Fishbowl Exercise

This will work for any text of any genre; however, it works best with a text that has multiple themes/motifs/topics. It forces a more reticent group of students to share their opinions and in an ideal scenario, converse with one another. I wouldn't use this exercise more than every three weeks because students begin to dislike it and there are only so many variations you can make with groups. However, it is excellent to shake things up and to get out of the "think, pair, share" mode. It also takes some of the burden off your shoulders in regards to forcing large group discussion.

Organize the room into two concentric circles, one small one in the center (5-6 students) with the rest of the class in a circle surrounding it. Do not let them form their own groups. Form them strategically, so that there is at least one "talker" in each small group. If you are lucky enough to have more, spread them out evenly.

The rules are as follows: every person in the small circle must speak, and they cannot speak a second time until everyone in the small group has made one contribution. The students in the small circle will have a conversation about a topic you have selected, while the outer circle takes diligent notes. When the inner circle conversation wanes, invite the rest of the class to contribute. This might take some pushing or prompting on your part, especially if the inner circle discussion goes well. Don't worry if only a few people on the outside talk at first. This will get better as you move through the exercise. Also, good conversations don't require literally every voice. Have back up questions or take notes as the inner circle speaks, so you can help them to continue the conversation. Playing devil's advocate can work effectively here. Once the discussion feels complete, offer a summary of the discussion and mention moments that you thought you were particularly insightful. If you feel like the discussion didn't quite hit on the point you wanted them to reach, now would be the time to offer your own reading. Then, move to the next group. Every student should get a chance in the middle.

In order for the conversation in the inner circle to begin, you need to offer topics/questions/characters to discuss. I recommend breaking the text into four themes/motifs/topics and asking distinct questions about each of them. For example, the first group might be focused exclusively on Character A, the second on Character B, the third on the theme of "family" or "class" or "race" and the fourth on the ending or a different theme. I'm referencing a novel with these suggestions, but this also works for multiple poems, or elements within one poem. Even breaking it into stanzas would be an effective choice. I put the questions on a powerpoint slide, so that the whole class can look to them throughout the exercise. Typically, I offer 3-4 questions that are fairly general because I can push them into specifics as the discussion goes on.

Sample questions for *Kindred*

Group 1: Literacy

1. What is the role of literacy and/or education in the text?
2. How do the Weylins view it in comparison to Dana and Kevin?
3. How does Dana’s own literacy work for her and against her?
4. Both Weylin and Alice are opposed to educating the enslaved workers. Why is that?

Group 2: Kevin and Dana/Sexism and Racism

1. How do the dynamics of Dana and Kevin’s relationship shift when they travel together to 1819?
2. How do their experiences on the Weylin plantation differ?
3. What is their relationship like in the present, especially in terms of the unexpected racism they have to deal with?
4. How would their relationship be perceived differently today?