

## **Words from Strong Women: Multicultural Literature as a Healing Balm**

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*I'm a woman  
Phenomenally.  
Phenomenal woman,  
That's me.*

- Maya Angelou, "Phenomenal Woman,"  
from *Chicken Soup for the Woman's Soul*

### **INTRODUCTION**

Storytelling is a tradition of virtually every culture in the world. Throughout the centuries, stories have been told for entertainment and for educational reasons. Telling how a caveman bested a beast not only taught others a way to do it for themselves, but brought approval and glory to the teller. By telling a good story, the storyteller can entertain, educate, and also heal or comfort. People are motivated to read for many reasons; to learn, of course, is paramount, but some simply seek solace in the written word. The most commonly read book is the *Holy Bible*, and it is a daily source of comfort and inspiration for millions. In the 1990s, Jack Canfield and Mark Victor Hansen, et al, wrote an overnight bestseller called *Chicken Soup for the Soul*. They knew that reading good stories can help soothe the spirit and inspire people to persevere despite life's many obstacles. I have developed a teaching unit incorporating as many wonderful life-experience stories from as many cultures as I can pack into one semester. I am limiting the selections to women writers because I believe that women have been under-represented in literature textbooks in the past, though that is vastly improved now. Our new literature books are wonderfully diverse, and both genders are well represented, but they have not always been. The unit is designed to challenge and, through literature, help to offer insight, and provoke contemplation and feelings that include joy, anger, astonishment, happiness, grief, sorrow, pride, compassion, sympathy, understanding, and mainly, inspiration and healing.

### **Who are my students?**

Many of my students see no benefits or rewards in reading. As an avid reader myself, I want to be able to share my love of reading with students. I would like to have them know the joy of reading something and thinking, "That is exactly how I feel," or "I've been there, or done that." I wish them to know and understand the universality of emotions; that most people have experienced similar situations, whether it was the death of someone they loved, the pain of a broken heart, an unwanted pregnancy, the loss

suffered from a miscarriage, the shame of poverty, or the joy and satisfaction of accomplishment. I want them to recognize the healing effects that writing and reading about common experiences can engender. Although I realize that not every student will, or even can, appreciate the joy of reading, I would like for them to at least see that there is reading material relevant to their lives, and about subjects in which they are interested.

The students I have worked with for the majority of my thirteen years of teaching have been black and Hispanic. I now teach eleventh grade English at James Madison High School in the South District of Houston Independent School District. I love teaching, but, like any educator, would like to see students who really want to learn with a burning, passionate desire, or barring that, will at least find something of interest in the material I share with them. This unit, unequivocally, will be designed to make students think critically. I intend for them to see that writing and reading about experiences of crises in people's lives can be cathartic and can help to ease the pain, if not actually begin a healing process.

My students, like most young people today (especially those who live in urban areas), face tough choices in life and many times have no choices, but have to deal with terrible occurrences at an early age. As an example, I have students who have lost one or both parents, many of them to violent death or prison. I have students who have babies, and those who have experienced homelessness and hunger on a daily basis. I have students who have been victims of crimes, from simple robberies to sexual assaults. Some of my students have already been in the criminal justice system as the perpetrators of crimes. Their need for security and safety many times overrides their need for education. In trying to reach these students, I strive to make our class materials as relevant as possible, and to give them some degree of comfort or healing from the problems they face daily.

Many of my students are first or second generation immigrants who face unique obstacles of their own. The language barrier is one of the main problems, but there is a sense of alienation and isolation among these young immigrants that those born in the United States are not sensitive to, and do not have to face. The literature I have chosen for this unit will deal with some of these issues.

I also have students who are just your average American kids, of course, and some who are spoiled or lazy, and underachievers who do not care about anything but what they will wear or what they will eat or watch on television, and who is "talkin'" to whom. These students engage themselves as little as possible in the classroom. In trying to reach these students, I continuously look for articles and contemporary fiction that excites and informs them, and opens up a dialogue.

Many, if not most, advanced placement students, under a sheer veneer of indifference, actually do enjoy reading, and especially discussing literature, but usually only if it contains at least one element of fiction they can identify with or which stimulates their imaginations. They all want to be asked for their opinion and to feel that what they say

matters to someone. The selections of this unit will definitely spark a dialogue among these students.

## **LITERATURE TO BE STUDIED AND TEACHING STRATEGIES**

This unit examines literature that deals with issues that are present in the lives of everyone. We will study literature about overcoming obstacles such as death, illness, poverty, abuse, and growing up, or rites of passage. We will examine the varied customs and the ways in which people across a broad-spectrum approach universal issues. In other words, I plan to include works from women of many ethnic origins, since I perceive multicultural studies to exclude no race.

The theme of my curriculum unit is inclusion of strong women writers from all cultures dealing with issues common to all and how writing and reading about these issues helps to heal our bodies and souls. This unit will include a variety of literary media, including short stories, novels, and excerpts from novels, essays, autobiographies, poetry, and related films written by women from many cultures. Though this unit is designed for an advanced placement class, I have included many selections from several levels of the Houston Independent School District adopted textbooks, McDougal Littell's *The Language of Literature*, and some of the activities can be adapted for use in regular classes. Some of my required reading materials, such as the novels, will have to be bought or ordered through the English department, if funds are available.

I plan a semester-long unit consisting of material within three different themes. This includes an alternating study of various short stories, essays, poems, novels, and films. This unit could also be extended for the entire year, because of the scope, depth of material, and length of some of the selections, by having novel study during the second half of the course. This is up to the discretion of the teacher, and how the class responds. The three themes studied in this literature include: some rites of passage many young people experience, such as the angst of growing up, and mother-daughter relationships; the issues and concerns related to emigrating and the trials of assimilation into American culture; and the process of grieving and accepting loss. The healing balm of literature and how people have helped and healed one another by writing and reading about these issues will tie these themes together. Some of the stories in this unit are related in that they contain more than one of the themes listed above. I have also included stories that have humor and irony. These stories demonstrate healing with humor or show the ironies of life. Sometimes laughter can be the best healer.

### **Growing Up and Fitting In**

At the beginning of each school year for the last few years, I have used "My Name" from Sandra Cisneros's book, *The House on Mango Street*. After reading and discussing this selection, I have students write about their own names, how they got the name, what it

means if they know, and what they would change it to, if anything. I intend to begin this unit in the same way.

For this section, I have chosen stories which have different themes dealing with issues common to women everywhere, one of which is oppression of women by men, and the strong will of those women to overcome it. Another theme related to that is daughters who are coming of age or are growing up and entering puberty and beyond, and their relationships with their mothers. Will they heed their mothers' advice, thereby avoiding the same painful experiences that the mothers' have had, or do they have to learn the hard way, by making their own mistakes? Two examples that combine both of these themes are found in the works of noted Asian writers, Hisaye Yamamoto and Amy Tan. These stories also contain examples of some of the assimilation problems many immigrants experience when they come to the United States, and the healing process they must go through after leaving their own countries and lives of oppression or severe poverty.

In Yamamoto's "Seventeen Syllables," a Japanese woman's oppressive, arranged marriage is told through the eyes of her young daughter. This story takes place in a small farming community outside of Los Angeles, probably during the forties or fifties. The main characters are Rosie, a young Japanese-American teenage girl around sixteen years old; her mother, Tame Hayashi, who uses a pen name of Ume Hanazono to write haiku to submit to a Japanese newspaper; Rosie's father, a simple-minded farmer, old-fashioned in his ideas of a woman's role in life; and Jesus Carrasco, the son of a migrant farm laborer hired by Rosie's father to pick tomatoes. The mother finds writing haiku a liberating and rewarding experience, which distracts her from her work on the farm and her responsibilities to her family. She uses haiku writing as an outlet to heal a painful past, which is unknown to Rosie. Her husband resents her social interaction with others who enjoy writing haiku, but does not come out and forbid his wife to write her poems and submit them for publication. Meanwhile, Rosie and Jesus slip off for a clandestine meeting where they kiss and cuddle and, to Rosie's mind, fall in love. Rosie and Jesus try to plan a rendezvous without their families finding out. One day, a well-dressed gentleman arrives at the farm and approaches Rosie's mother while she and her husband work side-by-side picking tomatoes. The gentleman carries a large package and speaks "elegant Japanese;" he informs them that she has won a prize for her haiku. It is a "pleasant picture" in a gilt frame, and Rosie's mother immediately announces herself as unworthy of such a treasure. She invites the gentleman into the house to have tea, and naturally he accepts. Meanwhile, Mr. Hayashi becomes more and more agitated about his wife's absence from the picking. He marches up to the house, and soon Rosie sees the gentleman hurrying out and then watches as her father burns the lovely prize her mother had won. When Rosie goes to her mother, she tells her, though Rosie doesn't want to hear, of another life she had back in Japan, which included a stillborn son born out-of-wedlock and a hastily arranged marriage to Rosie's father in America. After hearing her mother's story, Rosie has more sympathy for her mother, but still resists when her mother tries to make her promise to never marry. Rosie silently cries out for Jesus, not sure if it is the Savior or her young boyfriend she is crying for in her mind.

There are several themes within this story: a woman's place within certain cultures, submission in marriage, teenage rebellion, the telling an old secret as a way of healing a long-festering wound and clearing up old mysteries, catharsis, opening new wounds with the telling (of loss of siblings) for the daughter, and a daughter seeing her parents through new and more mature eyes.

The poem "Lost Sister," by Cathy Song, relates the feelings of a woman who is torn by feelings of homesickness and loneliness after escaping the oppression and restrictions against women in China and coming to America. The poem relies on figurative language and symbols to convey meaning, such as the practice of naming first daughters Jade, which is a cultural symbol of value or preciousness. Students will evaluate and make judgments on the life of a woman in China in comparison to that of a woman in the United States. They will determine which life is easier in their opinion, considering that the women in China portrayed in this poem and other readings are expected to be submissive, docile and obedient wives, feeding the family with whatever they can, while most women in America are expected to work and maintain a family. They will also research the life of a woman in modern day China to determine if this remains their cultural tradition.

This would be a good time to read and discuss another poem, "Adolescence – III" by Rita Dove. This is a very poignant, moving poem about the hopes and dreams of a young girl that her true love will come along and take away all of the ugly realities of life by offering her everything she doesn't have, mainly, love. In the poem, the young girl is not yet a woman, but she is no longer a child, either.

In Amy Tan's "Rules of the Game," another mother and daughter clash over cultural issues. The daughter in this story is younger and becomes an expert chess player. As she grows into a better player, she also grows more arrogant and disdainful of her old-fashioned mother who came over from China after many hardships. This story shows the difficulty of growing up in a different culture from one's parents, and the generational and cultural gap between mother and daughter.

After reading the above selections, we will have a class discussion about conflicts between parents and children. The students will have a writing assignment to describe a conflict they once had with their own parents and how it was resolved.

Another very short piece of literature with the theme of assimilation into American culture is Pat Mora's "Senora X No More." This is a one-page story about a woman who is attending classes to learn to read and write English. It demonstrates a sense of frustration, determination, and hard work, which results in a feeling of pride and accomplishment when she is finally able to write her name: "I carve my crooked name, my name" (109). She emphasizes that she has carved her name, not just an X.

The poem “Ending Poem” by Aurora Levins Morales and Rosario Morales, a mother and daughter of Puerto Rican ancestry, shows how they celebrate their identity both culturally and as individuals. It begins with “I am what I am” and ends with “We will not eat ourselves up inside anymore. And we are whole” (417).

“No Speak English” by Sandra Cisneros is a wonderful short story from *The House on Mango Street*. This story is told from the point of view of a young girl about a neighbor who brings his wife and baby to the United States from Mexico and how miserable she is here, away from her home and family.

The poem “Exile” by Julia Alvarez tells of a sudden, surprising emigration told through the eyes of a young girl, and of the fear and wonder she feels in a new country. A good poem to celebrate our differences and our appreciation for the uniqueness of the individual is “Tia Chucha” by Luis J. Rodriguez. This poem, though by a man, describes an unusual woman whom everyone thought of as crazy, but whom he admired for her individuality.

“Defining the Grateful Gesture” by Yvonne Sapia and “Refugee Ship” by Lorna Dee Cervantes are two other poems that deal with cultural conflicts that immigrants to the United States encounter. These poems can be used in this part of the unit dealing with the obstacles and barriers that immigrants encounter and the healing process they must go through in order to assimilate while maintaining their own cultural identities.

A good essay to show the indomitable spirit and the amazing ability of the mind to heal the body is “Who to Believe.” I found this very uplifting essay in *Chicken Soup for the Woman’s Soul*. This is a short essay about Wilma Rudolph and her determination to walk and then to be the fastest woman runner in the world, despite the fact that doctors told her she would never walk. Instead of heeding them, she listened to her mother, who told her “that all she needed was to have faith, persistence, courage and an indomitable spirit” (Canfield 118). This biographical essay shows that healing can be brought about by having faith and perseverance.

I have included works that use humor and irony to teach life stories, and I want to compare how different writers use these techniques in different ways. One example of this could be in using two stories by Flannery O’Connor, “A Good Man is Hard to Find” and “The Life You Save May Be Your Own.” The students would be expected to identify points of irony and humor, offset by more serious themes of spiritual awareness, cultural identity, racism, death, and complex relationships between parents and children.

“A Good Man is Hard to Find” is the story of a family who, while taking a trip to Florida, encounters an escaped killer who then kills them one by one. It reflects the moral and racial superiority many older Southerners feel in the grandmother’s attitude, which in the end cannot save her life. The students can discuss various themes in this story such as violence, overt racism, and spiritual redemption. Many students will readily

relate to the violent shootings of the family and will understand that more than the spiritual aspect of the story. In the end, was the old woman saved? Was her murder some type of cosmic justice or karma for her haughty superiority? These are questions I will have my students explore in discussion and written responses to the story. We will also compare this fictional story with violent crimes committed today.

O'Connor's story, "The Life You Save May Be Your Own," is the story of a woman who gives her mentally incompetent daughter—who is a deaf mute and an innocent child, though she is probably in her thirties—in marriage to an itinerant handyman who shows up at their home in the country. He takes her daughter, her money, and her car (which he has fixed up), and leaves for a honeymoon, but soon deserts the poor girl in a strange town. The foolish mother believes she is doing the right thing in finding a man who can be bought so cheaply to take over the care of her daughter, since she has been worried about what will happen to the girl after the mother's death. Trusting her only child to a strange man takes a leap of faith on the old lady's part, and one can only imagine how aggrieved and guilt-ridden she must have been when the strange man and her daughter never returned.

These two stories by O'Connor offer a comparison in how the author represented a view of the worst in men. After reading the novels, the students can compare how men are portrayed more compassionately as sensitive, although somewhat bumbling, or at least psychically challenged. O'Connor's stories also contain racial themes, mainly in the vernacular of the time period, and show that poverty and ignorance transcend racial boundaries.

Another story which can be used in conjunction with some of O'Connor's work is "The Lesson" by Toni Cade Bambara. In this story, an older neighbor in a black inner-city community takes it upon herself to expose the children to art, literature, and other types of outings designed to educate and enrich the lives of the poor children. This story is told through the point-of-view of a young girl who goes with Miss Moore on an outing to the famous toy store F.A.O. Swartz. The girl expresses shock and resentment over the inequality of a society in which many cannot even afford groceries, and who live in grinding poverty in the same city with a store which sells sailboats for \$1100.00, and silly clowns that cost as much as rent and groceries for a month.

Two stories which have common themes regarding young girls coming of age are Jamaica Kincaid's "Girl" and Tillie Olsen's "I Stand Here Ironing." "Girl" is a very short story told from a young girl's perspective, while "I Stand Here Ironing" is told from the point-of-view of a frazzled, worn-down-by-life mother talking to her teenaged daughter's teacher.

Kincaid's "Girl" is a kind of litany of how to be a woman, or instructions for living life, as told to her by an older, experienced female family member, probably her mother or grandmother. The woman is giving instructions to the girl, such as "this is how you

sew on a button, and this is how you make a button-hole..." (419), but time after time she insinuates that she has low expectations of the girl's moral character by saying, "Try to walk like a lady and not like the slut you are so bent on becoming," and, "This is how you hem a dress when you see the hem coming down and so to prevent yourself from looking like the slut I know you are so bent on becoming . . ." (419). The older female also gives strange advice such as, "This is how to bully a man," and "This is how a man bullies you" (419). The story lets the reader know that the older woman sees the world as one governed by rules to live by that usually don't vary, and if you follow her advice, you can expect certain results from life.

The narrator in "I Stand Here Ironing" is a mother speaking to her daughter's teacher who has made a home visit out of concern for the wasted potential of her student. The teacher seems to think there is something to the girl, some creative spark that needs to be nurtured and encouraged to grow into something that can set the daughter apart, give her a future. The mother is weary and appears to have given up hope for any type of success for her daughter, and blames herself for having left when the girl was an infant, to go out and work. The students can compare the attitude of the two maternal characters in these stories. The mother in "Girl," while appearing to expect the worst morally from her daughter, never stops giving direction and guidance, while the mother in "I Stand Here Ironing" has a defeated attitude, as if she has already given up on her daughter, and there is nothing she can do about it, while expressing regret about her daughter's early childhood, a time in life when she (the mother) had to make hard choices, including leaving her young toddler to go to work.

Another story which deals with young girls and the knowledge passed down from one generation to another is the short story "Beacon Hill" by Elizabeth Brown Guillory. In this story, a mother drives her reluctant sixteen-year-old daughter from Houston to the fictional town of Bayou St. Claude in Louisiana to spend time with the girl's great-grandmother. The great-grandmother lives in a primitive house without modern amenities located in an isolated, wooded area high upon a hill, called Beacon Hill, which has a reputation for being a magical place. The matriarch immediately sets about teaching her great-granddaughter the secrets of collecting roots, herbs, leaves and berries found in nature and how to make remedies from them to cure all types of people's problems. The girl is totally uninterested in that, and in the old lady's stories which have been told for generations about the Old World (Africa), until she becomes ill from a spider bite and her great-grandmother saves her with her homemade remedies. The girl's attitude in this story can be compared with the attitudes of the young girls in "Girl" and "I Stand Here Ironing." There are many other parallels, such as the teaching of young girls about their monthly cycles and how to take care of themselves. The ability to heal using herbs and homemade potions will be explored again in Gloria Naylor's novel *Mama Day*.

Eudora Welty's "A Worn Path" provides another example of maternal love, nurturing, and healing. This is the story of an elderly black woman who makes a very long trip to town by foot to obtain medication for her young grandson. The details of her

trip, such as an encounter with a patronizing white man who was out hunting, and her humbling herself to ask a white woman to tie her shoes, show students the lengths a parent will go to for the well-being of his/her child. Students will be led in a discussion of the boy's condition requiring medication, which is having swallowed lye, and why the old woman only needs to go to town once a year. How does she supply her needs the rest of the time? The students will be asked to consider whether she may be self-sufficient, like the great-grandmother in "Beacon Hill." This is also another approach to healing; having to have faith and rely on a medical doctor when the herbal remedies passed on from other generations do not suffice.

"Everyday Use" by Alice Walker is a good short story to read before or after reading the novel, *Mama Day*. The main idea of the story is the heritage of two sisters in the form of quilts made by their grandmother, who has already passed away when this story is told from the point-of-view of their mother. It will tie in very nicely with the story of the wedding quilt made in *Mama Day*. This story will demonstrate the heritage passed from one generation to another, not just in material things, but also in knowledge and understanding. An excellent follow-up to "Everyday Use" is a short excerpt from the non-fiction essay "In Search of Our Mothers' Gardens," by Alice Walker. It discusses the way her mother's pallet was her garden: it was her way of healing herself from the stresses of daily life.

"The Jilting of Granny Weatherall" is a short story by Katherine Ann Porter that tells the story of a woman who, on her deathbed, dreams that her long-ago beau will return to see how successfully she got on with her life after he left her at the altar, only to realize in the end that he was not coming back and she was more grief-stricken than before by this second jilting. This is a moral story of love and hate. We can discuss whether her productive life healed her heartbreak, or in the end, did the heartbreak override all the years of productive living?

## **Loss and Grieving**

While the coming of age theme is to be found in several of the selections we will read, death will also be a repeated theme. The grieving process and coping mechanisms of different cultures will be explored. One short story dealing with this issue is from the Indian culture: "The Management of Grief" by Bharati Mukherjee. In this story, a woman loses her husband and her only two children, and her friends and neighbors have also lost children and spouses in the terrorist bombing of an airplane. While these people are originally from India, they are living in Canada, and the airplane was bound for their old country, with many children and families on board heading home to see relatives for vacation. This is the story of how the mother deals with her own grief, still manages to help others for a time, and then folds into herself. Other characters in this story are used to display different issues related to death, such as guilt when a person dies and the survivors feel that they should have died instead, or a parent who cannot help but wish it were the "problem child" who had died instead of the "obedient child." The subject of

this story is delicate and should be done carefully and with the world's current situation taken into account. This can offer an excellent opportunity to open a discussion of the events of September 11, 2001, and how to deal with sudden death or unexpected loss of a loved one.

I would like to follow that story with an excerpt from the novel *The Poisonwood Bible* by Barbara Kingsolver. This is a very long novel about a missionary family sent to the Congo during the time of that nation's revolution in the late 1950s and early 1960s. I would use as a short story the chapter in which the youngest daughter is bitten and killed by a snake and how the mother handles her death.

Maxine Hong Kingston is a best-selling author and an American of Chinese ancestry, a heritage which is prominent in all of her work. Her novels are considered by some to be a reflection of what it means to grow up and live in two cultures at once. Her short Chinese creation tale "On Mortality" attempts to offer an ancient folk tale as an explanation for why people die. It is interesting and can be used to open up a class discussion or debate on death and the afterlife.

Another good story is Alice Walker's "To Hell With Dying." This story is narrated by a young woman who grows up in a close-knit community and has a kind, gentle, loving man named Mr. Sweet as a friend and neighbor. Mr. Sweet is a diabetic and an alcoholic, and also plays the guitar. He loves the neighborhood children, and dances and plays with them, and the children and their parents, in turn, love him. Mr. Sweet is given to bouts of melancholy or depression so bad that he often takes to his bed and announces that he is dying. The children's father calls them all together, goes to Mr. Sweet's house with the children, flings open the door and yells, "To hell with dying, man! These children want Mr. Sweet" (395). Mr. Sweet never fails to respond to the children's hugging, kissing, and tickling; he always gets up from the deathbed and goes on fishing and playing for a while longer, but each year, his revival is a little more difficult, and his ailments become worse. This is an excellent short story, and there is a beautiful picture-book edition, with illustrations by Catherine Deeter. This story illustrates the healing power of love, and especially of innocent children's love.

Leslie Marmon Silko's short story "The Man to Send Rain Clouds" is another excellent example of how a different culture deals with death or the rituals surrounding death. This short story is about an elder of the Laguna tribe, which is part of the Pueblo Indians, who dies and receives a customary Native-American funeral according to his wishes. This disturbs the local priest, who is a newcomer to the area who feels that the old man needs a "Christian" burial and therefore goes out to sprinkle holy water on the grave. This makes the relatives happy too, because they think that the holy water will ensure that the old man has plenty to drink and will send them much needed rain.

## Novels

Amy Tan's novel, *The Joy Luck Club*, deals with many of the same themes as Yamamoto's short story, described above. This novel is composed of vignettes which alternate back and forth between the lives of four Chinese women in pre-1949 China and the lives of their American-born daughters in California. The mothers, like the Japanese mother in "Seventeen Syllables," have lost children and had whole different lives before immigrating, re-marrying, and having a new, American family. The daughters come to see their mothers in a new, more respectful light and realize how difficult their lives were before coming to America. There is healing in the sharing of their stories with their daughters. The mothers hope to give the daughters strength and hope for a future in which they will not be as oppressed as the mothers. The theme of immigrating and teaching old customs to children in the new world is one that is repeated in several of our readings, as are the issues of assimilation and the culture/generation gap for immigrants and their children in this country.

*Mama Day*, by Gloria Naylor, is a wonderful novel about a black matriarch, Miranda Day, a known healer or conjure woman, using herbs and other remedies she makes from ingredients found on the island that has been home to her family for several generations. Mama Day also has the gift of "second sight" or precognition, a power that she learns of at the age of five when she predicts her sister's death. Her unusual powers are a legacy from her ancestors, handed down through the generations from Sapphira Wade, her great-grandmother who was a slave and a conjure woman. Mama Day knows how to heal body and soul. The local people respect her ability to heal, and come to her for help for illnesses and "spells" which they may have had inflicted upon them by someone wishing them evil. While Mama Day uses her "gifts" to heal and save, two other characters in the book also claim to have magical powers: Dr. Buzzard, whom Mama Day dismisses as a fraud, and Ruth, who is a jealous, vindictive woman who practices "hoodoo." There are several traditions which are very important to this family. One is a Christmas tradition that everyone in this small community participates in by carrying candles and delivering goodies or small gifts throughout the entire village. Another is the tradition of the wedding quilt which Mama Day and Cocoa's grandmother, Abigail, sew for Cocoa and George. This is a very good story, and many students will identify with the characters, since they may know someone or know of someone who still has these types of beliefs and utilizes the power of herbal remedies. Cocoa and her husband George exemplify a true, strong, pure love between a man and a woman, and also demonstrate how a woman can grieve, heal, and grow after losing the love of her life and, when she is ready, finally find another love.

According to Kathleen Puhr in her critical essay, "Healers in Gloria Naylor's Fiction," Naylor is a major, though somewhat overlooked, African American author. Puhr quotes Marjorie Pryse, who said that writers like Naylor, Toni Morrison, and Alice Walker "make it possible for . . . readers . . . to recognize their common literary ancestors (gardeners, quilt makers, grandmothers, root worker, and women who write

autobiographies) and to name each other as a community of inheritors” (Puhr 1). These characters, as healers, connect and speak to their readers. “Through their healing and conjuring they demonstrate the power to reassert the self and one’s heritage in the face of overwhelming injustice” (Puhr 1). This novel also deals with grief and how to handle it.

Zora Neale Hurston’s *Their Eyes Were Watching God* is a novel which celebrates a strong and independent woman. James Robert Saunders, in his criticism “Womanism as the Key to Understanding Zora Neale Hurston’s *Their Eyes Were Watching God* and Alice Walker’s *The Color Purple*,” describes this novel as a “cornerstone in literary history” (4). The main character of this novel, Janie Crawford, marries at an extremely young age to Logan Killocks, but soon discovers that her husband expects her to work in the fields like a mule and to be submissive to him. Janie leaves him for Joe Starks, who owns the general store in the small all-black town and is the mayor and the postmaster as well. Starks promises to treat her like a queen and expects her to do nothing all day but be a pretty baby-doll and just sit on the porch waiting for her husband to come home. But, he is psychologically abusive toward Janie, and she finds this marriage stultifying, and finally, after twenty years, stands up to Starks, who dies shortly after from some kind of kidney trouble. Janie then meets and falls madly in love with Tea Cake and leaves her comfortable home to go work in the fields in Florida. Tea Cake seems to love Janie for herself, but he is still stereotyped as a natural black man of that time, who expects his wife to submit to his whims, including striking her. In the end, Janie winds up shooting and killing Tea Cake after he has been bitten by a rabid dog. This novel advocates the rights of women to choose directions for themselves, rather than being bound in unfulfilling matrimony. The language is rich in dialect and the vernacular of the early twentieth century in which it is set. Some students may have difficulty reading the dialect in which the dialogue is written. Others will find it comes easily, much like their own speech patterns.

Barbara Kingsolver has also written two novels which may be added to the unit to read in their entirety: *The Bean Trees* and *Pigs in Heaven*. According to critic Maureen Ryan in her critical essay, “Barbara Kingsolver’s Lowfat Fiction,” “Kingsolver herself makes clear that her commitment to tackle the social issues of our day is conscious—and central to her undertaking” (2). Ryan says that Kingsolver, a product of growing up in the 1960s with the belief that we can make a difference in the world, writes about contemporary society, including child abuse, labor unrest, political repression, feminism, the disintegration of Native-American culture, and environmentalism. Ryan claims that Kingsolver proffers her medicine sprinkled with Nutrasweet because she wants her work to be for everyone, “...the English professor to understand the symbolism while at the same time I want one of my relatives who’s never read anything but the Sears catalogue—to read my books” (Ryan 2).

*The Bean Trees* is Barbara Kingsolver’s critically acclaimed first novel. It introduces the character Taylor Greer, an independent young woman on her way to Tucson, Arizona, who finds herself in Oklahoma, suddenly entrusted with the care of a silent, abused three

year-old Native-American child, whom she calls Turtle because of the tenacity with which she clings to her. In the novel, Taylor meets the dangers and atrocities of the world head-on with a commitment and competence for motherhood that continues in the sequel, *Pigs in Heaven*. The plot of this second novel discloses Taylor's attempts to flee with Turtle when a vigilant attorney who works for the Cherokee Nation Headquarters learns of Turtle's illegal adoption by Taylor Greer and tries to take Turtle away to place her with a Cherokee family. In this novel, Taylor teaches her daughter how to choose the fastest line in the grocery store and offers other bits of motherly wisdom, just as in several other selections we have read, including *Mama Day*, "Girl," and "Beacon Hill." The novel ends with Taylor, Turtle and Alice (Taylor's mother) being embraced by an extended family in Heaven, Oklahoma. In her critical essay, Ryan claims that "for all their apparent attention to the pressing social problems of our time, Kingsolver's light and lively books—which purport to give us food that's both nourishing and appetizing—leave all of us feeling just a bit too fine" (2). Ryan further quotes writer Karen Karbo, who raves about *Pigs in Heaven* claiming, "her medicine is meant for the head, the heart, and the soul—and it goes down dangerously, blissfully, easily" (Ryan 6). While this may present a problem to Ryan as being too pat and clever, for my students, these endings are good. The fact that seemingly insurmountable problems can be solved in the novel is an example of how resourcefulness and determination can overcome many obstacles.

*The Color Purple* by Alice Walker is another novel that is a tale of healing about black women in the South, who have been oppressed for hundreds of years. This is a very good book to use for this unit, provided there is time. This is the story of an African American woman named Celie and how she not only endures, but prevails to become a strong, independent woman. She heals herself from a terrible childhood by writing letters to God, and later, through Shug Avery, another strong woman who loves Celie for herself and her inner strength. Celie not only survives being sexually abused by her stepfather, but also losing her two babies and being married to an abusive, oppressive, unfaithful man. I plan to show excerpts from the movie, *The Color Purple*, or to show the entire film, to have students compare and contrast the two media presentations.

Alice Walker has also published a memoir, *The Same River Twice*, which chronicles the process of adapting *The Color Purple* to a screenplay. According to an interview by Ellen Kanner, though the book has won Walker the Pulitzer Prize and the National Book Award, Walker was hoping that the film would be loving and true to her novel. She had not expected the flood of criticism that critics heaped upon her, claiming that she hated men and that the male relationships portrayed in the film were destructive to the black community. Kanner quotes Walker on the subject of writing,

Storytelling is how we survive. When there's no food, the story feeds something; it feeds the spirit, the imagination. I can't imagine life without stories, stories from my parents, my culture. Stories from other people's parents, they're [sic] culture. That's how we learn from each other, it's

the best way. That's why literature is so important, it connects us, heart to heart (Kanner).

Walker wanted the public to know that she was hurt by the criticism, and so she subtitled *The Same River Twice* with the words, "Honoring the Difficult." About healing from her long dark illness in body and spirit (she had Lyme disease), Walker says, "You just continue. You basically just get up and continue making your oatmeal, playing with your dog, doing your work, your life just goes on. And you learn not to accept what is unjust" (Kanner, *From Alice Walker*).

### **Class Activities and Strategies**

The students will be expected to respond to selections in class discussions, reading logs, and various other written forms, such as memoirs or narratives of a related experience they or someone they know of might have had. Students can read these aloud and discuss with other students how their experiences are similar to ones we have read about. The focus will be on how people can heal or overcome obstacles in their lives and write about them so that others can recognize their own pain and the possibility of healing or going on to have productive, happy lives.

We will read, discuss, and compare the works of several different writers. I plan to group stories that have a common theme and cover two to six pieces of literature per week, depending on the length and subject matter of each. Short stories, essays, and poems with related themes will precede the unit on novels, so that the students can compare the events and experiences of the characters in the novels to those in the short stories. Students will be expected to keep a reading journal or log in which they will write a brief summary of each item read. We will do periodic reviews of these summaries, identify themes that are related, and discuss and write about the appearance of recurring conflicts in stories from various cultures and how the resolutions compare. All of my students suffer from a vocabulary deficiency, so vocabulary words are to be culled from each story prior to reading. Students will be expected to define and understand them before reading the story in which they are found.

One assignment each student will be required to do is a short biographical sketch of the writers, with each person researching a different author. These will be presented orally to the class, along with a visual such as a chart, photograph, or even a short video or excerpt from a film. The students will also be required to do some research in literary criticism, such as reading essays or analyses of various authors' works.

Another aspect of the study of different women writers would be to have the students think about, discuss, and respond in writing to the parallels drawn between the lives of these women and the situations they write about, in order to determine just how much of their work can be termed autobiographical. The students will compare the conflicts created for the characters in the plots to those the authors encountered in reality. We will

discuss how the writers themselves and their characters overcome obstacles and heal themselves physically and mentally. One example is the novel *Their Eyes Were Watching God*, by Zora Neale Hurston. Students will do research on the author's life and work and compare the two.

Each class will form a readers' club by dividing students into five or six groups of four or five, and each group will be reading and reviewing different novels. They will be required to do projects, such as surveying women they know personally to compare their lives with those of the characters we read about, making a diorama, recreating a scene from the story, or creating a screenplay from one of the scenes. Another activity that some students may elect to do is a collage of their family using photographs or mementoes which have stories attached to them, building a visual history of their families, just as a quilt can represent different stories through the cloth designs and memories of the people who wore the clothing from which the quilt pieces were taken.

I also expect my students to do a comparison/contrast essay, or charting of cultural similarities and differences of the various women writers. They will identify some of the universal themes of the literature, and how situations are handled by different cultures, for example, the customs of Native-Americans when a death occurs as compared to those of African Americans, white Americans, or Latinos. Students may be asked to predict how a certain group of people may respond to different conflicts.

## **CONCLUSION**

This unit contains many readings, some of which may have to be cut because of time restraints, but in the end I hope that my students take with them a greater understanding of the world around them and how people deal with difficult situations and seemingly insurmountable obstacles. Along with teaching them to read a variety of works of literature and nonfiction and to respond appropriately in writing, I hope to send them off with a greater, broader, and deeper appreciation for the written word and inspiration for their own lives. I hope that they will see that there is healing in reading and writing about common problems they face in life.

## **LESSON PLANS**

### **Lesson Plan I – “My Name”**

This is a very short lesson plan to introduce the unit as a search for identity, both personal and cultural. It also helps the teacher to learn something about the students early in the school year, as this short lesson can be done on the first day of class.

#### ***Objectives***

Students will summarize and analyze information given in a text. Students will understand the importance of a person's name and how it can help form their identity.

Students will write about their own names and research from their family, how they got the name and what it means.

***Materials***

Sandra Cisneros' short story "My Name," from *The House on Mango Street*.

***Activities***

The students will read the short story and discuss in class how the character feels about her name and why she does not like it. We will also discuss the implications of the grandmother's dissatisfaction with her married life and what she might have been had she not been kidnapped by her husband for marriage.

***Writing assignment***

The students will write a short essay in the same style as "My Name." They should address the following questions:

1. Who named you?
2. How was your name chosen?
3. How do you feel about your name?
4. If you were to change your name, what would your new name be?
5. What color would you assign to your name, and why?
6. What number would you assign to your name, and why?
7. Does your name have a history or tradition in your family?

**Lesson Plan II: Comparing Literature - The Immigrant Experience**

***Objectives***

The students will understand conflicts and cultural differences; examine a coming-of-age story; understand characteristics of narrative poetry; recognize poetic elements such as form, language, and content; use critical thinking skills to compare and contrast; and respond appropriately in a written composition.

***Materials***

Short story "Seventeen Syllables" by Hisaye Yamamoto

Poem "Exile" by Julia Alvarez

Poem "Lost Sister" by Cathy Song

***Activities***

A. The first part of the class period will be spent reading and discussing the short story. To help students assess their own understanding of the selection, they will answer the following short-answer questions:

1. Was the setting or the character's cultural background unfamiliar to you? If so, what did you learn about the culture?

2. Do you feel that you understood the important ideas or feelings the author wished to express? What were they?
3. Did you find any wider significance in the story, aside from its descriptions of a specific time and place and way of life? If so, identify the universal truths or themes that apply to other cultures as well.

Rubric for assessment of student answers:

1. Little or partial accomplishment: Student did not gain understanding of the cultural background of the story; student did not recognize the wider significance or universal themes of the story.
2. Substantial accomplishment: Student became somewhat familiar with the cultural background of the story through class discussion and reading the story; student recognized the larger significance of the themes of the story.
3. Full accomplishment: Student demonstrates familiarity with the cultural background of the story through outside exploration or research and student found and identified some universal truths in the story.

B. Read and discuss the two poems, “Exile” and “Lost Sister.” Compare and contrast them according to three basic aspects of each poem: content, form, and language. Create a chart as a guide.

Poetic Elements	“Exile”	“Lost Sister”
<i>Content</i> subject matter, speaker, setting, conflict, characters, plot	Immigration, child speaking to parent through memoir of leaving homeland, feeling of isolation	Immigration from oppression, loneliness, isolation, inner conflict
<i>Form</i> physical arrangement, pattern, structure use of stanzas	non rhyming 17 four line stanzas	non rhyming 64 lines divided in two numbered sections
<i>Language</i> word choice imagery figurative language symbols	narrative dark anticipation some loss adrift, lost from culture	Narrative/informative jade handcuffs/ tied to lost culture jade; something of value

C. Using details from the poems and story, students will write an evaluation of the lives the women lived before coming to America. Compare them to that of a woman in the United States.

- D. From a different perspective, have students write about the role of the male across cultural lines. Do males have as much trouble with their identity or assimilation into a new culture?
- E. How does writing and reading about these experiences help to heal the author and the reader?

### **Lesson Plan III – Readers’ Club**

One section of this unit is to be devoted to a readers’ club. We will begin this activity in the fall semester, however, by keeping reading logs. Each piece of literature we read together in class will be summarized in this log. Two of the novels will be read together as a class: *Mama Day* and *The Joy Luck Club*. The other novels will be read in groups, so not all of the students will have read the same books.

#### ***Objectives***

Students will read to acquire vocabulary; establish a purpose such as to inform, discover, or interpret; draw on prior knowledge to provide a connection with the texts; analyze text structures; produce summaries; draw inferences, conclusions and generalizations; recognize distinctive and shared characteristics of cultures through reading; compare text events with their own and other readers’ experiences. Students will express and support responses to various types of texts using textual evidence, and compare and contrast varying elements of texts. Students will analyze the setting and time frame to text’s meaning, describe and analyze the development of plot, and identify conflicts and resolutions.

#### ***Materials***

*The Color Purple*

*Their Eyes Were Watching God*

*The Bean Trees*

*Pigs In Heaven*

#### ***Activities***

I anticipate reading *Mama Day* and *The Joy Luck Club* together as a class and doing other projects with those novels for four to six weeks each. In the week following completion of the novels, the class will be divided evenly into four groups of up to ten students. Each group will read a different novel from the list above. Since we have block scheduling, the first hour of each class will be spent reading in the group. The group may elect to designate a reader by agreement or take turns reading aloud. At the end of one hour, each student will summarize in the reading log what they have read or heard. Each group will designate a student each day to report to the class what was read that day. After the novels have been completed, each group will do projects related to that novel. I have allowed six weeks for this activity.

1. Each student will write a report on the book read in his or her group.
2. As a group, students will create a visual, such as a diorama, recreating a scene from the book in miniature; produce a mini-play of the book or excerpt from it by writing the screenplay, making costumes, and acting out a scene or scenes; or design a tri-fold display poster according to specific guidelines. The tri-fold display might contain a list of vocabulary words from the book; biographical information on the author; a visual such as a cover illustration or an illustration of a specific scene; and a time-line of events in the novel that also identifies characters, setting, and plot in a short summary. Films of the novels will not be accepted as visuals unless they are written, directed, and produced by the students. Students themselves will evaluate the visual presentations of the other groups.

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