Connie Nguyen

ENGL 112B

T 4:30-7:15

Dr. Mary Warner

12/01/19

RATIONALE

 For my Unit of Study, I wanted to focus on the story of *The Odyssey* because it was a major portion of my high school literature. There was a major portion of the semester dedicated to the story, and since it was immensely long, the unit spanned about a month or two. To me, *The Odyssey* is more than just a centuries old tale about adventure and home, it’s a journey of self-discovery. The journey resonates very closely with the journeys that adolescents are going through, and although it seems completely outdated and irrelevant, I believe that pairing it with contemporary novels/works would help young scholars understand its importance. *The Odyssey* is a piece of literature that comes reiterated through numerous different works, so it’s essential that young adults have an understanding and appreciation for the work because its themes are recurring throughout many different platforms, even in today’s current time.

 During my observations, it was evident that the students were having trouble identifying with the text they were reading, *Summer of the Mariposas* by Guadalupe Garcia McCall because they weren’t entirely understanding of the point of the story. They weren’t exactly engaged with the conversations the teacher had tried to initiate in the classroom, and there wasn’t much she could do to encourage them since they were defiant in participating to begin with. The worksheets she had handed out were left untouched by some students until the class came together to work through the answers. It was evident that methods like worksheets were outdated. The students were really animated and excited to contribute when they were allowed to collaborate with one another in interpretations. It’s obvious that worksheets and solo work wasn’t the best use of time or brain energy for the students, so in my unit of study, I would steer heavily away from traditional methods.

 From an outsider perspective, I really appreciated the content of *Summer of the Mariposas* for the fact that it utilized elements of Spanish folklore in a modern retelling of *The Odyssey*. The story was a more concise approach to the concept of *The Odyssey* for the fact that their timeline was progressive, with minimal detours like in *The Odyssey.* The main characters of the novel, Odillia and her family, were on a journey to go home to Texas, but are met with difficulties of the magical and mystical nature. They encounter La Llorna, and their journey becomes a personal one wherein their integrity and honesty are challenged. It was the central text for the class, but it was difficult for the students to follow along despite its relatively easy read. *The Odyssey* has a plethora of inspired texts, but for the teacher to find something that was easily approachable to her students, which were a majority of spanish speakers, actually inspired me to use *The Odyssey* as my central piece.

 For my unit of study, I would like to incorporate other methods that help for better understanding. In the classroom I observed, it was apparent that there was a language barrier since a handful of students were non-english speaking. I don’t want those students to get left behind, especially when approaching a difficult text like *The Odyssey*. My man focus with this unit of study will be to walk the students through the concepts of *The Odyssey* with the help of companion texts that help contextualize the materials of the story.

Introduction:

 To start off my Unit of Study, I would like to show an episode of *Arthur*, specifically episode 6 of season 4, titled “D.W. Tale Spins.” In this episode, the characters are presented in an imagination setting, where D.W is transported into a story of Greek origins, *The Odyssey*. His adventures with his pals are an enjoyable introduction to the storyline of *The Odyssey* for the fact that it touches on important parts of the journey. The episode references Poseiden, the Lotus Eaters, Polyphemus’s cave, the Sirens, and the Cyclops. It is effective since it playfully captures the important journey points of the story, and it’s a quick twenty minute episode that helps students understand the importance of each major plot point.

 Reading the epic poem with the visual context of each major point would help the students understand what’s going on in the text better. They would be able to understand the danger of the Lotus Eaters, since they see how lazy and entranced the characters had been. I believe that having visual representations would help them be more active in reading since they would be able to recognize what they saw from the episode, and be more excited in reading what actually happens in the story. *The Odyssey* alone is difficult to understand through text, so having the episode summarize everything would make it easier for the students to follow along, since they would know who’s who and what they contribute to Odyseus’s journey.

*The Odyssey* byHomer

 The Odyssey is my central piece because it captures a lot of what young adults are dealing with in their daily life. They might not know it, but they can find many points of similarities in Odyseus’s journey with their own life. Odyseus’s main focus is on finding home, which relates to chapter 6 of *Young Adults in the Search for Meaning*. His identity is compromised at many points of the story, since he is constantly met with detours and delays in his efforts to return home to Ithaca. At the same moments of struggle, it is his identity that allows him to push through the deterrents, since his sense of identity and belonging to Ithaca is so strong, it makes him lead his men through various trials.

 In relation to young students, it is clear that there is an issue with identity and home. Especially with students who are on the cusp of transition, from junior high to high school, there is an immense amount of pressure to try and reinvent themselves or find out their own passions and motivations. These issues are things that *The Odyssey* resonates with, since Odyseus is challenged with people who want to acquire him or change the course of his journey. His strength and endurance is a teachable moment for the students, since high school and life in general is always willing to throw obstacles at them that would challenge who they are or change them to someone they don’t necessarily want to be.

 The Lotus Eaters is an especially powerful scene since it warns of the dangers of drugs, and how they debilitate you from moving forward with your life. At their young age, being stagnant isn’t ideal since they need to grow and move towards making major decisions like college and career. In order to dig through their goals and aspirations, I would have my students write silently for five to ten minutes in their journals and describe the things they want to achieve in the next few years. This would help them pinpoint their own journeys and help us contextualize the goals that Odysseus was trying to achieve in his journey.

 The most important message that *The Odyssey* conveys is the message of time. At first glance, it seems absurd that Odysseus would spend decades wandering the sea in an effort to make it back to Ithaca. His son has already grown to adulthood, and his kingdom has gone to ruin in his absence. The most important characteristic about him is that he never gave up. This is another teachable moment for the students, since they will come across challenges and they will feel moments of anxiety and want to give up and do something else. The important thing they have to take away is that no matter how long the journey takes, as long as you keep going, you’ll reach your destination eventually.

*Summer of the Mariposas* by Guadalupe Garcia McCall

 I really enjoyed this novel because it was contemporary and easily read. The *Summer of the Mariposas* intertwined Spanish folklore with the journey concept of *The Odyssey*. I feel that this is a good companion pair for *The Odyssey* because it mirrors the journey in a more easily digestible piece. The journey of Odillia and her family is more centered on personal integrity, which resonates with Odysseus’s purpose of staying true to his identity and his journey.

 In order to help students understand the novel more, I found it was most effective to have them read the book and come up with their own questions. The students I observed had done a round of question creation, where each table group (consisting of four students) were responsible for drafting a potential exam question in relation to chapter 9. Chapter 9 was important for the story as a whole because it was a moment of conflict between La Llorna and the family. Their integrity comes into question when they are confronted by La Llorna, and though they are initially forewarned to “stay true” to themselves, it is apparent that they fall off-course from their warnings. This sets up the next portion of the story, where their journey home becomes difficult due to the witch’s curse.

 The questions they come up with should attempt to dive deeper into the behaviors and thinking of the characters. They should be able to point out moments of tension, and articulate why they reacted to the witch with insults instead of staying true to their own personal integrity. The students would have 5 minutes to come up with an effective question, and thus proceed to create a circle around the room. This is an attempt at a Socratic seminar. Each student group would have a chance to ask their questions and have mini debates on the answers. In the classroom I observed, it was evident that this activity brought out the best in the students, as they were all willing to participate and argue amongst each other.

*We Were Here* by Matt De La Pen

 *We Were Here* is a good book to follow up with since it contains more realistic elements. The journey of Miguel is something that most young adults could easily understand, since his own issues are represented in everyday life. In my classroom, there were students who had just been released from Juvenile Hall, and while it was a shock to me to know that, it’s clear that the addition of *We Were Here* would prove fruitful for the students who are dealing with issues similar to Miguel.

 Miguel is someone who is very lost in the beginning of the book. He doesn’t have an identity or a place to truly call home. After being released from juvenile hall, he spends his time in a group home. There, he meets Rondell and Mong, who help him along his journey to escape with the intention of fleeing to Mexico. His story is particularly impactful since it deals with the struggles of identity, one struggle resulting in suicide. The suicide of Mong is a particularily powerful scene, since it really establishing the detrimental factors of loss of identity and belonging. Mong, at that point, doesn’t really see an escape for himself since the possibility of relocating to Mexico is more an impossibility despite their endeavours. I would use this moment as a teachable moment for the students, and ask them to reflect on this event in their journals for 5-10 minutes. A question I would ask is “What do you think about Mong’s death? Was it courageous or cowardly?,” which also aligns with chapter 7 of *Adolescents in the Search for Meaning.*

Another important factor is that Miguel relies on books to get him through his journey, which I hope will resonate with the students who are facing troubled home lives, since books are his escape from the troubles of group home living. Following the close of the novel, I would ask the students to pick a book that Miguel read that seems to stand out the most for them, and have them keep it in mind as the unit goes on. They don’t have to read it, but maybe having them do a short summary about the book as a homework assignment would help them understand why these books were so important for Miguel to read. They can choose the books they want to research, and then share their findings in a mini Book Talk activity in their tables.

*Into the Wild - Krakauer*

 To tie in with the theme of courage and survival, I would have the students read *Into the Wild* because it details a journey of self-discovery that ends in the death of Christopher McCandless. The story is based on true events, which I find would be effective for students because it brings our unit more rooted in reality. We move from fantasy to real life in order to contextualize the personal struggles that *The Odyssey* articulates. Having students read this novel will help them understand that *The Odyssey* isn’t a fictional and make-believe journey. It’s symbolic of any personal journey or endeavour that one might undergo in attempts to find their own identity.

Christopher McCandless was only 24 at the time of his death, an age that could potentially be deemed as ancient to the young 14 year olds reading it. However, what is important is that he decided to leave everything behind, to travel to Alaska and camp out there for 113 days. The unfortunate part of his journey is that his own attempts to find his way back to home and society are thwarted by elemental causes. His body was found September 6, 1992. The book uses his life as inspiration for the context, with a hypothesis on his death at the end. What is important for young scholars to take away is that the book articulates the journey of *The Odyssey,* in a very real life scenario. McCandless’s situation was unfortunate, but there are so many instances of journeys being taken for self-discovery and identity.

I would ask the students to write in their journals a short reflection on the novel. I believe it would be immensely impactful for them to understand the struggles that McCandless endured and how it would mirror their own struggles as they embark on their own personal journey through high school and adolescence. The most important message I would want them to take away is to not lose their sense of identity because in some cases, it might be too late to turn back. I would hope that they would never get to the point of absolute loss, so I hope having their journal entries as reflections would help solidify who they are, or at least remind them of their goals as they move through the years.

Finale: *Ithaca* by C.P Cavafy

 I would love to finish my unit with this poem:

As you set out for Ithaka

hope your road is a long one,

full of adventure, full of discovery.

Laistrygonians, Cyclops,

angry Poseidon—don’t be afraid of them:

you’ll never find things like that on your way

as long as you keep your thoughts raised high,

as long as a rare excitement

stirs your spirit and your body.

Laistrygonians, Cyclops,

wild Poseidon—you won’t encounter them

unless you bring them along inside your soul,

unless your soul sets them up in front of you.

Hope your road is a long one.

May there be many summer mornings when,

with what pleasure, what joy,

you enter harbors you’re seeing for the first time;

may you stop at Phoenician trading stations

to buy fine things,

mother of pearl and coral, amber and ebony,

sensual perfume of every kind—

as many sensual perfumes as you can;

and may you visit many Egyptian cities

to learn and go on learning from their scholars.

Keep Ithaka always in your mind.

Arriving there is what you’re destined for.

But don’t hurry the journey at all.

Better if it lasts for years,

so you’re old by the time you reach the island,

wealthy with all you’ve gained on the way,

not expecting Ithaka to make you rich.

Ithaka gave you the marvelous journey.

Without her you wouldn't have set out.

She has nothing left to give you now.

And if you find her poor, Ithaka won’t have fooled you.

Wise as you will have become, so full of experience,

you’ll have understood by then what these Ithakas mean.

 I feel like this poem is the perfect finale for the unit of study because it really reminds the students to be aware of their journey. They will face “dangers” much like the ones Odysseus encountered, but I hope that with each text we read, they become more aware of the importance of personal integrity and identity on their path. The poem serves as a final reminder to persevere.

 To finish the unit, I would have my students write a paragraph describing what they like to do, their hobbies, their goals, and what they want to be when they grow up. I would hope to mail it to them or find a way to reach them when they move forward, perhaps during their first year of college. I feel that this would be an effective reminder for them to continue to be who they are, and continue to “keep Ithaka in mind,” as they move through adolescence.

Works Cited

Arthur episode: <https://arthur.fandom.com/wiki/D.W._Tale_Spins>

Cavafy, C. P. “Ithaka by C. P. Cavafy.” *Poetry Foundation*, Poetry Foundation, www.poetryfoundation.org/poems/51296/ithaka-56d22eef917ec.

Krakauer, Jon. *Into the Wild*. Pan Books, 2011.

MCCALL, GUADALUPE GARCIA. SUMMER OF THE MARIPOSAS. TU Books, 2012.

Peña Matt de la. *We Were Here*. Ember, an Imprint of Random House Children's Books, 2019.

*Adolescent* references:

* Chapter 6 of *Adolescents*: Identity, Discrimination, and Struggles with Descisions.
* Chapter 7 of *Adolescents:* Courage and Survival