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Dr. Warner

English 112B

Unit of Study

Fall 2021

Unit of Study on Identity, Loss and Family Issues

**Rationale**

For many young adults, high school can be a very tumultuous time. As teens are slowly transitioning into their early adulthood, they begin to face complex situations. Death becomes a much more profound loss as they become much more aware of its repercussions, every struggle is emphasized as emotions are intensified, and ultimately their identities come into question as they try to discover who they truly are. My own high school adolescence was definitely just as confusing, especially due to the lack of a support system. I noticed that many of my peers went through similar losses, emotional spirals, and confusions, yet there was nothing in the high school English curriculum that genuinely helped us feel understood. I personally did not feel connected to some of the characters that I studied in the novels that I read for my English classes; I either felt a vague connection or absolutely nothing at all.

However, going back to my old high school for teaching observations made me notice how much the English curriculum has evolved. While some of the young adult novels that were being taught could be considered part of the literary canon, there were also many new novels that grasped students’ attention through themes of discovery, acceptance, the importance of family, and coping with serious modern issues. The characters are modern and relatable, and they genuinely entertained the students. Not only did the novels keep the students intrigued, they also made the students feel understood and accepted. My reason for creating this Unit of Study is exactly for that reason; I want to teach my students how to prepare themselves for the difficulties in life through novels and other texts that teach us how to cope with death and grief. I want to teach them about the complexities of familial relationships and the powerful bonds of family. For my Unit of Study, Chapters 4, 5, and 6 of *Adolescents in the Search for Meaning: Tapping the Powerful Resource of Story* are my guides in this Unit of Study as they focus on identity, coping with loss and death, and living through family issues. Even though these topics may appear to be heavy or dark, I believe that these topics can help students navigate their high school years and help them create their own identities.

**Canonical Novel**

I will be focusing my Unit of Study on *The House on Mango Street* by Sandra Cisneros. This novel was the first text I was ever required to read in high school and the first novel I read that was written by a Mexican-American author. The book greatly involves the theme of identity as the adolescent main protagonist, Esperanza Cordero, attempts to forge and establish her own identity in her Chicana community. Esperanza questions the cultural customs that weigh on her due to her identity as a young Chicana woman and that are frequently enforced on her due to family expectations. Esperanza also goes through several encounters with death and loss, emphasizing her transition from child to woman. *The House on Mango Street* has been read in high school English classes for generations due to its important themes, yet the book has still been at risk of being banned due to the heaviness of the topics. I believe that it is important to discuss these topics with young teens, so that they are prepared for their transition into adulthood and so that they can better understand what they are experiencing in their teenage years.

**Launching the Unit**

I would begin the Unit of Study with two poems: “The Last Word on Being Born to Old Parents” by Elizabeth Acevedo, taken from the novel *The Poet X,* and “In Blackwater Woods” by Mary Oliver. Acevedo’s poem discusses the weight that the narrator feels upon their shoulders as they struggle with their own belief that their birth is an inconvenience. The narrator does not feel good enough, especially with the expectations placed upon them by their family. The narrator feels trapped, due to the constant struggle with their identity. This poem introduces the idea that identity is something that many people struggle with due to the influences around them. Even though people may feel the pressure to please those they care about, it is important to remember that they do have a choice regardless of how black and white everything may seem. Since the poem is quite short, I would read the poem out loud to the class or choose a student to read the poem to the class before proceeding to the next poem. Oliver’s poem introduces loss, and death, and grief to the class, as well as the idea that nobody should ever take anything or anyone for granted. It is essential that both poems are read as there can be many different kinds of loss in life, not just through death, that eventually become part of our identity.

**The Last Word on Being Born to Old Parents by Elizabeth Acevedo**

You will learn to hate it.

No one, not even your twin brother,

will understand the burden

you feel because of your birth;

your mother has sight for nothing

but you two and God;

your father seems to be serving/ a penance, an oat of solitary silence.

Their gazes and words

are heavy with all the things

they want you to be.

It is ungrateful to feel like a burden.

It is ungrateful to resent my own birth.

I know that

Twin and I are miracles.

Aren’t we reminded every single day?

# **In Blackwater Woods by Mary Oliver**

Look, the trees

are turning

their own bodies

into pillars

of light,

are giving off the rich

fragrance of cinnamon

and fulfillment,

the long tapers

of cattails

are bursting and floating away over

the blue shoulders

of the ponds,

and every pond,

no matter what its

name is, is

nameless now.

Every year

everything

I have ever learned

in my lifetime

leads back to this: the fires

and the black river of loss

whose other side

is salvation,

whose meaning

none of us will ever know.

To live in this world

you must be able

to do three things:

to love what is mortal;

to hold it

against your bones knowing

your own life depends on it;

and, when the time comes to let it go,

to let it go.

After the class finishes reading the poems, the students will be given the option to write a quick-write about one poem in which they will express their immediate thoughts and reactions. As the poems are about very heavy topics, the students have the option to share with the class.

There will be a short lesson on the vignette to introduce *The House on Mango Street,* not only for the students to better understand the text but also in preparation for the project that will be done at the end of the unit. This would be done by distributing copies of the novel to students, so that they can analyze the structure, mood, themes, and tones of various vignettes. Since *The House on Mango Street* is only 103 pages, the students will mainly read in class. As they read, students would be writing down any phrases or vocabulary words that they do not understand. As they read, students would also be completing writing assignments in relation to the novel, such as:

* Writing a description of their own home, using the description in the first chapter as reference as well as using the elements of the style of a vignette. Students would be recommended, not required, to reread whatever chapter was read in class. Students should write about the physical description of their home, as well as briefly mention any family members who live with them. Students should also describe what ‘home’ means to them.
  + Students would be given the following guiding questions:

1. Does your home make you who you are/define you?

2. How does it affect your identity? Does it depict your culture?

At the end of each week, students would be given a very short comprehension quiz (about 1-2 questions) that would not only ensure a consistent reading of the novel, but would also help create a better understanding of the novel.

**Companion Novels**

For companion novels, I wanted to choose novels that involved very diverse protagonists, as well as still included the themes of death, loss, and identity. Adolescence can be very painful and confusing, so I wanted to choose novels that talk about real-life situations and relatable characters.

***I Am Not Your Perfect Mexican Daughter* by Erika L. Sanchez**

This novel talks about a Mexican-American teenage girl named Julia, who attempts to forge her own identity while also juggling the expectations of her parents and the sudden death of her older sister. This novel would pair very nicely with *The House on Mango Street,* due to its themes of identity, familial relationships, and sense of emotional loss. Esperanza and Julia both share the desire to reject the cultural expectations set around them in order to create their own identity, yet they also both struggle with the hardships that can be experienced as teenagers transition into adulthood.

I believe that this novel would pair very well with *Speak* by Laurie Halse Anderson or *We Were Here* by Matt de la Pena. In *Speak,* Melinda Sordino attempts to cope with the trauma of her rape through silence and isolation. Melinda and Julia could be compared to one another, as Julia also keeps her struggles to herself due to her belief that nobody would understand her situation. Melinda also experiences a profound sense of loss, yet instead of the death of a loved one, she experiences the death of her childhood and innocence. In *We Were Here,* Miguel also struggles with the loss of his sibling and the discovery that their idealized sibling may not have been what they seemed. In relation to *The House on Mango Street,* Julia, Melinda, and Miguel all relate to Esperanza in the sense that all characters try to shape their own identities even when everything appears to be against them–especially as they experience familial struggles and immense loss.

***Clap When You Land* by Elizabeth Acevedo**

This novel talks about two sisters that discover the existence of one another after the death of their father in a plane crash. Camino lives in the Dominican Republic and Yahaira lives in New York City, creating an immense difference between them. The two sisters are faced with the reality of their father’s secrets and the fact that he is truly gone forever. Yet amongst these profound feelings of loss and betrayal, the sisters learn about the true meaning of family. I believe that this novel would be a great companion novel because of its themes of love, grief, and family. The novel is also written in the style of a verse novel, making it quite similar to *The House on Mango Street.*

**Ending the Unit**

Final project: Vignette Collection

To finish off the unit, students will be asked to create their own collection of vignettes.

Students will:

* Create a “book” of vignettes with a personalized cover page. The cover page would include the title of the book, the student’s name, and an illustration. The illustration should be relevant to the student’s identity or the vignettes (could be a photograph).
* Each student would create a book that contains 4-7 typed vignettes that are at least two paragraphs in length. However, none of the vignettes should be longer than two pages.
* Each vignette must convey a theme (specifically the themes that were discussed in class and are relevant to *The House on Mango Street*) and each vignette must focus on a different theme (for example: writing four separate vignettes about friendship would not be allowed).
* Each vignette should have a title, start on a new page, and have at least two examples of figurative language (simile, metaphor, personification for example—students would be allowed to look these up if they cannot remember what they are). Each vignette would have imagery to help the reader feel immersed in the story.

I believe that this project would be especially fun since it gives students the opportunity to break away from the traditional essay format. The project also allows students to review the structure of a vignette and go over the themes of identity, loss, and family issues that are mentioned in The *House on Mango Street.* I remember doing a similar assignment when reading the novel in my 9th grade year, and I greatly enjoyed it. I believe that it would give students the opportunity to let their personalities and identities shine through, as well as demonstrate their creativity. The students would be given the choice to share one of their vignettes with the class. My end goal would be to create a safe environment for teens during what can be a very turbulent time. With the creation of this final project and their sharing of their vignettes, I hope to remind these students that they are never alone and how important it is to create their own identities.

Works Cited

Acevedo, Elizabeth. *The Poet X.* HarperCollins. 2018. Print.

Oliver, Mary. “In Blackwater Woods.” 1983.