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ENGL 112B

Fall 2016

Healing the Soul: Nature and Isolation in *Frankenstein*

For many young adults, life can feel overwhelming; as they strive to feel good about themselves, they take on social, extracurricular, and academic pressures. When one gets too caught up in these pressures, the act of living becomes a battle to upkeep a positive image in relation to those around, to be comparatively “successful”. The result is often that the students put tremendous pressure on themselves, self-conscious about what they look like, think, and feel. This constant judgment leads to feelings of insufficiency in the self along with sentiments of disconnection from, and even resentment toward peers. In his book *A New Earth,* Eckhart Tolle describes this notion of an isolated “me” as *the ego,* and discusses the harms of letting it govern one’s sense of self*.* He emphasises recognizing the soul, the “being” that observes and experiences our thoughts, as our true essence and as a means of connection, whilst emphasizing the teaching and soul-healing power of nature. With this unit, I wish to remind students that they are members of a connected world; to remind them that every human is truly an equal being; to remind them that they are not their thoughts; to help them realize that focusing on shared experience and the natural world leads to greater peace of mind and feelings of wellbeing.

In *Adolescents in the Search for Meaning,* Dr. Warner writes,

“Teenagers want to know who they are and what life holds for them, and they are in the search for and development of identity with peers who are equally adrift. Ironically, although adolescents are in the journey together, they are not always the most supportive of each other.” (Warner xix)

The desperation to feel good about one’s self often pushes students away from empathy and toward feelings of competition, leading to the lack of support that Dr. Warner mentions. By reminding students that focusing on our connection as living beings and observing nature helps us escape these stresses, Tolle offers students a very valuable message. His text embodies many of the seven Exeter Qualities of YA Literature outlined in chapter one of *Literature for Today’s Young Adult* (Donelson)*,* including “Lively, Varied, and Imaginative language...neither patronizing or simplistic” as well as “Themes that allow the possibility of emotional and intellectual growth” (9).

If there is any canonical text that deals with isolation, judgment, the human connection, and the solace offered by nature, that text is Mary Shelley’s *Frankenstein*. Tolle’s definition of the ego relates to Victor’s feelings of isolation, hatred, guilt and pain, which essentially erode his mental and physical state. We will examine the monster’s desires, the sources of his short-lived happiness, and the devastating effects of rejection and loneliness. There is also a great deal of canonical poetry regarding appreciating nature, each other, and life in general. In terms of YA lit, I aimed to select works that demonstrate both the contrasting effects of division and unity.The hope is that students will begin to reflect on the sources of their self-identification, reflect on how much they may be isolating themselves from others, and think about means of rediscovering a connection with fellow humans.

**Launching The Unit**

To begin the unit, I will use the songs “(I Can’t Get No) Satisfaction” by The Rolling Stones and “What a Wonderful World” by Louis Armstrong to illustrate for students the difference between being isolated by the ego, and recognizing the spiritual connection that we share with each other. As “Satisfaction” plays, I will tell students to observe who the main subject of the lyrics seems to be, and his seeming attitude about his relationship with the world, displaying: “When I’m ridin’ round the world/And I’m doing this and I’m signing that/And I’m trying to make some girl...Can’t you see I’m on a losing streak” (This and all lyrics from Google Play Music). After this song concludes and allowing students a few moments to finish writing, I will play “What a Wonderful World”, telling students to search for the same items (subject/focus of song and overall attitude/tone), displaying the following segment: “I see trees of green/Red roses too/I see them bloom/For me and you”. After students have heard and reflected on both songs, I would ask them “How do our attitudes and feelings about the world change when we shift our focus from ourselves and our problems to the natural world around us?”

**“What Does Nature Have to Teach Us?” Poetry Exploration**

One of the guiding questions behind the unit is, “What does nature have to teach us?”, because a major motif in both *Frankenstein* and *A New Earth* is the natural world and its harmony with the animal/human world. When the students come into class after having read this section of Tolle for homework, I will have an image of a tree displayed on a slide. The class will explore two poems: “The Sound of Trees” by Robert Frost and “The Tree” by Garret Gray (who was thirteen at the time of writing). First we will read “The Tree” which beautifully portrays the glean into the nature of life that trees offer if we only allow them to. Immediately after reading, to help the imagery of the poem sink in, we would go around the room one by one, each class member reciting his or her favorite line from the poem. I would follow this poem by asking students, “When the man looks back at the tree after having climbed out of it, what do you think he now knows?” Of course, there are many possible answers to this, and that is the beauty of Gray’s poem. Next the class would explore “The Sound of Trees”. After having read it, I will ask the class what Frost might mean when he says, “They are that talks of going/But never gets away”.

**Nature’s Role in *Frankenstein*: Quotation Compilation**

As the students read *Frankenstein* (sometimes in class, sometimes at home) supplemented with selected chunks of *A New Earth*, they will be on the lookout for nature’s role in the canonical text. An ongoing project will be for students to come into class with quotations from the night’s reading that address nature’s effect on characters. The text contains many instances of nature’s consoling and soothing effect on the human spirit. As students come into class with these quotations, we will develop an ongoing list that will aide students in some summative options.

**Observing Nature (SSW Reflection)**

At one point, I would like to take my class out and sit down in the grass for two minutes, in complete silence, the only task being to record in journals any sensory experiences they have: what they smell, what they feel with their hands or bodies, what they hear, what they see. Afterward, I will ask them if they feel any different than they did before the exercise. This activity will spur student thought about how nature can ease our mental load. It will also give them experience to pull from and relate to quotations from the text.

**“Take a Stand” Class Unity Activity (SSW Reflection)**

Another guiding question behind the unit is “What are the effects on both the individual and the group when we isolate ourselves from those around us?” To remind students of their shared experience of living, I would host a “Take a Stand” activity in which students each submit personal struggles they face as young adults, such as: “I care what my friends think about me”. I, the teacher, would participate too. Afterward, I would guide a class discussion, supplemented by a journal write, by asking questions such as: “How did it feel when you and your classmates stood up at the same time as you?” “Did anybody’s responses surprise you?” “What are the benefits of remembering the commonalities we share with each other as humans?”

**Emily Dickinson and *Frankenstein’s* Monster*:* The Effects of Isolation**

Because Emily Dickinson spent a large part of her life living in relative isolation, I would at one point assign students the task of going home and identifying an Emily Dickinson poem that they felt in some way related to Victor’s or the monster’s predicament or character. In class, students would read their poems aloud, sharing the connection they made, and we could explore ways that individuals cope with isolation, discuss how they may manage to remain positive, and where we can see evidence of the pain caused by feeling alone or being excluded.

**Summative Assessments**

The students will have several options for summative assessments, but here are a few options:

1. *Creative Interpretation of Nature’s Healing Effect*: Expressing the effect of nature on the human spirit through an artistic medium of their choosing (drawing, poetry, collage, short story, film, photography, skit, or musical performance), students create an artistic portfolio (of 2-5 pieces) and connect their art to the text using select quotations from *Frankenstein* and *A New Earth* in a short paper (one to two pages).
2. *Creative Interpretation of Isolation:* same general idea as above, but addressing the effects of isolation on the human spirit.
3. *Dear Eckhart* Letter Writing: Students select one character (either Frankenstein or the monster) and create a first-person dialogue between that him and Eckhart Tolle in the form of letters. Either the character or Tolle can send the first letter, but the letters should demonstrate critical thinking: what advice or complaints would this character/author actually offer the other? What help could Tolle offer these two characters? How would they respond? This activity demonstrates student ability to analyze character motives, voice, and concepts, then take this a step further by synthesizing these things in original work.
4. Text-based essay: Students write an essay on one of the following prompts: *How could Victor have helped the monster acclimate to life?; What does Victor (and/or) the creature learn throughout the novel? How do his plans/goals change throughout the novel?* (three to four pages)

**Extending the Unit: Connection and Prejudice**

After the unit’s conclusion, I would turn to *We Were Here* by Matt De La Pena as a means of exploring the effects of one who, as a result of trauma and guilt, isolates himself emotionally from the rest of the world. Miguel relates to Victor in this way. As Miguel develops a connection with Mong and Rondell, as he witnesses the beauty of the vast ocean, and as he appreciates the connectedness of humanity in the drum circle, I would ask the class the following question: *What types of experiences can cause us to disconnect ourselves from those around us? Through which of Miguel’s behaviors can we detect his isolation? Is it ever too late to reconnect with fellow beings?*

I would also consider using the following resources as ways of extending the unit and exploring the damaging effects of prejudice on the psyche:

1. *Witness* by Karen Hesse
   1. Readers can explore not only the effects of prejudice on the psyche of the victims (Leonora Sutter), but can gain insight into the heads of the discriminators and monitor the effects that prejudice and hatred have on the community as a whole.
2. *Freak the Mighty* by Rodman Philbrick
   1. Offers a firsthand look into the experience of being victimized based on physical looks or mental handicap, but also examines the power of friendship.
3. *Song of the Magdalene* by Donna Jo Napoli
   1. By observing the experiences of Miriam, who experiences fits, and Abraham, a cripple, who live in fear in a town of devout Jews, students gain a look into the difficulties of being different.
4. *Speak* by Laurie Halse Anderson
   1. A firsthand look inside a girl who not only has experienced a traumatic event, but is socially outcasted at the same time. This text reminds students that their peers are likely fighting internal battles of their own.

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PowerPoint Presentation:

Slide 1:

Healing the Soul: Nature and Isolation in *Frankenstein*

Unit of Study

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Slide 2:

*The Ego:* Complete identification with one’s emotions and thoughts.

*Egoic thinking leads to:*

Feelings of Isolation, resentment, judgment, etc.

Relief:

Observing thoughts

 remembering that you are not the thoughts themselves, but the consciousness that observes them

Observing nature

Image source: https://images-na.ssl-images-amazon.com/images/I/51qo%2B8ZGO0L.\_SX331\_BO1,204,203,200\_.jpg

Slide 3:Egoic Thinking:

Victor Frankenstein views himself as superior to his monster because of the monster’s looks; alienation and hatred ruin both of their lives.

Nature:

Both characters find moments of solace and tranquility in nature on many occasions.

Image Source: http://geekgirlpenpals.com/wp-content/uploads/2015/07/GG\_Frankenstein-Book-Cover.jpg

Slide 4:

Launching the Unit:

“Satisfaction” and “What a Wonderful World

“When I’m ridin’ round the world

And I’m doin’ this and I’m signin’ that

And I’m tryin’ to make some girl, who tells me

Baby, better come back maybe next week

Can’t you see I’m on a losing streak”

“I see trees of green

Red roses too

I see them bloom

For me and you”

•How do our attitudes and feelings about the world change when we shift the focus from ourselves and our problems to the natural world around us?

Slide 5:

What Does Nature Have to Teach Us?

“The Sound of Trees”, Robert Frost

“The Tree”, by 13 year-old Garrett Gray (published on online blog):

“A beautiful tree stands alone in a field of green.

A man stands alone not knowing what he is seeing.

He plucks a leaf off of one of the lower limbs.

It’s soft.

He looks straight up and starts to climb to the top.

Up and up he climbs to very high.

Up to the last branch, to watch the world pass by…

…He climbs back down onto the field of green.

He stands there now knowing what he sees”

Slide 6:

Other Activities:

Nature Quotation Compilation

Observing Nature (SSW)

“Take A Stand”

Emily Dickinson and Frankenstein’s Monster

Summative Options:

Creative Interpretation: Nature’s Effect or Isolation

Drawing, poetry, collage, short story, film, skit, musical performance, or photography organized in portfolio (2-5)

one to two page paper explaining decisions

*Dear Eckhart* Letter Writing

Traditional Essay

Slide 7:

Extending the Unit:

*We Were Here* by Matt De Le Pena

*Witness* by Karen Hesse

*Freak the Mighty* by Rodman Philbrick

*Song of the Magdalene* by Donna Jo Napoli

*Speak* by Laurie Halse Anderson

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<http://unger.myplainview.com/reviews/witness/witness.jpg>

http://mattdelapena.com/wp-content/uploads/2013/06/wwh\_big.jpg

Slide 8 Image Source: https://encrypted-tbn1.gstatic.com/images?q=tbn:ANd9GcTSI4HYH\_8GdNP6uvea1Vp3CyiN\_TJSQUUfs90c6tk9BxxSrDlU

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