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ENGL 112B

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UNIT OF STUDY: CONFESSIONAL POETRY

Rationale:

Poetry is often categorized as inaccessible by high school students; however, there are many themes employed by poets that any audience could relate to. If a student has the ability to unpack a poem, extract its themes, and explore the questions it raises, then that student may take advantage of those insights. The kind of close analysis required for poetry can be used in other disciplines and for other purposes, such as the simple activity of listening to music. I believe that music and poetry go hand in hand, and that poetry is an excellent vehicle for the student to express him- or herself. I believe that confessional poetry can appeal to high school students because it touches on taboo topics and explores them in an artistic, non-threatening way. Subjects that an adult does not want to broach with a teen can be explored through verse as well as other forms of expression.

When I first was exploring options for confessional poems, I immediately thought of Anne Sexton's "The Abortion." My second thought was to not use that particular poem because of the heavy content, but my initial hesitation gave me more reason to use the poem. If I think it is taboo to approach the topic of this poem, would a teenager not think so as well? Would middle school or high school students be able to discuss this topic in an open forum? I would present this poem as a means of looking at one poet's viewpoint of a particular issue so that the students can approach the topic in a way that is still appropriate for the classroom. I included creative writing exercises because I believe that writing is one of the best ways to grapple with difficult subjects, such as the theme explored by Sexton in her poem.

I. Part 1: Into

A. Each class period spent on confessional poetry will begin with the students listening to a song that has lyrics of a confessional nature. These songs will occur before the discussion, so students will not necessarily understand the significance. Explicit songs may only be appropriate for older students.

Examples of confessional songs include the following:

1. "I Hate Everything About You" by Three Days Grace
<YouTube Music Video: https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=d8ekz_CSBVg>
2. "Like Suicide" by Seether
<YouTube Lyric Video: <https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=WJT6iIoPDFE>>
3. "Whore" by In This Moment
<YouTube Music Video: <https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=GurkREc-q4I>>
4. "House of the Rising Sun" by Five Finger Death Punch
<YouTube Music Video, 1:45: <https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=sXYIkJScSik>>
5. "Imaginary" by Evanescence
<YouTube Lyric Video: <https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=0xVHXJ9SUuM>>

B. The students will be asked to journal about the song. They can journal about any of the following prompts for the first couple of minutes of class:

1. *What do you think the main theme of this song is?*
2. *How do you think this song relates to literature?*
3. *Examine the diction of the song.*
4. *Examine the form of the song.*
5. *Does this song affect you in any way? Explain how or why.*

II. Part 2: Through

A. What is **confessional poetry**?

1. "Confessional poetry is a style of poetry that emerged in the United States during the 1950s and 1960s that has been described as poetry "of the personal." The content of confessional poems is autobiographical and marked by its exploration of subject matter that was considered taboo at the time. This subject matter included topics like mental illness, sexuality, and suicide."
<http://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Confessional_poetry>

2. Besides Anne Sexton, confessional poets include Sylvia Plath, Allen Ginsburg, Robert Lowell, W. D. Snodgrass, and John Barryman.

B. Class reading of "The Abortion" by Anne Sexton.

1. The canonical poet I will focus on for this unit of study is Anne Sexton, and I will specifically be looking at her poem "The Abortion." First, the students will read the poem silently at their desks. Second, the students will read sections of the poem one-by-one. An individual student will stop reading when he or she gets to a period, semi-colon, colon, or other form of long punctuation.
2. With the guidance of the teacher, students will analyze the poem according to the Poetry Analysis Template handout. The sections on the handout are defined as follows:
 - a. **Contextual Vocabulary:** Students must pick out and define any terms in the poem that they do not know. Because a poem is so short, every word and its meaning counts.
ex. **chives (line 14):** (n) a widely cultivated small Eurasian plant related to the onion, with purple-pink flowers and dense tufts of long tubular leaves that are used as a culinary herb.
 - b. **Cultural Literacy:** After defining vocabulary, students will determine if there is anything in the poem that needs to be defined from a cultural viewpoint.

ex. **Pennsylvania (line 7):** *officially the Commonwealth of Pennsylvania, is a U.S. state that is located in the Northeastern and Mid-Atlantic regions of the United States, and the Great Lakes region.* <<http://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Pennsylvania>>

c. **Paraphrase:** To further their understanding of the poem, students must rewrite each poem in their own words. Paraphrase should include the definitions of words from contextual vocabulary and should contain more words than the original line.

d. **Discussion Questions:** After paraphrasing, students will be put into small groups and be given discussion questions to answer and write on the handout.

ex. *What significance do the cultural literary terms have within the poem?*

ex. *Does this poem have form? If so, how does the form add to the meaning of the poem?*

ex. *What literary devices can you find in the poem?*

ex. *How do particular images function in the poem?*

C. Creative Writing Prompt

1. Students will be given a creative writing prompt after they complete their analysis of “The Abortion.” They will have ten minutes to write on one of the prompts in their journals.

2. After the ten minutes, students will share phrases from their flash fiction or poem with the class.

III. Part 3: Beyond

Students can use aspects of close analysis to read other genres. Analysis of diction, vocabulary, and cultural literacy can expand student understanding of the text. Paraphrase can help students unpack complex passages. A practical application of paraphrase can be used on older “versions” of English (Shakespeare's plays, Chaucer's *Canterbury Tales*, etc.). Discussion questions are always an effective way of looking at a text from a different lens, or they can be used to guide students in the direction that the instructor wants to go.

Samples of confessional literature, in verse and prose, include the following:

Title	Poet/Author	Form	Summary
“The Addict”	Anne Sexton	Verse	<i>None available.</i>
“Daddy”	Sylvia Plath	Verse	<i>None available.</i>
<i>Speak</i>	Laurie Halse Anderson	Novel	From the first moment of her freshman year at Merryweather High, Melinda knows this is a big fat lie, part of the nonsense of high school. She is friendless, outcast, because she busted an end-of-summer party by calling the cops, so now nobody will talk to her, let alone listen to her. As time passes, she becomes increasingly isolated and practically stops talking altogether. Only her art class offers

			<p>any solace, and it is through her work on an art project that she is finally able to face what really happened at that terrible party: she was raped by an upperclassman, a guy who still attends Merryweather and is still a threat to her. Her healing process has just begun when she has another violent encounter with him. But this time Melinda fights back, refuses to be silent, and thereby achieves a measure of vindication. In Laurie Halse Anderson's powerful novel, an utterly believable heroine with a bitterly ironic voice delivers a blow to the hypocritical world of high school. She speaks for many a disenfranchised teenager while demonstrating the importance of speaking up for oneself.</p> <p><http://www.amazon.com/Speak-Laurie-Halse-Anderson/dp/0312674392></p>
<i>Witness</i>	Karen Hesse	Verse/Novel	<p>Witness tells the story of the Klan's attempt to recruit members in a small town in Vermont in 1924. Leanora Sutter, a young black girl, feels isolated by racial prejudice and her mother's recent death. She is befriended by Esther Hirsh, a younger Jewish girl, whose innocence and natural optimism provides a sharp contrast to the other characters.</p> <p><http://www.scholastic.com/teachers/book/witness#cart/cleanup></p>
<i>What My Mother Doesn't Know</i>	Sonya Sones	Verse/Novel	<p>Get to know Sophie, a freshman in high school who's struggling through the daily grind and all the crushes that come with it, as she shares her innermost thoughts and feelings in this remarkably relatable novel in verse from Sonya Sones.</p> <p><http://www.amazon.com/What-My-Mother-Doesnt-Know/dp/1442493852></p>

THE ABORTION

Somebody who should have been born
is gone.

Just as the earth puckered its mouth,
each bud puffing out from its knot,
I changed my shoes, and then drove south.

Up past the Blue Mountains, where
Pennsylvania humps on endlessly,
wearing, like a crayoned cat, its green hair,

its roads sunken in like a gray washboard;
where, in truth, the ground cracks evilly,
a dark socket from which the coal has poured,

Somebody who should have been born
is gone.

the grass as bristly and stout as chives,
and me wondering when the ground would break,
and me wondering how anything fragile survives;

up in Pennsylvania, I met a little man,
not Rumpelstiltskin, at all, at all...
he took the fullness that love began.

Returning north, even the sky grew thin
like a high window looking nowhere.
The road was as flat as a sheet of tin.

Somebody who should have been born
is gone.

Yes, woman, such logic will lead
to loss without death. Or say what you meant,
you coward...this baby that I bleed.

—Anne Sexton

Assignment #:

Name:

Date:

POETRY ANALYSIS TEMPLATE

I. Contextual Vocabulary

II. Cultural Literacy

III. Paraphrase (Please write this on lined paper and staple to the back of this handout.)

IV. Discussion Questions



Sexton Creative Writing Prompt

Instructions: You will have ten minutes to write on one of the following options in your journal. Remember to focus on concrete images and to omit abstractions.

Option 1: Everyone has an area in his or her life that they have trouble discussing with others. Write a piece of flash fiction or poem about something that you have difficulty vocalizing.

Option 2: Memory can be a powerful tool in creative writing. Sift through your childhood recollections and find an event that impacted you greatly. Write about the event itself as well as the impact that event had on your life as a young adult.

Option 3: Choose three phrases from Anne Sexton's poem "The Abortion" (remember, these are *phrases*, not clauses or entire lines!). Create a flash fiction piece or poem employing all three of those phrases.