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Coming of Age as a Reader, Writer and Thinker

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Introduction and Objectives

Two of my favorite novels growing up were *A Catcher in the Rye* by J.D Salinger and *A Separate Peace* by John Knowles. Looking back, I wonder how I could have identified so strongly with two upper class white male characters that went to elite prep schools. I grew up in a very different world. Nevertheless, the experiences of these two characters resonated with me. Like Holden, I was becoming increasingly disenchanted with the many "phonies" around me, and, like Gene, I was beginning to suspect that I had a war going on inside myself. Spending time with these two fictional characters offered me solace and at the same time held a mirror up to aspects of myself and of the world that were painful to look at. Witnessing someone else's journey to adulthood gave me the chance to make some sense of the messy business of growing up.

The coming-of-age story is a genre that invites readers to reflect upon themselves and upon their relationship to the world. In *Book Lust* , librarian and author Nancy Pearl asserts that "coming of age novels describe a search for understanding, not only of oneself, but of the often mysterious, contradictory and sometimes frightening adult world. They help readers reflect on their own experiences and offer a (sometimes minimal) consolation that one's feelings are not unique." (Pearl 207) These stories cross cultures and historical periods. While individual characteristics such as race, gender, ethnicity or family background will influence one's story, certain aspects of growing up are universal. The journey from innocence to experience is well documented in literature. There are many stories about losing a false sense of security, discovering injustice in the world and searching for one's authentic identity.

Typically, the protagonist of the coming of age story doesn't fully articulate or even recognize his or her own transformation. However, as witnesses of the character's journey, we can understand on an emotional and intellectual level how he has grown up. On occasion, the reader can even see something in the fictional world that he is blind to in his own life. Ironically, reading fiction can help him or her to "read" the real world more accurately. I've heard friends joke about how they wish someone gave them the "manual" for adulthood. Perhaps, in part, the coming-of-age story can serve this function.

As a new teacher, I was surprised when many of my thirteen, fourteen and fifteen year-old students would read one of these stories and dismiss it as something "boring" or that they couldn't "relate to." I soon discovered something that I probably should have known-many of my students were inexperienced readers. In

part, reading was unsatisfying for them because they hadn't yet come of age as thinkers. They did not automatically make inferences about characters, recognize themes, make connections between life and literature and evaluate the author's craft. I needed to make the processes that experienced readers use visible to them. I found the work of literacy theorists, Carol Booth Olson and Kylene Beers, particularly helpful as I developed practical strategies for my classroom and my practice as a teacher has been shaped by their work. Both of these women incorporated a Reader Response approach to literature which I have found to be an effective starting point for fostering independent thinking.

Reader Response theory assumes the stance that meaning is actively constructed by the reader. In other words, meaning does not reside solely within text, but is the result of the interaction between the reader and the text. Levels of interaction include: forming an understanding, developing interpretation, making connections, and generating a critical stance. Reading is no longer looked upon as a passive act of receiving someone else's meaning. However, I have noticed that many of my students are reluctant to give up the idea that all authority resides in the text. They believe that their main task is to prove that they "get it" by correctly answering the questions at the end of the story or parroting back what the teacher has said. Many are frustrated when I won't point to the answer in the text.

One exercise that I use to help students recognize what I call their "literal level, fill in the blank, worksheet type thinking" is to give them a "test," similar to one I took at a professional development workshop. This test was filled with nonsense sentences like the following: For the snagdoodle to work properly, all of its lombos must work together. The corresponding test question was: Why might a snagdoodle work improperly?

This exercise helps students to see that it is possible to get a good grade on the test while learning nothing of value.

My students' reluctance to move on to higher order thinking may be reinforced by what educational philosopher Paulo Freire (1970) calls the "banking model of education." (Maureen McLaughlin, Glenn L. DeVoogd 149) In *The Pedagogy of the Oppressed* Freire describes a teacher/student dynamic where teachers view students as bank accounts where they deposit facts and withdraw information when tests are given. He goes on to describe how students don't use the "deposits" because they don't seem to relate in any way to the students lives. Students are not taught to be critical readers because they are seen as "objects to be acted upon rather than subjects who make decisions about how and what they learn." (Maureen McLaughlin, Glenn L. DeVoogd 149)

As a teacher in New Haven, I work with students from social, racial and ethnic groups that traditionally have been marginalized in our society. Thus, Freire's metaphor frightens me. Often I feel tremendous pressure to push my students to a higher level of thinking. I see that there are issues of power involved and I imagine that the children in the wealthy suburbs are engaging in challenging inquiry, while my students believe that "doing work" is passively filling out worksheets. I want to pound the desk in frustration and exclaim, "If you don't start thinking for yourself someone will do the thinking for you," or "how are you going to 'stick it to the man' if you can't construct a cogent argument?" However, I continually need to remind myself that abstract thought is really quite new to my students. They, like their suburban counterparts (whom most people would consider the non-oppressed) are coming of age as thinkers.

According to the classic work of developmental psychologist, Jean Piaget, these early adolescents have just entered the formal operational stage which begins at around twelve years of age and continues into adulthood. It is characterized by the acquisition of the ability to think abstractly, reason logically and draw conclusions from the information available. During this stage the young adult is able to understand such

abstract concepts as love, recognize that when making moral decisions there are shades of gray, make predictions, concieve of logical theories and recognize the values that shape human behavior. This is quite a cognitive leap from what Piaget calls the concrete operational stage which typically occurs between the ages of seven and eleven.

Most children under the age of twelve do not view the world or literature in all its complexity. It is difficult for them to see and accept the contradictions that are inherent in human behavior. For example, the idea that Huck Finn defies the racism in his culture even though he calls his friend Jim "the N-word," is problematic. It disrupts the notion of an orderly, well-defined world where people and things are either good or bad, fair or unfair, right or wrong. Likewise, students can not fully consider the role that culture, social norms or the character's personal history play in his behavior.

It is not surprising that coming-of-age as an abstract thinker is a key task in developing into a mature thinking adult. However, such thinking demands entry into a world that is filled with contradictions, ambiguities and multiple perspectives. Sometimes there are more questions than answers and this world requires that one become an independent thinker in order to navigate it. Ideas need to be less fixed as new information is constantly assimilated. Things are not always as they appear to be. Being a mature thinker is hard work. It's frightening to leave the safety of childhood where things fit into clear categories and trusted adults can be relied upon to supply *right* answers.

Although traditionally we see adolescence as a time when students begin to challenge authority and question conventional wisdom, many early adolescents are ambivalent about becoming independent thinkers. Part of the answer might be that they have become accustomed to the banking model of education. They get extremely frustrated with the idea that I, as the teacher don't supply the *right* answer. They believe that *real* teachers give true and false tests and assign lists of vocabulary to memorize and rote grammatical exercises to complete all pedagogical strategies that have been found to be least effective in promoting critical thinking and strong insightful writing.

Researchers in critical literacy encourage teachers to help students to "problematize" issues. This involves asking questions that move students beyond superficial answers. For example, if students were asked to examine the problem of lack of motivation in teenage readers, they might suggest that the answer was to punish students that don't read and reward students that do. However, problematizing would mean to look at the complexity of the situation. Students might discover multiple factors that lead to lack of motivation: poor quality texts, students' past reading experiences, classroom climate, lack of choice in reading materials.

Growing up as a thinker and as a human being means entering into undiscovered territory. In doing research on the development of critical literacy, I've come across a quotation by Antonio Machado, the Spanish poet, who said, "Caminante, no hay camino, Se hace el camino al andar"-"Traveler, there is no road. The road is made as you walk." I believe that my job as a teacher is to provide the tools that children need to chart their own course as thinkers and to create a safe environment, rich with opportunities to practice critical reading and thinking.

Classroom strategies that support critical thinking

So how do we help students to cross the bridge from concrete to abstract thinking and to actively engage with the text as they read? In the section that follows I would like to present some methods that I have found particularly effective in helping students come of age as *thinkers.* All of these strategies challenge students to make their thinking *visible.* I frequently remind students that they are smart and are already doing the kind of thinking that they need to do in order to respond thoughtfully and analytically to literature. The problem is that they don't capture their thoughts or articulate why their conclusions make sense. It is essential to focus on fluency as students get their thinking on paper. At this point the focus is on getting ideas down. This is "first draft thinking" and students are expected to make discoveries and revise their initial reactions to the text as they go.

These strategies also promote independent inquiry among students. Traditionally, the teacher asks the majority of the questions and sets the agenda for class discourse. These methods put the onus on students. They are encouraged to remain curious, continually probing the text and relating it to their own life experience, as they seek answers to their own questions. They are then able revise, add to or clarify their theories through discourse with their peers. In fact I encourage students to keep their classmates in mind as they get their thinking down on paper. Making their thinking visible allows them to rehearse what they plan to contribute to class discussion.

Student centered discussion enables students to collectively develop interpretations and explore multiple perspectives. Inevitably they recognize that sometimes two people have equally viable points of view, even though their ways of seeing an issue are quite different. The reader response strategies encourage a similar ability to identify diverse characters' points of view and ultimately the author's perspective. Students begin to automatically look to the text to identify passages that reveal the character's and the author's assumptions about the world. Ultimately, these strategies help students step outside the text and consider author's craft and the broader implications of the author's choices.

The purpose of practicing these strategies continually in the classroom is to enable students to internalize mature "habits of mind" as readers and thinkers.

Reader Response Starters

Carol Olson and Robert Probst have both done extensive research on the cognitive strategies that underlie the reading and writing process. Olson has created a series of response starters that help students contruct meaning. Experienced readers tap prior knowledge, ask questions, make connections and reflect on the text during and after reading. The response starters provide a scaffold for students until these strategies become second nature. Sometimes I encourage students to use the starters to write in the margins as they read. To practice the process together, I often read a text aloud to students and stop at strategic points to have them respond to the text using the prompts. They can ask questions, make connections, evaluate the text or make predictions. The sentence starters kickstart their thinking.

I have found the prompts to be most helpful as a tool to help students articulate their initial understanding of text. Although, students want to verbalize their first emotional response immediately, when the class puts their first thoughts on paper using the prompts, a more analytical discourse follows. I have attached a list of open-ended prompts for responding to literature that I have adapted from the work of Robert Probst and Carol

Booth Olson. A comprehensive list is available is available in Carol Booth Olson's book *The Reading\Writing Connection: Stategies for Teaching and Learning in the Secondary Classroom* .

Questioning and Theorizing

This strategy taps into students' natural curiosity by encouraging them to generate their own questions about text. It is important that students understand that the types of questions I want them to generate do not have obvious answers. In other words they are not literal level questions that are spelled out in the text such as: What did Esperanza do when the teacher gave her the smelly sweater? (She took it) Where was Esperanza from? (Mexico).

A simple way to encourage higher level inquiry is to have students begin their questions with the phrase I wonder why: "I wonder why Esperanza… ?" or " I wonder why the author, Sandra Cisneros chose to _____." Both questions lead to analytical, interpretive and/or evaluative thinking. These are questions that do not have answers that are that are definitively correct or incorrect. They are debatable and require that the student develop a theory or multiple theories to answer the question. A theory requires support. I ask students to explain to me why their theory makes sense. They need to refer specifically both to the text and to their own experience of the world to substantiate their theory.

As my students are sometimes insecure about developing this habit of inquiry, I like to remind them that they already question and theorize on a regular basis. I point out that when I observe students in the hallway, most of them seem curious about each other. Additionally, I explain that I've overheard a lot of conversations at school (in the hallways and the teachers' room) about what people are doing and why people do what they do. I urge students to bring the same curiosity they have about people in real life to the people they meet in the texts. As students develop theories to answer the questions they generate, I urge them to make more of their thinking as visible as possible. In class I urge them to point specifically to the place in the text that shows us that their theory makes sense. Then I encourage them to think about where they have seen this "kind of thing" happening in real life.

Students' questions and theories provide the foundation for classroom discourse. As students share the "thinking they have done on paper," I encourage them to listen and respond to the theories of others by asking for clarification, adding to what's been said or offering a divergent opinion. Again my goal is to increase the flexibility of my students' thinking. I urge students to remain open-minded as I point out that there are multiple viable theories.

Finding and Interpreting Philosophical Passages

Most experienced readers read with a pencil or highlighter in hand. Often we underline passages that resonate with us or that we find particularly important or meaningful. Oftentimes, students are puzzled when asked to find *significant* passages. They instantly want to know what it is *I'm* looking for. At this point, I focus on the character's perspective. I tell students that significant passages are the philosophical ones-the ones that give us clues about what the character is thinking or feeling about something..

Finding these philosophical passages allows us to analyze the character's perspective, particularly his or her logic, beliefs and assumptions. I explain to students that one's philosophy, in the most simple sense, is his or her way of looking at the world. As the students begin to explore multiple perspectives, I expect that they will begin to appreciate that each of us has his or her own "truth" based on his or her own experience. Rather than jumping to premature conclusions (i.e that character was so stupid, or, she *shouldn't* have done that),

students will investigate causes.

By tracking these philosophical passages the student is able to recognize how and why the character has changed as a result of his experience. After locating philosophical passages and recording them in their notebooks, students can respond to them and then have a peer add his or her insights. (See appendix 1) Certainly, an understanding of the this character's shift in perspective will enable students to better understand the author's intent or the theme of the piece. I often help them to determine the author's perspective by completing the following sentence: I think that after reading this piece, the author wants me to understand that…

Identifying the Most Important Word, Phrase or Text Feature

Similar to finding philosophical passages, identifying the most important word, line and/or text feature helps students to root their interpretations in the text. Additionally it moves students from response to analysis. For example, they often have a gut sense that a certain word or phrase is important but have not been yet explored their reasoning. Again, they are asked to make their thinking visible to themselves and others. As they listen to the words and phrases that their classmates have selected they have an opportunity to reflect upon (and hopefully accept) multiple interpretations.

Identifying most important text features is a little more complicated but very useful in developing the ability to evaluate author's craft. Prior to using this strategy, it is important to have reviewed and identified basic rhetorical devices. The student can then identify literary elements: the author's use of figurative language, symbols, dialect etc. Theorizing about the stylistic choices the author made allows students to begin to see how they are related to the overall meaning of the piece. As students begin to master this skill, they learn to develop a more sophisticated critical stance.

Symbolic Responses

To help his students engage more deeply with texts, teacher researcher Jeff Wilhelm developed a strategy called symbolic story representation. In the SSR (1997) students reenact important scenes in the story using cutouts, objects or special props to represent characters, settings, motifs and key ideas. Although Wilhelm found that his students' first attempts were usually simple line drawings displaying the characters facial expression or surroundings, eventually they graduated to more sophisticated representations, such as dice to show risk taking or a tortilla to show that a character was "all wrapped up in himself."

I've found it helpful to begin by guiding students to think symbolically about the story. For example, I ask them to come up with an object, song, animal or color that reminds them of the character. Next, I ask students to explain why they made the comparison they did. Many students create these visual metaphors easily and the pictures give them a great starting point for interpretive thinking. A secondary benefit is that by creating their own similes and metaphors, students become more aware of these literary devices in texts.

Taking the Character's Perspective Through Role Play

I often ask students to take on the voice of one of the characters in the piece they are reading. Sometimes I'll ask students to do this in writing. They might write a diary entry or letter as the character. This assignment offers us the opportunity to examine voice and dialect as well as the character's inner life. The creative writing needs to stay true to the text. My experience has been that many students who have had difficulty writing analytical responses demonstrate insight when they step into the character's shoes.

Scripted or unscripted dramatic role play also offers students the chance to demonstrate their interpretations. The benefit of this type of activity is that it allows students to experience multiple perspectives. There are many variations of this activity. Students can produce a talk show where the characters are guests or two characters from different pieces might meet or have a conversation. Improvisation also provides opportunities for students to playout key conflicts in the text. Students often enjoy assuming the persona of one of the characters and answering questions directed to them by the class.

The Chalk Talk

This strategy is outlined in the New Haven Public School District's 9 th grade curriculum. A Chalk Talk is a silent way to do reflection, generate ideas, check on learning, develop projects or solve problems. In short, it is a silent discourse. It can be used with any level group. During the activity no one may talk at all. Instead the conversation must take place on chart paper or the blackboard. The teacher/facilitator usually starts out by posing a question or presenting a comment in writing. Students then respond. Participants can write a comment, comment on another's idea(s) (simply by drawing an arrow or line to the comment to which the response is directed), ask a question, etc.

The teacher can facilitate the discussion (or *problematize*) by circling interesting ideas, writing questions about a participant comment, adding his/her own reflections or connecting two interesting ideas/comments together with a line and adding a question. mark. The chalk talk can provide an excellent record of the thinking of the class that can be analyzed. I like to point out to students how they have helped each other clarify and expanded upon their thinking. Often the class generates multiple theories to answer a single question. Students are able to *see* and consider the validity of multiple viewpoints.

Reading, Thinking and Writing about The Coming of Age Story

Because the protagonists of coming of age stories are experiencing the exhilaration, confusion and angst of adolescence, their experiences are likely to be directly relevant to the lives of my students. These characters are in the midst of recognizing some truth of life that is disrupting their childlike view of the world and they can choose to integrate these understandings or reject them. When author Esmarelda Santiago explained the appeal of coming-of-age stories, she suggested that, "It really has to do with an experience that is universal: the experience of being faced with something new in which your identity is challenged." Reading these stories and discussing them with their peers will help students see they are not alone in facing these challenges, and will also allow them to weigh the consequences of non reflective thinking against the challenges of thoughtful examination of self in relation to the world.

I chose pieces of literature that examine how race, culture, language, gender and social class impact one's identity. Works by African-American and Latino writers will comprise the bulk of the selections in the unit. This mirrors the demographics of my classroom. I also made an effort to include a number of women's stories because traditionally the female coming of age has been underrepresented in the curriculum.

The unit will be organized around three key themes endemic to the coming of age story: our separation from parents; our longing to be accepted and identified as a part of a social group; and the influence that race,

culture, language, gender and social class have on our conception of self. It is clear that these themes overlap and that each person's experience growing up is shaped by multiple factors. For example, it is hard to imagine separating from parents without sorting out the expectations and stereotypes they have passed on to us regarding culture and gender. Similarly, a lack of family support might result in a stronger need for affiliation with a group of peers. As students study different texts, they will naturally go back to issues that were raised in previous pieces. Students will be encouraged to reread and reexamine texts and ideas. One of the premises of this unit is that learning is a recursive process and in order for students to move forward they will need to go back to clarify and refine their thinking. They will reconnect with ideas they have already articulated in order to construct new ideas.

I've organized the unit into five sections. The first introduces students to the genre of the coming of age story and asks them to examine how their own beliefs have changed since childhood. The next three sections focus on a particular theme that is common to many coming of age stories: separation from parents, the need to belong and the factors that shape identity. Within each, I've recommended texts that should evoke thought and discussion about the highlighted themes. I raise some key questions, make some connections between texts, suggest strategies that might facilitate the study and include suggestions for personal writing. I have also included journal prompts to help students explore these themes in relation to their own lives.

Three detailed lesson plans are inserted within the unit. In these sections, I present a more detailed description of the methods I will use in my classroom. I know that my plans might not be suited to your students; however, I believe that most of the texts and strategies can be adapted for your classroom.

In the last section I will present a culminating activity that will allow students to choose their own books and engage in inquiry with their peers. Participating in structured book clubs will allow students to set the agenda for their own discussion and apply the strategies that they have learned. Although instruction will not be teacher-centered, I will take an active role by supplying students with a protocol for discussion and reflection. This final project will allow me to assess how well each student is able to take responsibility for his own learning

Introductory Lesson: The Problem We All Live With

To begin the unit I will ask students to examine their own conceptions of childhood and adulthood and then consider the events and moments in their own lives that have marked their own coming of age. We will pay particular attention to how one's beliefs about the world change as he or she moves from innocence to experience. The first piece of fiction will examine a pivotal moment in a young girl's life. This piece will provide students with a basic understanding of the arc of a coming of age story: the protagonist experiences something that significantly changes the way he or she sees the world.

Objectives:

· Students examine their own conceptions of childhood and adulthood and then consider the events and moments in their own lives that have marked their own coming of age
· Students will use appropriate strategies before, during and after reading in order to construct

meaning.
· Students interpret, analyze and evaluate a visual and print text in order to extend understanding and appreciation.
· Students recognize that readers and authors are influenced by individual, social, cultural and historical contexts.

Activities:

I'm going to ask students to bring a picture of themselves as a child between the ages of four and ten to class. If they don't want to bring in a picture or can't find one, they will be encouraged to create a detailed mental picture. To get into the child's perspective, I will ask students to journal briefly about their child selves. What do you imagine you were doing before the picture was taken? After? What were you looking forward to? What were you dreading? What were you afraid of? Who was your best friend? Did you like school?

I'll then ask students to complete two identical sentence completion exercises, one as the child self and another as themselves in the present. The sentence stems will encourage students to reflect on how their perspectives have changed over the years. For example: I believe life is fair/unfair because… The best thing about school is…I believe/don't believe my parents will always be able to protect me because… I think boys are…I think girls are…

As a class we will chart some of their responses. Next, I will ask students to complete this sentence as many times as possible in a five minute period: I used to believe…but now I see …. Their homework tonight will be to choose one of the lines and write specifically about why and how their view point has changed.

After we establish that these changes are a part of coming of age we will view a piece of art work by Norman Rockwell depicting Ruby Bridges being walked to school by federal marshalls. The painting, "The Problem We All Live With" portrays the child's point of view. She is wearing a starched white dress: the picture of innocence in a hateful world. There are rotten tomatoes burst on the wall behind her and the word nigger is sprawled across the bricks. I will ask students to describe what they see and ask them if they can imagine what the child might be thinking at the moment.

I will then read a picture book written by Ruby Bridges as an adult. One of the interesting recollections that Bridges, a New Orleans native, had was that she wasn't afraid of the crowd at first because she was used to noise and chaos of Mardis Gras. In fact she didn't realize how malevolent the protestors were until one of them showed her a little black doll in a coffin.

Ms. Bridges also writes eloquently about the differing viewpoints of her parents: her mother was always in favor of her going to the white school. Ruby was invited to do so because of her high test scores. Her mother believed that she would have a greater opportunity to reach her potential at a white school. Ruby's father, on the other hand, was against having his daughter spearhead integration at an all white school. He wanted to shield her from the hate and predjudice that she would be exposed to. Of course, the pair ultimately decided to send Ruby to the white school. Their decision was difficult because it was problematic. Both of Ruby's parents had valid points of view. I will challenge students to avoid seeing either parent as right or wrong and

encourage them to recognize the complexity of the situation.

Next we will read *The Flowers,* a very short piece by Alice Walker. This story features a young girl, Myop, who is the daughter of a sharecropper. She, like Ruby Bridges, has a very abrupt coming of age experience. During a carefree walk through the woods, she literally stumbles over the skeleton of a man who has been lynched. Walker beautifully depicts how the child's view of the world changes in that moment.

Prior to reading the story, I will ask children what they about the south during the period of reconstruction and hate groups like the KKK flourished during this time. We will define the word sharecropper and consider what it might be like to be a black child living in this rural setting.

Although this is a very short story, it a complex one. The diction, images and sentence structure present problems for inexperienced readers. In the past, I've found it helpful to read aloud to the students as they follow along. I will stop at strategic points to check for understanding, making sure that I ask students to point out what in the text of their piece makes their conclusions make sense. After the reading I will have students write their first response to the story using the reader response prompts: I was surprised when… It doesn't make sense to me that… Students can choose one of these prompts or simply jot down their initial reaction to the story. I will then have students read their responses to the person next to them. Students will then share out to the group. I will ask students to record at least two of their classmates ideas during our discourse: one thing that they hadn't thought of before and one thing that affirms their point of view.

At this point I will point out to students that the name Myop is similar to the word *myopic* which literally means nearsighted or shortsighted. I will ask students to consider whether or not they believe Alice Walker's choice of name had any significance in the context of the story.

Next, I will ask students to draw a representation of Myop and her view of the world before her discovery and after. After discussing how Myop's way of seeing changes, I will assure students that it is possible to capture Myop's perception with very simple drawings or cutouts from magazines or the internet. I will explain that this assignment is more about ideas than artistic talent. I encourage them to think symbolically. For example a pair of dark glasses might stand for blindness. I also will allow them to use words in their picture. I'll explain that the they will need to write an explanation of why they chose to use the pictures and cite sections of text that support their choices.

I'll explain that in this story we don't really get to get a glimpse of Myop's actual thoughts because it is written in the third person, therefore in order to do the assignment students had to examine Myop's actions and the way that Alice Walker describes her. I will ask students to cite pieces of text that gave them clues as to how Myop is thinking and feeling. Students will then share their choices and explain how they made the inference.

If no one has pointed out the last line of the text, I will direct the classes attention there: *Myop laid down her flowers. And the summer was over.* I will explain that often in short stories, endings are especially meaningful. We'll discuss the inferences they made about the last two sentences. In the context of the story, what might the flowers or the end of summer symbolize?

"The Flowers" portrays a very dramatic moment of initiation into the adult world. Other pieces of literature depict more subtle awakenings. In the past, after I've taught the flowers and I asked students to describe their own coming of age moments, they were quick to point out that it's not that that easy because they have "never accidently stepped on a dead body" or done something equally as dramatic. I encourage students to think about ordinary moments when they might have realized that the world was not always safe or fair. I

usually tell them about how horrified I was the first time I saw a homeless person sleeping in an alley when I was on a trip with my family in Boston or about how in the middle of the "civil defense" drills we used to have at my elementary school I suddenly realized that crouching under our desks wouldn't protect us from atomic bombs. I encourage students to be on the lookout for experiences that change their own perspective-when they, like Myop, suddenly see the world through a new pair of glasses. This is a simple concept, but an awareness that is central to understanding how people and fictional characters change in reaction to to their experiences.

Section 2: Separating From Parents

To begin our discussion of the theme of seperating from parents, we will read the poem "Song in My Front Yard" by Gwendolyn Brooks. The speaker in this poem is a young child who longs to venture into the backyard "[w]here it's rough and untended and hungry weeds grow." Wishing to ignore her mother's warning about "bad" people, she claims that she would like to "be a bad woman, too…And wear the brave stockings of night-black lace …And strut down the streets with paint on [her] face." Certainly, the metaphorical experience of longing to leave your own front yard is an experience that many of my students can relate to. This speaker's experience is quite different from Myop's or Ruby Bridge's. Her innocence is not stolen from her; she has grown bored with it. She is curious about the parts of the grown up world that she is forbidden to see.

Demonstration Lesson 2: Leaving Your Own Front Yard

Objectives:

· Students reflect on the dynamics of their relationships with their own parents and guardians
· Students will use appropriate strategies before, during and after reading in order to construct meaning.
· Students will interpret, analyze and evaluate text in order to extend understanding and appreciation.
· Students will recognize that readers and authors are influenced by individual, social, cultural and historical contexts.

Activities:

After reading the poem "Song in My Front Yard" aloud, I will invite students to read it again silently and highlight important words and phrases. After we do this, I read the poem again, only this time anyone who has a word or phrase highlighted, joins in on the reading while that section is read. This is a very non-threatening way for students to get a glimpse of their peers' perspectives.

Next, students choose what they believe to be the most important phrase in the text. They will write for five

minutes about why they chose the word. As they share their reflections a discussion of the poem begins organically. Often as students clarify and extend on their thinking, they address questions like: Why does this little girl want to leave the innocence and protection of her childhood? How aware is she of the reality outside the front yard? How old do you think she is and why? What assumptions is the mother in the piece making about the "charity children"?

Journal writing topics that could be paired with this poem are: Write about a time when you longed to do something your parent or guardian didn't allow you to do. What do you think your parent's\guardian's reasoning was? Describe the kids you were not allowed to play with or the ones that you knew your parents wouldn't want you to play with. What were your parents worried about? What *should* they have been worried about?

The Cub

"The Cub" by Lois Dykeman Kleihauer is a short story that describes the changing relationship between a boy and his father. The young boy grows up admiring his father's physical strength and the two wrestle and playfight throughout his childhood. Although at first the father always wins, the day comes when the father doesn't look "nearly as tall or broadshouldered as he used to." (317) Bill, the boy, pins his father in the wrestling match and realizes suddenly that he has surpassed his father. Bill rushes out of the room to hide his emotional reaction.

Finding philosophical passages that show Bill's changing perspective in relationship to his father would be engaging activity for students and would ground their discussion in the text. After reading the story I might ask students to complete this sentence to identify the story's theme: After reading this story, I think Lois Dykeman Kleihauer wants me to understand…

"Reunion" by John Cheever is also a story about a father and son. Charlie, the boy, meets his father for lunch in New York City. His parents have divorced and he hasn't seen his father in three years. The beginning of the story details his feelings, expectations and reactions upon meeting the father. The actual meeting is a rude awakening. The story describes the fathers obnoxious, drunken disrespectful behavior. As readers we never get a glimpse of the boys reaction. After saying goodbye, the boy says, "that was the last time I saw my father."

This story also provides a great opportunity to analyze philosophical passages. I will direct students to the first paragraph. Phrases like "…as soon as I saw him I felt that he was my father, my flesh and blood, my future and my doom," provide students the opportunity to assess Charlie's point of view. Even simpler phrases like, "I hoped that someone would see us together. I wished that we could be photographed," are telling. Because this story is so short it lends itself to guided practice in locating passages that reveal the characters perspective.

The theme of sons' relationships with their fathers can be explored in two short poems: "My Papa's Waltz" by Theodore Rothke and "The Secret Heart" by Robert P. Tristam Coffin. Either poem could be included at his juncture and would provide students with an alternate viewpoint.

A female perspective of the parent/child relationship is presented in "My Mother Taught Me Purple" by Evelyn Tooley Hunt. An adult daughter, the speaker in this poem, remembers how her mother "taught her purple" and "golden" even though the two lived in great poverty during her childhood. This memory turns bittersweet at the end of the poem when the speaker states that her mother "died" from lack of beauty and could not

“teach her [the daughter] pride.”

Before reading, discuss how writers can use colors to symbolize abstract ideas and feelings. Explain how traditionally the color purple symbolized two very different ideas: mourning or repentence, but also royalty or nobility. Likewise, gold can be a symbol of wealth and power or something gifted in a way that promises future joy and success.

An excellent piece to conclude this segment with would be “Thank You, M’am” by Langston Hughes. While this classic story is not about a biological parent and child, it examines the significant effect that an adult can have on a child’s point of view. The boy in this story has obviously not been sheltered from the harsh realities in life. He might qualify as one of the “charity children” described in Gwendolyn Brooks’s poem. The boy attempts to steal the purse of Mrs. Luella Bates Jones, an older woman from his neighborhood. The boy (and the reader) are surprised by her reaction. She takes the boy home, washes his face, makes him dinner and gives him the ten dollars that he wanted to steal. Instead of lecturing the boy, she “has done things too” which she would not tell him or even God , “if He didn’t already know.”

In this case we see a variation of the coming-of-age story. The boy recieves kindness and nurturing from a total stranger. He steps from a harsh and unprotected childhood reality into an adult world where kindness and understanding exist. Although we don’t hear anything from the boy other than, “Thank you, M’am,” it is clear from his actions that he wants to gain the older woman’s trust and respect.

Section 2: Journal Prompts

· Write a few paragraphs comparing and contrasting yourself with one or both of your parents. In what way would you like to be like your parent(s) when you grow up. In what ways would you like to be different?
· Even though your parents or the other adults in your life generally believe that they are older and wiser, what is it that they don’t “see” or understand?
· What was one of the “stories” that your parents told you about life? How has your understanding of this story changed?
· If you could describe your childhood as a color, what would it be and why? How did your parents directly or indirectly “color” your experience?

Section 3: Lost in the Crowd: Dealing With the Pressure to Conform

Most developmental psychologists agree that adolescents crave the approval of their peers. While adults are certainly not immune from the pressure to conform, teenagers seem especially vulnerable to the temptation to sacrifice their individual values and desires in order to fit in. The selections in this section focus on the need

for belonging and how it can impair our ability to think for ourselves and construct our own identity. Many coming of age stories illustrate the challenges of struggling for integrity in the face of pressures to conform.

“The Owl Who Was God” is a modern day fable by James Thurber that demonstrates the danger of not thinking for oneself. It is about a group of animals who pass along a rumor that the Owl knows all things because he can see in the dark. Ultimately, all the animals put their faith in the Owl and this makes them feel less afraid. They are relieved of the responsibility of making decisions. Finally, the Owl (who of course cannot see during the day) leads the group on a walk down the middle of the street. They are all hit by a truck because they will not believe that the wise and powerful Owl is leading them astray.

Because this story is a fable it is easy to chuckle at the stupidity of the animals. At first glance this seems like a simple cautionary tale, but as students discuss it I believe they will recognize how frightening “the follower” dynamic can be. They certainly will be able to point to incidents in history where people bindly followed the crowd towards a disasterous end. I suspect however, that students might dismiss the “group think” mentality as something that they are too smart to ge caught up in. The next two stories we study will offer a more in depth look at how in everyday life, it is difficult it to resist the pressure to conform.

“Salvation” is a short autobiographical sketch by Langston Hughes, the author of “Thank You M’am”. He recalls the pressure he felt to “be saved” during a revival meeting at his aunt’s church. He eventually decides to go through the motions to please the crowd of churchgoers. Later, he is despondent because he deceived everyone. He didn’t really “see” Jesus at all and now he “didn’t even believe there was a Jesus anymore, since he didn’t come to help [him].” (p. 1095)

“Initiation” was Sylvia Plath’s first published short story. While this story is not strictly autobiographical, it was inspired by an incident in the author’s life. The main character Millicent, is a girl pledging a sorority. During the hazing period, she discovers that she doesn’t want to take on a group identity because she will lose her authentic self. Ironically, while she is conducting bogus interviews with strangers on a bus (one of the stunts that her sorority “sisters” make her perform) she discovers that “So many people were shut up tight inside themselves like boxes, yet they would open up…if only you were interested in them. And really you didn’t have to belong to a club to feel related to other human beings.” Furthermore she realizes that she will have to give up a friend who hasn’t been accepted to the sorority and that she wil have to always wonder if the boy she likes is only interested in her because of her social status. Millicent decides to reject the invitation to become a member of the sorority and realizes that her own private initiation has just begun.

If she lived in a different neighborhood, Millicent’s story might have been about joining a gang. The stakes would be higher, but in many ways the theme would be the same: the temptation to sacrifice self inorder to belong. Evan Hunter wrote two thought provoking short stories that explore the appeal and consequences of gang membership. “On the Sidewalk Bleeding” and “The Last Spin” were both written in the 1960’s but are relevant today. These might be excellent selections to pair with “Initiation”.

Journal Prompts:

· James Thurber wrote that the moral of his story “The Owl Who Was God” was *“You can fool too many people too much of the time.”* Why is it so easy to fool people? Where do you see this kind of thing happening in the world today?

· Describe a time when you, like the boy in “Salvation,” felt pressured to conform to the expectations of parents or other authority figures.
· Think about a time when you felt pressured to join a group or club. What kind of group was it? Where did the pressure come from-parents, teachers, friends or yourself? Why were you pressured to join the group.

Section 4: Who Am I? Exploring Identity

Identity can be defined as the condition of being oneself and not another. We have already examined how one’s family of origin and one’s need to belong can affect his or her sense of self. However, the society we live in also has written and unwritten rules that define who we are supposed to become. Our culture, gender, socioeconomic status, age and race are factors that contribute to our uniqueness. However each of these characteristics brings with it stereotypes that others may use to categorize us and limit our vision of who we can become. In this section we will examine a number of selections that deal with complex process of defining oneself.

Demonstration Lesson 3: My Name: Exploring Identity

Objectives:

· Students will identify how her culture, gender, family history and social class affect how Esperanza feels about herself

· Students will analyze how Cisneros reveals character through the use of figurative language.

· Students will explore their own identity by composing their own vignette

Activities

Introduce the novel the *House on Mango Street* by giving students a brief biography of Sandra Cisneros and showing them the format of the novel. Define the term vignette. Have students turn to a partner and briefly share their thoughts and feelings about their name. They might consider the origin of their name, its meaning within their family, its associations etc.

Read “My Name” aloud. Next ask students to read the piece again silently and underline key words and phrases. Have students do a quick-write, responding to one of the important pieces of text they selected. After students share with a partner have them share out to the group.

Once students have constructed the gist of the piece ask them to identify similes, metaphors and striking images in the piece. Have them determine the effect that they have on the reader and what they reveal about Esperanza.

Through her descriptions, what does Esperanza reveal about her feelings toward her family, her gender, her culture and her self at this juncture in her life.

Have students construct some original metaphors and similies about their names:

> If my name were an object it would be…because…
> If my name were a song it would be…because
> If my name were a season it would be…because

Ask students to volunteer some of their answers.

For homework have them imitate Cisneros's vignette. Suggest that they look up the literal meaning of their name on the web and ask their parents why they chose or created their name. Ask them incorporate original similies and metaphors into their vignette.

An excellent film to include at this juncture is the "Almost a Woman" written by Esmeralda Santiago for the PBS Masterpiece Theater Series. The story is an adaptation of her autobiography. It is the story of Santiago's coming of age as a 13-year-old girl who comes from Puerto Rico to New York with her family in the early 1960s.

Two scenes are particularly noteworthy and can provide focal points for discussion. The first is a scene where Esmeralda is having a discussion with her drama teacher. Here she reveals the difficulty she has playing so many different roles in real life:

> *I walk out of our apartment. I'm the English-speaking Esmeralda Santiago.*
> Actress, dancer, Americanized teenager who looks people in the eye even though it's disrespectful. At home I'm the Spanish-speaking, humble, traditional girl with eyes down. But home is really Puerto Rico. And I jump from one to the other and I come here. I'm not that good an actress to play three roles at a time.

Most students will relate to Santiago's struggles and to the multiple, sometimes conflicting roles that she plays. Sometimes each "self" has a different language. Amy Tan explores this aspect of the immigrant experience in her essay "Mother Tongue." Tan explains how she uses distinct "Englishes" for each of her roles: daughter, student, friend etc. For example she speaks more formal English in school, American slang with her friends and a Chinese-English hybrid with her mother. After discussing Santiago's situation and reading Tan's essay, students can write about their different roles and the different "languages" they speak

when addressing different audiences.

A second scene to focus on is the one where the Esmeralda is beaten by girls belonging to a gang. The girls accuse Esmeralda of wishing to be a *blanquita* (white girl), and insult her by calling her a “spick” and a *jíbara* . This scene will bring to mind the whole dynamic of “group think.” As students reflect on why the gang of girls are so hostile towards Esmeralda, they may revisit their earlier thinking about the group mentality. Are these girls gaining a sense of unity and belonging by attacking the other? Does Esmeralda represent aspects of their Latino culture that they are trying to distance themselves from?

Culminating Project

In this section I want students to use skills they have practiced to explore novels of their choice in groups. I will provide students with a list of classic and contemporary coming of age novels. I have attached this list but there are many other titles that would be suitable for the project and engaging for students.

The groups will meet three times. After choosing their novels I will ask students to devise a plan for reading and divide their book into three sections. During the first meeting they will discuss the first third of the book, during the second the second third and during the final meeting they will discuss the concluding chapters.

To prepare for each chat, students will do the following:

1. Consider the world the writer of your novel has created. Look closely at the various aspects of that culture. For example:

- List the **rules, laws, policies,** (written *and* unwritten), which have been designed to govern the behavior of the individuals within that particular society.

- List the ***dominant*** views and assumptions that form the belief system of many of the individuals in this society regarding your characters: gender, age, socioeconomic class, race or ethnicity.

2. List a few things you’re wondering ***why*** about.

- I wonder *why* [name of character].....
- I wonder *why* [name of writer] *chose* to.....

3. Identify two or three of the most important **passages** that you want to bring to attention of your group

(you're looking for the longer, more *philosophical* excerpts; we'll show you what one sounds like as soon as somebody finds one). [Don't forget page number]

After each book club meeting, students will type up and submit a reflection outlining the discourse they participated in and summarizing their response to those discussions. Detailed instructions for the book chat are attached

Appendix 1 - Book Club Reflection Format

As soon possible after your chat, write this Reflection. Try not to let too many hours go by before you sit down at your word processor or computer. Your purpose is to SHOW us, while it's still fresh in your mind, what "happened" *during* , *and* as a *result* of your discussions.

Section One: Record Keeping : let me know…

· the title and author of your book
· The names of people *present* at your discussion and those who are absent?
· The total number of pages that are in *your* copy of the book?
· The total number of pages that *you* have read so far?
· The number of pages each group member has read so far?

Section Two: The Chat

In this section, describe, as specifically as you can, the conversation that took place. [*Organize your summary around the issues that came up* , as well as how each of the group members responded and contributed. You may, if you choose, polish some of your journal writing for this part of the paper…]

What's bothering the members of your group (and what are you liking) - concerning the ways the characters are ***thinking*** about things - you know, *their* (the characters') philosophies regarding various issues. Did you point out any ***key*** (philosophical) ***passages*** to one another? - If so quote them for us. What are any of you noticing about the way the characters are ***feeling*** - which of these emotions seems familiar? Which seems to make no sense? What *are* the various members of your group ***wondering why*** about? What ***theories*** are they offering? What ***connections*** are they making - to their own walk-around-ordinary-everyday-world experiences, or to other things they've read? In other words, what real-life sense is any of this making?

Section Three: New thinking generated as a result of revisiting that conversation - a few hours *later , or the next day.*

(*Reread the summary you wrote of the conversation)*

Now that your Book Chat is over, and now that you've written *your* summary of it, think on-paper about your ***on-second-thought*** reaction to the ideas your group talked about.

What are you thinking about and wondering about *now,* a few hours later, that you weren't noticing before, or perhaps even during, your discussion? What real-world ***human*** things is that writer addressing, examining, questioning? What, in your *own* world, does s/he seem to be trying to bring to your attention? What aspects of your *own* experience do you find yourself becoming more *curious* about, starting to ***question*** ? How would that writer respond to some of what *you've* written this year? To what dome of your *classmates* have said and done? What's starting to make a bit more sense? What's getting more real?

(Try to give us a sense of what's playing around in your mind at *this* point- ***this is the most important section)***

List of Coming-of-Age Novels for Students

· Abrahams, Peter. *Mine Boy* (South African boy faces the bitter realities of apartheid)
· Achebe, Chinua. *No Longer at Ease* (Nigerian boy tries to live up to expectations of family1950s setting)
· Banks, Russell. *Rule of the Bone: A Novel* (Aimless boy's search to find his father)
· Bradbury, Ray. *Dandelion Wine* (Twelve-year-old boy's summer of discovery; Illinois, 1920s setting)
· Bradford, Richard. *Red Sky at Morning* (Father-son story; World War II setting)
· Burns, Olive Ann. *Cold, Sassy Tree* (Author's fictionalized account of her own father's boyhood in rural Georgia, early 1900s)
· Carter, Forrest. *The Education of Little Tree* (Tale of Cherokee boyhood in the 1930s and boy's relationship with his grandparents)
· Chambers, Veronica. *Mama's Girl* (Girl's tale of growing up in poverty-stricken Brooklyn neighborhood and her problematic relationship with her mother; nonfiction)
· Crane, Stephen. *The Red Badge of Courage* (Classic story of a young man's experience fighting in the Civil War)
· Dickens, Charles. *Oliver Twist* (Classic tale of orphan Oliver Twist, his experience with a gang of pickpockets, and his struggle to better his life)
· Fong-Torres, Ben. *The Rice Room* (Chinese American journalist/DJ's tale of growing up in San Francisco's Chinatown in the 1959s and '60s)
· Gates, Henry Louis. *Colored People* (African American scholar's coming of age tale of growing up in West Virginia)
· Gibbons, Kaye. *Ellen Foster* (Plucky orphan's search to find a foster family for herself)
· Grealy, Lucy. *Autobiography of a Face* (Young woman's struggle with facial disfigurement; nonfiction)

- Guest, Judith. *Ordinary People* (Boy's struggle with himself and his family after his brother's death)
- Hamill, Pete. *Snow in August* (Powerful story of a boy's moral dilemma when confronted with anti-Semitism in his neighborhood; late 1940s, Brooklyn setting)
- Heinlein, Robert. *Podkayne of Mars* (Brother and sister are launched on a space journey that risks political intrigue and planetary war)
- Kaysen, Susanna. *Girl, Interrupted* (Young woman's memoir of being hospitalized for psychiatric reasons; nonfiction)
- Kincaid, Jamaica. *Lucy* (West Indian girl comes to the United States as a baby-sitter for a family)
- Kincaid, Nanci. *Crossing Blood* (Friendship tale of a white girl and African American neighbor boy during the early days of the civil rights movement; set in Florida)
- Knowles, John. *A Separate Peace* (Friendship and rivalry of two boys at a private school during World War II)
- Lamb, Wally. *She's Come Undone* (Girl's long journey to deal with and get over childhood trauma)
- Lee, Harper. *To Kill a Mockingbird* (Southern lawyer's brave stand against the racism of his town in the 1930s, told from the point of view of his young daughter growing up)
- LeGuin, Ursula. *A Wizard of Earthsea* (Fantasy of Sparrowhawk and how he mastered knowledge and power in his universe)
- Major, Deborah. *An Open Weave* . (Imani's 17th birthday celebration with her family has to wait as she deals with a friend's crisis)
- Martinez, Max. *Schoolland* (Mexican American coming of age tale set in rural Texas in the 1950s)
- McBride, James. *The Color of Water* (African American author's tale of his family of 12 children and their white mother)
- McCorkle, Jill. *The Cheerleader* (High school-to-college tale of a girl's life and love)
- McCorkle, Jill. *Ferris Beach* (Growing up tale of a girl and her relationship with her daring cousin and strict mother)
- Morrison, Toni. *The Bluest Eye* (Young African American girl's wish to be blue-eyed and white)
- Mukherjee, Bharti. *Jasmine* (Young woman's flight from India to the US and her life as an illegal immigrant)
- Potok, Chaim. *The Promise* (Story of two Jewish boys growing up in Brooklyn)
- Remarque, Erich Maria. *All Quiet on the Western Front* (World War I tale of four young German soldiers, only one of whom survives)
- Rodriguez, Luis. *Always Running: La Vida LocaGang Days in L.A.* (Author's memoir of gang days in Los Angeles in the 1970s; nonfiction)
- Santiago, Danny. *Famous All Over Town* (Tale of family life and growing up in Mexican American neighborhood in Los Angeles)
- Sinclair, April. *Coffee Will Make You Black* (Growing up tale of young African American girl in Chicago)
- Steinbeck, John. *The Red Pony* (Boys love and care for a rescued pony)
- Taulbert, Clifton. *Once Upon a Time When We Were Colored* (Author's touching memoir of growing up; companion title: Last Train North)
- Walker, Alice. *The Color Purple* (African American girl's struggle to survive a brutal family and ultimately prevail)
- Williams, Donna. *Nobody Nowhere* (Author's struggle out of autism; nonfiction)
- Wright, Richard. *Black Boy* (Famous African American author's account of growing up; nonfiction)

Resources For Teachers

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