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ABSTRACT

An upper school English program has been experimenting with ways to reinforce its traditional literary curriculum with contemporary works. Three contemporary novels in particular (Naylor's "The Women of Brewster Place," Walker's "The Color Purple," and Miller's "A Canticle for Leibowitz") have been found to foster a sense of continuity with the enduring works which populate the classical, British, and American traditions. The contemporary fiction is incorporated into the program in such a way as to deepen students' appreciation of the demanding themes and evolving fictional, dramatic, and poetic forms they have already encountered. Each recent work represents a unique and "modern" approach to an ages-old theme; each takes its place within a centuries-old tradition of genre, or of narrative technique. The Naylor book paints the lives of a group of working, oppressed black women who have migrated to a rundown area of the city. They form a composite portrait of a community of neglected women, and serve as a poignant modern counterpoint to the variegated band of pilgrims Chaucer draws with such subtlety. "The Color Purple" is an epistolary novel and so fits nicely into a curriculum that includes "Pamela" and "Pride and Prejudice." Miller's evocation of a postnuclear future, when in effect the world returns to the barbarian and primitive system that marked the early Middle Ages is a superb introduction to that era for students in this program. (Possible essay topics and "journal response" assignments are included.) (NKA)

Contemporary Literature/Traditional Curriculum

Jamieson Spencer

Contemporary Literature/Traditional Curriculum

My school's Upper School English program has been experimenting in the last couple of years with ways to reenforce our traditional literary curriculum with works of immediate contemporary value and application. We are pleased with three new acquisitions in particular: Gloria Naylor's The Women of Brewster Place, Alice Walker's The Color Purple and Walter M. Miller's A Canticle for Leibowitz. The Walker novel works well as a supplement to our junior year focus, which is essentially the British novel from 1700 to 1875; the other two works reenforce various aspects, both thematic and formal, of our tenth grade emphasis, Medieval and Renaissance literature.

Our rationale is a multiple one. To convey it adequately, I need to sketch for you some of the philosophy that underlies our original commitment to an historically-oriented curriculum.

It was Matthew Arnold's ideal of exposing students to works of exceptional literary merit that prompted our initial adoption of such a curriculum - a curriculum based primarily on the Classical, British and American traditions. We were flexible enough in our approach to incorporate two plays of Shakespeare and one Dickens novel each year, even at the expense of strict historical continuity. In addition to the sheerly pedagogical benefits to be derived from exposing students to literature so demanding in its themes, its vocabulary, its complexity and depth, there were, we believed, further benefits. Chief among them is that it provides students with an antidote to our century's debilitating spirit of mindless change, its climate of pervasive instability. Our curriculum exposes them to a sense of tradition, of evolving fictional and dramatic and poetic forms, of, above all, recurring human themes. We aimed to foster a sense of continuity, through this exposure to "the best that has been said and thought."

But it is of still greater significance that the fullest benefits our students may derive are those that may not be felt or realized for 10 or 20 years. That's when the values these "great writers" embody and dramatize, and the habits of thought demanded for their full comprehension and accurate interpretation, start to prove their worth. The various life experiences each student will meet within his or her future will help shape the need for such visions, such scrutiny. We all too often neglect to remember that our job as teachers carries with it the demand for a large measure of suspended belief - of farsighted faith that what we are teaching

(and modeling) is right, even though we get to observe no immediate, tangible or quantifiable results. Rather than teach to a particular test or examination - some visible demonstration of so-called mastery or mere retention - we ought to be recollecting that the students we instruct will not even begin to find their true selves until well after they leave us, well after college, well after marriage; often, alas, well after the first divorce! We need to be sure that the habits of thinking and feeling and emulation that we transmit and foster, whether in sixth, tenth or twelfth grade, are meant to see them through life's full spectrum. We are equipping them for the painful reversals and difficulties, as well as providing the richness and fullness of humane vision that will make them eager to sample all that their life will bring them. We want them to bring to those encounters these transmitted ideals of humane thinking - of interested and tolerant openness - to all they encounter, whether it be their job, their colleagues, their spouses, their children,

These noble ideals passed on to us by past generations of artists do not, however, demand that we exclude from our curriculum artifacts of contemporary culture. For there are works which, while falling short perhaps of lasting literary merit, do contribute to the spirit of what Arnold terms Hellenism: "the ardent sense for all the new and changing combinations of (ideas) which man's development brings with it." We recognize, in short, an obligation that complements our dedication to tradition - an obligation to show our students literature's power to dramatize contemporary human issues.

The three works whose possibilities I'd like to pass on to you today represent our effort to meet that responsibility. But I hasten to add that we have incorporated them in a way that deepens students' appreciation of those themes and forms they have already encountered in their exposure to our traditional works. We want students to see how each modern work - Miller's, Naylor's and Walker's - fits into a tradition; each represents a unique and "modern" approach to an ages-old theme, each takes its place within a centuries-old tradition of genre, or of narrative tehnique, or of formal structure. It provides a healthful shock for students to be shown that works that seem (and indeed are) so gripping, so contemporary, are in fact merely performing literature's traditional function while expanding its formal potential and thematic applications.

One further benefit that deserves stressing here concerns women. Ours is an all-girls school, and so we seize every opportunity we can to promote possibilities for our students' futures - their futures as professionals, their futures as people.

To expose them to works by successful women writers establishes for our young women models of achievement, both personal and artistic. Naylor and Walker are women who through their dedication to their craft can serve as objects of emulation. The professional "best self" that each has striven to realize serves as another model of personal behavior that each of our young women can aim toward. Or, for that matter, contemplate and then choose to reject in terms of some other "self" she may wish to achieve.

The accompanying materials which you should have in your hand by now indicate specific uses to which each of these three books may be put. There you will see possible essay topics and "journal response" assignments that we have been developing over the last two years. Before discussing some of these specific applications for you, let me point out the relevance that we initially saw these works offering to our established curriculum. The Naylor books paints the lives of a group of working, oppressed, generally single black women, living in a run-down area of, apparently, Chicago. Each has migrated to the city from unhappy lives elsewhere. As a group, they form a composite portrait of a community of neglected women, undervalued individuals. They thus serve as a poignant modern counterpart to the admittedly more variegated band of Canterbury pilgrams Chaucer draws with such subtlety and sympathy - his tales being the focal work of our sophomore 1st term curriculum. The multiple personalities each author portrays provide an inevitable artistic parallel and the opportunity for an invaluable comparison of two widely divergent but complexly populated societies. And there is in both writers a deep affection for the full canvas of individuals - suffering, maladjusted, lonely, heroic. The Color Purple is an epistolary novel and so fits nicely into a curriculum that includes Pamela and Pride and Prejudice. Comparisons of the ways letters are used, structurally, and the singular potential they provide for conveying character through tone and diction, are two obvious areas of pedagogic analysis. The novel also traces the reintegration of an essentially humane and self-reliant matriarchy, and thereby allows dramatic comparison with two other modern works - June Brindell's Ariadne and William Golding's The Inheritors. The former is an effective retelling of the Greek Theseus myth from the quite different woman's point of view; the latter protrays an imagined encounter between gentle Neanderthals and our own ancestors, the sterner Cro-Magnons. Both serve to portray the essential superiority of ancient societies in which women's values and vision guide the tribal mores.

Finally, Miller's evocation of a post-nuclear future, when in effect the world returns to the barbarian and primitive system that marked the early Middle Ages is a superb introduction to that era for our sophomores. He paints with great accuracy and sympathy a time when monasteries resume their role as scattered seats for scribal retention of learning. Indeed, his portrait of monastic life and ideals is a remarkably relevant introduction to several of Chaucer's vivid depictions: his Monk in particular could learn much from the modern writer's brothers and abbots - Father Cheroki, Dom Paulo and Brother Kornhoer. Further, besides allowing an obvious chance to confront students with the devastating potential inherent in nuclear weaponry, the novel also sketches for us two thousand further years of history in which medieval life gives way to the next imagined Renaissance, and thence to a second technological inundation and terminal nuclear catastrophe. It is a stunning portrait with, as the material you are holding reflects, a wide range of stimulating intellectual and compositional applications.

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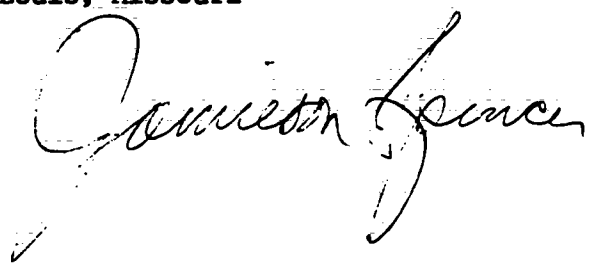

Some Suggested Topics, either for Journal response or formal Essay analysis.

The Color Purple

1. Describe in detail the origin and development of Celie's business. How did the business help her grow, personally?

2. Explain several of the abuses that men commit against women, as revealed in the novel.

3. Show the numbers of ways that women can bond together, as revealed in the novel.

4. Why is the narrative technique--letters to God--an appropriate form for Celie's confession? Explain the dramatic value inherent in switching those letters to Nettie half way through the novel.

5. Why is the paralleled African story an appropriate and necessary part of the novel? Or is it?

6. What value exhibited by the young African couple contrasts sharply with the values of the Black American couples?

7. List some of the indignities that Celie experiences before she meets Shug. List some of the characteristics of her self that she begins to value by the end of the novel. To what sides of Celie's personality, character or values do you feel most drawn? Explain.

8. There are many gender-related American traditions that this novel explores, and dismisses as antithetical to human dignity and self-sufficiency. Explain three and analyze Walker's alternative to the traditional custom, tradition or behavior.

9. As you read the nove, take notes or make marginal references to the following matters. When you have finished, enter in your journals the most significant examples of each category. Then write a substantial page or two on the final category. 1) customs and traditions of American blacks and their origins in Africa. 2) scenes or actions you find repellent or which make you uncomfortable. (Try to explain briefly.) 3) women upon whom Celie learns to model her behavior. 4) Celie's growth as a person and as a woman, and her successive rejection of values and behavior imposed upon her by a male-dominated society.

General end-of-term essay:

Analyze the view of women--how society defines them, the roles they are allowed to play, the steps they are at times encouraged to take on their own--in the major works we have read this semester. Look in detail at Ophelia (Hamlet); Mrs. Merdle OR Mrs. Gowan; Mrs. Plornish OR Little Dorrit (Little Dorrit); Barbara Undershaft (Major Barbara); Celie OR Nettie (The Color Purple); Chapter 6, Book I of Gulliver's Travels; and Cunegonda (Candide).

The Color Purple (2)

Some writers we have read this term have dramatized life' ungovernability: it is beyond our control or understanding, and its forces render us helpless, trapped, frustrated. Others are more optimistic and suggest steps we can take to make sense of the world and give our lives meaning--even to make the world a better place. Examine' the thoughts and actions of Hamlet, Celie and Nettie, Candide (at the end), the Houhynhyms, Barbara Undershaft, Ben Franklin, and Arthur Clennam.

Some short topics:

1. Is travel educational, or simply a means of escape? Compare with Gulliver with Nettie, or Candide with Hamlet.

2. Compare the sorts of family relationships with which Celie and Hamlet have to live, and try to assess the results these complex and often cruel bonds produce, in terms of personal beliefs, and the actions each character is driven to.

3. Develop the following scenario in several brief sentences: Gulliver comes, in Book V, to southern America; he drops in on Celie and finds her in bed with Shug.

The Women of Brewster Place

1. Explain how Kiswana sparks a sense of personal responsibility in Cora Lee.

2. Choose any four of the major characters and identify the strengths of each.

3. Explain Mattie's role in the lives of the other women in the novel.

4. In what special ways do women bond together, as revealed in the novel? In other words, what do women give each other?

5. The block party that occurs at the end of the novel is the first completed communal action shared by the place's residents. What might it represent?

6. The Women of Brewster Place is a convergent novel; i.e. all the action meets in a focus of setting. Explain the significance of the apartment building for the concerns of the novel, through action or character.

7. In this collection of short stories, Naylor presents a variety of women all of whose lives are filled with pain and frustration. But she also shows women reacting heroically to the privations they endure. Select and analyze three exemplars of "dealing with pain and suffering" and then compare their responses to those of Dr. Cors and Abbot Zerchi. in A Canticle for Leibowitz. OR: compare their responses to those of Chaucer's Prioress and the Wife of Bath: how do those five deal with the eccomic burdens placed on them by society's established patterns of behavior and legal custom.

A Canticle for Leibowitz

Journal Tasks

1. Read pages 52-53 and write a precis, explaining what roles the monastery served in Brother Francis' life, and the lives of people in those primitive (early medieval) days.

2. To help understand how the legend about Francis' meeting the Blessed Leibowiz sprang up, plant three rumors around school. We as a class will come to a common agreement as to what those rumors shall be, and we will determine three places where we will "plant" them. Your job then will be to keep an accurate account a) of what you tell your group of innocent listeners, b) their immediate reactions (quote the dialogue), and c) subsequent versions you hear of the original tales. Finally, write a paragraph explaining what this field experiment has taught you about human nature.

3. When Dom Paulo receives a message from New Rome, he blesses it with an ancient ritual gesture and words. Think about two or three daily rituals you practice either personally or as a family. Describe them in detail and then analyze what we learn about human nature from this need to engage in impractical gestures and habits.

4. You have been selected to help found a colony on Alpha Centauri. You will be permitted to take three living creatures along, and five "thing." Decide what your choices will be, explain why you have chosen them, and tell in full detail the use to which they will be put on your new colony. (Assume you will be fed and clothed on board the ship, but that when you arrive you will find only a habitable planet--no crops planted, no stores established.)

5. Could you live as a monk? (nun?): consider the three monastic vows that each brother most make--poverty, chastity and obedience. Assess your own ability to live by such strictures for the rest of your life: how well would you do in each category and why? Finally, is there any value or ideal so important to you that you would be willing to abide by such rules? What is it?

Essays

1. In Book II, technology and change visit the monastery. Analyze several of these forces of change that arrive, identify and analyze the person who brings or represents each force, and describe the effects of that force and agent on the lives, psychology and behavior of the monastic inhabitants.

2. Respond to Abbot Zerchi's lament in page 265 about mankind's inevitable habit of destroying his world, just when he has the technology and powers to come near to making his world nearly perfect.

3. Miller holds out hope at the very end of the novel in the appearance of Rachel, the immaculately conceived second head of Mrs. Grales. Is he suggesting that only through women may the world next time be saved? In light of the preceding chapters, analyze Miller's final stance: is he an optimist or a pessimist? Support with specific scenes.