



Curriculum Units by Fellows of the Yale-New Haven Teachers Institute
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Motherhood: Biological Asset or Social Liability?

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“Obviously the most oppressed of any oppressed group will be its women.”

Lorraine Hansberry

I am an English teacher at James Hillhouse High School in New Haven. Over 90% of Hillhouse’s population is black. Our students hail from all over the country, the Caribbean, Africa etc... They are from diverse socio-economic backgrounds as well as geographic locales. The commonality among them is that they attend an inner city high school. All of the students belong to a marginalized group for this reason. The few white students at Hillhouse are still subject to the stereotyping that accompanies inner city schools. The assumption often being that they are students at Hillhouse because of economic status not by choice. Oppression and racism are not new concepts for the Hillhouse students. This unit is especially important for them because it deals specifically with gender-based oppression. The objectives for this unit are to expose students to the different aspects of gender-based oppression and to identify the ways in which different societies manifest such oppression and perpetuate it. Students will recognize the ways in which they define themselves and others by paradigms rooted in oppressive thinking.

The female students at Hillhouse are mainly outspoken, self-assured young women. They are quick to defend themselves and confront others when they perceive an injustice. They are incensed when they feel their courage, strength and virtue have been questioned; yet they would be unable to articulate concisely how they had been insulted. They often perpetuate gender oppression by echoing sentiments that have long worked to subjugate women. An example of this is female students expressing their sexuality yet criticizing and judging others for the same behavior. Students who are not virgins are scorned and called names however no one wants to admit to being a virgin. With this unit and the material covered I seek to enlighten my students. They will be able to identify gender-based oppression and identify their own reasons for oppressing. Ultimately students will be able to draw conclusions about their own unique identity as both as women and as black women. They will understand the importance of both the biologically based roots of oppression and those that are culturally specific.

The emotional, sexual, and psychological stereotyping of females begins when the doctor says, “It’s a girl.” Shirley Chisholm

The following unit will explore gender-based oppression. Motherhood and the notion of it as both an asset and

a liability will be studied.

“Oppress”-1 to weigh heavily on the mind, spirits, or senses of; worry; trouble 2 to keep down by the cruel or unjust use of power or authority: rule harshly; tyrannize over 3 to crush; trample down b) to overpower; subdue

The dictionary offers the above definition of oppress. Oppression based upon gender is omnipresent throughout history and in contemporary times. While it is subtler in some societies than others it occurs nonetheless. It can easily be identified and protested yet rarely are explanations offered for this practice. This unit will explore themes of female oppression and consider the biological and social aspects of gender based oppression. Biological aspects and social constructions of motherhood will be identified and analyzed in a number of fictional and nonfiction works. Various issues and questions will be discussed throughout the unit. Research, journal writing and reading will all be included while studying these themes. In this manner students will learn to identify sexual oppression in its many forms and will begin to formulate theories as to its origin and to articulate reasons for the perpetuation of such oppressions. The unit includes three novels that deal with themes of motherhood and sexual oppression: *The Joy Luck Club* by Amy Tan, *Jasmine* by Bharati Mukherjee, and *Beloved* by Toni Morrison.

Motherhood

The female capacity to reproduce offers women certain advantages. Biologically there are characteristics that allow for certain advantages. Yet, as society has become more complex and moved from biologically based rationale and customs, attitudes and traditions have developed that move away from biologically sound traditions and practices. Asia has long been notorious for its poor treatment and abuse of women. The people of this area have long been scrutinized for the low status of their women. Routine female infanticide and more recent sex-selective abortions (India) have been widely publicized and criticized by the global community. The capacity for motherhood has long been the definitive characteristic of women. As society changes and biological advantages and necessities are negated by social institutions women strive to reinvent and redefine themselves against underpinnings of a sexist world. Motherhood itself is a permeable concept and must be defined in specific contexts.

Infanticide

Students will focus on several questions during the unit. They will first be asked to define Motherhood. What are a mother’s responsibilities? Motherhood in the biological sense consists of the ability to procreate and ensure that offspring is equipped with the essentials for survival. All mothers make choices. By analyzing mating habits of nonhuman primates students will be confronted with similarities they have with humans. The leap from nonhuman primates to humans manifests the human need for emotional survival.

Infanticide will be reviewed and analyzed by students from the biological standpoint and a social standpoint. Infanticide is widely viewed by the western contemporary world to be the most heinous of offenses, especially

for a mother. On the surface it appears to go against everything for which “motherhood” stands. The readings selected raise unique issues pertaining to infanticide. Is a mother only responsible for trying to maintain life? At which point does emotional happiness and well being transcend a mother's wish for her child's survival. Do the two ever diverge? Students will review the behavior of gorilla mothers. Gorilla mothers manifest a great deal of affection and attachment to their offspring. When a breeding silverback dies and leaves the mother and her infant unprotected infanticide, or attempted infanticide is inevitable. Biologically this practice among Gorilla males is sensible. Offspring of other males is a possible threat. By eliminating offspring of others the male is free to produce his own offspring. The female gorilla usually mates with her child's killer because that is the only option offered her. Surprisingly bachelor gorillas often attempt to kill infants of females who are protected. When this occurs females usually join with the offending male and mate with him. This is a horrific prospect when viewed through modern human society. However when the rationale for the gorilla's behavior is offered it may be adapted to conform to the ideals of a “good” mother. “The female's choice is imposed by the logic of violence, by the threat to her next infant. The new silverback has become her hired gun in an ape universe of silverback baby killers.” **(1)**

By establishing the behavior of the female gorilla as the paradigm for maternal responsibility can we not trace some of the oppressive behavior we see manifested throughout the world?

Studies of infanticide in India point to reasons that reflect the female gorilla's alleged logic. Economic necessity may be the “silverback baby killer” that Indian women are attempting to escape. Interviews with several poor farming couples in India reveal a humane excuse to justify infanticide. “We felt very bad, but at the same time suppose she had lived? It was better to save her from a lifetime of suffering.” **(2)**

These novels are covered in the unit yet several others may be substituted and included. Sociological and political issues concerning women's rights and reproductive issues also provide a broader approach to the issues presented.

Introduction to Unit

Goals:

Identify Gender Based Oppression

Draw Conclusions and Analyze Reasons for Oppression

Recognize Culture Specific Oppression

Formulate Notions of Motherhood based on Biological, Sociological and Literary Material

Exposure to a variety of literature

Analysis of different literary styles and devices

Strategies:

During the unit students will formulate notions and questions concerning gender based oppression. They will

record questions and responses in their journals. Before beginning the readings I will assign a simple question. Why do women change their names when they marry? Students will respond to this question in their journals. They will be expected to find the answer to this question while working on the unit. The class will revisit this question upon the unit's conclusion and discuss findings.

Opening Lesson Plan

Objectives:

Define gender-based oppression

Discuss motherhood and what it means

Answer the question what makes a good mother?

"We are the daughters of those who chose to survive."

Anonymous

Mini Unit I The Joy Luck Club

Objectives:

Identify patterns of maternal love and concern among the women in the novel

Cite evidence of oppression?

Distinguish between biological motivation and social motivation for Oppression in the novel

Determine whether motherhood is an asset or liability in the Novel

Understand use of multiple first person narrators

Amy Tan's novel *The Joy Luck Club* is a poignant story of four women who have emigrated from China. Each member of the "the joy luck club" tells the story of her life in China. In turn each of the women's daughters tells her story. Motherhood and the legacies left to each daughter are the themes throughout the book. *The Joy Luck Club* presents the reader with an interesting perspective on motherhood for several reasons. Tan begins in the present with the American born daughters. Each daughter manifests confusion and resentment toward her mother and her strange notions of life. The mothers in the *Joy Luck Club* are loving mothers in the only way that they know. Having been raised in China under very different social circumstances with extremely different expectations for and of daughters their intentions are often misconstrued by their daughters. The strategies mothers employed to ensure the emotional survival of daughters differ from China to the United States.

The novel is relayed in a series of vignettes with seven different narrators. The unique structure of the novel allows the reader to sense the alienation both the members of the *Joy Luck Club* feel and that of their

daughters. Each vignette is relayed in the first person with the exception of Suyuan's story. Her story is told by her daughter both from what she has heard directly from her mother and what she has learned from her father and other members of the Joy Luck Club.

The novel opens with a meeting of the Joy Luck Club. Jing-Mei Woo narrates the first chapter. She is the daughter of Suyuan Woo, the recently deceased founder of the Joy Luck Club. The reader is introduced to the three remaining members of the Joy Luck Club by Jing-Mei. The remaining vignettes of the first part of the novel consist of the members relaying stories of their early lives in China. The vignettes are relayed in the first person to the reader only. The second part of the novel is composed of the vignettes told by the daughters of their early lives. The third part of the novel is the daughters as adults. Each relays a way in which she perceives that she has failed as a woman (as daughter or wife) or has failed to live up to her mother's expectations for her. The last part of the novel is a series of vignettes told by the members of the Joy Luck Club. They discuss their daughters as related to the lives of their own mothers. The unique narrative is very effective because it allows the reader to understand the motives of both mother and daughter. As readers we can understand the perspectives of all of the narrators. Yet as readers we can clearly understand the inability of the characters to understand one another. What would have prepared the daughters for life as women in China caused a chasm between them when raised Chinese in the United States. Standards of good mothering were different in the United States because expectations of and for women are very different. The members of the Joy Luck Club sought to empower their daughters yet the daughters were unable to recognize this. They could not make sense of the lessons the mothers tried to impart.

"She said the two soups were almost the same, chabudwo. Or maybe she said butong, not the same thing at all. It was one of those Chinese expressions that means the better half of mixed intentions. I can never remember things I didn't understand in the first place." 3

Activities for The Joy Luck Club

Objectives:

Outline Characteristics and Philosophies of women in the novel

Identify patterns in relationships, both familial and generational

Strategies

Students will keep a journal while reading the novel. They will have one page for each of the members of the "joy luck club"; they will also have a page for each of the mothers of the members and the daughters.

Joy Luck Club Members

Suyuan Woo

An-Mei Hsu

Lindo Jong

Ying-ying St. Clair

The journal will be divided according to family, not generation. Students will provide a brief history for each of the Joy luck Club members.

Students will answer the following questions for each of the members:

What characteristics would you use to describe this member?

What does the character consider a valuable lesson in her life?

What does she want for her daughter?

Is she a good mother?

For each of the daughters the students will answer the following questions:

How would she describe her mother?

What behaviors and attitudes of her mother does she not understand?

Where does she believe that her mother failed her?

For the grandmothers (mothers of the joy luck club members)

What did they impart to their own daughter's

Upon completing the novel students will have a comprehensive profile of each character. They will be asked to review their notes and note similarities among the women.

They will be asked to write a three page paper based on the novel and journals.

They will answer the following questions in the papers.

Each of the daughters feels there is a great divide between her and her mother. Where is there evidence to suggest this? What are the reasons for the division? Are the members of the Joy luck club good mothers?

Students must cite specific reasons for their opinions. They must also consider the reasons for the divisions among the generations.

Lesson Plan Understanding Narrative

Objective:

Analyze the author's use of vignettes to contribute to the overall theme

Evaluate effectiveness of multiple first person narrative

Strategies:

Students will be asked to discuss the author's use of narrative as it relates to the novel's themes.

Students must consider what the effect of the novel would be had it not been told in such a manner.

Mini Unit II Jasmine by Bharati Mukherejee

Objectives:

Identify Jasmine's transformations

Identify and discuss instances of female oppression in India

Strategies:

Students will keep a journal for Jasmine. They will chronicle Jasmine's life according to her name changes. How are they significant?

The protagonist of this novel undergoes several changes during the course of her short life. When the novel opens "Jasmine" is living in Iowa. At age twenty-four she is the unlikely companion of a middle-aged man and adoptive mother to a Vietnamese teenager. Jasmine recounts important events in her life retrospectively. She shares the events of her birth in a small village in Punjab and her eventual widowhood and exile from her native land. She was born Jyoti and is renamed Jasmine by her husband in India. His eventual death brings her to the United States where she lives in Florida, New York and eventually Iowa. For each phase of her life Jasmine is renamed. She does not choose what she will be called at any point. The novel chronicles her life according to her names. The novel's main theme is Jasmine's perpetual self-reinvention. She actively integrates American society with her Hindu heritage and past. She never questions or condemns the life she led prior to coming to the United States. She manifests much of the detachedness of the members of the Joy Luck Club but perhaps due to her youth she appears to be more successful with the change.

Jasmine appears to have an understanding of both cultures.

"If I had been a boy, my birth in a bountiful year would have marked me as luck, a child with a special destiny to fulfill. But Daughters were curses. A daughter had to be married off before she could enter heaven, and dowries beggared families for generation. Gods with infinite memories visited girl children on women who needed to be punished for sins committed in other incarnations. My mother's past must have been heavy with wrong. I was the fifth daughter, the seventh of nine children. When the midwife carried me out, my sisters tell me; I had a ruby-red choker of a bruise around my throat and sapphire fingerprints on my collarbone. When I revealed this to Taylor's wife, Wylie- I was their undocumented "caregiver" during my years in Manhattan-she missed the point and shrieked at my "foremothers." Listening to Wylie I thought I understood the philosophy behind Agent Orange. Wylie would overkill. My mother was a sniper. She wanted to spare me the pain of a dowry less bride. My mother wanted a happy life for me. I survived the sniping. My grandmother may have named me Jyoti, Light, but in surviving I was already Jane, a fighter and adapter. " 4

Jasmine's frank acceptance and total understanding of her mother's motives present the reader with an interesting perspective. She is living in contemporary America with an understanding for her mother's motives. Jasmine understands her strength and her situation. Throughout the novel the reader is presented with Jasmine's understanding of her native Punjab and practices against the backdrop of American values and understanding.

Activities for Jasmine

Three writing assignment will be due upon the novels conclusion:

Students will be asked to discuss Jasmine’s ability to reinvent her. How does she integrate the Indian way of thinking and the American way?

Students will also be asked to discuss the narrative style of the novel. How does the narrative style affect the overall theme of the novel?

How is motherhood constructed in Jasmine? Are there similarities among the women in The Joy Luck Club and those in Jasmine?

“Black women whose ancestors were brought to the United States beginning 1619 have lived through conditions of cruelty so horrible, so bizarre, the women had to reinvent themselves”

Maya Angelou

Mini Unit III Beloved by Toni Morrison

Objectives:

Analyze infanticide within the context of the slave mother

Identify issues of repression and signs of rebellion

Discuss Morrison’s narrative style and its impact upon the reader

Beloved opens with an introduction to a baby ghost. The ghost has been haunting Sethe and her household for eighteen years. As the novel unfolds the reader learns Sethe’s story through Morrison’s stream of conscious narrative. Sethe a fugitive slave escaped her owners while nine months pregnant. The night she finally decides to flee, her owner’s nephews held her down and took her milk from her. Sethe gives birth to her daughter Denver, her fourth child, while on the run. She stays with her mother in-law where slave catchers eventually locate her. When the slave catchers find Sethe in a shed she is holding her murdered daughter in her arms and attempting to bludgeon her infant against the shed wall. The white men are appalled with Sethe’s seemingly inexplicable behavior and back away in horror. They do not attempt to reclaim Sethe or her living children, as she is clearly insane. Sethe is left with the three children she has saved with her heinous action. By murdering her daughter she has saved herself and her children from a life of bondage and tragedy.

The narrative does not unfold sequentially. The reader learns through a series of flashbacks and narrative. Beloved deals with an unspeakable evil and through a perverse means outlines infanticide as a loving mother’s most humane option.

Activities for Beloved

Before reading the novel students will be asked what is the true meaning of motherhood?

What is the ultimate sacrifice a mother can make?

What is the most important thing a mother can do?

While reading the novel students will be asked to form a time line in their journals. This time line will chronicle the events in the story.

Upon completing the novel students will have three writing assignments.

Was Sethe's act heinous or humane?

Was motherhood a biological asset or social liability for slave women?

Describe Morrison's narrative style and its impact upon the novel's themes.

Conclusion and Final Project

Notes

Wrangham and Peterson, *Demonic Males Apes and the Origins of Human Violence* , (Houghton Mifflin Company, 1996 page 150,151

Bumiller, Elaine, *May You Be the Mother of a Hundred Sons*

Tan, Amy. *The Joy Luck Club* . New York: G Putnam's Sons, 1989

Mukherjee, Bharati. *Jasmine* . New York: Ballantine Books,1989

Student Reading List

Morrison, Toni. *Beloved* . New York: New York: Alfred A. Knopf, Inc.,1987

Mukherjee, Bharati. *Jasmine* . New York: Ballantine Books,1989

Tan, Amy. *The Joy Luck Club* . New York: G Putnam's Sons, 1989

Teacher's Reading List

Carby, Hazel V., *Reconstructing Womanhood* , "The Emergence of the Afro-American Woman Novelist". New York: Oxford University Press,1987

Cott, Nancy & Pleck, Elizabeth. *A Heritage of Her Own* . New York: Simon & Schuster, 1979

Fried, Marlene Gerber. *From Abortion to Reproductive Freedom: Transforming a Movement* . Boston: South End Press, 1990

Hawthorne, Nathaniel. *The Scarlet Letter* . Boston: Bedford Books of St. Martin's Press, 1991

Kingston, Maxine Hong. *The Woman Warrior* . New York: Random House, 1975

Wrangham and Peterson, *Demonic Males Apes and the Origins of Human Violence* , (Houghton Mifflin Company,1996 page 150,151

Zinn, Howard. *The People's History of the United States* . New York: Harper & Roe, 1980

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