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English 112B  
02 December 2024

## Gothic Literature as an Outlet to Support Emotional Development

### 1. Rationale

Gothic literature is an extremely important tool in high school education, offering students an opportunity to explore complex emotions, develop critical thinking skills, and strengthen emotional resilience through engaging works. Classic gothic literature such as Henry James's *The Turn of the Screw* and Edgar Allan Poe's "The Raven" provide many opportunities for us to address universal human experiences like fear, grief, and uncertainty, which are feelings that are found in abundance among our adolescents. High school students are often struggling with intense emotional and psychological changes and these works of literature can allow them to find some sense of comfort and understanding in their rapidly changing lives. By confronting and learning about the fears and anxieties presented in these stories students can not only deeply engage with the literature but also gain the ability to process their own internal struggles in a safe and constructive environment.

I've chosen to center my unit on Gothic literature, particularly the novella *Turn of the Screw*, with a small focus on the poem "The Raven" because they are particularly effective in dealing with the emotional and psychological struggles that many teenagers face. In *The Turn of the Screw*, the governess's doubts and fears mirror feelings of uncertainty and anxiety. Students can connect with her struggles while discussing whether her fears are caused by external threats or her inner turmoil. Similarly Poe's "The Raven" discusses feelings such as deep sorrow and loss, giving students a poetic lens through which they can understand and deal with the concepts

of grief and death. These stories encourage students to reflect on their own emotions and develop empathy by understanding the struggles of others. Reading Gothic literature also helps students develop emotional intelligence by analyzing how the characters cope with the challenges they face. Activities such as class discussions, journal writing, and creative projects inspired by these stories may give students a way to express themselves and connect their personal experiences to the themes present in the literature. Along with this Gothic literature may help students in strengthening their creative thinking skills. Analyzing the genre's symbolism, unreliable narrators, and ambiguous endings can challenge students to think critically and look at texts from multiple perspectives. For example, analyzing whether the ghosts in *The Turn of the Screw* are real or imagined can build a student's creative thinking skills. Creative projects such as writing Gothic inspired stories, or creating artwork, can give students opportunities to channel their emotions while fostering creativity and self-expression.

One of the most important reasons to teach Gothic literature to our youth is due to its ability to normalize conversations surrounding mental health. By analyzing characters who face fear, anxiety, or loss, students learn that these emotions are a natural part of life. This can open up classroom discussions about coping strategies, encouraging students to share their feelings and seek support when needed. Gothic literature's themes of uncertainty, resilience, and self-discovery are particularly important among today's youth, as many students face challenges like social pressure and academic stress.

## **2. Introducing the text**

To introduce the texts to students I would begin by briefly discussing Gothic literature, including its importance, frequent themes, popular works, and what constitutes a gothic piece. A useful video in which I may play for my students can be found here,

<https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=1wCmZoljqqU>. To make the topic more interesting, and to gauge my students understanding of the subject, I would then ask each student to provide an example of a piece of gothic literature or film that they may be familiar with. By introducing Gothic literature as a whole before discussing the individual works, it will help the students better understand the importance and meaning behind the pieces we will read and discuss.

Continuing, I would integrate ten minutes of silent journal writing to every class, posing various thought-provoking and intense questions related to the literature such as,

- What is the scariest thing you have experienced?
- Do you believe in the supernatural?
- What do you do when you feel emotions such as fear or anxiety?

As we read and discuss the novels and works, the questions would then center more around the literature itself, attempting to aid the students with their understanding and force them to confront their own feelings surrounding these difficult themes.

### **3. Working through the text**

To continue teaching the texts to students it is essential to keep them engaged with various activities. For *The Turn of the Screw*, I would begin by reading an interesting excerpt, such as the first encounter with the ghost. I would then have students discuss whether at that point they believe the ghosts are real or imagined, encouraging them to examine the nature of fear. Further along in the novel, I would have the students participate in a class debate on whether the governess is a reliable narrator. This will help push their critical thinking and analysis skills as they analyze scenes in the book to prove their beliefs.

Similarly I would show/perform a dramatic reading of Poe's "The Raven", followed by an analysis of its repetition and imagery. This would allow students to explore how the poem conveys grief and obsession and how the narrator deals with his emotions surrounding death. Group discussions where students can share their thoughts on how the characters' emotions resonate with them will help deepen this connection.

Along with this I would utilize close reading exercises to show how Gothic authors use language to create atmosphere. For instance students can analyze how Henry James uses ambiguity in *The Turn of the Screw* and how it highlights the dangers of perfection. I would encourage students to annotate and keep tabs on critical scenes such as moments with the supernatural, or scenes with the governess.

Toward the end of the unit, I would have students participate in a creative project such as writing their own Gothic inspired short stories or poems, creating a mood board or a comic to illustrate key scenes, or acting out pivotal moments from the texts. This creative activity would allow students to express their understanding of the subject in many different ways. To gauge student understanding I would use a combination of writing along with creative assignments. Students would then write an essay to close the unit on common themes across the texts, such as the ways characters confront fear.

At the very end of the unit, a reflective class discussion can help students understand and depict what they've learned. By reflecting on how the Gothic stories helped them explore emotions like fear, grief, and self-discovery, students can communicate the personal value of the unit and how it may have benefitted them. For the very last assignment I would require a short journal submission asking them to identify which text impacted them most and why in order to reinforce the emotional and academic takeaways.

#### 4. Beyond the text

Feelings of fear, anxiety, and uncertainty, go beyond just gothic literature, and are found throughout almost every work of literature. Although Gothic literature might exemplify these feelings, there are many other works that discuss difficult emotions and topics, and help adolescents face tumultuous times as they grow and develop. Certain novels that can be offered to students in conjunction with *The Turn of the Screw*, as they also discuss the complexities of life and offer new perspectives on these difficult times.

YA:

- 1.) The themes in *The Turn of the Screw* relate closely to the emotional journey in *Speak* by Laurie Halse Anderson, as both novels center around fear, isolation, and confronting inner demons. In *The Turn of the Screw*, the governess's fear and uncertainty about the ghosts and her inability to trust her perceptions resonate with Melinda's internal struggles. Just as the governess's doubts blur the lines between reality and imagination, Melinda's silence and isolation create a barrier between her and the people around her. Both characters face an overwhelming fear of not being believed, and both struggle with the weight of unspoken truths. The governess's inability to share her fears with others can be paralleled with Melinda's silence where she isolates herself and suffers in silence until she finds the strength to speak out.
  
- 2.) The novel *We Were Here* by Matt de la Peña also shares themes of isolation, trauma, and distorted perception. In *The Turn of the Screw* the governess's fear and uncertainty about

the ghosts mirrors Miguel's internal struggle in *We Were Here*, where his past trauma and guilt create a distorted view of reality. Both characters feel isolated and unable to communicate their experiences, deepening their confusion. The works also explore how perception shapes reality as while the governess questions whether the ghosts are real, Miguel grapples with his guilt and self-image. Both stories center on characters confronting their inner turmoil and seeking truth despite uncertainty.

3.) *Coraline* is another novel that also explores themes of fear, isolation, and confronting otherworldly forces. The governess in *The Turn of the Screw* faces ghostly apparitions in isolation, while Coraline discovers a dark parallel world after feeling neglected. Both characters must confront terrifying forces that challenge their perception of reality and grow in the process. The stories highlight personal growth through fear, as the governess battles the ghosts and Coraline faces the Other Mother, ultimately reclaiming control over their situations.

## 5. Concluding the unit

To conclude the unit on Gothic literature I would have students write an essay that ties together the themes of fear, isolation, and self-discovery explored in *The Turn of the Screw*. The essay would encourage students to reflect on how these texts portray emotional struggles and the ways in which the characters confront their inner fears. I would ask students to connect the Gothic elements such as the supernatural, unreliable narrators, and psychological tension, with their own experiences of navigating difficult emotions. The conclusion would be a reflective

moment where students consider how these stories helped them understand the process of emotional growth, demonstrating how Gothic literature is an extremely relevant tool in exploring the universal human experiences.

Works Cited

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