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Dr. Mary Warner ENGL 112B

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## The Humanization of the “Other”

### **Rationale:**

Throughout human and literary history; the concept of the “other” has been prominent in understanding cultural context and story plots. Especially in young adult literature, the lines between black and white are usually stark, with the “us vs. them” mentality used to propel storylines and/or characters forward in a non-realistic evil versus good environment. *We Were Here* by Matt de la Peña challenges this rigid perspective of good versus evil through the characters in the story: Miguel, Rondell, and Mong. Three young boys, who are a product of their environment, set out to take fate into their own hands, discovering and showing how nothing is inherently good nor evil. A valuable and life changing lesson to young children/teens/adults who, for one reason or another, have been ostracized and discriminated against throughout their lives.

I’ve chosen to center my unit on the concept of humanization through gothic literature and the text *We Were Here*. Both are essential and go hand in hand due to the vilification that occurs in both. In *We Were Here*, the vilification of “troubled youth” is practically non-existent due to the humanization of the characters and their circumstances; the first person point of view allows the eradication of instant stereotyping and casting of certain biases. Through Miguel's

eyes and all of the boy's experiences, a more empathetic approach to their decisions and mistakes is not only possible but absolutely enticing to take.

Gothic literature, while at face value, can appear to take the complete opposite approach due to the instant aligning and sympathy with the “human” or the “normal/known” versus the “monster” or the “weird/unknown” is actually a minefield of advocating for the “other”. All it takes is to stand or view the text/life through the eyes of, not Frankenstein, but Frankenstein’s monster. By allowing the perspective of the vilified and misunderstood, it is easy to see where the “good” guy is actually just as flawed or perhaps, even worse than the monsters they dare to point their finger at.

The humanization of the “other” in gothic literature bleeds into other genres such as young adult fiction. It is through characters like Miguel that the fear of the “unknown” or the “different” is lost. The trauma, the rage, the sadness, the things that set him apart suddenly come with an explanation. The Chacryer is no longer a disembodied source of “bad” nor is he a flat concept of the “bad guy” used to prop up a “good guy” or a hero to come and save him or save the day. He is Miguel.

### **Introducing the unit:**

Introducing the unit; the basic foundations of gothic literature would be discussed through popular gothic classics such as *Frankenstein* by Mary Shelley and *Wuthering Heights* by Emily Brontë. Whether read or briefly explained through videos such as: [Wuthering Heights: Thug Notes](#), the text itself won’t be as thoroughly scrutinized as the characters themselves. In continuation of introducing the unit; students would be asked to categorize the characters of the

texts and the sole context provided into “good” versus “evil” categories. The absence of a neutral category necessary in order to compare and contrast in the starkest of manners.

**Working through the unit/text:**

After the categorization and gross stereotyping of these classic characters, I would invite students to think of their absolute favorite movie, tv show, book, graphic novel, etc. Any form of art media and to list all the important characters they can think of into the “good” versus “evil” categories. This activity is meant to be difficult due to the ever evolving literary and non-literary characters in pop culture and media. Specifically the humanization of the classic “evil” characters and the morally grey in the “good” characters.

Towards the end of the unit; students will have to take a classically “evil” character or the “other” and list all the factors/environment that caused this character to be labeled as such, they will continue by listing all the favorable qualities that this character possesses. Similarly, they will be required to choose a classically “good” character/hero and list all the opportunities provided to them and all the distasteful qualities of them.

This activity is meant to provide insight to how the concept of the “other” is only real when viewing life through one perspective. As a wrap to the assignment; I would have students discuss the examples or possibilities of their “other” characters doing good or being good. Through these lenses, it is possible for students/young people who feel misunderstood, invisible, or judged to see the possibility of good in themselves.

**Beyond the text:**

Feelings of displacement, criticism, harassment, isolation, and being “different/the other” are not specific to the gothic genre.

YA:

- 1) *We Were Here* by Matt de la Peña is a young adult novel that perfectly depicts the humanization of the “other” through social, emotional, and cultural context of the characters. It is a perfect mixture of morally grey characters who are only depicted as grey because of their mistakes. Mistakes that were a product of the environment they grew up in, the choices provided to them, and ultimately the paths they chose to follow. The text does a beautiful job of reminding that there is no such thing as evil versus good. But rather, a chaos of all good and bad with the intention of living as best as one can.
  
- 2) *Arcane* is a netflix original based on a video game: *League of Legends*. It relies heavily on character development and a detailed story line. *Arcanes* characters are the epitome of humanizing the “other”. Characters are chock full of trauma, discrimination, and ultimately life altering decisions that conclude in tragedies, yet, not one character can be fully labeled or described as the “bad guy”. There are no bad guys in *Arcane*, only terrible mistakes and tragedies resulting in bad occurring. An absolute must watch to understand the complexities of humanity and the duality in the “other”.

**Concluding the unit:**

To conclude the unit, students would be encouraged to choose a character classified as the “other” and draw parallels between the characters and themselves: whether it is physical,

emotional, social, financial, and/or mental parallels. After the parallels are drawn, the characters that they chose will be discussed positively by the class through questions such as:

- 1) What potential does this character have to improve their society? List them and discuss
- 2) If provided with opportunity, how would this character use it?
- 3) What positives does this character possess?

The conclusion of the unit would be to reinforce the idea of the “other” perhaps remaining “different” but every bit of importance and with every possibility of being “good”.

Works Cited

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