DOCUMENT RESUME

ED 116 237 CS 202 440

AUTHOR Wacht, Francine G.
TITLE The Adolescent in Literature.
PUB DATE 75
NOTE 19p.; Paper presented at the Annual Meeting of the National Council of Teachers of English (65th, San Diego, November, 1975)

EDRS PRICE MF-$0.76 HC-$1.58 Plus Postage
DESCRIPTORS *Adolescence; *Adolescent Literature; Course Content; *Course Descriptions; Course Objectives; *English Instruction; Literary Genres; Secondary Education; *Thematic Approach

ABSTRACT

This paper describes a one-semester high school course which introduces students to well-written contemporary novels in which the main character is an adolescent. Eight novels are read, and five of these are the core of the course: "The Catcher in the Rye," "A Separate Peace," "The Temple of Gold," "The Man Without a Face," and "Night." The students discuss these books in terms of various literary concepts such as plot, conflict, setting, tone, style, symbolism, characterization, point of view, and theme. A number of writing assignments are eventually based on these terms. Students also read and report on a novel of their choice. Other aspects of the course, such as writing assignments, class discussions, creative projects, short and feature-length films, and student-written evaluations of the course are discussed. (TS)

The Adolescent in Literature

By: Francine G. Wacht
Brookline High School
Brookline, Massachusetts
June, 1975

How many high school courses are there in which the student is somewhat of an expert even before he attends his first class? The Adolescent in Literature is such a course. Although being an adolescent does not assume literary expertise, the teenage reader can certainly sympathize and even empathize with his fictional peers. This one-semester course introduces students to well-written contemporary novels in which the main character is an adolescent. The novels are adult rather than teenage books ; the main characters are concerned with understanding themselves and their relationships with other people, rather than with getting dates for proms or financing flashy cars. Whereas adolescent literature helps teenagers get around the tree, the literature of adolescence helps them get out of the woods. The authors are established writers who have not limited themselves to the theme of adolescence. They recognize that young people have the immediacy of adolescent problems, but lack the perspective necessary to understand and deal with those problems. If teachers are to help teenagers understand themselves, as well as basic human values, through literature, we must present the works of authors who can look back at adolescence and make it come alive in a way that adolescents themselves cannot live it. Thus these novels help adolescents see themselves as others see them.

This is the fifth year the course will be offered at Brookline High School, and it has grown from two to eight sections. Its success seems due to three related factors: the choice of novels, the types of discussions, and the kinds of assignments. We usually read eight novels per semester. We read seven novels as a class; then we discuss them and write about them. The eighth novel is chosen by the individual student, who reads the novel at home and writes about it on his own. Since there are many different reading rates within the class, it is not possible to assign long novels. Those that are most successful run between 150 to 250 pages. Students are given between one week and ten days to read a book, depending upon its length. While the students are reading the book at home, they are also completing other work in class.

On the first or second day of the course, I ask the students to make a list of the things with which they are most concerned. These concerns usually include friends, parents, siblings, peer acceptance, sex, school, jobs, future plans, etc. After we have listed these on the board, we talk about them rather briefly; and I make the point that all of these issues arise in the novels we will read during the term. After the first novel has been assigned, and the students are reading it at home, we use class time to discuss various literary terms with which the students should become familiar. These include plot, conflict, setting, tone, style, symbolism, characteriza-

tion, point of view, and theme. The students are given handouts which summarize this information, so they can refer to it later on. A number of writing assignments are eventually based on these terms.

Each time I give out a book, I try to transmit to the class some of my own enthusiasm about it. I might tell them how I came to read the book in the first place, or why I chose the book as part of the course. Sometimes I ask them to focus on a single question as they read. For example, "What is the main character's biggest problem?" Or, "What is it that the main character is searching for?" The one rule I always follow, however, is not to give away any of the plot, especially the ending. Even if a student is not enjoying a novel, he wants everything that happens in it to be a surprise.

The five novels that have become the core of The Adolescent in Literature are The Catcher in the Rye, by J.D. Salinger; A Separate Peace, by John Knowles; The Temple of Gold by William Goldman; The Man Without a Face, by Isabelle Holland; and Night, by Elie Wiesel. All five use the first person point of view. Other novels that are occasionally read are Lord of the Flies, by William Golding; The Member of the Wedding and The Heart is a Lonely Hunter, both by Carson McCullers; and Anne Frank: The Diary of a Young Girl. Common themes, such as self-knowledge, friendship, and family relationships tie a number of these novels together. The Catcher in the Rye and The Temple of

Gold are particular favorites [redacted], and it is probably not a coincidence that both books have a number of humorous scenes that provide relief from the problems of the main characters. These two novels, in addition, deal with male-female adolescent relationships, and the students like to read about and discuss these relationships. At one point, I introduced some short stories with adolescent main characters, as well as magazine articles that dealt with adolescent problems; however, these were not very popular with the students, and they were eager to get back to the reading of novels. Although it is not necessary to go into a long explanation of the reasons for the success of the five books, one or two points about each one might be helpful to a prospective teacher of this course.

Aside from being the classic American novel about adolescence, The Catcher in the Rye presents a very real, and, to many students, a very likable main character. Sixteen year old Holden Caulfield experiences many of the doubts, goes through many of the problems, and asks many of the questions that our fifteen and sixteen year old students are asking. The fact that the book was written twenty-five years ago does not seem to be too important. When we discuss this novel, we talk about Holden's inability to adjust to the world the way it is. I ask the students whether they think Holden is all right and the world is mixed up, or vice versa. The students who like Holden become very involved in defending him, and those who

feel that he is the biggest phony in the book (in spite of his accusing everyone else of being a phony) attack him enthusiastically. Some students dislike this novel because they find its picaresque style hard to follow. "I didn't like this book because it didn't really have a plot." Or, "This book was boring because not much happened in it." What such students need to see is that almost all the situations and encounters that Holden goes through, no matter how brief or trivial, trigger the same negative response in him. Sometimes the students make paradoxical statements, such as "This book was good, but boring." What is missing in their perspective is the ability to see themselves as others see them, or the ability to analyze and say what they really mean. It is unrealistic to expect every student to like every novel; if he can relate to just a few of them, he can, perhaps, begin to see things in his own life more clearly. I often recommend that the students read a book like The Catcher in the Rye again, in a few years, when they have more perspective and can look at the book more objectively. They are always surprised when I tell them how many times I have read a certain book, since most of them have never read a book more than once. Once in a while, a student who really enjoyed one of the novels will read it a second time while the class is still discussing it. If this happens, I encourage that student to tell the class how the second reading differs from the first. At the end of the

course, one student commented, "I learned not to judge people too quickly, or to categorize them the way Holden did." Said another student, "It seemed that all the other main characters we read about were modeled after Holden Caulfield."

When we discuss A Separate Peace, we talk about the themes of friendship and human aggression. First, I ask the students to talk about the ways in which they handle anger. They respond with, "I yell at my mother", or "I go into my room and listen to my stereo", or "I cry and don't talk to anyone." Some explain, "I let it build up inside me till I feel ready to burst," or "I pick on my little brother." Then we discuss the way Gene handles the anger which builds up in him as he experiences the phenomenon of Finny's friendship. The students ask to discuss Gene's jealousy of Finny, the two boys' academic/athletic competition, and Finny's fall from the tree. They are often disturbed by Finny's death. "Why did he have to die? Couldn't Gene have made his big realization if Finny had only been injured?" This novel seems to encourage students to think about their own friends and the way in which they relate to their friends. As one student reader said, "This book got me thinking about friends, and if they really mean so much to you that you want to hurt them out of jealousy. I have had that feeling, but I never carried it out." Said another student, "It makes me think that you must trust people and accept them the way they are, not the way you want them to be." A third

student commented (again, paradoxically) "I didn't like this book because it dragged on. It made me think a lot, though, because I had a best friend, and I thought she was so perfect."

When we get to The Temple of Gold, we concentrate on Ray Trevitt's belief that if he can find the "handle" to life, the "answer" to it, then everything will be all right. We discuss the people, incidents, and events involved in his attempt to find this answer, as well as his ultimate failure to do so. The students usually want to talk about Ray's success with females, his relationship with his best friend, Zock, and his inability to get along with his parents. Some students can not understand what it is that Ray is looking for, and we must frequently go over the meaning of the title in relation to Ray's search. Most of the students like this novel very much. Said one, "This is my favorite book. It made me feel that even with all the disappointments in life, you can still go on living. There is always something to step in for what you lost."

The Man Without a Face is a relatively new book that is very popular with students. It deals with a fourteen year old boy who is very much alone and who has never loved anyone. His forty-seven year old tutor, the disfigured "man without a face," teaches Charles that he is, indeed, capable of both friendship and love. Their relationship bothers some of the students. One wrote, "I did not enjoy this novel. It was a good story, but it made me feel uncomfortable. It made me have crazy

thoughts about life." Other students are more concerned with the practical matters in the novel. For example, "The book made me think of the fights that my brothers and sisters have." They want to discuss these sibling relationships, because they can relate to them so easily. They can identify with Charles' frustration with his older sister, and his annoyance with his mother's attempts to manipulate him. After we finished our study of The Man Without a Face a couple of years ago, the students still had questions about the book. "Why did Justin have to die? Why couldn't he just go away and come back later on?" I suggested that one of the students compile all the questions and send a letter to the author, Isabelle Holland. One girl in the class volunteered to do just that; and several weeks later, she received a gracious reply from Ms. Holland. This novel seems to touch a responsive chord in students' minds. Said one, "The book teaches you to face up to your problems and not cop out." Said another, "The book made me think about how much you can do when you really want to."

The novel that has the greatest emotional impact on the students is Night, Elie Wiesel's autobiographical account of the adolescent period he spent in a Nazi concentration camp. The students ask to discuss Elie's relationship with his father, his religious questioning and gradual loss of faith, and his growing inner hardness. They want to talk about certain scenes or certain conversations that disturb them. This book is an eye-opener for

most adolescents. As one explained, "This is a superb book. Some of the things that happened in it are disgusting, but they did happen, and everyone should know." Commented another student, "This was the most depressing book I've ever read. Everyone should read it, so they know what really went on." We talk about Wiesel as an adolescent and whether or not he was denied an adolescence because of his situation. As part of our study of Night, we see the French documentary film, Night and Fog. This award-winning film about life in the concentration camps is brutally honest and thus disturbing; therefore, I tell the students about it beforehand and do not require that they see it. Also, they are permitted to leave the room during the showing of the film. Interestingly, few students have ever chosen these options. Explained one, "It's so sad. A lot of books are sad in an unreal way, but this is reality."

Taken together, these five novels seem to say that adolescence is a time of personal testing, a time for coming to grips with what it means to be a thinking, feeling human being. They say, in addition, that life is a series of problems and decisions, and that we must learn to cope with those problems and live with the consequences of those decisions. Holden, Gene, Ray, Charles, and Elie all realize, eventually, that a person must live, first and foremost, with himself. If he cannot come to terms with himself, or achieve a sense of peace within himself, he will be caught up in an ongoing internal struggle.

When the report on the individually chosen novel is introduced, I give the students a booklist of novels with adolescent main characters. The list starts with The Adventures of Tom Sawyer and The Adventures of Huckleberry Finn, and ends with the titles of present day novels. With this booklist, I distribute a handout which has the assignment explained in detail. Often, the assignment deals with the idea of conflict, a literary term which we have been discussing throughout the course. The student must first decide the nature of the main character's conflict; then he must determine how the conflict begins, how it grows, how it reaches its height, and how it is resolved. If the conflict is not resolved, he must explain why not. In this essay, the student must also provide specific examples and quotations from the book to support general points. Since conflict is essential to most literary works, it is an assignment which should have meaning for the student in his future reading.

Class discussions in The Adolescent in Literature can be very enjoyable. Most of the discussions involve the whole class, although occasionally the class divides into small groups for discussions. On the first day of the discussion of a new book, I sometimes ask students to write any questions they have about the novel, any points they do not understand, and any issues they would like to hear discussed. I compile their comments on a handout which is distributed the next day. We try

to cover these items at some point in our discussion, which usually lasts about a week. In reference to The Catcher in the Rye, for example, students often write, "Why is Holden depressed so often?" "Why can't he get along with anyone?" "If Holden is bright, why does he keep flunking out of school?" During these discussions, we concentrate on the main character's concerns. With The Catcher in the Rye, for instance, we begin with an examination of Holden's personality, then go on to the problems he faces and the ways in which he relates to those around him. We also talk about Holden's self-image and discuss whether his feelings about himself are common to adolescents or peculiar to him. I try to ask questions that do not have "right" or "wrong" answers. For example, "What is Holden's attitude toward school, and why does he have this attitude?" Or, "Which scenes would you highlight if you were filming this novel, and why?" Students sometimes bring up personal experiences which they use to illustrate the validity of Holden's concerns. They talk about their friends, their siblings, and their feelings about themselves. It is important that these discussions do not become sensitivity-training workshops. If this seems to be happening, I steer the discussion back to a specific issue in the book. I hope, of course, that all the students will participate in the discussions; sometimes I call on students if they have avoided taking active roles in class discussions. I also try to ask questions that force students to look at Holden in

relation to themselves. I might ask the girls in the class if they would like to date Holden; I might ask the boys if they would like to have Holden as a close friend. In order to answer such questions, one would have to think about Holden's personality very carefully. During these discussions, I try to avoid the phrase "typical adolescent", because I do not think there is one. (One potential limitation of the course is that a number of the adolescent heroes are alike, and thus tend to present a picture of the "typical" literary adolescent.)

Once in a while, an overnight written assignment is the topic for the next day's discussion. Having their thoughts in writing makes many students feel more comfortable, and more willing to take part. In addition to discussing the novels from literary viewpoints (tone, symbolism, point of view, etc.) we often discuss something that is of general interest to adolescents, such as the people who influence them the most. We make a list of these people (friends, parents, siblings, relatives, teachers, employers, coaches) and discuss the ways in which they influence teenagers. Then we talk about the people who are the greatest influences on the lives of the main characters in the novels we read. Sometimes we discuss adolescent friendships. I might ask the students to write personal definitions of the word "friend." After we talk about what a good friend is, we discuss the kind of friend Gene was to Finny, and vice versa. Since the students must support their comments with

specific references to the novel, it is important that they have the books with them each day. These constant references to the book make the student realize how an author must use narration, description, and dialogue to convey a theme. We talk about how realistic or unrealistic the novels are. How do they compare and contrast with the lives of "real" adolescents? Often, I read a passage aloud, or I ask a student to read aloud. This refreshes the students' memories and makes the book come alive. Often, the students ask why so many of the characters go through such difficult adolescent stages. That question gets us into an examination of why so much of literature is concerned with problems and conflicts.

As with the discussion questions, the writing assignments involve questions that do not have "right" or "wrong" answers. They are questions which the student can answer by giving his own opinion and supporting it with examples and quotations from the book itself. Usually, there are a couple of overnight, single-paragraph assignments on each novel, and one longer paper (two or three pages) which is written when we have finished talking about a book. An example of a single-paragraph paper is "What do you think Ray Trevitt and his friends are talking about when they refer to a "temple of gold"? Or, "Which scene is your favorite, and why?" I go over the basic paragraph structure of stating, explaining, and illustrating a point. The overnight assignment might also be a brief list; for example, after we saw

the film version of Lord of the Flies, the students were asked to make up ten good discussion questions on the film. The longer papers are often expository essays, and the form for such essays is explained at the beginning of the course. Topics might be: "Holden. . .Ten Years Later" or "Is Holden Mature?" In a less structured paper, students might write about the events in a novel from a minor character's point of view. (This was a particularly successful assignment with regard to The Temple of Gold.) If the content of the students' papers is not discussed when the papers are handed in, it is discussed when the papers are handed back. I think it is important for them to have an idea of what others in the class think about the same issue; they should share these thoughts with one another. I try to vary the writing assignments as much as possible. Said one student at the end of the course, "We didn't have to do book reports; we did things that really made you think." Since we are trying to help students with their writing, as well as with their understanding of literature, they are required to make correction sheets which list and correct all the mechanical errors made on each assignment. If a common problem in mechanics should arise, we have a mini-lesson on that problem. Since there are no tests in this course, the student's grade depends upon class participation and written assignments.

Sometimes it is more appropriate for the students to express their thoughts and feelings about a novel through creative projects,

rather than through written assignments. Night, for example, lends itself to this type of project. The students work on these projects, at home, for about a week; then they present their projects to the rest of the class. The projects include art work, music, sculpture, poetry, photographs, etc. Usually, the students do very well on these projects. Through a drawing, a painting, a musical composition, or an original poem, the students express a compassion and sensitivity that some of them are hesitant to express in a class discussion. Perhaps this is because class attention is taken away from the student and focused on the project itself.

Both short and feature-length films have been very effective in this course. The film that the students enjoy the most is The Diary of Anne Frank; however, they have also made positive comments about The Loneliness of the Long Distance Runner and Lord of the Flies. Sometimes they get so interested in the film version of a novel, they are moved to read the novel itself. If we are to see a film and I know that the school has copies of the novel, I make those copies available to the students immediately after the screening of the film. The National Film Board of Canada produces very good short films on adolescence. One such film is No Reason to Stay; it is the story of Christopher Wood, a bright, high school senior who decides to drop out of school shortly before graduation, because there is "no reason to stay." Another short film, titled

You're No Good, tells about an eighteen year old boy who steals a motorcycle and gets into trouble with the law. We always discuss these films; sometimes the students write about them, as well. Did Christopher make a wise decision? Did the young thief have needs that no one recognized?

Field trips and guest speakers are also part of the course. We have gone to local movie theaters to see Romeo and Juliet, A Separate Peace, and American Graffiti. After studying A Separate Peace, two classes visited Exeter Academy in nearby New Hapshire. Two English teachers had attended or taught at prep schools such as the ones described in The Catcher in the Rye and A Separate Peace; both of them visited our class and spoke to the students, answering their questions about life at such schools. One teacher brought with him some slides of his school; the other teacher brought the school's yearbook. Another guest speaker was the school's consulting psychiatrist, who dealt with students' questions on a number of adolescent issues raised in the novels we read.

At the end of the semester, I ask the students to write anonymous evaluations of the course. I suggest that they look through their folders, which contain all of their written work, as they respond to the evaluation questions. First, I ask them to comment on each novel that we read and to answer questions like the following: Did you enjoy reading this novel? Why? In what way did it make you think? What, if anything, did you

17.

learn from it? Were you able to relate it to your own life? Do you think it should be a part of next year's course? I also ask the students to comment on the individual reports, the major writing assignments, the creative projects, and the discussions. I ask them which assignment was their favorite and why? Which was their least favorite and why? I also ask them to comment on the teacher's general approach to the course and to make specific suggestions for improving the course. (They frequently suggest the addition of more novels with female main characters; the scarcity of such novels is a problem.) Finally, I ask them to suggest other novels that would be appropriate to study. Their suggestions often include Lisa, Bright and Dark; The Outsiders; That Was Then; This is Now; Black Boy; and The Pigman. I use their responses to determine the reading selections and the assignments for the following year. For example, Huckleberry Finn is no longer required reading. Black Boy might become required reading on a one year trial basis.

Over the last four years, dozens of students have commented positively about this course. Their comments have ranged from, "The course helped me think about the views of boys, which I didn't even think existed" to "The course has affected my attitude toward reading. Before, I didn't like to read, and now I read a book every two weeks." One comment, however, stands out. It may well be the primary reason for the success of The Adolescent in

Literature. I had asked the students if the course made them think about themselves and about adolescence more than they usually did. One teenager replied, "Yes, because sometimes I feel the same exact way the main character of the last book we read felt. It's funny, but sometimes the things that happen in books also happen to me."