

Sarai Angel

Dr. Warner

ENGL 112B

December 9, 2024

The Search For Identity: Compare and Contrast

Rationale:

The teenage years are most famous for uncertainty. As adolescents pass through high school, they start the lifelong journey of discovering who they are. Teens are under immense pressure from society and themselves to figure out what role they will play in society. Along with that, they crave acceptance and belonging. The teenage years are difficult to navigate.

Published in THE ALAN REVIEW, Virginia Monseau reflected on an interaction where she believed a student would love a book that reflected her life. However, the student loved a book that was her opposite. Monseau spoke on this, noting "a story's power to fulfill an unrecognized emotional need" (Monseau). Despite having good intentions, she did a disservice to her students by assuming she knew what she needed. Teens are constantly stereotyped and misunderstood. My unit of study intends to help students on this journey and to deal with these mischaracterizations. The beauty of books is that they can be both a mirror and an escape. In a YA Wednesday blog post, Kristine E. Pytash, and Monica Bartholomew speak about recognizing differences. They call these "disconnections," and "Disconnections remind us that, for students, literature isn't always a mirror, window, or door; sometimes literature is a reminder that they are locked out of the house entirely" (Pytash, Bartholomew).

My unit of study will focus on character analysis and allow students to compare and contrast themselves against the characters in the novel. My central piece is *After The First Death*

by Robert Cormier. This book offers opportunities for escape and reflection. The hijacking is an unimaginable experience, but the character's actions can reflect students' choices. What will connect most to students is the complexities and insecurities of the characters. Miro, Kate, and Ben all go through an identity crisis. They are all also wrongly characterized by others in the novel. Ben is a coward, Miro is an evil hijacker, and Kate is the damsel in distress. The way others see them is not how they see themselves, which is true for teens in real life.

After The First Death is rich in literary features. It uses multiple perspectives and creates unreliable narrators to heighten the mystery. The novel is not so complex that students will need to be walked through it, but it has enough substance that students will be able to analyze it in various ways.

To work through the novel, I intend to have students break down the characters and review how their identities overlap and differ. The supplemental materials I will include are aimed at reminding students of how themselves and the characters are not always what they seem. The end goal is to show students that despite how characters and themselves are viewed on the outside; they can show who they really are.

Into the text:

After The First Death by Robert Cormier

Using the novel, students will do a mixture of discussion-based projects and self-reflection. To open the unit, the students will first map their characteristics. With an item that represents themselves at the center and surrounding that, there are character traits and experiences that they think shape who they are. This activity is so students can reflect on who they are and see how experiences shape who they are. When viewing other students' maps, they can see how they relate and are different.

Moving on to the novel, we will read together in class. Students will keep track of quotes that speak to them and show key aspects of the characters. Students will be given a character in groups and work together to fill out a character chart. In the chart, students will note the characters: Role/importance, Motivation, Actions, Traits, Relationships, and Development. In different groups, they will summarize the novel's events and identify key themes, such as Patriotism, Sacrifice, Betrayal, Identity, and Courage.

In addition to the text, I would like to show the students *The Breakfast Club* by John Hughes. The film focuses on five teens who are given weekend detention. Over the hours in detention, the students talk, bicker, and connect. The film connects to the unit as the teens battle who they are, what people think they are, and what they want to be. Students will write about their initial perceptions of the teens and, at the end of the film, write about how they now view them.

Finally, I would like to do a reading of Maya Angelou's *Still I Rise*. In the novel and film, the characters show insecurity. With this poem, students are able to see the aspects of identity in an uplifting form. The poem can also help students bring in aspects of ethnicity and race to see how that impacts identity. Angelou's poem works beautifully in universal and individualized aspects. Students can take it as a universal and see how they can still succeed despite others' perceptions and doubts. In an individualized approach, students can reflect on how discrimination and oppression form identity. Oppression and identity relate to *After The First Death*, as Atrum radicalizes Miro in the context of the US as an oppressor.

Through the text :

The work done previously will prepare students for a discussion and an individual essay. They can choose which material to speak about: Book, film, or poem, but the essay will be on

After The First Death. Students at home will prepare one prompt per work to use in the discussion. They will also write a 1-page reflection on any work detailing how any two characters are similar and different; for example, Ben from *After The First Death* and Andrew from *The Breakfast Club* both are trying to live up to what they believe is their fathers' expectations; however, Ben is under added pressure to save lives and defeat hijackers, while Andrew is under pressure from himself to impress his peers.

Essay Prompts will be:

- Kate, Ben, and Miro are all put into impossible positions; given their circumstances, which character do you believe acts the most in line with their identity? Are any of them truly in control of their actions, or are they victims of circumstance?
- Compare and Contrast two characters from *After The First Death*. How do their motivations align, and how do they differ?

Beyond the text:

To complement the unit, I would encourage students to look into these books: *We Were Here* by Matt de La Peña, *Paper Towns* by John Green, and *The House on Mango Street* by Sandra Cisneros. These novels are a mix of books discussed in class and ones that I have seen used in my classroom observations. They are all relating to identity, self-discovery, and acceptance

- *We Were Here* by Matt de La Peña,
 - *We Were Here* follows Miguel, an adolescent who has been sentenced to write daily journals and serve out his time in a group home. Miguel runs away with two

other boys and struggles to come to terms with the fact that he accidentally killed his brother.

- The struggle to accept oneself is present in *After The First Death*. Ben and Miro both question who they are. Ben is faced with the realization that people thought that he would be a coward, and that breaks him. Miguel has the opposite approach; he knows how people view him but works to stop viewing himself that way. Both boys show the opposite side of the struggle between how the world views you and how you view yourself.
- *Paper Towns by John Green*
 - This novel follows Quentin and his friends on his quest to find the missing Margo. She is his childhood crush who suddenly re-enters his life and disappears. Quentin is shocked when he finds Margo, and she is angry to be found. Ultimately, he realizes that he has misjudged her character and is projecting an identity onto her.
 - This follows the characters' misconceptions of each other. They each have a version of the other in mind that does not align with reality. Miro thought he could kill Kate, as he envisioned her as the enemy, but she is not.
- *The House on Mango Street by Sandra Cisneros*
 - This is a novel written in interconnected vignettes. It details the life of Esperanza, a young Latina living in a working-class neighborhood in Chicago. Esperanza dreams of a new home and finding a place where she feels she belongs—the novel deals with issues regarding abuse, gender, identity, and culture. In the end,

Esperanza accepts how Mango Street has shaped her and will always be a part of her.

- This novel connects with *After The First Death* as it explores the intersection of home and identity. Miro bases his identity on avenging his homeland. Mark Marchand is a patriot and places high importance on his job. These identities are tied to the land they inhabit. These two novels show how where you are from does impact you, but it is not the center of your identity.

Works Cited

- Cisneros, Sandra. *The House on Mango Street*. Vintage, 1991
- Cormier, Robert. *Whale After the First Death*, Pantheon Books, 1979.
- De La Pena, Matt. *We Were Here*. Random House Inc., 2009.
- Green, John. *Paper Towns*. New York, Speak, 2012.
- Hughes, John. *The Breakfast Club*. Universal Pictures, 1985.
- “Identity Charts.” *Facing History & Ourselves*,
www.facinghistory.org/resource-library/identity-charts-0?backlink=for-educators%2Feducator-resources%2Fteaching-strategies%2Fidentity-charts. Accessed 8 Dec. 2024.
- Angelou, Maya. "Still I Rise." 1978. Poetry Foundation,
www.poetryfoundation.org/poems/46446/still-i-rise. Accessed 8 Dec. 2024.
- Monseau, Virginia. “Mining the riches of story: Young Adult Literature and the Peaceable Classroom.” *THE ALAN REVIEW*, vol. 31, no. 2, 2004, pp. 6–11.
- Pytash , Kristine E., and Monica Bartholomew. “Creating Space for a Spectrum of Connections by Kristine E. Pytash and Monica Bartholomew.” *DR. BICKMORE’S YA WEDNESDAY*,
www.drlickmoresyawednesday.com/weekly-posts/creating-space-for-a-spectrum-of-connections-by-kristine-e-pytash-and-monica-bartholomew. Accessed 8 Dec. 2024.