

“This is music!”: What *Stranger Things*’ Eddie Munson reveals about the power of metal

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ABSTRACT

The wide reach of digital technology has further diversified student perspectives in the contemporary classroom and what was once considered mainstream has become less pronounced due to the vast assortment of television programming, music, and other forms of media available. Still, this diversity is often not reflected in school curricula. Though examining music as text is a common practice in the secondary English classroom, the songs selected for study are usually representative of mainstream trends and rarely include selections from alternative genres like punk rock, rap, or heavy metal. These genres are avoided due to misconceptions surrounding how their messages affect young people, despite the potential for many positive outcomes. Educational applications for metal music, though seemingly dissonant, can disrupt exclusive and limiting social norms in school settings, provide a sense of community for socially “othered” youths, and have long-term emotional benefits. This paper explores the social/emotional and literary potential of integrating metal music as text in the secondary English classroom, using *Stranger Things* character Eddie Munson as a frame of reference. Implications for practice include employing the metal genre to engage socially “othered” students and pairing these texts with canonical pieces to examine themes of nonconformity, social justice, and resisting oppression.

Keywords: metal, music, literacy, secondary English, *Stranger Things*

Last summer, after a prolonged delay due to the challenges of navigating COVID-19, *Stranger Things* finally premiered its long-awaited fourth season. In it, viewers meet the monster who has been covertly pulling the strings since the show's first episode back in 2016: Vecna. Season Four, Episode One holds nothing back, with Vecna violently killing a shocking total of 17 kids over the course of the 76-minute episode. We learn later that the villain chooses his victims based on their personal experiences with trauma and that their only defense against his power lies in listening to their favorite music. By coincidence, the show's newest season was released during a period of my own life fraught with trauma. The death of two close family members compounded by the stress of my teaching career, a PhD program, and a few rocky personal relationships had left me struggling to stay afloat despite the reprieve of summer break. Like the characters in *Stranger Things*, I had turned to music as my saving grace. In watching the characters connect with their favorite songs, I was transported to the days I spent driving around, blasting Machine Gun Kelly and All-American Rejects, beating the steering wheel to the tune of my own heartache. I thought about how I had similarly used music to cope with the challenges of adolescence, and how I'd often seen my high school students do the same. The pandemic has thrown them into their version of the "Upside Down" which, for many, is just as dark and disorienting as the realm depicted in *Stranger Things*. How many of them would be targeted by Vecna if they existed in his universe? How many are using music as a way to release negative emotions and temporarily escape their circumstances?

In this article, I explore the social/emotional, and literary benefits of integrating music as text in the secondary English classroom, with a special focus on the heavy metal genre. Using *Stranger Things* character Eddie Munson as a lens through which to frame my analysis, I discuss the potential for employing this alternative music style to connect with and engage students often perceived as "other" in the high school setting. Additionally, I offer ideas for classroom application of these strategies, specifically as they relate to themes of nonconformity, social justice, and resisting oppression.

THEORETICAL FRAMEWORK

As digital technology and social media have become more prominent in young people's lives, the world has gotten "smaller" in the sense that it is now easier than ever to connect with people and cultures outside of one's bubble. At the same time, however, this surge in new and diverse media has also created division where there formerly was none. Gladwell (2022) points out that the limited television programming available in the 1960s and 70s resulted in majority viewership of popular shows, with as many as 40% of Americans tuning in for episodes of *Guns, Smokey, and the Bandits*. This widespread exposure to the same shows, and subsequent ideologies, was powerful enough to influence political stances. The more television they watched, the more likely conservatives and liberals were to position themselves as "Moderate" on the political spectrum due to a concept called "mainstreaming" (Gladwell, 2022). Now, with the availability of thousands of shows hosted by numerous streaming platforms like Netflix and Hulu, TV viewership and personal perspectives have become much more diversified.

This variety only accounts for TV media, not to mention how the music industry, video games, the internet, and social media have further contributed to the miscellany of viewpoints. The declining effect of mainstreaming does raise the question of why, with so little ideological heterogeneity, schools still rely so heavily on mainstream resources for instruction. As an English teacher, I can attest to the pressures of utilizing canonical literature like *The Odyssey* and *The Great Gatsby* despite the availability of countless texts that better reflect the diversity of the students in my classes. Ladson and Billings (2000) assert that "dominant perspectives distort the realities of the other in an effort to maintain power relations that continue to disadvantage those who are locked out of the mainstream" (p. 263). By refusing to adapt instruction to serve students' diverse

perspectives and cultures, educators may be complicit in upholding oppressive power structures instead of empowering students' unique identities.

One proposed approach to combat the continued presence of mainstreaming in education is punk pedagogy, which is promoted as teaching students "to work within and against institutional constraints, to be critical of the texts and systems that surround them" (Kahn-Eagan, 1998, p. 100). Modeled after the beliefs ingrained in Punk Rock culture, this framework encourages a do-it-yourself mindset, an impassioned anger that empowers one to speak their mind, and a desire to change perceived oppressive structures. This reflects the stance of critical theory which requires that individuals critique the power dynamics present throughout social arrangements and address forms of oppression or exploitation that are discovered (Prasad, 2018). Buchanan (2016) connects punk pedagogy to critical theory by asking educators to join in critiquing the power dynamics that exist in our field, citing punk pedagogy as one in which "we reflect on the experiences of our students and actively work to make changes to those experiences as a way to create more authentic sites of learning by engaging students in their classrooms, particularly through creating authentic learning spaces and projects" (p. 132). Authentic learning spaces and assessments are those that students can connect to their own experiences and prior knowledge, not necessarily the mainstream culture.

Pop culture has been referred to as a "terrain of exchange" where struggle takes place "between the subordinate and the dominant groups in society" (Morrell, 2002). Music becomes one such rendezvous point for representatives from across the social spectrum. Unlike literary canon which is sometimes thought to be reserved for those with superior intellect or culture, music is an easily accessible format that transcends educational background, age, socioeconomic status, and more (Rubin, 2011). Even so, the music that is included in school curricula typically reflects the mainstream, rarely acknowledging the presence of alternative genres, and further bolsters the already dominant perspectives. Ardizzone (2005) notes that music, especially alternative genres like punk or hard rock, can be a convenient and accessible outlet for marginalized youths to share their ideas and express their voices, as they are typically dismissed within the realm of politics and sociocultural decision-making. As educators, choosing to lend credence to alternative and undervalued genres illustrates a commitment, not only to dismantling oppressive structures that exist in our field but also to empowering our students to do the same.

EDDIE MUNSON, "FOR WHOM THE BELL TOLLS"

The unlikely hero of the *Stranger Things*' fourth season was metalhead Eddie Munson, played by actor Joseph Quinn. Viewers are first introduced to Eddie as he rants about Newsweek magazine's critique of *Dungeons and Dragons* as promoting violent behavior and satanic worship (Duffer et al., 2022a), similar to critiques of metal music around the same time. Metal was condemned in the 1985 U.S. Senate hearing for its connection to "violence, perversion, rape, substance misuse, and poor mental health" despite these claims being unsubstantiated (Rowe & Guerin, 2017, p. 430). Rumors like these fueled the "Satanic Panic" epidemic of the 1980s and 90s, which perpetuated the conspiracy theory that metal fans were devil worshippers because of the genre's references to the occult and its generally dark aesthetic (Perticone, 2018). According to Haynes (2022), *Stranger Things* creators, the Duffer Brothers, have confirmed that Eddie's character was inspired by Damien Echols of the infamous 1993 West Memphis Three case in which three teenage boys—and metalheads—were accused and convicted of murdering three elementary school children as part of a supposed satanic ritual. DNA evidence later showed no connection between the three men and the child murders. They were released from prison in 2011 after many people—including celebrities like Pearl Jam's Eddie Vedder and the members of Metallica—advocated on their behalf, prompting a movement in support of their release (Haynes, 2022).

It's immediately obvious that Eddie is an outcast at Hawkins High School; his long shaggy hair, outlandish behavior, and status as president of the Hellfire Club in his first appearance alone are enough to

make people keep their distance. But the same scene also hints at a softer side to Eddie when it's revealed that he took main characters Mike and Dustin under his wing, welcoming them into Hellfire Club when they too were outcast by their classmates at the start of the school year. In a study conducted by Rowe and Guerin (2017) exploring the mental health of metal youth, findings showed that all 28 participants had experienced some form of social exclusion or bullying in school and that, for many, this was the impetus for their interest in the metal genre. Many also reported the desire to be perceived as scary or intimidating so that ostracism became a choice instead of the result of their peers' rejection. This is reminiscent of the scene in which cheerleader Chrissy Cunningham tells Eddie he's not as "mean and scary" as she thought he'd be, to which he responds, "Yeah, well, I thought you'd be kind of mean and scary too" (Duffer et al., 2022a).

Naturally, because of his appearance, interests, and reputation, Eddie becomes the prime suspect in a murder investigation after teens start dying (at the hands of Vecna) in the small, quiet town of Hawkins. There's even a scene in a later episode when a literal mob of townsfolk is incited to hunt down Eddie and bring him to justice. Contrary to his societal perception, Eddie is far from the murderer he's believed to be and actually establishes himself as quite the hero in the show's last episode. His superpower, it turns out, is shredding the guitar to Metallica's "Master of Puppets". Like Eddie, many disenfranchised youth gravitate toward metal because of its angsty themes of rebellion and anti-establishment, which also happen to be common threads woven through the teenage experience. It's likely, then, that integrating metal music as text in the secondary ELA classroom is a promising strategy for engaging high school students, especially those perceived as "other".

"WELCOME HOME" - THE METAL COMMUNITY

After its appearance in one of the most exhilarating scenes of *Stranger Things*, Season Four, Metallica's "Master of Puppets" surged in popularity. First released in 1986, the song topped the charts over thirty years later when it became the #1 Song on the iTunes Rock Charts as well as the 29th most popular song overall (Lash, 2022). Its transition into the mainstream music scene and subsequent uptake by a diverse and much younger audience prompted many long-time fans to speak out against what they saw as a bandwagon effect. According to Kaufman (2022), one such fan took to Twitter, now known as X, to address Metallica directly, writing, "I'm sorry Metallica for all the fake stranger things fans love ya." The band, who have embraced the *Stranger Things* fame as well as the new fans of their music responded on Twitter, saying, "Don't be sorry. Everyone is welcome in the Metallica Family. If they like 'Puppets,' chances are they'll find plenty of other songs to get into" (Kaufman, 2022). The band later took to TikTok to further address these claims, stating, "FYI - EVERYONE is welcome in the Metallica Family. Whether you've been a fan for 40 hours or 40 years, we all share a bond through music. All of you started at ground zero at one point in time" (Reyes, 2022). This reaction from one of metal's biggest acts evinces a significant allure of the genre: the sense of community that exists amongst its fans.

Rowe (2016) explores the curious collective identity shared by metalheads, even those who have never directly encountered a fellow metal fan. Many metal youth identify with the persona as a result of their interaction with relevant online content such as songs, music videos, recordings of metal concerts, and artist interviews. Others pointed to the significance of band t-shirts in connecting the metal community, as it is through this choice in apparel that they can easily identify other fans of the genre. One person explained, "[If] you're on the bus and you see a dude with a Cannibal Corpse shirt on, you kind of know them without even knowing them, you just understand where they're coming from" (Rowe, 2016, p. 86), possibly referencing the feelings of social exclusion shared by many metal youth. Another commonly repeated sentiment was a reverence for the mosh pit and its role in creating this sense of community. Despite the outside perception of mosh pits as settings for violence and aggressive behavior, fans assert that these are spaces in which they "look

out for one another" and feel "cared for" by others (p. 85).

These images of family and a supportive community have starkly contrasted the portrayal of metal in society and pop culture since its inception. In addition to claims that metal induces feelings of depression, suicidal ideation, violence, and risk-taking behaviors, other contributing factors to fans' ostracism have been allegations that they are cognitively inferior to the general population (Baker & Brown, 2016). These assertions were the result of questionable research conducted with metal populations in the 1980s and 90s, which were backed by the American Academy of Pediatrics and the American Academy of Child and Adolescent Psychiatry (p. 4). A prime illustration of this offensive and inaccurate stereotype is *Stranger Things*' Eddie Munson, who is characterized as a 20-year-old high school student still struggling to earn his diploma after two failed attempts, furthering his status as an outcast. Despite its reputation and the historical treatment of its fans, metal music has long provided a sense of belonging and comfort to "othered" youth, the implications of which should be considered in terms of school culture and the classroom environment.

RECHARGING ONE'S "BATTERY" WITH MUSIC

It's no secret that the COVID-19 pandemic was mentally and emotionally taxing for most people. Stay-at-home orders, inconsistent and ever-changing public health communication, and the threat of contracting the virus all took a toll on our state of mind and emotional regulation. During this chaotic chapter, many turned to music for escapism, emotional release, and as a coping mechanism for stress. A study investigating listening to music for stress relief during the pandemic found it to be one of the most effective strategies for stress management among first-year university students, comparable to exercise and sleep (Vidas et al., 2021). Researchers speculate that, unlike these other coping strategies, music listening during COVID lockdown was unique in that it fostered a sense of connection between individuals who may have felt isolated by social distancing and stay-at-home mandates. Another inquiry by Aggarwal (2021) found that 61.3% of teenage participants cited music listening as an effective way to overcome anxiety and manage their stress (p. 241). Other research suggests two approaches to using music for emotional regulation: (1) listening to positive music to counteract a negative mood and (2) listening to music that matches a negative mood to process negative emotions (Stewart et al., 2019, p. 4). Results showed that frequent listening to negative music as a means of coping with negative emotions could be harmful to a person's well-being, while individuals were more likely to experience positive outcomes when listening to more optimistic or uplifting songs (p. 5). However, an earlier study by McFerran et al. (2012) reported that many "highly distressed adolescents used heavy metal music to successfully manage their moods" (p. 11). It is important to note, as well, that metal cannot always be classified as "negative", and to assume such would mean accepting commonly held misconceptions about the genre.

Interviews conducted with metal music listeners support the idea that the genre has positive effects on one's mental health. Several metalheads described experiencing physical and emotional release when listening to metal songs. One such fan recalled letting go of his anger as he "beat [his fists and feet] down on the bed' in time with the intensity of the music" (Rowe & Guerin, 2017, p. 434). Others described connecting with themes of pain and brokenness common to metal lyrics as well as those of dominance over other groups. These reports are further backed by a relatively new approach to mental health, Heavy Metal Therapy (HMT). Quinn (2019) describes undertaking HMT following an experience with a client who was not responding to a traditional therapeutic treatment, Cognitive Behavioral Therapy. Being a self-proclaimed metalhead and recognizing her client's similar musical interests, Quinn took a chance on an unconventional therapeutic approach, asking the client to create metal playlists to serve as narrative retellings of his experiences. This strategy, Quinn (2019) explains, was born from theories of Voice Dialogue which assert that "we all have different aspects

of ourselves, some which are dominant and some that are ‘disowned’ or pushed away” because they are too “challenging, undesirable or unsafe” (p. 420). Metal, she says, addresses and even embraces the discussion of such “disowned” qualities. The HMT approach has since grown into a widely successful movement which is chronicled on a website that stores playlists, blogs, poetry, and more submitted by HMT users.

As previously discussed, dubious research from the early days of metal correlated the genre with predispositions for mental health conditions like depression and suicidal ideation. However, recent research surveying former metal youth who are now adults suggests that the opposite may actually be true. According to Fradera (2015), results from a Facebook survey by Humboldt State University showed that when compared to a control group of non-metal fans around the same age, the adult metalheads were psychologically and socially comparable to those in the control group. Additionally, participants who listened to metal as adolescents were less likely than those in the control group to be in treatment for emotional issues as adults, providing support for the theory that listening to metal is an effective form of emotional regulation (Fradera, 2015). While there is yet to be an established consensus on the emotional effects of metal music listening, more and more research points to its therapeutic significance and positive implications for stress management and emotional regulation.

There are many potential advantages to integrating music-based learning in the ELA classroom, including songs from the metal genre, typically avoided because of the stigma and general public perception, but which may be the key to engaging many socially othered students. According to Towel (2000), music “can be especially beneficial for hard-to-reach children, who have difficulty learning through traditional methods” (p. 287). Given the precarious state of the pandemic and the ongoing mental health crisis, these findings about the psychological benefits of music should be closely examined in relation to educational approaches.

“TURN THE PAGE” - CLASSROOM APPLICATIONS FOR METAL

As Goering and Strayhorn (2016) note, English educators have been integrating music-based lessons in their curriculum for many years, from the songs of The Beatles in the 1960s to the more recent study of Katy Perry’s “Firework”. It is rare, however, to encounter metal music in the ELA classroom even though its themes pair nicely with many canonical texts. One reason for this is that the content of metal songs is often deemed inappropriate for study in an academic context. The repeated references to self-harm and suicide, for instance, may be seen as unsuitable for adolescent brains. However, as Baker and Brown (2016) point out, these are topics often addressed in secondary English classes when reading Shakespeare’s *Romeo & Juliet*, the works of Edgar Allan Poe, and Sylvia Plath’s *The Bell Jar* (p. 10-11).

Unlike these pieces, metal songs often reference such taboo topics to deter listeners from self-destructive behaviors. For instance, the video for “Coming Down” by Five Finger Death Punch depicts two suicidal youths who are saved from this fate by their loved ones, concluding with the contact information for the National Suicide Prevention Lifeline (p. 11). Another prime example is Metallica’s “Master of Puppets”, which cautions listeners against drug use by likening addiction to a puppet master controlling users’ lives (*Metallica – Master of Puppets*, n.d.). Lyrics such as “Master of puppets, I’m pulling your strings / Twisting your mind and smashing your dreams / Blinded by me, you can’t see a thing” demonstrate the negative impacts of drug addiction, warning listeners about the dangerous repercussions of using (Burton et al., 1986)

It is clear that the exclusion of metal music from academia is not rooted in concern for young minds but is due, instead, to the stigmatization of the genre. A popular scene from Season 4, Episode 8 of *Stranger Things* perfectly captures this perception, as the adolescent characters work to rescue Nancy Wheeler from Vecna’s grasp in the Upside Down. Frantically searching through Eddie’s cassette tapes for a song that will save Nancy, characters Robin and Max criticize Eddie’s collection saying, “...we can’t find anything!...What is all this

shit?!...We need music!" prompting Eddie to shriek in response, "This is music!"; thrusting forth a copy of Iron Maiden's *Piece of Mind* album (Duffer et al., 2022b). This sentiment coincides with Walser's (1993) study which

refutes the assumptive claim that heavy metal is not really music but violent, senseless noise through a detailed, informed and informative discussion of development of the musical genre, the history of the music, the influence of classical music, issues of gender, and a look at some of the controversies that have contributed to the reputation of heavy metal as violent, malevolent or dangerous (as cited in Baker & Brown, 2016, p. 13)

Though consistently underestimated in the field of education, the metal genre presents many complex ideas worthy of academic study as well as opportunities to analyze and discuss these topics in relation to students' experiences.

"Master of Puppets" became the unofficial theme song of *Stranger Things* Season 4 because of its strong connections to the show's villain, a puppet master controlling the fate of his victims who also serves as a powerful symbol for the effects of trauma. A classroom analysis of this interpretation alongside the song's original message about drug addiction could segue into a discussion of what "puppet masters" exist in students' own lives (e.g. schoolwork, technology, social media, gender norms, etc.). Lyiscott et al. (2021) posit that "student engagement with popular culture and media in the ELA classroom is richest when it encompasses both analysis of existing texts and composition of new ones" (p. 4). This lesson could culminate with students creating a piece representing their personally-recognized "puppet masters", such as a poem, short story, or visual text. Introducing learners to this alternative genre can bridge further analysis and creation of unconventional texts, and metal songs are easily integrated into existing curricula because of their complementary themes. The following lessons pair metal selections with more traditional literary texts.

TABLE 1
Classroom Applications for Metal

Dystopian Literature	Rubin (2011) details a unit he created that pairs Orwell's <i>1984</i> with the concept album from metal band Queensrÿche, <i>Operation: Mindcrime</i> . Both texts deal with characters fighting against oppressive regimes and the collective anger felt by the affected citizens. The corresponding project asks students to consider the texts' parallel themes as part of their larger study of injustice and political consciousness (p. 76).
Transcendentalist Literature	Wagner (2021) writes about using music to explore themes of nonconformity, civil disobedience, and self-reliance when paired with works by Thoreau and Emerson. While her lesson descriptions do not utilize metal music, one can see how analysis of songs like Metallica's "Wherever I May Roam" would supplement these readings.

<p>Civil Rights and Protest Literature</p>	<p>Cortés Santiago (2016) discusses using “Without a Face” by Rage Against the Machine to teach about injustices directed at marginalized groups, specifically immigrant populations. She writes, “Such dissident voices serve an important goal: reminding us of our civil duty to question, rebel, uncover, problematize, and challenge the status quo” (p. 32).</p>
<p>Romantic Literature</p>	<p>Because of its exploration of the complexities of human emotion, Dark Romantic literature makes an apt pairing for metal music. I recommend pairing Edgar Allan Poe’s “Alone” with Korn’s “Tearjerker”. Both texts address feelings of being an outcast and the psychological and emotional effects of such treatment.</p>

For the upcoming school year, I am planning a unit for my A.P. English Language classes about the dangers of censorship and homogeneous thinking in a pluralistic society. Our major texts for the unit will be Arthur Miller’s *The Crucible* and a recent podcast called *The Witch Trials of J. K. Rowling*, both of which center around individuals who are targeted for their actions and beliefs that butt against the status quo. Within the unit, we will also explore the idea of “accepted disruptors”, such as rock artists, who similarly challenge societal norms without experiencing the same backlash or falling victim to socially pervasive cancel culture. Students will listen to and analyze examples of metal songs that function as social commentaries such as Black Sabbath’s “War Pigs”, exploring the music and lyrics for rhetorical choices that convey the band’s message within the greater rhetorical situation. We will also be using the 3Ps– perspective, positioning, and power (Jones 2006)–to examine how artists like these are able to discuss controversial topics without losing their fan base and credibility. The main goal of the unit will be to empower and equip students to express themselves as accepted disruptors in combating issues of social justice. The unit will conclude with students creating a social justice narrative in which they apply some of the strategies they have garnered from our study of metal music to address their chosen social issues in a way that is both outspoken and credible.

Conclusion

If we choose to recognize metal music and other peripheral genres as valid ELA classroom resources, we can further broaden the horizons of our mainstream students while also welcoming “othered” students into the fold. Utilizing metal songs as texts may also help students manage stress and provide a release for frequently repressed negative emotions. Additionally, the themes and topics explored in the metal genre complement a variety of traditional literary texts, so the only resource needed to integrate these songs into established curriculum is an open and creative mind.

Though Eddie Munson’s experience in the Upside Down differs from that of other characters–he is not directly targeted by Vecna and is instead attacked by vicious “demobats” which inhabit the realm–the role that music plays in his story invites pause. Why is it that, while other characters’ favorite songs protect them from danger in the Upside Down, Eddie’s rendition of “Master of Puppets” is ultimately what leads to his death? This serves as a poignant analogy for our “othered” students who are so often typecast, ostracized, or persecuted for their interests while mainstream content is praised for its societal and even educational value.

However, it may be that Eddie wasn't a victim after all. Perhaps he was instead able to harness his "othered" status to create positive change in the world where he existed. Because he was unwilling to succumb to the mainstream influences of his time, he had the skills, tools, and subsequent power to fight against Vecna's evil influence and save his friends in a way that no one else could. Perhaps by exposing our students to alternative genres like metal, they can feel empowered to stand up and fight too.

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