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English 112B

November 25, 2021

Unit of Study

### This Isn't the End: Combatting the Mental Health Crisis Through Literature

#### **Rationale:**

Mental illness is at an all-time high amongst young adults. According to a recent study by the World Health Organization, one in every four 10-19 year-olds experience a mental disorder, globally. In addition, suicide is the fourth leading cause of death amongst 15-19 year-olds (WHO). More teens are losing their lives to suicide, and there isn't a solution for the foreseeable future. To further this conflict, teens consume information through media and literature that can heavily influence their decisions. Frequently in young-adult literature, the concept of mental illness is negatively portrayed or has harmful stereotypes. As a result, readers who struggle with a mental illness will be less likely to seek help, and their symptoms may get worse (Olan, Richmond).

So what can we as educators do to guide our students to look past these stigmas found in literature? Literary works that focus on subjects such as mental illnesses and suicide may not always be equipped with the education to allow readers to work through the conflicts they struggle through in real life. Even many canonical works that are commonly taught in the K-12 system have mentionings of mental illnesses, yet many fall short in educating the readers about these issues. For instance, many high school students are required to read *The Awakening* by Kate Chopin. Although the novel accurately portrays mental illness through several points of view, the novel ends with the suicide of the main protagonist Edna Pontellier. Edna's death is

viewed as a celebratory escape from her mental illness and the oppression she faced from society. As a high school student battling a major depressive disorder, Edna's suicide left me with a negative message. I remember being taught that her death was a good thing because she was finally free from the oppressive systems that helped deteriorate her mental health. Not once did we thoroughly examine the ways in which Edna's suicide could have been prevented. Edna was dead, the book was over, and she could finally escape; at what cost?

By going more in-depth about mental health and the implications it may have on an individual, the students will be better able to recognize mental illnesses in literature as not a character fault but as an illness that can further be worsened by external factors. In class, we will destigmatize mental health and recognize its importance in literature. By allowing the classroom to be a safe space for open thoughts and discussion, students can feel more comfortable talking about such a touchy subject.

**Centerpiece Work:**

The canonical work that the class will examine is Kate Chopin's *The Awakening*. Edna, the main protagonist obviously struggles with poor mental health. Not only does she notice it, but those around her recognize that something is off about her. Edna not only struggles with her mental health but also must conform to the expectations of women during the late nineteenth century. Although she can hardly take care of herself, Edna has to be a devoted wife to her husband and an attentive mother to her children. When Edna is unable to fulfill these expectations, she is looked down upon by others. Everything Edna faces leads her down a spiraling path that leads to her losing everything, and eventually ending her life to escape the burdens that society has put on her.

Although Edna is a powerful female protagonist who questions what society expects of her, she does not necessarily meet a favorable ending. The novel teaches a valuable lesson about the restrictions women face in a patriarchal society, and the ending is necessary to cement that idea. Unfortunately, the ending does not leave much in regards to any lessons regarding mental illness, especially for a novel about a character who loses her battle to it. I find it necessary for a class that reads this novel to have a deeper discussion and understanding of mental illnesses past the stigmas that commonly influence the mindsets of young adults.

**Launching the Unit:**

I will launch the first class of the unit with a classroom discussion regarding mental health. I will establish that the classroom is a safe space for students to discuss their knowledge and experiences if they feel comfortable doing so. We will have a discussion and lesson regarding triggers and how to discuss mental health issues in a classroom environment. Because the topic of mental health can spark mature discussions, I want to ensure that the students recognize the importance of keeping the classroom a safe and happy environment for everyone involved.

The class will be handed a printout of the lyrics to “Lithium” by Nirvana. They will annotate the paper like they would a poem for ten minutes, paying close attention to any lines that might relate to mental illness. After their annotations are complete, we will listen to the song out loud in class. Then I will call on students to share their annotations and their thoughts regarding the lyrics of the song. After the students share, I will pull up the Genius annotations online and we can go over what top annotators had to say about the song. We can discuss how Lithium is not only the title of the song but also the name of a popular medication used to treat bipolar disorder. If time allows, we can also talk about the suicide of Kurt Cobain, the writer of

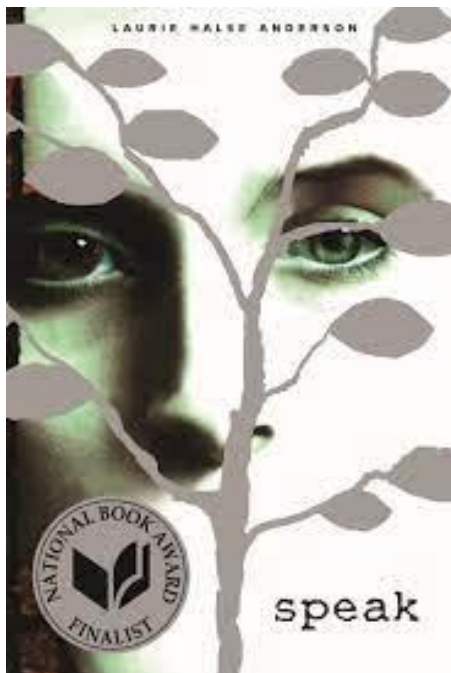
that song and a member of the band Nirvana, and how his lyrics may have related to his mental well-being during the time.

Link to song: [▶ Nirvana - Lithium](#)

As a class, we will read through *Speak* by Laurie Halse Anderson. Since the novel discusses mature themes such as suicide and rape, I find it more appropriate to read in class. By doing so, I can give students trigger warnings and we can discuss the more tough scenes as a class. Since *Speak* is a relatively shorter work, we will be able to complete it in a decent amount of time by only using class time. I will call on students using equity sticks so that each student has an equal chance of participation and so that students stay on task during in-class reading. After the book, we will discuss how mental illness is portrayed in *Speak* and how Melinda's mental health is impacted by the events in her daily life. We will then have a class share and discussion regarding their own experiences with mental health for the students who feel comfortable speaking out.

### **Works Beyond the Text:**

*Speak* by Laurie Halse Anderson



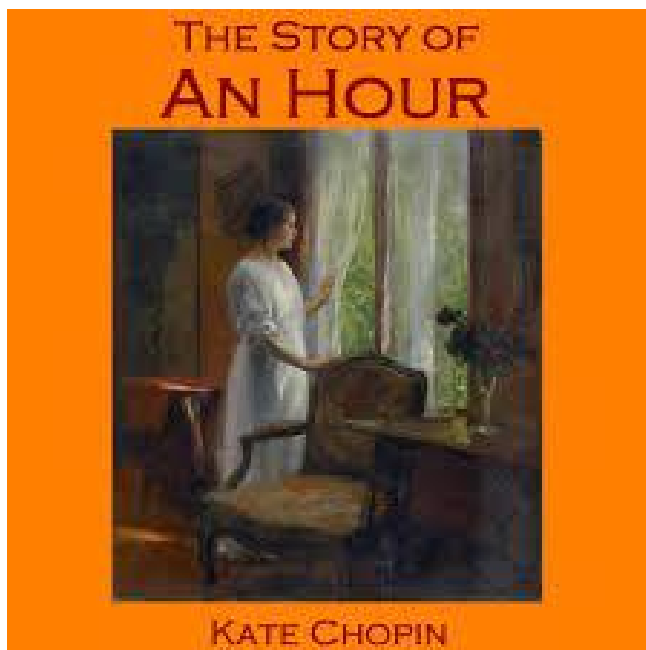
#### **Summary:**

Melinda is a high school freshman with a secret no one knows about. The summer before school started, she was sexually assaulted and called the police for help, but ended up getting the party shut down. As a result, Melinda loses all of her friends and must navigate through her trauma on her own.

#### **Significance to Unit:**

Because this novel is set from the point of view of a high schooler, it is more relevant to the students reading it. Although Melinda has been through an extremely traumatic situation that not all teens can relate to, she gives representation and a story of survival for those who have experienced sexual assault or any kind of trauma. Although Melinda struggles with mental illness, she finally overcomes her trauma and speaks out which is a good lesson for young adults. Additionally, this book serves as a relatable work that can interest the readers further on the subject. *Adolescents in the Search for Meaning*, Books for Adolescents: Chapter 4: Books about Real-Life Experiences, Chapter 6: Books about Identity, Discrimination, and Struggles with Decisions, Chapter 7: Books about Courage and Survival

#### “The Story of an Hour” Kate Chopin



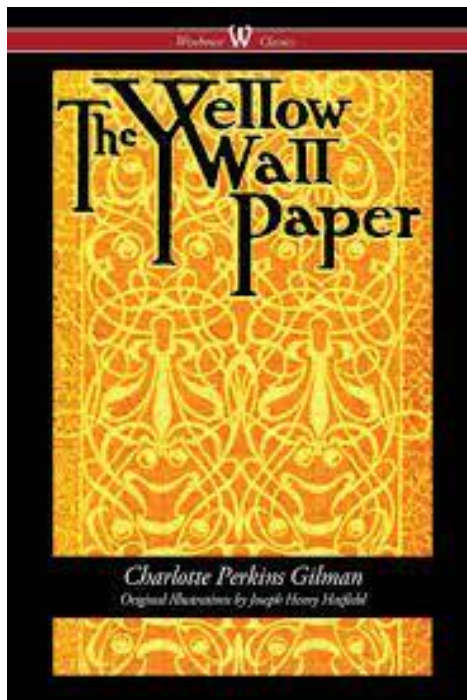
Summary: A woman is informed that her husband has died in a tragic train accident. She begins to cry and isolate herself in her room, however; her tears are not of sorrow but joy. The woman finally rejoices over being free from her husband, but her joy is cut short upon learning that her husband is alive. She screams and dies suddenly upon seeing her husband alive and well.

Significance to Unit: By reading another shorter

work by Kate Chopin, students can become more familiar with her works and recognize the commonalities between this short story and *The Awakening*. Both are stories about women who

feel trapped in their restrictive relationships. The main protagonist reacts the exact opposite as expected when she learns about her husband's death and dies immediately from heart troubles upon the realization that he was still alive and in her life. Her reaction conveys how the negative impact of her relationship truly affected her inner well-being.

### “The Yellow Wallpaper” by Charlotte Perkins Gilman



Summary: A woman moves into her estate for the summer to rest from her illness. Her husband, who is also her doctor, treats her and moves her into a room with hideous yellow wallpaper. The woman begins to form an obsession around the wallpaper and her mental health gradually deteriorates as her husband dismisses her troubles.

Significance to Unit: The main character in this short story is yet another woman whose mental health is significantly impacted by a patriarchal system. In the story, the women’s mental health can be observed as it deteriorates while staying

in the room. The narrator gives her perspective of what's going on in her head as her illness affects her. Unlike *The Awakening* which is narrated in the third-person point of view, “The Yellow Wallpaper” allows for a more intimate first-person point of view.

### “Lady Lazarus” by Sylvia Plath

Summary: The speaker of this poem talks about her constant deaths and resurrections. She continues to try to kill herself because of the oppression she faces in a male-dominated society,

yet every time she is brought back to life. Each revival she faces is dramatic and entertaining for the “peanut-crunching crowd” but she swears she’ll come back once more to “eat men like air”. Significance to Unit: Poetry is a wonderful way to convey emotions in a small amount of space, and Sylvia Plath does a wonderful job at portraying her internal and external struggles as a woman who struggles with a mental illness. The speaker of the poem struggles with suicidal tendencies and has tried to end her life on several occasions, but still feels resentment after being saved. She believes that men view her as nothing more than a pretty object, and she resents them for it just as Edna resents her husband in *The Awakening*. This powerful work can lead to a class discussion regarding suicide, which can be closely monitored and facilitated.

“Alicia” by Gabrielle Roy

Summary: A younger sibling recounts how her older sister’s mental illness worsens throughout time. The narrator’s sister Alicia gradually becomes more and more violent and acts out more because of her illness. Their parents send Alicia to a mental hospital for treatment but that experience takes a toll on everyone including Alicia. Eventually, Alicia succumbs to her mental illness and commits suicide but the narrator always remembers her sister for who she was before her mental illness completely took her over.

Significance to Unit: Although Alicia’s breakdown causes her to lose herself and become physically violent, the point of view of her younger sister gives a loving perspective from someone who has grown up with her. Alicia’s actions are not to demonize her but to convey the harsh reality of mental illness and lack of proper care. The story also displays the impacts Alicia’s mental illness has on her family.

**Working Through the Text:**

Students will be given a reading log with a schedule of the dates that their reading sections are due. For each section, they must write a minimum of two-sentence reflection about that part. Every week on Friday there will be a small quick write with a prompt regarding the sections that were read over the week. These quick writes will allow me to know which students are staying on top of their reading, and which students may need a bit more encouragement to catch up in the novel.

While the students are reading the text, they will be expected to answer a list of questions regarding the text. They should keep track of textual evidence that will support their claim. These questions will be useful after the reading of the novel is completed because we will do a Socratic seminar regarding those questions. These questions include:

1. What “awakening” does Edna face in the novel? Or does she face more than one?
2. Did Edna plan her death, or was it an impulsive decision?
3. Why does Edna decide to take her life?
4. What is the significance of birds in the novel?
5. Which major events lead to Edna’s death?

On the block schedule day after finishing the novel, I will give the students instruction to bring in their sheet of questions and answers to the seminar. I will expect for each question to have at least 2-3 quotations to support their claim. The desks will be arranged in a circular formation so that students can face each other while stating their points. This seminar will prepare the students to make arguments and find textual evidence to support their claims. As a result, they will be practicing their essay skills as well.



**Concluding the Unit:**

When we have concluded our reading of the text, students will be assigned a short paper where they will give *The Awakening* another ending instead of the death of Edna. This project will allow students to get creative and find solutions to Edna's despair other than her tragic one. Instead of giving the students a formal essay to conclude the unit, I want to allow them to reflect deeper into the novel by writing their own versions of it. When the students are finished with their paper they will have a class period on a block day where they will all share their endings and allow for commentary and discussion. Once all of the students have finished sharing their ending of the novel, the class will discuss and vote on which ending they liked the best and why.

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