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ENGL 112B

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Understanding the Female Experience

**Rationale**

As much as there has been an advancement in women’s rights, there have been many moments that highlight the inequalities that women of every ethnicity face. Women still make a quarter less than men on average, are more prone to sexual assault, and face discrimination based on their gender more often than men. The #MeToo Movement unveiled the ugly truth of sexual assault that goes unnoticed, but also the community that follows these tragedies. It was more than a movement that brought togetherness because it educated the masses on an issue most women and girls thought was their sole experience. This was followed by books, television shows, blogs, movies, and articles that centered on promoting the female experience and women’s rights.

Yet, with the progression of promoting the female experience also comes drawbacks. Social media platforms such as TikTok are often used to dissuade feminist rhetoric, most notably with “influencers” such as Andrew Tate, Kevin Samuels, and The Fresh and Fit podcast that put down women and push hypermasculinity. What is more discerning are the responses to these accounts, especially those that support the sexist views that are promoted. With social media reaching a global audience, it is very important to keep our youth educated on the female experience and the harm that comes with these sexist views. In the classroom, immersing students in female-made literature is a step in the right direction.

I would like to continue educating my students on the female experience as feminist issues are an ongoing crisis that is evolving. During this unit, literature created by women would be the focus, as well as literature that is based on feminist views and female experiences. My centerpiece for this unit is *The Handmaid’s Tale* by Margaret Atwood which explores the society of Gilead in a dystopian America. Women are stripped of their rights in Gilead and forced into the “traditional” roles of wives and caretakers. Fertile women, like Offred, the protagonist, are used solely for reproduction and are labeled property to Commanders. But through Offred’s perspective, students will be exposed to societal expectations of women, feminist issues, and, most importantly, her experience as a woman during the fall of the United States and the rise of Gilead. I hope that at the end of the unit, my students will be able to compare Offred’s experiences to current events as well as their own experiences and have a better understanding of the female experience.

**Introducing the Text**

 Before reading *The Handmaid’s Tale*, I would assign an Anticipation Guide for each student to fill out. The Anticipation Guide is a sheet of paper that consists of a series of questions that glimpse over the general themes of the novel, such as gender, family dynamics, religion, and literacy. It would prompt students to begin thinking about the text and applying it to their personal experiences and thoughts. This would be sent home as part of their homework for the start of the unit and should be answered in two sentences or more. Questions from the Anticipation Guide would be as follows:

1. How would you define women’s rights?
2. What are societal expectations for women?
3. What are societal expectations for men?
4. What is the importance of a name?
5. Do you believe that literature is powerful? Why or Why not?
6. What roles should the government play in society?
7. How far will you go to fight for what you believe in?

 The following school day would be dedicated to discussing their answers to the Anticipation Guide and how they relate to the text. Students would be split into groups of four, discussing their answers in their groups to relay to the entire class. As a class, we would take note of any similarities found in their responses as well as how they think these concepts will apply to *A Handmaid’s Tale*.

 Another activity to do is reading the lyrics of Beyonce’s *If I Were A Boy*. Each student would be given a copy of the lyrics and follow along with the song as it is played out loud for them to hear. We would then discuss their feelings and thoughts toward the song.

1. How does the song make you feel?
2. What are some examples of things Beyonce would do as a boy?
3. What does that say about her position as a woman?
4. Can you relate to Beyonce?

**Working Through the Text**

 Due to the graphic content in the novel and sexual themes, students will read the novel in the classroom. This would also allow for a deeper understanding of the text because I would be present to answer any questions they have throughout the reading. It would also allow me to help with the students’s understanding of the society of Gilead and draw connections to contemporary events. As they read, students would be encouraged to take notes for reflections that will be assigned throughout the unit. These reflections will be take-home assignments that could be used for their final project in the unit, called the One Pager, while also letting me know that they are paying attention during the in-class reading. The reflections will be checked at the end of every week with stamps of approval if they are done. This is an example of the reflections and the questions students will have to answer:

Chapter 1

Summary (in two sentences or less):

One quote that stood out to you (with page number):

An important image:

A struggle of Offred:

 We would begin each class with a summary of what we read in the previous class and any questions they might have had about the reading that we were not able to cover. This would be followed by a short 10-minute discussion of the last question on the Reflection for the chapter. The struggles noted by the students do not have to be physical and can be mental barriers that Offred has difficulty overcoming and can vary from student to student. How does this affect Offred? Are these struggles limited to just her or do they affect other characters?

 Once we are finished reading the novel, the students will be shown clips of the television show *The Handmaid’s Tale*. Due to the TVMA rating of the show, parent permission slips will be given out to students for their guardians to sign. The clips of the show are mostly to help the students visualize the society of Gilead and bring to life Offred’s story. The television show also gives insight into other characters, diving into their perspectives and stories. As they watch the clips, students will be required to take notes on similarities and differences between Atwood’s novel and Bruce Miller’s adaptation and which they prefer. A key topic for their notes would be why they believe Atwood’s novel was adapted for television if the novel was published in 1985.

**Ending the Unit**

 In preparation for the end of the unit, students will complete a One Pager to summarize key concepts and themes from the text. The One Pager is a single page that allows for creativity while analyzing the text. Students are required to write down one important quote, an essential question, and a border with images that are symbolic of the text. They are also required to include images and/or words that show the importance of the setting, a key character(s), and a connection of the themes to something in our world. Students will be encouraged to use the reflections earlier in the unit as they keep track of important quotes and images from the novel that were discussed in class.



(image taken from One Pager Instructions)

The final project of the unit will be a short essay where students will use a current event or experience that they can connect to the themes discussed in *The Handmaid’s Tale*. The current event cannot be over a year old and students must include a link to the source reporting the event. If the student is writing about a personal experience, they should include when this experience took place. For both the current event and the personal experience, students are encouraged to write about their thoughts and feelings. The essay should be between 250-500 words and answer the following questions:

1. What current event or experience will you be writing about?
2. How does this current event or experience relate to *The Handmaid’s Tale*?
3. What can you expect others to learn about this current event or experience?

By the end of the unit, I hope students will have a greater understanding of the female experience and be willing to continue learning about it.

**Beyond the Text**

 While we may not be able to cover all texts and films in the unit, students need to have an array of literature that can connect to the female experience, and hopefully broaden it through diverse perspectives. There has been a boom in diverse narratives that explore the female experience in different genres that are sure to captivate young adults. Not all feminist rhetoric has to be centered around white female characters in a realistic fiction genre. The female experience can be seen through the perspectives of women of color, genres such as science fiction and fantasy, and women that fall under the LGBTQ+ spectrum. The experiences of women reach beyond novels and can be found in films and songs beyond the classroom setting. By broadening their scope of feminist literature, students can broaden their knowledge on the subject and be productive members of society.

**YA Novels**

* *The Power* by Naomi Alderman

 This novel centers around the premise of young girls being given the power to conduct electricity from their hands. Due to this, they flip gender dynamics which allows women to be the dominant sex. The focus of the novel is on gender dynamics and the disproportionate power between them. The fantastical elements of the novel would captivate young readers as well as the premise of switched gender dynamics.

* *I’m Not Your Perfect Mexican Daughter* by Erika L. Sanchez

 This novel follows Julia as she processes the death of her older sister Olga while also juggling her family’s expectations after Olga’s loss. She unravels the mystery of Olga’s secret life as well as the person she wishes to become, and not who her parents want her to be. This novel is one of many that dive into women of color’s female experience. It also contains the Exeter quality of themes that allow the possibility of emotional and intellectual growth through engagement with personal issues.

* *Moxie* by Jennifer Mathieu

 This novel focuses on Vivian as she vents her frustrations on the sexist norms in her small-town high school by creating a zine she anonymously distributes at school. With more girls supporting her ideas, Vivian leads the girls to revolutionize the school and change it for the better. The novel carries strong themes of female empowerment and community that are important to teach to young adults.

* *Speak* by Laurie Halse Anderson

 This novel is told from the perspective of fourteen-year-old Melinda who tries to cope with a sexual assault. Her first year of high school is explored as she falls deeper into depression and tries to find the strength to speak about her assault before her friend falls to the same fate. The novel details Melinda’s mental decline as well as the challenges she faces in trying to tell others about her experience. An Honor List Book Characteristic from the novel is dealing with emotions that are important to young adults given that Melinda struggles with her ability to cope with her assault.

* *The Grace Year* by Kim Liggett

This novel follows Tierney during her Grace Year in the dystopian society of Garner County where young women are believed to have dangerous powers. To relieve themselves of their power, the girls must spend a year away from the county at nature’s mercy. The novel portrays well-known feminist rhetoric in a unique way that would be entertaining for young adult readers. It also has the Exeter quality of characters who reflect the experiences of teen readers, especially when it comes to strong female protagonists.

**Classics**

* *Jane Eyre* by Charlotte Bronte

The story of *Jane Eyre* is one of strength and freedom through the perspective of a woman which can be still enjoyed and understood by young adult readers presently. While the language can be difficult for some young adult readers to read, the themes of gender and class relations remain familiar. Young adults would benefit from reading Bronte’s novel as it shows an early depiction of the female experience, the challenges that Jane has to overcome, and how she overcomes them.

* *Pride and Prejudice* by Jane Austen

 The novel follows Elizabeth Bennet as her parents attempt to marry her and her sisters off to worthy prospects in Regency England. Elizabeth is a strong-willed, and confident woman who butts heads with the equally stubborn Mr. Darcy whom she gradually falls in love with. Austen’s novel details the barriers Elizabeth must overcome as a woman of a low upbringing in making difficult decisions that modern audiences can remain sympathetic to. This novel can help introduce young adult readers to strong female protagonists in older texts, as well as female writers, such as Austen to broaden their knowledge of the female experience.

**Films**

* *Barbie* (2023) directed by Greta Gerwig

 Barbie is brought to life in Gerwig’s film as Barbie and Ken venture into the real world which they thought was a reflection of the perfect, female-led Barbieland. The female experience is relayed through the characters of Gloria and her daughter Sasha who reveal the sexism and gender discrimination that lies in the real world. The film is funny, whimsical, and captivating, with an entertaining story that takes on a fresh approach to the female experience.

* *Little Women* (2019) directed by Greta Gerwig

Based on the novel by Louisa May Alcott brings to life the chronicles of the March sisters in the 19th century as they reunite after years of being apart. It centers on themes of personal growth and family dynamics among women. As it follows the stories of women, the movie is relevant to the female experience, noted through the direction of a feminist lens of Gerwig. Despite the film being labeled as a period piece, the trials and tribulations of the March sisters continue to remain relevant.

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