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English 112B

Dr. Warner

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Unit of Study: Drama

Addressing discrimination through drama and poetry

Most high school students dread drama and poetry. Both often require to be read aloud in front of their peers and are written in a way that intimidates most students. Once a student gets past reading a handful of Shakespeare's plays or learn the difference between free verse and prose they never revisit these areas of study. In addition, young adults are now connected through so many devices and social media outlets that finding the time to appreciate let alone appreciate works of drama and poetry is extremely difficult. With a better appreciation for drama and poetry many high school students would be able to read a canonical piece of work and realize that the issues that Shakespeare or Lorraine Hansberry address are the same issues we are dealing with today. Young adults have are at a point in their lives where they feel no one understands them. By gaining a different outlook on poetry and drama young adults may discover that what they are dealing with is not entirely unique; people even older than Shakespeare have dealt with the same issues young adults are facing today. Once young adults are able to find some common ground or connection with canonical works they discover another outlet for expression. Most importantly they can learn that canonical works are more than just words on a syllabus, rather they are and have been modes for authors to address the issues that never seem to disappear from contemporary society.

I chose drama and poetry for my unit of study because of the effect they had on me as a

young adult. The idea that you can sit in a dark theater and spend an hour or two in a different world than your own always fascinated me. Likewise, poetry was a means of expressing yourself whether through written poetry or spoken word. However, I think that drama and poetry have one aspect that is often overlooked, and that is the fact it serves just as much as form of expression as it does a reflection of society. While this can be the case for any form of literature, young adults will be able to identify lyrics of a rap song as poetry, or recognize the satire a theatrical work uses to point out a specific social issue. Just as Langston Hughes does with “I, Too”, poetry and drama offer a means of addressing issues of discrimination and injustice. Given the number of racially motivated crimes and the increase in racial tension across the United States, these canonical works hit closer to home than many believe. Exposing students to more poetry and drama will hopefully inspire them to appreciate the value of canonical works and see how racism is just as relevant today as it was hundreds of years ago.

Launching the unit

I would use two different works of poetry, one canonical and the other contemporary, to launch the unit. The first piece of poetry focuses on the injustice of racial discrimination. I include the full poem “I, Too” by Langston Hughes:

I, too, sing America.

I am the darker brother.

They send me to eat in the kitchen

When company comes,

But I laugh,

And eat well,

And grow strong.

Tomorrow,
I'll be at the table
When company comes.
Nobody'll dare
Say to me,
“Eat in the kitchen,”
Then.
Besides,
They'll see how beautiful I am
And be ashamed—

I, too, am America.

I would begin by reading the poem to the class, and follow it with a discussion using the following questions:

- a. What are some of the social issues the poem touches on?
- b. Can you think of current cases where people are discriminated against because of their ethnicity?
- c. Personally, do you think this poem still has relevance today?
- d. Current racial issues that can be used in discussion: Michael Brown case verdict and Baltimore Riots.

After a brief discussion I would show my class a video of a spoken word performance that focuses on racial discrimination from a different perspective. The piece “Listen Asshole” by the spoken word duo Yellow Rage offers racial discrimination from an Asian-American perspective.

Most importantly I would make sure I received permission from the student's parents/legal guardian because the piece by yellow rage does include strong language. Ultimately, the video will reinforce the idea that racism is not a black and white issue but a universal issue. The clip can be found on Youtube.com as a part of *Russell Simmons presents Def Poetry*. Once the video is over I will again ask the students the following questions, using their responses to segue into a class discussion.

- a. What are your thoughts on Yellow Rage's performance?
- b. What issues does this poem deal with that differ from "I, Too"?
- c. Does the language and content of the poem undermine the message the poets are trying to send?
- d. What are your personal thoughts on the poem?

At this point the students will have a clear idea of how poetry is used to attack racial discrimination. This is essential because my centerpiece also addresses racism, but in the form of a work of drama.

Centerpiece

The canonical text I chose is *A Raisin in the Sun*, written by Lorraine Hansberry. A summary from Shmpoo.com describes the play as follows:

A Raisin in the Sun, written by Lorraine Hansberry and produced on stage in 1959, marks a watershed moment in American theater. On the face of it, *A Raisin in the Sun* was not destined for success. With only one white cast member, an inexperienced director, and an untried playwright, Hansberry had difficulty finding financial backing for the play at a time when theater audiences were overwhelmingly white. It was an immediate success, however, and after several tours, it opened on Broadway, making it the first-ever Broadway play written by an African-American woman.

What makes Hansberry's writing remarkable is not only her accuracy in capturing the racial dynamics of her time, but her foresight in predicting the direction black culture

would take in subsequent years. The play's setting covers a pivotal time period for race relations in America – after WWII and before 1959. When Americans fought in World War II, they were fighting to uphold equality for all...which exposed the hypocrisy of the very unequal conditions for blacks back home. Americans were only beginning to address these inequalities at the time Hansberry was writing, and she did a great job at capturing the mood of her time through only one family.

Prior to any reading, I would acquaint the students with the major issues of the time the play was written. I would also inform students of the themes present in the book, and divide the class into small groups for discussion. For example, I would ask one group to discuss the importance of family. Another group will be assigned the importance of not giving into racial discrimination, and remainder will focus on the value of following your dreams. Once all the groups have an enough time to discuss amongst themselves I would open a discussion by asking the class questions such as:

- a. How is the family unit used in other forms of literature? Provide examples
- b. Are there different levels of racial discrimination? In other words can some forms of racial discrimination be considered more racist than others?
- c. Why do certain people feel the need to chase a dream or goal? While others are content with their current lifestyle?

Because some students may still be unfamiliar with the mechanics of a play I would assign small sections of the play to read, instead of entire acts. This would allow for the student to become familiar with the plot and help them come up with questions for future discussion. To stress the importance of themes and symbolism in the play I would have students keep a journal after completing each small section. Possible prompts could include:

- a. What's more important, our families or our individual desires? How do you know? Explain what in your life has led you to believe this. What does this play say about individual desires and families? How do you know?

- b. What does it mean to assimilate? Who worries about assimilation in this novel? Do you think the play shows it as a strength or weakness? Do you see people assimilating around you? How do people assimilate, and why do they do it? Do you?
- c. Is there anyone you know who gave up his or her dream? Do you think it's ok to give up at some point and accept what life gives you? In reality, do most people keep pursuing or give up their dreams? What do you think of this? What are the most valid reasons for giving up something you deeply desire in your opinion or in the play?
- d. Why would it have been wrong for Walter to take Lindner's money in his family's eyes?

The first time I read *A Raisin in the Sun* was in ninth grade. Prior to reading Hansberry's play my only experience with a canonical work of literature was *Romeo and Juliet* and *Oedipus Rex*, so reading this play provided a good step away from archaic language and a step towards people that I felt offered a slightly more modern perspective.

Expanding the unit

Before expanding on the unit I would provide students with some entries in the Assembly on Literature for Adolescents of the National Council of Teachers of English or ALAN REVIEW. The journal entry, "Rac(e)ing into the Future: Looking at Race in Recent Science Fiction and Fantasy Novels for Young Adults by Black Authors" by Yolanda Hood stress the importance of having ethnic diversity in young adult literature. Although the article focuses on the genre of science fiction and fantasy I think students will be able to grasp the concept hood mentions, "race and ethnicity are not ignored in these books, the race or ethnicity of a character does not drive the plot." Students will learn that not all young adult fiction can be used in more ways than just addressing racial discrimination.

I would expand the unit of drama and poetry by using plays or poetry written for young adults that also deal with discrimination. One example would be *Witness* by Karen Hesse, a free verse poem which according to novelinks.org: "explores the tensions the KKK (Ku Klux Klan)

brings to a small town in Vermont in 1924. The small town community slowly breaks apart as the KKK, a band of all white males who believe that whites are the most supreme race, forces its way into the town". The poem can easily be used in a reader's theater activity, which would involve the entire class. Multiple students will be assigned to a role and rotated as each section passes. The key to this activity will be to have students answer questions regarding the story, development of characters, and finding the voice for their own character:

- a. Which character had the strongest voice throughout this section? Why?
- b. Which character do you sympathize with the most?
- c. What tone of voice did you use for your character? Were there queues from the text that helped you find your character's voice?

After the assignment and activity are complete I would ask the class: Do you believe John Reeves survived the hanging or he drown and is haunting Merlin's conscience? Simply to engage those who might have had a difficult time finding the plot interesting.

To expand the unit even further I would use other young adult novels along with *A Raisin in the Sun* that complement the theme of racial discrimination. Those works of young adult literature include:

- a. *Whale Talk* by Chris Crutcher. Online summary from Barnesandnoble.com: "Intellectually and athletically gifted, TJ, a multiracial, adopted teenager, shuns organized sports and the gung-ho athletes at his high school until he agrees to form a swimming team and recruits some of the school's less popular students." Intellectually and athletically gifted, TJ, a multiracial, adopted teenager, shuns organized sports and the gung-ho athletes at his high school until he agrees to form a swimming team and recruits some of the school's less popular students."
- b. *Becoming Billie Holiday*, by Carole Boston Weatherford. Overview: Before the legend of Billie Holiday, there was a girl named Eleanora. In 1915, Sadie Fagan gave birth to a daughter she named Eleanora. The world, however, would know her as Billie Holiday, possibly the greatest jazz singer of all time. Eleanora's journey into legend took her through pain, poverty, and run-ins with the law. By the time she was fifteen, she knew she possessed something that could possibly change her life—a voice. Eleanora could sing. Her remarkable voice led her to a place in the spotlight with some of the era's hottest big bands. Billie Holiday sang as if she had lived each lyric, and in many ways she had. Through a sequence of raw and poignant poems, award-winning poet Carole

Boston Weatherford chronicles Eleanora Fagan's metamorphosis into Billie Holiday. The author examines the singer's young life, her fight for survival, and the dream she pursued with passion in this Coretta Scott King Author Honor winner. With stunning art by Floyd Cooper, this book provides a revealing look at a cultural icon

- c. *The Absolutely True Diary of a Part-Time Indian* by Sherman Alexie. Overview from goodread.com: Sherman Alexie tells the story of Junior, a budding cartoonist growing up on the Spokane Indian Reservation. Determined to take his future into his own hands, Junior leaves his troubled school on the rez to attend an all-white farm town high school where the only other Indian is the school mascot. Heartbreaking, funny, and beautifully written, *The Absolutely True Diary of a Part-Time Indian*, which is based on the author's own experiences, coupled with poignant drawings by Ellen Forney that reflect the character's art, chronicles the contemporary adolescence of one Native American boy as he attempts to break away from the life he was destined to live.
- d. *To Kill a Mockingbird* by Harper Lee. Overview from Goodreads.com: "Shoot all the bluejays you want, if you can hit 'em, but remember it's a sin to kill a mockingbird." A lawyer's advice to his children as he defends the real mockingbird of Harper Lee's classic novel—a black man charged with the rape of a white girl. Through the young eyes of Scout and Jem Finch, Harper Lee explores with rich humor and unswerving honesty the irrationality of adult attitudes toward race and class in the Deep South of the 1930s. The conscience of a town steeped in prejudice, violence, and hypocrisy is pricked by the stamina and quiet heroism of one man's struggle for justice. But the weight of history will only tolerate so much. The author won a Pulitzer Prize for this striking novel about life in a quiet southern town rocked by a crisis of conscience.
- e. *The Golden Hour* by Maiya Williams. Summary from Barnesandnoble.com: Thirteen-year-old Rowan and his eleven-year-old sister Nina, still bereft by the death of their mother the year before, experience an unusual adventure through time when they come to stay with their two eccentric great-aunts in a small town on the Maine coast.
- f. *American Born Chinese* by Gene Luen Yang. Summary from npr.org: Graphic novelist Gene Luen Yang's funny and sensitive drawings weave together the stories of Jin Wang, a Chinese-American kid who just wants to fit in at his new school; basketball player Danny, whose life is bedeviled by his stereotypical cousin Chin-Kee; and the mythical Monkey King, whose desire to become a god gets him in rather a lot of trouble.

In accordance with the unit, I would divide the class into groups and assign each group a one of the young adult novels mentioned above for reading. All six of these novels deal issues that are similar to *A Raisin in the Sun*. The readings will be done out of class and cover about a weeks' time of group discussion and assignments. In addition, students will submit a journal entry at the end of each discussion to for comparison and credit for the assignment. In order to bring the young adult resources and the canonical piece together as a whole I would

assign an essay prompt comparing their young adult novel with *A Raisin in the Sun*.

The unit as a whole will most likely take three weeks as we will be reading and discussing *A Raisin in the Sun*, hold a readers theater of “Witness” by Karen Hess, and doing assignments on the assigned young adult novels. Concluding with a final paper which will require use all three of the previously mentioned to answer the prompts.

Works cited

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