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ENGL 112B

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Outcasts, Misfits, Outsiders, Identity and What it Means to be Human

### **Rationale**

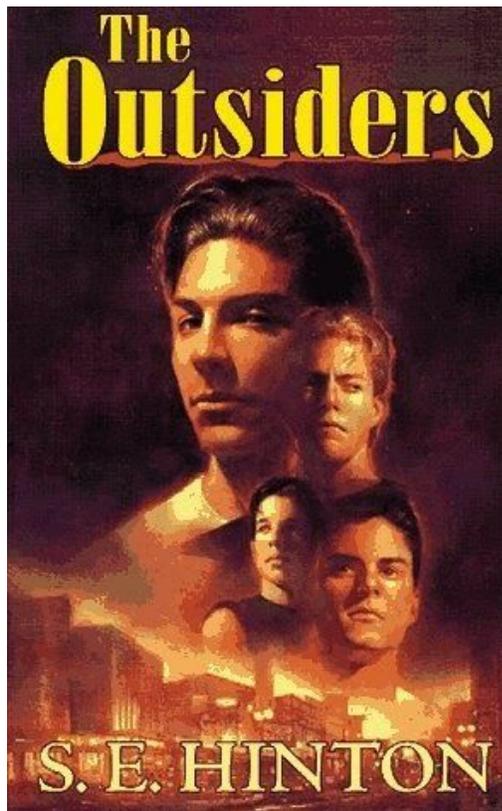
What does it mean to be human and what does it mean to be normal? Young adult is a term given to adolescents aged 12-18. This is an important time in the development of any person given it has things to do with puberty and identity. This is when children's brains begin to mature and they can discover who they are and what they want to become in the future. That being said though, because of the chaotic nature of the human body and the human spirit during adolescence, it is also one of the most difficult periods in life. At the outset of this course I misunderstood the purpose of this project. Originally I was treating it like a research paper and I created a question relating to the evolution of literary education because it had become abundantly clear that things had changed since I was a teenager. My youngest two siblings read Percy Jackson and the Olympians: The Lightning Thief as a class in eighth grade, where the other siblings and even our mother were reading The Outsiders at the time. It was Dr. Warner who helped me define what this project would be, because I already had a link between a canon text and a more modern young adult literature book. Better yet they were already connected by a central theme. Outcasts, grouping, and finding yourself and where you belong.

Chapter 6 of *Adolescents in the Search For Meaning: Tapping the Powerful Resource of Story* is all about looking at literature that handles themes of Identity and Discrimination. Exactly what is spoken on within the two books I spoke of above. How do kids's struggle with who they

are and where they belong? How can they find their home amongst the chaos of youth? Why do kids and people label one another and other them? In the end I want to explore these questions with a class and help these kids work through them. More than anything I want to help teens reach a place where they feel it is ok to just be themselves and avoid an outcome where they feel like outcasts. Struggling in adolescence is something I am all too familiar with and I want to use that experience to expose my students to the grander scheme of life and facilitate discussions that can break down barriers for them on how they can view themselves and the world, being comfortable with anything and everything life has to throw at them.

The time period for this unit would be during eighth grade which would mean a majority of the kids would be 12-13. More important they would be learning these topics and having discussions before entering high school. High school is in every way a more intense and difficult time than middle school. A place and period rife with cliques, bullying, othering, and discrimination. If the youth that leave the classroom can handle themselves better when thrust into that wild world then I will have succeeded in my goal. They need to come to an understanding that one is no different than another and labels at the end of the day are pointless words given to people for really no reason. Using literature to do that is just but one way to make sense of it. The additional work we put in within the classroom will make up for the rest of it. Take fiction and real world activities and we might just learn a thing or two.

### Centerpiece Work

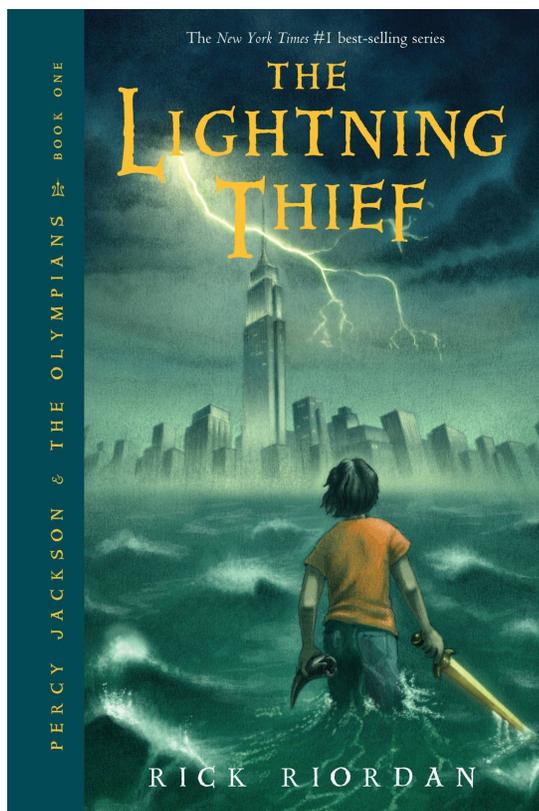


A classic novel that has been around upwards of five decades, written by an adolescent herself and published when S.E. Hinton was but 18. Perhaps that is why it has such relevance and characters that can be related to on such a level that has kept this book alive for so long. For decades it has been taught in classes during middle school and is core to Young Adult Literature. In Fact S.E. Hinton is credited as the founder of the genre a majority of the time and it is plain to see. This book was written for her peers by someone close in age to the characters themselves. This novel is about class warfare brought to life through two rival gangs separated by

their socioeconomic status. More than about the class warfare though is the othering of one another thrust upon them by generations and society. The characters have depth to them that has no relation to their status but more to their passions and desires. They find comfort amongst each other which is what drives them to committing such acts of violence on one another.

This book is an intense read because of its content. Kids are drinking, smoking, and even killing one another or committing suicide by cop. I do not adhere to this idea of banning books. This is a good book and worth reading. It handles sensitive topics in interesting ways with compelling characters that have transcended generations of cultural evolution. If taught in the right way students can discover real life lessons and begin looking at themselves and one another in a new light. As well, they can enjoy reading this book and use what they have learned to look

into something else they might be reading in the coming years. Looking at how the kids in The Outsiders will come in handy when I also introduce them to Percy Jackson and the Olympians:



The Lightning Thief. Now they will probably enjoy reading about Percy and his friends far more than something like Ponyboy and crew, but I want them to look at how Rick Riordan handles kids and identity and how is it different from S.E. Hinton. Percy struggles with feeling like an outcast because at the outset he knows not where he belongs. This carries over even when he finds Camp Half-Blood because the demigods are split up amongst their cabins and are made to fight each other, foster alliances, and squash their rivals. The Lightning Thief is not so much a socioeconomic class struggle between gangs but it does stem from similar

themes that can be seen throughout. Children of gods group together and are made to fight each other. Demigods being othered for what they are or who their parents are but more importantly it is about choosing who you are and finding a place to belong.

### **Let's Get in the Classroom**

To introduce the section I want to show the students two quotes from The Outsiders as well as an image from the American anime series *Teen Titans*. I feel these two quotes are core to the wisdom I would like to impart on these kids. The image is for my enjoyment and because it is something the kids might have heard of or even seen. It wraps up the lesson in a few panels. “It seemed funny to me that the sunset she saw from her patio and the one I saw from the back steps

was the same one. Maybe the two different worlds we lived in weren't so different. We saw the same sunset.”

“They grew up on the outside of society. They weren't looking for a fight. They were looking to belong.”



1. Before getting into the novel proper I think that classroom discussions are important to the learning environment. Open classroom discussions all the better because I want to facilitate in depth conversations that these students may not have otherwise. With that in mind I will put some questions on the board for the kids to discuss amongst themselves in groups before coming together to talk to me.
  - a. What makes you different from other kids?
  - b. Are boys and girls different from each other?
  - c. What about being Mexican or White? Or rich as opposed to poor? Chubby or skinny? Athletic or not? LGTBQ+ as opposed to heteronormative? Feeling like you aren't the right sex?
  - d. Have you ever felt like you don't belong or been bullied for who you are?

2. It is that last question that I want to spend a lot of time on. Some of the students might be shy about sharing with me or the class. I have thought of that though because it is one of the biggest reasons I want to be a teacher. I have been through it. So to break the ice I will share first. About my experiences growing up Mexican but being lighter than all my peers, my mom, and my younger siblings even. How that affected me and how I was bullied for being small in stature, reading a lot, smart, or for not knowing what being straight meant. That's a big one. Anecdote here
3. I want to follow up this with asking the kids what they think defines them as a person. This will come in the form of a name tag activity where they draw pictures around their name on what they identify with and it can be anything. I will show mine and it will have Kpop group names, Anime, and Video games, and Japanese symbolism. I will then have them give me their name tags to keep and why will be revealed later.
4. Finally I want to ask them about characters they identify with in the media and those they think could be considered outcasts or outsiders. Why are they made out as such?

### **Working through The Book**

Popcorn reading is fun and all but that isn't always the best way to work through a text. There will be assigned chapters to read with discussion on the plot being done in class. Important sections we will read together in class. With the theme of outcasts and identity being core to the unit I am teaching, I devised a way to read through the book in a way that would make it interesting for the kids. At the start they will be randomly separated into groups and choose a character from the book as their Mascot. While they read the book they will be looking for those characters and how they act and are written about. They will keep track of how their character progresses through the novel. I want them to mark what they think sets this character apart from

the others. What things comprise that character's identity. At the end they will make a name tag for their character except it's on poster paper and will be displayed around the room. Draw the character as they envision them along with writing and drawing the items that define the character's identity. Write some quotes from or about them as well. There will be multiple Ponyboy posters because he is the protagonist and I think the kids will find different things to attach to when it comes to this character. I want the kids to then also go around the room looking at all the posters and choosing who they most identified with and then we can talk about why.

### **Finale to The Outsiders**

The real finale will be a small essay assignment where the students will all be answering the same question. Why were the Greasers and Socs fighting? Whose side do you think you'd be on regardless of how much money your family now makes? Neither is an answer.

While they are writing this, give them a week to do so, we will be watching the movie over a few class sessions.

### **Connecting to Other Texts**

Time for the students to branch out and read something. In high school honors classes when we had genre sections we read one canon text then the other was free choice. I always appreciated the idea. I will be highlighting Percy Jackson and the Olympians and perhaps it is even required reading depending on my coworkers. If that is the case I know we are dividing the class up into god Cabins and holding activities and point systems and also making posters for those gods and characters and who they identify with. It has to be done. Other texts though that we can look at that handle themes along these lines are as follows. Pair YA books to think about:

1. Percy Jackson and the Olympians series by Rick Riordan. Already spoken enough about its merits with relation to the topic.

2. Whale Talk by Chris Crutcher. A novel about a band of misfit swimmers trying to get some letterman jackets in highschool and how they come together, become a team, and succeed by their own efforts. It is also about identity and bullying as well as being othered for who you are or any issues you may have. It is then about finding a place to belong and acceptance. It is about elevating kids who have been dealt bad hands all their lives and how they can then overcome anything.
3. We Were Here by Matt de la Pena. A novel about a boy named Miguel writing in a journal trying to discover who he is. It is why he is running away to Mexico, to get that fresh start away from literally everything.
4. *Teen Titans* graphic novel series by Kami Garcia and Gabriel Picolo. *Ms. Marvel* by G. Willow Wilson and Adrian Alphona. Discuss Miles Morales as a character. I think graphic novels and comics are a worthwhile form of literature that can have a surprising amount of depth. With the ones mentioned here I find it to be abundantly clear why they are important. In the case of the Teen Titans they are a band of misfit teens who become a team and family. Kamala Khan is a Muslim teenager from Jersey City trying to figure out who she is and what she should do with her new powers. The same can be said of a classic character like Spider-Man but with Miles it is taken to a whole other level when they introduced a half Black half Puerto Rican teen from New York who becomes the new Spider-Man, a character who has now taken the world by storm.
5. Another canon text that has these themes to be explored that the kids might read in high school that I can introduce them to now would be Of Mice and Men by John Steinbeck ethnic discrimination present throughout and how the characters are treated and handle themselves amidst the hate being hurled at them. Character's who are mentally disabled

but can be used for their strength and what that says about society's view of people as resources. Displaced migrant workers are what the book is about and in a way that is outcasts of outcasts. Migrant workers existing on the fringes of society are then outcast further with little opportunity.

6. Let them recommend something to me in media or literature or read something they've explored themselves.

### **Ending the Unit**

After reading through The Outsiders as well as another book the students choose themselves we can come together as a class to have a big open discussion about how the kids feel about identity and outcasts after all is said and done. I want them to make new name tags for themselves and see if how they view themselves has changed. I want to finish with an I am Poem and put them together because I want the kids to feel comfortable with themselves and each other. The final class will be for them to bring in real life items that they identify with and have a share and tell. I want them to scream to the class THIS IS WHO I AM. Volunteers can read their poems aloud. Essays kind of suck so they won't need to write anything like that and we will use these activities and the poem as the participation with the activity. They will have needed to keep a journal on their thoughts about the characters in the pair work they chose. Besides that though time to celebrate a finished unit.

Citations

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