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ENGL 112B

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Unit of Study: Mental Illness

Rationale:

While mental illness in all its variety of forms is very common, there is still stigma in American society against it. However, peoples’ inability to talk about mental health does not mean that those who are impacted by it feel it any less. High school can be a particularly difficult time for students as adolescence is when mental illnesses usually begin to pop up, and young people usually do not have a framework for how to deal with these new problems. By introducing novels to students that have mentally ill characters, students can begin to find ways to both identify and solve their problems. In addition, discussing the literature in class will both teach how to analyze literature and normalize the discussion of mental health itself.

While part of the unit will look at contemporary novels, this unit will center around *The Yellow Wallpaper* by Charlotte Perkins Gilman, which was published in 1892. For many people, texts written before 2000 seem inaccessible. From the language used to the problems the characters encounter, nothing seems relatable to the contemporary reader. *The Yellow Wallpaper* stands out from other canonical texts usually assigned to high school students because, for one thing, it is a short story. Its short length will make it less daunting to most high school students. It is also a very exciting story, and this will appeal to students who may think that nothing really happens in older works, which is a complaint I remember hearing about Jane Austen in high school. By tracing how mental illness is discussed and portrayed in this story, students will learn that they have more in common with people that lives a few centuries ago than they may have previously thought, and they will learn how to trace common themes through various texts from different time periods.

Introduction to the Unit:

This unit will involve keeping a journal, so to begin the unit, I will have students write an entry in class about how they would feel to be stuck in one room for three weeks. In a COVID world, this will be a relatable prompt because we are all staying at home. In a non-COVID world, this will be an imaginative exercise. We will then discuss our answers as a class. As we live in a time of easy access to technology/ the internet/ social media/ etc., the answers will probably include spending time on these devices.

After sharing their responses, the class will move onto a handout about “the rest cure.” This article includes other information about how mental illness was treated in the past, so while the focus will be on the rest cure, the class will look at the article as a whole.

* Link to article: <https://www.sciencemuseum.org.uk/objects-and-stories/medicine/nerves-neuroses>

Once we finish going over this handout, we will move into the actual text. For their first exposure to it, I will read “The Yellow Wallpaper” out loud to them. I will have them take notes while I read in a way that makes sense for them; this means that they can write down their thoughts, quotes they like, draw pictures from the text, anything that helps them connect to the text. I want to read it out loud because of the horror aspect to the story. I want them to know the content of the story before trying to analyze it because it is easy to get carried away by the horror-esque bits.

* Link to short story: https://www.nlm.nih.gov/exhibition/theliteratureofprescription/exhibitionAssets/digitalDocs/The-Yellow-Wall-Paper.pdf

Through the Text:

We will listen to “Hey Jude” by The Beatles and analyze the lyrics in class. We will connect these lyrics to “The Yellow Wallpaper” by talking about how both the song and the short story involve an outside voice telling a person how to deal with their mental illness/ negative emotions.

* Link to song: <https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=A_MjCqQoLLA>
* Link to lyrics: <https://www.google.com/search?client=firefox-b-1-d&q=lyrics+to+hey+jude>

The class will also read *These Shallow Graves* by Jennifer Donnelly, paying particular attention to how mental illness is depicted by a contemporary author writing about the 1890s versus an author writing in the 1890s. At the end of the unit, there will be an essay comparing “The Yellow Wallpaper” to a more contemporary novel on mental illness, so this will be a way to practice comparing literary works and help prepare the students for writing the essay.

As supplemental material, the class will be given a PDF of Nellie Bly’s *Ten Days in a Madhouse*. Not only is this mentioned often throughout *These Shallow Graves*, but this book will also provide context for “The Yellow Wallpaper” because it shows what options for treatment a mentally ill person had during this time period. Excerpts from Bly’s book can also be used in the essay.

* Link to book: <https://www.sas.upenn.edu/~cavitch/pdf-library/Bly_TenDays.pdf>

After finishing these two books, the students will be asked to read “The Yellow Wallpaper” again while keeping in mind everything they have learned about how people in the 1800s dealt with mental illness. They will then write a novel comparing “The Yellow Wallpaper” and *These Shallow Graves* to come up with a statement about what options the main characters had. This essay will become the basis for a later essay in which the students compare “The Yellow Wallpaper” or another historical text dealing with mental illness and a contemporary novel written about contemporary characters in order to trace the evolution of the concept of “mental illness.”

Beyond the Text:

This unit is focused mainly on mental illness in a historical capacity. To go beyond the text, the students can read more contemporary novels about mental illness.

* *The Catcher in the Rye* by J.D. Salinger
  + This novel follows Holden Caufield as he comes home from his boarding school for the Christmas holidays. He feels increasingly depressed and isolated as he finds it hard to relate and connect to his family and friends.
* *The Perks of Being a Wallflower* by Stephen Chbosky
  + This coming-of-age story follows Charlie as he begins his freshman year of high school. Charlie and his friends are dealing with many different issues including sexual abuse and grief, and this is a powerful story that should be read by everyone.
* *Speak* by Laurie Halse Anderson
  + As Melinda starts high school, she has to deal with the fact that she is a social pariah because she called the cops during a summer party. What no one knows is that she was raped at the party, and she is now struggling with the aftermath of her assault and the mental state that this attack has left her with.

If the students like the historical aspect of the canon text, here are a few books they can read after the unit.

* *Alice’s Adventures in Wonderland* by Lewis Carrol
  + This fantastical book follows a young Alice as she discovers the magical world of Wonderland and its equally magical inhabitants. This novel is considered by many to be an allegory for mental illness.
* *The Woman in White* by Wilkie Collins
  + Walter Hartright is drawn into a world of mystery and crime after he comes across a woman in the middle of the night who he is later told has escaped from the nearby asylum. This connects to “The Yellow Wallpaper” because the titular woman in white, Laura Fairlie, is labelled as insane by her husband because her husband wants the inheritance her uncle will give her, which would fall into his control if she is dead.

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