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It’s the End of the World as Teens Know It, or Is It?

**I. Rationale**

The journey of navigating young adulthood is nothing short of easy. The glamorized side of teenhood contributes to a warped perception of adolescence where these years are depicted as being nothing but fun and care-free. However, there are constant battles being fought internally and externally just to try and find one’s place in the world. These internal battles often lead to experiencing bouts of social isolation, loneliness, and depression. There is a negative social implication attached to these issues as they cause the affected to be outcasted from their peers instead of encouraging togetherness. Due to this, it is important to instill the power of self-acceptance and provide an optimistic outlook on personal growth during this challenging part of life. My objective is to get my students to understand that enduring a traumatic experience does not define a person and they are able to keep moving forward. In my unit of study, I will focus on teaching my students that feeling isolated, lonely, or depressed during adolescence is completely normal while encouraging them to feel those emotions fully in order to properly process them. Also, it is equally important for this realization to promote a sense of self-acceptance and internal love for oneself.

This unit of study is to be centered around the canonical literary novel *Speak* by Laurie Halse Anderson with a minor pairing with the YA novel *The Perks of Being a Wallflower* by Stephen Chbosky. The novel *Speak* concentrates on those feelings of social isolation and loneliness as the main character, Melinda, struggles to find (or keep) a connection with peers/friends as she deals with the gravity of being raped at a party by another student who holds an elitist status on and off campus. Parallelling this novel with *The Perks of Being a Wallflower* works well as two characters, Charlie and Patrick, both combat their own feelings of social isolation, loneliness, and depression. Charlie is grieving the loss of two important figures in his life while feeling left alone with his racist and homophobic father while Patrick is navigating his queerness and experiences violent homophobia and rejection. All three characters experience different traumatic events, but they all lead to the same emotional and mental issues. By the end of their respective novels, each character acquires the necessary tools to start their journey toward self-acceptance so they will no longer be plagued by their trauma. These novels promote the idea of “seeing the light at the end of the tunnel” and while the internal work may seem impossible, the positive changes made will attract the genuine connection, understanding, and love that these characters seek.

**II. Into the Text**

To introduce this unit, I will have printed out the lyrics to Lady Gaga’s song “Born This Way” and place them on each desk. Before jumping into the written material, the song will be played in its entirety but mainly focusing on verse 3 and the chorus that follows which reads:

“Don’t be a drag, just be a queen

Whether you’re broke or evergreen

You’re black, white, beige, chola descent

You’re Lebanese, you’re Orient

Whether life’s disabilities

Leave you outcast, bullied or teased

Rejoice and love yourself today

‘Cause baby, you were born this way”

“No matter gay, straight, or bi

Lesbian, transgender life

I’m on the right track, baby

I was born to survive

No matter black, white, or beige

Chola or Orient made

I’m on the right track, baby

I was born to be brave!”

Having the tangible lyrics in front of them, it will be encouraged to annotate what they find to be powerful and/or what resonates with them on a personal level. This song is a great representation of the emotional and mental progression of Melinda throughout the novel. The first set of highlighted lyrics set the foundation to Melinda’s story as she called the cops after she was raped by Andy Evans, but the partygoers took it as she was snitching on them. This leads Melinda to become socially isolated and lonely because no one wants to be associated with her. Through the middle of the novel, the second pair of lyrics channel her desire to survive high school by operating below the radar. She achieves this for a while with the help of her favorite teacher, Mr. Freeman. Lastly, the final set of lyrics highlight her bravery to come forward about her trauma, and her bravery causes a tidal wave of other girls to come forward who were also harassed and assaulted by Andy. Lady Gaga’s “Born This Way” places the importance of recognizing differences while promoting a positive outlook on how to love everyone regardless.

After the students have listened to the song and annotated the lyrics, I will also ask my students to then journal a response to a loose prompt that coincides with the novel’s themes. This will give them the opportunity to openly and honestly discuss within themselves their own feelings before diving into the stories of others. This activity will serve as a pre-write that is dedicated to the concept of allowing students to write freely without feeling confined to the usual structure of proper writing techniques.

**III. Through the Text**

As we move through *Speak*, students will participate in a daily journal entry that corresponds with the events happening currently in the novel. They will need to respond to two prompts; the first will focus on literary analysis and their overall comprehension of the text while the second will be in the form of multiple questions that the student can choose between. Some examples of the questions being:

**How do the actions of \_\_\_\_\_\_ affect the other characters? What would you have done in that scenario? What themes, or other literary elements, are prominent in this section / Do they resonate with you? What are 3 things you love about yourself?**

These open questions will allow students to write freely on a personal level while still engaging with the text by using it to compare and contrast to their own lives.

As a final assignment for this unit of study, I will ask students to find a piece of literature, poem, song, or film that relates to the themes of *Speak*. Their findings will then need to be accompanied by at least a page’s worth of reasoning while connecting it to the text. This will be submitted in the form of a presentation. These in-text assignments aim to promote text comprehension, literary analysis, and personal reflection.

IV. Beyond the Text

After finishing the novel *Speak,* I would like to provide my students with the opportunity to watch one of the book’s film adaptations in class. I believe film is a powerful way to bring literature to life as it conveys the themes of the novel in a visual way. The acting, the directing, the soundtrack, and the setting are all purposefully chosen in order to successfully impart the themes, lessons, and messages that are found throughout the novel. The film adaptation also allows students to compare both pieces of work and make mental notes and connections. I will also encourage them to watch the other one we didn’t get to in class. Ending the unit with the film adaptation will also give them the satisfaction of completing a heavy unit while enjoying a media that is easily digestible and entertaining as it involves movie stars and songs they like or know of.

Overall, this unit of study is important because the novel *Speak* and *The Perks of Being a Wallflower* wrestle with complicated and devastating themes that are crucial to young adults because it affects them directly. As this will be taught to high schoolers, the events within both novels are very prevalent and the teaching of these themes of social isolation, loneliness, depression, and self-acceptance will help navigate the treacherous waters of adolescence. I aim to create a healthy way to process these feelings while heavily supporting the sentiment that there is always light in the dark when you love and support yourself.

Works Cited

Anderson, Laurie Halse. *Speak*. Macmillan Publishing Group, 1999.

Chbosky, Stephen. *The Perks of Being a Wallflower*. Pocket Books, 1999.

Gaga, Lady. “Born This Way.” *Born This Way (Official Music Video)*, YouTube, 2011, www.youtube.com/watch?v=wV1FrqwZyKw.