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Literature for Young Adults

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The Pursuit of Meaning Sans Destruction

1. **Rationale**

Young adults approach the time in their lives in which they are no longer able to defer to their parents or other authorities to justify their actions, inevitably questioning what meaning their lives have to offer. This newfound sense of agency can be disorienting; young adults often are not able to provide reasoning for the life changing decisions that they will eventually have to make. This can result in them making decisions that they are later unhappy with, or making no decision at all due to the paralyzing fear of the first described fate. My unit of study focuses on overcoming the anxiety of life potentially having no universal meaning and the paralysis of being responsible for pain.

My unit of study’s canonical piece is Albert Camus’ novel *The Stranger*. The canonical work gives an example of how one can find meaning in a world that offers no such thing. The protagonist Meursault rejects the chance to appeal the verdict of him being found guilty of murder, and berates the chaplain offering him salvation through God as he awaits his execution. Meursault forgoes any opportunity to deny responsibility for his decisions, whether it be to deny his guilt in murdering another person, or attempting to repent to God when he has never felt remorse. He deliberately removes any potential chance of escape from the fate of execution, and from this denial of hope, he is able to appreciate the world for its “gentle indifference”, and finds happiness in the moments before his death.

For much of the story Meursault is amorally passive, not having any concern with his friend abusing his partner or testifying in his defense. He only becomes active, truly expressing emotion, when he is confronted by others who try to convince him to renounce his actions. Meursault finds meaning in remaining steadfast in his beliefs even in the face of external pressures, and this act of revolt is what I think young adults can learn from.

While the canonical piece offers a potential remedy to despairing over meaninglessness, it has significant limitations. It portrays the search for meaning as highly individualistic, with no regard for human relationships and larger social structures. Little attention is given to love, to the nurturing of another being, which is often missing from the readings of young men. Darius Phelps acknowledges this in his article “Love Cannot be Lost in Translation: The Work of Minh Lê and his impact on Young Men of Color”, noting how his students lacked “depth, perception, and the ability to view the world as a spectrum: a place of solace where every person, no matter what ethnicity or color, could belong, and most importantly, where their authentic truths with the world.” While Meursault found happiness in revolting against those that would try to deny him of his authentic beliefs, he is not a character to be emulated, with him unable to express any emotion other than rage, his actions responsible for the destruction of a man’s life and his own. Young adults may come away from reading the canonical work with the understanding that the pursuit of meaning is conducted through unrepentant violence and the stymieing of emotions that could make them vulnerable. I will use young adult resources to provide examples of how young adults can pursue meaning, can have unshakeable beliefs, without necessitating their own destruction.

1. **“Into” the Text**

I would open the unit with a song that includes the themes of existential crisis and the pursuit of meaning. Beginning the unit with a song allows the students to ease into the unit with little effort; even with passive listening, they are able to understand the themes that the material will cover.

The song “Kimochi Warui” from the band Car Seat Headrest encapsulates the existential angst that plagues young adults following the realization that they cannot rely on others to provide meaning in their lives. I would present the song with its lyrics so the students can follow along. The singer Will Toledo has no answer to what the meaning of his life is, instead deferring to the music of his idol Brian Wilson for guidance. But after learning of Wilson’s tumultuous relationships and drug abuse, Toledo is left without anyone to provide him with a sense of purpose. He comes to the conclusion that his search for his own meaning in other people and the media he consumes is futile. After having students listen to the song and read the lyrics, I would ask them about how it pertains to their own experiences.

**YouTube Video:** <https://youtu.be/zOkNjpJtiLU?si=defYABR4fGIrVHKH>

**Lyrics:**

**Hey** **Will, why don’t you cut the shit**

**And tell me who you’re fighting for?**

**If you’re not taking care of yourself**

**Then what are you here for?**

**I used to think there was an answer**

**In the music of my youth**

**But I just read Brian Wilson’s biography**

**And now I know the truth**

**Because his father never loved him**

**And the band just wanted the money**

**And Dennis was an alcoholic**

**Who drowned looking for treasure**

**And everyone who was around him**

**Just gave him drugs and took his money**

**He was dependent on social acceptance**

**Just like every other human**

**And now I’ve got no one to pray to**

**And now I’ve got nowhere to stay the night**

**And it’s hard to be here at all**

**I have no faith in life to leave me satisfied**

**I’ll have these doubts and worries until the day I die**

**And I will not go to heaven and I will not go to hell**

**I have no faith in death to be anything at all**

**I feel sick**

**I don’t feel well**

**What a disgusting feeling**

**I don’t like this feeling**

**How disgusting**

**This feeling sucks**

**Some of these things are symptoms**

**And some of these are being human**

**And now I’m torn between**

**Trying to be a better man**

**And trying to accept the man I am**

**The people that I’ve talked to**

**And the books that I’ve read**

**And the TV shows and movies that I’ve seen**

**Are all I have to turn to**

**To learn how to live**

**But when? When? When? When?**

**When? When? When will I ever learn?**

The song’s depiction of Toledo losing direction in his life after learning of his idol’s faults is something that I believe can resonate with young adults. Many have someone that they place upon a pedestal with the belief that they will achieve happiness by emulating them, eventually becoming disillusioned when they find out that their idol is also an imperfect human being. The song establishes the theme of searching for meaning, allowing for students to segue into *The Stranger*.

1. **“Through” the Text**

 Working “through” the canonical text requires an understanding of absurdism, psychoanalytic theory, particularly Freud’s concepts of the ego, superego, and id, as well as psychological defense mechanisms. I would have the students watch videos in class to introduce them to these concepts before engaging with the text. After the viewing of each video, I would have them discuss in groups how these concepts pertain to their own lives. As the students read the text, I would have them keep track of instances worth psychoanalysis on a chart, categorizing them into either the three conflicting parts of the mind, or defense mechanisms. The chart would be made accessible to the entire class, so students are able to collaborate with their peers to better navigate the text through different perspectives. This collaborative effort would be continued in the Socratic seminar, in which the students would answer questions such as how the three parts of the mind dictate Meursault’s actions, and how Meursault revolts against his circumstances.

**YouTube Videos:**

**https://youtu.be/6KC1YrxJma8?si=aeyt1zNcZXugwt5n**

<https://youtu.be/mUELAiHbCxc?si=6pEC-V_K06VzEsOI>

1. **“Beyond” the Text**

 Even though the canonical work provides insight on how to find meaning in the absurd, the result being Meursault’s death does not provide young adults with a healthy template to build off of. However, an essential part of absurdism is the rejection of universal meaning; not everyone has to die from execution to find happiness. The inclusion of contemporary works supplements the canonical work with other possible outcomes that also provide meaning, allowing young adults to move beyond the text and gain more comprehensive understanding of how to pursue meaning in their own lives. I will include two works from ENGL 112 and an additional work.

1. ***We Were Here* by Matt de la Peña**

**i.** The novel’s secondary character Mong’s final interaction with Miguel before he dies reveals that his actions correspond to absurdism.

**ii.** His failing kidneys condemn him to death, much like Meursault. In rebellion of his inevitable death, Mong acts unconstrained by any limitations, legal or physical. He is unafraid to break the law in escaping the detention center, and fights without restraint against much larger opponents, terrifying them with his brutality. He creates meaning out of the meaningless, making a necklace of a tooth that he randomly found. Like Meursault, he is content with the world even as he is about to die.

**iii.** Mong goes beyond Meursault in his ability to love. He seeks out others to connect with, revealing his vulnerable authentic self to Miguel before his death. He is capable of expressing his love as well as his sadness to Miguel, finding meaning in the time they had together.

1. ***Whale Talk* by Chris Crutcher**

 **i.** The protagonist TJ is a character that learns to live as his authentic self.

 **ii.** He first appears unconcerned with social norms, interfering with Chris Coughlin’s abuse by Mike Barbour, who is emblematic of a larger chauvinistic structure in the community.

 **iii.** His lack of participation in the athletic department is his own revolt against it, but he is not free from its influence as TJ is defined by his antagonism towards the institution. It is through the creation of the swim team, connecting with his teammates, and nurturing their development that TJ finds meaning.

1. ***Blood on the Tracks* by Shuzo Oshimi**

 **i.**  This is a manga featuring a middle schooler Seiichi’s experience living with his abusive mother Saeko. The graphic novel format is more compelling to young adults than mere text on a page, and it features both Seiichi and Saeko eventually becoming capable of love despite their destructive circumstances.

 **ii.** Saeko hoped to find meaning in her life through having Seiichi, and only doubling down on her possessiveness of him as she was unable to find it. Seiichi as an adult is unable to move on from his traumatic childhood, incapable of finding meaning in his life.

 **iii.** As Saeko is on her deathbed, they reveal their authentic selves to each other, with Seiichi wishing to have never been Saeko’s child, and Saeko’s wishing to have never been his mother. Against these circumstances, the two revolt by loving each other.

Works Cited

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3. Toledo, Will. “Kimochi Warui.” How to Leave Town, 2016.
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6. de la Peña, Matt. *We Were Here*. Penguin Random House, 2010.
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8. Oshimi, Shuzo. *Blood on the Tracks*. Shogakukan, 2017-2023.