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ENGL112B: Unit of Study

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**Identifying and Challenging Gender Norms**

**Overview**

For this unit of study, the chosen topic that I want to lead in a secondary classroom setting someday is the identification of gender norms and the explanation of why they ought to be challenged. The key to this lesson is to ensure that students build a dependable foundation in what gender norms traditionally entail prior to fostering applications of criticisms against them. Although students may undoubtedly have plenty of experiences witnessing the effects of gender norms on an individual’s self-esteem, applying this mode of interpretation to the analysis of literature can be quite a hassle. Nevertheless, gender norms present themselves throughout all literary genres, especially in canonical and young adult (Y.A.) literary productions. Therefore, this unit of study will review methods of identifying and challenging gender norms in a secondary classroom setting in an appropriate and effective manner by using Y.A. and canonical literary works for application purposes.

In this unit of study centering on gender norms, music, Y.A. and classic literature, children’s books, and poetry is used. To introduce this unit to students, beginning with a contemporary song, such as “Shallow” by Lady Gaga and Bradley Cooper, is beneficial for getting them excited about the study and for allowing them to feel comfortable engaging in a discussion about it too. Then, in order to extend this contemporary perspective of gender norms in a surprising way, the use of a short story, such as *The Giving Tree* by Shel Silverstein, will allow students to broaden their awareness of these norms by finding them in the most unexpected places. However, with *The Giving Tree*, the manipulation of gendered pronouns is critical. Specifically, in the activity for this reading, some handouts use the pronoun “he,” while others use the pronoun “she,” followed by a discussion amongst groups of students regarding their ratings of the tree’s level of “niceness,” “generosity,” “selfishness,” and so forth from their rating forms. Finally, in order to help students carry on what they have learned about gender norms in their close-readings of texts throughout their futures, an in-class reading and discussion of the hidden message in Shakespeare’s Sonnet 130 (“My Mistress’ Eyes”) is an excellent choice. Thus, by the end of this unit of study and all of the in-class readings and discussions conducted in support of it, students should be able to independently carry critical analyses about the existence and role of gender norms in their societies.

**Outside Sources**

In *Literature for Today’s Young Adults* by Mary Warner:

* Chapter 5: “Poetry, Drama, Humor, and New Media”
  + covers useful methods for applying poetry to in-class lessons for young adult students. This source is beneficial to broadening the role of music and poetry for teaching students on a variety of topics. Although this lesson does not work closely with the concept of humor, chapter 5 of *Literature for Today’s Young Adults* does provide an assortment of example Y.A. texts to use in expansion of the application of poetry for instructional purposes.
* Chapter 7: “Fantasy, Science Fiction, Utopias, and Dystopias”
  + discusses the role of fantasy in literature, especially for how it “refuses to accept the world for what it is” (1). For this unit, the concepts of utopias and dystopias as modes of challenging gender norms plays a central role in recommended outside reading assignments (see “Y.A. and Canonical Literature Pairs”). In addition, just as chapter 7 of *Literature for Today’s Young Adults* describes, fantasy and fiction provide the opportunity to illustrate alternate worlds as a contrast to our current state of being, creating juxtapositions that heighten the level of criticism articulated by students.

In *Adolescents in the Search for Meaning* by Mary Warner

* Chapter 4: “Books about Real-Life Experiences”
  + deals with the issue of troublesome real-life experiences to help instructors consider methods of discussing them appropriately and welcomingly in a classroom setting. Although chapter 4 of *Adolescents in the Search for Meaning* specifically identifies the issues of decision-making, abuse, and relationship problems, the resources and activities provided in support of discussing them in a classroom setting are still equally resourceful to teaching this unit on gender norms, which is a sensitive topic for many students.
* Chapter 6: “Books about Identity, Discrimination, and Struggles with Decisions”
  + expands on the concept of identity and how close it is to an individual’s self-esteem in a way that instructors can learn from for the purpose of empowering their students. For this unit of study, identity and discrimination are central to the anticipated in-class discussions regarding the identifying and challenging of gender norms. With chapter 6 of *Adolescents in the Search for Meaning*, an assortment of example Y.A. texts that deal with the struggle of identity and discrimination is provided, which is especially helpful with expanding the depth of this issue for secondary students from an instructor’s perspective.

**Resources / Activities**

To introduce the unit: “Shallow” by Lady Gaga and Bradley Cooper

* Link: <https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=iPot3IZuJq8>
* Handout: Lyrics for “Shallow”
  + Purpose: This song will leave students wondering what the “shallow” is and what it means. With lyrics questioning, “are you happy in this modern world?” and stating, “crash through the surface where they can’t hurt us,” it is clear that the constraints of gender norms have a negative influence upon the love between the two individuals singing the song. Therefore, once having listened to and read the lyrics of this song, students should find themselves questioning what the role of gender norms is in their own societies through the fostering of an in-class discussion.

To go through the unit: *The Giving Tree* by Shel Silverstein in-class reading and discussion

* Handout A: *The Giving Tree* using the pronoun “he”
* Handout B: *The Giving Tree* using the pronoun “she”
* Handout C: rating form
  + Purpose: By confusing the gender pronouns in each versions of this story, students will find themselves torn between their interpretations of the text. For example, many students may consider the female tree to be very giving and selfless, while others may find the male tree to be very mean and selfish, or perhaps they will find a mix of both interpretations. Nevertheless, a discussion regarding the differences between the expectations of what a woman and a man ought to behave as will unfold, allowing for an expansion on the challenging of gender norms.

To go beyond the unit: Sonnet 130 by Shakespeare in-class reading and discussion

* Handout: copy of Sonnet 130 (“My Mistress’ Eyes”)
  + Purpose: At this point in the lesson, students should be able to understand what exactly gender norms are and how they may be identified throughout their experiences. With this activity that centers on Shakespeare’s Sonnet 130 (“My Mistress’ Eyes”), a discussion regarding the beauty standards of women and how they are being challenged should come about. From which, students will ultimately realize that the truest form of love lies not in our appearance but in our personal, intellectual connection to a significant other, tying back to the love illustrated in Lady Gaga and Bradley Cooper’s song “Shallow” and its criticism of how norms infringe on the freedom of love and identity. Thus, by the end of this unit, students should not only become increasingly aware of the gendered norms and expectations in their own lives but also in the literature that they read.

**Y.A. & Canonical Literature Pairs**

*Brave New World* & *The Hunger Games*

* In each of these texts, the roles of women come in a variety that encompasses several issues concerning their discrimination. While *Brave New World* encourages solely the promiscuity of women, *The Hunger Games* stars a strong female protagonist that shatters these constraints. To further dissect this contrast centering on gender norms, students should be encouraged to compare Katniss Everdeen of *The Hunger Games* to Lenina Crowne or Bernard Marx of *Brave New World*. By doing so, students will find themselves entangled in a fruitful discussion focusing on the identification and challenging of gender norms.

*Catcher in the Rye* & *The Perks of Being a Wallflower*

* In both the *Catcher in the Rye* and *The Perks of Being a Wallflower*, major coming-of-age issues unfold from the perspective of a young, male narrator. However, despite these narrators both being heterosexual boys leading seemingly normal lives, they still face an assortment of encounters involving the struggle with identity and conforming to social norm. For example, both Holden and Charlie have awkward encounters with the expectations of sexual normalcy that many students may find themselves facing within their own lives.

*Romeo and Juliet* & *The Fault in Our Stars*

* Although the concept of fate plays a larger role in comparing these two texts, contrasting the excessive gender norms depicted in *Romeo and Juliet* to the lack of ones in *The Fault in Our Stars* will help students broaden their awareness of them. While students may consider the level of normalcy in regard to gender norms in *The Fault in Our Stars* to be most applicable to their own perspective, comparing this point of view to the one that forms when reading *Romeo and Juliet* reveals the problem of implicit discrimination and methods of how to resist it.

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