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April 27, 2014
ENGL 112B – Dr. Mary Warner

UNIT OF STUDY
**Slavery and Friendship in *The Adventures of Huckleberry Finn* and Contemporary
Young Adult Literature**

The Unit of Study I have created focuses on the novel *The Adventures of Huckleberry Finn* by Mark Twain within the adventure genre. I chose this canonical text because there are so many great themes within the book, as well as a rich history concerning both the banning of the book and the overall influence it had (and continues to have) on America. According to English teacher Kevin Klenholz, the key ingredients for a good adventure story include: 1) adventure, 2) friendship, and 3) a hopeful ending (Klenholz 35). *The Adventures of Huckleberry Finn* includes these three ingredients as well as the important history of American slavery.

Along with the specific characteristics for a good adventure novel, *The Adventures of Huckleberry Finn* also possesses many of the Exeter qualities listed in *Literature for Today's Young Adults*. The text offers an exciting plot, the characters (Huck and Jim particularly) go beyond typical experiences, and themes associated with slavery inform readers about the wider world. This novel is usually taught to 11th graders, as they must take American literature and American history during their junior year, so naturally teaching this book and focusing on slavery is an important aspect. However, there are many themes in the novel that allow readers to put themselves into the character's shoes in terms of friendship, adventure, and relationships. Bringing these themes to the forefront may help students both understand the characters, and also imagine that they are on the adventure right along with them. For this reason, I will not

only focus on slavery, but will have students explore their feelings about the unlikely friendship between Huck and Jim.

There are many contemporary YA novels that include unlikely friendships such as *We Were Here* by Matt De La Pena, *I Hadn't Meant to Tell You This* by Jacqueline Woodson, and *Whale Talk* by Chris Crutcher. These are novels I would include to expand the unit and give students the opportunity to explore a similar theme within contemporary books. The main things that I will focus on for this unit of study include: the censorship and banning of the canonical text, major themes within the novel, and expansion of the novel both within the adventure genre and outside of it.

INTRODUCTION TO THE UNIT

Censorship and Book Banning

“Light Out, Huck, They Still Want to Sivilize You” by Michiko Kakutani

To introduce the unit, I will lead with a discussion of banned books, particularly about the history of the centerpiece novel’s censorship and banning. Students will read the article, “Light Out, Huck, They Still Want to Sivilize You” by Michiko Kakutani (published in the New York Times in 2011). I will ask for opinions on banning books in America, fueling the discussion with the idea of freedom of speech. I will ask the students questions such as: Do you think it is fair to ban books such as *Huckleberry Finn* because of the use of the “N” word? Does changing the “N” word to “slave” change the significance of the language used in the novel? Do you think all American students should have the opportunity to read the original novel without any censorship? After the discussion, students will write in their journals about their thoughts on the discussion.

Reading this article is not only a good introduction to *The Adventures of Huckleberry Finn*, it is also a good way to introduce students to more non-fiction material. Learning how to read non-fiction articles thoroughly and to be able to respond to them are skills students need for the Common Core testing.

LAUNCHING THE UNIT WITH MUSIC

In order to launch the unit after the discussion of censorship and introduce the theme of friendship, I will have students sing and listen to the theme song from the movie *Toy Story*. This is a fun and interactive way for students to be introduced to the unit and also form a connection of their own. Most likely, students will be familiar with this song, and it is my hope that using this song to launch the unit will get students both excited and engaged.

“You’ve Got a Friend in Me”

You've got a friend in me
 You've got a friend in me
 When the road looks rough ahead
 And you're miles and miles from your nice warm bed
 You just remember what your old pal said
 Boy you've got a friend in me
 Yeah you've got a friend in me

You've got a friend in me
 You've got a friend in me
 You got troubles and I got 'em too
 There isn't anything I wouldn't do for you
 We stick together, we can see it through
 'Cause you've got a friend in me
 You've got a friend in me

Some other folks might be a little bit smarter than I am
 Bigger and stronger too
 Maybe

But none of them
 Will ever love you the way I do
 It's me and you boy

And as the years go by
 Our friendship will never die
 You're gonna see it's our destiny
 You've got a friend in me
 You've got a friend in me

You've got a friend in me (Newman)

CENTERPIECE WORK

The Adventures of Huckleberry Finn by Mark Twain

I will begin with a brief history of American slavery as it pertains to the novel (a review since students will be taking U.S. History and will already be familiar with it). I will discuss the adventure genre and which qualities make this novel an adventure novel. As discussed in *Literature for Today's Young Adults*, we will go over the qualities which include: “A likable protagonist with whom young readers identify, An adventure that readers can imagine happening to themselves, Efficient characterization, An interesting setting that enhances the story without being in the way of the plot, Action that draws readers into the plot within the first page or so of the story” (Nilsen).

As we read the novel both in class and as homework, students will answer questions in their study packet. Questions will be based on plot and will be used to keep students accountable for doing their reading at home and paying attention during in-class reading. In order to get students to move past the basic plot of *The Adventures of Huckleberry Finn*, students will be given various essay prompts to choose from. They will write a 3-page paper. Prompts will move beyond basic plot ideas and ask students to

reflect on the meaning of the novel including themes such as friendship, slavery, and survival.

EXTENDING THE UNIT WITH POETRY

Students will read the poem “Where I’m From” by George Ella Lyon. They will be given a layout to follow in order to create their own poems. Instead of writing a “Where I’m From” poem about their own lives, students will create a poem about either Huck or Jim’s lives. Students will be told to use the novel: they can use actual quotes, or just use it to mimic the language and tone of the characters. As a class we will come up with words or phrases that each of these characters use throughout the novel in order to point students in the right direction. This allows the students to dig deeper into the characters and what they represent, rather than focusing only on the plot. This activity is taken from *Teaching Writing Grades 7-12 in an Era of Assessment*. After poems are written, students will be put into groups where they will share their poems with their groups. Half of the students in each group should represent Huck and the other half should represent Jim.

Centerpiece novel synopsis from Scholastic.com: “Mark Twain's classic novel, *The Adventures of Huckleberry Finn*, tells the story of a teenage misfit who finds himself floating on a raft down the Mississippi River with an escaping slave, Jim. In the course of their perilous journey, Huck and Jim meet adventure, danger, and a cast of characters who are sometimes menacing and often hilarious. *The Adventures of Huckleberry Finn* offers both brilliant humor and tragedy as Huck and Jim explore moral dilemmas of slavery and freedom. Huck, the narrator, is shrewd, ingenious, and literal — he reports on everything he sees, which allows the listener to experience the hypocrisy of "sivilization."

EXPANDING THE UNIT WITH BOOK REPORTS/SUGGESTED READING

For a book report project following this unit, students will have the option to choose from adventure novels, friendship novels, and novels concerning slavery. The following are novels students can choose from with a synopsis following each title. Students are welcome to request permission to read a different book that fits into one of the three categories.

Adventure:

Hatchet by Gary Paulsen

“*Hatchet* (is) about thirteen-year-old Brian, who is flying to visit his father in the Canadian wilderness. The pilot has a fatal heart attack and the plane goes down. Brian's only survival tool is a hatchet that was a gift from his mother. While that wasn't much, it allowed him to survive” (LFTYA Ch.6).

The Pirate's Son by Geraldine McCaughrean

“Set in the 1800s and packed with derring-do, opens with the death of Nathan Gull's father. Nathan must leave school since he has no money, but luckily for him, Tamo White, son of a pirate, decides to leave school, too, and take Nathan with him” (LFTYA Ch.6).

Scott of the Antarctic by David Crane

“Scott's background-middle-class upbringing amid genteel poverty, and the navy he joined which, in peacetime, recruited upper-class officers-made life difficult for him during the expedition to the Antarctic” (LFTYA Ch.6).

Friendship:

Freak the Mighty by Rodman Philbrick

“A brilliant, emotionally charged novel about two boys. One is a slow learner, too large for his age, and the other is a tiny, disabled genius. The two pair up to create one formidable human force known as "Freak the Mighty."

MAX. FREAK. BEST FRIENDS. FOREVER.

I never had a brain until Freak came along. . .

That's what Max thought. All his life he'd been called stupid. Dumb. Slow. It didn't help that his body seemed to be growing faster than his mind. It didn't help that people were afraid of him. So Max learned how to be alone. At least until Freak came along.

Freak was weird, too. He had a little body — and a really big brain. Together Max and Freak were unstoppable.

Together, they were Freak the Mighty.”

(<http://www.scholastic.com/teachers/book/freak-mighty#cart/cleanup>)

The Friendship by Mildred D. Taylor

“Cassie Logan and her brothers have been warned never to go to the Wallace store, so they know to expect trouble there. What they don't expect is to hear Mr. Tom Bee, an elderly black man, daring to call the white storekeeper by his first name. The year is 1933, the place is Mississippi, and any child knows that some things just aren't done.”

(<http://www.scholastic.com/teachers/book/friendship#cart/cleanup>)

Autumn Street by Lois Lowry

“Elizabeth is forced to grow up when her father goes to fight in World War II. Her family moves in with her grandfather, and a special friend is struck by tragedy.”

(<http://www.scholastic.com/teachers/book/autumn-street#cart/cleanup>)

Slavery:

Nightjohn by Gary Paulsen

“Sarny, a female slave at the Waller plantation, first sees Nightjohn when he is brought there with a rope around his neck, his body covered in scars. He had escaped north to freedom, but he came back to teach reading. Knowing that the penalty for reading is dismemberment, Nightjohn still returned to slavery to teach others how to read. And twelve-year-old Sarny is willing to take the risk to learn.”

(<http://www.scholastic.com/teachers/book/nightjohn#cart/cleanup>)

Kindred by Octavia E. Butler

“Dana, a modern black woman, is celebrating her twenty-sixth birthday with her new husband when she is snatched abruptly from her home in California and transported to the antebellum South. Rufus, the white son of a plantation owner, is drowning, and Dana has been summoned to save him. Dana is drawn back repeatedly through time to the slave quarters, and each time the stay grows longer, more arduous, and more dangerous until it is uncertain whether or not Dana's life will end, long before it has a chance to begin.”

(<http://www.goodreads.com/book/show/60931.Kindred>)

47 by Walter Mosley

Number 47, a fourteen-year-old slave boy growing up under the watchful eye of a brutal master in 1832, meets the mysterious Tall John, who introduces him to a magical science and also teaches him the meaning of freedom.

(<http://www.goodreads.com/book/show/64380.47>)

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ADVENTURE

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ENGL 112B
Spring 2014



LAUNCHING THE UNIT



LFTYA

Non-fiction reading
& journal response:

“Light Out, Huck, They
Still Want to Sivilize
You” by Michiko
Kakutani
(NY TIMES)

“YOU’VE GOT A FRIEND IN ME”

RANDY NEWMAN

You've got a friend in me
You've got a friend in me
When the road looks rough ahead
And you're miles and miles from your
nice warm bed
You just remember what your old pal
said

Boy you've got a friend in me
Yeah you've got a friend in me

You've got a friend in me
You've got a friend in me
You got troubles and I got 'em too
There isn't anything I wouldn't do for you
We stick together, we can see it through
'Cause you've got a friend in me
You've got a friend in me

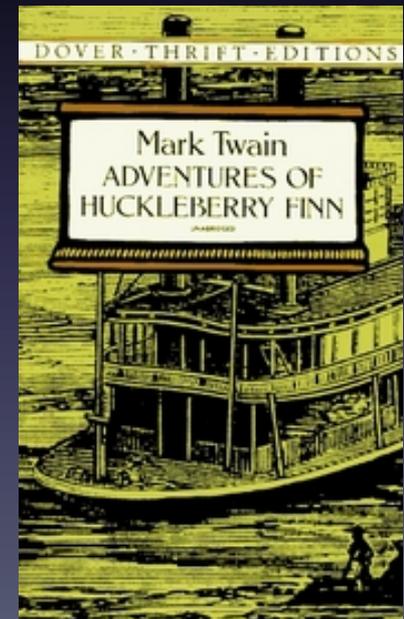


Some other folks might be a little bit
smarter than I am
Bigger and stronger too
Maybe
But none of them
Will ever love you the way I do
It's me and you boy

And as the years go by
Our friendship will never die
You're gonna see it's our destiny
You've got a friend in me
You've got a friend in me
You've got a friend in me (Newman)

THE ADVENTURES OF HUCKLEBERRY FINN BY MARK TWAIN

“Mark Twain's classic novel, *The Adventures of Huckleberry Finn*, tells the story of a teenage misfit who finds himself floating on a raft down the Mississippi River with an escaping slave, Jim. In the course of their perilous journey, Huck and Jim meet adventure, danger, and a cast of characters who are sometimes menacing and often hilarious. *The Adventures of Huckleberry Finn* offers both brilliant humor and tragedy as Huck and Jim explore moral dilemmas of slavery and freedom. Huck, the narrator, is shrewd, ingenious, and literal — he reports on everything he sees, which allows the listener to experience the hypocrisy of "sivilization.”



Themes: friendship, adventure, slavery, survival

ACTIVITIES WITH *HUCK FINN*

- Brief history of American Slavery

- Characteristics of a good adventure story

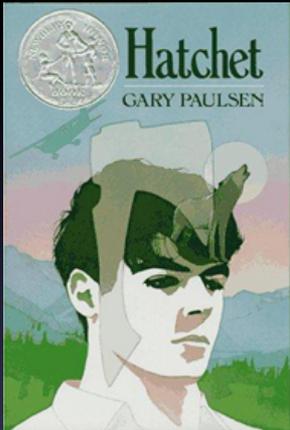
- Study guide question packet

- Essay on *Huck Finn* themes

- “Where I’m From” character poems

EXTENDING THE UNIT

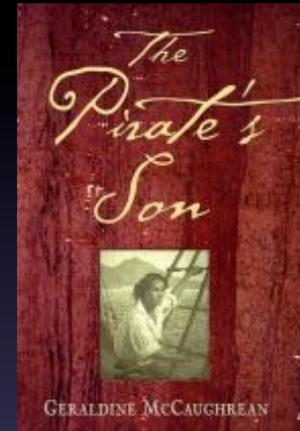
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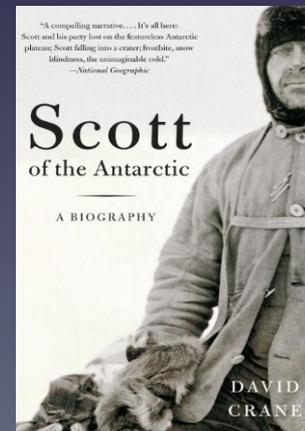
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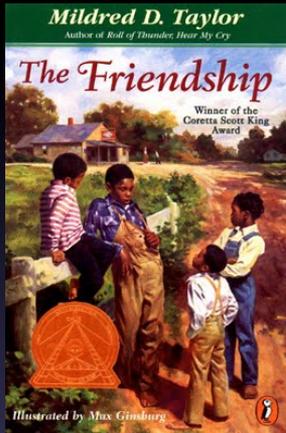
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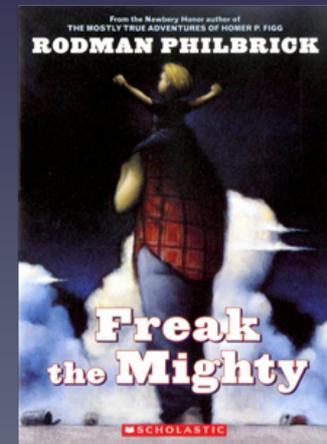
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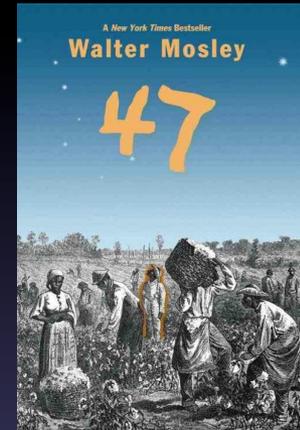
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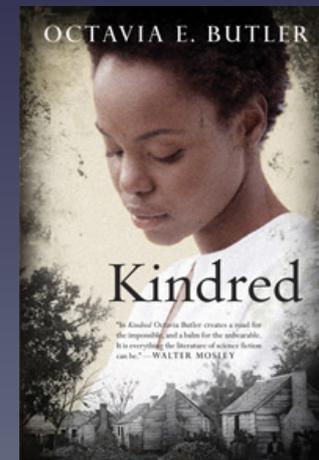
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