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Unit of Study: Strong Female Characters

**Rational:**

Representation in the classroom is important. Throughout their high school years most teengers are still trying to figure out who they are as people. In this process of self-discovery, they look to media, both in the classroom and outside of it, for characters that they can identify with and whose examples give them insights about their own lives. Thus, it is a serious problem when girls are not able to see themselves in the literature that they are reading for school.

There is a lack of female characters in the literary canon, and many of the women that are found in the canon are portrayed in problematic ways. Books that portray women as accessories to men, or which force them to fulfill stereotypical roles without giving them real agency, are sending the wrong message to female young adult readers, by implying that they are not as important as men and that they do not deserve to be the heroes in their own stories. It is imperative that teachers assign literature with strong female characters to validate the experiences of their female students and combat the many harmful stereotypes about women presented in popular media. Moreover, providing such books is the best way to encourage male students to respect their female peers and view them as equals.

This unit starts by asking students to consider what is meant by the term strong female character and then moves into a comparison of *To Kill A Mockingbird* and *The Hunger Games*. These two books provide a solid foundation for students to examine the above definition since they “Each present female coming-of-age stories against backdrops of racism, sexism, classism, segregation, poverty and oppression” (Hill-Vasquez 16). Exploring how Scout and Katniss mature in response to these challenges, provides a solid foundation for students to further explore the characteristics of a strong female character, and move beyond the simple definition they will come up with at the beginning of the unit. Specifically, students will be asked to consider the ways in which Scout and Katniss both stand up for injustice in their respective communities, as well as the ways in which they subvert stereotypes and norms for their gender. Students will also think about the examples of femininity presented by the minor characters in each of these books and consider the problematic Hollywood trope of a strong female character as it relates to portrayals of women in literature.

The analysis of *To Kill A Mockingbird* and *The Hunger Games* will mostly be completed as a class, with students being guided through various exercises that encourage them to think about different themes throughout the books. This will prepare students for the second portion of the unit which involves a group presentation project based off one of the following books: *Speak*, *The Lie Tree*, *The Hate You Give, The Scarlet Letter,* and *The House on Mango Street.* Students will take the themes that were discussed in the first half of the unit and apply them towards an independent literary analysis of one of the books mentioned above. They will present on this so that the entire class can gain exposure to all these characters. Students should walk away from this unit with an understanding of what traits define a strong female character, as well as with the ability to think critically about the way women are being portrayed in media. Most importantly, this unit provides a wide range of female voices, reflecting experiences that can reach out to young women readers, who may not often get the chance to see themselves in canonical literature.

**Part 1—Launching the Unit:**

As one of the goals of this unit is to have students consider how women are portrayed in media, this unit will start with a discussion of what exactly defines a strong female character. This introduction could be done in either one or two class periods, depending on much time is alloted to each class. On the first day of the unit, I will create four stations in the classroom by taping large sheets of paper to each corner. At the top of each page will be a discussion question, and each station will have some sharpies available. I will divide students into four groups and they will rotate through the stations, spending about five minutes on each one. Each group needs to discuss the question at their station, and use the sharpies to write their thoughts on the paper, before moving to the next station. The questions will be as follows:

1. Are there any character traits that you think apply to a strong female character?
2. Is there a stereotypical strong female character? Is this a good thing or a bad thing?
3. What are some of your favorite female characters in media? Why are they your favorites?
4. Can you write a one sentence definition of a strong female character?

After all the students have rotated through the stations, I will have them quickly return to their desks and write down the one sentence definition that they came up with in their groups. We will then discuss all the questions as a class. I will give students a chance to share and elaborate on their responses to each question. The main purpose of this exercise is to get students thinking about how women are portrayed in media and what kind of portrayal serves to make a woman a strong female character.

The discussion will provide a segue into the next portion of my introduction, which involves showing a short Youtube video called *Trope Talk: Strong Female Characters*. This fun animated video will act as a more formal introduction to the unit. It discusses the traditional archetypes for female characters, the issues in the way women are often presented in popular media, and the disconnect between reality and the way the media depicts women. As they are watching the video, I will ask my students to list the tropes discussed by the narrator in their journals, to make sure that they are paying attention, and also to give them a basic frame of reference to think about how women are portrayed. After the video, I will show students the following quote by Melinda Gates, “A woman with a voice is, by definition, a strong woman.” Although Gates is not necessarily referring to fictional characters in this quote, as I will point out to my students, it can certainly applied to women in literature. Students will be asked to write a journal entry addressing the following prompt:

What does it mean for a woman in literature to have a voice? Would you agree with the claim that having a “voice” makes a woman a strong female character.

The journaling activity will connect the video and the previous discussion together. If time permits, students will be asked to divide into groups to share their journal entries. Afterwards, I will explain the unit in more detail to the students. I will tell them that we will be starting off by reading *To Kill A Mockingbird* and *The Hunger Games*. *To Kill A Mockingbird* will be read in class, while *The Hunger Games* (an easier read) will be read on my students’ own time. I will tell my students that as they read these books, they should be thinking about if any of the women fit their one-line definition of a strong female character that they created earlier, as well as the definition of a strong woman presented through the quote by Gates.

**Part 2—Through Activities:**

Throughout the unit, in-class journal prompts and pop quizzes will be used to make sure that students are doing the reading. These will be relatively short, and focus mostly on testing students’ knowledge of the basic plot of each of these books. In addition to these things, students will be given the following mini-assignments that are designed to guide their focus towards different themes present in both *To Kill a Mockingbird* and *The Hunger Games*. Many of these activities involve journal prompts that ask students to think more critically about the literature, and go beyond a simple explanation of plot. They are as follows:

1. Gender Stereotypes: Both Scout and Katniss subvert typical expectations for their genders. As they read both books, students will be asked to look for any “rules” (either explicit or implied) regarding female behavior and write them down in a journal. On a certain day, they will bring their lists of “rules” to class and there will be a group discussion on how well Scout and Katniss follow them. To give students an idea of what such rules could be, students will be given a copy of the photo in Appendix A which lists some examples of stereotypical feminine and masculine behavior. They will also be asked to brainstorm examples of gendered stereotypes as a class, before this activity is assigned. The goal is to get students thinking about the ways in which Scout and Katniss both subvert gender norms by adopting typically masculine traits.
2. Character Social Media: In order to gain a better understanding of some of the more minor female characters in these books, students will be randomly assigned a character from *The Hunger Games* (most likely by drawing names). They will be tasked with creating a twitter profile for their character, that involves writing a short bio as well as crafting fake tweets that they think fit that character. Students will share their profiles with the class and be told that they must rationalize their choices with quotes from the book that their character is from. They will model this off of posts for characters from *To Kill A Mockingbird* which will be done as an in-class activity before this activity is assigned. This idea was taken from Orman’s *Hunger Games Lessons* which includes a template that students can follow.
3. Examples of Femininity: This exercise will be done only after the previous one, which ensures that students have a basic understanding of several of the female characters in both books. In *To Kill A Mockingbird*, Scout goes from shunning anything that makes her more of a girl to realizing that being a “lady” may not be so bad after all. This change happens, in part, as a result of her observations of Aunt Alexandra and Miss Maudie. Students will be divided into groups and be asked to come up with three ways in which Aunt Alexandra and Miss Maudie provide positive examples of femininity, which will then form the basis for a whole class discussion. The homework for that day will ask students to do the same thing for two of the female characters in Hunger Games (besides Katniss). As an example, students might pick Rue and Prim, who are both much more stereotypically feminine than Katniss is.
4. If I Were A Director: Students will be told to imagine that they are Hollywood directors, tasked with making a remake of either *The Hunger Games* or *To Kill a Mockingbird* (half of the class will do one book and half will do the other book)*.* As “directors” students will have to decide how to portray Katniss and Scout in their movies. Students will be tasked with identifying three essential traits that make either Katniss or Scout a strong female character. For example, a student might pick Katniss’ role as her family’s breadwinner or Scout’s refusal to be excluded from Jem and Dill’s games. Students will do a journal activity where they rationalize the traits that they chose and then describe three scenes that they would include showcasing these traits. Each half of the class will then share with the other half the traits that they chose and why.
5. Character Development: As they read, students will be asked to keep track of the way that Scout’s and Katniss’ characters change in terms of their beliefs/opinions and responses to difficult situations by noting relevant quotes and scenes in their journals. Once both books are read, there will be a class discussion on character growth, with the students working together to create a timeline chronicling the way Katniss and Scout change throughout their books.
6. Mini-Research Project: The best female characters reflect the experiences of real women in some way. Students will be tasked with researching real-life historical women who remind them of Scout and Katniss. They will fill out two Venn diagrams that ask them to compare the woman they chose first with Scout and then with Katniss.
7. Strong Female Character (SFC) Trope: Popular media has created a stereotypical strong female character which is in itself problematic because it limits character complexity. Students will be asked to read an article called “I Hate Strong Female Characters” (<https://www.newstatesman.com/culture/2013/08/i-hate-strong-female-characters>) and then discuss the following questions in groups: 1) What characteristics of the SFC trope does McDougall identify and 2) Do Katniss or Scout ever fit this trope?

This portion of the unit will conclude with a reflection where students will be asked to return to their initial one-line definition of a strong female character and decide if they still agree with that definition, based on the reading and character analysis which they have done. They will need to justify their answer with examples from both *The Hunger Games* and *To Kill A Mockingbird*. The reflection will take the form of a two page paper.

**Part 3—Moving Beyond:**

In the final phase of the unit, students will be asked to read one of five books on their own time: *Speak*, *The Lie Tree*, *The Hate You Give, The Scarlet Letter,* or *The House on Mango Street. The Scarlet Letter* and *The House on Mango Street* are often taught in high school classrooms, and *Speak*, *The Lie Tree*, *The Hate You Give* are all popular YA books. I have included a short summary of each book (I have personally read all these books except for *The House on Mango Street*):

*Speak*: Melinda Sordino is raped at a party before the start of freshman year and must go through her first year of high school being ostracized by her friends for calling the cops on their party and knowing that her rapist is walking the halls. The book chronicles Melinda’s journey to find her voice and in the process examines the double standard affecting female rape victims.

*The Lie Tree*: Set during the Victorian era, this book tells the story of Faith Sunderly, whose family moves to the island of Vane ostensibly for the sake of her father’s research, but as Faith later finds out, her parents are actually trying to run away from a scandal over her father’s scientific findings. After her father dies mysteriously, Faith decides to investigate what happened, and she finds a tree that tells a truth for every lie that it is fed. Throughout the book, Faith fights against gendered stereotypes imposed on her by society.

*The Hate You Give*: An African-American teen, Starr Carter is only sixteen when she witnesses her best friend Khalil’s murder. While in a car, the two are pulled over by a white cop who shoots Khalil when he reaches for a hairbrush, thinking that it is a gun. The story makes national headlines, with Starr agreeing to testify about the incident before a grand jury and participating in the riots that follow the grand jury’s decision not to indict the officer. Starr’s courage in agreeing to stand up for her community makes her a good role model for female readers.

*The Scarlet Letter*:This book is set in Boston, Massachusetts during the mid-1600s, when it was largely controlled by the Puritans. Hester Prynne is forced to wear a scarlet “A” on her clothing, a punishment for having a baby as a result of an affair. She refuses to name the child’s father, despite frequent urging to do so. Most of the book deals with the way her life is affected by her choice to have an affair. Hester provides an example of quiet strength, as she remains loyal to her baby’s father, tries her best to be a good mother, and calmly accepts ostracization by the Puritan community.

*The House on Mango Street*: This YA coming-of-age story documents the life of Esperanza, who is twelve at the start of the novel, when she and her parents move into a new house on Mango Street. Over the course of the book Esperanza matures significantly as a result of her experiences with poverty, racism, and sexual assault (SparkNotes).

The class session in which this project is assigned will start with a short book pass activity to give students a general sense of what each book is about. Students will then sign up for books and be divided into presentation groups based on the book that they choose. Each group will do a presentation that involves teaching the book to the class. The presentation will largely focus on the main protagonist of each book (Melinda, Faith, Starr, Hester, or Esperanza). Ideally there will be a total of five groups,with each group having a different book; however, if needed multiple groups can present on the same book, with each covering a different character. In a larger class, more books might be added to the list that students can choose from, which would also prevent overlap between books. For the purpose of this paper, I have chosen to focus on the five books above and assume that all presentations will be on a main female character from one of those books. The presentations will include the following elements:

1. Students will submit a written plot summary that can be printed by the teacher and distributed to the rest of the class.
2. During their presentation, students will have to explain whether or not they think the main character is a strong female character and provide three quotes to support their argument.
3. Students must include a creative element based off of the main female protagonist. For example, they could act out a defining scene, create a short video about her, or write a song/poem based on her character traits.
4. At the end of their presentation, students in the presenting group will give their classmates a five question quiz that will be graded as a class.
5. The presentation will be followed by a short Q&A where students observing will ask the presenting group questions. Students will be told that they must come up with at least one question to ask each group and write it down in their journal, although there may not be time for everyone to get their question answered.
6. Extra Credit: For extra credit, groups can research a historical woman who reminds them of the character that they chose and share her with the class, including a brief explanation of how she relates to the character they are supposed to be analyzing.

The goal of the presentation project is to get students to take the themes and ideas discussed during their analysis of *To Kill A Mockingbird* and *The Hunger Games*, and apply them to the books that they choose to present on. Additionally, this assignment offers students a chance to practice independent critical analysis of literature, building on the experience they gained through analyzing the two books at the start of the unit. Another benefit of this project is that it allows students to gain exposure to a varied cast of strong female characters without having to read all the books associated with them, which is not feasible time-wise.

Once all the presentations have been done, the unit will conclude with an open class discussion. Students will be encouraged to share final thoughts about any of the female characters that they learned about in this unit, and especially to compare the characters discussed in the presentations to Scout and Katniss. I will also use this as an opportunity to get students’ opinions on the unit as a whole.

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Appendix A:

<https://www.google.com/search?q=gender+stereotypes+list&client=firefox-b-1-d&source=lnms&tbm=isch&sa=X&ved=0ahUKEwikw_aJjYHiAhVKJDQIHTujCRMQ_AUIDigB&biw=1300&bih=732#imgrc=FxTFUnUhHcm7rM>