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ENGL 112B

Dr. Warner

Unit of Study: Understanding Systematic Oppression Through Literature

**Rationale**

In the contemporary period, the issue of systematic oppression is rising through mainstream media, especially the abuse of power by the Police in the United States. Starting with the George Zimmerman, Trayvon Martin incident, where Mr. Martin was fatally shot in Sanford Florida, the country is divided between groups supporting the Police’s actions in cases involving people of color and groups demanding a restructuring of the Police system. Similar cases, the Choking of Eric Garner and the Shooting of Michael Brown, have prompted the Black community to start a movement, called Black Lives Matter, to highlight the prejudice that the judicial system has against Black Americans.

Tracing back to the beginning of the United States, the country is founded upon oppressing others that do not look a certain way, starting with the Slaves in the South. Though there have been breakthroughs such as the Civil Rights Act of 1964, outlawing discrimination on race, color, religion, sex, and national origin, the Voting Rights Act of 1965, outlawing voting discrimination against racial minorities, and the Fair Housing Act of 1968, outlawing discrimination when it comes to selling, renting, or negotiating housing, Civil Rights is still a highly debated subject. Eventhough there are laws passed to protect such discrimination, the oppression of People of Color is still relevant as Black, Asians, and Latinx/Hispanics are targeted.

There are few canonically taught texts that speak on systematic oppression. Harper Lee’s *To Kill A Mocking Bird* is a canonical text that is widely taught in schools. From the perspective of six year old Jean “Scout” Louise Finch, the text explores the small town of Maycomb, Alabama and the court trial of Tom Robinson, defended by Scout’s father, Atticus Finch. With the Innocent archetype, Scout attempts to understand the world of Maycomb as Atticus, embodying the outlaw archetype, teaches Scout that society is not always right. The trial of Tom Robinson serves as a discussion topic of the systematic oppression that is not only ingrained in the judicial system, but also in society. Without substantial evidence, Tom Robinson was still convicted of raping Mayella Ewell, a young white woman.

Choosing to study the systematic oppression with students allows them an opportunity to observe the rich history of the Civil Rights Movement as well as a chance to connect the current political and social atmosphere that the United States is in. The events of Scout, Atticus Finch, and Tom Robinson mirror those of Trayvon Martin, Elijah Wood, Breonna Taylor, and many other Black Americans as they are facing oppression that the Civil Rights, Voting Rights, and Fair Housing Acts hoped to dismantle. The reason to teach *To Kill a Mockingbird* is that literature needs to connect to students and enrich their minds to see that literature is not just a pastime, but a learning system that can provide students with knowledge to critically analyze for themselves. Because of how *To Kill a Mockingbird* mirrors the current political and social climate of the U.S., I believe that teaching it is important, as it allows space to discuss the idea of systematic oppression with students, explore how this form of oppression has influenced our individual lives, and ways that they can engage with the injustice that is the current U.S. climate.

**Launching the Unit**

Before reading and discussing Lee’s *To Kill a Mockingbird*, the class should engage in activities to frame their mindsets to deal with such a highly debated topic.

1. Discussion - ask students, in an open forum space, what they know of Civil Rights
   1. Does the United States have equality for all its citizens? How do the students feel about their individual opinions of the United States and equality?
   2. What do the students know of the Civil Rights Movement?
   3. What do the students know of the Black Lives Matter movement or the hashtag #BLM? Does the Black Lives Matter movement reflect the United States constitution of “All men are created equal” ?
   4. What were the origins of both movements? How are both movements similar or different?
2. Play “This is America” by Childish Gambino
   1. “This is America” is Childish Gambino’s 2018 single that he released to address the issue of gun violence in the U.S. and other social issues like racism. Have students listen to the song while looking at a handout of the lyrics.
   2. Have students highlight or underline lyrics that are key to the message as to why Childish Gambino would release this song. Ex: “this is America (skrrt, skrrt, woo) / Don’t catch you slippin’ up (ayy) / Look at how I’m livin’ now / Police be trippin’ now (woo).”
   3. Have students journal under the prompt of why these lyrics are important
3. Play “Changes” by Tupac Shakur
   1. “Changes” by Tupac Shakur was recorded in 1992 that addresses drugs and racism towards Blacks. Like “This is America”, have students listen to the song while looking at the lyrics on a handout
   2. Have students point out key lyrics that stand out in the song. Students will be questioned by Tupac would record this song in 1992.
   3. Then, have students answer a prompt of what is different between Childish Gambino’s and Tupac Shakur’s songs. Highlighting that there is at least 26 year gap between the two songs.
4. Showing of Jane Elliott’s “Blue Eyes/Brown Eyes experiment”
   1. Jane Elliott, schoolteacher and anti-racism activist, attempted an experiment in a class, in 1968, that separated students based on eye color as an example of the oppression that Black Americans faced. By giving privileges to certain eye-colored students and restricting privileges to others, the brown-eyed students oppressed the other students based on Elliott’s privileges. The next day, Elliott reversed the roles and established the blue-eyed students with privilege while taking away the privileges of the brown-eyed students. The blue-eyed students oppressed the brown-eyed students the same way.
   2. Have students answer a prompt reflecting Jane Elliott’s experiment on current social climate, and list examples of the students' individual experience with oppression, whether it is directed at them or directed at someone else.
   3. Lastly, ask students could this experiment be attempted today? Why or why not? What are changes that can be made to this experiment so that it is more applicable to current students?
5. Introduce *To Kill a Mockingbird* to students
   1. Introduce the historical context of the book and the time period that Harper Lee was in as he was writing. Allow students to understand that this book takes place during the Great Depression, but Harper Lee had the book published in 1960.
   2. Discuss how the main characters react to Tom Robinson’s arrest, trial, and conviction. How are they similar or different when compared to the town of Maybury? Would a trial like this be able to happen in the current social-political climate?
   3. Discuss similarities and differences with the actions happening in the novel, the Civil Rights Movement, and the Black Lives Matter movement. Does the novel sound fictitious when compared to events happening in U.S. history? Why or why not?

**Working Through the Unit**

1. Students will be requested to read 15 pages a day. By following this timeline, students should finish the text within a month’s time. To keep students on track with the reading, students will have 15 minutes, at the beginning of class, to silently write in a journal that will be collected at the end of class. Students are asked to talk about the highlights of each night of reading. Students can also pose questions, at the end of their journal entry, to reflect on the assigned reading. These journal entries can also be personal reflections of what is happening in the assigned reading. The journal entries will be collected into their individual folders that will represent 20 percent of their grade for the unit, with no opportunity to be made up.
2. After the students finish their journal entry assignment, the students will be put into groups and be tasked to illustrate a particular scene or quote that the group deemed as important or believe to be influential to the assigned reading. This in-class participation assignment will be worth 25 percent of their grade for the unit.
   1. The groups will share with the class why this particular quote or scene is important or influential to better understanding the text and how it relates to racial oppression.
3. Another assignment after the journal entry can have students take the opportunity to speak on what stood out in the reading, allowing students to share and discuss why these details stood out to them. This in-class participation assignment will be worth 25 percent of their grade for the unit.
   1. As the text follows Scout’s point of view, students will be asked if a different character, from the particular assigned reading, will see the events differently than Scout and why is it that this particular character will observe the events the same or differently. Students should reference the text to support their claim.
4. Students will have two quizzes, held bi-weekly, regarding the text that they had to read up to the quiz. These quizzes will serve as another benchmark to evaluate whether students are able to keep up and comprehend the reading as these will be open book quizzes. Quizzes will represent 10 percent of their grade.
5. At the end of the book, students will write a paper regarding the oppression that is shown. Students are to explore the oppression that Tom Robinson experienced and how that oppression trickles to other people that are not directly involved with Tom Robinson. Students are encouraged to draw parallels to what is happening in the U.S. political and social climate. This paper will be worth 30 percent of their grade for the unit.
   1. As extra credit, students can also write a film review of the 1962 film of the same name, directed by Robert Mulligan. Limited to 1 page, students will explore the differences between the film and the text and whether or not the film captures the same tone as the book.

**Extending the Unit**

After finishing their papers, students will have the chance to relate *To Kill a Mockingbird* to another text that deals with oppression. The list includes:

1. *Othello* by William Shakespeare. Shakespeare highlights the racism that Othello faces as a Moor. Iago’s betrayal to Othello can be seen as racially motivated, despite Othello being seen as a superior officer in the army. Unable to come to terms, Iago’s devious plan to remove Othello can be seen as a parallel to the attempted lynching of Tom Robinson
2. *All American Boys* by Jason Reynolds and Brendan Kiely. From two different points of views, the book explores the police brutality victim Rashad and the officer in question’s acquaintance Quinn. Both young adults, these two students have to figure out how to navigate the racial tension within their town and discover where they fit in the contemporary period United States as they are affected by police brutality.
3. *The Hate U Give* by Angie Thomas. The story has Starr, a young Black girl, coming from a predominantly Black neighborhood and attending a predominantly White school. Starr has to navigate and understand how both sides view each other and herself after a police officer shoots her childhood friend, Khalil, all while battling societal and racial stereotypes.
4. *The Port Chicago 50: Disaster, Mutiny, and the Fight for Civil Rights* by Steven Sheinkin. Set in 1944, a massive explosion killed 300 sailors at a Naval base at Port Chicago, California. Fifty men were charged with mutiny as they were part of a group that refused to work until unsafe and unfair work conditions were fixed. The story explores the oppression that black men and women faced while serving in WWII, before Civil Rights. This protest can be seen as a slow build up into what we understand is the Civil Rights movement in the South.
5. *Harry Potter and the Prisoner of Azkaban* by J. K. Rowling. Though not specifically racial oppression, Harry’s journey in the third book explores a systematic oppression that he faces as the murderer, Sirius Black, escapes from Azkaban. Black’s journey from murderer of Harry’s parents to being framed and the oppression that he experiences as a member of the Black family and from the dementors, mirrors the systematic oppression that *To Kill a Mockingbird* explores.

Students have two weeks to complete their chosen novels and give a mini presentation that should not only explore the basic literary elements of the novel but also explore the oppression that is seen in the novels. Students should also reflect the oppression in the novel onto current events in the United States. This presentation will be worth 10 percent of the grade for the unit.

**Finishing Up the Unit**

At the end of the unit, the discussion question asked at the beginning of the unit, “does the United States have equality for all its citizens? How do the students feel about their individual opinions of the United States and equality?” will be asked again and should any student’s opinions change, ask them to explain why they changed their opinions on the question. Then to finish up the unit, students will have one page written assignment to reflecting what they have learned from the novel *To Kill a Mockingbird*, answering the question how does Scout’s age and innocence affect the racial oppression in the novel and are the characters in the novel present in today’s society?

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