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ENGL 112B

Unit of Study-Human Relationships and Marginalization

In many instances humans may experience moments of isolation and situations of adversity. For some these situations of adversity are more common. Being born in the 1900s skin color will affect how society treats an individual . On a similar note, a woman in the same era may face similar, or different adversities. As humans the topic of marginalization is one that is grappled with constantly and requires progressive discourse in order to find common ground and acceptance for all marginalized groups. Finding acceptance and forming a common understanding of marginalized groups is necessary in forming relationships in which all involved recognize their value and their impact on society. In addition to facing these adversities it is valuable to form communities and relationships that help to overcome said adversities confronted in society.

*Of Mice and Men* by John Steinbeck is a canonical text that depicts the struggle of marginalized communities through the experience of Lennie and side characters Candy, Crooks, and Curley's wife. Lennie is a large man that has some form of stunted social development. Early in the novel Lennie is described collecting mice and killing the mice from petting too hard not understanding his strength. Candy is an elderly man who does not have one of his hands. Candy grapples with the reality that he is getting older and is crippled, and doesn’t know how stable his life will be as a ranch handyman. Crooks is an African American who is forced to stay in his room in the stables away from the white workers. Crooks has to face the adversity of being a black man in America and is put in a situation where lynching is threatened to suppress his views on a subject. Curley’s wife is shut down in every situation in which she wants to interact and speak to any of the workers. In addition to not being able to interact with the other workers she is despised and harassed because her presence could be trouble for the men she talks to. In these situations the novel illustrates the theme of adversity directed at marginalized groups and how common understanding is a possible solution to recognize an individual's value and the value of others in their community.

The concept of a relationship is presented through the characters of Lennie and George. While it may not be clear at first glance the relationship is one that could be described as symbiotic. Lennie is strong and capable of long strenuous work, and George is able to look out for Lennie so that he does not get into trouble or is not taken advantage of. George and Lennie's relationship goes even further when it comes to emotional support. The two share a dream, which gives the duo hope for their future.

**Introducing the unit of Study**

I would begin the Unit of Study with the song Lean on Me by Bill Withers.

<https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=f7P8wusL1Z0>

“We all have pain / We all have sorrow / But if we are wise / We know that there's always tomorrow / Lean on me / When you're not strong / And I'll be your friend / I'll help you carry on…”

I would put the lyrics on the board after the song and ask the class what is a “relationship”? After forming a loose definition of relationships I would have the class write a reading log #1(SSW) on what their relationships look like at home or at school, and how the lyrics of the song may or may not relate to their own relationships. I would bring up the idea that humans are social creatures. This discussion will allow students to reflect on their personal experiences and how they fit in their communities.

I would round out the introduction to the novel with an introduction of John Steinbeck. Steinbeck is an American author who grew up in Salinas California. He is well known from his historical non-fiction novel *The Grapes of Wrath,* which represents communities of farmers and migrants*.*  He has also written novels like *Cannery Row* and *Tortilla Flat,* which represent those that have little to no wealth*.* What these novels have in common is the representation of everyday common people.

I would also put a disclaimer that the book has strong language. There is the N word and B word.

**Centerpiece Work**

The Unit of Study’s Centerpiece will be *Of Mice and Men by* John Steinbeck*. Of Mice and Men* follows the story of Lennie and George. The two are field workers who have just been run out of town and are now looking for new jobs. On their journey we learn that they live a hard and insecure life, and the two have a unified dream of earning enough money to own a ranch, so they could “live off the fatta the lan’ ”. Before George and Lennie find work we learn that George is essentially the smarter of the two and George prefers to guide Lennie when it comes to navigating social interactions. Lennie has demonstrated through past events to be rough with soft things which include: dresses, rabbits, mice, and small animals. George takes over as a parental figure for Lennie. In the relationship between George and Lennie the class would be able to dissect the areas in which Lennie contributes to the relationship and in contrast the way that George contributes to the relationship.

The topic of Marginalized groups is more apparent after the foundation of Lennie and George’s friendship is presented. Once Lennie and George begin work at the farm they meet a wide array of people. However, Steinbeck expertly weaves in characters that face unique adversities. I described each character briefly in the introduction of this Unit of Study. Essentially the second theme that I would like the students to focus on would be the way that these marginalized communities are being represented and how their adversities impact the characters. Questions like: How does Curley’s wife overcome being locked away by Curley? How does Crooks overcome his isolation? How does Crooks react to being threatened with lynching? How does Candy react when faced with his aging and possible obsoleteness? The representation of these characters is valuable for the story, and holds a greater commentary on society and it’s treatment of marginalized groups.

**Companion Works:**

##### *We Were Here* by Matt de la Pena

*We Were Here* is a novel that I have read. *We Were Here* is written using a journal format. The story unfolds from the perspective of Miguel who at the beginning of the novel is being held in juvie. Miguel is a young adult struggling with a trauma that is intentionally not discussed in the beginning of the novel. Miguel is a brilliant young adult, but does not admit this in his journal entries. However, he does discuss his admiration and passion for reading new books. While in juvie and later in a care home Miguel meets Rondell. Rondell is described as a large athletic, yet illiterate and simple minded person of color. Miguel, Rondell, and Mong escape from the group home and go on a journey to Mexico.

The novel draws on the same relationship scene in *Of Mice and Men*  with Lennie and George. Rondell like Lennie has a large hulking figure, and similarly to Lennie Rondell is not too eloquent in his way of speaking and his actions are simple minded. Miguel also closely resembles the character of George. Both characters are smart, and take on roles that compensate for their friends' weaknesses. Through the novel *We Were Here* students will be able to see another example of a symbiotic relationship that illustrates the value of forming relationships. In addition to this theme, there is the presence of marginalized characters. Miguel and Rondell go through juvie and care homes and both characters have to face the adversities that are present in these systems.

##### *Whale Talk* by Chris Crutcher

*Whale Talk* is a novel that I have read. Whale talk follows the story of T.J. Jones, an athletically gifted student at Cutter High School. Cutter High School holds athletics at the top of it’s priorities when it comes to preferential treatment of students, and while that may be beneficial for jocks and jock alumni it makes life difficult for the rest of the students at the school. T.J. decides to change the status quo after seeing Chris another student being harassed by a jock that goes by the name Barbour. T.J. makes it his life's mission to recruit a group of misfits and get them Letter Jackets. T.J. attempts to accomplish this goal by forming a swim team to compete on behalf of Cutter High School in swim meets.

*Whale Talk* works as companion text because T.J. is essentially the George figure in the novel. T.J. is athletic and smart, but feels an obligation or a calling to help characters like Chris when they are bullied. Moreover, the character of Chris could be compared to Lennie in some aspects. They both struggle with social interactions and defending themselves when it comes to aggressive social confrontations. Another reason why this text would be an excellent companion work is because it represents marginalized communities. Each member of the swim team is a misfit or an outcast that does not have a group of friends. This illustrates the value of relationships in that the group and the members in it provide something of value to each of the members in the group.

##### *Freak the Mighty* by Rodman Philbrick

I did read this book in highschool, but I hardly remember the details. This description I found was helpful.

“Two boys - a slow learner stuck in the body of a teenage giant and a tiny Einstein in leg braces - forge a unique friendship when they pair up to create one formidable human force. (Made into the film, The Mighty.) A wonderful story of triumph over imperfection, shame, and loss. - School Library Journal, starred review Compelling written with energy and humor. - The Bulletin for the Center of Children’s Books”

From what I remember *Freak the Mighty* by Rodman Philbrick would work well as a companion work because it similarly resembles the situation of Lennie and George. Kevin (freak) and Max have a relationship that could be described as symbiotic. Similar to George, Kevin guides Max in a literal sense by sitting on his shoulders and giving commands. When the two characters face adversity they overcome together. In addition to the theme of relationship, Kevin and Max are outcasts in their life situations, and they don’t fit well into society.

**Through Activities**

Small Groups:

The first activity I would implement would be group analysis of the text. I would have set groups for the books. These groups would be small 3 to 4 person groups. I would give each person in a group a role. This is something I remember from my highschool days, but I have also seen it implemented in my community college courses. I also observed this activity in my Field Experience of a literary analysis on the teaching channel. The roles include: facilitator, recorder/reporter, team captain, resource manager. I would let these book groups analyze the text and find connections to the class theme of relationships and marginalization. I would also encourage groups to find at least one other theme present in the novel. Groups would have to provide a minimum of 3 quotes that relate to the themes of relationships, marginalization, or a new group discovered topic present in the novel.

After group discussions I would have everyone come together and have groups share with the class what their group found in regard to relevant key points to the topics of relationships or marginalization. In addition to this other topics that are present in the text.

It may also be beneficial to form these groups around students that are reading the same companion works. This is taking into consideration that the companion works are assigned, but split into different groups.

Socratic Seminar:

Another activity that I remember fondly from high school and also in community college is the Socratic Seminar. Essentially a list of questions would be given to students a week in advance that touches on themes in the novel. By the end of the week students will be expected to have their own answers and interpretations of the questions and how the novel may answer the questions. These answers will need to be supported with quotations from the novel. The students form a circle around the classroom, go through the questions, and share their findings on the topics and themes. The teacher will be outside of the circle, but the teacher will also facilitate the discussion if it gets off topic or too heated.

Reading Log:

I would like the students to keep a reading journal while reading *Of Mice and Men* and the companion works. I have seen this implemented in a few classes here at SJSU and in community college, and I find it to be an excellent tool for breaking down events in the novel.

**Closing the Unit:**

I think the best way to close the unit would be through a reflection of the themes and topics addressed in class. I would have the students write a short reflection paper minimum of a page long discussing a topic in the novel that they found a personal connection with. If a student is unable to think of a topic that is relevant to their life it would be acceptable to center the reflection on how this book relates to our current society. Finally in the conclusion I would want the students to write why the novel *Of Mice and Men* is still relevant today. I would finish off the Unit of Study by asking students to leave their reflection papers on their desk and browse other students' reflections. This would allow students to reflect on not only the impact of the novel on their own lives, but also the impact of the novel on their classmates. If a student does not wish to share their reflection paper because of personal reasons I would allow for them to make up the activity with a brief oral reflection that summarizes the impact of the novel.

Works Cited

Crutcher, Chris. *Whale Talk*. Greenwillow Books, 2018.

Matt De la Peña. *We Were Here*. Ember, an Imprint of Randon House Children's Books, 2019.

Philbrick, W.R. *Freak the Mighty*. Scholastic Inc., 1993.

Steinbeck, John. *Of Mice and Men*. Penguin Books, 2017.