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English 112B

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## **Unit of Study—A Study of Literary Devices in Psychological and/or Paranoia Thrillers**

### **Introduction and Overview**

Engaging students in to the realm of literature is not an easy task. To make sure students are engaged, the material has to be of clear and relevant context. In his article, “On Teaching of Literature,” Julius Lester suggests introducing “subjective approaches” of writing when it comes to teaching literature (29). Lester points out that it is essential to have readers connect with literature on a personal level, so asking/assigning “personal responses” about a work of literature will let teachers know how readers are understanding the material. Once teachers become aware of how students are interpreting/understanding the text, teachers will know how to approach the rest of the material as opposed to having students struggle throughout the lesson. As a result, students will engage and learn when reading literature.

Another article called “Writing for the Uninspired Reader” by Walter Dean Myers, tells what to do when encountering uninspired readers. Myers discusses that “uninspired readers” tend to lose inspiration for reading because of a previous bad or forced reading experience. Because Myers wants to appeal to the uninspired reader, he writes, “To engage this audience I seek to use their language, their phrases, and their cultural contexts in a way that will make the stories user-friendly as possible” (37). This means that teachers should keep in mind that students are attracted to the familiar, which in this case it will be a familiarity of language. For this unit of study it is essential to start off with contemporary literature to acquaint students with the experience of reading as well as to inspire them to explore other genres.

Once students are confident enough to enjoy contemporary literature, then the “canonical” or more complex literature would follow. For the more complex literature, a deeper approach to teaching is required. Luis J. Rodriguez’s article “Nemachtilli: The Spirit of Learning” suggests that keeping “the spirit of learning” and “the spirit of teaching” alive is essential and shall be encouraged. Rodriguez feels that these “spirits” are more “about love of learning, challenging, creating, posting, and countering that makes a classroom a truly organic and spirited place” rather than a religion imposing expectations and rules (44). Once students have been introduced to literature that is more real and familiar in terms of the language aspects, the student will be more confident and more likely to continue the journey with literature (of a higher level) because of the pleasant experience lived with previous works.

In this unit of study I propose to focus on the genre of Mysteries and the Supernatural while focusing on a branch of it: Psychological and/or Paranoia Thrillers. In this genre, the themes of morality, doubt, good and evil, obsession, and mystery are explored. Because students come from different backgrounds and cultures, it is essential to introduce a piece that will share a commonality. I feel that the notion of the “supernatural” and the “mysterious” produces effects every culture in the world shares. This will enable an interest in a topic that all cultures have some familiarity with, thus making the reading experience for students more rich and pleasurable. The intention of this unit is to introduce students to subgenres that are rich in literary devices (theme, symbolism, allegory, irony and imagery) as a means to help them understand the concept of literature.

### **Launching the Unit**

The center piece for this unit will be Nathaniel Hawthorne’s *The House of the Seven Gables* (optional). This particular work of fiction explores many themes and elements of literature essential to a good story. *The House of the Seven Gables* is the story of the Pyncheon’s family that has been haunted by the curse of Maule for many generations. The story develops when Matthew Maule is accused of being a wizard after refusing to sell his land to Colonel Pyncheon. These accusations come from Colonel

Pyncheon of course. Maule is convicted and killed, while Pyncheon keeps the property. During the building of the house, Maule puts a curse on the family. Misfortune follows the Pyncheon family for generations as members of this family living in the house of the seven gables die of unnatural causes.

Most students will probably be intimidated by this novel since the kind of language Hawthorne uses is, of course, mysterious in nature. To make this journey much more pleasurable, students will begin by reading a few contemporary works to gain an understanding of Hawthorne's style of writing.

To begin the study of Psychological and paranoia thrillers, students will begin by forming in groups and talking for 5 minutes to define the words "psychological," "paranoia," and "thriller." Once students discuss and share with the rest of the class the possible meanings of these words, the teacher will introduce this subgenre in depth. The teacher must present a clear definition of the subgenres and how they have changed through time. Students will be assigned to read *Harbinger* by Sara Wilson Etienne. *Harbinger* is the story of a girl named Faye who suffers from nightmares and visions that wake her up in the middle of the night. When she arrives at Holbrook Academy she finally begins to feel normal. She even makes new friends. Things seem fine except for the strange things that have been happening to them in the dorms. Every morning, her friends wake up on the floor with their hands stained red. Faye has no clue as to what is happening but she knows it's happening because of her. Now Faye must find a way to find out what is going on. She must find out whether or not Kel (the boy she likes) is helping her sincerely or if he is trying to kill her instead (teenreads.com).

As a response to this novel, students will be asked to keep a journal with their personal responses to each of the chapters in this book. In the responses students will be allowed to express what their feelings and interpretations of each chapter are. They may also incorporate an aspect of the chapter to a real life situation/event. By relating an important event in the chapter to a real life situation, students will connect with the story at a deeper level rather than just identifying its literary elements. Also, after the end of each chapter, the teacher will introduce a literary element (such as theme, symbolism, tone,

imagery, etc.) and the students will be asked to keep that aspect in mind as they read the next chapter. Later students may choose from each chapter an important passage to analyze and incorporate these literary elements. This will give students an opportunity to view the text from the perspective of a critic.

Another novel that can be paired with the centerpiece is *The Killer's Cousin* by Nancy Werlin (Radical Reads 147-8). *The Killer's Cousin* is the story of a boy named David and how his life changes completely after he kills Emily. David is sent to his aunt's place as a way to forget and begin a new life. Instead, he finds out his aunt and cousin don't want him there. Now, David must find a way to deal with this situation along with figuring out the strange sounds and shadows in the apartment they all live in.

*Crazy Jack* by Donna Napoli is another book that can be used instead of the previous mentioned. *Crazy Jack* deals with Jack's family going through financial hardships. Jack's father likes to gamble so he loses all the money he has left. Not understanding his father's desperate state, Jack fools around by telling his father about the golden pot at the end of the rainbow. Jack's father goes in search of the pot and never comes back. Seven years later, Jack mourns his father's disappearance. Every year on the day of his father's disappearance, Jack tries to climb the cliff his father climbed until he falls of exhaustion. Jack has to live with the burden of being guilty of this loss for the rest of his life.

### **Extending the Unit**

It is also a good idea to introduce some short-stories under this genre, so students can have a greater understanding of literary elements. A possible project can be to assign a short-story and have students transform it into a one act play. Students will be asked to work in groups to rewrite into a play along with acting/reading it to the class. Students will focus on one major literary aspect and explain how the author makes this aspect work. With this activity students have the chance to get creative. When presenting, students can even prepare a power-point, video or hand-outs as a way to keep the class engaged.

Here is a list of resources that can be useful in the class. These works fall under the genre of Psychological and/or Paranoia thrillers:

- *The Scarlet Letter* by Nathaniel Hawthorne, and/or “*The Lottery*” by Shirley Jackson paired with *A Break with Charity* by Ann Rinaldi (from LfTYA Chapter 12).
- “*The Minister’s Black Veil*” and/or “*The Birth-Mark*” by Nathaniel Hawthorne and/or “*A Rose for Emily*” by William Faulkner paired with *Fractured* by Teri Terry.
- “*The Tell-Tale Heart*” and/or “*The Cask of Amontillado*” by Edgar Allen Poe paired with *Liar* by Justine Larbalestier.
- “*A Very Old Man with Enormous Wings*” by Gabriel Garcia Marquez, and/or *The Strange Case of Dr. Jekyll and Mr. Hyde* by Robert Louis Stevenson, and/or “*The Legend of Sleepy Hollow*” and “*Rip van Winkle*” by Irving Washington paired with *Afterwards* by Rosamund Lupton.

Here is a list of some visual media that can be useful when implementing this unit:

- TV series: *Tales from the Crypt*, *Tales from the Darkside*
- Youtube video: Tell-Tale Heart 1953
- Films: *The House of the Seven Gables* 1960

### Concluding Activity

Once students get a sense of this literature the final project can be an explication essay about any of the literary aspects studied. Students will incorporate what they learned throughout the lesson. They will be able to analyze a work of fiction using all the tools we used in class. Hopefully students will feel more confident when reading and writing about literature.

### Works Cited

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