



Curriculum Units by Fellows of the Yale-New Haven Teachers Institute
2016 Volume II: Literature and Identity

Introduction

‘As I read . . . I applied much personally to my own feelings and condition. I found myself similar, yet at the same time strangely unlike to the beings concerning whom I read . . . I sympathized with and partly understood them, but I was unformed in mind . . . What did this mean? Who was I? What was I? Whence did I come? What was my destination? These questions continually recurred, but I was unable to solve them.’

The plot events that allow the “monster” in Mary Shelley’s *Frankenstein* to find and read an epic poem, a novel, and a work of classical history are quite improbable, but the experience of reading he describes is familiar to many of us: recognizing his difference from the people around him, uncertain of both his origins and his future path, the creature searches intently for meaning and self-understanding in the books that have fallen into his hands. What he finds in his reading painfully intensifies his questions about himself as well as promising to cast some light upon them. Poignantly, this young reader reads entirely alone; he has no one with whom to share the urgent questions and reflections that his reading stirs, to guide his self-examination or to consider his reactions.

The curriculum units designed by Fellows in our seminar on “Literature and Identity” draw on the enduring power of books to prompt explorations of identity which Shelley powerfully evokes; in each case, their design also provides for the kind of guidance, dialogue, and sense of community in the reading process that Shelley’s creature so desperately lacks. While that creature lacks a reading community, one of the remarkable features of Shelley’s novel is that in the inmost portion of the novel’s layered structure, he is given a chance to tell his own story, to give voice to his own experiences, feelings, and sense of self. The units designed by seminar Fellows offer students opportunities to explore questions of identity through speaking and writing as well as reading, sponsoring their development of individual voice and their powers of story-telling. Collectively, these units affirm what Jessica Grande names “liber-acy”: the conviction that human powers of language and communication may blaze freeing paths forward and pose alternatives to violence as a means of self-expression.

In our shared readings for the seminar, ranging from *Frankenstein* (1818) to Claudia Rankine’s *Citizen* (2014), Gene Luen Yang’s *American Born Chinese* (2006), and Alison Bechdel’s *Fun Home* (2006), we found that literature in fact offers multiple approaches to identity: a means to reflect on and articulate what we already feel; a virtual community of people who are like us in one or another way, who have felt what we feel and expressed it openly; a window into the experiences of people very different from ourselves, across time and space; and models of the power of story-telling to make sense of individual lives and to find meaning in them,

even in suffering, conflict, or confusion. Throughout, we were mindful of the particular intensity and challenge of questions of identity for young people, who are continually involved in a process of ongoing identity formation, and of the complex and often fraught interplay of external features and internal experiences within the “identity” process.

In some of our readings and discussions, we attended closely to the broad, socially-recognized categories that contribute to the composition of individual identities: gender, race and ethnicity, class, able-bodiedness or disability, sexuality, religion, and geography (whether national region or city neighborhood). The social and political events of the year gave special urgency to these discussions; the daily news of racial strife and protest, mass incarceration, debates about religious difference, refugees, and undocumented immigrants, and the struggles of transgender people for acceptance entered into our discussions of our own classrooms, of our students, and of the works we read. Often our discussions moved among these levels, as we found links between literary treatments of identity and our own struggles to afford others their full due as individuals as well as to understand ourselves.

Several of the units developed by Fellows build on the intuition that developing and articulating a stronger sense of one’s own identity may also allow more empathy and acceptance of others, in all their differences from oneself. Mislal Aodom-Lake’s unit, “Embracing Identity through Children’s Literature,” uses three stories about the complexities of cross-cultural identity to encourage students both to consider and embrace the complications of their own multiple roots and to celebrate the diversity of their peers. Structured around the study of several characters from Sharon Flake’s *The Skin I’m In*, Alexandra Novak’s “The Confusion of Identity Exploration in Middle School” juxtaposes corollary texts with key passages from that novel, allowing students to conceptualize the connections and contradictions among characters’ circumstances, behaviors, role-playing, and emotional needs. The innovative clusters of literary and multi-media works in Cheryl A. Canino’s “Right, Wrong, and Along the Continuum . . . You” are designed to provide a repertoire of words and ideas that will help students express their often inchoate experiences of conflict, longing, and struggle. Rich Cuminale’s “Discovering Yourself in the Voices of Others: Exploring Literary Aspects of Constructing an Identity” resists easy notions of “relatability” in literary works by challenging students first to identify with characters quite different from themselves, and then to create a voice for such a character in a story of their own.

Like Frankenstein’s creature, disowned by his creator and excluded from society, the narrator of Walter Dean Myers’ *Monster*, the main text for Jessica Grande’s unit, has been labelled a “monster,” and his fate depends on whether the members of a jury can see him as more than that—as an individual, and as fully human. Engaging students in a creative array of individual and group activities, Grande’s unit provides them with opportunities to address those experiences and circumstances of their own lives that may have made them feel less than fully human, and to see themselves, and their relationships to the world, in new ways. Jamie Garstka’s unit builds out from Sherman Alexie’s *Flight* to encourage special education students to reflect on and define their identities for themselves, while Eric Maroney’s unit highlights the centrality of questions of identity and of race in Ralph Ellison’s *Invisible Man* to engage “non-traditional” AP students in both the intellectual rigors and immediate relevance of analyzing a great literary text. Two music teachers in our seminar, Gillian Ann Greco and D. Scott Stewart, extended our seminar’s focus on literature and identity to encompass the important role that musical expression plays in our experience and perception of identity as well; they offer units that beautifully combine the study of music with discussion of literary works for students of different ages. Finally, in “Cuba! Identity Revealed through Cultural Connections,” Waltrina Kirkland-Mullins provides a model of student-generated research and hands-on engagement that could be adapted to the study of any nation or culture, countering stereotypes and media images through direct experience of music, dance, food, and personal witness. Her unit reminds us that identity is something continually *lived*, a full-

body experience, residing in body, palate, ear, and mind.

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