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English 112B

The Role of Narrative in Young Women’s Lives

**Part 1: Rationale and Evidence**

It is known now more than ever that representation in media leads to a stronger sense of self, especially in young people’s lives. Seeing a part of your life reflected in a book or movie makes one feel more “normal,” but also special at the same time. Experiencing these characters who are just like us implicitly guides us to use them and their choices as a model. Their journeys replicate ones we wish to go on one day, and force us to reflect on what we have accomplished. For young people especially, who are still building the foundations of their person, art plays a crucial role in their sense of identity.

According to *Literature for Today’s Young Adults*, middle to high school grades find themselves within Levels 4 and 5 of “literary appreciation.” Level 4, most associated with middle school grades 6th-8th, shows teens searching for themselves in stories. They find themselves relating to the characters and reflect on them their own experiences as a way to cope. High school, Level 5, shows students looking outward for stories unlike their own. This is where students find compassion and broaden their worldview. This shows it is crucial for students at these stages to find a personal connection with art as it helps build a sense of belonging, confidence, and compassion.

It is apparent that these grade levels are crucial for learning about the world, for looking inward and outward, beyond. So, what is the message for young women if the books and media they encounter lack representation of their experiences? What role models are we providing for them, what characteristics to keep in their back pocket?

Though, there is a certain challenge for young women when trying to discover stories and characters that truly reflect them. From the time they are born, there are signals forced upon them, showing them the “correct” path to be a girl, a teenager, and a woman– as is consistent with any gender. TV shows, princess movies, and teenage vampire books reflect a narrow box, a short list of choices that a young woman may choose her future from. My curriculum suggests a focus on literature and media that aims to subvert socialized gender expectations and challenge dominant narratives.

I suggest a curriculum best suited for 12th grade students on their way into the adult world, focusing on the broader discussion of gender expectations and building self-identity with the help of literature, but specifically how representing young women in these works provides them the tools to navigate the patriarchal world.

<https://www.goodreads.com/book/show/15798148-the-story-of-an-hour>

The canonical focus of this curriculum will surround around *The Story of an Hour* by Kate Chopin, and will discuss other supplemental works that also carry the theme of subverting expectations and challenging dominant narratives. It will include works that show how the expectations of women and young girls translate into contemporary literature and art, so as to create a personal connection to the work and indulge a larger conversation of representation in literature.

*The Story of an Hour* by Kate Chopin demonstrates the freedom of a life beyond patriarchal oppression, of a woman’s identity beyond a man’s influence. In a sudden event, Louise Mallard’s husband dies in an accident, leaving her widowed and alone. Readers may expect the short story to be filled with dreary and depressing imagery, but Chopin paints a picture of opportunity and excitement. The image most associated with this short story is of Louise Mallard looking longingly out of the window. A general read of this story would see Louise Mallard as looking for her husband in the street and waiting for his return, but the story subverts our expectations. Louise Mallard is instead day dreaming of the life she will live without her husband, no doubt alluding to his control over her life, and hinting at the broader topic of marriage as a form of patriarchal oppression in women’s lives. One of the most powerful lines expressing this is, “And yet she had loved him--sometimes. Often she had not. What did it matter! What could love, the unsolved mystery, count for in face of this possession of self-assertion which she suddenly recognized as the strongest impulse of her being!” (2). Different from the expectation of a mourning wife, *The Story of an Hour* displays a woman dreaming of her life beyond romantic love and the societal obligation off marriage.

In *Literature for Today’s Young Adults*, the Exeter Qualities that outline aspects of good literature for young adults mentions the importance of “characters who reflect experiences of teen readers, something that is not found in much of the literary canon, especially when it comes to strong female protagonists” (LFTYA, number 3). In a short moment, Louise Mallard allows herself to dream, with Kate Chopin detailing the power of that moment and showing readers what dreaming feels like. Though this theme of marriage as a form of patriarchal control is far from personal to 17 to 18 year old high school seniors, they have more than likely witnessed aspects of this theme throughout their life. Perhaps they were given baby dolls to play with when they were a baby themselves, already instilling the certainty that they will one day be a mother. But what of other options? Must every woman want to be a mother? They might take Louise Mallard as an example, a woman who more than likely did not want to be a wife. Louise Mallard dreams of her life without marriage, maybe not because she did not want it, but because she did not choose it. By force feeding our young women media of one narrative, of finding their prince and happy ever after, they will feel like that is the only right choice. Beyond the themes of feminism, the greater theme of challenging expectations and questioning their impact in our lives resonates universally across gender. It is especially important for this age as they enter adulthood to understand their worth and strength beyond societal pressures. In a short moment, Louise Mallard as a character expresses the importance of choice and diversity in narratives for young women.

Chapter 6 in *Adolescents in the Search For Meaning: Tapping the Powerful Resource of Story* by Dr. Mary Warner expresses the need for students to witness stories with hardship, especially concerning self-identity. *The Story of an Hour* displays a woman who is passionate and hungry to learn who she is beyond societal pressures or signals of how to be a proper woman. This theme would not only resonate with 17-18 year olds who are eager for life, but serve well as a reminder to be themselves and never forget their goals.

**Part 2: Lesson Plan and Extending the Unit**

In observing 6th grade literature classes, I found that the teacher started with light-hearted, hands-on activities to launch their unit. Due to the student’s age range, arts and crafts were mainly utilized and visual displays. This tactic created excitement for the lesson, but also established a personal connection to the work.

Though the 12th grade high school students might find themselves too advanced for such activities, these light-hearted ice breakers might loosen nerves and create a safe space for sharing. Because the purpose of this curriculum is for students to establish a personal connection with literature and find belonging in its themes, many of the pre-activities will be focused on identifying how students feel these socialized gender roles in their own lives and open up conversation for how societal expectations affect their choices.

1. Drawing activity: materials include paper and pencil
   1. Instruct students to draw a doctor, a teacher, a professor, a nurse, a rockstar and a firefighter. Give them about 2-3 minutes per drawing. Make sure to remind students to draw whatever first comes to mind.
   2. After their drawings are complete, have them share with their neighbors. Do they have anything in common? What is similar?
   3. Next, the discussion may open to the rest of the class. What did you find was common between the drawings? Who did you draw as a woman and a man? Why is that? Take this opportunity to discuss the various societal signals and pressures pushed onto young people depending on their gender. Also discuss how this might affect a young person’s choice in career, and their view of themselves. If we only draw, and therefore think, of a doctor as a man, would a woman feel comfortable choosing this career?
2. Inform students of the historical evidence that supports this phenomenon. Briefly go over the Women’s Suffrage Movement where women fought for their right to vote. If applicable, you can go over recent legislature such as Roe v. Wade, and even include its recent overturn.
   1. These themes are heavy, but include how America’s structure is inherently based on these hierarchical social standards regarding race and gender. “All men are created equal” excludes both women and the existing Native, Mexican, and Black populations.
   2. Use this time to touch on *The Story of an Hour*’s connection to American Literature and how a dive into American Literature leads to an inevitable encounter with these themes.
3. Read Kate Chopin’s *The Story of an Hour* together, popcorn read style. Encourage students to take note of points in the story that surprised them or challenged their expectations. They can use these notes in future exercises.
   1. Further discussion: How might Louise Mallard’s subversive behaviors relate to our conversation of gender expectations? How do you challenge expectations in your life?
   2. Journal write: what is expected of you as a young person concerning your gender? Are there certain social, personal, household expectations because you are either a young man or woman? Do you ever feel you do not *fit in* to their expectations?
4. Play “All American Bitch” by Olivia Rodrigo 

<https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=n2BnbpjpRdo>

“And I am built like a mother and a total machine

I feel for your every little issue, I know just what you mean

And I make light of the darkness, I’ve got sun in my motherfuckin’ pocket

Best believe, yeah, you know me, I

Forgive and I forget

I know my age and I act like it

Got want you can’t resist

I’m a perfect all-American

[...]

I know my place, I know my place

And this is it

I don’t get angry when I’m pissed

I’m the eternal optimist”

* 1. Though this song includes strong language, it exemplifies the rage of being put into a box. Whether students identity as male or female or none at all, all can relate with the frustrations of societal expectations and gender roles.
  2. Do a cold listen of the song without any discussion. Then ask the students what language, images, etc. that they notice. What metaphors? What “expectations” is the speaker singing about?
  3. The lyrics present a defiance of the cultural pressures that women and young girls face to be “perfect;” they must be caring and kind like a mother, but also sexy and silly like a teenager. The angry, slightly crazy sounding guitar and drums express a woman’s frustration but also how they use it to their advantage. Women are able to exist on both planes, as people want them to be and who they are. When they are aware of these social constructs, they create a hybrid identity– one that “plays by the rules,” or adheres to socialized gender constructs, and one that challenges and contradicts those expectations.
  4. Similar to the song, encourage students to find this “middle ground.” Though we cannot fix the very foundation of our society, we may acknowledge how these pressures affect our lives.

1. Additional activity: Have students pick a song that illustrates Louise Mallard’s range of emotions since learning of her husband’s death. Follow this up with a writing activity that includes an explanation of how their song connects to Louise Mallard’s feelings.
2. Ending with an art project
   1. Now that students have become open to the idea of challenging expectations, give them an opportunity to imagine a life beyond those expectations– similar to Louise Mallard. Just as Mrs. Mallard looks out of the window dreaming of her life without her husband, her newfound freedom, encourage your students to create their “dream life” that would make them feel like Louise Mallard.
   2. What does Louise see outside the window? Use the window as a metaphor for your vision of life beyond social expectations. What does it look like? Have students create an art project of themselves looking out the window, with the outside representing this image of life free of suffocating expectations.

**Part 3: Extending the unit**

Many contemporary authors and artists are addressing this problem with their work. In addition to the lesson of *The Story of an Hour*, you can include these supplemental works to showcase how other authors and artists are subverting expectations in their respective spaces.

* *Circe* by Madelyn Miller with connections to *The Odyssey* by Homer
  + Villanized in *The Odyssey*, Circe is characterized as en evil sea witch, but is re-invented in Madelyn Miller’s Ancient Greek inspired novel. Circe’s character subverts many socialized gender expectations. She is cast away on an island of her own and meets characters who, in Greek Literature, are usually the protagonists, not the background people. But this novel focuses on Circe’s journey– her growth from divine to humanity. It gives depth to a character often misunderstood, or just written by a man.
* *Witness* by Karen Hesse
  + This collection poems showcases the very diverse perspectives of the same event. Set in rural Vermont, the book connects to the theme of fighting against oppressive standards. It also includes strong female protagonists like Sara Chickering and Iris Weaver, who both work for themselves and defy gendered expectations. Similarly, it includes Viola Pettibone, whose superior conscience aims to steer her husband toward the right direction.
* *The Gilded Ones* by Namina Forna
  + In a village where purity in girls is preserved above all else and the book of “Infinite Wisdoms” is the highest truth of law and order, a young girl named Deka anticipates the most important moment of her life– the day that she turns sixteen, when the men of the village will decide if she is pure or *unnatural* by the color of her blood. Deka’s whole life is flipped upside-down when her blood shows gold, the color of impurity. Her kind is called *alaki*, but even to them she is unnatural, as she possesses special powers. When her family and everyone she knows abandons her, she finds that she has only two options– death or survival. Deka consistently chooses to survive, even when the forces that surround her want nothing more than for her to fail. This book showcases themes of oppression and discrimination, but focuses in on how patriarchal control affects Deka’s choices in life. Instead of listening to what the outside forces, Deka chooses to create her own life.
* *The Yellow Wallpaper* by Charlotte Perkins Gilman
  + This short story deals with mature themes of mental illness, specifically pertaining to women’s “hysteria” and how diagnosis of these symptoms was a mask over patriarchal control and marital oppression. A woman is confined to a bedroom after expressing her feelings to her husband who is also her doctor. She is given drugs and told to stay in the house instead of being cared for mentally. This story connects to the idea of impossible standards and expectations for women. The woman is expected to feel happy with her place in life and is consistently ignored when asking for help.