**Unit of Study: Death and Humor**

**Rationale:**

Classes can be hard for students, many would much rather be having fun then being forced into a class, learning about things that may find trivial and not very useful. As a teacher that is the hardest thing to overcome, finding a unit of study that can be interesting for the class, but at the same time intellectual enough to have merit to actually be taught in the class. While many may attempt to find relatable topics for students, that too may be subjective as not many students may relate to the topic or even understand its significance. A way to help them understand it is through how it is written and one thing that is universally understood by many is humor.

While humor is subjective, everyone likes to crack a smile no matter how cynical or jaded they may be. Within a circle of friends there is always a moment when someone asks what was so funny. In a similar sense this is what makes humor so valuable in an English class. This form of engagement can be transferred into a classroom setting where students want to see what made something from a reading so funny. If word play is used, for example, a student may tell the other student that it was funny because the word has two separate meanings and within the context of the story it was utilized differently, but still makes sense within the frame of the sentence. This is why I propose the author Terry Prachett and his series of Discworld books. Within the context of this prompt, however, I will be using Pratchett's book *Mort* to open up a discussions about how Parchett utilizes humor in his novel. From character traits to settings students can analyze the style of humor Prachett uses and how it is implemented to discuss topics that are found throughout the novel. The bookdiscusses the concept of death and how people will question it, what does it feel like, is there an afterlife? Why do certain people have to die and others don’t?

**Introducing the Unit**

Because everyone can have a different sense of humor it is important to understand what students find humorous. According to the book *Literature for Today’s Young Adults* Professor Jacque Hughes found that “drawing relationships between raucous humor and more subtle humor can help students move to new levels of appreciation.”(Chapter 5). Raucous humor is very easy to spot as it tends to be low-brow humor that can be found in most comedies. Therefore, before any reading can even begin, I will hand an assignment out that asks students these questions:

1. Can death be funny?
2. Can there be humor along with death?

Students are asked to write a short paper, whether or not they agree that death can be funny. Then another question asked.

1. How is death portrayed in that particular scene that they found funny.

This can lead to other questions such as if the text mentions a soul and how does it act in the scene and so on. The students must explain with some anecdotal evidence on a particular moment, be it movie, games or books, in which death was in conjunction with humor. If a student disagrees it is also encouraged to explain why. What influences their ideas, was it their culture or is it their personal beliefs and explain. Maybe they are a part of a religion that heavily frowns upon mocking the dead. In both cases, Students are encouraged to show their thoughts and feelings about humor and death, this will introduce students to other cultures through a very relatable topic. This is to more easily introduce the students on what to expect what the session(s) will be centered around. The last part of this part of the assignment is explaining how a scene in which death was incorporated helps the narrative? Does it help move the plot forward? Does it initiate the narrative, does it conclude the story?

One might wonder, why death was chosen as a topic. Why such a dark topic for an English class? The topic of death, much like humor, is a universally understood thing, but unlike humor we as humans do not really know about it in the metaphysical sense. This allows authors to think of ways on how death is interpreted. For students, specifically in high school, they may have encountered death in one way or another. From family to a pet or even a friend. Death can come suddenly and it may be unfair that someone they know has lost their life. When we lose someone close to us it feels as if a part of us is gone and a wave of emotions may come from happiness to sadness, how we deal with death can be different from others.

**Centerpiece:**

As stated earlier, the book that students will be focusing on during the next few weeks would be on Terry Pratchett’s *Mort.* The book goes into several topics about death, such as the afterlife and how death can be unfair. Good people die and bad people can get to some facsimile to heaven but in *Mort* Death states, “FAIR DOESN’T COME INTO IT, YOU CAN’T TAKE SIDES...WHEN IT’S TIME, IT’S TIME. THAT’S ALL THERE IS TO IT BOY. “(Pratchett 49). This is supported earlier in the novel as Mort’s first witness of Death’s work is collecting the souls of drowned kittens. Death doesn’t and shouldn’t pick sides on who gets to live or who gets to die, even if these people are innocent and that they have become part of an incident without their free-will, Death does not and should not mess with destiny. This is the basis for the plot of the story of Mort as it asks “what if someone was supposed to die, but isn’t yet the world keeps moving on as if they were”? By putting a more humorous take on a dark subject, it allows students to see it in a different perspective. Not only is death a part of destiny, but there are also various aspects of being dead. When Mort does his first soul collecting duty many of them go out in different ways, from souls vanishing, “if you stay you sort of spread and get thinner, until-”(Pratchett 87), to reincarnation. This goes back to the writing assignment as there are various cultures that view death differently. From reincarnation to going to heaven or just disappearing, based on how one is raised or taught, people will have various views on death.

There are also other themes that seem to be prevalent in the novel that do not necessarily pertain to the themes of death. Expectation is one, Mort seems to struggle with meeting the standards of others, due to him constantly asking questions, causing his family and relatives to see him as a failure. Death, however, doesn’t see his constant questioning as a negative, but a sign of someone who is always willing to think and see the world from a different perspective.

The other reason for choosing this book is its length. The book is not very long, barely reaching 300 pages. The font is fairly large and the grammar is very basic so students should have no trouble reading this book and keeping track of what’s been going on. At the very least we would spend at least 2, maybe 3 weeks at most, depending on the pace of the students. While reading, however students will begin their assignments that is part of the reading.

**Working with the Text**

While the students are reading the book, either in-class or at home, they are encouraged to keep tabs on anything they had found humorous in the book. Along with this I will provide each student a sheet of paper that lists the various styles of humor that can be found in the book with a brief description for each. This will allow students to find out exactly what makes something so funny if they don’t understand the structure of the joke. Humor can be a useful tool as according to *Literature for Today’s Young Adults*, “humor can be a good way to entice students into other kinds of literary analysis...students are genuinely interested in figuring out what causes them to smile or laugh.”(Chapter 5). By having them mark up the things that they found funny it allows them to create a stepping stone to their analysis without even realizing that they are doing it. Because they are picking something they personally found funny it also has personal incentive and isn’t something that is chosen by the professor or a random list of quotes.

There is no rule for the mark up portion of the assignment. All students need to do is to keep a journal or tabs on what they found funny and write about what about the scene/sentence made it so funny. Depending on whether the assignment is done in-class or at home students will then discuss what they found funny at the beginning of class or at the end of class.

Once the reading has been completed and quotes have been marked it is time for the next part of the assignment. Similar to the earlier assignment given, I will provide students with various questions about their reading. The arguments that will be discussed in class will focus on the theme of death and how humor is applied to it. Such questions can include:

1. Did they find anything in the reading that was particularly un/funny to them?

2. What form of humor has been used that made it humorous or not?

3. How was death portrayed in this scene?

4. Why was death portrayed in such a way?

Afterwards they’ll adapt Mort’s method of questioning by using the Socratic method. According to Thoughtco’s article “What is the Socratic Method” this allows “The principle underlying the Socratic method is that students learn through the use of critical thinking, reasoning, and logic. This technique involves finding holes in their own theories and then patching them up.”(Fabio para 3). This also provides students, “practice thinking and making arguments on their feet. It also helps them master the art of speaking in front of large groups.”(Fabio para 4).In either case this is where the students will use the information they have gathered while reading to formulate an opinion and explain through reasoning. This is where they begin to discuss in class about a particular quote they had found interesting, using the answers they had wrote for questions like the ones mentioned above to formulate their argument/opinion.

This will allow students to think about the text beyond the surface level, look a bit deeper into each word and use certain analytical approaches like Semiotics to help analyze the writing style of Pratchett.

By doing so students will

* Gain a better understanding of analyze a text
* How narrative can affect a theme
* Gain a better understanding about death and life itself

**Outside Readings:**

Pratchett’s unique take on death is quite difficult to top as other stories that revolve around death tend to be moody and never really show much humor, especially in relation to the topic of death at hand. As students have demonstrated though, death can be seen differently in various novels and students are encouraged to do some outside reading that have such themes about death. Such stories can be found in the book *Adolescents in the Search For Meaning: Tapping the Powerful Resource of Story*, which has a chapter that focuses on Death, some of other books outside of this include.

***A Summer to Die* by Louis Lowry**

Much like Mort’s idea that death can be unfair, this book *A Summer to Die* also brings this idea up. As the protagonist of this novel, Meg has a sister Molly whom she always fights over the tiniest of things. However, as they spend time at the country house it becomes apparent that Molly is dying. Diagnosed with acute myelogenous leukemia, she dies by the end of the novel, because of the short time she has Meg becomes to appreciate and adore her sister. The book talks about how death can be unfair, but at the same time teaches about loss and to cherish the time you had with the ones that have passed.

Along with this a personal choice I made was the book:

***Into the Grey*, by Celine Kiernan**

While primarily a mystery novel, a big part of this mystery revolves around death and mourning. Kiernan’s take on death and the soul is rather different to Pratchett’s take, but it is still interesting nonetheless. What would happen if a spirit that refuses to leave this world? What if the soul in question takes over someone else? Would they continue to live on, what would happen to the original soul? These are the questions that are brought up in *After the First Death* where our protagonist Pat has to move to a new location. After their move he begins to notice that his brother, Dom isn’t acting like himself almost as if someone else has taken over his body. Pat then has to find a way to get his brother back, figure out why this soul has taken over his brother’s body before Dom’s soul disappears forever.

**Closing the Unit**

Students should gain a greater understanding about death and its various portrayl in society through the different ways it is viewed in *Mort*. By finding quotes and agreeing/disagreeing with its presentation of death students begin to analyze and think more critically of the works that they read. Through this reading, students may gain a better appreciation of life. Despite the book focusing on death it talks about how sometimes in life, we cannot get the things we want and letting that fester and linger can only make things worse. As the section “Outside Reading” has shown, most of those books are not comedic and take death as a serious subject, but as stated in the beginning of the book there needs to be levity, things shouldn’t be always grim or somber. Sometimes we need humor to help explain the unexplainable.

Citations

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