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Losing Yourself with Contemporary Realistic Fiction

It is to my understanding that most people tend to think of the world as being fairly small. This mindset is forgivable, given that, as opposed to some of the earth’s neighboring planets, the earth is clearly amongst the tiniest in the solar system. However, it is my personal belief that people who look at the earth in this manner are simply being too literal, and not looking at the bigger picture that the world leaves behind. Granted, the world is indeed small in terms of its landscape; however, it is the inhabitants, the people, of this landscape that cause the earth to be significantly larger than it appears. The reason for this is that each person has with him or herself their own world; each person has their own unique values, beliefs, traditions, and routine. In this sense, the world as a whole, as a result of the existence of people, consists of many subworlds.

This is where the genre of contemporary realistic fiction comes into one of its uses: allowing for the exposition of the world’s true size via the exploration of its many subworlds. With contemporary realistic fiction, readers can not only “find themselves” in a sense that they can read realistic stories that consist of elements similar to those present in their own lives, but they can also “lose themselves,” (a phenomenon associated with the genre of fantasy) in a sense that they can read realistic stories that consist of elements that differ significantly from their own lives. For example, people who work in the field of law enforcement can “find themselves” by reading stories that revolve around law enforcement; likewise, they can “lose themselves” within a completely different world by reading stories that revolve around farmers. It is this ability of contemporary realistic fiction allowing for the abandonment of one’s own world in favor of traversing into someone else’s, that serves as my primary interest in it; I’ve chosen the genre to examine the true scope of the world by venturing into its many subworlds.

**Launching the Unit**

Initiating the unit is simple: students will watch and take notes on a three-minute Youtube clip that details the qualities of contemporary realistic fiction. This video, simply entitled “Contemporary Realistic Fiction,” provides a definition of the genre as well as a few example novels.

Moreover, we will watch trailers for the films *Holes* and *Zootopia*. Then, we will go into a discussion in which we talk about why one of these trailers is realistic and why the other is not, highlighting their qualities (such as characters, settings, plots, etc) as we go; while this may seem incredibly straightforward and pointless, ridiculous even, the idea is to win over the attention of the students and prepare them for entering the unit with confidence and joy.

Later, we will look at how the elements of realism appear in different parts of the world. Students will be given the task to locate and read at least two articles in which the topics of these articles revolve around current events taking place outside of the United States; in addition, these two articles must pertain to two different locations. For example, students may pick an article that covers some of the events taking place in China as their first article, but their second article must not also pertain to China.

After they’ve located and read their articles, students will be asked to share their findings with the class. After each student speaks, they will be given an in-class writing assignment that goes as follows:

**You have read about some of the events happening in two locations outside of the United States. Moreover, you have listened to your classmates discuss some events from additional locations. Based on what you have read and what you have heard from your classmates, talk about some of these events. How significant are they? Are these normal occurrences, or are they a rare phenomenon? Are you seeing similar events unfolding in the United States? If not, can you see them happening in the United States at one point or another? Do they, or will they, have any impact on you personally? If yes, describe how. If no, discuss why.**

This assignment will help prep students for the upcoming readings, as the novels that we will be looking at take place in locations that are foreign to most (if not all) students, and will therefore cause students to “lose themselves” as if reading fantasy.

**The Unit**

There are a total of three novels and two short stories that we will be exploring. After reading the short stories, students will be tasked with in-class writing responses. On the other hand, the three assigned novels will each feature an assigned essay; these essays are due two weeks after we finish working with their respective novels. Moreover, students are to complete a minimum of nine journal entries for each novel in which they briefly summarize, analyze, and respond to the readings; on a weekly basis, a minimum of three journal entries must be completed and submitted. Students are strongly encouraged to write one journal entry per reading session or one per day.

For my center piece work, I’ve chosen a novel entitled *The Happiness of Kati* by Jane Vejjajiva. We will discuss the conflicts of the main character, including her emotional struggle as well as her inability to fully understand the hardships of life due to her young age; we will also discuss the process of her maturity. Most significantly, however, is that we will also discuss the setting of this novel (modern-day Thailand), and we will analyze how the elements of Kati’s homeland stack up to what we see here in the United States, as the objective with this book is to get an idea as to how the genre of contemporary realistic fiction might be presented in foreign locations. This novel will be given along with an essay assignment. The prompt is as follows:

**Discuss the significance of Kati’s location: are her conflicts exclusive to her homeland, or are they universal in nature? How do her traditions, beliefs, and values compare with those commonly seen in the United States? In what ways might Kati’s homeland influence her growth? Is any of this seen in the United States? Use examples and quotes from the text to support your claims. Also, you may need to perform outside research regarding American culture.**

After completing *The Happiness of Kati*, we will transition into *The Absolutely True Diary of a Part-Time Indian* by Sherman Alexie. We will explore the elements of pessimism that plague the world of the protagonist and examine its slow journey to recovery. As we read this novel, we will, like the previous novel, also focus on conflict and setting. Furthermore, there will be an activity in which students get into groups, look through the text, consider their own situations, and compare the education system and economy of Junior’s world with our own. In addition, we will compare and contrast the novel as a whole with *The Happiness of Kati*; we will spend time during a discussion to create a Venn diagram in which we will closely analyze Kati and Junior (the protagonist of *The Absolutely True* […].” Hence, in this lesson, we will attempt to look at two different worlds simultaneously. The essay prompt for this novel offers more options than the first for its approach:

**Choose one:**

**1. Look into the cultural backgrounds of Junior and Kati. How are they similar? How are they different? How do their locations play a role into all of this? Be sure to talk about some of their specific values, traditions, and beliefs. Also, consider talking about their families and friends as well.**

**2. Compare and contrast the ages of Kati and Junior and discuss how it influences their personalities, decision-making, and interactions with other characters. Take into account that Junior is a character filled with pessimism and doubt, while Kati, who is much younger than Junior, is currently in the process of learning the meaning behind pessimism and doubt.**

**3. Explore the settings of the two novels we have read. Perform outside research regarding life in modern-day Thailand and the Spokane Indian Reservation. Consider subjects such as geography, economics, government, standard of living, crime, and culture. Is your research consistent with the elements seen in the readings? Do the books stay true to their real-life settings? Discuss why or why not. You may find it helpful to utilize a Venn diagram should you choose this option.**

**As usual, regardless of which option you choose, you must use specific examples and draw quotes from the text(s) to support your claims. Research outside of the text is permitted, but keep it at a minimum (with the exception of option 3) in order to maintain focus on the text itself.**

Once finished with *The Absolutely True Diary of a Part-Time Indian*, we will veer into *Lupita Mana* by Patricia Beatty. When reading this novel, we will consider the protagonist’s status as an undocumented immigrant as well as her cultural and family background. In addition, we will look at some of her motivations. There will be an in-class writing session in which students answer the following question: **consider Lupita’s status as an illegal immigrant. Then, consider her motivations, actions, and aspirations, and discuss whether you believe Lupita is in the right or in the wrong.** We will again link the qualities of this novel with the qualities seen in *The Happiness of Kati* as well as those in *The Absolutely True Diary of a Part-Time Indian*. The prompt for the assigned essay goes as follows:

**Choose one:**

**1. Discuss the quality of love and how it presents itself in the three novels we’ve read. Be sure to mention the relationships of the characters, such as the relationship between Kati and her mother, Lupita and her brother, and Junior and his friends/family.**

**2. Discuss what allows the three novels we’ve read to be considered part of contemporary realistic fiction. Consider the points covered in the video “Contemporary Realistic Fiction.” Are the novels believable in their nature? Discuss why or why not.**

**3. Take a stance on illegal immigration. Then, consider Lupita’s situation. Are the actions of her and her brother justified? Why or why not? Outside research on illegal immigration is permitted for this option.**

**4. Discuss whether Lupita relates more closely with either Kati or Junior, and why she relates less with the other. Be sure to talk about qualities such as personality, location, culture, age, and conflicts.**

**You must use examples and quotes from the texts regardless of which option you choose.**

For the final segment, we will read the short story entitled “We Didn’t” by Stuart Dybek. For this reading, students will be called to share their beliefs on the concept of love and relationships. Then, in a two-part writing session, they will answer the following:

**Part One:** **is the narrator of “We Didn’t lustful or loving? Explain your thoughts.**

**Part Two: With which of the three novels we have read does “We Didn’t” have most in common with? Explain your answer.**

To conclude the unit, we will have a class discussion in which we do a brief recap of the assigned readings. Students will then be ask to discuss which reading was their favorite, which was their least favorite, and why. Additionally, students will be asked to discuss which reading, for them, hit closest to home, and which was the furthest away.

Then, students will again watch the trailer for the movie *Zootopia*. Utilizing their new understanding of the elements of contemporary realistic fiction, students will then be asked to identify which aspects of *Zootopia* can be considered for elements of contemporary realistic fiction (i.e characters, dialogue, economy, etc.).

Works Cited

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