

Joanna Jenkins

ENGL 112B

Dr. Warner

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Unit of Study: Empowering Women and Expanding the Conversation on Sexual Assault

Rationale

I am going to become a high school English teacher, so I decided to do a unit of study for my final project. The focus of my unit is women empowerment and sexual assault since these are two topics I am extremely passionate about. These issues are also relevant to students because unfortunately young people can be victims of sexual assault. Sexual assault is a serious issue that desperately needs more attention, and it is vital that victims of sexual assault find solace one way or another in order to cope with the traumatic experience. Female empowerment is a way for women to overcome sexual assault and defy the toxic gendered stereotypes placed upon them by society.

Additionally, literature and media focused on sexual assault and female empowerment serves as a great coping mechanism for victims and brings awareness to the fight for gender equality. Male students can shift perspectives—instead of the usual powerful male main character, they can see an empowered woman, and debunk stereotypes about women in the process. It is absolutely necessary for male students to see positive representation of women in media and literature since women are too often depicted negatively or are not represented at all. Male students becoming aware of the power and capability will hopefully cause them to not stereotype their fellow female classmates, and instead empower them with the respect and

dignity they deserve. With my unit of study, I hope to bring enlightenment and awareness to female empowerment and sexual assault.

I conducted my observation hours at Christopher High in Gilroy, California. I observed both junior and senior English classes, and the senior class was doing a unit on *The Awakening*. The female students were excited and passionate about the novel as it is a feminist novel focused on breaking away from toxic men and female empowerment. I was happy to see the girls so welcoming and thrilled about a novel that defied female stereotypes because sometimes girls are resistant to empowering novels because they are not used to being represented as powerful individuals. The male students were not as thrilled as the female students, but they were engaged enough to demonstrate that they realized Edna was her own person who owed nothing to her misogynistic husband Mr. Pontellier. The students' reactions and engagement with the text inspired me to create a unit of study that partly focused on female empowerment.

The juniors were doing a unit on *The Jungle*, and I was disappointed with the lack of conversation and engagement with Ona's rape. Ona's rape is a very sad yet integral component of the novel and not something to be taken lightly. The female students were stoic when the event was brought up and the male students were either not paying attention or even laughing with their friends. I am sure they were not laughing about Ona's traumatic event, but it was apparent that they were not taking the subject seriously at all which is disturbing. The mixed reactions and lack of reactions from students inspired me to focus my unit of study primarily on sexual assault as it is clear a conversation in high school classrooms is desperately needed. So, I decided to use *Speak* by Laurie Halse Anderson as my central text for the unit.

Launching the Unit

Sexual assault and female empowerment are not subjects that can be easily introduced to a classroom as they can be quite dark and/or controversial. Pop culture and media are becoming more popular in classroom settings, so I believe to start off this unit I will introduce some inspiring media to prime them for the heavy read of the novel *Speak*. To introduce the unit, I will show students Lady Gaga's Grammy performance of her song "Til it happens to you". Lady Gaga is a strong, empowered woman who is a sexual assault advocate. Sadly, Lady Gaga is a victim of rape, but she has overcome her trauma through the power of community and music, and now helps other survivors cope with their trauma. The song "Til it happens to you" details the sheer pain of experiencing sexual assault and how it's hard for others to understand who have not experienced it themselves. This is important because it'll show people who have not been through sexual assault how truly painful assault is which will hopefully enlighten them and show them that it is not an easy feat to overcome. The song states, "Tell me, how the hell could you talk/How could you talk?" which strongly parallels with *Speak* as Melinda has a tough time verbally opening up about her rape. This video will prove powerful to students as there are about fifty or so sexual assault survivors holding hands and singing the song along with Lady Gaga. This performance is especially moving for this reason as it demonstrates how survivors can come together as a community and feel empowered through song to cope with their traumatic experiences. The fact that a celebrity made this public is so vital for awareness and to viewers watching because they feel the unity just by watching the performance. So, I believe this video will be moving and eye opening for students to watch, and some of them will enjoy watching a celebrity they are a fan of perform.

After the video, I will have a class discussion on the video to gauge students' reactions to it. Then, I'll have students write a reflection in journals about their thoughts, feelings, and opinions about the video. Some guiding questions for the journals will be: "What did you think of Lady Gaga's performance?", "What did you think of the survivors holding hands on stage in unity?", and "How has your view on sexual assault changed after watching the video? Do you feel more aware of how common sexual assault is?". Students will leave the classroom with more awareness of the issue and hopefully more insight on the effects of sexual assault.

The Main Text & Activities

As previously mentioned, I will have students read the novel *Speak* by Laurie Halse Anderson. *Speak* is written from the perspective of fourteen year old Melinda who was raped by a male student at a summer party. In a panic, Melinda calls the cops to report the rape, but her fellow classmates assume she is calling the cops to end the party which results in her ostracization from people in high school. Melinda battles with depression as everyone hates and bullies her, so she stops speaking because she feels as though her voice has been stripped from her. Melinda's eviscerating, heart wrenching tale will serve a powerful awakening to students and/or validation to students who have experienced sexual assault themselves.

To provide context, I will tell students about the author of the novel, Anderson, and how she was raped which motivated her to write this young adult novel. This context will give great credibility to the author and cause students to take the novel even more seriously.

As another introduction activity aside from the Lady Gaga video, I will share the letters that Anderson received from young people about their sexual assault experiences and other nightmarish experiences. These letters are super eye opening and heartrending, and they will

show students how influential the novel is for people. These letters are also very empowering for women, as they are using creative poetry to express their feelings and reclaim the power their assaulters took from them.

For each chapter of the novel, I will have themed journal writes for students to complete in order to get in touch with themselves and experience Melinda's journey to recovery and empowerment. For example, for the first journal write I will have students address this prompt, "What are or were your anxieties about starting high school?". Other prompts include, "Have you ever lost a friend?", "Have you ever had a huge fight with a friend? How did you make up or move on?", "Have you ever been bullied at school?", "Have you ever gone to a party and wish you hadn't?" and much more. These prompts will allow students to learn more about who they are and also encourage them to empathize with Melinda's struggles in the novel. Additionally, students will compare and contrast their responses to the prompts with how Melinda would respond. This assignment functions as both a way for students to shift and gain perspective of another person—Melinda—and to indicate if students are reading the novel or not. I believe this is a constructive alternative to quizzes, I am not interested in trivia.

In terms of themes of the novel, students will identify themes and symbols through their journal writes, partner discussions, and class discussions. Themes that will be explored will be female empowerment, sexism, double standards, depression, sexual assault, coping mechanisms, and recovery.

Additional Activities

1. Students will identify stereotypes they know about men and women. Students will create three columns on a piece of paper labeled "men", "women", and "both" and they will

then label characteristics of men and characteristics women have separately and together. This exercise will be a good way to understand where students are coming from and their ideas on gender stereotypes. As a class, we will fill out the same three columns on the whiteboard and have an open discussion on why we label men and women differently—why we give power to men and deprive women of it.

2. Read and analyze the article “Terry Crews to D.L. Hughley: 'Are you implying I 'wanted' to be sexually assaulted?'”. Students will see how male victims of sexual assault are treated differently by people and the public. This will be beneficial because, even though women are primarily the victims, men are victims too and have a tough time accepting it.
3. Students will watch Chimamanda Ngozi Adichie’s Ted Talk “We should all be feminists” as it is an eye opening talk about how men and women are treated so differently. Adichie is an empowered woman who proudly expresses her power and capability as a woman which will be inspiring for students to see.
4. Students will read various poems from Rupi Kaur’s collection of poems titled *Milk and Honey*. This collection of poetry demonstrates Kaur’s journey of self awareness and empowerment. Some of her poems tackle gender stereotypes, sexual assault, and how she has overcome insecurities thrust upon her by society. Kaur is a strong, independent woman who can influence female students to be the same. It is also important for all students to read and analyze different styles of poetry.
5. Students will complete an “I Am” poem as creative assignments are a phenomenal way for students to tackle their traumas and become self aware of their identity. Moreover, students can share their poems and learn about others perspectives and experiences.

6. Watch the movie *Speak* and write a comparative essay. Students will benefit greatly from watching the film *Speak* as it is able to visually show us Melinda's painful yet inspiring road to recovery. In the paper, students will analyze the differences between the novel and the film and argue which medium is better: "What does the film do that the book cannot?", "What does the novel do that the film cannot?".
7. Students will analyze articles about the Brock Turner case. Brock Turner raped a young college woman who was drunk and unconscious, and he served a very short time in jail. Students will form arguments as to why they believe there is a tendency to not punish predators and how female victims of sexual assault hardly face justice. Students will compare this article to the Terry Crews article.

Final project

For the multimedia final project, students will choose one of the additional readings and write a literary analysis paper. In the literary analysis paper, students will create an arguable, original thesis that relates to the reading's overall message, themes, symbols, etc. Students will also be required to complete a creative project in response to the reading that they choose. Meaning, students will have the option to either create a video, skit, small collection of poetry, short story, song, painting, drawing, collage, or 3D art that corresponds to the reading they choose. Students will present their creative project to the class and explain their process of creating it, reasoning behind the creative medium they choose, and its relation to the reading. There will be a Q&A session after each presentation to gauge student engagement and to give praise and validation to the presenter.

It is important to allow students to be creative in addition to a literary analysis paper because these readings will most likely evoke emotional responses from the students and a creative project is a wonderful, cathartic way for them to express this. This also ties to Melinda's tree art project she works on throughout the school year and the tree ends up being a really powerful symbol of Melinda's growth and resilience in the novel.

Additional Readings

- *The Awakening* by Kate Chopin
 - *The Awakening* is a classic feminist novel that tells the story of Edna Pontellier's personal rebellion. Edna can no longer stand her misogynistic husband that constantly objectifies and tries to control her. Desiring to be her own person, Edna abandons her wifely and motherly duties and moves out of the house to pursue her own passions. Edna is defying so many gender social norms but does not care because they are unjust and she's an empowered woman who knows it.
- *The Scarlet Letter* by Nathaniel Hawthorne
 - *The Scarlet Letter* is another classic novel that explores the sexist double standard of allowing men to have frequent sex and shaming women for doing the same. Hester Prynne is accused of adultery and is sent to prison for committing this "crime". Hester is forced to bear the scarlet letter "A" in order to publicly shame and humiliate her. While adultery is obviously wrong, this novel exposes how much more harshly women are treated for committing this act versus men. This novel features a strong, inspirational, and empowered female protagonist.

- *the princess saves herself in this one* by Amanda Lovelace
 - *the princess saves herself in this one* is a collection of poems in novel form. These poems explore the pain, grief, and insecurities of being a woman in American society. Lovelace explores gender stereotypes, double standards, and experiences that negatively affected her as a woman. These poems also are extremely inspiring and many of them focus on female empowerment which is important for everyone to read in order to debunk negative stereotypes about women.
- *The Way I Used to Be* by Amber Smith
 - *The Way I Used to Be* tells the story of high school student Eden who is raped by her brother's best friend. Throughout all four years of high school, Eden suffers the traumatic aftermath of her rape but also eventually empowers herself through recovery and self-love. This novel bears a striking resemblance to *Speak*, and is a good additional reading because it features a strong female protagonist. Eden is similar to Melinda in the sense that they both cling onto who they used to be before they were raped and yet they realize that they are much stronger than they think.
- *Wrecked* by Maria Padian
 - *Wrecked* tells the story of college student Jenny who is raped at a party by a male college student. Similar setup to *Speak*, *Wrecked* exposes how messy and difficult it is to publicly accuse someone of sexual assault. This novel explores the toxicity of rape culture and how reporting sexual assault greatly affects people's lives, relationships, and reputations.

- *Moxie* by Jennifer Mathieu
 - *Moxie* tells the story of high school student Vivian Carter who starts a rebellion. Vivian is sick and tired of the unfair dress codes the school places on its female students so she sets up a campaign against it. In addition, Vivian is exhausted by male students harassing female students, so she decides to do something about it. This novel is a great additional reading as it features a strong female protagonist who is empowering other women with her revolution.

Exeter Qualities:

I chose *Speak* as the central text for my unit of study as it has a range of Exeter Qualities:

- Exciting plots that include secrecy, surprise, and tension brought about through narrative hooks and a fast pace.
 - The novel is definitely full of tension and secrecy as readers do not discover what happened to Melinda until the middle of the novel.
- Characters who reflect experiences of teen readers, something that is not found in much of the literary canon, especially when it comes to strong female protagonists.
 - Although initially Melinda does not believe so, she is in fact a strong female protagonist as she overcomes one of the worst things that can happen to someone--rape.
 - Rape is not a topic often explored in the literary canon, at least not in as much depth *Speak*. Melinda provides deeply personal insights on the

traumatic effects of sexual assault and her depression. Rape and depression are potential experiences of teen readers

- Characters who go beyond typical experiences so that readers can use the fictional experiences to learn and develop in their own lives.
 - Rape is not, and should not be, a typical experience. Melinda's experience of and aftermath of rape can be educational to students. Perhaps it can teach students how important boundaries are when it comes to touching people, and to only touch people with their consent.
- Themes that inform truthfully about the wider world so as to allow readers to engage with difficult and challenging issues relating to immediate interests and global concerns.
 - Rape and sexual assault are definitely challenging issues and cause for global concern. *Speak* explores the true reality of how rape can happen to people as young as Melinda and the negative effects it has on her.
- Themes that allow the possibility of emotional and intellectual growth through engagement with personal issues.
 - Melinda is dealing with many personal issues such as the post trauma of rape and depression. These are deeply emotional issues that Melinda tackles and grows from.

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