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English 112B

6 May 2014

Unit of Study: Latina Literature; Focusing on the female author

Rational:

The beauty of the Californian classroom is its diversity in cultures, languages, and ethnicities. The purpose of literature is to build links of understanding, tolerance, and acceptance that transcends the culture, language, and ethnicity of the individual; literature builds communities. The genre of contemporary realistic fiction allows for fictitious situations set in the real world to explain, explore, and examine conflicts that people from all walks of lives face and experience. In a high classroom the importance of empathy, sympathy, and community can built through this genre of literature.

Since the Californian classroom is diverse, the focus of each Unit of Study should be a specific culture prominent in the Californian classroom. Therefore, the focus of this unit of study is Latina/o literature with an emphasis on the female author. In her article “Interpreting Latino/a Literature as Critical Fictions” in *The ALAN Review*, Carmen L. Medina explores the importance of understanding the true meaning behind the works of Latina authors and offers new ways of understanding the text beyond the interpretive lens of the teacher and student, which may be “mostly centered in solely our personal responses to the literature without an in depth analysis of the authors’ stances and the social, political, and cultural ideologies presented in the texts” (Medina 71). Medina claims that this new method of reading literature as the author intended, allows for a deeper connection between the student reading the work and the author, and also promotes a better understanding of the topic, events, and culture presented in the work. Though

personal meaning is important when relating to literature, interpreting the work as the author intended will allow young adults to make a connection with the culture presented, and therefore fulfill the true purpose of literature.

The unit will focus on answering the following questions: What is the/a theme of the story? How is the theme represented? What are some examples of symbols, metaphors, and motifs the author uses to better explain this theme in her story? What experience does this story transfer of Latino/a literature? What does the story tell? For example, in *Esperanza Rising* by Pam Muñoz Ryan, An important theme is perseverance, which is represented as a tool for success in Esperanza's family. A metaphor and motif of perseverance is Esperanza's knitting pattern which tells you that life is a series of hills and valleys (ups and downs). The story discuss the difficulties of coming to a new country and starting over. The story tells that perseverance is the main ingredient for success and survival in a new world.

Besides pushing students to see the meaning of the work beyond personal understanding, it is important to recognize that the definition of Latino/a as an umbrella term that encompasses many different cultures, i.e., Puerto Rican, Mexican, and Dominican are just a few, a point also made by Medina in her article. Therefore, this unit will contain a variation of stories that come from several cultural backgrounds and that center on the themes of immigration, searching for identity, loss of home, importance of family, and traditional gender roles. Medina has a beautiful quote in her article that highlights the purpose of the author; “It is the responsibility of those who survive the struggle for freedom to give testimony. To tell the story of those who die” (Medina 75). This is the perfect definition for the purpose of writing and understanding the original meaning of the work, too.

This unit of study, built on Sandra Cisneros' canonical work *The House on Mango Street* and framed by poetry, art activities that will better explain themes, and other young adult novels, is intended for students in grades nine or ten to build empathy, tolerance, and awareness of problems beyond the high school classroom.

Launching the unit: Canvas Analysis



This canvas was painted by Carmen Lomas Graza in 1993 titled “Una Tarde/ One Summer Afternoon” (Grandwohl, Ann). Have students analyze the canvas and answer the following questions:

1. What catches your eye the most?

- a. For example, the first thing that caught my eye was the bed spread because the color is bright and the woman sitting on the on the bed looks bored.
2. What is a theme?
 - a. A theme her seems to the place of the mother/woman since we have the three generations of women, plus the mother cat with her kittens.
3. What is the artist saying?
 - a. The juxtaposition of the man in the window and the women inside gives this idea of domesticity, and calls for an examination of gender roles in Hispanic culture.

It is not expected for high school freshmen and sophomores to come to the same conclusion as I have about the painting; however, this will prompt a discussion about the importance of analysis, which help in the understanding what it means to analyze. The themes presented on the canvas are also examined in *The House on Mango Street* and this into activity helps students build the analytical skills needed to truly read and understand the story.

Before Reading: Pre analysis/more practice

Poetry is the quickest and most effective way to build students analytical skills and expose them to many cultures. These poems could be done before or during the reading of the novel; however, if done while reading this novel the focus questions should be done for only some of the chapters not all. By reading the following poems and answering the focus questions for each poem, the students should be able to see beyond their own understanding of the work and make a connection with the community and topics presented in the work. These poems share the similar themes of loss of identity, home, and search of self. First analyze and answer the focus

questions for one poem. Then divided students into three groups and have them analyze, answer Focus question, and present to the class.

Focus Questions:

1. Who is the author?
2. What is the/a theme of the story/poem?
3. How is the theme represented? Positive or negative?
4. What are some examples of symbols, metaphors, and motifs the author uses to better explain this theme in her story/poem?
5. What experience does this story/poem share of Latino/a literature?
6. What does the poem/story tell?

Poem for group analysis: "Refugee Ship" by Lorna Dee Cervantes 1981

Like wet cornstarch, I slide
past my grandmother's eyes. Bible
at her side, she removes her glasses.
The pudding thickens.

Mama raised me without language.
I'm orphaned from my Spanish name.
The words are foreign, stumbling
on my tongue. I see in the mirror
my reflection: bronzed skin, black hair.

I feel I am a captive
aboard the refugee ship.
The ship that will never dock.
El barco que nunca atraca.

Poem 1: “Child of the Americas” by Aurora Levins Morales 1986

I am a child of the Americas,
a light-skinned mestiza of the Caribbean,
a child of many diaspora, born into this continent at a crossroads.
I am a U.S. Puerto Rican Jew,
a product of the ghettos of New York I have never known.
An immigrant and the daughter and granddaughter of immigrants.
I speak English with passion: it’s the tongue of my consciousness,
a flashing knife blade of crystal, my tool, my craft.

I am Caribeña, island grown. Spanish is my flesh,
Ripples from my tongue, lodges in my hips:
the language of garlic and mangoes,
the singing of poetry, the flying gestures of my hands.
I am of Latinoamerica, rooted in the history of my continent:
I speak from that body.

I am not African. Africa is in me, but I cannot return.
I am not taína. Taíno is in me, but there is no way back.
I am not European. Europe lives in me, but I have no home there.

I am new. History made me. My first language was spanglish.
I was born at the crossroads and I am whole.

Poem 2: “Freeway 280” by Lorna Dee Cervantes, 1954

Las casitas near the gray cannery,
nestled amid wild abrazos of climbing roses
and man-high red geraniums
are gone now. The freeway conceals it
all beneath a raised scar.
But under the fake windsounds of the open lanes,
in the abandoned lots below, new grasses sprout,
wild mustard remembers, old gardens
come back stronger than they were,

trees have been left standing in their yards.
Albaricoqueros, cerezos, nogales . . .
Viejitas come here with paper bags to gather greens.
Espinaca, verdolagas, yerbabuena . . .
I scramble over the wire fence
that would have kept me out.
Once, I wanted out, wanted the rigid lanes
to take me to a place without sun,
without the smell of tomatoes burning
on swing shift in the greasy summer air.
Maybe it's here
en los campos extraños de esta ciudad
where I'll find it, that part of me
mown under
like a corpse
or a loose seed.

Poem 3: "To Live in the Borderlands" by Gloria Anzaldúa 1987

To live in the borderlands means you
are neither *hispana india negra espanola*
ni gabacha, eres mestiza, mulata, half-breed
caught in the crossfire between camps
while carrying all five races on your back
not knowing which side to turn to, run from;
To live in the Borderlands means knowing that the *india* in you, betrayed for 500 years,
is no longer speaking to you,
the *mexicanas* call you *rajetas*, that denying the Anglo inside you
is as bad as having denied the Indian or Black;

Cuando vives en la frontera

people walk through you, the wind steals your voice,
you're a *burra*, *buey*, scapegoat,
forerunner of a new race,
half and half-both woman and man, neither-a new gender;
To live in the Borderlands means to
put *chile* in the borscht,
eat whole wheat *tortillas*,
speak Tex-Mex with a Brooklyn accent;
be stopped by *la migra* at the border checkpoints;
Living in the Borderlands means you fight hard to
resist the gold elixir beckoning from the bottle,
the pull of the gun barrel,
the rope crushing the hollow of your throat;
In the Borderlands
you are the battleground
where enemies are kin to each other;
you are at home, a stranger,
the border disputes have been settled
the volley of shots have scattered the truce
you are wounded, lost in action
dead, fighting back;
To live in the Borderlands means
the mill with the razor white teeth wants to shred off
your olive-red skin, crush out the kernel, your heart
pound you pinch you roll you out
smelling like white bread but dead;
To survive the Borderlands

you must live *sin fronteras*
be a crossroads.

This assignment is flexible, for example, instead of a group presentations you can choose one of the four poems and work as a class to analyze it. Also, students can use copies *American Literature* from Penguin Academics to find the definition to words and the explanation specific metaphors that can be found in the foot notes and may be difficult to decipher on their own. If this is done as the group presentation, the assignment will take longer than a day since most of the poem are longer than two stanzas.

The Main Text: *The House on Mango Street* and Final project

Finally, focusing on the canonical work by Sandra Cisneros students will apply the analytical skills practiced in the previous activities. Every chapter of the novel students will answer the focus questions. Some important themes in the novel are: loss of identity, hope for progress, prescribed gender roles, the struggle of the immigrant community, and writing as a way to survive. The answers should be 3-4 sentences and focused on the text. After reading the novel and answering the questions, the students will create a picture or multimedia project based on one of the chapters. They will use the answered questions for help and work in pairs to create a visual expression of the authors writing.

Extending the Unit through YA Literature

The books in the following list can be used to make the themes and topics presented by Cisneros in *The House on Mango Street* concrete and relevant for young adult readers. In addition, these books are also written by female authors and most of them have female protagonists. These books can also better illustrate the true definition of Latino/a by providing a wide spectrum of cultures and backgrounds.

Esperanza Rising by Pam Muñoz Ryan

Esperanza comes from a privileged home in Aguascalientes, Mexico. Her father is wealthy hacienda owner whose wealth provides Esperanza with beautiful things like silk dresses, porcelain dolls, and luxuries food. Esperanza is ready to celebrate her thirteenth birthday, but her celebration soon turns to tragedy and she finds herself runny away from danger without her father and with her servants. Esperanza arrives to the U.S. and becomes one of the workers in and must learn to forget about what makes her different from others and become part of her community to survive.

This has beautiful language and imagery, and uses symbols, metaphors, and motifs to make the story come to life, just like *The House on Mango Street*. For example, knitting is used to explain the complexities of life. A great activity that could connect the students to the work would be teaching them how to knit along with Esperanza.

The Red Umbrella by Christina Diaz Gonzalez

The story takes place in 1961 Cuba post-communist revolution as fourteen year-old Lucia is living the typical teenage life; dreaming of her crush, studying the latest fashion, and planning her quinceañera. But after Castro takes drastic measures in power, her friend Ivette begins to attend meetings of the *Jovenes Rebeldes*, neighbors disappear, and her family is followed, her parents decide to send her to Nebraska with kind hearted strangers, alone. Suddenly, Lucia finds herself in a new world, with a new language, and no family. Lucia must face the possibility of never returning and possibly never going seeing her parents. One thing is for sure, she will not be the same girl after this.

The Red Umbrella is an excellent novel for students to make connection to the historical events. Furthermore, the themes of loss of home and identity are most prevalent in this novel. The students can build character charts where they write down quotes that highlight this aspect of the novel. They can also use some of the titles in *The House on Mango Street* to link the stories, or compare and contrast some quotes that show this loss of home and identity.

Krik? Krak! by Edwidge Danticat

This novel is compilation of ten different stories that have female narrators and take place in Haiti and New York. All of the stories deal with the loss and search of identity, hope, and family. They follow Haitian women and their struggle to survive. The women show strength in their struggle. Similar to *The House on Mango Street*, the narration is a series of vignettes with different characters for each story. Students could compare and contrast the way the stories are told and compare the titles of each novel. (SparkNotes)

Woman Hollering Creek and Other Stories by Sandra Cisneros

This novel, like *The House on Mango Street*, is a series of vignettes that have female characters who deal with the loss and search for identity, the importance of family, and the down side to traditional gender roles. The women of these stories are from a wide spectrum of ages; however, they deal with similar conflicts and themes that appear in *The House on Mango Street*. There are many stories about the borderland experience and highlight the difficulties women in this area of the United States deal with. There is also a huge emphasis on immigration and can serve as tool make students

aware of the issue. These stories can be read in conjunction with the main novel, or one story can replace the four poems. These are wonderfully short stories that carry a big message.

Illegal by Bettina Restrepo

Nora is dreaming of her fifteenth birthday, not only because she will be fifteen, but also because she will see her father, who left for the U.S. But after her father stops sending and stops reaching out, she realizes that her dream is no longer a possibility. Nora and her mother decide to leave their home in Mexico in order to find her father in Texas. Crossing the border is a rude awakening to the reality that awaits them beyond the border. Nora must find the strength to survive and preserve. This is another excellent novel to introduce the topics and themes in *The House on Mango Street*. Students compare the two herons and collect quotes for the themes of hope, family disintegration, and the struggles of the immigrant.

What Can(t) Wait by Asheley Hope Pérez

Marissa is smart with a bright future ahead of her, but the struggles of her immigrant family threaten her future. Her family struggles to make ends meet, and therefore college is not a priority for them. Marissa begins to look for comfort in all the wrong places, and suddenly begins to lose herself. She must decide if she will fall into a perilous cycle of poverty or strive for a better life, even though that means putting herself before her family. Again, another excellent novel that can be used to trace gender struggles, the importance of family, and identity. The best activity that can be done is a compare and contrast of the two herons (Esperanza and Marissa).

Conclusion to Unit: Presentations

To end the unit, the student could present their creative works with the class and explain their creative choices. The way their presentation should be done is by answering the following questions in their presentation, there is no writing involved, but they must answer these question for the class.

1. Why did they choose this chapter?
2. What was inspiration behind the choices?
3. What theme or symbol from the chapter are they trying to represent?

This activity should be fun and give them the opportunity to dive into the stories.

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LATINA LITERATURE

With an emphasis on female authors

Unit of study by Tracy Israde
Torres

WHY LATINA LITERATURE?

- Not enough power or time is given.
- Helps build links between cultures.
- Contains themes that are relevant to news and life as a teenager: immigration, loss of identity, traditional gender roles, and the importance of family
- Also, highlights the importance of moving beyond personal understanding when relating to literature.

UNIT FOCUS QUESTION

1. Who is the author?
2. What is the/a theme/tone of the story/poem?
3. How is the theme represented? Positive or negative?
4. What are some examples of symbols, metaphors, and motifs the author uses to better explain this theme in her story/poem?
5. What does this story/poem share of Latina/o culture?
6. What does the story tell?

“UNA TARDE/ ONE SUMMER AFTERNOON” BY CARMEN LOMAS GARZA



Have students analyze the canvas and answer the following questions:

1. What catches your eye the most?
2. What is a theme?
3. What is the artist saying?

POEM ANALYSIS

"Refugee Ship" by Lorna Dee Cervantes 1981

Like wet cornstarch, I slide

past my grandmother's eyes. Bible

at her side, she removes her glasses.

The pudding thickens.

Mama raised me without language.

I'm orphaned from my Spanish name.

The words are foreign, stumbling

on my tongue. I see in the mirror

my reflection: bronzed skin, black hair.

I feel I am a captive

aboard the refugee ship.

The ship that will never dock.

El barco que nunca atraca.

Other poems:

"Child of the Americas" by

Aurora Levins Morales 1986

"Freeway 280" by Lorna Dee

Cervantes, 1954

"To Live in the Borderlands" by

Gloria Anzaldúa 1987

1. Who is the author?

2. What is the/a theme/tone of the story/poem?

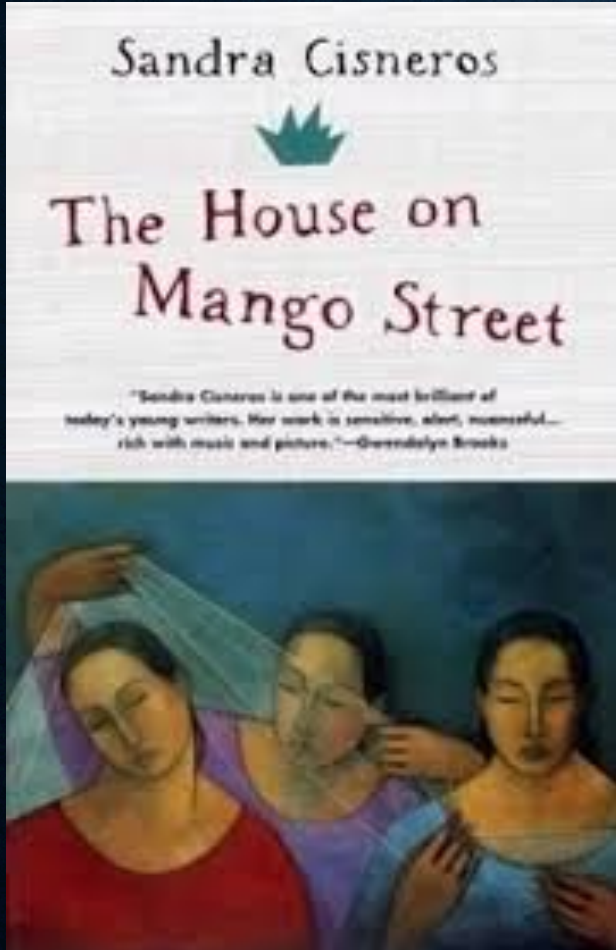
3. How is the theme represented? Positive or negative?

4. What are some examples of symbols, metaphors, and motifs the author uses to better explain this theme in her story/poem?

5. What does this story/poem share of Latino/a culture?

6. What does the poem/ story tell?

THE HOUSE ON MANGO STREET



Use focus questions to review the chapters of the story and get the students ready for the final project.

The final project would be to make a creative representation of one of the stories, symbols, and metaphors, etc. of the novel.

To close the unit, student will present their work in front of the class and answer these three questions:

1. Why did they choose this chapter?
2. What was inspiration behind the choices?
3. What theme or symbol from the chapter are they trying to represent?

GOALS MET

- Student will be able to identify themes
- Students will be able to do close reading and analysis of literature
- Students will build links to the authors and cultures through literature
- Students will be able to understand the importance of text interpretation, or rather moving past personal interpretation

YA NOVELS THAT COULD EXTEND THE UNIT:

