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Seeking Identity Despite Alienation and Self-Isolation

**Rationale**

Hate and entitled judgment are overabundant, and more often than not, people ostracize their peers because of their race, religion, economic status, sexuality, gender, physical appearance, or disability. In other cases, teens that have identified these social issues will reject the world they live in and intentionally isolate themselves because they know that they are different from the norm and want nothing to do with it. Regardless of whether the teen is alienated or self-isolates, struggling with understanding their reactions, emotions, motives, and goals that may contrast with the norm may become overwhelming.

As a student, most of my English classes focused on literary elements, so while we did analyze specific themes, most of them were themes that were more relevant to the adult world than our world as teens. Of course, learning about literary elements was helpful, but I believe that we lost many opportunities to use the text to learn more about ourselves. If more teens had an unhindered concept of who they are and who they want to become, they would be comparatively less frustrated and confused. For that reason, teens should learn introspection as early as possible, and I will have them do this by analyzing the archetype of the seeker and the theme of identity.

Teens can learn introspection by reading about characters that have been alienated or have self-isolated. The seeker archetype, as defined in *Literature for Today’s Young Adults,* is a character who searches for something more for themselves. On the other hand, the shadow seeker romanticizes a world far more different from their own, and their search for something better may result in disillusionment. Teaching this archetype will allow students to read about characters who share similar experiences. It will also encourage them to be more open-minded as they read about struggles they may not be facing, but perhaps their classmates are.

**Introduction**

The centerpiece for my unit of study is J.D. Salinger’s *The Catcher in the Rye*. After being expelled from Pencey Prep, Holden Caulfield goes to New York for three days to avoid his parent’s disappointment. The said reason for his expulsion is his academic failure, but the real reason is his disillusionment and disgust by the phonies in his school, which makes him self-isolate. Not only is he repulsed by teens his age, but also adults whose lifestyles depress him. Holden is an example of a shadow seeker; he fantasizes about running away and avoiding everything that would make him a phony, but his younger sister, Phoebe, helps him return to reality.

*The Catcher in the Rye* is a perfect example of a problem novel, as defined in *Literature for Today’s Young Adults.* Holden’s tone throughout the book is quite somber, but he poses questions that are important for young adults to consider. Although his family does not have financial problems, he is still a realistic character; his narrative focuses more on his fear of growing up, which can appeal to multiple young readers. His concern with being genuine rather than following the superficial interests of phonies is a valid concern that young adults may face, especially if they are alienated and may want to follow the crowd for acceptance. His narrative encourages teens to explore their interests and fears, which may be stopping them from pursuing those interests.

**Launching**

The objective of this unit is for students to have a better understanding of their identity and the person they want to be, so I will have my students keep a reflective journal throughout the unit. I want them to be as thoughtful as possible, so I will not read the content. For accountability reasons, if I taught this unit in an in-person class, I would quickly check if they wrote at least a page. I will introduce *The Catcher in the Rye* by playing the music video, “Run Boy Run,” by Woodkid. Some notable lyrics are, “Tomorrow is another day/ And when the night fades away/ You'll be a man, boy!/ But for now it's time to run, it's time to run!” The music video shows a young boy running. Creatures crawl up from the ground, and at first, the creatures seem threatening, but as the boy continues to run, they carry him, helping him move faster and give him weapons to defend himself. I will ask the class to reflect on the music video and the lyrics in their journal. How did the song and music video make them feel? What do they make of the meaning? Is there something they are currently trying to avoid?

After listening to the song, I will ask the class to think of a song that represents them as individuals or simply a song that they like. They will not have to present their song, but they can share in the next class discussion. I will ask them to write about why they chose that song in their journal.

Additional introductory song options include:

1. “Broken Boy” by Cage the Elephant
   1. Notable lyrics: “Tell me why I'm forced to live in this skin/ I'm an alien, I'm just an alien, oh/ Tell me why I was born to live in this skin/ Tell me how I'm supposed to be forgiven/ With my hand in the hive and the sun in my eyes, yeah.”
   2. Link to lyrics: <https://www.azlyrics.com/lyrics/cagetheelephant/brokenboy.html>
   3. Rationale and activity: Holden self-isolates to avoid phonies because his way of thinking is different. After listening to this song, I will ask students to write about a situation they feel they have no control over.
2. “Angry Sea” by Mother Mother
   1. Notable lyrics: “I don't want the same disease/ That everybody's got these days/ I don't want to live that way/ I do not want to live in pain/ So take your parasites away/ And keep them somewhere far from me/ Cuz I don't want the same disease.”
   2. Link to lyrics: <https://genius.com/Mother-mother-angry-sea-lyrics>
   3. Rationale and activity: This song is relevant to Holden’s disgust in phonies. Students can write about something they dislike and do not want to become a part of who they are.
3. “I Disagree” by Poppy
   1. Notable lyrics: “I disagree, everything you believe is a tragedy/ I disagree with the way you keep preaching insanity/ I disagree with all of the reasons you're mad at me/ I disagree, everything in your life is a tragedy/ Down, let it all burn down/ Burn it to the ground/ We'll be safe and sound/ When it all burns down.”
   2. Link to lyrics: <https://genius.com/Poppy-i-disagree-lyrics>
   3. Rationale and activity: This song has a similar angsty tone as *The Catcher in the Rye*. Both Poppy and Holden strongly dislike and disagree with the expectations that others have for them. Students can reflect on an occasion when an adult, or anyone with authority, made them do something they did not want to.

**Working Through the Text**

1. Before we start reading the text, I will go through the character archetypes with the class and ask them to think about what character archetypes they would be or which one they wished to be if they were a character in a book. This mini-lesson will encourage students to pay more attention to how Holden behaves and thinks. The goal is to have them analyze their behavior as well.
2. As we read the text, I will ask my students to think about the following questions:
   1. How do you feel about growing up?
   2. What do you wish you could change about the way people live and think?
   3. What is Holden afraid of, or what is he avoiding?
   4. Why is Holden so keen on wearing his hunting hat?
   5. Why does Holden feel lonely?
   6. Is Holden a phony?
   7. Why is he fond of Allie and Phoebe but not his peers?
   8. What character archetypes does Holden resemble?
3. I will divide the reading into four sections. Students will write reflections in their journals about what they thought about Holden. They can also write about similar experiences they have had. If they want, they can also write about a song the chapter made them think about, as long as they bring it back to the book’s content, which can be shared in discussion.
4. To further discuss the topic of alienation and self-isolation, I will assign Edgar Allan Poe’s “Alone” and Nour Al Ghraowl’s “Truth is I would like to escape myself.” Students will write a reflection comparing and contrasting the poems with Holden and themselves, and of course, they can mention a song with a similar theme as the poems.
   1. Links to the poems:
      1. <https://www.poetryfoundation.org/poems/46477/alone-56d2265f2667d>
      2. <https://www.poetryfoundation.org/poetrymagazine/poems/155504/truth-is-i-would-like-to-escape-myself>

**Going Beyond the Text**

Since this unit is about identity, It would be most beneficial to expose teens to introspection as early as possible, so I would teach it at the beginning of the school year. I will also continue encouraging them to share what they write in their journals and the songs they have picked. Sharing out will make class discussions more enjoyable, and I hope that it will also make them look forward to the readings and activities.

Although *The Catcher in the Rye* has relatively easy language, I will pair this book with contemporary Young Adult books about various issues related to identity. Some pairing options include:

1. Matt De la Peña’s *We Were Here*: Miguel has done something that got him sent to Juvi, and he has to spend a year at a group home. He meets Rondell and Mong, and the three of them escape from the group home, hoping to make their way to Mexico and start again, but that journey is not an easy one. Like Holden, Miguel fits the archetype of the seeker. This book includes various subjects such as death, grievance, identity as a mixed teenager, juvenile criminal justice system, disability, family, and friends. Miguel is Mexican and White, so multiethnic students and students from immigrant families will finally read about a character with similar doubts about his identity. While the book has many heavy subjects, it ends in an encouraging and hopeful manner.
   1. Introductory song: “It’s Alright” by Mother Mother
      1. Notable lyrics: “You're not a monster, just a human/ That you made of your mistakes/ It's alright, it's okay, it's alright, it's okay/ You're not grouse, I'm just human.”
      2. Link to lyrics: <https://genius.com/Mother-mother-its-alright-lyrics>
2. Edwidge Danticat’s *Behind the Mountains*: Celiane lives with her older brother and mother in Haiti. Her father is in New York, and he has been saving up for them to move there with him. Celiane is on a school bus when someone throws a bomb and is nearly killed. She poses questions, such as why children, who have nothing to do with politics, must suffer. Once her family moves to New York, her entries focus on the many issues of immigrants and assimilation. As an immigrant, Celiane also fits into the archetype of the seeker. While Celiane’s experiences may not be common, this book exemplifies several Exeter Qualities. It is from the perspective of a young woman, which is uncommon in Young Adult novels, and it exposes students to how teens their age experience the horrors of politics, violence, and moving to a different country.
   1. Introductory song: “belong” by slenderbodies
      1. Notable lyrics: “Dream of palaces and countrysides/ All I want, want, want, want/ Is to wake up with the morning light, laughing all alone/ Break away from all the city lights, hiding in the dark/ 'Cause you don't belong where you don't belong, yeah, I don't belong.”
      2. Link to lyrics: <https://genius.com/Slenderbodies-belong-lyrics>
3. Shelley Fraser Mickle’s *The Turning Hour*: This book is about Bergin’s attempted suicide. It is told from Bergin and her mother’s perspective. The book follows Bergin’s journey in trying to get back to her normal life and her mother’s attempt to understand why Bergin tries to kill herself. Not only does this book comment on mental health, but also the difficulties of having alcoholic parents and divorced parents. This book may interest students as some of them may have also felt suicidal at some point in their lives, and if they haven’t, this book allows for emotional growth so that they know what to do with friends who are. This book encourages students to move forwards from hardships.
   1. Introductory song: “Human” by Daughter
      1. Notable lyrics: “Underneath the skin there's a human/ Buried deep within there's a human/ And despite everything I'm still human/ I think that I'm still human.”
      2. Link to lyrics: <https://genius.com/Daughter-human-lyrics>
4. Nora Raleigh Baskin’s *Anything But Typical*: Jason is an autistic twelve-year-old who worries about not fitting in the neurotypical world. However, he “meets” Rebecca, who posts stories on the same site he does. While she helps him feel less alone, he is still anxious about meeting her. This book offers the perspective of a young boy with autism. Since this narrative goes beyond the typical experience, it encourages students to understand and respect issues they might not have considered. Jason fits into the archetype of the seeker as he tries to find a place for himself in a world that, for the most part, is not aware of his experience.
   1. Introductory song: “Nobody” by Mitski
      1. Notable lyrics: “And I don't want your pity/ I just want somebody near me/ Guess I'm a coward/ I just want to feel alright.”
      2. Link to lyrics: <https://genius.com/Mitski-nobody-lyrics>
5. A.S. King’s *I Crawl Through It*: This book follows four teenagers that have lost a sibling, been neglected by parents, survived rape, and struggle with anxiety and depression. These four teenagers resort to different coping mechanisms, all of which allow them to escape reality. However, they must learn to face reality to move forward. These characters are similar to Holden as shadow seekers, as they change their reality in their minds to avoid thinking about what makes them uncomfortable. This book has several Exeter Qualities, which make it an enjoyable read. It has multiple perspectives, and each character thinks and copes in such a different manner that hooks the reader. It also goes beyond the typical experiences, as the characters have been through emotionally intense experiences, which will encourage readers to grow emotionally.
   1. Introductory song: “Hiding” by Florence + The Machine
      1. Notable lyrics: “I know that you're hiding/ I know there's a part of you that I just cannot reach/ You don't have to let me in/ Just know that I'm still here/ I'm ready for you whenever/ Whenever you need/ Whenever you want to begin.”
      2. Link to lyrics: <https://genius.com/Florence-the-machine-hiding-lyrics>
6. Erika L. Sanchez’s *I Am Not Your Perfect Mexican Daughter*: After Julia’s older sister, Olga, dies in an accident, the expectations of the eldest daughter are transferred on to her. However, Julia wants more for herself; she wants to move out and go to college, which her family sees as abandoning them. Julia is yet another example of the seeker archetype; she is not satisfied with her life, and she must go against her parents to allow herself to become the person she wants to be. Not only does this book reflect the cultural values of traditional Mexican families, which other Latinx students may identify with, but it also covers the universal theme of growing up and becoming an individual outside of the family. The overall message of the book encourages readers to continue seeking their identity.
   1. Introductory song: “Punchin’ Bag” by Cage the Elephant
      1. Notable lyrics: “She won't take no more, won't take no more/ Won't take no more, won't take no more/ Oh no ain't it a drag/ If you take a swing, the kid swings back/ She say, I'm not your punchin' bag.”
      2. Link to lyrics: <https://genius.com/Cage-the-elephant-punchin-bag-lyrics>

**Finishing the Unit**

Since students will have already been doing a lot of writing in their journals, I will give them the option of writing an essay or doing an oral presentation. If they choose the essay, they will write about Holden or the protagonist of the Young Adult novel and how the character reflects characteristics of the seeker archetype. They can also answer any of the questions I asked them to think about at the beginning of the unit. Those who enjoyed the journal reflections may write about an experience in which they showed characteristics of the seeker archetype. Those who choose to do a presentation will choose three quotes from one of the books and pair them with a song. They will use their quotes to explain the relevance of the song, or they can also prove why the protagonist would listen to the song. If they want to do more, they can also include a song representing them as a seeker archetype.

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