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Literature as a Catalyst For Social Change

I. Rationale:

Teachers put an emphasis on improving their students' reading and writing skills, but to what extent are students encouraged to use those skills outside the classroom in an effort to improve the world around them? Literature that engages with marginalized communities may require students and even their teachers to face discomfort, however, I believe it is important for young adults to read texts where they might not resemble the characters whose perspectives they are reading from. As a result, students can empathize with these marginalized communities and use those new feelings to initiate social change. My purpose is to not only teach a canonical text that may be challenging to work through because it's in the form of a play, but to empower students to analyze types of discrimination beyond the text and feel a commitment to question, reject, and bring attention to their constructions of reality.

In this unit of study, my canonical piece will center around Lorraine Hansberry's *A Raisin in the Sun*, a play that takes place in Chicago's south side during the 1950's. This canonical work explores the theme of dreams or dreams deferred as the story follows the Youngers, a working class Black family that uses their deceased husband and father's life insurance check for a down payment on a house in a white neighborhood. An essential scene I want to address is in Act 2, Scene 3 when a representative from this neighborhood visits the Younger family and asks them to reconsider moving. In addition to exploring racial prejudice and struggles with economic hardship, *A Raisin in the Sun* addresses themes such as self-identity, gender role expectations, and the importance of family unity.

Wendy J. Glenn, Ricki Ginsberg, Erin Gaffey, Kate Lund, and Isabel Meagher's excerpt in *The ALAN Review* explores how young adult literature that contains critical literacy helps students understand the society they are a part of and develop a critical outlook regarding social, political, cultural, and economic issues present. In the article "From Awareness to Action: Young Adult Literature as a Road to Reflection and Catalyst for Change," the authors state that by analyzing literature that fosters a consideration of social justice issues, students can extend their knowledge with an obligation to create social change: "Ideally, as students develop increased awareness of the self and the other in the process of textual analysis, they develop identities that extend beyond the words on the page and into the world at large, identities that reflect a commitment to social justice by experiencing a shift from awareness to action," (Glenn, Ginsberg, Gaffey, Lund, and Meagher 26). This quote confronts some of the themes that are important to be conscious of while reading *A Raisin in the Sun* and other young adult novels I will pair with my canonical text in my Unit of Study.

Since *A Raisin in the Sun* is a story conveyed in three acts and tackles a plethora of issues throughout the play, I will use additional young adult resources to help elaborate students' understanding and social, political, and economical context of the primary canonical piece. Also, I will present other approaches that will allow students to flesh out the play while they actively keep issues of race, gender role expectations, and dreams or dreams deferred at the forefront of their minds.

II. Into The Text

In order to garner students' interest to read *A Raisin in the Sun*, which explores the notion of perseverance in the face of racial discrimination, I will introduce a rap song that can begin the unit in an exciting way because rap lyrics specifically, is easy for students to absorb because many artists use colloquial language in their tracks. Kendrick Lamar is a widely known rapper whose name can pique students' interest even if students don't listen to his full discography. Lamar's fourth studio album "DAMN" is added to a list of poetry that can now be taught in International Baccalaureate classrooms, according to an April 21, 2019 article from The Diamondback. In this same article entitled "It's time for schools to expand beyond the Eurocentric literary canon" written by Liyanga de Silva, Lamar's songs can broaden what forms of literature are considered academically rigorous to students, even if it doesn't conform to standard American English. Some characters in the YA books I chose to pair with my canonical text speak other dialects, including Black vernacular English. My intent is for students to expand their literary canon and consider these texts as equally important and insightful as other books they read that follow a white, Western-centric perspective.

The song "Alright" by Kendrick Lamar from his third studio album *To Pimp a Butterfly* (2015) is about types of racial discrimination Black people face in America. Although Lamar addresses topics such as police brutality and the difference in pay wages compared to white Americans, he conveys a hopeful tone to the Black community about better days ahead despite these issues. I think this song about self-empowerment is similar to the ending of *A Raisin in the Sun*, when the Younger family moves into their new home in a white neighborhood despite challenges they face. Also, the song "Alright" touches on Lamar's faith in God which is also present in the play especially for Mama, who turns to her faith in times of hardships.

Youtube video: <https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=Z6bNTun3ZXg>

Transcribed lyrics: <https://genius.com/Kendrick-lamar-alright-lyrics>

[Pre-chorus]

Wouldn't you know

We been hurt, been down before, n*gga

When our pride was low

Lookin' at the world like, "Where do we go?" N*gga

**And we hate po-po
 Wanna kill us dead in the street for sure, n*gga
 I'm at the preacher's door
 My knee's gettin' weak, and my gun might blow
 But we gon' be alright**

[Chrous]

**N*gga, we gon' be alright
 N*gga, we gon' be alright
 We gon' be alright
 Do you hear me, do you feel me? We gon' be alright
 N*gga, we gon' be alright
 Huh? We gon' be alright
 N*gga, we gon' be alright
 Do you hear me, do you feel me? We gon' be alright**

As a non-Black educator, I would work around the explicit lyrics by providing my students with the lyrics of the pre-chorus and chorus printed out. I would play this song on a speaker and ask my students to pay attention to the tone Lamar uses to sing these lyrics and the overall message in the song and what that could indicate to his audience. Although *A Raisin in the Sun* was written by Hansberry in the 1950s, it's important for students to contextualize the play with current events in order to understand why it's still regarded as a relevant canonical text. In the Youtube video linked above, the line "We gon' be alright" was chanted by peaceful protestors as a sign of solidarity during a demonstration in Cleveland. My canonical text doesn't deal with police brutality, but some of the YA novels I chose for my Unit of Study does address this topic. By showing students this video, it could help them examine how racial discrimination against the fictional Younger family during the 1950s has altered or not since then, but in their own communities.

Songs can serve as an introduction to poetry, because students can transfer methods they use to interpret lyrics on a regular basis to annotate poems. By introducing students to songs first, students practice sharing their thoughts aloud in the classroom about the meaning of casual, digestible lyrics. This can ease students to begin using technical terms such as motifs or similes to analyze poems, with a song already providing the basis for this process.

The poem "Harlem" by Langston Hughes connects to Hansberry's play because it's where the title originates from. I chose this poem because it is short with just ten lines total, and students can work with the poem to associate which lines resonate with certain characters from *A Raisin in the Sun*.

Poem transcribed: <https://www.poetryfoundation.org/poems/46548/harlem>

What happens to a dream deferred?

Does it dry up
like a raisin in the sun?
Or fester like a sore –
And then run?
Does it stink like rotten meat?
Or crust and sugar over –
like a syrupy sweet?

Maybe it just sags
like a heavy load.

Or does it explode?

Theme of dreams or dreams deferred

- i. Similar to Hughes's "Harlem," each member in the Younger family from the play *A Raisin in the Sun* have their own dreams they want to accomplish, and the insurance check of \$10,000 could allow for them to turn their dreams into reality.
- ii. Mama wants to own a house, Beneatha wants to become a doctor, and Walter wants to own a liquor store in order to provide for his family.
- iii. Students can use their knowledge of the play's characters to interpret the many paths a dream can manifest and become based on the poem.

III. Through the Text

I have included three main YA strategies I would use to teach students this canonical text. With these resources, I hope to alleviate students' stress about a potentially challenging piece of literature by focusing on how they make sense of it. One YA strategy I would implement for students to understand the play further is a music video project based on *A Raisin in the Sun*. Similar to a play, music videos are a powerful medium to tell a story in under ten minutes. "Alright" by Kendrick Lamar might contain aspects that can be traced throughout the play as a whole, but for this music video project, students will look for a song that encapsulates one character in a specific scene and figure out how to convey that in a short amount of time. This is a way for students to pinpoint the characteristics of the character of their choice and demonstrate what are their weaknesses, strengths, etc.

Music Video

- i. This is similar to a project my ninth grade English teacher assigned to my class when we read *Romeo and Juliet* by William Shakespeare, in order to memorize the order of events that led to Romeo and Juliet's deaths.

- ii. Similar to a play, a music video requires visual aesthetics such as color schemes and lighting, wardrobe and styling through characters' costumes, and story-telling with facial expressions and emotions.
- iii. Inspired by my experience in ENGL 112B this semester, I would produce an example of a music video to give the class a model. The character I would choose is Ruth, Walter's wife whose feelings aren't prioritized in the play by other characters, and the song that would accompany my music video is "It's a Man's Man's Man's World" by James Brown.

Another YA strategy I think could extend the canonical play from only a piece of literature that is read by students is brainstorming questions that broaden the students' realities. Worksheets that include framing questions can engage students in the classroom, and this can also help students that might struggle with the primary text. In order for students to see themselves in the characters they read, especially if the characters are not young adults, I would ask students to initially answer questions based on their own experiences and opinions and then harness that information into their responses about the play.

Brainstorming Worksheet

- i. This is inspired by the "Examining Your Reality" reflection model included in the article "From Awareness to Action: Young Adult Literature as a Road to Reflection and Catalyst for Change" from *The ALAN Review*.
- ii. The worksheet below aims to supply students with framing questions that can serve as a catalyst for students to connect the play to their own lives. In my own example, students will compare Walter, the eldest son in the Younger family who works as a chauffeur, and Beneatha, his younger sister who goes to college.
- iii. **Theme: How do Walter and Beneatha seem to feel about their economic, racial, and social privilege (or lack thereof)?**

Thought Questions	Examining the Text	Examining My Reality
What positions of power do I hold? How do I use this power? How <i>might</i> I use this power?	What position(s) of power does Walter hold? Beneatha? How might Walter be more privileged than Beneatha and vice versa?	How can I talk to my friends or family members about social inequalities?

The final YA strategy I have in mind are weekly Silent Sustained Writing assignments or SSW's. This is a way to gauge students' understanding of the text, as well as a chance for students to consistently write about what they read. I can read students' SSW's and directly respond to their ideas and give them tips to improve their writing and grammar. In addition, SSW's can be used for teachers to monitor if a text resonates with students based on the quality

of their responses. This could serve as an “Exit Ticket” that can be completed in the last 15-20 minutes of class after the majority of class time has been spent working on the canonical text.

Silent Sustained Writing

- i. This weekly assignment is based on my experience in ENGL 112B this semester, and inspired by designated Silent Sustained Reading time.
- ii. Here are possible prompts students can respond to inspired by previous SSW’s:
 - a. Which voice is the most powerful for you in *A Raisin in the Sun*?
 - b. What minor character in the play offers insight about the story or one of the main characters?
 - c. Write two quotes from the play that helps you understand the theme(s) of the story.
 - d. What is a scene from the play you would absolutely include in its film adaptation?
- iii. For the “Awareness to Action” aspect of the unit, my goal is for students to understand the text and then be able to relate it back to themselves and their communities. Other question I would ask my students to engage in:
 - a. If it were up to you how the insurance check would be allocated, how would you split up \$10,000 amongst the Younger family?
 - b. Do you think your choice is fair in comparison to how Mama uses the insurance check money?

IV. Beyond the Text

The following YA novels can encourage students to work beyond the canonical text to issues occurring in today’s world. Hansberry’s *A Raisin in the Sun* was published in 1959, and yet similar themes of racial discrimination and social justice are still employed by recent authors. By pairing these YA novels to the canonical text, it can empower students to recognize the power of their own voices to create change. My goal is to transform students to not only appreciate a literary text, but to also become active contributors in their communities.

a. *Whale Talk* by Chris Crutcher

- i. The novel’s protagonist is TJ Jones, a mixed race teenager who recruits a swim team of misfits to challenge his high school’s elitist and racist athletics department.
- ii. The novel addresses themes of bullying, racism, and the importance of friendship and community.
- iii. One of the most significant scenes in *Whale Talk* is when TJ stands up for Chris Coughlin, a fellow teenager at his high school who is bullied for wearing his deceased brother’s letterman jacket.

b. *This is My America* by Kim Johnson

- i. This novel was introduced to me during a classmate’s “Book Talk” in ENGL 112B.

ii. Tracy Beaumont, a 17-year-old girl, writes letters to an organization called Innocence X in an attempt to save her innocent father who is serving time on death row. Tracy also wants to save her brother who is under investigation for the death of a white girl. **Summary provided by:**

<https://clubs.scholastic.com/this-is-my-america/9781338861655-rco-us.html>

iii. The notions of police brutality, violence, systemic racism, and incarceration frames the novel as it follows Tracy's commitment to justice.

c. *The Hate U Give* by Angie Thomas

i. The novel's protagonist Starr Carter grapples through two worlds as a Black teenager who attends her predominantly white high school. Starr speaks out for her childhood friend Khalil who dies from a fatal shooting by a police officer.

ii. Starr witnesses Khalil's death which motivates her to speak up for him.

iii. The themes present in the novel are the importance of speaking out to create change, activism, police brutality, and how members of marginalized communities are portrayed.

d. *Chains* by Laurie Halse Anderson

i. This is another novel from Anderson, an author I engaged with in ENGL 112B from her novel *Speak*.

ii. Isabel, a 13-year-old, and her sister Ruth are enslaved during the American Revolutionary War and Isabel wants freedom from her new ones who know details about a British invasion. **Summary provided by:**

<https://www.simonandschuster.com/books/Chains/Laurie-Halse-Anderson/The-Secrets-of-America-Trilogy/9781416905868>

iii. Isabel confronts themes such as slavery, freedom, identity, and family.

e. *We Were Here* by Matt de la Peña

i. Due to an accident that results in his brother's death, Miguel believes he has to behave a certain way that matches with the crime he commits.

ii. One of the most significant scenes in the novel is when Miguel steals the files about him, Rondell, and Mong from the group home and rips them apart.

iii. Miguel rejects a preconceived notion of who he should be and throughout the novel, works to assuage his guilt over an accident he doesn't let define who he is.

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