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The Effects of Trauma on Mental Health in YA Literature

Rationale:

Mental Health has become an essential conversation that is beginning to gain more research and overall acceptance, with campaigns, public resources and media bringing light to the topic. This has even become an essential discussion in Young Adult literature, with many works placing focus on character development through mental health issues caused by personal traumas. As someone who has struggled with both mental health issues and trauma, this topic is of importance to me and one I believe holds importance for Young Adults and students specifically. There is much to be taught, and even normalized on the issue of mental health, and YA literature is a perfect way to introduce these issues into the classroom.

Trauma is described by the American Psychology Association as “an emotional response to a terrible event like an accident, rape or natural disaster” (APA, <https://www.apa.org/topics/trauma/>). Trauma in Young Adult literature has become a topic with significant importance in presenting universal emotional issues and struggles. In the following annotated bibliographies, the main characters have all undergone a type of trauma that begins to appear and affect various aspects of the character’s life. This holds value in teaching adjustment, mental wellness, and recovery from traumatic events.

For as long as I could remember, I have had my own personal struggles with anxiety, depression and post-traumatic stress disorder. I did not grow in an environment that supported the conversation or acknowledgement of these issues. Many times my struggles were overlooked as exaggeration or “typical” teenage behavior. This resulted in years of concealing my emotions without anywhere to turn to for guidance. It wasn’t until I was 15 years old, that I began to look into literature as a source of comfort and information on how I was feeling. It first began with reading the novel The Bell Jar by Sylvia Plath, in which the protagonist deals with her own personal issues of mental illness, trauma and attempted suicide. It was the first time I was not only deeply moved by a book, but also related to the character in a way I could not relate to anyone in my life. For this reason, I began looking into literature that covered the topic and included a protagonist experiencing a trauma or loss that inevitably contributed to obstacles in their mental wellness. This is also my reasoning behind the books I chose to evaluate.

Center-piece: The effects of trauma on an individual’s mental health

The center piece for all the reads picked for this project share a common ground: the protagonist or a character in the story endures a traumatic event or position in life that begin to affect their mental health, this can be a positive or negative effect. This is a valuable theme for Young Adult literature because it can be used to offer guidance, comfort and even awareness on issues young adult readers could be facing. It can also be of significance for readers who have not experienced similar situations, as a clarification or source of information on real-life experiences that may be happening to individuals around them. Stories placing an emphasis on mental health can work to normalize the idea as well as begin reversing the stigma surrounding these serious issues.

New reads this semester:

Speak, by Laurie Halse Anderson:

Anderson, Laurie Halse. *Speak*. Farrar, Straus and Giroux, 1999.

Summary: Speak presents the issue of physical and emotional trauma from rape through the perspective of a young teenage girl named Melinda. Melinda not only endures the burden of having been raped but also suffers from bullying and isolation as a result of the incident that happened to her. Throughout the novel, Melinda begins a personal journey in coming to terms with the sexual assault she faced, and learning what it means to claim her identity and live her life after such a traumatic incident.

Evaluation: This plot is a good representation of the effects of trauma on mental health because it describes the realistic and long lasting effects of sexual assault, the stages of grievance and acceptance with a traumatic event, and the progress behind reclaiming one's identity and adjusting to life after a traumatic experience. This is both valuable for victims of sexual assault, and even readers who have not experienced a similar incident as it could bring understanding to the issue. This book exemplifies Exeter qualities 3 (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), 6 (Themes that inform truthfully about the wider world so as to allow readers to engage with difficult and challenging issues relating to immediate interests and global concerns), and 7 (Themes that allow the possibility of emotional and intellectual growth through engagement with personal issues). This work furthers the knowledge of what it means to survive a traumatic event, and the growth one must adhere to in order to feel "normal" again.

Endgame, Nancy Garden

Garden, Nancy. *Endgame*. HMH Books for Young Readers, 2006.

Summary: Gray Wilton is filled with hope with his recent move to Greenford Connecticut, as he can finally escape his prolonged history of bullying in school. Gray begins the new school year with making a few friends and involving himself in the music program at school, however the hopeful tone quickly shifts as Gray finds himself dealing with bullying and lose once again at Greenford High School-- this time it's even worse. Soon Gray loses all his support systems, joys and companions and finds himself in a dark mental state and a lethal plan-- planning a school shooting to end his suffering once and for all.

Evaluation: This book offers a unique perspective on the effects of trauma on mental well-being. It holds value because it not only brings awareness to the extent bullying can reach, but also brings about the conversation of gun violence. This is a significant YA book that can be useful to teach in classrooms as it can serve as a resource to an array of traumatic topics. The book demonstrates Exeter qualities 3 (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), and 6 (Themes that inform truthfully about the wider world so as to allow readers to engage with difficult and challenging issues relating to immediate interests and global concerns). This book furthers the understanding of what untreated trauma can cause and the capabilities of an individual in a dark mental state.

Me, Earl, and the Dying Girl, Jesse Andrews:

Andrews, Jesse. *Me, Earl, and the Dying Girl*. Abrams Books, 2012.

Summary: Gregg Gaines is a typical teenage boy, attempting to survive high school the best way he can with his formulated plan of being cordial with all his classmates but keeping a safe distant relationship between them all. This formula quickly changes when Gregg receives news that his childhood friend Rachel is dying of cancer. Gregg joins his friend Earl in attempting to make Rachel's last days enriched with excitement and joy.

Evaluation: The trauma in this storyline is presented in two oppositional perspectives: acceptance of a predetermined death and the effects of grievance and loss experienced by loved ones. The trauma dealt with in this story holds value in its opportunity to present the conversation of death to young adult readers. This book is an essential read inside and outside the classroom, to offer insight on coming to terms with the realization of one's own death and learning how to grieve loved ones. This book presents Exeter qualities 3 (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), and 7 (Themes that allow the possibility of emotional and intellectual growth through engagement with personal issues), as it can apply to an event many young adults have had to deal with or will have to deal with in the future, and emotional growth through the mourning process.

Thirteen Reasons Why, Jay Asher,

Asher, Jay. *Thirteen Reasons Why*. Razorbill, 2007.

Summary: Hannah Baker is a teenage girl who experiences a long list of traumatic issues at her new school, including bullying, betrayal and sexual assault among others. As Hannah begins to experience more hurtful events, her despair grows ultimately leading her to plan a suicide

attempt. Hannah leaves behind thirteen tapes, each one explaining a reason and person who she felt contributed to her making her decision to end her life.

Evaluation: The plot of Thirteen Reasons Why holds value in the awareness of bullying, sexual assault and suicide. Not only are young adult readers exposed to experiences that are common occurrences, they are also given the opportunity to read how these actions affect not only the protagonist, but all those who knew her and played a role in her life. Like Endgame and Speak, this book can be used as a transitional piece to open up the conversation to any of the traumas mentioned in the book. This book best exemplifies Exeter qualities 1 (Imaginative and well-structured plots going beyond simple chronologies to include time shifts and different perspectives), and 3 (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). This book can further the knowledge of how trauma may spiral into much larger issues and the severity of the negative impacts it can have on an individual's mental health.

We Were Here, Matt de la Peña

Peña Matt de la. *We Were Here*. Ember, an Imprint of Random House Children's Books, 2009.

Summary: We Were Here follows the life of protagonist, Miguel, a young teenage boy who has faced time in a juvenile correctional facility, and is now experiencing living in a group home after committing a crime. Miguel encounters many other rebellious boys close to his age, and bonds with two in particular while attempting to escape the group home to commence a new life in Mexico, leaving their troubled past behind them. Miguel's crime is finally revealed towards the end of the book, as he recounts the story of accidentally murdering his older brother.

Evaluation: The topic of trauma is much more complex in this book by introducing the realistic concept that trauma not only impose a toll on one's emotional state, but can lead to life-altering damage, such as incarceration. This book holds a tremendous value in unveiling how victims of trauma are susceptible to having negative encounters with the judicial system, on top of already suffering emotional responses. This book ties into Exeter qualities 1 (Imaginative and well-structured plots going beyond simple chronologies to include time shifts and different perspectives), and 4 (Characters who go beyond typical experiences so that readers can use the fictional experiences to learn and develop in their own lives). This book can be taught to further the understanding of the power trauma can have on all aspects of one's life.

Reads from outside of this semester:

The Bell Jar, Sylvia Plath

Plath, Sylvia. *The Bell Jar*. Heinemann, 1963.

Summary: Esther Greenwood is a young woman commencing an internship for a magazine publication in New York City. Although this is expected to be an exciting time in Esther's life, the societal pressures she feels pressured to adhere to (such as getting married, settling in a career, and sexuality) begin to negatively impact Esther's mental state eventually leading her to attempt suicide. After her suicide attempts, Esther is placed in different institutions before finally being placed in a treatment center. It is here where Esther begins to come to terms with her identity, her desires, and overall perception of life.

Evaluation: The value in this book, is placed on the emphasis of mental health and recovery rather than the trauma itself. This alone sets the book apart from other works dealing with the

concept of trauma and mental health, as it focuses more on the recovery aspect. This book also offers a perspective from a character who experiences life inside of a mental institution. This book best presents Exeter qualities 6 (Themes that inform truthfully about the wider world so as to allow readers to engage with difficult and challenging issues relating to immediate interests and global concerns) and 7 (Themes that allow the possibility of emotional and intellectual growth through engagement with personal issues). This plot can be used to further the understanding of treatment for victims of mental illness and attempted suicide, as well as raising awareness on mental health disorders such as depression and borderline personality disorder.

The Perks of Being a Wallflower, Stephen Chbosky

Chbosky, Stephen. *The Perks of Being a Wallflower*. Pocket Books, 1999.

Summary: Charlie is a young teenage boy who has just experienced the most traumatic events of his life so far: the deaths of two of his closest loved ones. Charlie is attempting to deal with the loss of his friend and his aunt, and along the line meets Sam and Patrick, two seniors at his school that adopt them into their friend group. As Charlie begins to feel more comfortable with his friends he finally confronts a traumatic event he has been repressing for years: Charlie was sexually abused by his aunt Hellen.

Evaluation: This book holds most value in its ability to expand on similar issues through the perspective of different characters. An example of this is the depiction of sexual abuse through both the male and female perspective. This is a rare occurrence in a young adult literature, and is a significant tool that broadens the conversation on specific traumatic events through different identities. This book represents Exeter qualities 3 (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), 6 (Themes that inform truthfully about the wider world so as to allow readers to engage with difficult and challenging issues relating to immediate interests and global concerns) and 7 (Themes that allow the possibility of emotional and intellectual growth through engagement with personal issues). Through these qualities, the issue of sexual trauma and mental health disorders are explored in unique ways.

The Fault in Our Stars, John Green

Green, John. *The Fault in Our Stars*. Penguin Young Readers Group, 2012.

Summary: Hazel Grace is an average seventeen-year-old girl, except for the fact that Hazel is a lung cancer patient. Hazel begins attending a cancer support group where she meets Augustus Waters. The two grow very close and even form a romantic bond, and begin to shift their perspective on life. Their young love comes to an end when Augustus unexpectedly finds out his cancer has returned and spread all over his body, ending his life shortly after.

Evaluation: This story is particularly unique in recounting the experience from the perspective of a cancer patient, and uses the character's experiences to highlight important life lessons. The trauma in this book is self explanatory as it is based on a cancer patient, however it also touches on the idea of grievance and loss of a loved one to a fatal illness. The book complies to Exeter qualities 3 (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) and 4 (Characters who go beyond typical experiences so that readers can use the fictional experiences to learn and develop in their own lives).

***Did not read this book.**

Hate List, Jennifer Brown.

Brown, Jennifer. *Hate List*. Little, Brown and Company, 2009.

Summary: Valerie Leftman is a teenage girl with a devastating secret that causes her to live with the burden of guilt every day since the incident-- she helped her boyfriend write the hate list with the names of the victims he shot at in the cafeteria. Now Valerie must face an investigation and her whole school after the incident, while living in a dark mental space she was not anticipating.

Evaluation: The value of this story lies in the characters distinctive position in life at the moment, one to which she unknowingly put herself in. Though this story is a fictional tale based on a very specific event, it holds importance to readers who may also be forced to live with guilt from a trauma they partially contributed to. Young adults who have experienced a similar situation can look to Valerie for comfort and guidance and learn that trauma does not define an individual's character. While those who have not experienced a similar situation can grasp from the novel, the severity some decisions can hold on determining one's future and life. This book furthers the understanding of how unanticipated and self-inflicted trauma can hold devastating effects. With that said, this book falls under Exeter qualities 1(imaginative and well-structured plots going beyond simple chronologies to include time shifts and different perspectives), and 4 (Characters who go beyond typical experiences so that readers can use the fictional experiences to learn and develop in their own lives).

***Did not read this book.**

Wonder, R.J Palacio

Palacio, R.J. *Wonder*. Knopf Books for Young Readers, 2012.

Summary: Auggie is a bright young boy with a facial abnormality. To protect Auggie from other children's judgement on his differences, he is homeschooled up until the 5th grade, when his parents decide to finally enroll him in public school. Auggie begins a new chapter in his life that is both terrifying and exciting. He encounters copious amounts of bullying, antagonizing and embarrassment, but also learning friendship, trust and acceptance along the way at his new school.

Evaluation: Wonder is a must-read for not only students, but all young adults because it brings awareness to the topic of children with special needs and abnormalities. This can be valuable in normalizing and diminishing the stigma revolving disorders and disabilities, a rare subtopic in YA literature. The trauma in this novel, stems from Auggie's experience with his "differences" in a setting where being different is not socially-acceptable. This is a great learning lesson for all young-adults, as it can bring clarification to those who are not living with a disorder or abnormality, and be allow readers who share similar experiences to turn to this book for guidance. Given all of this information, the book exerts qualities 3 (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), 6 (Themes that inform truthfully about the wider world so as to allow readers to engage with difficult and challenging issues relating to immediate interests and global concerns), and 7 (Themes that allow the possibility of emotional and intellectual growth through engagement with personal issues).

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