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Coming Of Age: A Young Adult's Journey to Finding Their Identity

I. Rationale

Where do I fit in? Who even am I? These questions amongst a plethora of others have been known to plague a young adult's mind throughout adolescence and into the early stages of adulthood. The speed at which a young adult is able to find answers to these questions varies and is unique to each person. Also varying from person to person is the journey itself—whether a person is actively seeking out answers regarding their identity, or their identity is revealed by external factors. People going through this journey of self discovery can find solace in the book theme, coming of age. These novels have a central focus on the main character, who is an adolescent, and their interactions with others in relation to their own lives. Books with this theme have a heavy character-related focus and a higher emphasis on emotions rather than action. Or rather, how a character *feels* about a certain event. That is why it is important to conduct analyses on these characters and how they come to the conclusions they do—if any at all. There are many angles that can be taken into account when studying a coming of age book and the characters within them. Sometimes a character is learning to *accept* who they are, sometimes they don't know who they are at all. A third possibility is that a character could be trying to escape the identity projected onto them by others in the story. Whatever the situation, the characters are relatable and serve as great case studies when exploring the realm of coming of age novels and identity.

While many classrooms do assign coming of age novels, the focus on the character development varies, and I believe it should be the main focal point. There should also be a focus on how the students are reacting to the character, whether they relate or they have a strong opinion on the character's actions, etc. The unit I'm proposing will allow students to reflect on how they personally feel regarding a character. The unit will also focus on how side characters affect the main character's development. Additionally, there will be a large focus on the symbols and motifs found in the novels since those aspects have a large impact on characterization. Through this, students will learn how to close read and annotate a text while looking for symbolism, overarching themes, and key characterization quotes. Overall, the students will feel a sense of connection to the text as a coming of age novel and will feel comfortable stating their argument on Holden's grasp on his own identity throughout the novel. During the unit, students will take a look at various mediums including songs, poems, books, TedTalks, and movies that all express the plight of trying to find one's identity and the fears that come along with change and growing up.

The centerpiece for the unit will be the novel *The Catcher in the Rye* by J.D. Salinger. This novel is best suited for 10th or 11th grade students, as some of the themes are harder to grasp for younger grades. The unit will involve a focus on the main character, Holden, and how his experiences with the people he meets shape his view of the world and of himself as he navigates being a teenager.

- Holden deals with insecurities that students will find relatable.
- Students will analyze Holden's behavior as well as his inner monologue.
- He contradicts a lot of his opinions by often acting hypocritically, which makes his character easy to study.

- Students may hate Holden, or they may relate to him. Every chapter, Holden details his experiences with people that he encounters whether he knows them well or they're complete strangers.
- Holden is afraid of adulthood and clings on to his immaturity as much as he can, despite thinking himself to be mature and above the “phonies” around him.

He despises the people who act superficial, but there are times when he himself acts exactly that way. The novel depicts his journey through these opinions and feelings while on a three day adventure in Manhattan, reuniting with people from his past while also meeting new faces. It can be argued whether or not Holden actually changed at the end of the novel, and students will have the chance to argue their opinion.

II. Introducing the Unit

To begin the unit, students would set up their journals. Since the unit has themes of identity, I would have the students decorate the outside of their journals with stickers or pictures that they feel represent them (this can be done at home)

Then, we would have an in class discussion about the essential question, to get some ideas stirring about the unit. I would pose the question, and then the students will discuss it in their groups (of 3 or 4) and then voluntarily share with the class.

- **How do you, in your own words, define identity?**

The first journal prompts to kick off the unit are as follows; students choose one or as many as they want of the prompts:

- Who is a character in fiction, whether that be in film or book, that you feel you relate to the most? Why? If you feel as though you don't particularly relate to anyone, is there someone you admire? What are their admirable qualities?

- Write an “I Am” Poem; provide an outline or encourage students to take the reins on how they want to format it
- If you could describe yourself in three words, what are they? Do these three words differ from the three words you think other people would choose?

These prompts open the students’ mind towards the direction of identity. Can we even limit it to a concrete definition? Is the answer found in tangible ideas like morals, habits, personality, etc? The first prompt also opens them up to identity in relation to book characters, rather, who they identify with. I will open it up to the students to share the answers to their prompts if they wish.

To further delve into the topic of identity, I would show a TedTalk given by 16 year old Halle Richards called, “You Have to Lose Yourself to Find Yourself.” I think that since the speaker is around the age of my students learning this unit, what she says will resonate with them. She talks about what it’s like to go through high school not really knowing who you are. Halle strives to convince her audience that flaws are what make us human and we can never be perfect.

Link: [You have to lose yourself to find yourself | Halle Richards | TEDxJIS - YouTube](#)

Students will then discuss and write a journal entry detailing what stood out to them most from the TedTalk and what resonated with them.

We will also take a look at and analyze the song “mirrorball” by Taylor Swift, which describes what it feels like to constantly perform for others and showing different sides of ourselves.

I want you to know

I'm a mirrorball

I'll show you every version of yourself tonight
I'll get you out on the floor
Shimmering beautiful
And when I break, it's in a million pieces
...
And I'm still a believer, but I don't know why
I've never been a natural, all I do is try, try, try
I'm still on that trapeze
I'm still tryin' everything to keep you looking at me
Because I'm a mirrorball
I'm a mirrorball
And I'll show you every version of yourself tonight

Then we will take a look at this poem by Julio Noboa Polanco called “Identity.” This poem directly juxtaposes the feelings of the speaker in “mirrorball,” and I would want students to notice and document those differences along with just their general opinions on both.

Let them be as flowers,
always watered, fed, guarded, admired,
but harnessed to a pot of dirt.

I'd rather be a tall, ugly weed,
clinging on cliffs, like an eagle
wind-wavering above high, jagged rocks.

To have broken through the surface of stone,
to live, to feel exposed to the madness
of the vast, eternal sky.
To be swayed by the breezes of an ancient sea,
carrying my soul, my seed,
beyond the mountains of time or into the abyss of the bizarre.

I'd rather be unseen, and if
then shunned by everyone,

than to be a pleasant-smelling flower,
growing in clusters in the fertile valley,
where they're praised, handled, and plucked
by greedy, human hands.

I'd rather smell of musty, green stench
than of sweet, fragrant lilac.
If I could stand alone, strong and free,
I'd rather be a tall, ugly weed.

1. Which poem do you resonate with more?
2. Both poems feature a metaphor in which the speaker compares themselves to an inanimate object. What effect, if any, does this have on the message?

III. Working Through the Text

To ensure that the reading is done, we will do the reading in class. I will provide the class with tools to annotate, like highlighters and tabs, so that they may interact with the text.

Pink Highlighter/Tab: Marking symbols in the book and mentions of their significance throughout. Ex: Holden's red hat, the ducks, the "catcher in the rye," etc.

Green Highlighter/Tab: Moments that have to do with the theme of identity, whether Holden is rejecting his or embracing it

Purple Highlighter/Tab: A key interaction or key moment for the development of Holden's character

Yellow Highlighter/Tab: Key coming of age elements (immaturity, fear of growing up, decision making, etc.)

Students can also have free range with their annotations—the idea's I provided above are merely a guideline. While reading the book in class, I would stop in places where I think some annotating could be done, but the goal is that eventually the students would start to notice things on their own.

Before we read each set of chapters for a class period, I would have students write a journal entry to Holden himself. This is so that the students can form a connection with Holden directly. I would call it Dear Holden. They can ask Holden questions, they can remark on his bad decisions, they can pat him on the back, etc. The goal is for the students to interact not only with the text, but Holden as well. This is to ensure that the students feel a connection to the character, whether good or bad. The students can also occasionally opt to write an entry to a side character, if they wish to comment on any of their actions or thought processes. I will also occasionally have journal prompts along with the Dear Holden, where I will ask the students essential questions regarding the text to ensure retention.

Throughout the novel, I will also provide a Motif/Symbol Tracker. It would look something like this:

Key:

Holden's Red Hat

The Ducks in the Central Park Lagoon

Loneliness

Alienation

Etc.

# of the Chapter	Symbol/Motif	Quote	Significance to Identity Theme
Ch. 8	Holden's Red Hat	"We got to the Edmont Hotel, and I checked in. I'd put on my red hunting cap when I was in the cab, just for the hell of it, but I took it off before I checked in. I didn't want to look	Holden prides himself on "not caring what others think" and his sense of individualism, and yet he is worried about looking like a "screwball."

		like a screwball or something. Which is really ironic.”	
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IV. Beyond the Novel

Coming of age is an idea that encompasses a multitude of different experiences and can bleed into multiple different genres from fiction to fantasy. The epitome of a young adult novel is one that contains at least one element of coming of age, whether that be delving into identity issues, fear of growing up, relationships, etc. Coming of age YA novels cover topics like anxiety, sexuality, mental health, and many more that pay true homage to the adolescent experience. These novels provide teens with a safe space where they can relate to the characters in the books and feel comforted in that they are not alone in their struggles. Various lessons are taught throughout these novels and are implemented into the story with an unforced ease.

YA:

Fiction

1. *The Perks of Being a Wallflower* by Stephen Chbosky: This is a coming of age story detailing what it's like to grow up in high school. The book is written as letters from the main character Charlie whose voice is hilarious and devastating. We don't know who he's writing to, all we know is the world he lives in and how he goes about navigating it. Charlie is caught between living his life and running from it in this story as he embarks into new territory. (Summary taken from Goodreads)
2. *Speak* by Laurie Halse Anderson: This novel is a tale of a girl named Melinda trying to get her voice back. For reasons she gets into, she begins to know what it feels like to lose the power of her voice and along with it, herself.

3. *The Outsiders* by S.E. Hilton: This story is narrated by a boy named Ponyboy Curtis who struggles with the ambiguity between right and wrong. Because he finds himself in this limbo of morality, he views himself as an outsider. Caught in the middle of a war between greasers and socs, Ponyboy begins to realize that maybe they aren't so different—after all, at the end of the day, everyone feels pain the same way. (Summary taken from Goodreads)
4. *Walk Two Moons* by Sharon Creech: This book is written from the point of view of Salamanca, a girl who is telling a story to her Grams about an adventure she had with her friend Phoebe. The story contains a melting pot of mystery, romance, spiritual undertones, American Indian themes, and a missing mother. This novel proves the complexity of human emotion, and the nuances that come along with missing someone no longer around. (Summary taken from Goodreads)
5. *We Were Here* by Matt de la Pena: This novel follows a boy named Miguel who embarks on a journey across California with two of his friends. He leads a life defined by a file, much to his dismay. His journey is less about a physical one, and more about an internal journey toward forgiveness for himself. He spends the book expressing how he is more than a name in the file, and comes to believe that himself as the story concludes.

Dystopian

6. *Hunger Games* by Suzanne Collins: This story follows a sixteen year old girl named Katniss who is forced to perform in a role she has never played before. As she fights for her life in the Hunger Games arena, the hunter becomes the actress. She must cross into uncharted waters as she must fake a relationship with a boy she hardly knows for both of

their survival. How can she put on a facade pretending to be someone else, when she's never gotten a real opportunity to find out who she really is?

7. *Divergent* by Veronica Roth: Amongst her society, Tris is rare. She is Divergent, meaning that instead of having one outstanding personality trait, she has multiple. This news shocks Tris, and it takes her awhile to come to terms with her multifaceted and complicated personality.
8. *Lord of the Flies* by William Golding: The boys in this novel have crash landed on a deserted island. At first, they rejoice at the thought of freedom because they quickly realize they can do anything they want. This joy is short-lived when the noises in the night begin to plague their minds with fear and they are forced to focus on survival. While trying to form their own hierarchy, the boys begin to turn on each other in true human fashion. Ralph takes the role of leader and must grapple with the responsibility of being their chief.

Fantasy

9. *The Cruel Prince* by Holly Black: In Elfhame, as one of the only humans, Jude is put into a box by the Fae that is not so easily escaped. She is viewed as weaker and beneath the Fae. This novel details Jude's struggles in trying to climb up in ranks in the Fae world to prove to them and to herself that she is more than what they make her out to be. Throughout this, she grapples with the difference between hating her humanness and embracing it.
10. *Harry Potter* by J.K. Rowling: This story follows Harry Potter throughout his adolescents at a renowned wizarding school called Hogwarts. It is here that Harry is able to truly be

himself. The series takes place over seven novels in which Harry must face grief, fear, love, identity, and more.

11. *Six of Crows* by Leigh Bardugo: The Crows are a band of misfit criminals who embark on a heist together to break a prisoner out of the highest maximum security prison in Fjerda. The goal is to stay alive to complete the mission, but with their differing personalities, who's to say they won't end up killing each other. This story delves into topics like grief, displacement, prejudice, and love. At least in these ways, the Crows realize they aren't so different after all.

12. *Throne of Glass* by Sarah J. Maas: Celaena Sardothien, secretly Aelin Galathynius, has a responsibility born into her that she has run from her entire life. However, the series takes a turn in which she is forced to embrace this side of her identity, despite her wishes to run away from her old life entirely and leave her responsibilities behind.

YA Pairs:

The Book Thief by Markus Zusak and *Fahrenheit 451* by Ray Bradbury

- Themes of censorship
- Themes of identity/societal norms

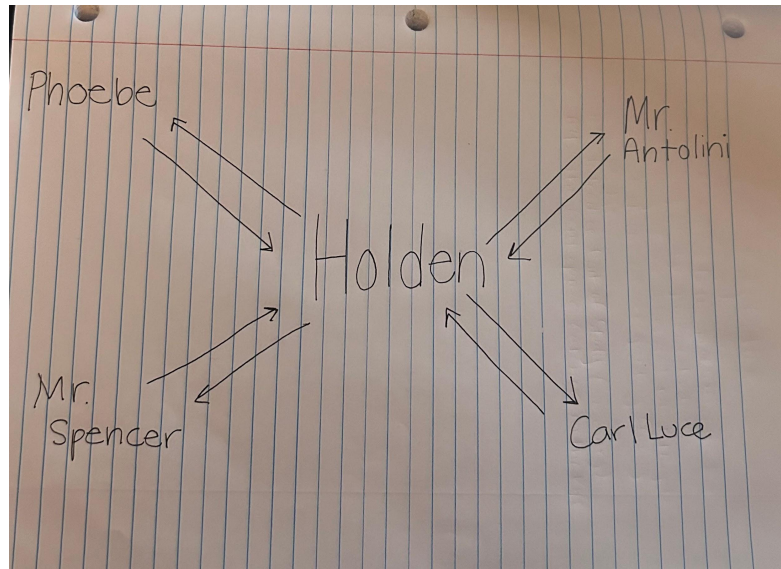
An Abundance of Katherines by John Greene and *Normal People* by Sally Rooney

- Themes of relationship hardships
- Finding oneself in another person

V. End of the Unit

At the end of the novel, I would assign a character project in which students would be given a large piece of blank white paper and would be assigned to write Holden's name in the middle, along with a drawing of something that represents him, like his red hat. In the

surrounding four corners, students will write the names of four more characters and symbols to represent them. For example, they may draw a carousel horse for Phoebe. Then students will draw arrows from Holden to the surrounding characters, as well as arrows from them to him.



On the arrows students will copy a quote from the text that they believe is the most significant in regards to Holden's character development and his interactions with those particular characters. On the back of the paper, they will provide blurbs of analysis of their quotes.

Finally, I would assign a journal entry that would be 1-2 pages of whether or not the students believe Holden actually matured or gained any insight into who he wants to be as a person. The novel ends in present tense, and Holden's voice is so similar in this part of the novel to the flashbacks that it is argued whether or not he has actually done anything transformational.

For the final essay, I would provide five quotes and the students can pick one to analyze and connect to the theme of identity and coming of age. Some of the quotes are more abstract and therefore more challenging, as they may involve a symbol or a tougher theme.

Prompt: Pick one of the following quotes and conduct a literary analysis connecting it back to the theme of identity. Keep in mind the quote's significance to Holden's character.

1. **“Sometimes I act a lot older than I am—I really do—but people never notice it. People never notice anything.”**
2. **“I’m the most terrific liar you ever saw in your life.”**
3. **“When I was all set to go, when I had my bags and all, I stood for a while next to the stairs and took a last look down the goddam corridor. I was sort of crying. I don't know why. I put my red hunting hat on, and turned the peak around to the back, the way I liked it, and then I yelled at the top of my goddam voice, ‘Sleep tight, ya morons!’”**
4. **“Sometimes you get tired of riding in taxicabs the same way you get tired riding in elevators. All of a sudden, you have to walk, no matter how far or how high up.”**
5. **“The best thing, though, in that museum was that everything always stayed right where it was. Nobody’d move.”**

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