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Helping Minority Students Find Themselves in Literature

**Rationale**

For my unit of study, I wish to explore methods that can be utilized to help minority students see themselves within canonized text as they search for their own identities. It is common that canonized works are centered around white, wealthy, and successful men and women. Looking at novels like *The Great Gatsby* and *Pride and Prejudice*, students may greatly struggle to see themselves within the characters. However, for minority students, it is especially difficult when they see almost no similarities between themselves and the same white characters rehashed time after time. Therefore, it is necessary to explore different works that feature characters of varying ethnicities to allow students a chance to see that diversity is possible and that there are characters they can turn to during their search for meaning.

Through similar childhoods and familial sturggles, dealing with discrimination and mistreatment, and feelings of imposter-syndrome and fear of never fitting in, minority students benefit greatly from finding some sense of themselves within the text; this is one of the best ways to get students interested in literature. A crucial part of growing up is surrounding oneself with people to aspire to be like—to create one’s individual identity from bits and pieces of characters and people around us. Literature provides great examples of tragic heroes, love-struck teens, and troubled youths to learn from and lean into when all hope seems lost. Forming these connections is especially important for those growing up in communities where they feel like outsiders, where their teachers and fellow classmates differ in skin tone from them, by introducing them to other teens just like them, or who have been victim to the same feelings of isolation, they can gain hope of becoming whoever they dream of being.

**Centerpiece Novel**

As the centerpiece work to my unit, I have chosen to teach *The Outsiders* by S.E. Hinton. As a novel taking place in Oklahoma during the 1960s, the story focuses around a group of boys called “greasers” who are seen as the bad boys from the wrong side of the tracks and their rivalry with group of rich kids called “socials” or “socs”. The novel’s main character, Ponyboy Curtis, narrates the story as it unfolds in front of his eyes. While this novel does take place in the 1960s in the central south of America, in a place known for having a predominantly white population, there are many aspects of the characters’ lives that can be drawn from by anyone around the world.

Being seen as troublemakers and hooligans, the greasers, especially Ponyboy, force themselves to try to fit this standard that society has placed on them. While the greasers and the socs are rival gangs with an intense hatred for each other, Ponyboy begins to learn that their differences are not as large as he once thought thanks to a budding relationship with a socs girl named Cherry. Ponyboy states, “ maybe the two different worlds we lived in weren't so different. We saw the same sunset” making him realize that while they don’t share the same views, they all exist at the same time in the same place; they are all real people with different stories to tell (Hinton, 38).

Ponyboy’s greatest struggle is that of fitting into the mold set for him by society as he has a good heart, loves to read, and a big brother focused on keeping him out of trouble. He knows he’s not the same as the other greasers, but he also knows he doesn’t fit into any other category leaving him feeling lost; a feeling far too many minority students often feel. As Ponyboy and Johnny skip town to avoid being caught for the murder, in self defense, of a socs boy named Bob, Ponyboy discovers how to be true to himself, stand up for what he believes is right, and how boxes are made to be opened so it is okay if he doesn’t stay in it.

This novel would fall under both the “Books about Real Life Experiences” and “Books about Facing Death and Loss” chapters of *Adolescents in the Search For Meaning: Tapping the Powerful Resource of Story*. The greasers struggle with issues of classism and violence as they are treated as less than their upper class counterparts and must defend themselves during their ongoing gang war. On top of this, many of the greasers come from very bad homes with parents who are either abusive, neglectful, or deceased leaving them to fend for themselves, including stealing from wherever they can and taking care of one another. In terms of death and loss, Ponyboy and his brothers are left as orphans being forced to look after each other with eldest brother, Darry, in charge. Throughout the novel the characters face death in the form of murder in self defense, a tragic accident, and suicide by cop therefore shaping each character in different ways as they grow stronger, or in some cases weaker.

To introduce the novel to students, I would first teach them about the varying archetypes in young adult literature highlighting specific ones that will appear in the works read throughout the unit such as: the innocent embarking on a journey, the archetypal seeker, the orphan, the friend, and the lover. In order to ensure the students understanding of the archetypes, we would do an exercise where we went around the class listing off various characters in literature and/or media that fit specific ones. This would make it easy for them to identify which characters in the novel fit which archetype, as well as notice when characters in other novels or forms of media fall into these roles; it is knowledge that is applicable way beyond the classroom.

In order to ensure that the students are understanding the novel and answer any questions they may have, we would read the novel together as a class. There would be at least 30 minutes of each class dedicated to reading, either with the students simply listening to me or popcorn reading, and addressing any vocab words that come up that they do not understand. We would then have a bit of time for the students to discuss what they thought of the novel thus far and answer the question of the day, usually about a decision a character makes during the day’s portion of the novel, in their journals. While reading the novel, the students would be asked to keep a journal where they document the major plot points, large decisions the characters make, or any quotes that stood out to them so they could learn the importance of story development.

**Intro to Unit**

As an introduction to the unit, I have selected a song that can be used to introduce the themes of the novel while also showing students that stories come in all shapes and sizes. Songs, poems, movies, and even video games can tell an entire story with very precise themes just as a book does. By embracing this idea of using other forms of media as an introduction to literature, students will hopefully take an interest in the unit from the very beginning. The song I’ve chosen to introduce the students to is “My Generation” by The Who. With lyrics like “people try to put us down just because we get around” and the repetition of the phrase “talkin’ ‘bout my generation”, there is a clear connection between the themes of identity, adolescence, and rebellion present in *The Outsiders*. In order to make the song easy to process and break down, I would prepare a handout with the lyrics on it as well as a few lines to write their own thoughts about the song. After presenting the song, I would ask the students to talk in small groups about what these themes mean to them; what message do they think The Who is sharing through their song and if any songs that they enjoy have similar themes.

After about 5-10 minutes of discussing in small groups has passed, I would open the floor to anyone willing to share either the message they took away from the song, the song that came to mind for them, or both. Before asking this of my students; however, I would share my own thoughts to make them feel comfortable sharing. For me, the message portrayed is that of young adults feeling pushed down by older generations and forced into this perceived ideal of “rebels” while in reality, they are just being true to themselves and trying to figure out what it means to be part of their generation. A song that I personally enjoy that shares these themes is “Hope for the Underrated Youth” by YUNGBLUD. The song encompasses the idea of teens and young adults being put into a box and misrepresented in society as they try to figure out their place in the world; the song showcases many fears young adults have when it comes to being themselves as that’s often regarded as not good enough.

By sharing my own answers I am allowing the students to know it is okay to be vulnerable in the classroom—they can open up without fear of judgement just as I had. However, it is also important to understand that many teenagers struggle with the idea that it is okay to be vulnerable, so I would never want to push my students to do something they are uncomfortable with, but I certainly would encourage it as much as possible. When reading a novel as complex and emotional as *The Outsiders*, with characters that do portray common fears, beliefs, and personality traits as many young adults, it is important to create a safe space for students to express the connections they form between themselves and those characters.

**Companion Novel - Through the Unit**

The novel I have chosen to pair with *The Outsiders* is *We Were Here* by Matt de la Pena. The novel follows the journey of three teenage boys, all from different racial background, as they run away from their group home towards the hope of creating new lives in Mexico. As the three main characters travel from San Jose, California to the border of Mexico, they struggle to find themselves and their places in the world. This is most clear in Miguel, the novel's main character, as he goes on an emotional journey to figure out what being Mexican American means to him and the difference between being a bad person and a person who did a bad thing. Miguel is a very troubled kid who must come to terms with accidentally killing his brother, growing distant from his mother, being placed in a government mandated group home, and just being a teenager. This is the main reason I believe this book is a must when trying to teach young adults to see themselves within a text, especially in relation to a novel that centers around a group of greasers living in the middle of rural America.

*We Were Here* works as a great companion to *The Outsiders* due to the stark similarities between Miguel and Ponyboy. Like Ponyboy, Miguel has grown up under the shadow of an older brother who has made it his job to look out for the family. While they sometimes don’t see eye to eye, they are family and with no father, they must work together to keep the family strong. On top of this, there is also the similarity between Miguel and Ponyboy in their love for books. While it takes Miguel a while to come around to the idea of reading, once he finds a love for it, it sticks with him throughout the novel. While reading *The Color Purple,* he realizes that “when you read books you almost feel like you're out there in the world. Like you're going on this adventure right with the main character” which is similar to how Ponyboy feels reading *Gone with the Wind* to Johnny; they are able to escape the fear and pain of life just for a little bit (41). The last major connection between the novels is the journey the characters go on as they run from the law, stand up for themselves, deal with death and suicide, and struggle to determine who they are and who they want to be.

Students can turn to Miguel, or his friends, and see that they are not so different from the kids in *The Outsiders* as they’re all just misunderstood teens trying to figure out how to exist in a world that has trapped them in a box predetermining who they are and what they can achieve. Ponyboy struggles to break out of this box as he tries to prove he is more than just a greaser, in the same way that Miguel knows he, Rondell, and Mong are “more than just some file could say” (de la Pena, 138). There is more to their story and they want to share it. As Miguel says they are “real people too, just the same as anybody else who was alive” and they deserve to be treated with the same respect and given the same opportunities as everyone around them. This is the kind of message that students need to be able to pull from literature; this is the advice I want them to latch onto and never let go. YA lit is such a great way of teaching students how to connect to a character with the same background or skin tone or mental/physical health issues as them because the characters in YA are just that, they are exactly like them.

There is a fantastic article on YAWednesdays.com titled, “Making Their Voices Heard: Students in YA Literature Courses Articulate ‘Why YA?’” by Dr. Bickmore that addresses exactly the questions I have posed in this paper. In the article, Dr. Bickmore has comprised a series of excerpts from essays written by Dr. Mary Warner’s students on why it is valuable to teach YA literature. One quote in particular relating to *We Were Here* that caught my attention stated that books like it “invite those ethnicities, who may have felt marginalized due to the importance of reading canonical works for so long, to read YA books that tend to connect to a wider audience” (Dr. Bitmore, 2017). This is exactly what reading YA novels that step outside of the binary with character representation can do for students. Even further, it can teach them how to apply the same lens they view YA with to canonical works where they may not have felt a connection to the characters or story beforehand.

*We Were Here* is a great example of a novel with a wide span of themes, motifs, and characters that almost any student can grab onto and say “hey, I know what that’s like” or “I think that way too.” As Miguel goes through his search of finding who he is in relation to his own racial background, any student struggling with the same question of “where do I actually belong?” can be right there with him. Miguel believes that he is not Mexican enough to deserve to go to Mexico as he stands on the other side of the border and sees a young boy, causing him to feel like a “damn poser” because he “was on the better side” of the “big-ass fence” (218). This is a very common feeling of inadequacy or imposter syndrome that canon literature rarely addresses, so by having students read a novel where such a large issue is tackled by someone their age and similar skin tone can greatly affect how they see themselves being represented in literature.

In regards to teaching *We Were Here* to non-White young adults, there are many aspects that can be picked out and applied to the real life experiences they may be familiar with. Any students who are experiencing, or have experienced, similar issues that Miguel goes through during the course of the novel can find comfort in watching him grow and learn as he travels up and down the California Coast. Just as Miguel finds a love for reading once he begins to connect with the characters in his books, I hope my students will be able to form a connection with him and his journey, seeing bits of themselves within him, Rondell, or Mong.

While I would love to ask the students to go home and read a few pages *We Were Here* on their own every night, I know from my own high school experience that will most likely not happen. Some students may do the reading, some may decide to just read a summary online, and some may not even make it that far. Asking young adults to read a 400 page novel on top of homework they may have from all of their other classes is asking a lot of them. Therefore, I would make this process as painless as possible by sectioning out 15 minutes per class for sustained silent reading where students will be expected to just read. This way I can monitor if they are actually reading, answer any questions they may individually have about what they’re reading, and provide them with a safe and quiet place to be able to read in peace. Many students do not have a comfortable reading environment at home, so by providing that space in the classroom, even if only for a few minutes a day, will hopefully encourage them to get as much out of the novel as they can.

Because this method does not offer too much time to read, I would encourage students to try and read for at least another 15-20 minutes after school just so they are able to get as far into the novel as possible. However, if they are not able to finish the entire novel by the end of the unit then that is okay because it is most important that they at least gain an understanding of the characters, their journeys, and the archetypes they fall into. I want them to get as far into the novel as they can in order to do some fun activities in class with the characters.

Just as with *The Outsiders*, I would have the students keep a journal of the major plot points of the novel and the challenges that the characters face. This will begin the process of drawing connections between both novels that will set the students up to write a final essay for the unit. Within their journal, I would ask that they write at least one journal entry of their own per week, taking inspiration from Miguel, about something that happens during that week. They can choose to write the entry over the course of the week or as a wrap up to the week in reflection—whichever they feel more comfortable with. On Fridays, I would walk around the class during SSR to check to make sure their entries for the week were completed followed by at least 10 minutes of sharing aloud about some of the things they wrote.

In addition to just examining the major story arcs and plot points, students would also be asked to examine the language of the novel. Referring back to that YAWednesday’s article, one student proposes the examination of Miguel’s use of language throughout the novel and how it “affects the reading of the story and perception of him, [and] how it affects and marks his relationships with other characters” (Bitmore, 2017). This not only asks the students to pay attention to diction and tone while reading, but also opens the floor up to examining the differences between Miguel and Ponyboy as the narrators of their respective stories.

**Beyond the Unit**

At the end of the unit, I have planned to have the students watch Francis Ford Coppola’s 1986 film version of *The Outsiders*. Watching the film adaptation of a novel offers a different approach to processing the story. Being able to see the pages come to life on the screen and connect faces to names can make the story not only easier to follow for students, but also more entertaining. However, on top of just watching the movie I would ask that they take notes in their journals of the decisions the director chose to make when interpreting the novel. There are many aspects of novels that need to be altered to allow it to flow better on screen, such as, removing scenes for the sake of time and adding in bits and pieces of plot to give more context. It is important for students to note how these changes affect the story and if they help or hinder the overall message.

As a wrap-up to the unit, I would ask the students to write a final standard five paragraph essay comparing one character from *The Outsiders* to one character from *We Were Here*. Using the lesson at the beginning of the unit on archetypes and their journals, they would be asked to examine the connection between one main character from both novels that share at least one archetype using quotes from the novels to support their claims. They must say how their chosen characters fit the role of the archetype, similarities they share, and how the decisions they had to make affected the outcome of their story lines. I believe this could be a very fun paper to write because not only will they be well prepared for it due to the prior work put into the unit, but they will hopefully have found a character within each novel they would like to write about. This paper not only tests their knowledge of archetypes and how well they understood the novels’ characters, but also allows them to have a bit of freedom in their essay as it is more so opinion based; there is no correct answer, they are simply expected to be able to support their reasoning to the best of their abilities.

As a result of this paper, I hope the students would be able to apply this knowledge that both canonical characters and YA ones can experience the same hardships and life struggles as each other. However, I also hope by exploring varying forms of representation through all of the characters in both novels, they will learn they can find bits of themselves within them. Learning how to identify common archetypes, plot points, and story lines within literature, or any of the previous media I have mentioned so far, is a crucial part of being able to connect to the text on a deeper and more personal level. The characters of both novels, no matter their race, are more than the box society has put them in. They aren’t just dumb characters in a dumb book, they represent real people with real problems that many kids, teens, young adults, and even grown men and women can see themselves in. Lack of representation for minority students in canonical literature is a very large issue, but the first step in rectifying it is teaching students that there are so many great works of literature out there with boys and girls just like them who can inspire them. The second step is giving them the tools to find this inspiration in people like Holden Caulfield, Ponyboy Curtis, and Elizabeth Bennet by pairing their stories with those of kids who look more like them to show that no matter someone’s skin tone, we can all achieve greatness.

Works Cited

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