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Exploring Identity and Problem Novels in Young Adult Literature

**Rationale:**

At least once in their life, if not more, a person has thought about their identity and questioned it. Identity may seem like a deceptively simple concept due to how easily labels are given out and put on people, but it is actually much more complex. It is human nature to question, label, and categorize everything we encounter because human beings instinctively fear the unknown. There are two types of labels: ones that are assigned and ones that are created. While labels are not always negative, they aren't beneficial for people either because they not only limit people, but also cause many misconceptions and misassumptions about them. This is especially true for students because once students are labeled as "lazy" or "stupid", the people around them, as well the student; begin to have lower expectations for themselves, which can also take a toll on their self-esteem and overall mental health.

This is exactly what happened to Holden Caulfield in J. D. Salinger's *The Catcher in the Rye*, who is struggling with identity issues, his inability to cope with his brother's tragic death and move on from his traumatic past, all of which affect his performance in school and him being unable to form meaningful relationships/friendships, which cause him to feel lonely and alienated from society. Rather than helping him and trying to understand him, society has labeled Holden Caulfield as a troubled teen and a basket

case, which ends up becoming his whole identity. If Holden was given the help, guidance, and encouragement he desperately required to succeed, he definitely would've been less confused, lonely, frustrated, and a lot more sure of himself than he was throughout the novel. He also wouldn't have such a distorted view of the world as a corrupt and evil place, and the desire to protect the innocence of children from the clutches of the sinister and harsh realities of the adult world.

Holden Caulfield in *The Catcher in the Rye* displays many examples of realism and the modern problem novel, as stated in Chapter Four of *Literature for Today's Young Adults*. The textbook discusses the misconception that children need to read "happy books" because they tend to model their lives based on what they read is both false and misleading. Life isn't always happy because there will always be highs and lows, so giving children this false expectation will do them more harm than good. The textbook even states that children will have a higher chance to lead happier lives once they have realistic expectations about happiness and come to terms with the good and the bad in the societies they live in. Although no one can completely relate to or have gone through the same experiences that Holden has, the book would still be appealing for many young adults because of how realistic Holden's character and the issues/problems he faces are. His fears of growing up and entering the adult world, which stem from the grief of losing his brother, is something young adults may be able to relate to because many people struggle with all of the harsh realities and responsibilities that come with becoming an adult. Holden also is a refreshing breath of fresh air by not being interested nor involving himself with being accepted by everyone else, especially the "phonies" in the very society he questions and fears.

**Launching:**

Before the class reads and discusses J. D. Salinger's *Catcher of the Rye*, have them carry out the following tasks.

1. Listen to the song "Basket Case" Green Days twice; the first time have students just listen to the song and the second time give them a handout with the lyrics to the song.
  - a) Have students analyze the lyrics and imagery shown in the music video. Highlight and define any key terms they feel are important.
  - b) Define and analyze the term "basket case", and the meaning of the term.
  - c) Inform students about the original meaning of the term and how it has changed over time. Has their analysis or thoughts changed?
2. Present students with a few discussion questions and have them write their answers on a sheet of paper. After the sustained silent writing session, ask students to share their answers (if comfortable).
  - a) Discuss how society and literature often portrays someone's whole identity by certain labels they have rather than viewing them as a whole. For example, there is a difference between saying "a Muslim character" vs "a character who is Muslim". (Hint: One is centering a person's whole identity around their religious beliefs while the other is only mentioning the person's religious beliefs as a part of their identity.)
  - b) Have you ever been misunderstood, discriminated against, or had misconceptions about yourself due to certain part(s) of your identity?

- c) How do you feel about the labels that were given to you and the labels you chose?
  - d) Do you think it is appropriate or fair for society to place so much importance on people's labels?
3. Read and discuss Sujata Bhatt's poem "Search For My Tongue".
- a) Discuss the use of imagery and the "two tongues" the narrator describes.
  - b) Ask students this question: How would you feel if you suddenly lost the ability to speak your native language and became completely fluent in another. Would you also feel the same discomfort the narrator feels in speaking their newly dominant language and mourn the loss of their native language?
  - c) If possible, listen to Sujata Bhatt reciting her poem to bring her poem to life

**Working Through the Text:**

While students are reading the canonical text of *Catcher in the Rye*, the following activities will help them to further analyze and engage with the text. Discuss the Exeter Qualities and Archetypes (especially The Seeker) with the students and have them apply these to the text and the Holden Caulfield.

- 1. Open discussion and writing assignment
  - a) Discuss Holden's struggles with mental health and how it has been affecting other areas in his life, like his performance in school, struggles with identity, etc.

b) Have students write a journal entry from Holden's point of view to further understand and analyze his character.

2. Journal

a) Every week, students will write a journal entry about what occurred in the chapters they read for that week along with their personal thoughts about what is occurring in the book.

b) Have students also pick two quotes from the chapters they read for that week that really stood out to them and write their interpretations of the quotes, which they will share in class (why they choose the quote and what they think it means or the significance of the quote).

3. Brown Bag Activity

a) Put or have students form small groups to write and discuss what three items or quotes they think captures the true essence of the novel, the meaning or significance of the item, and why they chose those particular items.

b) Have students prepare a brown bag for themselves with three items and present them to the class. They will tell the class why they brought those items and the meaning/significance behind the items they brought.

**Going Beyond the Text:**

This unit will encourage students to look past the labels assigned to Holden and further analyze his character by stepping into his shoes.

1. Monologues

a) Students will be randomly assigned a character from *The Catcher in the Rye* and will select a scene they would like to react to in front of the class.

- b) Discuss why they chose that scene and whether or not it accurately portrays/represents the character they were given.
2. Holden's Playlist
- a) Have students create a list of ten songs they think Holden would have listened to if the novel had taken place in the present day.
  - b) Each song must have at least 3-5 sentences about its connection to the novel (use textual evidence like themes, symbols, and imagery used in the book), how it represents Holden and why you think he may have enjoyed listening to the song, and include one quote from the text to support their claims.
3. Essay
- a) Students will write a paper on Holden's struggles with society and how society views him as a basket case and troubled teen. Use textual evidence to back up any claims.
  - b) Discuss how society expects people to behave and act in a certain way depending on the label(s) they are categorized under, and how this can be limiting or restrictive.

**Young Adult Literature Selections:**

1. *The Outsiders* by S. E. Hinton

Just like *The Catcher in the Rye*, this book would also be considered a problem novel due to the issues and themes of the teens in this novel, like gang violence, teachers making assumptions about students, and the loss of a loved one (death).

2. *Of Mice and Men* by John Steinbeck

*Of Mice and Men* explores themes of human interaction, the damaging effects of isolation, and having a dream/fantasy about a better life, which are things that Holden faced and went through in *The Catcher in the Rye*. While Holden did not have a mental disability, he certainly had mental health issues, which were having a negative affect on his life and making him think and behave the way he did.

3. “I’m Nobody! Who are you?” by Emily Dickinson

The narrator of the poem discusses the differences between the “Nobodies” and the “Somebodies” in society and how tiring it must be to always be in the public’s eye, which leaves no privacy. Also, similar to Holden, the narrator criticizes the “Somebodies” in society (the phonies) and how they spend their time waiting for someone to give them attention and admiration.

4. The Adventures of Huckleberry Finn by Mark Twain.

Both Huck and Holden share dissatisfaction with their current lives, which they try to remedy by wandering around and daydream. Both are also labeled as troubled teens by the respective societies they live in.

5. *Lord of the Flies* by William Golding

Just like *Catcher in the Rye*, this book discusses similar themes of rebelling against society, individuality, and the struggles to preserve innocence, especially childhood innocence (Ralph and Piggy).

**Finishing the Unit:**

At the end of this unit, students should have a better understanding of the novel, but also how we shouldn’t make assumptions, generalizations, or have certain expectations for someone based on their identity and the labels they are categorized

under. For the final activity of this unit, students will create a piece of art (poetry, drawing, painting, song, etc.) that they feel represents *The Catcher in the Rye* and Holden Caulfield as a character. Students will also write a 1-2 page paper explaining their artwork, why they think it captures the essence of the novel, and how this novel affected their perception or views of identity.

In *Adolescents in the Search for Meaning: Tapping the Powerful Resource of Story*, Chapter Four discuss Real-Life Experiences, which perfectly sums up *The Catcher in the Rye*. In the book, Holden faces many issues like feeling alienated and isolated from society, which is further aggravated due to his fears of adulthood and the harsh realities society has to offer. He is also dealing with family issues, especially his grief from the tragic death of his brother. As a way to cope, Holden often lies and creates imaginary scenarios to escape from the issues and struggles that haunt him in the real world.

In *Literature for Today's Young Adults*, there are several archetypes discussed and the one that fits Holden Caulfield is The Seeker archetype because The Seeker is described as a character that searches for something more, while the Shadow Seeker romanticizes a false world that is very different from the real world they live in. Holden Caulfield's constantly lying and making up fantasy scenarios about his life because he wants to run away from all of the issues that ail him in the real world. He also has an obsession with preserving his innocence and the innocence of children, which is why he denies himself of anything that has to do with the real world. An example of this can be seen when Holden invites a prostitute out of loneliness, but when she arrives he only wishes to only speak with her and even tells her to put her clothes back on. This can be seen as an attempt to preserve his innocence by refusing physical intimacy (sex), which is

considered an adult thing to do. There are also Exeter Qualities mentioned in Chapter One of *Literature for Today's Young Adults*, and number seven perfectly sums up Holden Caulfield's character because he clearly has many personal issues and these themes allow for the possibility for emotional and intellectual growth.

By teaching the Exeter Qualities, The Seeker Archetype, and reading *The Catcher in the Rye*, students will hopefully become more aware and open-minded about issues and struggles someone may be going through. Although Holden Caulfield is a fictional character, many of the experiences he went through are relatable for young adults going through something similar. Students will also hopefully learn to look past a person's labels and not let these labels define who they are as a person because identity is much more complex and beautiful than that.

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