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PLEASE BE A GATSBY

A Thesis

by

GABRIEL JORGE TORRES

Submitted to the Graduate College of  
The University of Texas Rio Grande Valley  
In partial fulfillment of the requirements for the degree of

MASTER OF FINE ARTS

May 2018

Major Subject: Creative Writing



PLEASE BE A GATSBY

A Thesis  
by  
GABRIEL JORGE TORRES

COMMITTEE MEMBERS

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May 2018



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## ABSTRACT

Torres, Gabriel J., Please Be a Gatsby. Master in Fine Arts (MFA), May, 2018, 72 pp., references, 14 titles.

I use my position as a high school English teacher to teach the following books: *The Metamorphosis*, *The Stranger*, *Fahrenheit 451*, *The Great Gatsby*, selected poetry by Housman and Hardy, *Lysistrata*, short stories by Ernest Hemingway, and the *Catcher in the Rye*. These literary classics have accompanied me in my growth as a scholar and individual and comprise the major works I teach as a high school teacher. I have blended sketches of my life with these works of literature to create small narratives about the way I inspire my students to be like the characters they read about. Each chapter stands alone but together creates a retrospective exploration of my maturity, relying on literary works as guides. I am as honest with my readers as I am with my students about the events that transpired in my life and how they resonated with the books I read.





## DEDICATION

I dedicate all my work to my past, present, and future students.



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## CHAPTER I

### CRITICAL INTRO

*Please be a Gatsby* blends sketches of my life with the literary classics taught to me as a student. With students and educators as the targeted audience, I created a thesis accessible to both avid and sluggish readers that aims at asserting the importance and relevance of literary classics to generations actively averse to them. Thus, my thesis' inception can be traced to the first day I stepped into a high school English classroom.

The McAllen Independent School District has three main high schools, but students have the option of enrolling at a fourth campus named Lamar Academy, which houses an endurance program called The International Baccalaureate Program (IB). The rigorous courses of the IB Program are specifically designed to foster success in college and future careers. When I first entered the program in 2007, Lamar Academy's IB Program contained an elitist mentality that employed the sink or swim method. For those unacquainted with the term, sink or swim means tossing students into a sea of work and seeing what happens. If you sank, the program brought you out and threw you into one of the other high schools. Out of the 150 students that enrolled in the program my freshman year, only 60 graduated.

The program left me scars: three late night nervous breakdowns, moments of contemplation at the top of the school's stone staircases to calculate at what angle I could fall in order to get a few days off at school, and countless bottles of Tylenol to battle stressed induce headaches. However, I graduated with the coveted IB Diploma, and I think my classmates were

justified when they skeptically asked me, “Did you really put up with all of this just to go to UTPA?”

The University of Texas-Pan American (UTPA), renamed The University of Texas Rio Grande Valley in 2015, served as the safety net for many of my classmates who applied to more prestigious schools. Texas Tech and The University of Texas at San Antonio seduced me with generous financial aid packets, but UTPA offered to cover all my costs. I enrolled and started taking classes composed of students from one of the three high schools the program had threatened to send me to if I broke the IB Code of Conduct. My new friends expressed shock once they gained knowledge of my past; IB students are stereotypically pegged as rich kids with snobby personalities. (As one of the students on the lowest socio-economic rung at the school, I often agreed with them.)

“Was it worth it?”

They asked the same question I asked myself many times after graduating from the program.

“Of course it was worth it, because you didn’t have the quality of teachers I had.” Maybe some of the condescension rubbed off after all.

I did not realize it until I started working as an educator, but I made it out of those turbulent waters with the help of my teachers. As I swam my way through high school, I eventually started feeling the sand beneath my feet, and I arrived at a mesmerizing and sunny beach. After the salt water stopped stinging my eyes, my vision became focused, and I noticed my teachers scattered and soaked around me. They had been swimming alongside me, trying their best to make sure I made it safely.

Those questioning my decision to enroll at UTPA failed to understand what I now tell all my students: a school's prestige stems from its educators. I entered UTPA with 55 credits; I could have graduated in two years, but I graduated in four, because I found the best teachers in my field and started taking courses I did not need. A professor I admired taught in the Theater department, and I ended up with a Theater minor; I heard UTPA had an excellent teaching program, and I got my teaching license; the school offered a Creative Writing program with published professors, and I took extra Creative Writing courses.

UTPA watched me grow and mature as an individual and student; I lost something precious when the merger occurred the semester after my graduation. UTPA changed to UTRGV and Bucky the Bronc disappeared. Fortunately, my old teachers taught the majority of the classes in the MFA Creative Writing program, and I enrolled to once again place my education in their hands; imagine my shock when Dr. William Broz, one of the professors I planned to retake, passed away from cancer a few days after giving me a letter of recommendation. As UTRGV came into sight my first day of graduate classes, I realized my count of enchanted objects diminished by three. When I formed my thesis committee, I picked the teachers I knew would help me succeed.

In my thesis, I focus on the one thing I excel at: making literature accessible to those who are repulse by it. After graduating, I returned to Lamar Academy to work as an English teacher, but I did not get hired to teach at the IB program as I originally planned. Instead, I got hired to work at the sister program called Options: a program for kids in danger of dropping out. The majority of the kids placed in my care possess reading levels two or three years behind their current grade. Despite these obstacles, I teach literary classics, and my students read them.



I accomplish this Herculean task by showing my students my genuine investment in the books I present them, and the lessons derived from them, which they can in turn apply to their modern problems. As examples, I share with them my stories; the stories found in my thesis. When we reach the scene in *Fahrenheit 451* where Guy Montag finds his wife overdose on sleeping pills, I tell the story of my friend who attempted to commit suicide. When we read the *The Great Gatsby*, my students are introduced to the girl who broke my heart in college. My students learn to see me as someone approachable with similar problems as theirs, and they start believing literature can understand them at an age when they feel no one can.

Unlike the students in the IB Program, the students at the Options Program are not proud about their enrollment in our program. They are with us, because they have bad grades, bad behavior, or bad attendance, and our program is what stands between them and dropping out. Many of our students feel branded when they enroll in our program. This thesis was created based on the interactions I have had with this type of students. Thus, the interpretations and reflections I share in my thesis are based on a very narrow scope: relationships. Since my students are transitioning from adolescence to adulthood, the constant changes my students' experience put strain on the relationships they create or try to maintain. Although we do invest an ample amount of time analyzing literature through a variety of interpretative lenses, relationships are the gateway through which I lure my students' attention to the novel I want them to read.

I wrote my thesis using pedagogy, and I treat my reader with the same respect and dedication I treat my students. I start every class with a writing prompt connected to the reading selected for the day's lesson. If in the selected reading the protagonist gets heartbroken, I ask my students to write about their first crush, their first break-up, or first unrequited love. If a death

occurs in the selected piece, I ask my students if they have gone to a funeral or experienced the death of a loved one. Before I present them with the selected reading, I want my students to be in tune with what they will learn that day. In my thesis, I start every chapter with the title of the work I will allude to, and the passage that makes me reminisce on my own life; thus, the reader starts inferring what type of personal story I will share from the context of the passage.

After the writing prompt, my students read the selected piece. I stop in appropriate places to explain similes, metaphors, allusions etc. Through the writing prompt and my guidance, my students learn the theme of the story: the relevance of the story to their own lives. In my thesis, I add a small synopsis of the piece being discussed for readers unacquainted with the material, and I hope my readers analyze the way my life compared to the passage. I end by sharing the lesson I learned from the literary work, and the lesson I try to instill in my students to make them better individuals. All my chapters are written in the same format. I created a feeling of repetitiveness in my thesis, because repetitiveness creates structure and order in a classroom. By the last chapter, the reader knows what to expect from me and readily prepares to dive into the lesson I constructed for them.

Readers who pick up my thesis are enrolling themselves in one of my classes. I wrote it as a conversation between the reader and me, since I prefer discussions to lectures in my classes. There are no pre-requisites to read my thesis; no one has to read any of the books I talk about.

The chapters in my thesis are not long ones. I am conscious of the brief attention span of modern teenagers, and the discouragement a thick spine gives them when reading a book. Small chapters allow weaker readers to digest my thesis one chunk at a time, providing a recovering period if they wish to stop momentarily.

As the title of my thesis implies, I hope to achieve through my thesis what I strive to achieve in my classes: create better individuals. Students always ask me the same question: “Why is English important?” Some really see no point in teaching literature. I tell them reading good literature heals the soul and nurtures the mind. We have good role models like Gatsby, and bad role models like Meursault. They each teach their own lessons, and I dedicate my job to instill the good ones.

Teachers are not excluded from the lesson I try to impart. I cannot stomach educators who are not passionate about teaching or disparage my profession. I took two years worth of education courses to prepare me for the classroom, and I constantly strive to perfect my craft as a writer and teacher. I have sat in trainings where teachers struggle with the texts they need to teach and sigh, “I don’t understand any of this. I was a History Major.” After all, individuals seeking a teaching position in Texas don’t need a degree on the subject they are teaching. I have a Bachelor of Arts in English, but I could teach Biology if I pass a state exam.

I remember when I first applied for a job and an older gentleman started talking to me.

“Have you worked as a teacher before?”

“No, I am barely going to graduate from college. How about you?”

“I worked for a while, but I got fired and thought I would give teaching a try. I got certified through an alternative certification program and finally passed the state tests.”

“So you don’t have any teaching experience?”

“I raised two kids. How different can it be?”

It’s very different. Teaching at a public high school entails going into a room full of strangers; you cannot expect them to treat you as they treat their parents. In fact, most of my kids disobey and disrespect their parents. Most of the time, teachers need to earn their students

respect. I earn my students' respect by first giving it to them and showing them I care about them as both an individual and as a student.

I did not continue my conversation with the older gentleman; I doubt he would have agreed with my notions concerning education; ultimately, he needed to fill a financial need. Many teachers teach for the money. I know educators more concerned about the next pay date or upcoming vacation than their students; they never talk about what happens in their classroom, about what they are teaching, or to whom they are teaching it to. Those are just tasks they have to accomplish to get their reward.

A teacher must involve themselves with their students to really impact them. I share my stories with my students and involve myself in their life. I teach my favorite novels, because I want to share the lessons and joy I experienced when I first read them. I hope teachers eventually start picking up my thesis to see the effort placed in every lesson taught in and outside my classroom. In addition, the thesis itself comprises an annotated bibliography of teachable literature with brief lesson ideas scattered throughout.

My thesis encapsulates everything learned from my teachers. "Not Reading: The 800-Pound Mockingbird in the Classroom" by Dr. Broz first opened my eyes to the resistance of reading inside the classroom, intensified by a Bradburian nightmare called Google. As an educator, I now share the goal he states in his article: "my primary teaching goal in literature classes, whether secondary or postsecondary, is to convince students to accept the invitation to read the books" (Broz 16). This quote captures the essence of the driving force behind my thesis: getting students to read and teachers to teach. Although there already exists a plethora of books on pedagogy, my thesis offers a more personal approach. Instead of bogging my readers down

with pedagogical jargon and strategies, I share my experiences, ultimately showing how I effectively teach my classes.

If the sections dealing with literature are removed, the sketches of my life spanning from my years as a high school student to my years as a high school teacher remain. These personal stories establish a chronological order in my thesis. I created these sketches of my life through the memoirs I read as an undergraduate and graduate student. In a perfect world, a graphic novel would have served as the perfect medium to achieve my goals. Graphic novels are accessible and appealing to high school students. I currently teach *Woman Rebel: The Margaret Sanger Story* by Peter Bagge and *Persepolis* by Marjane Satrapi in my AP English III literature courses. The visuals, strong female characters, and short prose spread throughout the pages makes the process of reading a full-length of work less tedious to my students, creating another gateway through which I entice my students to start reading. However, I possess no drawing talent and relied on more traditional memoirs like *Fat* by Jean Braithwaite and *house built on ashes* by Jose Antonio Rodriguez.

The intimate moments the authors shared with the readers caught my attention. The authors expose themselves to the readers and engage them in their story. Although hesitant about including the works of the members of my committee, I believe a critical intro concerning the importance of setting the example as a teacher made their mention indispensable. I enjoyed seeing my professors' lessons in action; I constantly traced the notes I took in their classes and connected them to what I read. Hopefully, my students will one day find my thesis hidden in the UTRGV library and do the same. Since I am writing to a much younger audience and I want to be able to direct my students to my thesis, I cannot share things at the level of intimacy as these writers, but I yearned to be as frank with my readers as these authors were with me.

These memoirs and the individuals behind them taught me the importance of honesty as a writer. I depicted myself as objectively as possible. Chapters I and II contain a very young and naïve Gabriel similar to Meursault, because I felt like a foreigner in the world of relationships, which happens to a lot of my teenage students. Chapters III and IV serve as stepping stones into maturity; I no longer felt like a stranger, but formed close bonds with the people around me. Chapters V-VIII contain Gabriel as Gatsby; the current and most mature version of myself. In these chapters I stop talking about my students in a general context, but I start sharing specific events in my teaching career. I am Gatsby, and they are my Nick Carraways, floating around me ready to hear my lessons. Finally, I also take time in these chapters to reflect on the immaturities of younger Gabriel, and how I can help my students outgrow theirs.

In addition, the names of the characters in my sketches should catch the attention of my more avid readers. With the exception of my students, Beto and Melba, I substituted the names of my characters with the names of fictional characters of other literary classics. I did not pick the names randomly. Either through the context of the story depicted or the individual's personality, I gave each of the individuals in my life a literary identity. This was important, because I analyze the different forms relationships can take: friendship, unrequited love, cheating, and heartbreaks. I am afraid this thesis might land in the hands of a past lover, friend, or acquaintance, revealing secrets I kept well hidden.

A teacher constantly reflects on their work and how to improve it. As I wrote my critical intro, I reflected on the year I spent writing my thesis. I did not realize until these past few weeks the importance of the work I ventured to form; my thesis is the fruit derived from the seed my teachers planted; a well-nurtured tree does not produce rotten fruit.

I now plan to share this fruit of knowledge with the countless students that I will never meet, especially those who feel neglected by friends, family, or teachers. If you are a student currently reading my thesis, please know that I am rooting for you and take the lessons I share from these great literary classics. Also, pick at least one of these novels and read it. After all, the purpose of my thesis was to encourage you to read. The lessons I share are based on relationships, which will only give you a fraction of what you can learn from these great works of literature. These characters guided me through my transition from student to teacher, and I hope they can help you on your journey as well.

## CHAPTER II

### THE STRANGER BY ALBERT CAMUS

“When she laughed I wanted her again. A minute later she asked me if I loved her. I told her it didn’t mean anything but that I didn’t think so. She looked sad. But as we were fixing lunch, and for no apparent reason, she laughed in such a way that I kissed her” (Camus 35).

When I teach *The Stranger*, my students spend a lot of class time analyzing the way Meursault interacts with the other characters in the novel. We pay special attention to the relationship between Meursault and Marie, Meursault’s lover. I ask my students to place themselves in Marie’s and Meursault’s shoes and think what type of relationship they have. Most of them say it is abusive and one sided. Some are angry at Marie for being in a relationship with someone whose affections runs skin deep; others are angry with Meursault for not realizing the wonderful woman he has by her side. We resume our conversation in the second part of the novel, where Meursault has been sentenced to death for murder.

“I had lived my life one way and I could just as well have lived it another. I had done this and I hadn’t done that. I hadn’t done this thing but I had done another...Throughout the whole absurd life I’d lived, a dark wind had been rising toward me from somewhere deep in my future, across years that were still to come, and as it passed, this wind leveled whatever was offered to me at the time, in years no more real than the ones I was living” (Camus 121).



“Ok, guys. What do you think Meursault mostly regrets at this point of the novel?”

“He is upset he messed up his chances of being with Marie.”

“I agree.”

I tell my classes how Meursault had everything to make him happy, but he threw it all away. I exhort them to learn the lesson Meursault teaches readers: appreciate the people around you. I tell them to think of family members, significant others, and friends they appreciate and to preserve those relations, while they in turn get rid of the toxic ones. Depending on the maturity of the group, I share excerpts of the following story.

I attended a small high school in McAllen, Texas, called Lamar Academy with an enrollment of no more than 200 students. Thus, the union between our classmates Leonce and Edna infiltrated itself into every conversation. Their love story even grew to an obsession for some. I remember one day Leonce and Edna waltzed down one of the main halls, holding hands, and the nearby onlookers murmured gleefully about them. A close friend of mine laid on her belly after the couple passed by, pointing her cellphone camera at the happy couple huddling together on the ground. Hiding behind a wall leading to another hall, she only allowed her cellphone’s camera to pop out as she took the picture. She quickly reincorporated herself and walked towards me. She sat down next to me.

She whispered, “They are like a Disney couple.”

I closed my copy of *The Stranger* and looked at the phone screen she shoved at my face. She possessed a small gallery of pictures with Leonce and Edna as the protagonists.

“Why do you have so many pictures of them? Isn’t that a little creepy?”

“They are so cute. We need more couples like them. They give me hope of finding someone.”

“Yeah, that would be nice. Not like the couple in this book. What I would do to have a girl like Marie.”

I tried to conceal the envy I felt whenever I saw Leonce and Edna walking together; I envied how they looked at each other with loving eyes; I envied how perfect they were. Leonce accepted a full ride to Cal-Tech and Edna a full ride to Stanford University. If they managed to last together after high school, which everyone believed they would, a promising future awaited them.

We all graduated from high school and started college. I got accepted with a full ride to The University of Texas-Pan American (UTPA) in 2011. Although I did not get into any big name schools like Leonce and Edna, my scholarship covered tuition and room and board; I had no room to complain. Leonce was amongst the first to leave McAllen to start his education, and, as I acclimated to my first semester in college, Edna prepared to head out to Stanford. She told her close friends, including myself, that she wanted to spend a day at UTPA to say goodbye.

On the day she came, I met with her late in the afternoon at the library. She was in one of the study rooms on the third floor with another friend of mine; the glass pane on the door prevented me from eavesdropping. She finally came out, hugged me, and told me to hurry.

“Why did you meet with Robert?”

“We had some things to get out off our chests. I don’t want to leave McAllen without being at peace with myself.”

Before Leonce came into the picture, Robert and Edna had attempted to date. However, Robert never asked her out. Leonce took the chance Robert did not and dated Edna.

“Yeah, I get you. Does he still have a crush on you?”

“Yeah, but he knows I am with Leonce now. We had other things to talk about.”

“Sounds good. You are going back to McAllen right?”

“Yes, why?”

“Can I get a ride to your house? Today is usually the day I go spend one night with my mom, and I don’t want her to drive all the way here. That way we can talk more on the way to your house.”

“Sounds great. Want to take off already then?”

“Sounds perfect. Let’s just go to my dorm. I need to get some things from there.”

On our way to my dorm, we ran into my roommate and his girlfriend, who were heading out to dinner. I gave her the grand tour of my dorm: two individual sized beds, two desks, and two small closets. There was a bathroom connecting us to another room, meaning four people to a restroom. I told her to get comfortable in my bed as I started packing my things.

When I finished, I found her outstretched on my bed.

“I know its small, but it is actually quite comfortable.”

“Yeah, come lay next to me.”

The lights were off, and the afternoon sun entered through the window blinds. I lay down next to her in the small place left in my twin size bed, and we looked up at the ceiling as we talked.

“So how is Leonce doing? How are you guys going to see each other?”

“He is alright. W are planning to meet each other once a month once school starts. There is a train he can take from where he is to Stanford or something like that. We will figure out a way.”

“You guys always found a way to make it work. You guys are like the perfect couple. Did you know Lyangela took a bunch of pictures of both of you?”

“Yeah, she thought we never noticed. It was a little bit annoying.”

“Yeah, she watched too many Barbie movies I think, because...”

She silenced my lips with an adrenalized kiss. My mind went blank, and a tingling sensation traveled from my lips and to my stomach. We made out for about an hour before I finally gathered the sanity to speak.

“You need to drive home already right?”

“Not really. I told my mom I would be late. Do you have to go?”

“Yeah, my mom starts watching her soap operas at 8, and I don’t want to interfere on her precious time.”

As we drove home, the adrenaline rush slowly died. I started to feel the guilt I should have felt on the first kiss. Leonce started popping in my head. I started to feel horrible, and I imagined Edna felt worse. She had cheated on her boyfriend with me. I took a quick glance as she drove, and she caught my eyes; she smirked. She smiled the entire drive home, and we continued to kiss in her house. I couldn’t restrain myself. I wanted more of these new and delightful sensations. My mom’s arrival finally stopped us.

Once separated, I started thinking with my other head. Did I just taint the perfect couple? I never viewed Edna as more than a friend; why did I kiss her then?

I borrowed my mom’s car and drove to her house the next day. I intended to fix whatever I had broken. As I approached her house, she anxiously waited for me outside. As I exited the car, she ran to me and kissed me.

“Hi, Edna.”

“Did you miss me? I missed kissing you,” she said as she tried to kiss me again. I pulled away.

“Yeah, about that. Let’s have a walk and talk about what happened yesterday.”

“Ok, what do you want to talk about?”

“What are you planning to do now? Are you going to tell Leonce? What’s going to happen?”

“I am not going to tell Leonce. I am going to break up with him and date you. I mean, you like me. Don’t you?”

“Edna. You can’t just break up with Leonce like that. He loves you. Talk to him. Try to work this out, because I think both of you make a wonderful couple. We all think that. You can’t just let it end.”

“Gabriel, you are the guy I have always liked. The only reason I even talked to Robert and Leonce is because they actually showed interest. I never thought you felt the same, but, after yesterday, I can see you like me too.”

Her confession broke everything apart. Leonce and Edna embodied the perfect couple, and I envied the love I thought they shared. Now, she was telling me it was all a façade to cover up her feelings for me. I did not want to date her. I refused to carry the guilt of being the one responsible of breaking the golden couple of my high school generation. How could I face our mutual friends if word of my actions spread?

“No, Edna. This never happened. It was just mistake.”

Despite her arguments, we were not going to date over a one-afternoon make-out. I drove away, and, through the rearview mirror, I saw her wipe tears off her eyes.

I often make a pause in this story to include another character from *The Stranger* to my students: Raymond Sintes. Raymond is one of Meursault’s closest friends in *The Stranger*, and the person that constantly leads our protagonist into trouble. Raymond starts problems with a

character named the Arab by beating and humiliating the man's sister. The man seeks revenge against Raymond and has an encounter with Meursault, which results in the Arab's death and Meursault's imprisonment. I tell my kids how we all have that one friend that constantly gets us into trouble. Meursault had Raymond; I had Mercutio.

I met Mercutio in middle school, where we both joined orchestra; I played the cello, and he played the bass. At Lamar Academy, Mercutio and I formed part of the 45 students graduating under the International Baccalaureate (IB) Program. Although not private, Lamar Academy's elitist environment cemented our friendship. Mercutio and I belonged to the lower economic rung at our school, where the parents of most students earned high salaries or held positions of power in the community. Mercutio and I earned our spots with our good behavior and grades.

Mercutio also came from a single-parent household, living with another hard working mother. While our mothers dropped off Mercutio and me, our friends drove to school; two of them in Porsches. Most of our friends applied to universities outside of the Rio Grande Valley: Baylor, Rice, UT-Austin, MIT, Dartmouth, Stanford, Columbia, and California Tech. Mercutio and I applied to UTPA and enrolled with a full ride.

A semester had passed since my incident with Edna. Since then, I did not hear anything from Edna or Leonce until I saw Mercutio and Leonce walking towards me one afternoon. They walked down a gravel path connecting Unity with the rest of the campus. Trees served as walls of an artificial hallway, and I felt we were back at Lamar. I stopped in front of them. Mercutio smiled; Leonce remained stoic.

“Hey, guys. Leonce, what brings you down to the valley.”

“We have our spring break already in Cal-tech. So I came to see Mercutio.”

“That is awesome. Mercutio, can I talk to Leonce for a little? Alone.”

Leonce and I moved a little further off the path and talked in low voice. At this point, I was unsure if Leonce knew what had transpired in my dorm, but the guilt resurfaced when I saw him. I needed to at least apologize and clean off part of the guilt I felt.

“Leonce, are you aware of what happened between Edna and me?”

“Yes, Gabriel. Edna told me everything. We worked it out.”

“I am glad to hear that. Leonce, I am so sorry. I do not know what came over me. I apologize. I am so sorry.”

He placed his hand on my shoulder.

“Don’t worry, Gabriel. I forgive you.”

I could not believe it. I left them with a smile; I finally confessed my sins and received absolution. I received a text from Mercutio that night, telling me to go to his room.

I entered his room, and Mercutio told me to sit down.

“Gabriel. Why did you never tell me about Edna?”

“I was so embarrassed dude. I did not want anyone to know. I am just glad Edna and Leonce are still together and that I was able to offer him an apology.”

“But out of all the girls. Why would you try to force Edna to kiss you?”

“What? Edna kissed me.”

Mercutio’s expression completely changed.

“Tell me exactly what happened.”

“Edna came to my dorm one afternoon, and she kissed me. Then we made out for like an hour or two. She said she wanted to break up with Leonce, but I told her I did not want to be with her.”

Mercutio immediately took out his cellphone and started dialing a number.

“Mercutio what are you doing?”

“She lied to him, man. She told him that you forced her to kiss you, but she refused you. He needs to know.”

“Mercutio, come on. Leave it like that. They are happy.”

Mercutio was about to ruin everything. Just like Raymond handed a gun to Meursault, I felt Mercutio was about to hand me one, and Leonce was the target.

“Leonce, yeah, it’s Mercutio. Edna lied to you, man. Gabriel never forced her. She kissed him for like...how long?”

“Two hours.”

“Two hours, man. She wanted to leave you. I just have to tell you, because I am your friend. It is not right that they do this to you. You need to have a talk with her, because she is lying to you. You are welcome, brother. Take care. There it’s done.”

I felt I had shot the Arab. From what I pieced together, Edna and Leonce momentarily broke up after the revelation. However, they eventually got back together. They have been dating for seven years. Some couples do endure the tests life gives them.

I share this story because the individuals involved in the story did not appreciate the individuals around them. Edna did not appreciate Leonce, who loved Edna more than I could possibly love her. Leonce had draconian parents and dating Edna was his first act of rebellion against them. He even sneaked out of his house to go to prom with her. At the time, I shared Meursault’s view of relationship: relationships are only skin deep. I believed Edna deserved more than a relationship based on physical responses; she deserved the emotional relationship Leonce built for her.



However, we all do stupid things in the name of love. Edna risked everything to be happy with the guy she actually liked; sadly, I did not like her back. I kissed her because some primitive instincts took over, and she interpreted my actions as the acceptance of her love. That is why I tell my students not to criticize Marie. Marie did everything because she loved Meursault, even if Meursault just wanted her for her body.

As for me, I missed the chance of starting something with Edna. She was the type of girl mothers would be proud of seeing their son date. She was among the top ten graduates of her generation and displayed great affection for me. However, I know that a relationship that starts bad ends worse, but it turns out Edna was the only girl I got involved with my first year in college. There were nights where I felt like Meursault in his prison cell, cursing himself for letting go of all the many opportunities that fell in a silver platter.

My students know the feeling of remorse very well. They are in our program because of the mistakes they made. The difference though is that they are not in a prison cell, although school feels like prison for most of them. They are in a program designed to give them a second chance at success. It is up to them to realize their good fortune and make the best out of it, before society brands them as dropouts and executes them. Just like society executed Meursault.

I finish my lesson by asking my students what they think Meursault would do if he exited prison? Most say he would marry Marie. Others say Meursault would break ties with the bad friends he made. Some say he would probably still make the same mistakes because some people never learn.

## CHAPTER III

### THE METAMORPHOSIS BY FRANZ KAFKA

“Above the desk, on which a collection of fabric samples was unpacked and spread out- Samsa was a traveling salesman-hung the picture that he had recently cut out of an illustrated magazine and put in a gilt frame. It showed a lady, sitting upright, dressed in a fur hat and fur boa; her entire forearm had vanished into a thick fur muff which she held out to the viewer” (Kafka 7).

I always tell my students every author carefully selects every detail he shares with his readers. When we first read *The Metamorphosis*, I tell them to pay close attention to the gilded frame in Gregor’s room. Then, I ask my students to look at their smart phones and tell me what picture they have as their screen saver. Some phones display a picture of family member, others a significant other, and some boast the picture of a famous celebrity. Usually, the individuals with a celebrity on their smartphone are single. I explain to the class how Gregor’s life is devoid of romance. His life is so devoted to his family that he never made time for himself. In addition, the frame is gilded, meaning it is fake gold. The whole picture represents the vision of what type of life Gregor envisioned for himself; the cockroach he transforms into represents the type of life he lives. I later reinforce my claim with the following quote:

“...then he saw on the otherwise barren wall opposite him the picture of the lady swathed in furs and quickly scramble up and pressed himself against the glass, a surface he could stick to and that soothed his heated belly. At the very least this picture, which Gregor now completely concealed, would be removed by no one” (Kafka 33).

Gregor’s family has given up on the idea of ever getting their son back to normal and start clearing his room. The one thing they cannot take out is the picture in the gilded frame; Gregor refuses to let the illusion go; it is all he has left. Gregor’s story exhorts individuals to transform their illusions into reality. I redirect the attention of the class to their screensavers once again. For those students that have an individual they know on their phone, I tell them to work hard everyday to keep the smile in the faces that appear in the pictures. For those that have a celebrity, I tell them to replace it with something more meaningful: a family member, a friend, or a place they have visited; replace the illusions with reality. If I feel the timing is appropriate, and I can trust my group’s maturity I share with them some variation of the following story, which I can share in full through this medium.

My high school love life can be summed up in one word: disappointment. Then again, nonexistent or even pitiful are also accurate. Girls all around me preferred me as a friend and not a lover. I have heard every phrase: I just see you as a friend; I do not want to lose you as a friend; I want to focus on school; I need to put God first in my life; I want to be single for a while. I always responded in the following way: a smile turned into a frown the moment I hugged them.

Every morning I looked at the mirror and inspected my slim and muscular body, wondering, “Why aren’t the girls chasing me like in the Axe commercials?” Two years of physical training with the MCJROTC (Marines Corps Junior Reserve Officer Training Corps) program at my High School paid off. Sadly, no exercise developed height, and I stayed at 5 foot

3 inches tall. If I found a girl I was interested in, I would buy them gifts: flowers, chocolates, and fantasy jewelry. I complimented them every chance I got and helped them any time they needed something. None of it worked, and I mainly fell for girls that were not interested in me. I realize now how pathetic I must have looked to some of those girls, but I reached my lowest point was when I was given the role of George Gibbs in Thornton Wilder's play *Our Town* during my senior year in high school.

In conjunction with the English classes, my school's theater department would do a live performance of Wilder's play, which was being read by the seniors. My English teacher promised extra points to anyone performing, and I auditioned for a part. Since not many boys showed up for the auditions, I was given the lead role. I felt like a star. After all, the lead role is the dream of every thespian. My excitement turned into dread as I started re-reading the play to memorize my lines.

The main scene from act two depicts the marriage between George Gibbs and Emily Webb, and the director decided the actress playing Emily and me kissing after the "I do" would add to the play's realism. Sadly, the director did not realize that would be my first kiss. There were plenty of hugs from the girls I pursued, but that is where they drew the line. Kisses on the lips were an intimate act I never enacted with any of my love interests.

During rehearsals, I eyed the Emily, played by a girl named Rosaline. Rosaline's beauty and charisma posed the real problem, because I grew to like her more and more through each rehearsal. She always made me laugh, and I felt at ease around her, especially when we held hands during rehearsal. I felt goose bumps and butterflies whenever we rehearsed lines, and I started imagining her words full of love were more than memorized lines from a play. I waited for the fateful first kiss that would signify the start of our love story.

The day we rehearsed our kissing scene arrived, and we faced each other, standing no more than 5 inches apart with the priest between us saying the ceremonial rites. As the scene of the wedding progressed, I held Rosaline's hands, hoping she did not notice mine were getting sweaty. I anxiously waited for the "I do." I arrived at the threshold of my first kiss. We both said, "I do," and I neared my lips toward hers. My first kiss resulted in a head-butt; a miscalculation on angle or speed perhaps? I felt a surge of embarrassment as I stared down at the floor and heard the unanimous laughter of the entire cast.

There were more rehearsals and three performances, and I did not fail anymore. I had my first kiss with Rosaline, and she turned into my fur coat lady in the gilded frame. Rosaline represented the romance I wanted to experience in high school. I wanted the love story we created to extend beyond our rehearsal time, but it never happened. Emily was in love with George, but Rosaline was not in love with Gabriel. With rehearsals over, Rosaline started going back to her real group of friends, and she distanced herself after the play. I never asked her out. Just like Gregor, the closest thing I had to a real girlfriend was in Wilder's play, and I held on to that illusion of Rosaline and me together until I finally got my real first kiss with Edna.

I teach *The Metamorphosis* to also exhort my students to aim for what they want for themselves, even if their own family and friends stand in their way. This mainly hits a chord with students with parents that do not want them to leave the Valley. While my student dreams of UT Austin, the parents dream UTRGV, the local university located in Edinburg, Texas. Although my entire education took place in that institution, I always encourage my students to leave if that is their goal, especially the female ones; there is more hesitance in this region to allow females to go off on their own to study. After all, Kafka gives readers a warning as to what happens to those that don't follow their goals.

“His thoughts full of tenderness and love, went back to his family. He was even more firmly convinced than his sister, if possible that he should disappear...Then his head sank involuntarily to the floor and his last feeble breath streamed from his nostril” (Kafka 48).

If I have done my job and invested my students into Gregor’s story, there is confusion mixed with anger within them. How could such a noble character suffer such a tragic ending? The answer is that he allowed his family to strip him of everything that made him human, especially his dreams. I tell my students to follow theirs and not become imprisoned by them.

## CHAPTER IV

### FAHRENHEIT 451 BY RAY BRADBURY

“Her face was like snow-covered island upon which rain might fall, but it felt no rain; over which clouds might pass their moving shadows, but she felt no shadow...The small crystal bottle of sleeping tablets which earlier today had been filled with thirty capsules and which now lay uncapped and empty in the light of the tiny flame...” (Bradbury 11).

In Bradbury’s dystopian novel, the first time we meet Mildred, the protagonist’s wife, she is overdosed on sleeping pills. Guy Montag, our protagonist, quickly calls for help, and strange men with strange machines perform a blood transfusion, pumping out all the drugs and replacing them with a serum that brings her back to life. As the novel progresses, we witness how dysfunctional the marriage of our protagonist is, which is amplified by another character named Clarisse. Clarisse embodies everything Mildred lacks: youth, vitality, and interest in Montag. As the novel progresses, they establish a friendship, and Montag starts finding interest in the small pleasure life offers. One of the most poignant moments being when Montag tastes the rain after watching Clarisse do it. Sadly, Clarisse suffers a tragic death, and Mildred nonchalantly tells Montag Clarisse got run over by a car a week after the incident.

Every now and then a student makes the following cringing comment at this point of the story, “Why couldn’t Mildred die instead?” The class is especially inclined to have Bradbury kill his character in the second part of the story, where we find out Mildred turns in Montag to the authorities and abandons him. It is at this point that I jump in to defend Mildred.

“That is his wife and a human being. Regardless of how their marriage is he will do everything to save her, because it is the correct thing. Have you lost someone dear to you? What would you do to bring that person back to life?”

Conversations usually end after that comment, but I usually teach this novel to 14 and 15 year olds. They want to be right, and they challenge my decision as they clamor for Mildred’s death. Most of the time I move on, and I rarely share this story with the entire class, but I share it with students that truly want to get a grasp why Montag wanted to save Mildred.

‘Gabriel, can you get on Skype?’

‘Sure. Give me a second. Everything ok?’

‘No, please hurry.’

I quickly found a quiet place on campus and opened up my laptop. Technology always fails when you need it the most, and, after a few tries, I finally started our video chat. She was at home, and she looked weary and depressed. Her eyes aimlessly looked at my direction.

“What’s wrong, Ashley?”

“I am tired. I am tired of everything. I am tired of feeling sad and crappy.”

“Why? Did you have a bad day? Did your ex tell you something again?”

“No, it’s just that I want to end it all, but I am scared.”

“What do you mean?”

“I am scared of trying again and failing. Gabriel...can you help me commit suicide?”

I saw the honesty in her eyes through the computer screen. Those gorgeous black eyes were aimlessly looking nowhere, and her soft voice showed me the exhaustion and grief tormenting her. I spent twenty minutes talking to the image in my laptop’s screen, explaining reasons to be alive and telling her about the brightness of her future.



My voice remained confident, but my hopes decreased with each word. She dismissed my comments and told me in a quiet and trembling voice,

“I am going to do it anyway, tomorrow even since I really do not want to go to school anymore, I just want to know if I can count on your help.”

“I have a meeting with a club in fifteen minutes. Can I please let you go, let me think about it and then give you an answer. Ok?”

She agreed, and I made her swear she would not do anything until I got back to her. Then, I started running. My body intuitively knew where to go. As I ran, I thought of all the signs I ignored.

The boy Ashley had been dating for the past three years had recently broken up with her to leave to another college, leaving Ashley in a lonely and depressive state. Despite my Herculean attempts at battling her depression, I only kept a smile on her face for a couple of seconds, and the only times I did see her happy was when she found an excuse to message her ex-boyfriend on Facebook.

“Who are you talking to?”

Her guilty expression told me everything.

“I am sorry. I will stop.”

I always found her sitting alone glued to her laptop messaging her ex, who did not want to get back with her. This information always perplexed me; why wouldn't he want to be with her? Through financial aid and personal sacrifices, Ashley enrolled herself in college. Her parents constantly neglected her, and she took the role of mother for her two younger sisters.

Being the hopeless romantic I was, I fell in love with the damsel in distress. I fell in love with her soft voice and became jealous of the strong affection she still held for her ex. Ashley

was in a world of suffering. I had to save her. Her life now rested in my hands. I stopped at the University Center building at UTPA. As I walked in, my counselor from one of my programs emerged from the elevator. I unknowingly ran towards her office, which had closed over an hour ago.

With her aid, we got in contact with the head psychiatrist at my university, who exited the elevator as I finished telling her my story. They asked for her address and phone number, both of which I knew by memory. At their insistence, I drove to her house and forced her to come with me to my dorm. She stayed with me the entire night, eating the ice cream I bought her. The psychiatrist instructed me to keep her company that night.

I received a call from a police officer the next afternoon.

“Hello, am I talking to Mr. Gabriel Torres?”

“Yes, who am I talking to?”

“This is the Police Department here at UTPA. We need to meet with Ashley, but we cannot get in contact with her. Do you know where we can find her?”

“I don’t know where she is, but I can find out. Why do you need to talk to her?”

“We just need to ask her a few questions about yesterday’s incident. We are on campus and just need to know where to meet her.”

“Can I call her, and call you back?”

“Very well, Mr. Torres. We will be waiting.”

I quickly called her.

“Hey Ashley, where are you?”

“I am here at the library. What happened?”

“Can you meet me at the library lobby?”

“Sure, I will be right down.”

I headed to the library and called the police officer.

“Hi, sir. Ashley is going to be at the library lobby.”

“Thank you very much, Mr. Torres. We are going to need to meet with her in private so please don’t approach her until we talk to her.”

I stopped dead in my tracks. I looked up, and the library doors were right in front of me.

“Ok, officer, I understand.”

I walked close to the glass pane next to the door. Ashley sat with her back against me, waiting for me. Two officers came in from the opposite door and approached her. They talked to her, and, then, took her through the opposite door. I called the police officer again, but he didn’t pick up anymore.

Ashley disappeared for a week. She did not pick up the phone, she didn’t answer my texts, and I did not know who to ask for her whereabouts. I visited the psychiatrist who originally helped me in hopes of getting an answer. The receptionist at the Psychological Services Office informed me I needed to make an appointment, but I explained my situation to her and gave her my name and Ashley’s. The receptionist left and came back telling me the psychiatrist wanted me to go in and talk to her.

“Thank you for coming, Gabriel. Sit down. I know you are worried about Ashley, but she is ok, don’t worry.”

“What happened? I just saw policemen taking her away. Where did they take her?”

“She refused to answer our calls and refused to talk to me. Since we feared for her life, we involved the authorities to screen her. Her parents and I decided it was best to send her to a psychiatric clinic in Harlingen to receive treatment.”

“What? Why? She said she was just kidding.”

“Even if she was kidding, we had to screen her. Our results showed she was serious.

Gabriel, you saved her life.”

To me it did not feel like it.

“Can I see her?”

“Sure, the clinic opens up for half an hour every Friday for visits. Here is the phone for the clinic if you want to talk to her.”

The clinic in Harlingen had one phone patients could receive calls from, and I called Ashley every night. Every Friday of the month she spent there, I drove from Edinburg to Harlingen visit her; the clinic allowed one hour supervised visits every Friday. The waiting room always contained visitors, but no one related to Cristina ever showed up. No one else visited her. Ashley displayed happiness when I called or visited her, but, once she was released, she started hating me. She blamed me for being sent to the clinic, but I understood the source of her change. The psychiatrist diagnosed her with a bipolar disorder, and, on her good days, she apologized for anything mean she said the day before. However, she started distancing herself.

The consequences of my actions haunted me for a while. After she was released from the clinic, I felt responsible for her happiness or unhappiness; I also wanted to date her. If I could date her, I could provide all the affection I felt she needed. I drove to her house one afternoon to ask her out, but she rejected me, stating I reminded her of a very unhappy time in her life. She also told me not to try again. Over the past two months she discovered she loved a friend of ours deployed with the marines and planned to date him soon. I had a lot of mixed feelings for her, and I drove home with the bouquet of roses I bought her.

*Fahrenheit 451* helped me put things in perspective many years after this incident, which is why I feel compelled to share this story with some of my students. Montag tried his best throughout the novel to save his wife, but his wife did not want to be saved. She wanted to continue to live in the senseless world she felt trapped in. At the end of the novel, Mildred is killed during a nuclear strike and Montag has to watch everything from afar. My students usually cheer when this happens.

I tried my best to help Ashley, but I could not help someone that does not want it. At least, she no longer wanted help from me. In addition, the individual you are trying to help has to also put their part in order for things to work, instead of trying to find the easy route out of their problems. That is why despite all of Montag's attempts Mildred still dies at the end.

I also share this anecdote and novel with students in toxic relationships. Some of my students' moods depend entirely on the mood of their partner. I am careful with what I shared with these students, since I prefer to send them to the counselor, but, on the occasions one of them opens up to me, I share my experiences with Ashley. Her bipolarity might have been the reason she tried to commit suicide, but it was her heartbreak that triggered those intentions. Then, I put my advice into practice; if they actively try to fix their problems, I provide as much support as I can; if they hear me but fail to carry out what needs to be done to fix things, I simply let them be, hoping they will remember my words when it most matters.

Students' problems are at times overwhelming. I help them as much as I can, but I am aware I will fail many times. I sometimes even have to do what Guy does at the end of the novel: walk towards a city full of debris in an attempt to help those left alive.

## CHAPTER V

### THE GREAT GATSBY BY F. SCOTT FITZGERALD

“And as I sat there brooding on the old, unknown world, I thought of Gatsby’s wonder when he first picked out the green light at the end of Daisy’s Dock. He had come a long way to this blue lawn, and his dream must have seemed so close that he could hardly fail to grasp it. He did not know that it was already behind him, somewhere back in that vast obscurity beyond the city, where the dark fields of the republic rolled on under the night” (Fitzgerald 180).

I teach *The Great Gatsby*, my favorite book, to my juniors, since it’s a book that requires a certain amount of maturity to read. However, I read the short story *The Chaser* by John Collier to my sophomores. In this short story, the protagonist purchases a love potion from a mysterious old man to make a girl fall in love with him. The name of the girl is mentioned only once in the story; if the student was not reading carefully, it is a piece of information that is easily missed. Thus, I always ask the name of the girl in the test. During the review before the test, I always make the same comment, “Remember, the girl has the same name as my ex-girlfriend from college.”

Thanks to that piece of information from my personal life, they always get the question right during the test. One year, I had a class that refused to let me teach unless I shared the story of the only girlfriend I ever mentioned to them. After all, they were always coming to me for relationship advice, and they wanted to know what type of relationships I had been in. Thus, I shared with them a concise version of the following story.

I spent my first two years in college as part of the Student Government Association (SGA), where I served as Chief Justice and a mentor for incoming protégés. For those unacquainted with the program, it is the college version of student council, and it is structured after our own government. We have three houses: the Executive branch composed of a yearly elected student President and Vice-President, the Legislative branch composed of yearly elected student Senators, and the Judicial branch composed by the Chief Justices, who are selected by the President. However, you can only apply after your first semester in college, which is why The First Year Internship Program (FYI) was created. In the FYI Program, college freshmen are paired with a mentor that will guide them through the program to see if they are interested in it once they are able to enroll. Thus, students enrolled in the program get a taste of SGA without having to deal with all the responsibilities attached. I was a mentor for both semesters of my sophomore year.

My story begins the second semester of my sophomore year, where we all met in the first floor lobby of the University Center building. The program director of the FYI Program welcomed the newly selected protégés and told them she paired them with a mentor. One by one, she called the name of the protégé and mentor.

“Gertrude, you will be paired up with Gabriel. Introduce yourself and get to know each other.”

My eyes dilated the moment I faced her. Although it was frowned upon, there was no rule against protégés and mentors dating, as long as it was after the program ended. We had many cases where protégés and mentors dated after the program. Thus, I had no qualms about my immediate attraction towards Gertrude.

“Hi, I am Gabriel Torres. I am a Computer Science Major, and I am also the Chief Justice for the Student Government Association. What can you tell me about yourself?”

“My name is Gertrude, and I am a pre-medical biology major. I come from Torreon, Coahuila.”

I immediately switched the conversation to Spanish cracking up witty comments. I could not get enough of her smile. Her melodious accent enamored me, and her voice softened up when she talked in Spanish.

I started our first week as mentor and protégé with a tour of campus. She probably already knew all this information, but I needed an excuse to walk around with her. I took her to a theater production at UTPA, where I realized she enjoyed theater as much as I did. I invited her to dinner at the school cafeteria, and we “accidentally” stumbled on a school dance across from the cafeteria.

We went into the University Center building, which an organization transformed into a dance floor. Blasting Latino music hit us as the sliding doors opened. We danced the night away, and, as we sat exhausted and sweaty from dancing, I knew I encountered perfection.

She graduated from the program in early May, and I asked her out on our first date. She said yes. We ate at a burger place in McAllen called Fuddruckers. As agreed, we each brought our old high school yearbooks to share stories from before we knew each other. I wanted to know everything about her; we learned about our friends, our parents, our favorite memories growing up, and our hopes for the future. After eating our burgers, I drove her to the McAllen Convention Center. We held hands the entire drive, and Gertrude and I waltzed down the halls of the corridors created by the pillars of the McAllen Convention Center.



I wanted her to be my girlfriend immediately, but she wanted to spend the summer getting to know each other better. We promised to keep in touch, and I kissed her on the third column away from the newly constructed McAllen Performing Arts Center. As I kissed her, I held on to her waist. We shared the kiss of two people who desperately wanted to be with each other. We talked everyday, but I did not see her until after the summer break.

Gertrude returned at the beginning of my junior year in college, and I got in my best suit: sneakers, blue jeans, and an American Eagle shirt. I bought a bouquet of flowers and rode my 2005 Ford Focus towards her house, ready to claim her heart. Gertrude's 2007 Golden Rav4 Toyota with dinosaur license plates made my heart flutter. I called her.

"Gertrude, I am here. Come out already."

"Going."

I turned off the car and stood at the other end of the gravel path connecting her doorstep and the street. She came out, and she looked like a star walking down the red carpet as she headed towards me. As she got closer I got one knee.

"Gertrude, would you be my girl..."

"No, don't do that. Get up. Yes, yes, yes, I will be your girlfriend."

We kissed: our first kiss as boyfriend and girlfriend. Once school started, I never allowed her to leave without giving her one last good kiss. Our bliss lasted for only a couple of months.

In November, clouds formed in the horizon one Friday morning. Gertrude and I started our day with another small argument, and she wanted to talk after one of her club's meeting. After the meeting, we met at the student union, and we walked towards my car. We shared small talk along the way, but we didn't hold hands. My dragging feet contrasted with her hurried steps. The clouds started getting darker as we approached her car. I stopped and faced her.

“What is wrong, Gertrude?”

“I give up.”

Her tears combined with mine, and the heavens joined us. The sudden rain poured upon our unhappiness, and something magical happened.

“I think we should break up.”

The moment the last syllable exited her lips a clap of thunder echoed throughout the parking lot. Gertrude added, “How appropriate.”

We broke up. From one moment to the next, our relationship came to an end. I could not understand why Gertrude was giving up, and confusion and grief plagued me from the moment she spoke those words.

All my students know the name Gertrude by the end of their sophomore year. Thus when I read *The Great Gatsby* and I talk about how Daisy was Gatsby’s true love, they always bring Gertrude up to tease me. My AP English III class in which I teach the book is always very small, since the students here abhor the idea of taking an advanced English course. Thus, I share with them the second part of my story when we start talking about Tom, the man Daisy married instead of Gatsby.

Two months after our breakup, I comfortably sat down to eat Chick-Fil-A at the Student Union. From my table you could see the chapel across the mowed green lawn, and the different people walking under the covered walkway. A beautiful spring view with a blazing sun spreads out before me like *A Sunday Afternoon on the Island of La Grande Jatte*. Everyone smiles, including Gertrude, and the guy she walks next to.

The piece of chicken I placed in my mouth lost its flavor. The sudden loss of appetite made my stomach churn, and my hands started trembling. Gertrude promenaded alongside

Claudius. Claudius wore a black suit and tie; he dressed professionally since he carried the position of President for the Student Government Association. Gertrude wore a light brown zipper jacket and blue jeans. The way she looked at Claudius reveals a newfound intimacy. Their bodies are relaxed as they walk closely together. She says a joke, and they start laughing.

The table at the Student Union disappears, and I am transported to the month before our break up. I am driving Gertrude home. The dark October night requires me to drive carefully, but I drive with only one hand. My right hand caresses Gertrude's hands. Gertrude places her head on my arm, and I feel her warmth.

"Gertrude, do you think we'll be together for a long time?"

"Why do you ask that?"

"Well, things have not been going so well between us lately. I am scared of losing you."

"Losing me. To whom?"

"I don't know. Claudius. I noticed he tries to talk to you every time he can. Now that his girlfriend broke up with him, he probably wants to be with you."

"You are afraid I will start dating Claudius?"

"Yes."

"Don't worry. I will never date Claudius."

She sealed her promise with a kiss.

I shook these memories off my mind and prepared to leave for my dorm. I headed to the nearest trashcan to dispose of my leftovers, and, since I am a masochist, I exited the Union and followed the path Gertrude and Claudius took. I exited just in time to see them take a left turn into the University Center.

When I first read *The Great Gatsby* as a high school student, I didn't understand it. I had not been in a meaningful relationship or had my heart broken. I actually re-read *The Great Gatsby* after my heartbreak, and the novel transfigured itself something beautiful and cathartic. I got it. I knew why Gatsby dedicated every single day of his life to one day be with Daisy again. I understood the uneasiness Tom's presence caused him, and the shock he must have felt when he saw Pammy, Daisy's and Tom's daughter, for the first time. I went through all those emotions with my break-up. If Claudius and I ever walked past each other, he would cough, teasing me with his glory. On one occasion, Claudius and Gertrude sat two tables in front of me at the Student Union while I ate. The Student Union was empty that day. Gertrude appeared uncomfortable the entire time, while Claudius would not stop smirking. Every time Tom appeared on the page, I imagined Claudius; Claudius was just as cocky as Tom.

Then, I heard Gertrude started leaving Claudius' apartment late at night. My imagination ran wild with what they could possibly be doing. I know exactly what was going through Gatsby's mind when he saw Daisy's daughter.

I share these stories with my kids, and it gives them a more personal connection to the book. With the trust I deposit on them, they start sharing their own problems with love. They start sharing similar scenarios like those that occur in the novel. For many it might appear my students and I crossed the boundary between educator and student, but literature is meant to connect souls. I am teaching them the real value of reading a good piece of literature, and my experiences and Gatsby's are nurturing them. One year, one of my girls went through a breakup as we were reading the following passage from the book:

“ ‘They're such beautiful shirts,’ she sobbed, her voice muffled in the thick folds. ‘It makes me sad because I've never seen such—such beautiful shirts before’ ” (Fitzgerald 92).

My student burst into tears. She understood exactly why Daisy was crying. In that moment, she did what most high school students are unable to do: be moved by a piece of literature. Several girls started crying after, and I started crying with them.

I tell my students to read it again in college, promising them that it will have new meaning. I re-read the book every year, and I find something new every time. My students always ask what happened to Gertrude and Claudius. I tell them that they eventually broke-up, and she is now happy with someone else. Meanwhile I am like Gatsby, living in the memory of the love we once shared.

We eventually dig deeper into the symbols in the novel, and we start talking about the green light at the edge of Daisy's house, which Gatsby watches intently every night. My post-breakup stories once again come in handy to explain the meaning of that light when I start talking about Gertrude's car: the golden Toyota Rav 4 with dinosaur license plates. (Coahuila is a famous fossil site in Mexico.)

Every time I saw a golden Toyota Rav 4, I became a dog chasing cars. I darted through traffic, cutting people off and ignoring speed limits. If the car turned towards a direction outside my route, I followed it, regardless of how late I might arrive to my appointments. I needed to reach the car. The engine moaned as the weight of my foot crushed the pedal, and I reached it. The license plates were always American with no dinosaurs.

Some nights, I drove to a place where I knew I was no longer welcomed. I entered a familiar neighborhood through the side of the street I could easily exit if spotted. I slowed down as I approached Gertrude's house. No golden Toyota. It was past 11:00 p.m., and she was still with Claudius. I always had to drop her off home by 10.

I wanted to see her, and I wanted her to see me. Sadly, the only way I could see her was when I saw her walking on campus, but Claudius always escorted her. Driving was the only time I could see her alone. Thus, her car transformed into my green light. If only I could reach it, I would be able to be with her. The green light showed Gatsby how close he was to Daisy. If Gatsby could only reach her, he knew they would work things out and be together again.

Once we reach the end of our tragic novel, there are shouts of anguish and confusion in my classroom. The students weep over Gatsby and, just like they wish Mildred's death, they now start asking for Daisy's head in a silver platter. They always make the same comments.

"I am going to die alone."

"There is no such thing as love. Why do you make us read these things?"

"How could she do that to him? He loved her so much."

"Love is complicated but not always. I actually met a Gatsby that was able to be with his Daisy."

My students always look intently at me as I share with them a final story.

I headed to the wedding wearing a black suit, turquoise shirt and tie. I exited the hotel in Laredo, entered my Ford Focus, and drove towards the church. I took my place next to my friends, and we waited for the ceremony to start.

An orchestra played Pachelbel's Canon, and Beto, alongside his parents walked down the aisle towards the altar. Close behind Beto came Melba, Beto's high school sweetheart who he had a 5-year long distance relationship with. They had known each other since infancy: Beto's sister was Melba's best friend, and the two families were very close. In addition, the timing of the wedding could not have been more perfect. Melba earned an acceptance to a dental program in Houston, where Beto was finishing his first year of medical school. A future dentist and a future

doctor married each other to support one another in the most challenging part of their academic lives. How more perfect could that be? It was the wedding friends and family anxiously waited since the inception of their relationship.

As I watched them exchanging vows, I thought of Gertrude but realized our love could never rival theirs. We only lasted a couple of months and spent all the time together. Beto and Melba lasted over five years, and they were physically separated. Despite their distance, they never cheated on each other or did anything to put their love in danger.

The church erupted in applause when the ‘I do’ was spoken. Amongst our group, we had a saying: ‘If Beto and Melba ever break up, then there is no hope for anyone. Love is dead.’ Thus, the night erupted into a celebration of true love and happily ever after.

“See, class. All you have to do is find someone that loves you as much as Gatsby loved Daisy and avoid any Toms that come along. It will take time, but the love described in this book is possible to achieve.”

Whenever I can, I use my students heartaches and my own stories to attract them to literature. I introduce them to a love story they can relate to, and I give them hope of someday finding someone that loves him/her as much as Gatsby loved him. All of this is done as I fulfill my duties as an English teacher, because I not let my students to be distracted from their personal growth by individuals who do not appreciate them.

## CHAPTER VI

### A.E. HOUSMAN AND THOMAS HARDY

“ ‘Is my girl happy,  
That I thought hard to leave,  
And has she tired of weeping  
As she lies down at eve?’

Ay, she lies down lightly,  
She lies not down to weep:  
Your girl is well contented.  
Be still, my lad, and sleep.

‘Is my friend hearty,  
Now I am thin and pine,  
And has he found to sleep in  
A better bed than mine?’

Yes, lad, I lie easy,  
I lie as lads would choose;  
I cheer a dead man’s sweetheart,  
Never ask me whose.’ ”  
(Houseman 38-39)

Whenever I teach Housman’s poem to my classes I always focus on the last four stanzas, since it provides me the opportunity to help them connect to the text. The poem itself deals with the answers to a question many individuals have at some point or another in their life: what is going to happen when I die? Housman states that at the end of our lives the world only stops for us. People will learn to accept our death and move on with their life. Housman’s poetry however also contains a dark outcome for the recent deceased: his closest friend has married his widow. As I give my interpretation to the class, I arouse in my students the same indignation I feel at this



act of betrayal. My student's chime in with stories of cheating ex-boyfriends or ex-girlfriends, and they start throwing accusations at the widow's lack of fidelity towards the dead husband.

Once I sparked my students interest, I move on to the next poem; I read to them Hardy's "Ah, are you digging on my grave?" I direct their attention to the last stanza.

"Mistress, I dug upon your grave  
To bury a bone, in case  
I should be hungry near this spot  
When passing on my daily trot.  
I am sorry, but I quite forgot  
It was your resting-place."  
(Greenblatt 2325)

This time the person buried is the wife, and, as she feels her grave being stirred, she questions who has taken the time to visit her. She wonders if it's her lover, a family member or, an enemy. The visitor is none other than her loyal dog. The narrator finds solace in the dog's identity, because she feels there is at least one being that has not forgotten her. However, the dog confesses it only dug in that spot to bury a bone; the world had moved on and forgotten her. To tie in the two poems I also ask the class what happened with the widower. They quickly point out the first stanza of the poem.

" 'Ah, are you digging on my grave  
My loved one?--planting rue?'  
--No; yesterday he went to wed  
One of the brightest wealth has bred.  
'It cannot hurt her now,' he said,  
That I 'should not be true.' "  
(Greenblatt 2324)

Once again, indignation fills my classroom. Whenever we have class discussions on a piece of literature, I don't need my students to raise their hands to express his/her interpretation of the piece; it dampers the flow of the conversation. The only exception is when they start arguing with each other. I stop the class and have them talk one by one.

“The girl barely died, and he moved on with another girl. That is why I prefer to be single.”

One of my girls exclaims loudly.

“Guys are the worst.”

Another girl in the class agrees. My students may not get along outside of the classroom, but I always manage to get them to unite when we talk about literature.

“Don’t forget that in the first poem the one to move on is the wife. It’s not always the guys.”

One of the boys quickly defends the males. Whenever I can, I make the same commentary after every time we interpret the story.

“At least they waited until she was dead.”

The class starts laughing. I love being a teacher because I finally have an audience for my lame jokes and witty comments. Some laugh out of respect, some laugh because they find my comments genuinely funny, and others laugh because they know their grade depends on me. Whatever the case is, I am glad to finally have an audience from which I can get a reaction other than the blank stares my friends sometimes give me. I then follow up my comment with a concise version of the following story.

Every Thursday, the nightclub Hillbilly’s filled up with college students hoping to release stress through dancing and beer. Georgette and I emerged out of my car dressed in plaid shirts, jeans, and cowboy boots. We walked in and looked for her friends, which formed a tight group by the dance floor. I courteously greeted everyone; I needed to make a good first impression.

I immediately took Georgette to the dance floor. As we danced, I tentatively touched her white skin exposed in the gap between her plaid shirt and jean shorts and it sent shivers up my

arm. Her wavy hair moved gracefully as I looked at her two black beady eyes through her glasses. We two-stepped throughout the dance floor, and I twirled her every chance I could, because it made her smile. It was during one of those twirls that I immediately distinguished Ashley.

“What are you looking at?”

“Nothing. Seeing if there is anyone familiar.”

I needed to be careful, but my eyes refused to leave Ashley. I constantly caught glimpses of her through the gaps in the crowd, drinking happily with a group of people I didn't recognize. The identity of the only guy in her group intrigued me, because they kept sharing smiles. Every time Georgette and I took a break from dancing, they appeared close to one another. According to her Facebook, Mike had asked her to marry him a couple of months ago, and they were engaged. I did not see Mike anywhere. Dark lights and my poor vision prevented me from watching them closely, and the loud music prevented me from eaves dropping.

“What is he doing here with her?”

One of Georgette's friends aggressively pointed to Ashley and the mystery guy. Her red face blended with her orange red hair.

“What's wrong?”

Georgette approached her.

“We broke up like a month ago, and he is with her now. Not only that. They actually moved in together.”

I interjected and directed my question at Georgette's friend.

“She is engaged? Are you sure?”

“Gabriel, how do you know her?”

Georgette looked at me accusingly.

“I know her and her fiancée since middle school.”

Georgette’s friend was livid as she spoke the next words.

“He would. That bastard doesn’t give a shit as long as he gets what he wants.”

The club closed at 2 a.m. and Ashley walked out in front of me holding hands with the guy. As they walked, she leaned in closer to him. Georgette and I entered my car and observed them through my rearview mirror. They stopped in the middle of the parking lot. She jumped in his arms, and he carried her to his car and drove away.

“Gabriel, is she really engaged?”

“Yes. Her name is Ashley, and she is engaged to a friend of mine who is currently deployed in Afghanistan. He is a Marine. We were never close, but he is someone I have known since Middle School. Ay, Georgette, the guy loves her.”

“Poor guy.”

“What do you think? Should I tell him?”

For the next 24 hours, the question I asked Georgette gnawed my mind. Mike also supported her after exiting the mental health clinic in Harlingen. He was supposed to be the reason why she finally got over her ex and could be happy again. Why was she cheating on him? After all, another reason that she broke up with me was because she fell in love with Mike. My laptop enticed me; Facebook Messenger would deliver the truth to Mike in a matter of seconds. I stared at the cursor, debating whether to tell Mike his fiancée betrayed him. Was I going to interfere once again with this girl’s life? I closed the laptop and held my peace.

“Torres, you never told your friend?”

I am back at my classroom, and I look at my students expecting faces.

“Of course not. I did what the best friend in the first poem and the dog in the second should have done from the beginning: say nothing. The person is already resting in peace. Why disturb them when they could rest in ignorant bliss?”

“Are they still together?”

“I don’t know. The poem doesn’t tell us.”

“No, Torres. I mean is your friend still married with the girl.”

“According to what I see on Facebook, they are happily married. Thus, I think I did the right thing. I had no right to break their happiness.”

Even though I am a teacher, I often end up learning more from my students than they learn from me. One year I was interpreting this set of poems to a class that included a student who was raised in Syria. As I started condemning the widow and best friend from Houseman’s poem, my student raised his hand.

“Mr. Torres. He is not a bad friend; he must be a really great friend.”

All my instincts told me to interrupt him. I was about to get my students to relate to this poem, but a good teacher knows when to listen to his students. It is another important way to seize a teaching moment.

“Really? Please, explain yourself.”

“Well, from where I am, the widow is defenseless after her husband dies. If the best friend marries her is out of love for that friend that has died. He is taking responsibility to look after the women left behind by his best friend.”

The class was silent. My jaw must have dropped. I had been so trapped in my personal experiences that I could not find another interpretation to either poem. However, a boy who was fifteen years old taught me a new interpretation of a poem I had read since high school.

“You are totally right. Remember what I said, if you can support your interpretation then it is correct. Maybe that is not the author’s original intention, but I like that outcome better than the one I was about to share with the class.”

Since then, I always include his interpretation whenever I teach this poem. Things are not always what they appear, and, in the classroom, the teacher in the classroom is not always the person holding an English degree.

## CHAPTER VII

### LYSISTRATA BY ARISTOPHANES

“Lysistrata: All right, then: Women! Sisters! If we really want our men to make peace, we must be ready to give up—

Myrrhine: Give up what? Quick, tell us!

Lysistrata: But will you?

Myrrhine: We will, even if it kills us.

Lysistrata: Then we must give up going to bed with our men.

(Long silence.)

Oh? So now you’re sorry? Won’t look at me? Doubtful? Pale? All teary-eyed? But come: be frank with me. Will you do it, or not? Well? Will you do it?

Myrrhine: I couldn’t. No. Let the war go on” (Lee 169).

My class exploded in laughter as they watched a recorded performance of *Lysistrata*. As the first act ended, they were surprised to see me emerge from the curtain and bow with the actors. I tell them I adapted the first scene of Aristophane’s play for a directing class I needed for my Theater Minor. I re-play the video, telling them why I coordinated them the way I did. I tell them of how my stomach turned when my Lysistrata forgot her lines in the middle of the performance, and, as I closed the video, I thought of how different I was from the Gabriel that had just bowed on stage.

My job has been a blessing since the beginning. I graduated in 2015 with a BA in English and a teacher certification from the state of Texas. Despite these successes, I entered limbo. June transpired, and I could not find a job. I got an acceptance from UTRGV's MFA Program in Creative Writing, but I only had around \$3,000 left in my savings from my scholarships. I could pay for one semester, but I would find myself with no job and no money. I applied at McAllen ISD at the end of May, but I had heard nothing from them. My days were spent on the couch waiting for a phone call from McAllen ISD, spending afternoons talking with Mercutio in his front porch, and avoiding my mother's questions concerning my future.

My mother urged me to apply to districts outside McAllen, but I wanted to work at my old high school. My mother complained that life never goes according to plan; even if I managed to get accepted to McAllen ISD, the chances were slim I would be offered a job exactly where I wanted. As children, we love to prove our parents wrong.

One afternoon, I sat on my couch deciding what to do with my day. Suddenly, my cell phone started ringing.

"Hello?"

"Hi, is this Gabriel Torres?"

"Yes, who am I talking to?"

"This is Mrs. Pena. I am the principal from Lamar Academy. Are you still looking for a job as an English Teacher?"

"Yes."

"That is great. When can you come by to see if this somewhere where you want to work?"

"I can go tomorrow?"



I arrived early the next morning. It was the first time I arrived to Lamar in my own car. I went through the back entrance; the same entrance I always used as a high school student there.

I approached the secretary in the front office.

“Hi, my name is Gabriel Torres. I came to see Mrs. Pena.”

“Hi, mijito.”

Mrs. Pena walked towards me. A lady in her 50’s dressed comfortably in slacks and a blouse. Her smile widened under her glasses.

“Hi, Mrs. Pena. Do you remember me? I graduated from the IB program 4 years ago.”

“Of course, that is why I wanted to offer you a job with us.”

“At the IB program?”

“No, we don’t have any vacancies there, but I wanted to offer you a job at our Options program.”

“What is that?”

“Well, it is a credit recovery program. You mainly have to work with at risk students who are attempting to graduate. For many of them, we are the last safety net before they drop out. It is also a self-paced program where you mostly guide instead of lecture.”

I had hoped she offered me a job at the IB program, but I needed the money.

“I am very interested. When can I have a formal interview?”

“What are you talking about? Just say yes and you’re hired.”

“Really? Yes, please.”

I started my first year by teaching a class that prepares sophomores to challenge The State of Texas Assessment of Academic Readiness (STAAR) for English II. Just like Mrs. Pena promised, my classes are mainly composed of at risk students who were behind three or four

grade reading levels. Every now and then, they place a senior who has attempted to take the exam multiple times to see if I can help him/her when all the other teachers failed; most of the time, they just need to be shown someone believes in them, and my pedagogical methods give fruits when they get a passing score in the exam.

During my second year, I became the teacher of an English III AP class, since I was the only one of my co-workers that volunteered to teach the class. These classes are always small since I handpick each student, and there is very little motivation from the students in general to do anything more than the bare minimum to graduate. I always pick the lumps of coal that I will pressure for a year to become diamonds. I still teach both classes with great pleasure.

However, the best part of my job is that I have complete control of my classroom. In most public schools, teachers are accountable to turn in lesson plans to a supervisor, usually to a veteran teacher or an administrator. Also, teachers are instructed to teach the same things at the same time according to their grade level, regardless of whether they agree with the material being taught or not. However, my principal gives me creative freedom as long as I raise our students' test scores, and my co-workers are too busy with their own classes to care about what I do in mine. Thus, I teach whatever I deem is best for my students.

It is customary in my district to teach *Romeo and Juliet* or *The Tragedy of Julius Caesar*, but my students hate Shakespeare. They constantly whine about not understanding old English, even though I constantly remind them the correct term is Elizabethan English. Thus, I teach *Lysistrata* by Aristophanes, which has a much more appealing story than the other two.

*Lysistrata* is a Greek comedy that tells the story of how the women of Greece banded together to convince the men of opposing city-states, mainly Sparta and Athens, to stop their on-going war. They vow to stop having sex with their husbands until they form a truce and cease the

war. My female students love the play because of the strong female protagonist; my male students love all the dirty jokes.

As we read it, students constantly make fun of the phallic symbols they learn to interpret, and the girls argue against the stereotypes set against them. (The first act talks extensively about girls taking too long to get ready to go out. Apparently this stereotype can be traced back to ancient times.) In addition, I always assign a character to each of my students and settle disputes when there is an argument over who gets the lead. The years I have a couple in class gives me the perfect opportunity to cast the girl as Myrrhine and the boy as Kinesias, Myrrhine's husband; there is a hilarious scene in Act 3 where Kinesias attempts all manner of sweet talk to sleep with his wife; he is unsuccessful. As we read, I see them giggling, adding their own inappropriate comments at times, and I remember Mercutio and I during our undergrad years. I remember how immature we were at some not so long ago point in our lives.

"Gabriel, there are two types of guys," Mercutio explained to me as he looked down from the bed he propped himself on. I sat on a beanbag chair on the floor, ready to take note of anything he said.

"You are either a fisher or a hunter. If you are fisher, that is fine. That is respectable. You patiently wait for the one fish you want from the sea. You might get lucky and get it, but, in the time you are waiting for that fish, others might swim by you. That's why I am a hunter. I run around the forest with a loaded shotgun. Firing at any doe in sight. Things have not been going good, Gabriel, but I will eventually hit something. That is why it is important not to waste time. There are so many girls, I am bound to get lucky."

Neither Mercutio nor I caught a single fish or killed any doe our first year of college, but it has become a great story we can laugh at as we reminisce about the past; the only one that does not find that story funny is Mercutio's fiancée. Although we were much older than my students when that conversation transpired, we were no different. We all laugh at the subject matter that has become taboo over the ages. Thankfully my students like what is taboo and their immaturity attracts them to it. I remember a conversation I had with a student of mine named Christian.

"Torres, I want to have a son. If not, I want my daughter to be ugly."

"Why do you want her to be ugly, Christian?"

"So that no guy wants to sleep with her."

"What if she is beautiful?"

"I also thought of that. I am going to name her Tom."

"Tom?"

"Yeah, here is why. Why do guys sleep with girls? They want to collect trophies and brag about them. However, no guy will ever say, 'Guys, I slept with Tom.' His friends will ridicule him."

"I am glad you think that way. A parent must always protect their children. I don't need any. I already have all of you to look after."

Apart from using my students' immaturity over tabooed subject matter to get them to read, I have another motive behind openly discussing sex in my classroom. The Options Program takes in the pregnant teenagers of our district. These are the students I invest my full time and attention to. Some are not ashamed to flaunt their round bellies, but some are ashamed and feel like they have been sent to Options to hide their misfortune. It is important for me to create a classroom environment where they know they are accepted and not shunned.

I realized the importance of this when a student named Thelma arrived to our program. She was quiet and did not interact with any of the other students. In addition, she always wore a long black coat inside and outside the classroom, despite the high temperatures of the Valley. Thelma was hiding, and she came everyday to my classroom during lunch. She felt safe in my room and wanted to avoid any possible comments or stares she might get from other students. Without her knowledge, I instructed a group of girls, who had already noticed her pregnancy, to keep an eye out for her and tell me if anyone made her feel uncomfortable. According to Thelma and the girls I set up as her guard, no one ever did.

She eventually opened up to me about the details around her pregnancy; thankfully, it was not a tragic story. The baby was a result of unprotected sex with her boyfriend, who she is still happily with. She knew I would not condemn her. However, there is still a prevalent stigma involving pregnancy before marriage, and, through the literature I share with them, I plan to make sure none of my students enforce it.

After her graduation, Thelma invited me to her son's baptism, and I presented the little baby named Iker his first picture book. There is a purpose behind every piece of literature I share with my readers and students. *Lysistrata* helps me create a more tolerant environment over a subject matter to which some of my students might be susceptible. Students need to feel safe in the classroom. I have learned to use literature as an instruction tool and a means to protect my students.

## CHAPTER VIII

### HEMINGWAY'S NICK ADAMS

“Nick went back and lay down with his face in the blanket by the fire. He could hear Marjorie rowing on the water.

He lay there for a long time. He lay there while he heard Bill come into the clearing walking around through the woods. He felt Bill coming up to the fire. Bill didn't touch him, either.

‘Did she go all right?’ Bill said.

‘Yes,’ Nick said, lying, his face on the blanket.

‘Have a scene?’

‘No, there wasn't any scene.’

‘How do you feel?’

‘Oh, go away, Bill! Go away for a while.’

Bill selected a sandwich from the lunch basket and walked over to have a look at the rods” (Hemingway 82).

I always teach Hemingway to my AP English III class from the very beginning, and I always focus on the Nick Adams stories. The brevity of these stories make them appealing to my students, and it introduces them to the world of interpretation, since they have to decipher what Hemingway is hiding under the surface.

*The End of Something* is one of the few stories my students will continue to remember by the end of the year, because it deals with a breakup. The story revolves around an adolescent narrator named Nick Adams, who breaks up with his girlfriend Marjorie. At the end of the story, the reader learns that Nick had been planning to break up with Marjorie for a while now and finally mustered the courage to do it; the reader can also assume Bill influenced Nick to carry on with the break up, which gives an opportunity to my female students to talk about the snakes their boyfriends choose as friends. I mainly use this story to teach foreshadowing, and, after reading it once, we go back and talk about all the small actions Nick did to hint at readers that he was going to break up with Marjorie. Then, I follow the story with Hemingway's *The Three Day Blow*.

“ ‘So long as it’s over that’s all that matters,’ Bill said. ‘I tell you, Wemedge, I was worried while it was going on. You played it right. I understand her mother is sore as hell. She told a lot of people you were engaged.’

‘We weren’t engaged,’ Nick said.

‘It was all around that you were.’

‘I can’t help it,’ Nick said. ‘We weren’t.’

‘Weren’t you going to get married?’ Bill asked.

‘Yes. But we weren’t engaged,’ Nick said.

‘What’s the difference?’ Bill asked judicially.

‘I don’t know. There’s a difference.’

‘I don’t see it,’ said Bill.

‘All right,’ said Nick. ‘Let’s get drunk.’

‘All right,’ Bill said. ‘Let’s get really drunk’” (Hemingway 89).

After reading both stories, the students understand the following thing: Nick broke up with Marjorie influenced by Bill and Nick regrets it. Thus, the two adolescent bachelors are spending three days drunk to forget their problems. My female students always end up hating Bill, and my male readers start thinking of who is the Bill in their life. Every so often, one of my female students comes seeking comfort after their soul mate broke up with them. My response is usually:

“Be patient. He will come back for you. Guys usually do. However, you will decide at that point if he deserves to be given a second chance, and you will have to accept the consequences of that decision. Meanwhile, show him how good you are without him, or find someone else.”

Whenever one of my male students comes and tells me their girlfriend broke up with them, I tell them:

“What did you do?”

They explain to me the problem.

“Sorry, she is not coming back. Move on and find someone else.”

In my experience as a high school teacher, my female students are more fragile than my male ones. There is a high chance my boys will bounce back from a broken heart by the next week, while I have seen some of my girls cry over the same guy for months. My students are in my program to graduate; there is not time to waste on broken hearts. Thus, I am supportive of my female students, whereas I give my male students tough love.

However, my students complain about my sage words of advice, and I bring up Hemingway’s stories as examples. I show them how Nick immediately regretted breaking up with Marjorie and is planning on how he is going to get her back. Then, I ask the most important



question: do you think Marjorie is going to take him back? That is one story Hemingway never wrote. We never see Nick planning how he is going to win Marjorie back nor do we get to listen to Marjorie's response. However, we never see Marjorie again. Thus, it can be assumed he tried, and she rejected him.

Even after my sermon, some students are not convinced, and it is with them that I share the following story that takes place after Gertrude broke up with me.

Mercutio, Benvolio, and I found ourselves single on Valentine's Day. Refusing to host an alone anti-Valentine's Day party, I urged Mercutio to organize a night out; Mercutio texted Benvolio. The three of us agreed to meet in Downtown McAllen: the place to mingle when you are single. Downtown bustled with so many people that it was impossible to distinguish between couples and single individuals; the ideal place for us to blend in. Mercutio and I arrived in his Chevy truck, since he insisted my Ford Focus would not attract enough female attention.

"So what's the plan, Mercutio?"

"Well, Benvolio is on his way, and I texted a girl I met in my classes. She promised she would bring her friends and we could all hang out together. Lets go to one of the clubs and wait for Benvolio."

We entered an obscured bar area, and, after my senses adapted to their surroundings, I started hunting, as Mercutio liked to say. Who appeared single? Did anyone have wedding rings? We found our way to the back, which led to an open space area with a live band. Mercutio and I sat without ordering anything to drink; we were saving our money to impress girls. Benvolio walked in a few minutes later.

“What’s up guys? What’s the plan?”

“Sup, Benvolio. I invited some girls to hang out with us, bro. They should get here any minute.”

“You guys are not going to drink anything.”

“Nah, bro. I don’t really want to drink.”

“I am going to wait for the girls.”

Sitting between them, I realize fate brought Mercutio, Benvolio, and me together. A few weeks before Gertrude broke up with me, Benvolio had broken up with his girlfriend, and another girl rejected Benvolio the week before. Three lonely guys brought together by their ambition to rid themselves of that loneliness; what a pitiful trinity. Nevertheless, I refused to give up hope. Benvolio went back to the bar to get drinks for the three of us; Mercutio promised we would meet some new girls; the band started playing a song I liked. The night started to become very promising. A few minutes passed and Benvolio came back.

“So what about the girls?”

“I just texted my friend again, but she hasn’t answered.”

The band played several songs until I finally asked Mercutio again, “Mercutio, if they are not coming, then lets just go to another place and invite girls to a drink.”

“Ok.”

We walked up and down the street, looking for a place that did not ask for a cover charge. We finally arrived at one and started surveying the field. Now that I think about it, we must have looked ridiculous: three guys standing around with baby faces that contrasted with slacks and button up shirts; we looked more like high school seniors attending a school dance than college seniors attempting to woo a woman.

“Mercutio, go ask that girl.”

“Gabriel, look at her. That is obviously a high school girl. That’s jailbait, man.”

“Oh, crap. Some of them look older than us though. How about that one over there?”

“Nah, man. Let me just text the girls again to see where they are at.”

“I don’t think they are coming, man.”

“They have to come, bro.”

The night progressed in the following way: I looked around, Mercutio waited for his friends to reply, and Benvolio bought at least one drink at every different place we went. I did not talk to a single girl. I did not buy a single drink, but I enjoyed my night. If it had not been for these two, I would have spent another lonely Valentine’s in my room.

We spent about two hours taking in the nightlife of McAllen before Mercutio suddenly burst.

“Fuck, lets go, Gabriel.”

“You guys wanna come to my house and drink more?”

“No, I have work tomorrow. Gabriel?”

“I am tired. I want to go home.”

Mercutio and I climbed into his truck.

“Damn it. What the hell? I am tired of this shit, and these crystal gains.”

He slammed the wheel with his arms, causing a loud thud. For the past few weeks, Mercutio had started a workout routine to look better and attract girls. He called the muscle he earned ‘gains.’ However, not enough time had progressed to show any physical changes. He had also broken up with his girlfriend and had not found someone ever since. He never said it, but I have the feeling he really missed her.

“It’s ok, Mercutio. I had a great night. Thanks to you and Benvolio I did not spend my night alone. We got to hang out. We are just going through a dry spell. Things will get better.”

“Yeah, I guess.”

I understood how Mercutio felt. It was Valentine’s Day, and I was not with Gertrude. She was more likely having a wonderful time with Claudius somewhere romantic. I wondered when I would be able to forget her. Will there be another girl I like as much as her, or is that it? Was she the last girl I was ever going to share something with?

Mercutio and I were having our own three-month blow, and our relation mimicked the relationship between Bill and Nick. We both tried to get back with our exes, but they both found new partners quite easily. Just like Billy and Nick who talk about sports to just have something to talk about, Mercutio and I talked about all the girls we dated and wanted to date; we never talked about those that broke our hearts. We preferred to reminisce on the good times, hoping they would come back once again.

It is very common among my students to get bored when we read Hemingway because they find the dialogue boring at times, especially during the long parts of dialogue in *The Three Day Blow*. I tell them to analyze why they are having that conversation. Billy and Nick talk about sports, because that is the most exciting thing happening in their life at the moment, and Nick does not want to talk about Marjorie, which is why he changes the conversation every time Bill tries to bring her up.

Mercutio and I reminisced because we had nothing new to talk about at the time. To eavesdroppers and readers, both conversations are uninteresting, but they display the emptiness that Bill, Nick, Mercutio, and I experienced. My story has a more positive outcome for my girls than my boys. My boys always get upset, wondering if it’s all over for them. With my boys I

share Hemingway's story *Fathers and Sons*. Nick Adam suddenly appears with a family, and we get to see Nick interact with his young son. Somewhere along the line, Nick moved on with someone else and formed a family.

Sometimes the guy does not return like I promised; sometimes the girl does take back the guy. I tell my students to be patient and look for the right person to appear. Mercutio had to wait, but he is engaged with the women he loves, and I am patiently waiting for the right person to appear. Relationships suddenly end and begin. We just need to be patient. My students leave my classroom with a little bit of hope and Hemingway after talking to me.

## CHAPTER IX

### CATCHER IN THE RYE BY J.D. SALINGER

“I sat there for about half an hour after he left. I mean I just sat in my chair, not doing anything. I kept thinking about Jane, and about Stradlater having a date with her and all. It made me so nervous I nearly went crazy. I already told you what a sexy bastard Stradlater was” (Salinger 39).

During this scene of Salinger’s novel, readers learn about the narrator’s deep crush on a girl named Jane Gallagher, who Stradlater nonchalantly announces he is having a date with. As Stradlater prepares himself for the date, the narrator starts noticing Stradlater’s physique and good looks. The first time I read this novel I had the following conversation with a student:

“Alright guys, why is Holden so obsessed with Stradlater?”

A male student in the front row answered boisterously.

“He is gay.”

While the class laughed, I challenged him to prove his answer. Regardless of the comment, the student was showing interest in the piece.

“Well, why else would one guy check out another guy? I would check out another guy.”

“Alright, lets look at what we know. Why is Holden so upset Stradlater is going out with Jane?”

Others students started chiming in.

“He cares about her.”

“I think he likes her.”

I take the reign of the conversation.

“Well, if he likes her, then he is probably not gay. He at least holds some form of affection for her. So why is he upset Stradlater is the one taking her out on a date?”

“Stradlater is a player.”

“He is probably going to use her and move on to another girl.”

I redirect my students to the novel.

“Just by looking at them physically. Who do you think Jane would find better looking?”

A chorus is heard in my class.

“Stradlater.”

“Oh, he wishes he looked like Stradlater so he could have a shot with Jane.”

Yes, one of them got it.

“Exactly. Holden wishes he was the one going out on the date with Jane. He likes her and wants Jane to be with a good guy, preferably him. He is worried about Stradlater taking advantage of her. Stradlater can also be seen as the bad boy good girls stereotypically fall for.”

How my words turned bitter on my tongue. During my senior year in college, I finally stopped seeing Claudius and Gertrude walking around UTPA together; Claudius had graduated a year before, and I finally felt I could walk around campus free. I spent a lot of time alone during that last year of college and often looked for quiet spots around campus to relax.

One of my favorite places to sit was the first floor lobby at the University Center building; it is full with tables and chairs and it’s always empty. It was the building in which I first met Gertrude and where Gertrude and I first danced. It was the place where I told my Bridge

counselor about Ashley trying to commit suicide. It held a lot of sweet and bitter memories. I entered and took a seat. My eyes widened as I looked at the pictures plastered on the walls.

As you go into the University Center building there is huge picture of Claudius on the right wall. A giant Claudius is sitting on a desk smiling at you. The outline around him is blurry with the figures of other students sitting in desks; the focus of that picture is Claudius.

“Damn it, dude. Can’t you ever leave me alone?”

I looked around. I was fortunate that the lobby was empty. I took a good look at Claudius. He was several inches taller than me. He was well built; I gained around 15 pounds between my freshman and senior year in college, and my height did not help me hide the belly I molded. Claudius had straight white teeth. There are gaps in mine since I did not use my retainer enough time after removing my braces. Claudius’ picture survived the transition from UTPA to UTRGV. I grabbed my things to look for somewhere else to rest.

Some time late, I arrived home exhausted one day. I sat on my couch and started flipping through channels. I put the control down as the Big Bang Theory went into a commercial break. I had just come back from work, and I wanted to relax. An advertisement reminding people in McAllen to vote started playing. As the voice of the narrator emanated from the television speakers, different pictures of individuals holding signs saying “Vote Now” appeared on screen. It lasted no more than three seconds, but Claudius appeared grinning at me holding a sign saying, “I am still with Gertrude.” I turned off the television.

In my couch, I felt like Holden, unable to move as he realizes Stradlater was on a date with the girl he loved and he could do nothing about it. Through Salinger’s novel, I felt I found somebody that understood me in that book. I always teach the story of the book of the kid that goes from page to page without ever arriving anywhere to my high school students, because life



feels like that at times, and we need to learn to find a path that actually leads somewhere. Mine led to my students.

“Alejandro, you have been telling me about the same girl for the past three years. Just ask her out already or at least start talking to her.”

“It’s not that simple, Torres. I get really nervous when I see her. I am waiting for the perfect moment.”

“I have seen her walking down the halls with other guys. You have to hurry or someone is going to ask her out before you do.”

“No comment.”

Alejandro gave the floor a depressing look. I heard footsteps, and Faith walked into my classroom. Her freckled face radiated with a smile as she walked towards us; her whole body moved from side to side with every step.

“Hi, Torres. What’s wrong, Alejandro?”

“Fatima again. I am telling Alejandro that if he doesn’t hurry, he is going to have to see her dating someone else.”

“That’s right. You gotta man up and ask her out. You never did.”

“Exactly. Look at Faith. You had what? Four relationships in three months last year.”

“Stop it, Torres. I was experimenting. I finally found Kevin, and I am very happy. Those were just the free trials before I signed up for a membership.”

“See, I don’t want to be like Meursault over here. I can’t just go from person to another. Fatima is my destiny. I saw my future in her eyes.”

“Boy, is your future empty then?”

“You wanna fight? I have been through the great depression many times.”

“Besides, what about you, Torres. You are still single.”

“I wasn’t always single, and I am trying to help you guys so you don’t fall for the same mistakes I did. Alejandro, you cannot be so idealistic. You have to go for it and hope for the best, and, if it doesn’t work out, don’t worry. You have a lot of time.”

“I know what you mean, but seeing her makes me wonder if I can move on. I want something new, and maybe she isn’t the right person, but I still want to try. I feel that if I stop, she will start.”

“Just go to class guys.”

I quickly fell in love with the students at the Options program. Most of the times, those are the types of conversations I have with them. More than an English teacher, they need someone that listens to them. They are not the cream of the crop, but the fallen fruits. Most of my students end up in our program as a result of problems at home or fights with their personal demons. Some problems are as simple as a relationship, but they can range up to suicide attempts. Every year since I started working I have had at least one student who at some point attempted suicide. While some of my students pass through my class without sharing more than their name with me, there are a few who I get to know intimately.

“Torres. I need to tell you something.”

Valerie sat in the desk I placed adjacent to mine. Since her single mother doesn’t want to deal with her, she lives with her aunt. She constantly makes the joke that I have been in more important events in her life than her own father. She constantly touches her glasses and moves her long wavy black hair away from her face as she talks.

“What happened now?”

“I did something stupid. Again. You know me.”

“Ay Valerie.”

“Well, you remember Bryan?”

Bryan, a student with severe anger issues; Bryan, who got caught stealing around \$2,000 in merchandise from Abercrombie; Bryan, who came to me crying before the trial; Bryan, who managed to come to an agreement with the authorities to avoid jail time.

“Yes, I clearly do. What happened?”

“Well, we met up. Cause we have been talking.”

“Valerie! You continued talking to him? I told you not to.”

“Sir. I know. I hate when you are right, but I continued talking to him. And...yeah.”

“Yeah, what?”

“We are dating.”

“Valerie!”

“Sir, I know, but I don’t want to be like Gregor. You know, lonely forever.”

I always wondered why Holden only appeared happy when he talked to his younger sister Phoebe, but now I do. When I talk to my students, I feel rejuvenated. They make me cringe, they make me smile, and they make me angry. They are the reason I come to school every day to be the best teacher and mentor I can for them. I share with them my memories, my worries, and my triumphs. We are watching each other grow, and I am happy to imbed seeds of literature in their young minds. I nurture the Gatsby within them and pull out the Meursault by the root. Hopefully, I will one day watch them bloom.

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## BIOGRAPHICAL SKETCH

Gabriel Jorge Torres earned a Bachelor of Arts in English from The University of Texas-Pan American in May 2015. The summer after graduation, he commenced his studies as a candidate for The Master of Fine Arts in Creative Writing with The University of Texas Rio Grande Valley and graduated in May 2018. He continues his work as an English high school teacher for the McAllen Independent School District.