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English 112B

Unit of Study

Professor Warner

African and African American Literature:

Critically Diverse Voices

I. Introduction and Rationale

The primary novel I've chosen focuses closely on the interconnection of African and American lineage and history. The span of time in *Homegoing* by Yaa Gyasi reflects 250 years of horrific moments in history, focusing on the integration of colonialism and slavery in both Ghana and the United States, and the aftermath of this in both countries. Alongside this under representation of literature from other cultures, when classes choose to focus specifically on African American literature, a majority of essays and authors tend to be written by white males focusing on historical events such as slavery and colonialism. However, *Homegoing* is written by Ghanaian author Yaa Gyasi; not only was Gyasi born in Ghana, she is also a woman, presenting a direct antithesis of what is typical of high school English authors studied in the classroom. The presentation of Gyasi as opposed to authors historically represented in American literature classrooms is important for high school students, specifically those who don't fit into the typical canon of American literature (white, male, American). Students will be able to read a novel that reflects important historical moments and feelings from an author who does not fit the canon,

showing students of different ethnicities, races, cultures, and genders that their voice matters and can be learned from.

I chose this topic for students because I believe it is an ever important topic and will be for generations to come. Oftentimes in American high school English and History classes, an emphasis is put on certain historical time periods solely focusing on American history and representation of slavery. Something that lacks focus is colonialism, as well as how Africans have been affected historically by colonialism, the slave trade, and the aftermath of these things in the country of Ghana. What is most often focused on in high school classrooms when delving into this topic is how it has affected the United States, but lacks focus on how these horrific historical events have affected African countries.

The supplemental material reflects some of the major events in the novels, focusing on both Ghanaian and American historical events. Also, each of the supplemental materials are written/spoken by either African American or African authors, making it a point for these historical events to be heard and understood from those who have had their experiences silenced throughout history. Each piece of supplemental material being a different medium such as poetry, speech, and music, allows for students to explore different media representative of certain historical moments presented in the novel, which can help students understand the themes of the novel more fully than just solely focusing on the text.

This chosen topic connects to YA's in many ways, specifically focusing on those who are part of groups generally underrepresented in the typical canon that is focused on in American high school English classes. *Homegoing* also deals with typical YA experiences such as coming of age, understanding your sexuality, friendship and familial struggles, as well as experiences of love and loss. These universal YA experiences are not necessarily masked by the plot, but are not

exactly at the forefront of the novel itself. The novel generally focuses on African and African American history through the presentation of multiple characters, though each of these characters presents their own emotions and experiences in which YA readers can relate to in some way or another.

II. Texts/Media in Use

Homegoing by Yaa Gyasi (*OR Things Fall Apart* by Chinua Achebe)

“The Weaver Bird” by Kofi Awoonor

“Incidents in the Life of a Slave Girl” by Harriet Jacobs

“Give Your Daughter’s Difficult Names” by Assetou Xango

“One Way Ticket” by Langston Hughes

“The Lord's Prayer” by Sanna Aabam

“Alright” by Kendrick Lamar

“Harlem” by Langston Hughes

“Drop Me Off In Harlem” Ella Fitzgerald, Duke Ellington

III. Introducing the Unit

As a way to begin the unit, I would introduce the primary text, as well as introduce the author Yaa Gyasi. I would then pose a silent reflection question to the students in which they would answer the question “What work have you read by African or African American authors during your time in school?”. After asking this question, I would allow students to discuss with a partner, just before jumping into a class group discussion, comparing and contrasting student findings. I believe it is important for students to analyze and discuss representation in the

classroom, and upon reflecting with the class, students may begin to understand just why this unit is important for each of them. I then plan to present a YouTube video titled “Yaa Gyasi On *Homegoing*” as a way for students to learn a bit more about the author, as well as her perspectives and choices during the writing and publishing process of the novel. After students watch the short video on Gyasi, I would have them split into groups and answer questions about how they think the novel will be, such as “What are you interested in learning more about that Gyasi had mentioned in her brief introduction of the novel?” Or “What is something you are hoping to learn or take away from this unit experience?”. I would use the answers to this short answer response as an exit ticket for students to be able to leave after the end of the class period, while also being able to gauge their interest in the unit and the text. After this activity, I would begin reading the first chapter of the novel to and with the students. I believe this to be an extremely important part of teaching a unit alongside a guiding text. First, students need to be comfortable reading and understanding the language and tone of a text, and will not be able to fully grasp these things unless you present it to them. Also, it is important to read the literature you are asking students to analyze alongside them, not just having it be an activity they do on their own, or something they do exclusively for homework. In reading with your students in the classroom, they are more likely to take the text seriously, as you are showing it should be taken seriously.

IV. Working Through the Text

As a way to reinforce the themes and ideas from the core text *Homegoing*, I would pair this alongside multiple accompanying texts of different formats and medias. I have included titles in the “Texts/Media in Use” section in the form of poetry, speech, literature excerpts, as

well as music. It is important for students to see connections to the historical and cultural aspects of the text using varying media as some students prefer certain media over others. For example, one student may prefer to listen to Kendrick Lamar's poetry at the beginning of the "Alright" music video, as that may draw a certain connection to the main text that poem "The Weaver Bird" by Kofi Awoonor would not, and vice versa.

V. Working Beyond the Text

Students take a deeper look into themselves, answering questions that pertain to themes and ideas brought about through analysis of the core text for the unit. During my observation of Jennifer Creech's Ethnic Studies Literature course, she made it a point to allow students to perform self analysis in regards to their own culture, ethnicities, race, sexual orientations, etc. as a way to come to a further, more concrete conclusion of the text itself and the themes presented. It seemed to work extremely well with the students; oftentimes in order to come to a conclusion about a theme, or a person/people outside of yourself or something you have trouble understanding, looking at yourself and what makes you who you are helps to develop your thoughts and feelings in a more coherent and concrete way.

VI. Concluding the Text

To conclude the unit, I would assign a final essay in which students can take one of the supplemental materials studied together as a class and relate it to the core text. The prompt would be: Over the course of this unit, we have been introduced to various forms of literature written by both African and African American authors, and have analyzed their literature alongside our reading of Yaa Gyasi's *Homegoing*. **Please write a 3-5 page typed, double spaced essay in which you compare and/or contrast one of the short pieces of literature we've analyzed together as a class with the novel *Homegoing*.** You may choose to focus either

on a theme that is present in both your chosen text as well as Gyasi's novel, or maybe you will choose to focus on a comparison between the historical time periods of one of the in class reading assignments and a time period presented in *Homegoing*.

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