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ENGL-112B

Representation in Literature:

From Shadows to Rainbows and Everything in Between

Representation is important for readers to see in their literature because it helps in the connection to the context. That could range from something dark and tragic as sexual assault as read in *Speak* by Laurie Halse Anderson and then could be a telling of three friends hitting some life lessons that teach about love and resilience as read *Like A Love Story* by Abdi Nazemian. In Nazemian’s novel multiple windows are shown as well that allow for a greater range of connectivity between the young reader, from a student immigrating to the country and joining a new school, questioning of sexuality and friendship, over all acceptance in the family dynamic. Seeing literature that reflects more than that of the white American dynamic helps students engage with the literature they can personally connect with.

Growing up I remember reading the classics like The Great Gatsby by F. Scott Fitzgerald and thinking it was one of the most boring books ever and recently had to read it again for another class. Yet, after reading this time around we were assigned to read another book called The Chosen and The Beautiful by Nghi Vo which happens to be the similar story of Gatsby but told through the eyes of Jordan Baker, an adopted openly bisexual of Vietnamese decent young woman. This helped keeping me engaged in the reading as it was something refreshing and different to read. The dynamics in the book I would center my Unit of study would have to be *Like A Love Story* by Abdi Nazemian. The story of three friends having to deal with issues ranging from sexuality, family, resilience, heartbreak, making amends, and has some historical accuracy as well. More representation in literature will expand the audience for the reader, even the secondary characters.

1. Rationale

Representation in literature helps the student engage and connect on a much deeper level. Representation can serve as opportunities for minority groups to find community support and validation. From the student seeing themselves reflected among the characters, to seeing familiarities in the story to their own lives. Besides the main characters, secondary characters could reflect a life experience much like that of the reader. Take example in *Like A Love Story* I can relate to the secondary character Saadi, who is the older brother to Reza. Through my eyes I saw the story of my late brother and his journey of accepting himself in the LGBTQ community. Saadi is a character who was just trying to be cool but comes off as a major bully. How many students can relate to bearing witness to this dynamic? Breaking down the following character of the younger brother, Reza, being a newly migrated student, new school, new family because his mother remarries.

The personal connection that I could start the unit is sharing the dynamics I have with the book. For starters, I am an older brother to my late brother who came out as gay while we were in high school. Another dynamic I shared with the story is being in a family where one of the parents re-marry, however in this sense I was the oldest and Saadi is the middle child, he is being the character I personally relate to the most. How many students can relate to being new or remarrying into a new family.

1. **Introducing the Unit**
   1. **Main Characters and Representation**

The opening to the unit I would present a Ted Talk video by Aisha Thomas titled [*Why Representation Really Matters*](https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=-X-taPvKWbY) and present the question what representation means to each other? Each student would write what they think down on a sheet of paper and this would be an anonymous writing exercise for 7 minutes and at the end everyone would crumple up their paper and place it in a bin. From here I would take volunteers to pull from the bin and read the random note they pick out from the bin. During this activity I would write down on the board or media projector that the class could agree on.

Over the next few days, we would read and listen to the audiobook of *Like A Love Story* and get to know the three main characters Art, Judy, and Reza. As a class we would draw up a character chart that would point out characteristics that are relatable.

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Depending on the class and the comfort level I would be the one to point out the sexuality of Art being gay, and the conflict of questioning one’s own sexuality with Reza. This helps because if somebody is dealing with their own battles this allows for the student to see it relatable to themselves, without the worry of “outing” themselves. Reza being the first character we are introduced too, has a plethora of character traits that range from losing a parent, his mother remarrying, an older rebellious sister, and older jock stepbrother. As a class we can discuss if anyone has had a life experience based on Reza and how his life is introduced.

The use of technology would be utilized during a journal assignment and each student would start a Google doc. Their first journal entry would reflect on Reza and the things he represents. I would ask them if they have ever felt as if they were out of place, whether it be on a new team, school, job for some students. After the journal entry I would open a discussion asking if they have had any representation in other forms of literature using the example of Wilson Alphona’s *Ms. Marvel* and how the character is a young girl of Pakistani-American background. Something totally different from the blonde hair blue eyed Captain Marvel.

Expanding on the character charts, in the next few days we would work on the character chart of Bartholomew Emerson Grant VI aka Art. Words that can attach this character can start as open, activist, bold and who comes from a family who does not accept him for who he is but wishes for him to pursue other avenues in life. This would be a great time to use my own life experience in sharing how my late father wanted me to pursue a career that would pay very well versus something that I found enjoyable and or passionate for. My father was a hardworking man that immigrated to this country and pursued the career of mechanic and eventually owned his own shop in Gilroy.

Once completing the chart for Art, we would move onto Judy, who is an aspiring fashion designer who worships her uncle Stephen, a gay man with AIDS who devotes his time to activism as a member of ACT UP. Judy shows signs of insecurity over her own body image which is a common issue for the age of social media. She is also best friends with Art, which eventually gets tested because of the unexpected.

1. **Activities throughout the unit**
2. Reflection assignment after the main characters are introduced, we would discuss the different dynamics of each character’s family and the impact that it could have on the character.
   1. Questions to think about
      1. Which family relates to yours the most, which one relates the least and why?
      2. Have you encountered any resist on who you want to be in life even if from outside the family?
      3. **TOUGH QUESTION/OPINION free write**
         1. Write about how you might have handled the situation that transpires between the three young people?
3. Using the poem *280* by Lorna Dee Cervantes as an example we would look at the descriptions used and see if they can recognize any of them. If none are familiar, we would use technology to pull google maps and look at the stretch of highway 280 from San Jose to San Francisco. After reading the poem and a brief discussion, the students will do a free write poem on local area they frequent. Could be the mall, the beach, the library, wherever you feel home.

280

Las casitas near the gray cannery,

nestled amid wild abrazos of climbing roses

and man-high red geraniums

are gone now. The freeway conceals it

all beneath a raised scar.

But under the fake windsounds of the open lanes,

in the abandoned lots below, new grasses sprout,

wild mustard remembers, old gardens

come back stronger than they were,

trees have been left standing in their yards.

Albaricoqueros, cerezos, nogales . . .

Viejitas come here with paper bags to gather greens.

Espinaca, verdolagas, yerbabuena . . .

I scramble over the wire fence

that would have kept me out.

Once, I wanted out, wanted the rigid lanes

to take me to a place without sun,

without the smell of tomatoes burning

on swing shift in the greasy summer air.

Maybe it's here

en los campos extraños de esta ciudad

where I'll find it, that part of me

mown under

like a corpse

or a loose seed.

1. As the novel wraps up I would have the students discuss if their connections have changed throughout the novel and ask after reading about the AIDS epidemic if they see any similarities in the COVID-19 pandemic or the handling of Mpox.
2. **Other Resources and books**
   1. [**https://www.lgbtqsaves.org/**](https://www.lgbtqsaves.org/)

Mission statement “Our mission is to provide safe and brave spaces for social and personal development of LGBTQ youth. Our physical and virtual programs offer hope in the lives of each youth served.”

* 1. *Whale Talk* by Chris Crutcher in which an athlete takes on the Athletic board with a group of unexpected group of students to prove a point.
  2. *Speak* by Laurie Halse Anderson. Melinda Sordino is put in a very horrible situation that leads to the student body shunning her, little do they know that there is a dark secret that took place at the house party.

Works Cited

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