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English 112B

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Southern Gothic Literature: A Look at the Grotesque

My unit of study revolves around the idea of preconceived notions. The best way that students could see this idea in motion through literature is in Southern Gothic Literature—the idea of the “grotesque” and how it helps to challenge what the students initially thought. I want my students to understand that those first impressions may not always be correct, and things that society may believe are good and evil can sometimes be the opposite.

Finding the preconceived notions that students have when it comes to works of literature and then turning them completely on its head is what my intention is for this unit of study. I want my students to understand that there are two different sides to a singular story. Although someone may seem different, it doesn’t automatically make them the bad ones. Through Southern Gothic Literature and the idea of the “grotesque,” those ideas are very prevalent. I ultimately chose Flannery O’Connor’s short story, “A Good Man is Hard to Find” this story starts like any other, with a family on a trip. Then the story gets completely derailed to one about a person’s character and less about a journey.

Utilizing this text gives students an understanding of Southern Gothic Literature and the idea of the “grotesque.” Through “A Good Man is Hard to Find,” students can identify specific aspects of Southern Gothic Literature in the story and in other works. They will be able to relate works of this genre to each other and even challenge what they thought they knew about famous literature.

**Introduction to the Unit**

*Spend two to three days introducing this unit.*

Students will watch the short film “Alma,” where things aren’t what they seem. We will then discuss what the story itself meant, and how they thought that it was going to go versus how the story went. The class will break into groups to discuss the significance of the characters and the setting. Also, how tone (or in the case of this short music) impacts the entire piece. After we have discussed this as a class, have the students do a short creative writing assignment in which they explain what happens to the next doll, who runs the shop, how the boy on the bike got there, or any idea that fits in with the story. They can then share the next day in small groups and discuss how each person’s creative assignment would fit into the story.

Link to “Alma”: <https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=Aw0uORumRts>

**The Main Text: “A Good Man is Hard to Find”**

Start by doing a PowerPoint surrounding who Flanner O’Connor was and how she became known not only as a Southern Gothic writer but also as a comic writer. Go into detail about her feelings regarding herself and her relationship with religion. Watch the YouTube video about Flannery O’Connor as a class so the students can get a feel for her writing before they read anything by her.

The three main questions and goals for the unit would be:

* Examine the historical and social context of Flannery O'Connor's short stories.
* Conceptualize the literary genre known as the "Southern Gothic" or "Southern Grotesque."
* Construct an original essay based on a close reading of a short story.

Link to the YouTube video on O’Connor: <https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=wnBWbCEZiNI>

First Activity:

Before the students read the short story, I would have them start a journal entry with what they think the story is about and the expectations they have for it knowing O’Connor’s background information. After reading the short story, I would then have the students finish the journal entry surrounding the ending to the story itself and how it made them feel. Were they expecting it? Did they see the twist coming, or was it a complete surprise? Then in class, I would have them share in small groups to discuss what each other thought.

Second Activity:

After the students have read the story and we have discussed it as a group, I would then have the students break out into smaller groups and have them create their own version of the road trip that the family could have gone on in the text. The students would use the internet to find accurate 1950s maps that their “family” would have used to get from Atlanta to Florida. The students would pick a car, two distinct destinations, and then some things that their “family” may have been interested to see on their way (all accurate to the time period of “A Good Man is Hard to Find”). By going through prominent Southern Gothic photographers like Walker Evans, Clarence John Laughlin, Sally Mann, and William Eggleston, the students can look at these pictures and use them in their slideshow. Then they would show the class their “trip” and how it relates to a Southern Gothic setting.

Third Activity:

The third activity that I would have my students do is to break them into groups of three, where each student in each group is assigned another O’Connor short story to read and annotate with their notes. From there then, they would all three get into a group where they could share the similarities and differences in the setting, the characters, and the ending of each of the stories. They could talk about how it relates to the idea of the grotesque or how each story fits into the Southern Gothic genre. I would make a worksheet with each story written on the top with three columns with spaces for students to explain the plot, characters, and setting of their story; that way, each student can make notes on each story, the one they read and the ones their groupmates did. They could use this worksheet as a tool to help them write the essay if they chose that specific topic.

Fourth Activity:

I would start this activity by going over the definition of the word “grotesque” and what it means in regular society. From there, then, I would reiterate the definition of “grotesque” through the lens of the Southern Gothic genre and create a list of how the two are different, then have them make a list of the things that they found humorous in the story. I would break my students into groups and have them analyze O’Connor’s quote: “Anything that comes out of the South is going to be called grotesque by the Northern reader, unless it is grotesque, in which case it is going to be called realistic.” I then would have them think about and answer these questions:

* How would you define the words "gothic" and "grotesque"?
* What does O'Connor mean by "grotesque"?
* What elements of "A Good Man is Hard to Find" would you describe as "grotesque"?
* What elements of "A Good Man is Hard to Find" would you describe as humorous?
* What are the effects of O'Connor's being both humorous and grotesque in "A Good Man is Hard to Find"?

**Concluding the Unit:**

Wrapping up our unit on Southern Gothic Literature would culminate in an essay of the student’s choice. This unit relates heavily to chapters four and six from *Literature for Today’s Young Adults*. I would say that the master text is more heavily rooted in chapter four; there are parts of chapter six (especially the ideas of the supernatural) that relate heavily to the idea of Southern Gothic Literature. But ultimately, this unit is mainly a part of chapter four and the idea of drama and realistic fiction. From these essays, the students should be able to identify and understand the elements that make up Southern Gothic Literature and how it relates to the idea of the “grotesque.”

First Option:

* Using the three different stories by O’Connor, write a paper examining the significance of the Southern setting in the stories. Use the primary source material explored in this lesson to detail O'Connor's portrayal of the South.

Second Option:

* Identify who is the real “Misfit” in the story and use evidence from the primary source material to support the claim.

Third Option:

* Find the humor in the grotesque. Analyze O’Connor’s use of the grotesque and humor in the text.

Fourth Option:

* Or if they think of a different option that they would, in turn, like to explore, they could discuss that idea with me

**Working Beyond the Text**

*Wednesday* (Netflix TV show)

This television show showcases a macabre girl who is searching for the truth in her school and the neighboring town. The original townsfolk hate these so-called “outcasts” and want them out of their town. Although they have a tumultuous peace, there is a history of bad blood between the “normies” and the “outcasts” initially; one would assume that the townsfolk are the ones who are good people. Still, as the show continues, the “outcasts” become more human than their “normie” counterparts. This is an excellent example of the grotesque in a more modern setting and one that will make teenagers want to know more about the genre itself.

*To Kill a Mockingbird* (Novel by Harper Lee)

This novel is an almost quintessential part of the high school experience and often a student’s first introduction to the idea of Southern Gothic Literature, even if it isn’t labeled as such. Lee plants the idea that Boo Radley is the villain in the story by showing that he is a monster in the eyes of children. The realization comes to a head during the trial when the real culprit is accused, and the reader discovers the truth behind the story. The entire concept of first impressions and what society has determined you to be is a huge part of Southern Gothic Literature. Boo Radley being innocent and being a good person who looks out for the kids is just another way that the “grotesque” turns out not to be at all.

*Flowers in the Attic* (Novel by VC Andrews)

Although this novel showcases a great deal of Southern Gothic and grotesque in its pages, it is a hard book to teach. There are many things that the book goes into that most parents wouldn’t allow their children to be exposed to. So, this book would have to be an outside read with the same setting and feel as most of O’Connor’s works, but it wouldn’t have that comic side as most of her writing does.

*As I Lay Dying* (Novel by William Faulkner)

Faulkner is often credited as the father of the Southern Gothic genre, so it seems only fitting that his most famous work be a part of the list. This particular book has a similar setting as “A Good Man is Hard to Find” and can easily be compared and contrasted between the different works of literature. Faulkner does a great job of creating characters that feel very real and with real emotions and feelings, and so does O’Connor. This novel would be great to use as a side reading along with the short stories by O’Connor because, at some points, it almost feels as if the characters (especially the Misfit and his goons) could belong in *As I Lay Dying*.