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Transforming Readers through Cultural Texts

Rationale

Encouraging students to read about a variety of cultures is one of the most powerful ways to help students learn how to think critically. An important genre of text that allows students to explore contrasts and similarities, understandings, misunderstandings and tradition is through reading about culture. Without culture, there would be no new perspectives, which would result in no new growth, which would then result in a loss of knowledge. Introducing a cultural text into the classroom setting is to have students think critically about a culture other than their own and to gain insight about issues that not only affect one cultural group, but to piece together that these issues affect every cultural group. A powerful text that emphasizes a culture that is neither read about, nor studied very extensively in Middle School or High School is Chinua Achebe's *Things Fall Apart*. This award winning novel opens the reader to learn about complex issues, including imperialism, which sets the stage for the White European Missionaries' presence in Nigeria. With the encounter of the Missionaries, comes the loss of main character, Okonkwo's family and village. With the loss of Nigeria's land, resources, language, cultural practices and religion, all that Okonkwo and the other tribe leaders once had is gone. Their homeland and their families have been stripped of what belongs to them. The African village ends up in ruins and the reader can see all that has happened that has made for things to fall apart.

Launching the Unit

I would enjoy including this book in a classroom curriculum because of how rich it is not only as a cultural text, but as a political and historical text that reveals a part of history that is often not read or studied about. I would start off this unit by opening with passing out note cards to each student and would have them write down their answer to my question: “Why is culture important?” It is a simple question that is meant to be open-ended so that the students can freely express their thoughts. This would also give them the opportunity to provide context to their answers by giving insightful examples from other pieces of literature they have read or from other discussions they have had. After the students have all written down an answer to this first question, I would have them write their answers to my second question: “If your culture were to be taken away from you, who would you be? Where would you be? What would you be?” This question could be answered in three parts as it is posed, or students could answer it generally and simply put their first thoughts down as their answer. After all the students have finished writing down their answers, I would then have all the students share both answers to the two questions aloud. Part of learning from other classmates is seeing their point of views and allowing their thoughts to develop into a potential classroom discussion. Before starting *Things Fall Apart*, it is important to start off with something that will make the students think. Although culture is a general topic that is often inserted into many classes, a lot of the time, there are always more ways that it can be tied back to how it relates to the student personally. In terms of styles of how to teach a cultural novel in the classroom, one way to approach this is to provide the students with various cultural texts and discuss the significance of each of them. This is something I would do so that the

students can hear about different cultural novels and comprehend how they share themes. As it is, African Literature is not read much in the classroom, much less in High School, so it would be beneficial to give an explanation of how Achebe's work shares similar meaning to other authors' works. In this unit, I would center on various cultural texts, in hopes that an explanation on these books would give better context to Achebe's novel. It is important that students are provided with ways they can connect dimensions and elaborate on a novel, or more explicitly stated, "One set of moves was used to elaborate on and extend the story world beyond what was explicitly described in the text and to set up and explore alternatives to the written story" (Wilhelm, 65). Having the students extend the story so that it relates to other cultures and time periods is an important part to having the students connect to the text and it urges them to think critically about why *Things Fall Apart* is such a relevant piece of literature.

Extending the Unit

A text I would start off with that at first sight, might seem to have no relevance to *Things Fall Apart*, is Carlos Fuentes' *The Crystal Frontier*. A reason why this book would be great to start off with is because it has everything to do with appearances and how it frames what "the other" looks like and who "the other" is, or appears to be. This is a theme that has a direct relation to Achebe's work because of how often this theme is portrayed. For example, in Okonkwo's eyes, the European Missionaries are "the other" because they invade his land, his home and his way of life. In the Missionaries' eyes, Okonkwo and his clan are seen as "the other" because they appear to be out of touch with the rest of the world. This can be seen in the way they dress, the food they eat, the gods they worship and in the traditions and beliefs they have. I would start off by introducing

The Crystal Frontier by giving the students a short synopsis of the book, and have them read aloud the most significant chapter, titled “The Crystal Frontier”, that tells a story about two lovers, both are of different cultural backgrounds, who see each other through a glass window and automatically sense an attraction. This idea of a crystal frontier is made vivid in this chapter, and so it best expresses the reality of there being a divide between people of different ethnicities. While introducing this novel, I would have the students journal about a time when they felt that they were seen or treated as “the other” and how they dealt with their feelings and how it affected their self-esteem. I would also bring examples of what communities typically see as people who occupy the stereotype as “the other” so that the class would not only get exposure to identifying common stereotypes, but moreover, it is an outlet to discuss where these stereotypes come from and what validity, if any, that they still hold. Just as I would make sure that the students can see a direct relevance to them and *Things Fall Apart*, I would also make sure that the class engages in an interactive discussion that has relevance to *The Crystal Frontier*.

Another cultural text that also has a level of relevance to *Things Fall Apart* is Patrick Chamoiseau’s short novel, *School Days*. The main tension that exists in this novel is the language barrier between the main character, The Little Boy and his teacher. Because The Little Boy does not speak French, but instead speaks Creole, a slang form of French that is spoken in the Caribbean, he is seen as incompetent, stupid and lazy. I would introduce this novel by starting off with asking the students about the power of authority and have them journal about how negative attitudes projected on to someone can ruin their self-esteem and stunt their growth as an individual. A discussion topic like this would be relative to *School Days* because The Little Boy battles with these issues

throughout the story line. In Chamoiseau's book, *The Little Boy* is not in a healthy learning environment because he is not valued by his teacher. His teacher gives him the impression that he is useless because he cannot communicate effectively like the other children. This is a powerful cultural text to add to the classroom because not only is it about one student's struggle to find self-worth amongst an unwelcoming and hostile cultural climate, but it also showcases the concept of the white man's burden – how the “dominant” culture is the one who can justify for the act of imperialism and invasion against another culture. This also is seen in a very obvious way in *Things Fall Apart*. Other texts that would be worth looking at to further analyze the main text and culture as a whole could include: Amy Tan's *The Joy Luck Club* and Matt de La Pena's *We Were Here*. These novels would be great to use because they would bring additional support to the topics that would already have been discussed in *The Crystal Frontier* and *School Days*.

Unit of Study Wrap Up

After introducing the students to Achebe's work and expanding on the various cultural texts, the goal for the students is that they would be able to understand that *Things Fall Apart* is a book that invites readers to get out of themselves by analyzing history, politics, and culture. The intent of introducing the students to other cultural novels is to give context to the main piece of literature and to have the students think critically about how different cultures are, in many ways, united by similar experiences.

Works Cited

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Literary (Non) Fiction Novels: Transformations and Cultural Texts

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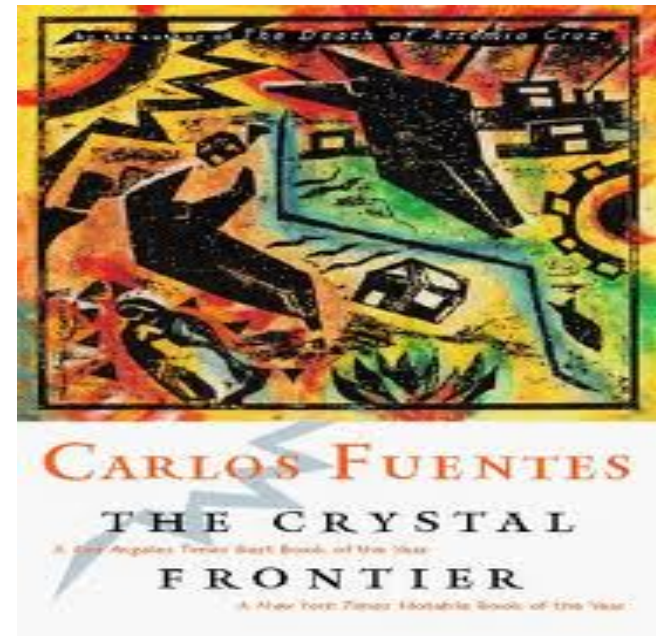
Things Fall Apart: Chinua Achebe



- [http://
www.learner.org/courses/worldlit/things-fall-apart/watch](http://www.learner.org/courses/worldlit/things-fall-apart/watch)

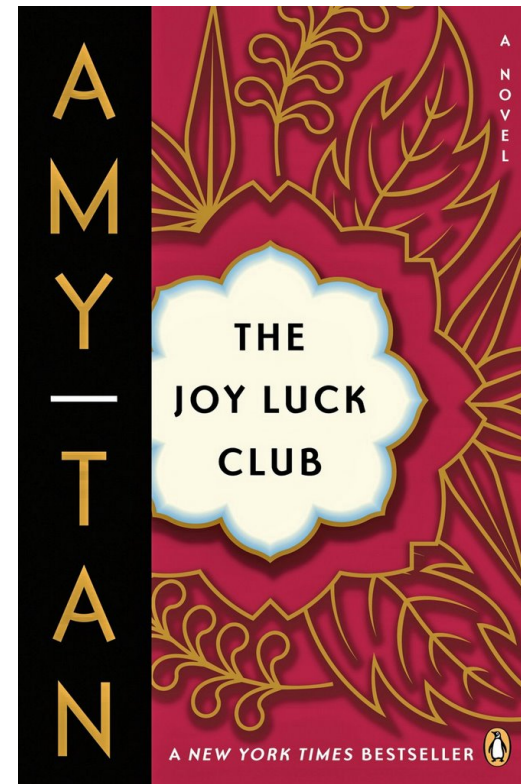
The Crystal Frontier: Carlos Fuentes

- Cultural identities
- How “the other” is viewed
- Incorporates “the looking glass self”
- Asks the reader to look beyond themselves



The Joy Luck Club: Amy Tan

- Mother & daughter clash in their differences – cultural & generational
- Explores 4 mothers and their relationships with their daughters
- Daughters' search for their identities – Chinese by birth, American by nationality.



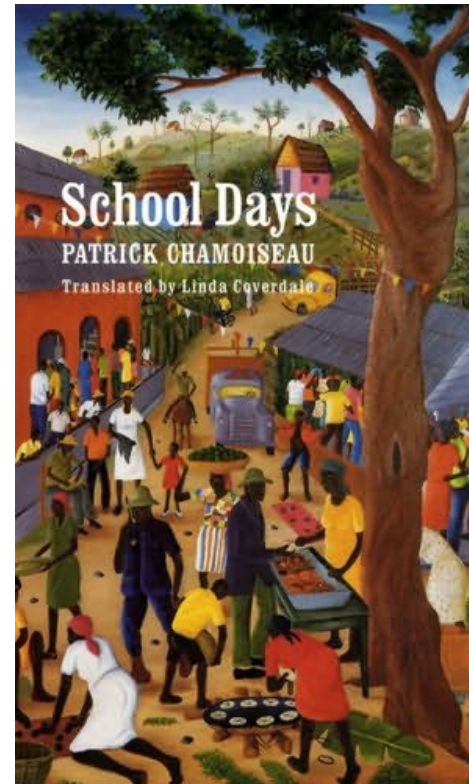
We Were Here: Matt de la Peña

- One person's experience unites the human experience: themes of loneliness, unsure of a future, doubts about personal worth/merit



School Days: Patrick Chamoiseau

- Little Boy experiences what it's like to go to school and consequently, learns social mores
- School is a place for personal, social & intellectual development
- Little Boy experiences what it's like to be excluded, called out, made fun of, left to defend himself



Works Cited

- All pictures from Google Images