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Literature for Young Adults

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Archetype: The Outsider

Rationale

Prejudice is something bred, not born. Many children, teens, and young adults (and actual adults) are exposed to worldviews that beget prejudice against those that bigots arbitrarily decide should not have rights. Often times, this is done by labeling the out-group as “inferior,” “different,” and “potentially dangerous,” either by pointing out perceived differences, such as gender, skin color, or level of beauty, or by simply calling them as such. For example, to frame someone as dangerous, a word like “alien” or “illegal” might be used over “migrant.” Learning by example is easy with regular exposure to this type of alienation and biased thinking. When it is a community or parents who spread hateful rhetoric, it can be difficult for teens to find and credit other sources of guidance, which is why it is so important for schools to softly educate on moral character.

One such way to combat prejudice through education is by exploring the archetype of the outsider--the character who lives on the fringe of a community, set apart by their mindset, actions, or appearance. This archetype is heavily related to chapter 6 of *Adolescents in the Search For Meaning: Tapping the Powerful Resource of Story*, which revolves around identity and discrimination. Some outsiders are actually

part of the in-crowd in many ways, and others purposefully leave their communities on their own to rebel against what they see as an unjust society. Others are actively shunned and alienated by society, and are usually represented as an underdog or victim deserving of compassion. By seeing these positive representations of outsiders, and by attempting to see events from their point of view, teens can learn to be empathetic to those who may need kindness the most. They can also learn to analyze their own social standing, unlearn their prejudices, and be critical of others. The outsider could very well be themselves in some way. Here in the Bay Area, it might not be too big of a problem, but Discrimination persists heavily in many other areas of the US. The status quo of power has largely been rich White men. Perhaps because outsiders are so prevalent in everyday life, in the past and now, they are found in many pieces of the canon. A unit on Shakespeare might have *Romeo & Juliet*, in which the families are outsiders to each other despite being different only in name. Older teens might encounter *Othello*, who in many interpretations is a Black man or an immigrant being ostracized by a White or cultural in-crowd. Whatever the case, discriminating against the outsider usually ends badly for everyone involved, teaching that unjustified hatred causes self destruction--first morally, then physically. In the end, the most important thing is to understand varied perspectives, and to understand the fact that outsiders exist only because something has gone wrong on a social level.

Centerpiece



Image from https://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Of_Mice_and_Men

Another story that is often taught in high school, the centerpiece for my Unit of Study, is *Of Mice and Men*, by John Steinbeck. The Freshmen class that I observed read the novella, and they had a discussion on how the characters failed to become successful because they were disadvantaged from birth or discriminated against due to features such as age, race, disability, and class. Lennie and George, the main characters, are poor migrant farm workers, which sets them apart from the in-crowd by social class. Moving from place to place, and being chased out, solidifies them as being unable to find somewhere to belong. Lennie is doubly an outsider due to his mental disability and immense, uncontrollable strength. At the end of the story, George shooting Lennie is portrayed as an act of loyalty and mercy. Instead of Lennie being

seen as a monster, George still maintains that he is innocent, only misunderstood. The novella portrays them as tragic heroes in a society that uses and then disposes of the weak without giving them a chance to move up in life. It is a very bleak, but realistic outlook.

YA literature, though sometimes still dark and tragic, is a valuable resource to help teach because it represents the other facet of bigotry: that it is never too late to change. It is generally more inspirational, which is a good break from canonical works that can often be both difficult to read and depressing. Many of the works this class has read have at least semi-happy or hopeful outcomes for the outsider, teaching teens who may be “outsiders” themselves that they are deserving of a place to belong, and perhaps people will learn how to treat them with respect and dignity. After all, though recognizing the ills of various communities is important, leaving it at “Lennie dies and nothing could be done about it” does not teach how to combat discrimination, and might rather teach teens to be complacent about their own mistreatment. I have personally thought there were times I should let people mistreat me because of features about myself that I cannot change, like when I used to let non-Asian people make fun of my small eyes. Therefore it is also equally important to discuss ways to open up the possibility for change and development.

Launching the Unit/Into the Text

To launch the unit, and ease in the heavy subject of discrimination, I would first pull from a simple text, Dr. Seuss' *The Sneetches and Other Stories*. Though it may be simple, it exemplifies the lesson. The Sneetches in the titular story do this by claiming bellies with stars are the best, and those without are shunned. After a bunch of switch-aros, they become unable to tell who had stars and who didn't at first, and then begin to get along.

1) Before bringing up the book, I would try to do a multi-round activity where students get an arbitrary privileges, represented by tokens of some sort:

- a) Randomly chosen, some have more tokens than others, and some even have none. They can freely give away tokens. Specially designated students (the richest) are allowed to collect "tribute" from their table groups every round.
- b) I would say the students with the most tokens get a prize. No matter how the students interact, I think it would be meaningful. If some try to hoard tokens, it's a lesson on greed and power. If they decide to equalize themselves, then it shows working together can overcome a corrupt system
- c) I would probably end with giving everyone an equal amount of the prize. After all, I didn't say only the people with the most tokens would get any.
- d) I want students to be able to recognize that biases are often based on unfounded or arbitrary decisions to keep one social group in power.

2) After this, I would ask the class if they know of any "popular" stereotypes, such as ones from their own culture or social groups, while trying to keep it as respectful

- a) Though it might not work with all stereotypes, I would attempt to disprove them, then invite the class to do the same by giving counterexamples.
 - b) I then want them to think more deeply about prejudice and discrimination, such as whether they have ever felt personally discriminated against because of unchangeable aspects of themselves like race, gender, religion, ethnicity, disability status, appearance, income level, etc
- 3) Finally, I would ask the class to provide examples of “outsiders” from other books they’ve read in school. I would ask:
- a) What makes this person an outsider? Why are they “otherized” by the community they live in?
 - b) Is your outsider depicted as a bad or good person?
 - c) What are some systematic ways, like through laws or institutions, that communities ostracize outsiders and favor themselves?

Working Through the Text

As we read through *Of Mice and Men*, I want the students to focus on the various characters that are outsiders. Particularly, I want them to pay attention to ways other characters describe Lennie, George, Crooks, and Candy; whether by appearance or action. I want to ask the question, is it easy to be prejudiced? Is it easy not to be prejudiced?

- 1) I would ask if the students have ever been prejudiced themselves.
 - a) Why were they being prejudiced?

- b) Did they feel justified in the moment?
- c) Have they ever tried to stop other people from being prejudiced? Did it work, or were they ignored?

2) I would want the students to draw a character from the book, and write down traits they associate with that character. The visuals would help conceptualize them. It might also reveal possible biases.

3) We could do an activity where students anonymously write some of their non-physical traits, or purposely ambiguous traits, and hobbies on pieces of paper, then pass them out. This could be things like “lives in family of 6,” “smart,” or “likes to dance.” I would try to discourage negative traits, so nothing like “ugly”

- a) One by one, we would call students up and ask people if they think the paper they got matches.
- b) I would keep track of which students are described with the same paper, to show that people aren't very different past appearances.

4) We would continue reading the text, probably with some quizzes here and there to teach terminology or concepts. At this point, I would ask the students to choose a character they relate to and explain why. Or alternately, to choose a character or viewpoint from another piece of media.

- a) This would help with recognizing the existence of outsiders in various texts
- b) It would give a larger range of characters who are “otherized” by their communities, or perhaps even by themselves depending on the piece

- c) I might suggest other literature, they may have read, like *Catcher in the Rye* or *The Great Gatsby*.

Working Beyond the Text

Going in YA Lit, I would definitely pair this text with books that include other marginalized or socially disadvantaged people. Though *Of Mice and Men* isn't an incredibly difficult book, it might be less relatable to teens because it's bleak, about older characters, and set in a timeframe that seems long behind us. By using YA lit, we bring issues to the present. These are books I would pair with *Of Mice and Men*:

1. Karen Hesse's *Witness*: As they are both in a similar timeframe, these could pair well together to represent the early 1900s. Though this story could be confusing as the perspective shifts with each character, it is important because it is optimistic about how a community can work to rid itself of hate. The treatment of Leonora Sutter and the Hirshes only takes root because other characters do not reach out to them. Others, like the Pettibones and Merlin, are complacent in gaining benefits from a system that actively tries to disadvantage others. *Witness* shows that they are able to think past themselves and change for the better.
2. Chris Crutcher's *Whale Talk*: This book has another character who is mentally challenged, and his ending is much more optimistic. Aside from Chris, most of the Swim Team, including the main character, are outsiders to the school's organization that largely favors sports. Still, Chris eventually beats his bully in a swimming race. As it shows an outsider actively succeeding and achieving

victory and acceptance, *Whale Talk* can be used to show that it is possible for the disadvantaged to find a place in society, and that they often only need some assistance to get started. Additionally, showing the perspectives and sad lives of the bigots can be helpful to warn away from that type of rhetoric.

3. Matt de la Peña's *We Were Here*: Our main character is a youth who, as the story unfolds, becomes more and more complex. The narrative elicits scrutiny and perhaps judgment about Miguel, a Mexican teen who goes to a correctional facility for an unknown crime, from the start. However, the first impression is turned on its head when many facets of Miguel are revealed: that he loves to read, he loves his family, he is lonely despite himself, and that he doesn't believe he deserves redemption from his crime. Rondell and Mong are similar in their unexpected depth. The three outcasts find solace in each other. The book teaches us not to rely on stereotypes, and to always look deeper into a person before passing any judgments. Additionally, one might relate George and Lennie to Miguel and Rondell.
4. Robert Cormier's *After the First Death*: This story challenges the conception of who the outsider is, and how it is always a matter of perspective and power. In the eyes of Miro, it is the Americans who committed crimes, and he only retaliates to take back his homeland. The narrative paints Miro as deserving of empathy, which is perhaps why he is the only youth to survive. The US government in the story is guilty of war crimes, and actively hides secrets using

its own citizens as collateral. This is another story that teaches the lesson of not jumping to conclusions, and of attempting to see things from other perspectives.

5. Becky Albertalli's *Simon vs. the Homo Sapiens Agenda*: I think a book like this might be important (as well as all the others I've listed) because it gives a view that is not often given the spotlight in canonical literature. Many times, a canonical piece's narrator is not the one who is being discriminated against, but rather a case like Lennie and George, wherein George (who is still an outsider, but one that is more easily able to fit in) is the one who narrates about Lennie. That is not the case with a lot of YA Lit: they give voices to voices that have not historically been given importance. Doing this makes the outsider seem less "strange" or "alien." In his story, Simon is gay, and feels like an outsider because of things like people asking when he will get a girlfriend, and loathes the fact that straight is the standard. It helps us question why that is so.
6. Walter Dean Myer's *Monster*: This can relate back to *Of Mice and Men* by showing how marginalized persons are assaulted at the systematic level. This is a story about a Black youth being framed for a crime he did not commit, and subsequently being labeled as a "monster." He is demonized due to the color of his skin. This book asks: how we can dismantle these unequal systems? An activity we could do with this idea is reimagining *Of Mice and Men* in a modern setting, wherein Lennie is still accused of rape or where he accidentally murders someone. How might we see him? What would the media say? Would it be easy

to dispel stigma against mentally challenged persons?

Concluding Activities:

Before, I wanted students to provide examples of an Outsider. Using that, they would compare and contrast that character with one from *Of Mice and Men*, including categories like why they are discriminated against, how are they discriminated against, and whether or not they get a happy ending.

1) This will lead up to a final essay on the subject of discrimination; an analytic essay on a single character, asking them to critically think about the character's motivations and dreams, and why they are unable to achieve that dream. Besides teaching them writing skills, this is meant to really drive in the fact that society does not cater to "outsiders" and people it deems invaluable.

2) Because I don't want to end the unit on a depressing note, I would include a follow-up project about ways things have gotten better. I would want my students to research a law, community change, or overhaul of the government (in any country) that has helped marginalized persons gain rights.

- a) This is to promote empathy and the possibility of change
- b) Teaches students how to conduct research, especially in an age where computers are becoming ever-more prevalent in class settings
- c) Focuses them on change at the institutional level, because these problems are often way more than just the personal level.

Citations

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