Visaya 1

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*Female Roles in Literature*

**Rationale:**

While growing up books managed to save my life from a mother whose overwhelming bipolar disorder caused me to draw inward and struggle with my own issues of depression and feelings of being silenced. I often felt alone and invisible, and reading books allowed me to escape into another world, into characters stronger than me, giving me strength when I thought I had none. I could walk through the pages, fight monsters, overcome fears, and speak up, unlike the reality that surrounded me. This need for teenagers to escape and find means to cope are why *Literature for Today’s Young Adult’s* lists one of the exeter qualities for young adult literature as “Characters who reflect experiences of teen readers, something that is not found in much of the literary canon, especially when it comes to strong female protagonists” (Donelson 9). This emphasizes the importance of having strong female protagonists for young teens who are trying to discover their identity and place in the world. When the semester began, reading *Speak* by Laurie Halse Anderson reminded me of my teenage years and need to connect to a strong female protagonist. It took me back to a time when I needed characters such as Melinda to help me discover my own voice and place in the world. Teenagers, regardless of gender, need strong female role models in literature in order to help discover their own identities.

What strikes me now as I continue to study literature is how the female characters roles are presented throughout literature, and how this shapes the youth reading them. Melinda in *Speak* wrestles with thoughts of suicide when she struggles to deal with the pain of rape. These thoughts of suicide are something many young teens can relate to. According to *NPR,* suicide rates have had a dramatic increase since the 1980’s and 1990’s. Particularly this can be seen in

Visaya 2

young girls from the age range of 10-14. They are at the highest risk for suicide, and need just as I did resources to help them through the struggles of becoming a young adult. This led to the

centerpiece for the research for the Unit of Study: identifying the importance of the evolution of female protagonists throughout literary history in order to help young teens find a place, discover their identity, and transition into the adult world.

**Introducing the Unit:**

Resources that help young teens can come not only in the form of books, but also through the characters and protagonists of movies and music. As seen with popular songs on the radio today, song such as “Sit Still, Look Pretty” by Daya express a desire to be more than the typical sexualized object that women are so often portrayed as in works of canonical literature, as well as move beyond the traditional roles of wife and homemaker. Her lyrics express, “Then Snow White/ She did it right/ In her life/ Had seven men to do the chores/ 'Cause that's not what a lady's for.” Here Daya expresses that in today’s world, girls can be whatever they want to be, more than just an object for men as generally depicted in classic canonical works. This would be a positive introduction to the unit, which will end up covering some sensitive, and often depressive subject matter and themes. What is also helpful about Daya’s song to introduce the unit is that Daya use a Fairytale reference of Snow White that students will be familiar with, and uses it to show that the roles depicted within these classic tales can be flipped. This familiar reference will be a good start for students to be able to think back on as they start to look at female characters in other works of literature. This song can also be an inspiration to begin the unit for young girls who believe they have few opportunities or roles in life to choose from as a growing woman, even in the 21st century.

To introduce the song:

1. Pass out the lyrics to the students on paper.

Visaya 3

1. Play song aloud.
2. Have students read lyrics aloud.
3. Have students write an SSW for 5-10 minutes on their reactions to the song.
4. Allow 5-10 minutes for students who would like to share.
5. Move to introduction of unit: Looking at female roles in literature.

**Canonical literary works:**

* “The Yellow Wallpaper” by Charlotte Perkins Gilman would be a good example to show students the traditional role women held in European and American society. In this story, a woman is cooped up in a room covered in yellow wallpaper, due to postpartum

depression, which at that time men simply labeled Hysteria. Although her husband thinks locking her up in the house will help cure her, it essentially drives her mad. She hallucinates there is woman trapped within the wallpaper, and she madly scratches away at it to set her free. In reality, it is the woman locked in the room who is trapped, showing the state of many women at the time locked within the confines of four walls. Although this tale may seem depressing, it can give hope to students who might feel trapped in their own lives, by being paired with a more contemporary example showing how female roles have changed. If this story is paired with for example, the *Hunger Games* by Suzanne Collins, students can see that they have hope because roles have changed, and that they can do so many things with their lives. Like Katniss, they can fight against oppressive figures such as the Capital, be a warrior, and rise against all odds.

* Another canonical work to show students a broader perspectives of female roles and expectations is *The Woman Warrior* by Maxine Hong Kingston. Kingston struggled with feelings of being silenced and finding a sense of belonging, both as a female and a Chinese-American. She often felt like she belonged to neither culture, and also neither

Visaya 4

the language of English nor Chinese. Her identity felt split, identifying the theme of double consciousness present in many canonical works. Although *The Woman Warrior* was published in 1976, it can still be relevant for students today. The text can challenge them to think about tough issues such as immigration and assimilation, and the implications this has on the individual’s culture and language. It can also help other students find a place and identity, who may like Kingston be immigrants, children of immigrants, or females lacking a voice. Students do not have to feel like they are silenced in their own lives, and by identifying with the strong female protagonist in *The Woman Warrior,* they can hope for a better future. Women’s roles do not have to be limited to the narrow scope presented in traditional stereotypes. This text would be paired great with YA Literature, as it meets the exeter quality of complex and shifting chronologies of plot (Donelson 9). This canonical work can be paired with YA Literature such as *The Secret Life of Bees* by Sue Monk Kidd set in the Civil War. As it is told from the perspective of an African American girl, it would provide another female perspective from a different time period and ethnic point of view tying in racial studies into the unit.

* *The House of Mirth* by Edith Wharton is a similar option to “The Yellow Wallpaper” depicting women in early 1900’s and their limited roles as wives and homemakers. The main character, Lily Bart struggles with becoming a woman and not wanting to settle by becoming a wife. She wants to be independent, but the world around her does not allow women this opportunity. This text would help students explore why limited had such roles, and allow them to see what expansive opportunities there are today. This text can also help students look into the difficult theme of suicide, and lead into a discussion on how to avoid suicide and find resources for help.
* To provide an option of poetry, a portion of the unit can be dedicated to reading aloud and studying the poem “Parturition” by Mina Loy. This poem explores themes of

Visaya 5

motherhood, marriage, and the restrictions within these roles that cover canonical literature such as The *House of Mirth*. This would allow students to see that the limited roles of women are prevalent throughout poetry, fiction, memoirs, and all depict the same themes of trying to break out of the stereotypical expectations of being a female.

**Other Young Adult Literature to pair with canonical works:**

To make these canonical texts more accessible for young adults, they can be paired with young adult texts over the course of the semester or year such as:

* *Island of the Blue Dolphins* by Scott O’Dell which tells the story of a young girl living in a village on an island that is overrun with European colonialists. Karana, the protagonist, survives violent attacks, and overcomes all obstacles. This text would help young students see that young girls like Karana can survive against all odds, remaining resilient even when alone or in the wilderness. This text follows the exeter quality by showing an experience many students might likely never experience, but allow them to escape into an exciting and fast paced journey. Students can still identify with and learn from the emotions Karana faces throughout her journey, even though they’ll likely never be stranded on an island alone as she is.
* *Speak* by Laurie Halse Anderson would also be a beneficial choice in order to show students a contemporary example of feeling silenced, in addition to dealing with heavy themes teens face such as rape. *Speak* is another work which could easily be paired with *The Woman Warrior* in order to link the theme of silence. Students can see in both works that speaking up for themselves and their truths is essential, and often there are other people waiting there to support them if only they find the courage to speak.

Visaya 6

Students can compare and contrast these works and realize that something written long before they were born can still be relevant to what the are experiencing in life now.

* *White Oleander* by Janet Fitch would be a good option for a mature age group, such as seniors in high school, or even AP and college students. This text is written from the perspective of a young teenage girl dealing with the trauma of being orphaned after her mother goes to jail for murder. This text covers in detail issues many teens face of suicide, depression, mental illness, sex, drugs, and dealing with feelings of abandonment and feeling like an outsider. Students could easily relate to the text, and compare and contrast it to *The Woman Warrior* or “The Yellow Wallpaper.”

**Activities:**

* Have students make lessons of female roles in the texts relevant to their own lives by first writing about careers they want to explore in their future. Then have them write if they are choosing these careers because they want to, because they think they have no other option, or because that is what is expected of them. Allow for several minutes after writing for students to discuss. Then have students make a list of careers that they think only apply to certain genders. For example, as a teacher I would provide them with the career of a nurse, which is highly stereotyped as female. Often, male nurses are laughed at for not going on to be the assumed male position of a doctor. This could get students thinking about why these stereotypes exist, and why it is important to challenge them. Other examples to provide could be the presidency, and why other countries have had a female president, but the United States has not. They could discuss even further, ideas on how to stop perpetuating the stereotypes and stigmas surrounding these careers, and realize that anyone can be or do anything they want to. This activity could be done by students as a whole group, or even broken down into small groups who would cover different careers, and then present to the class in their groups.

Visaya 7

* Appealing to girls in young adult literature does not mean that the books with strong female protagonists are not relevant for boys as well. Boys can use the same principles used with the female protagonists to challenge traditional or stereotypical gender roles. In the classroom, they can be encouraged to challenge the rhetoric of today’s language such as with common phrases such as, “Be a man!” or “Men don’t cry! Man up!” The assumption that men have to be strong or are not capable of sentimental emotion should be challenged. No one person should ever have to fit into any given label or category. Teaching this to young students, both boys and girls, is essential for them to help guide them in finding their place and identity as they transition into the adult world.

For this exercise, have students come up with more of their own examples and discuss why it is we continue to use these phrases even if they are hurtful and perpetuate stereotypes we are working to move away from. Also have students discuss why these phrases seem to be primarily negative only in the context of female or feminine characteristics. For examples use: “Don’t be such a little girl” or “Don’t be a pussy.” Though the latter should be used with discretion and only for mature age groups.

* To extend the unit further, student could do a research paper of 3-5 pages on the first or second wave of the feminist movement. They could if they wanted focus on one main contributor to one of the particular movements. If they did not want to pick the feminist movement, they could also explore the Civil Rights movement which has similar themes of questioning the traditional stereotypes and stigmas surrounding race instead of gender. They would then present a 3-5 minute presentation of their findings and thoughts.
* Students could also write an essay in response to one of the texts such as *The Woman Warrior* on an influential woman in their lives. They can explain how their identity, like Maxine Hong Kingston, has been shaped by the women in their lives. Because this

Visaya 8

could become a very personal part of the unit, students can present aloud if they choose, but should not be required to.

**Conclusion:**

Ultimately, this unit should teach students of any gender that there is no one way to be a man or woman, boy or girl, and that their options in life can be limitless. The evolution of central female characters throughout literature reflect the opportunities both men and women have in the world today. Through the study of these characters, students can learn how to find their identity and place. They can learn that challenging the traditional stereotypes is important in becoming active members of the adult world and having a successful future. The goal is to have students move beyond traditional stereotypes, and realize that studying strong female characters can be important in linking all humanity of any gender, any race, and any sexual orientation.

Visaya 9

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