shakespeare module, looking at the ways in which the plays *Macbeth* and *A Midsummer Night's Dream* sanction stereotypes of women and men.

In line with our overarching goal to support students to read literary texts in ways that make meanings for them personally and socially, we set up the assessment for the module to involve a series of short writing tasks that students had to post online for grading. Each student had to submit four short essays, two on *Macbeth* and two on *A Midsummer Night's Dream* as part of their coursework

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assessment. Each essay was to be 250–300 words long. The four tasks required students to address different topics. In Task 1, students had to identify a relatable value in *Macbeth* and explain how the play develops ideas around it. Task 2 centred on gender stereotypes in *Macbeth* and students had to identify one stereotype of men or women and elaborate on its construction in the play. The third task returned to a relatable value but this time students had to discuss it in relation to *A Midsummer Night's Dream*. The last task required students to show the contrast in the gendered representation of one male character and one female character in *A Midsummer Night's Dream*. The pedagogical aim of the tasks was to get students engaged in literary reading that focused on specific characters in the play and it required them to apply feminist theoretical ideas on gender construction covered in the lectures in critically interpreting the characters' actions and to put down their ideas in writing, because in writing they would learn to synthesize the theoretical ideas and the textual evidence to make logical arguments. We do agree with Douglas et al. (2016, p. 255) that "our discipline has, in recent times, tended to be more writing-centric than reading-centric when it comes to instruction and assessment." However, we argue that writing and reading cannot be separated when teaching students to read literary texts meaningfully. For us to gauge how students are reading texts to be able to provide necessary support, they need to write critical responses to the texts. These responses, however, do not have to be extensive pieces of writing. In our module, we aimed to break the tradition of the long essay assignment by introducing short writing tasks as formative assessment.

In all four tasks, students were to connect their ideas to everyday life experiences. This requirement was stated explicitly in the assessment criteria given to students. Tomasek (2009, p. 131) argues that making personal connections with texts helps students "to find more meaning and relevance with the text." This is what we hoped for with our students. We also felt it was important for students to relate their ideas to social realities because literary reading, as has been argued, is a social practice that cannot be divorced from the existing social realities and contexts of readers (Allington & Swann, 2009; Finn, 2022).

Because we had designed and taught the course as part of a research and development project for which we had received ethics clearance from the university (Protocol Number H21/07/38), we retrieved for analysis the short essays of 42 students in the class who had given us consent to participate in the study. In this article, we focus on the essays on *Macbeth*, meaning that we looked at two essays per student. We retrieved from the course site a total of 81 essays (a few students did not submit both tasks) which we subjected to a thematic content analysis using an analytical framework adapted from Roberts (2015) to identify students' readings that foregrounded the personal and social relevance of texts. In analyzing the essays, we wanted to understand how students' social contexts influenced their interpretation of the texts and conversely how their understanding of the texts influenced their understanding of social realities around them. This was important for us to know in order to challenge our own assumptions about how students read literary texts. We were thus pleasantly surprised to find that the students were doing much more than giving the texts personal and social relevance in their readings; they were enacting a *responsiveness* to the texts at multiple levels.

Students' Responsive Readings of *Macbeth*

The first step in our data analysis was to read the 81 essays we had retrieved from the course site, highlighting all sentences in which students were interpreting plot details in *Macbeth* beyond the play itself i.e. instances in which they made direct links between the play and real-life experiences, emotions, events, or social values. We then read the essays a second time, noting the readings that directly linked the play to social problems in South African society today and identifying the specific social problems students were addressing in their interpretations of the play. A third reading resulted in us coding the data thematically. Approaching the data with open minds, we used open coding to organize the themes that were emerging from the essays. Open coding is associated with grounded theory research since the codes generated emerge from and are strongly grounded in the data being analyzed (Leedy & Ormrod, 2019). Using open coding ensured that we did not impose our expectations on the data but rather were open to whatever social problems the students found to be relevant to their own contexts. Based on our curriculum orientation of reading texts for personal and social relevance, we identified 10 significant codes in the data: (1) power abuse; (2) crime and violence; (3) toxic masculinity; (4) women's marginalization in leadership; (5) deception; (6) disloyalty; (7) injustice; (8) greed and selfishness; (9) corruption; and (10) women's exclusion from public spaces. The next stage in our data analysis was to group these initial codes into thematic categories. This was quite a challenging process as we found that these codes did not fit neatly into particular thematic categories since there were overlapses among them. To go around this problem, we resorted to axial coding by which we made these thematic patterns subcategories under an axial theme: responsiveness. This is because we found responsiveness to be a central concept holding these themes together. Axial coding allowed us to collapse thematic categories in order to solve the problem of overlapses in the data (see Moje et al., 2004). In the end, we came up with three thematic subcategories under responsiveness: (1) responsiveness to power abuse; (2) responsiveness to social violence and

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violent masculinities; and (3) responsiveness to women's exclusion from public spaces and leadership. All student names used below are pseudonyms.

Responsiveness to Power Abuse

Students' reading of power projects it as a complex social phenomenon and the abuse of it by those who hold it as an intrinsic part of power display. In reading power in *Macbeth*, Zandile argues that Macbeth kills relentlessly because "the only thing he cared about was fulfilling his selfish desires." She then takes this point beyond the text to address similar displays of selfishness in South African society by stating that "in today's century, people care less about other people, they've become greedy, thinking that everything good belongs to them." To illustrate her point, she states that "five hundred billion rands was donated to South Africa during the peak of the corona pandemic, but because of greedy politicians, we do not know where all the money went." Zandile's interaction with the play's meanings intertwines with her exposure to other kinds of text, in this case media reports of political corruption. She suggests that once the motivation for taking on leadership positions is selfish, power abuse is inevitable.

Nina explains power abuse as lack of loyalty to those who put one in power. Relating Macbeth's disloyalty to Duncan to present-day South Africa, Nina states:

> Look at our own ruling party, the ANC for instance. There seems to be more corruption at play than ever before. Yet it was this very political party who before being in power, strived for justice and equality for all. Now it just seems to be a whole lot of looting of state funds. When loyalty is lost, it often is replaced by some sort of betrayal just like the first Thane of Cawdor who betrayed his own country for perhaps a better or more revered title from the Norwegians.

Here, Nina is responsive to the crisis of leadership in South Africa as she explains that corruption in the government of the ruling African National Congress (ANC) party arises out of disloyalty to the people and greed for money. The two responses from Zandile and Nina show that though students' interpretive engagement leads them to focus on the same social problem, the individual nature of their meaning-making processes results in different insights about the complexity of ambition. While we do not necessarily share these students' political ideologies, we acknowledge that bad politics in the country, which is marked by the abuse of power, matters to them.

Zandile and Nina's essays are responsive through their critique, as they diagnose reasons behind the corruption of power in the play and in South African society. In contrast, Junia is responsive by offering a different way of seeing power, one which could improve the problem of corruption. She states that "being fearless is what drives people in everyday life to become powerful leaders because they have the courage to take over someone else's reign, make hard sacrifices and lead." Here, she replaces selfishness with courage and disloyalty with willingness to serve. Junia seems to be suggesting that if leadership is understood as self-sacrifice, then it can be practiced without the abuse of power. This is remedial thinking that stands as a possible solution to power abuse in society.

These students' comments about power abuse suggests a deep concern about its pervasiveness in South African society. A study by Pillay (2023) equally found that high school learners in the KwaZulu-Natal province of South Africa are troubled by the misuse of power in the family, the community and the state. In such a context, close reading of literary texts would be inhibiting the potential of the literature classroom to assist students to think critically about the things that matter to them in their everyday lives, because one of the problems with close reading is that students are "not allowed to use external factors as a crutch" (Walsh, 2017, p. 137). By contrast, accepting socially responsive reading as valid enables students to engage with power issues through their education. From the perspective of Freirean critical pedagogy (Freire, 1970), allowing students to marry reflection and action is what makes education a practice of freedom.

Responsiveness to Social Violence and Violent Masculinities

Students' short essays reveal deep concerns about social violence and violent masculinities. As noted in the introduction to this article, violence is a major problem in contemporary South Africa. In students' written tasks, they demonstrate responsiveness to this social vice by explaining why violence happens, as they deduce it from *Macbeth*. Lebo, for example, identifies ambition as a major conflict-inducing attribute in *Macbeth* but separates positive ambition from negative ambition as she applies what happens in the play to what happens in everyday life. About positive ambition, she notes the following:

> The majority of people want to improve themselves in some way. A grocery store bagger may aspire to be a cashier, whereas a computer programmer may aspire to be a project lead or manager. Today's student teachers, for example, want to earn employment, promotions, and so on. However, I would classify this as positive greed because no blood would be spilt, only hard work and perseverance.

While the claim that no blood is spilt in the quest for social upward mobility is a bit simplistic, the point Lebo seems to be making here is that positive ambition does not (and should not) result in violence towards others. In contrast to it, negative ambition moves people "to be violent for no clear reason other than to want power," she writes. Thus, in Lebo's reading of *Macbeth*, the greedy desire for power is what turns ordinary citizens into violent human beings.

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In his writing, Thamsanqa is responsive to violence not just as enacted in South African societies but as demonstrated in the political history of the continent of Africa. He states the following:

> To apply the play in our daily lives, one has to take into consideration what the English political theorist and philosopher Thomas Hobbes said about the state of nature. He claims that people are able to harm their neighbours and take what is needed for their own survival and that the weak can destroy the strong …. With the theory of Hobbes, we see men as evil, life of a man is solitary, nasty, brutish and short. In our daily lives many people still betray others for the sake of power. Looking at the history of Burkina Faso, we see how Thomas Sankara was betrayed by his comrade and his brother Blaise Compaoré to gain presidency.

Thamsanqa here goes to the extent of applying political theory from the work of Thomas Hobbes to explain social violence as the inevitable consequence of societies having sovereign authorities. The political history of Burkina Faso offers him a salient case for making his point about the violence that results from humans' obsession with power. Thamsanqa's argument may be stretched and in need of further development, but one thing it points to is the capacity of humans to violate other people's rights to life for the sake of power.

Other students' essays focus specifically on violent masculinities. Gender-based violence is endemic in South Africa, and thus fear has become a sustained, publicly reinforced way of being for those rendered female in society (Gqola, 2021). In her essay, Karin sees society as the root cause of violence, particularly what society makes men to believe about masculinity. Analyzing Macbeth's relationship with Lady Macbeth, she argues that Macbeth kills Duncan because Lady Macbeth challenges his masculinity. On the basis of this, she surmises:

> Society makes us believe that it is wrong for man to show any form of emotion or be seen as weak and that they should always be strong and willing to do anything. Men all around the world are raised to refrain from showing any emotional vulnerability or weakness and are expected to show only a limited range of emotions, if not none. This process of limiting the range of men's allowable emotional expression helps set the path toward anger and aggression.

Karin's responsiveness to violence is specifically about male violence which she locates as the product of distorted ideologies about masculinity.

Like Karin, Kwanele posits an explanation for male violence based on his reading of the killing of Macduff's family by Macbeth's "hitmen." In Kwanele's view, these men kill Lady Macduff and her son just to prove to Macbeth that "they are real men" whereas the instruction Macbeth gave them was to find and kill Macduff. As the implication of his argument, Kwanele states:

> It is typical for men to always have to portray themselves as tough human beings to prove their masculinity…. that is a reason a lot of men are always aggressive and vile towards other people because that is how they should act like in order to claim a seat at the table of real men.

Here, Kwanele explains male violence as induced by the desire to perform masculinity according to society's standards and expectations.

These students' responses point to literary reading that involves, not "empty fluency" or "abstracted meanings" (Duck, 2018, p. 17), but ideological claims that seek to make theory out of human actions—actions in both the fictional worlds of the text and the real world of the readers. Boughey and McKenna (2021, p. 64) argue that students are social beings, and because reading is a social practice, students will choose to "engage with certain kinds of texts in certain kinds of ways because they see value in doing so." We therefore note here that our students' attempts to explicate violent masculinities based on their readings of complex gender relations in *Macbeth* stem from a desire to use literature to foster social action.

This explains why, beyond providing explanations for why male violence happens, students propose alternative ways of seeing masculinity which can serve as a counter foil to violent inclinations. Lebo reconceptualises masculinity as associated with "compassion" and "sensitivity" and argues that it does not mean a man is "without emotions." In this way, "masculinity may be a source of hope." Lebo further states assertively: "I don't believe that 'being a man' is determined by your gender identity, whether you identify as a male, female, or something else. Your behaviors determine whether or not you are a 'man.'" What Lebo offers here is a new way of seeing masculinity—as a positive attribute—which, if adopted, can help men prevent excessive displays of power that often result in the violation of women and other vulnerable human beings.

Rasheeda believes that *Macbeth* provides alternatives to violent masculinity, holding up a mirror to society about the value of gentle masculinity. She notes that "throughout the play, we develop an understanding about how the characters' perspectives on what manhood and masculinity means plays a huge part in the decisions that they make." In her analysis of Macbeth's actions, she argues that "Macbeth's insecurity about his manhood pushes him to keep murdering to maintain his power." By contrast, "Shakespeare uses Macduff to show a different side of manhood which goes against the general norms." Commenting on Macduff's insistence on grieving for his murdered wife and son, she deduces that "it is okay for men to be vulnerable and show emotions." Her overall assessment then is that "there is more to being a man than just being strong, courageous and violent." While we are cautious not to read more into Rasheeda's statements than is intended, one thing that is clear is that Rasheeda is both explicating what underpins violent masculinity—a

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distorted sense of manhood—and suggesting a different way of seeing masculinity—as a blend of hard and soft emotions.

Lastly, Lolo seems to think that the solution to the killing of women is for men to communicate better with their wives and also to stay loyal to them. She arrives at this conclusion based on her reading of the killing of Lady Macduff. According to her, Lady Macduff suffers this tragic fate because Macduff leaves for England "without explaining anything [t]o his wife, because he is the man of the house and he has the power to decide for himself." She believes that Lady Macduff would have been better prepared to save her life had she been privy to Macduff's thoughts about Macbeth's murderous intentions. In an obviously angry tone, she notes that Macduff "leaves his family to England to save himself from the terror of Macbeth yet the wife …ends up being killed for Macduff's deeds." She no doubt reads grave injustice in Macduff's actions. Her ultimate solution to this injustice would have been for Macduff to exercise his headship better by taking his family with him to England: "I believe that it would have been better if he ran away with his family rather than putting them in danger and risk their lives." Lolo's essay, while offering a solution to curb male violence against women, simultaneously advocates social justice for women in heteropatriarchal marriages whose vulnerability to violence remains an insurmountable challenge in contemporary South Africa. Lolo is clearly re-writing *Macbeth* from a feminist perspective, as if responding to the invitation by Pillay (2021) for students to re-write Shakespearean texts if they deem it necessary for their context.

Responsiveness to Women's Exclusion from Public Spaces and Leadership

Scholarship from literary and cultural studies has suggested that public space in South Africa is still largely dominated by masculine bodies, as crime, taxi violence, xenophobia, sexual harassment, rape and other violent actions increasingly push women and other feminized bodies into the private space (Gqola, 2021; Penfold, 2012). Our analysis reveals a trend of students' attempts to explain why women's exclusion from public spaces happens in contemporary South Africa, drawing on specific plot details in *Macbeth*.

Joella notes that the theme of battle is dominant in the play but "never once in the play is there a woman included in the battle." She reads Lady Macbeth as "a woman who is powerful and assertive," yet has to adopt masculine qualities of "cruelty and violence" to be able to concoct "a plan to have King Duncan murdered." This representation of Lady Macbeth is problematic for her because of its "disregarding other human characteristics associated with femininity." Her essay suggests that women are excluded from public leadership because of the misconception that they do not possess the aggressiveness associated with masculinity, which is presumably critical for successful leadership.

Nina equally draws on Lady Macbeth's role in the play to make a claim about women's exclusion from religious leadership. She notes that Macbeth's letter to his wife in advance of Duncan's visit to Inverness indicates that "Lady Macbeth's place was to prepare the Macbeth home for the coming of the king." She links this to contemporary society in which "pastors and priests still dominate the spiritual/religious realm and commonly also speak and prophecy over people's lives, which believers welcome with open arms" while "their wives still remain in the background as the first lady of the church who oversees the arrangements of certain church functions or décor of the church." Here, Nina constructs women's exclusion from religious leadership as the result of gendered role assignment which restricts women to background performances of wifehood while men occupy the foreground of leadership.

Thamsanqa finds it problematic that in the play "only men are tasked to protect the King while women are made to stay at home and take care of the children till the husbands return from the war." Transposing this gendered role play to modern South African society, he notes that "women are underpaid in some workplace for certain jobs that they do" and that "in some cases women are not given opportunities to be in leadership positions." Thus, Thamsanqa reads *Macbeth* responsively by explaining women's exclusion from leadership roles as the outcome of gender role configurations that are clearly unjust. "This injustice," as he puts it, "does not occur in the play only but [also] in our society."

Workplace discrimination against women is also Zandile's concern in her reading of gender relations in *Macbeth*. She observes that "throughout the tragedy, we only come across passages where we read about men fighting for big positions… but we don't read anything about women achieving great things, occupying big roles." Based on this reading of male domination of women in the play, Zandile argues that gender discrimination is still pervasive today "where women are believed not to be strong enough to do a certain job." She cites other instances where "you find that a man and a woman might be doing the very same job but the man receives a greater income compared to the woman because they are believed to be inferior and the man superior." Like Thamsanqa's reading, Zandile's reading of *Macbeth* displays a responsiveness to discrimination against women in the workplace, showing such discrimination as rooted in patriarchal ideology.

For Busi, socio-cultural ideologies that see women as incapable of leading acceptably are what underpin women's exclusion from political leadership. She states:

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> There is a saying in my mother tongue Sepedi that goes "ya eta ke ya mosadi pele e wela leopeng," which literally translates to "if it is lead by a woman, it will fall into a pit or hole["]. Now, in the play *Macbeth*, Shakespeare only puts men in positions of leadership and also gives the impression that if a woman heads things, all fails.

Busi's explanation of women's exclusion from politics in *Macbeth* and in contemporary society derives from her understanding of Pedi culture and its language, Sepedi. Her response shows how students took characterization in the play into the larger arena of everyday life across cultural and linguistic borders, to make sense of social phenomena. What we note here is that students' readings of the play were not fixated on what Duck (2018, p. 25) calls "a superficial awareness of certain technical devices" but were rather geared at holistic character analysis through which they could make larger claims or deduce bigger meanings in relation to social issues.

Conceptualizing Socially Responsive Literary Reading

As stated in the introduction, our key finding in this study was that our students were practising what we have termed socially responsive literary reading. Literary reading as a socially responsive practice involves two things: explication and remediation. In responsiveness as explication, students are explaining social phenomena. They identify certain social ills and try to explain why they happen, what motivates them, the ideologies behind them, and the attitudes that trigger them. Bawa (2021, p. 213) argues that universities are social institutions that are "by definition knowledge intensive" and "their primary role is the production of new generations of organic intellectuals." Thus, by explicating social problems, students are living up to their roles as intellectuals in a social institution. One may argue that teaching students close reading can move them to attain the same degree of social intellectualism. We do not deny such a possibility, but like Downing (2002, p. 120), we are wary of "how easily our close readings can become closed readings based on our own agendas—no matter how enlightened we believe them to be." By contrast, socially responsive reading entrusts students with the power to make their own agendas as they read literary texts. Responsiveness as explication is about what matters to students, not the teacher. How our students weaved *Macbeth* into the fabric of their own personal and social lives was solely a product of their own critical thinking.

In responsiveness as remediation, students are offering possible solutions to social problems. These solutions may be actual prescriptions of what can be done to remedy a problem or new ways of seeing reality which can result in the prevention of social ills. Typically, they use the "if… then" approach to making claims: if A is done, then B will not happen. The goal here is to try and fix the things that are broken in society. Young people in South Africa's institutions of higher education are concerned about the social problems besetting contemporary South Africa as they have "expressed dissatisfaction with the slow pace of change in society and an awareness of the structural nature of injustice" (Case et al., 2018, p. 129). Our students' responsiveness to social injustices, such as power abuse, gendered violence and women's exclusion from leadership positions, is marked by corrective thinking as they propose remedial possibilities. This shows that they are "socially progressive and are critically engaged with key public debates" (Case et al., 2018, p. 139). We argue, therefore, that socially responsive literary reading enhances the value of higher education for literature students in general and prospective literature teachers in particular.

Socially Responsive Literary Reading: Implications for Literature Pedagogy

The findings from this study demand that we train our preservice teachers of English to become skilled in teaching learners to read literary texts in terms of what is relevant to their personal and social lives. We need to teach literature to our students in ways that adequately prepare them to deliver the school curriculum in ways that will touch learners' lives meaningfully. It demands that literary reading ceases from being an elitist pursuit (Allen, 2011) and starts being a socially responsive practice that allows literature teachers and students to collectively reflect on possible solutions to pressing social problems within their contexts. These solutions can be in ways of thinking about these problems—understanding their complexity and dire consequences and rethinking ways of seeing reality.

While close reading tends to emphasize the minute details in texts and ignore the big ideas (Tomasek, 2009), this study has demonstrated that socially responsive reading enables students to use the minute details as building blocks for big ideas. We argue that close reading, being a hand-me-down from European hermeneutics and Russian formalism, is doing little to raise the critical consciousness of African students towards African problems and ways of solving them. Our students need literary reading methods that offer them practical value in terms of not only thinking about social challenges but also doing something about them. Socially responsive reading is an Africanised literary reading approach that breaks away from close reading to foster reading that names context-specific social issues, explains them, and offers possibilities for fixing them. Carter et al. (2022) note that with all the emphasis on close reading at universities globally, students are

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still said to lack the ability to read literary texts meaningfully. This irony points to a weakness in the continuous teaching of the close reading methodology at universities; if it is not helping students reach the desired critical reading levels, then it is time we switch to new modes of reading that aim, not to make students tell us a particular meaning supposedly inherent in a text, but to empower students to see all the possible meanings the text can have that are valuable for assisting us make our world a better place.

Extending our argument, we state that socially responsive reading is in alignment with the ethos of a responsive university whose task it is to foster education that responds to societal needs and issues of social injustice (Keet & Muthwa, 2021). A responsive university operates not with borrowed pedagogies but with pedagogies tailored to the needs of its student constituencies. This means our literature pedagogy has to be transformed by rejecting the hegemony of close reading and embracing innovative, relevant, contemporary and localized modes of literary reading that are responsive to students' intellectual needs and in turn move them to be responsive to pressing social problems in the national and global arena.

When it comes to Shakespeare education in particular, the literary reading tradition at South African universities is still largely informed by the Eurocentric ideal which "privileges certain modes of reading" (Long, 1993, p. 192). Thus, in English departments, students' reading of Shakespearean texts are still modeled towards ideational forms of reading that emphasize knowledge of genre (e.g. tragedy vs. comedy), understanding of concepts (e.g. hamartia and catharsis), and identification of linguistic elements in plays (e.g. rhyme, metre, irony, alliteration, pun, synecdoche and metaphor). While we cannot dismiss the value of this form of literary reading, we argue here that a socially responsive reading that develops students' consciousness of the material conditions that determine and affect characters' relations with one another and incites them to figure out strategies for resolving character conflict is a far more useful form of reading that will serve students for life. In addition, socially responsive reading that connects Shakespearean texts to students' community life will have a more lasting impact on their educational training than a reading in which meaning making does not go beyond the page. In literary studies in South African higher education, a pedagogy that exhibits "responsiveness to the community" (Naidu, 2022, p. 154) is important because it enables universities to achieve much needed transformation from colonial modes of knowledge production to decolonised modes. As Naidu (2022, p. 155) puts it, "teaching that crosses the borders of the academy to engage with the community transforms the discipline and the institution." Socially responsive pedagogy is therefore required in the higher education literature classroom if we are to produce graduates who will become citizens who can think and act for the betterment of their societies.

Curriculum Possibilities for Socially Responsive Literary Reading

In advocating for socially responsive literature pedagogy in the training of pre-service teachers, we are not blind to the constraints that the Curriculum and Assessment Policy Statement (CAPS) places on teachers of English in South African schools. On the contrary, we are painfully aware of issues such as the prescriptive Annual Teaching Plan which restricts teachers' creativity in the classroom, the dominant orientation towards using literature as a tool for language teaching, the prevalent practice of teaching for assessment, and contradictions in the curriculum where learners' personal views on literary texts seem at once valued and discouraged (Mavhiza & Prozesky, 2020; Nkealah & Simango, 2023). These challenges notwithstanding, we find niches within the same curriculum that teachers can optimize to teach literature in socially responsive ways. Such niches are evident in the curriculum documents for Grades 10–12 in both English HL and English FAL. In the English HL document, we find that among the types of essays that high school learners have to be taught to write is the literary essay. The document states:

> These essays present the writer's response to a literary text that is *interpretative, evaluative, reflective, even on occasion personal*. Arguments are presented and supported or illustrated by reference to the text; the language of the text may be explored and shown to possess particular linguistic or literary qualities. *The style is formal, but not necessarily dryly objective. Personal responses are possible in some essays*, especially when asked for. (Department of Basic Education, 2011a, p. 34, emphasis added)

This statement can be interpreted in different ways and one of them is that a literary essay can centre on or include learners' responsiveness to particular social problems raised in texts being studied in class. Adopting this interpretation, teachers can get learners to critically respond to social problems in texts that have a direct bearing on their own lives. Thus, the teaching of texts can be scaffolded to get learners to express their personal responsiveness to pressing social realities that affect them. The literary essay also forms part of the assessment for Grades 10–12 in the English HL curriculum and learners are expected to write essays of a given length (depending on the genre), and this is one of the seven tasks that forms part of their formal school-based assessment constituting 25% of the subject mark (Department of Basic Education, 2011a). Since the literary essay is assessed, teachers have a strong motivation to apply socially responsive literature pedagogy in teaching literary texts as it means they can evaluate the extent to

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which learners have mastered the skill of socially responsive reading.

In the English FAL curriculum, the space for applying socially responsive literary reading is less obvious as this curriculum does not include a literary essay as a skill, and the assessments centre on contextual questions. However, teachers can utilize their creativity to implement the pedagogy since the curriculum is intended to produce learners who are able to "identify and solve problems and make decisions using critical and creative thinking" (Department of Basic Education, 2011b, p. 5). English FAL learners in Grades 10–12 are also expected to read literary texts with critical awareness by identifying issues in texts and discussing plot details in relation to these issues (Department of Basic Education, 2011b). Teachers can then extend such discussions to include learners' responsiveness to these issues as they pertain to everyday life. Distiller (2009) suggests that novel ways of reading Shakespearean texts can be included as theoretical notes in school editions of the plays. While this amendment of textbooks may not be possible to do by teachers themselves, they can design formative assessment tasks that require learners to extend the theoretical notes in textbooks to encompass socially responsive ways of thinking about the Shakespearean plays they are learning about. As Distiller (2009, p. 181) states, "provocative or different approaches at least make available the knowledge that the play has multiple possible interpretations." Following a pedagogy in which learners interpret texts to address everyday social problems by way of explicating them or proposing remedial possibilities shows teachers' critical awareness of the limitations of their roles as teachers. In this regard, socially responsive literature pedagogy is the complete opposite of a banking pedagogy since it derives its validity from students' own interpretations of textual details.

The CAPS is only the curriculum for public schools in South Africa. Although some private schools also use CAPS, many fall under the Independent Examination Board (IEB) which also administers the CAPS curriculum in its schools but with some flexibility since their Grade 12 learners write a separate National Senior Certificate examination. In addition, many private schools use the Cambridge curriculum. Many of the students we graduate end up employed in private schools that utilize the Cambridge curriculum or fall under the IEB consortium. Our interactions with in-service teachers from such schools at our postgraduate classes indicate that they have greater liberty within their curricula to teach literature in ways that they find beneficial for their learners. This means that our pre-service teachers who end up in these private schools will have greater opportunity to implement socially responsive pedagogy in their literature classrooms. Such a possibility provides further impetus to our advocacy of this pedagogy for the training of pre-service teachers of English.

Since our English programme is directed specifically at pre-service teachers desiring to teach at the Senior Phase (Grades 7–9) and Further Education and Training (FET) phase (Grades 10–12), the curriculum opportunities identified herein become salient motivations for acquiring skills in socially responsive literary reading. In practising socially responsive literary reading with their learners, these teachers will not only be exercising their teacher agency in interpreting the curriculum pragmatically but would also effectively be contributing in reversing some of the problems with literature education in schools. They would be engaging learners in creative activities as they read literary texts, encouraging learners to express their views on how the texts can influence social transformation, teaching literature for its own ideological meanings rather than merely its linguistic value, and teaching literature not just to meet assessment requirements but also for personal growth and critical development. Thus, we argue that implementing socially responsive literature pedagogy at higher education enables teacher educators to equip pre-service teachers to become effective socially responsive teachers in the classroom and they in turn can produce socially responsive learners who are equipped "with the knowledge, skills and values necessary for self-fulfilment, and meaningful participation in society as citizens of a free country" (Department of Basic Education, 2011b, p. 4). The pedagogy, working best in this cyclical fashion, holds great potential for advancing South African literature education.

Conclusion

We started this article by problematising the common view among university teachers of English that students cannot read literary texts meaningfully. We have thus far argued that perhaps what needs to change is not how students are reading the texts we prescribe for them but how we are understanding their ways of reading. As Weed (2012, 95) argues, "no critical practice can maintain its vitality without continually questioning its theories of reading." In questioning our theories of reading in literary studies, we need to be open to new approaches to literary reading. We have illustrated in this article the pitfalls of sticking to the dominant approach of close reading, even in contexts where its value is insignificant to students' material lives. As an alternative, we proposed socially responsive reading which we found to be the approach our students were inventing in their reading of Shakespeare's play, *Macbeth*. Shakespearean plays, being products of English cultural heritage, have been especially taught following the close reading approach. However, we agree with Turchi and Christensen (2018, p. 95) that "our times and the lives and emerging voices of our students demand consideration as we hatch our teaching strategies." Our students now want

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higher education that empowers them to be responsive to society's needs and to better the quality of their lives materially, not just intellectually. Thus, we need to adopt literature pedagogy that makes allowances for students' social responsiveness in the classroom and beyond. Literature pedagogy cannot be stuck in the same old models which we ourselves inherited from our teachers; it has to be flexible to be responsive to our students' concerns, sense of social responsibility and motivation for social action.

We have demonstrated in this article how our preservice teachers of English read *Macbeth* in ways that explicated or provided solutions to three key social problems in South Africa: power abuse, social violence and violent masculinities, and women's exclusion from public spaces and leadership. Under these problems, we discussed sub-problems like corruption, greed, selfishness, disloyalty, injustice and deception that students equally showed a responsiveness to. Based on our findings presented above, we argue that literature pedagogy at higher education must introduce students to ways of reading that allow them to think about social problems within their immediate environments, reflect on their root causes and figure out possibilities for remedying them. Close reading is not a neutral skill; it is a reading skill rooted in a particular cultural tradition. Moreover, close reading should not be the end of reading; reading must move beyond the text as students attempt to make meaning of it. As literature teachers, it is important that we allow students to read texts to find relevance of their lives in the texts and of the texts in their lives. In African universities, literature pedagogy that engineers socially responsive readings of literary texts presents itself as a viable pedagogy for decolonising higher education. A limitation in our study is that we conducted the research in a course involving a western text, which raises questions about the universality of the knowledge in the text. It would be interesting to do a similar research project on a course in which we teach an African play and see how different or similar the responsiveness of students would be to social problems raised in the play.

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No potential conflict of interest was reported by the authors.

Data Availability Statement

We confirm that we have access to the original data on which this manuscript reports.

ENDNOTES

[1] The racial categories of Black/African, White, Indian and Colored are specific to South Africa. Colored refers to persons of mixed racial heritage. Our immigrant students come largely from African countries (e.g. Zimbabwe, Nigeria, Angola, Ghana, Democratic Republic of Congo, Ethiopia, Cameroon and Kenya), but we also get a handful of students from Asian, European and South American countries.

[2] The English HL curriculum is intended for learners who claim English as their first language while the English FAL curriculum is for learners whose first language is any of the other South African languages (e.g. isiZulu, Afrikaans, isiXhosa and Sepedi). Because Shakespeare is optional in the English FAL curriculum, teachers in Black township schools tend not to teach it and rather opt for African plays in the curriculum. This is more because they find the language of Shakespearean texts difficult to explain to learners than because they find the plays irrelevant.

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