

Overcoming Obstacles and the Search for Identity: Literature of Multicultural Women Writers

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INTRODUCTION

As an English teacher at an inner city high school, I have tried to make the study of literature more relevant to my students' lives. In my Advanced Placement literature and composition class, I have had the opportunity to explore modern works by minority writers alongside more traditional and classical works. However, in the past most of the authors whose works I have taught have been male. Since the majority of my students are female, the need for the incorporation of works by minority women writers is one of my goals for the AP (Advanced Placement) program. In addition to the AP program, I teach five regular senior English classes. Students in my regular classes study British literature their senior year; however, in an attempt to make my course more relevant, I intend to incorporate part of this curriculum unit into the regular English 4 course.

One of the themes that is incorporated in much of the literature that I teach is the quest for identity and the obstacles one must overcome during this journey. This search or quest frequently involves a healing process, as the writers or their characters come to terms with who they are or who they want to become. The addition of works by multicultural women writers would enhance my students' appreciation and understanding of this universal theme. From Oedipus' quest that ultimately leads him to find his true identity, to Tom's quest for self in Tennessee Williams' *The Glass Menagerie*, to James McBride's search for identity in *The Color of Water*, to the search for self by the narrator of Ralph Ellison's *Invisible Man*, my students explore this motif throughout the school year. The addition of works by such authors as Gloria Naylor, Amy Tan, Alice Walker, Sandra Cisneros, and Toni Morrison will enhance this exploration and make this motif more relevant to my students' lives.

The search for identity and the struggle of minority women writers to overcome the obstacles that society puts in their way is a theme that touches the lives of every teenager, especially the inner city youth whom I have had the pleasure of teaching for over thirty years. Many of my students—both male and female—live this struggle every day. My unit will allow us, and here I am intentionally including myself, to explore—through reading and discussing short stories, novels, or excerpts from novels by contemporary multicultural women writers—the obstacles that we have had to overcome and those that we still need to overcome.

GENERAL OVERVIEW OF THE UNIT

My unit for my AP class will center on the novels *Mama Day*, by Gloria Naylor, and *The Joy Luck Club*, by Amy Tan, in addition to several short stories, including Alice Walker's "Everyday Use," Elizabeth Brown-Guillory's "Beacon Hill," and selections from Sandra Cisneros' *Woman Hollering Creek* and *The House on Mango Street*. The unit for my regular senior English classes will focus on excerpts from *Mama Day* and several short stories, including "Everyday Use," "Beacon Hill," and several narratives by Cisneros. The women in all of these works face emotional, spiritual, and often physical obstacles as they try to come to terms with their own identities and heal themselves and those around them.

As a pre-reading activity to the entire unit, I will have my students write an essay in which they discuss an obstacle or hurdle that they need to overcome during their senior year of high school and how they intend to overcome this challenge. This essay will be written at the beginning of the school year, and in May they will revisit their essays to see how successful they have been.

In order to relate this literature to my students' lives, I want my students to write their own mini-memoirs through both original poetry and personal narratives; therefore, part of the unit will relate to the study of the memoir as a literary genre. I will begin this part of the unit by having students write their own poems based on George Ella Lyon's poem "Where I'm From." In addition, I often start the school year by having my students write about their names, using Cisneros' selection "My Name" as a model. This piece and their own "Where I'm From" poem will be the first pieces of their memoir units.

Literature that I may use to inspire my students to start thinking about their own family stories will center around the wedding quilt in *Mama Day* and the controversy over which daughter should get the mother's quilts in "Everyday Use." Quilts often "tell" family stories or serve as a springboard for storytelling. Portions of the film *How to Make an American Quilt* will be viewed, showing at least one of the members of the quilting bee telling her story. The film focuses on the making of a wedding quilt. As the film unfolds, each woman involved tells a story to a young graduate student who has come to her grandmother's home to consider a marriage proposal. The stories are lessons in love, heartache, and reconciliation. A clip from this film will connect to Miranda's narrative on the different pieces of material that are being used in the wedding quilt for Cocoa and George in *Mama Day* and the similar discussions in "Everyday Use" and "Beacon Hill." I will use the storytelling in the film as part of the introduction to the memoir-writing portion of this unit. Models for memoir writing will include excerpts from Morrison's *The Bluest Eye*—the section on pages 19-21 about the blue-eyed baby doll—and the selection "Barbie-Q" by Cisneros. Other models I plan to use from Cisneros are "The House on Mango Street" from *The House on Mango Street* and "Eleven" and "Mericans" from *Woman Hollering Creek*.

UNIT THEMES

The Quest for Identity and the Powers of Healing in Multicultural Literature

I envision a unit that will connect on some level to the other literature that we study, so that the search for identity and overcoming obstacles is a theme that will run throughout the year. This unit will address the emotional, spiritual, and physical healing that is an integral part of texts focusing on the search for identity and “wholeness” or “wellness.”

According to Beverly Tatum, “Integrating one’s past, present, and future into a cohesive, unified sense of self is a complex task that begins in adolescence and continues for a lifetime” (20). The search for personal identity involves every aspect of an adolescent’s life, from religion, to values, to gender roles, to ethnic identities. This quest for self is especially integral to adolescents of color. One of the exercises that Dr. Tatum does with her students is to have them complete the phrase “I am…” by writing down as many descriptors as they can in sixty seconds. She has found that minority students almost always mention their ethnicity, but white students do not. She concludes that students in the majority often take their ethnicity or, in this case, their “whiteness,” for granted. White students do not feel oppressed because of their skin color, so they do not think about it. Students of color, however, are faced with coming to terms with their ethnicity in a way that white students are not (21). African Americans, Hispanic Americans, and Asian Americans are faced with biases against their ethnicity every time they look in a mirror, watch a television program, or walk down the street. These students have had their perceptions of themselves shaped by the reactions of the white majority. Minority students, therefore, react against these biases in their daily lives.

This search for self is often a distinguishing characteristic of the writings of multicultural authors. Characters in each of the novels or short stories to be studied in this unit are in some way searching for their identities, trying to make sense of their place in the world. In order to discover who they are and who they want to be, they must explore their cultural heritage. The characters in these texts face challenges in their search for self, in their search for positive relationships, and in their desire to come to terms with their lives, their families, and their environment. Survival and success in overcoming these obstacles—internal as well as external—is a direct result of a healing process that takes place in the text.

Healing in literature takes various forms. There is the healing that takes place in the writer’s soul through the actual process of writing. Authors frequently write as a means of therapy or as a positive way to deal with loss. For example, *In Memoriam*, a work by Alfred, Lord Tennyson, was written following the death of his closest friend Arthur Henry Hallam. This collection of meditative poetry examines Tennyson’s feelings of loss and grief over Hallam’s death. Dr. Elizabeth Brown-Guillory’s short story “Beacon

Hill”—one of the stories to be studied in this unit—was written after her mother’s death as a way to come to terms with her loss.

As in “Beacon Hill” and Naylor’s *Mama Day*, healing is a prominent theme in African American literature. In both selections, healing connects the past to the present and often serves as a way to unite those in the present. Tauntzia in “Beacon Hill” and Miranda in *Mama Day* are healers who pass on their gifts or abilities to their descendants as a way of keeping the past alive. Athena Vrettos states that healers have the “ability to forge spiritual bonds with the past” (Vrettos 455-456). The role of the healer in African American literature often “resembles the dual role played by the priest/physician in traditional African culture” (456). Vrettos goes on to say, “By taking healing as a metaphor for spiritual power, black women emphasize the restorative potential of their own narrative acts” (456). According to Vrettos, “the fragmentation and alienation of African American culture from traditions of the past . . . can be healed, . . . specifically by black women” (471).

This same fragmentation and alienation is also seen in Amy Tan’s *The Joy Luck Club*. The Chinese American daughters must learn about their cultural past in order to become whole, in order to heal. Thus, the theme of healing will be emphasized in the discussion of the selections in this unit.

LITERATURE STUDIED IN THE UNIT

Amy Tan’s *The Joy Luck Club*

In an interview in *Maclean’s*, Amy Tan stated that as an American-born child of recent immigrants, she remembers feeling that she had been “born into the wrong family” and that she “went down the wrong chute and ended up in a Chinese family” (Young 47). As she matured, she became more interested in her heritage. This renewed interest in heritage is a theme that runs throughout this unit, especially since the writers are bicultural Americans—Asian American, Hispanic American, and African American. At twenty-six, Tan discovered that her mother had been married before and that Tan had three older half-sisters still living in China (Young 47). This situation is echoed in *The Joy Luck Club* in the story of Suyuan Woo, the mother of Jing-Mei or June Woo.

The Joy Luck Club consists of interwoven stories narrated by Chinese-born mothers and their American-born daughters. The novel explores the relationship that first-generation Chinese American women have with their mothers and the problems of being both Chinese and American. The stories told by both the mothers and daughters trace their search for identity and the obstacles they must face in order to discover themselves. The stories told by the mothers are primarily set in pre-1949 China. The stories told by the daughters are about growing up in California and about a current situation. There is a definite communication barrier between mothers and daughters and between the older Chinese culture and the newer American culture. The daughters are caught between

Chinese and Chinese American culture. The mothers struggle against fate, while the daughters struggle with too many choices (Shear). [In order to help students keep track of the various characters, the students will keep a character chart for each family. The two-column chart will list the mother in the first column and her daughter in the second column. As they read the novel, students will jot down notes on each character's personality as well as a brief summary of the experiences or stories told by each character.]

The mothers all want their daughters to have the best of both cultures. Lindo Jong describes her feelings of despair that her daughter Waverly does not possess a "Chinese character." Lindo states that she wanted her children "to have the best combination: American circumstances and Chinese character. How could I know these two things do not mix?" (Tan 289). She laments that she could not teach her about Chinese character, "How to obey parents and listen to your mother's mind. How not to show your own thoughts, to put your feelings behind your face so you can take advantage of hidden opportunities . . . Why Chinese thinking is best" (Tan 289). Lindo feels that her daughter is ashamed of her, and Lindo is ashamed her daughter is ashamed because "she is my daughter and I am proud of her, and I am her mother but she is not proud of me" (Tan 291). However, later in this narrative, Waverly shows herself to be proud of her mother or at least pleased that they look alike. They are looking in the mirror at the beauty shop, and Waverly comments on their crooked noses. She states that this shows that they are "two-faced" or devious. Lindo begins to question her motives and intentions: "Which one is American? Which one is Chinese? Which one is better? If you show one, you must always sacrifice the other" (Tan 304). This concern of one identity taking over the other is a problem faced by all of the women in the novel.

According to M. Marie Booth Foster, the "daughters' sense of self is intricately linked to an ability to speak and be heard by their mothers. Similarly, the mothers experience growth as they broaden communication lines with their daughters" (208). Until the mothers and daughters can connect, they feel isolated and fragmented. Like women from other American minority groups, Chinese American women struggle with what Foster calls "hyphenated" American females (209). She states that the problem lies in trying to balance women's roles: wife, mother, daughter, and career woman:

In achieving balance, voice is important: in order to achieve voice, hyphenated women must engage in self-exploration, recognition, and appreciation of their culture(s), and they must know their histories. The quest for voice becomes an archetypal journey for all of the women (Foster 209).

The mothers in the novel are trying to adapt to a new culture and inspire their daughters to achieve by American standards, but also retain their Chinese sensibilities. This barrier between mother and daughter can only be bridged when the daughters truly listen to their mothers' stories.

The mothers' lives in China were very different, and all of them tell horrific stories of their lives in war-torn China during the Second Sino-Japanese War and the Communist takeover of Mainland China. Telling their stories allows the mothers a chance to review and analyze their pasts, partially healing old wounds. According to Ben Xu, the "only means available for mothers to ensure ethnic continuity is to recollect the past and tell tales of what is remembered." For the daughters, their mothers' stories allow them to finally understand their "ancestry and thus themselves" (Foster 210). The daughters find their voices through interaction with their mothers—in both listening to their stories and interacting with them about the present. As the daughters gain insight into their mothers' lives in China, it is this Chinese identity that becomes the healing factor in the daughters' search for self.

A good example of the mothers' need to relate their stories to their daughters is seen as Ying-Ying St. Clair laments the disintegrating marriage of her daughter, Lena: "All her life, I have watched her as though from another shore. And now I must tell her everything about my past. It is the only way to penetrate her skin and pull her to where she can be saved" (Tan 274). Xu states that in our memories, we have stories and narratives "to tell about the past which both shape and convey our sense of self." The mothers' narratives help to give their daughters a sense of ethnic identity, something the daughters need in order to deal with the present.

Jing-Mai or June Woo—who narrates the first and last stories in the novel, as well as a story in each of the middle two sections—must learn about her dead mother in order to find her voice. According to Foster, her name symbolizes her confusion and lack of direction. She is the only daughter with both a Chinese and an American name—Jing-Mai and June (Foster 211). Her quest for identity takes her to Mainland China, where she meets her two half-sisters, the babies her mother had been forced to abandon. Her mother had tried for years to locate her lost daughters, and it is up to Jing-Mai to tell her mother's story to these older sisters. Learning about her mother and meeting her older sisters give Jing-Mai a renewed sense of belonging. The photograph of the three sisters at the end gives her a sense of completeness (Shear). Jing-Mai states:

My sisters and I stand, arms around each other, laughing and wiping the tears from each other's eyes. The flash of the Polaroid goes off and my father hands me the snapshot. My sisters and I watch quietly together, eager to see what develops . . . And although we don't speak, I know we all see it: Together we look like our mother. Her same eyes, her same mouth, open in surprise to see, at last, her long-cherished wish (Tan 331-332).

Once these daughters in *The Joy Luck Club* realize and appreciate the hidden strengths that their mothers had to possess in order to survive in China, they begin to come to an understanding of both their mothers and themselves. The stories are no longer "dead echoes of past acts and events" (Xu). The daughters can finally understand and accept the two cultures that shaped them, thus healing themselves.

Gloria Naylor's *Mama Day*

Like Amy Tan in *The Joy Luck Club*, Gloria Naylor explores the issues of the importance of the past or one's cultural heritage in her novel, *Mama Day*. Both novels have a similar structure in that they both are told through several narrators. In *The Joy Luck Club*, the narrators include the four daughters and three of the mothers—each in first person. In *Mama Day*, there are three narrators—a communal voice in the present tense, representing the viewpoint of Miranda or Mama Day and sometimes using “we,” and two first person narrators—Cocoa and George. Cocoa and George speak in the past tense in a kind of running dialogue. At first the narratives of Cocoa and George seem to be “spoken discourses, but later they prove to be interior dialogues that Cocoa has with George in the Willow Springs graveyard many years after his death” (Eckard). We learn of the distant past and of the legends of Willow Springs through the communal voice. Interchanging the communal voice with that of Cocoa and George blurs the line between past and present and adds an aspect of magical realism to the novel.

The past is very important in *Mama Day*. It significantly influences the lives of the inhabitants of Willow Springs and changes the lives of Cocoa and her husband George. The novel is set in two locations—Willow Springs and Manhattan. Willow Springs is an isolated community—an island off the coast of the United States between Georgia and South Carolina. It is part of the United States, but is not part of a particular state. It is a world outside of “white parameters” (Meisenhelder). Mystery and legend form the foundations of Willow Springs. African beliefs and values flourish. The island represents a view of the world in which the boundaries between secular and sacred and living and dead are blurred. The island's inhabitants believe that ancestral spirits serve as guardians of the living—an African belief brought to America and preserved in Willow Springs (Tucker).

The novel begins with the legend of the progenitors of the island's inhabitants—Sapphira and Bascombe Wade. In 1823, Sapphira persuaded Bascombe Wade to sign over Willow Springs to his slaves. The powers of Sapphira have been passed along as a family legacy to Miranda, the island's matriarch, and to her niece Cocoa. Sapphira was a conjure woman. She had mythic powers—she could “grab a bolt of lightning in the palm of her hand” (Naylor 3). She was like the conjure women of African tribal cultures, such as Chielo, a priestess in Chinua Achebe's *Things Fall Apart*, the district-required novel for the senior year. Miranda communicated with ancestral voices, especially during her solitary walks in the woods and in her visits to the “other place,” the original family home. Like Sapphira, Miranda is a conjure woman. At age five, she demonstrated second sight by knowing that her baby sister Peace was going to drown in the well. Although she can “read” signs, her second sight is often just an acute awareness of nature. She realizes there is to be a hurricane by observing the behavior of the crabs, shore birds, rabbits, and even Dr. Buzzard's bees (Naylor 227). She also has “gifted hands” (88) and is proficient in herbal medicine. Although there are other “conjurers” on the island—Ruby, Dr. Buzzard, and even the ancestor Sapphira—it is Miranda whom

Naylor chooses to develop into a “concrete presence, a fleshed out character” (Tucker). She is even respected by the mainland physician, Dr. Smithfield. They respect each other’s abilities. Ruby and Dr. Buzzard represent more of the sinister definition of a conjurer—an agent of vengeance, a practitioner of witchcraft or voodoo. It is Miranda, however, who is the force that guides the island and keeps the past alive.

The novel is about more than just Miranda. It also involves her great niece Ophelia (Cocoa) and Cocoa’s husband George. Both Cocoa and George are searching for their identities. Cocoa’s confusion can even be seen in her names. She is Ophelia to the outside world, including George. In Willow Springs she is Cocoa. She even states that no one on the island would even know who Ophelia was. Although she is probably Miranda’s successor on the island, Cocoa has left Willow Springs to work in Manhattan. There she meets and marries George. Unlike Cocoa, George has no roots. He was brought up in an orphanage and has little knowledge of his cultural heritage. He has lived his life with an emphasis on achievement, status, and money. His life is full of Shakespeare and American values. He lacks knowledge of African American traditions. His visit to Willow Springs is a revelation. Cocoa, on the other hand, has ties and roots, yet she has been trying to run from them—visiting Willow Springs every August and then returning to a different world in New York. She is very hesitant to bring George to Willow Springs. She has told him very little about her grandmother and about her great-aunt Miranda. She has completely left out any mention of conjuring. She is afraid he will not understand the islander’s way of life. Although he is taken by the island’s beauty and genuinely enjoys the island’s inhabitants, he is still an outsider.

Miranda’s biggest challenge during George’s visit comes when a jealous Ruby hexes Cocoa and makes her ill. Although she can counter some of the poisonous effects of the mercury used on Cocoa’s hair, Miranda realizes that she needs George’s belief in her abilities and his love for Cocoa to save her. George is asked to perform a certain task, which seems irrational to him. He is supposed to take Bascombe Wade’s ledger and Miranda’s walking stick to the hen house and bring back whatever he finds behind the nest. His fear gets the better of him, and he lashes out at the hens, killing them. He does realize that perhaps all Miranda wanted were his hands (Naylor 300), but he does not return to her. He goes instead to Cocoa and, although he is able to save her, he loses his life by succumbing to a heart attack. Cocoa survives, remarries, has children, moves closer to Willow Springs, and visits George’s grave frequently. By visiting George’s grave, Cocoa is keeping his memory alive. The African American world of Willow Springs allows Cocoa and George to continue their conversations, even after his death. In the African religion, death is a door to another world and, as such, it allows contact with the living. So long as the dead are remembered, they are immortal. Thus, through his death, George becomes part of a community and becomes whole (Donlon). Cocoa, through her conversations with George, undergoes a healing process. She rediscovers and finally accepts her heritage and is finally at peace with herself.

For many of my students, there is no sense of a distant past. Only the immediate past is remembered. Often there is no sense of family or place to provide identity. Both *Mama Day* and *The Joy Luck Club* illustrate that the past is the source of racial, cultural, and family legacies that influences who we are and what we will become. It is through the telling of the family stories that we find solace and a sense of self-worth.

Alice Walker's "Everyday Use"

"Everyday Use" is the story of a mother's conflicted relationship with her two daughters. It is set in the 1960s at a time when the Black Power and Black Nationalism movements were coming to the forefront. African Americans were interested in rediscovering their roots and rejecting their American heritage. "Everyday Use" is Walker's response to heritage as expressed in the black political movements of the 1960s (Hoel). Walker argues in this story that an African American is both African and American, and that the rejection of the American side of one's heritage is disrespectful of one's ancestors (White).

The mother in "Everyday Use" is a simple country woman who has done her best by both her daughters—Maggie, who was badly burned in a fire, and Dee, who was given an education and who left home. In the story, Dee is returning for a visit. She wants to be called Wangero now and has brought her Muslim boyfriend or husband (Hakim a Barber) with her on this visit. In an attempt to shed her American heritage, Wangero drops the name Dee, not realizing or caring that it represents several generations of her ancestors in America and is, therefore, part of her heritage. According to Helga Hoel, Dee's new name is a mixture of names from more than one ethnic group representing the whole East African region. Her greeting to her mother is Ugandan, and her dress is a West African feature. Hoel states that Walker "has made Dee embrace this confusion of misunderstood cultural bits and pieces from all over Africa on purpose either to let Dee represent anything African or to portray her as a very shallow and superficial young woman who does not bother to check her sources." Dee follows fashion. It is "in" to be ethnic. Maggie, on the other hand, is a shy, quiet girl who has not had the opportunities of her older sister. She is meek and generally acquiesces to anything that Dee wants. This sets up the main conflict in the story over Dee's desire to possess the family quilts. Dee covets them for financial and artistic value. She wants to hang them on the wall of her home. The mother intends to give them to Maggie as a wedding present. To Maggie, the quilts are personal. They link her emotionally to her ancestors. She will put them, as Dee says, "to everyday use" (Walker 91). For the first time in her life, the mother sides with Maggie, and Dee storms off with only the butter churn lid and dasher that she also wants to display. The desire for the churn lid and dasher, as well as for the quilts, is Dee's superficial idea of heritage. Ironically, she wants to display items her ancestors in America made, but she has rejected her American name and, therefore, those same ancestors.

Although still scarred both emotionally and physically, Maggie gains a sense of self-worth in her mother's decision to give the quilts to her. Maggie has always stood in her older sister's shadow. She has always felt inferior. This low self-esteem was reinforced as she grew up by her mother's catering to her older sister. As the story ends and Maggie triumphs in this small battle over the quilts, it is now time for her to go out into the world, marry, and put the quilts to "everyday use." Healing for Maggie can finally begin.

Elizabeth Brown-Guillory's "Beacon Hill"

Like Willow Springs in *Mama Day*, Beacon Hill is a "magical place." Not only was the writing of "Beacon Hill" part of a healing process for the author, but also the story itself centers around a healer, Tauntzia. Tauntzia, like Miranda in *Mama Day*, has second sight. She "sees" her great-granddaughter Brandy's spider bite and the beginning of her menses. Tauntzia calls Brandy to stay with her for a week in order to pass on the stories of their ancestors and teach her about herbs and healing. Brandy goes up Beacon Hill as a whiny, spoiled twelve-year-old child and comes down as a wiser, more self-assured young woman. She gains insight into the world of her ancestors and learns to appreciate the old ways. As Tauntzia lies dying, Brandy "sees" her mother's return and Tauntzia sitting beside her in the car. Brandy realizes that the powers of sight and healing have been passed on to her.

Selected Short Stories by Sandra Cisneros

I plan to use several stories by Sandra Cisneros as part of the memoir writing section of this unit. Although they are short stories, the selections from *The House on Mango Street* and *Woman Hollering Creek* are actually short vignettes or character sketches. They resemble personal narratives or short memoirs; therefore, they will serve as examples for my students as they recall incidents from their own childhoods. All of the stories that we will use as examples of personal narratives use child narrators who are coming to terms with identity and gender.

Like the women portrayed in the other selections in this unit, Cisneros' characters "engage in a process of cultural mediating as they struggle to reconcile their Mexican past with their American present" (Fitts). This confusion and conflict is complicated by the use of child narrators. This aspect of being a child coming to terms with being both American and Mexican is easily seen in the story "Mericans."

Stories such as "The House on Mango Street," "Hairs," "My Name," and "Eleven," are excellent selections to serve as examples for having students write about their names, homes, families, neighborhoods, dreams, and disappointments.

Passage from Cisneros' "Barbie-Q" and Toni Morrison's *The Bluest Eye*

Cisneros' "Barbie-Q" and an excerpt from Toni Morrison's *The Bluest Eye* will also serve as a springboard for writing about identity. Both selections deal with the "struggles of a dark-skinned woman to recognize her own beauty in a land of Barbie dolls and blond beauty queens" (Fitts). The doll in both selections is a symbol for what a woman, girl, or female is supposed to be according to a white-dominated society. According to Trinna Frever, "The doll image becomes a playing field for contests of racial and cultural identity" (Frever). The Barbie doll is the representation of American womanhood, while the blue-eyed baby doll is the embodiment of what every girl should try to emulate. The narrators in each story reflect different reactions to these symbols of the perfect woman or child. In "Barbie-Q," the narrator wishes to collect Barbies and emulate their qualities. In *The Bluest Eye*, Claudia cannot understand the adults' reactions to a blue-eyed baby doll. The adults thought all little girls would want one, but Claudia destroys hers. This doll resembles Shirley Temple, not her. Claudia is reacting to a doll that does not resemble her at all. She cannot identify with it. A story about a childhood toy or game would be a logical outgrowth from the discussion of these two selections. Students might also write about a family story, especially one that had an emotional impact on them.

QUILT MAKING, STORYTELLING, AND THE FILM *HOW TO MAKE AN AMERICAN QUILT*

When reading *Mama Day*, I was struck by a similar discussion of quilts that is at the center of both "Everyday Use" and "Beacon Hill." The art of quilt making is like weaving stories. Each piece of the quilt represents a story or a stage in someone's life. Miranda in *Mama Day*, the mother in "Everyday Use," and Tauntzia in "Beacon Hill" feel that their quilts have special meaning. When they touch the quilts, they are touching the people whom the quilt pieces represent (White). The history of the quilt represents the history of their families. The quilts in these selections contain scraps of material from dresses worn by grandmothers and great-grandmothers. Each scrap tells a story. Quilt making is a tribute to women who have been able to devise something beautiful and functional out of scraps and cast offs. The "quilt is the central metaphor for this unrecognized female creativity" (Hoel). Nikki Giovanni, in her poem "Hands: For Mother's Day," expresses these ideas about the importance of quilts:

Some people think a quilt is a blanket stretched across a Lincoln bed . . . or from frames on a wall . . . a quaint museum piece to be purchased on Bloomingdale's 30-same-as-cash plan . . . Quilts are our mosaics . . . Michelle-Angelo's contribution to beauty . . . We weave a quilt with dry, rough hands . . . Quilts are the way our lives are lived . . . We survive on patches . . . scraps . . . the leftovers from a materially richer culture . . . the throwaways from those with emotional options . . . We do the far more difficult job of taking that which nobody wants and not only loving it . . . not only seeing its worth . . . but making it lovable and intrinsically worthwhile . . . (17).

I plan to have this excerpt from Giovanni showing on an overhead transparency as students enter the classroom on the first day of the study of the part of the unit that includes “Everyday Use” and “Beacon Hill.” We would already have discussed the importance of the quilt to Miranda in *Mama Day* (pages 135-139), so this quotation and subsequent discussion of it will help link the study of *Mama Day* to the two short stories. In addition, we will watch at least part of the film *How to Make an American Quilt*, which centers around a young woman named Finn who has come back to her great-aunt and grandmother’s house to work on her thesis and to decide if she really wants to get married. The members of the quilting bee are making Finn a wedding quilt, each person designing a square that represents love. Memories of each woman are interwoven in the film as the quilt is being made. Anna, played by Maya Angelou, is the one who had taught the other women how to quilt and has planned Finn’s quilt. She narrates a twelve-minute segment approximately one hour and ten minutes into the film about the fact that a story quilt is meant to be read. If nothing else of the film is shown, this segment should be used “to show” the importance of the quilts and what the scraps of material represent.

Since one of my activities for the unit involves student memoir writing, the stories represented by the different scraps of material used in the quilts featured in the various selections and in the film will serve as inspiration for student writing.

MEMOIR WRITING

“Where I’m From”

I will open this section of the unit by having my students write a poem entitled “Where I’m From,” patterned on George Ella Lyon’s poem by the same name. I learned about this activity when I was part of the Rice University/Houston I. S. D. School Writing Project in 1998. After reading Lyon’s poem and my version of it, students will brainstorm about such things as items found around their homes, backyards, and neighborhoods; names of relatives; old sayings; favorite foods, toys, games, and movies; and places where they “keep” their childhood memories. The following are excerpts from student poetry based on Lyon’s poem:

I’m from waking up in every morning to the smell eggs and grits in the kitchen,
To going to bed at night with a stomach full of kool-aid and fried chicken,
To going to bed early on school days listening to all the fun I’m missing.
. . . listening to my grandmother’s old stories of picking cotton and working the
butter churn . . .
Where I’m from it’s a challenge to get out, and you continuously need motivation,
but the only way out is through your own self-evaluation.
Out here there’s no mercy for the weak, and it’s even harder on the strong, but
you have to keep your head up and keep moving right along.

Now that I've told you where I'm from, just do me one favor; don't try to change it.

These trials and tribulations made my people who they are, and that's why we're able to make it.

So the next time you come in my parts and see me, just walk up and show me some love because where I'm from we're all family.

by Billy Cravin

I come from a world of boys having messy rooms

And girls having clean rooms

I come from a world where boys play with frogs, worms, dogs, and Tonka truck toys

And girls playin' curls in their own Barbie doll world.

by Donte' Alexander

I'm from a place where there is no privacy,

A place when everyone sees darkness, but there is hope for some,

A place where the sun hardly shines.

I'm from a family that shows compassion and love,

A family that often says, "I love you,"

A family that often shows that they care.

I'm from family gatherings where they would have all the fixings:

Turkey, ham, gumbo, okra, dirty rice, bread, fruits, and vegetables.

Food that is so good that feeds all through, even into the soul . . .

Trapped inside a world where there's more harm than good.

I rise above with a backbone full of passion and love.

With devoted parents, sisters, aunts, uncles, and cousins,

I have risen above all the obstacles like cream.

by Shannon Chenier

Personal Narratives: Student Memoirs

Before starting the essay portion of the unit, I will need to explain the difference between memoir writing and an autobiography. A memoir is more than just telling a story. It is trying to find meaning. The writer's voice must capture the writer's personality. It is conversational. According to Judith Barrington, while an autobiography is the story of a life that is supposed to capture all of the essential elements, a memoir is a story "from a life" (Barrington 22). It does not intend to represent a whole life. There is also usually some theme that ties the memories together. The memoir shows how a person remembers his or her own life; therefore, it is quite subjective. An autobiography would require research and facts and would be much more objective (Barrington 22-24). A

memoirist tries to make sense of his or her life. The reader will hopefully find some “commonality” and identify with the writer and feel, therefore, a little less alone in the world. Barrington calls this form of healing “shared humanity” (69). By writing memoirs or personal narratives, the writer is often able to come to terms with grief or loss. As in James McBride’s *The Color of Water*, the memoirist may use his or her writings to address the problem of who they are—emotionally, spiritually, and culturally. McBride was the son of an African American father and a white, Jewish mother who had converted to Christianity. His mother refused for many years to talk about her past. McBride felt that he could not understand himself until he could understand his mother’s heritage, a theme also seen in *The Joy Luck Club*. This healing process is an integral part of many memoirs, as the narrator focuses on the search for identity or “wholeness” or “wellness.”

As I stated in the Overview of the Unit, I plan to use clips from the film *How to Make an American Quilt*, as well as the discussion of quilt-making in *Mama Day*, “Everyday Use,” and “Beacon Hill,” as a way to inspire my students to begin thinking about their own family stories.

I plan to use several selections by Sandra Cisneros as springboards for writing. The vignette “My Name” is an excellent piece to use to have students write about their own names—the origin of the name and/or whether the student likes the name or not. “Hairs” is a good descriptive piece to inspire writing about members of the student’s family. “The House on Mango Street” can lead to personal narratives about the houses and apartments that students call home. “Eleven” is a story with which all students can identify. Everyone has had an embarrassing moment, and this story typifies the feelings that adolescents have when embarrassed in front of their classmates or friends. The excitement of an eleventh birthday is shattered by a tacky red sweater and an adult who will not listen.

Cisneros’ “Mericans” and “Barbie-Q,” as well as a selection from Toni Morrison’s *The Bluest Eye*, serve as good pieces for students trying to come to terms with stereotyping and their own identity. They are also excellent selections for my AP students to use to discuss tone, style, and characterization in preparation for the Advanced Placement literature and composition exam.

Having read and discussed these selections, the students will create writers’ notebooks with lists of ideas for personal writing: their names, homes, families, friends, neighborhoods, schools, teachers, favorite games or toys, dreams, and embarrassing moments.

JOURNEY PROJECT

Since my unit focuses on a journey or quest for identity, another activity that I intend to use will be a project in which my students will trace a “journey” that they have made.

The journey can be emotional, physical, spiritual, or a combination. Students will include an essay describing the journey, a “map” of the journey, and mementos they “collected” along the way. [This project is adapted from an activity created by Miriam Schweitzer when she was the English Chairperson at Sharpstown High School.]

In the essay section, students will describe their journey. They will discuss obstacles, how they met them, and what they learned from facing or overcoming them. They will then write a diary entry or an original poem detailing one important or significant day or event in their journey. Students will also include a map of the journey. They need to be creative, especially if the journey is spiritual or emotional. The last part of the project will be mementos that they “collected” on this journey. Again, they will need to be creative. Additionally, I will caution them not to include anything irreplaceable as part of the memento section.

LESSON PLANS

Lesson Plan One: AP Open-Ended Questions for *The Joy Luck Club* and *Mama Day*

Students in Advanced Placement English Literature and Composition take an AP test at the end of the year. One of the three essays from the composition section of the test is an open-ended question in which the student discusses an issue or theme of a self-selected novel or play. The time limit for the three essays is two hours; therefore, it is recommended that students spend approximately 40 minutes on each essay. Since students are used to having an entire class period (90 minutes) or several days to write a composition, these practice AP essays need to be written according to the time constraints of the exam.

Objectives for both novels

The student will:

- write a well-developed essay based on an AP-style question,
- draw conclusions about themes of a work,
- respond to a timed essay, organizing quickly and clearly, focusing on
- major points that provide a competent response to the question as asked,
- relate the topic to the theme of the novel and avoid merely plot summary, and
- write a fluent and relatively grammatical essay in the time allotted.

1. *The Joy Luck Club*

Procedure

After reading and discussing *The Joy Luck Club*, students will spend 40 minutes in class to respond to one of the following questions that have been adapted from the open-ended questions on old AP exams.

- A. Many novels and plays focus on a conflict between a parent and a child. Choose a parent-child pair from the novel and write an essay in which you discuss how this conflict between a parent and a child contributes to the meaning of the novel *The Joy Luck Club*. Be sure to avoid plot summary.
- B. The search for identity often involves a character who is pulled in different directions. Choose a character from *The Joy Luck Club* and write an essay that identifies these conflicting forces and discusses how this conflict contributes to the meaning of the work as a whole.

Assessment

Students are graded according to a rubric similar to those used on the AP exam. The following rubric has been adapted for this particular novel.

Possible Scores on the Nine-Point AP Scale:

Choice A:

8-9: These essays explain the conflict between parent and child and convincingly analyze how this conflict enhances the work's meaning. The essay is fluent, well written, and free of plot summary that does not relate to the parent-child conflict.

6-7: These essays less adequately explain and analyze the parent-child conflict and its relation to the meaning of the work. They are less perceptive and specific than the 8-9 papers and are well written but may lack the fluency and control of the 8-9 papers.

5: These essays are more superficial than the 6-7 papers. They offer a discussion of the conflict between a parent and a child, but they tend to be more plot summary than analysis. They are also less well written than a 6-7 paper.

3-4: These essays may fail to explain the conflict or fail to relate the conflict to the meaning of the work. They may offer merely a plot summary. They may also contain misinformation and misinterpretation and often contain problems with diction, organization, or grammar.

1-2: These essays are weaker than the 3-4 paper. They are so poorly written that errors in grammar and mechanics detract from the flow of the essay. Although the writer may have attempted to answer the question, the answer is vague or very brief.

Choice B:

The assessment for Choice B is basically the same as that for Choice A except that instead of discussing the child-parent conflict, the papers would discuss the conflicting forces faced by one of the characters and relate that conflict to the meaning of the work as a whole.

2. *Mama Day* and/or *The Joy Luck Club*

Procedure

After reading and discussing both *Mama Day* and *The Joy Luck Club*, students will spend 40 minutes in class responding to one of the following questions that have been adapted from the open-ended questions on old AP exams.

- A. Often a novel or a play focuses on a theme of healing. It may be the act of writing itself that aids in the healing process, as in James McBride's *The Color of Water*. In other selections, a character is a healer, such as the conjure woman Miranda in *Mama Day*. Some novels or plays also focus on a character being healed, perhaps through self-discovery. This quest for self is prominent in both *The Joy Luck Club* and *Mama Day*. Choose one of these novels and discuss the theme of healing as it relates to the selection. Avoid mere plot summary.
- B. Both *The Joy Luck Club* and *Mama Day* are novels that emphasize contrasting places—California and China in *The Joy Luck Club* and New York and Willow Springs in *Mama Day*. Choose one of the novels and write an essay in which you discuss the significance of the two locations, explaining what each place represents and how the contrasting places contribute to the meaning of the novel as a whole.

Assessment

See the rubric for *The Joy Luck Club* questions. In this section, the rubric for Choice A would be reworded to have the essays examine the theme of healing as it relates to the meaning of the work as a whole. In Choice B, the rubric would concern the analysis of the contrasting places and the relationship of these settings to the meaning of the novel.

Lesson Plan Two: Writing Personal Narratives or Memoirs

As a culminating project for the unit, I plan to have my students write a collection of personal narratives or memoirs. This part of the unit will take several weeks, including time spent reading and discussing several short stories.

Objectives

The student will:

- interpret and evaluate written texts and connect to his or her own experiences, ideas, and values,
- analyze purposes for which a text is written,
- analyze relevance or setting and time frame to text meaning,
- identify conflicts and how they are addressed and resolved,
- connect literature to historical context, current events, and his or her own experiences,
- use elements of the text to defend his or her own responses and interpretations,
- recognize distinctive and shared characteristics of culture through reading,
- recognize and discuss themes and connections that cross cultures,
- generate ideas and plans for writing by using prewriting strategies,
- write literary texts, including poetry and memoir,
- write descriptive and narrative passages,
- write in a voice and style appropriate to the audience and the purpose,
- employ literary devices to enhance style and voice,
- refine selected pieces to publish,
- employ written conventions appropriately, and
- engage in conferences concerning aspects of his or her own writing and the writing of others.

Selections

“Hands: For Mother’s Day,” by Nikki Giovanni (excerpt from her poem)

“Everyday Use,” by Alice Walker

“Beacon Hill,” by Elizabeth Brown-Guillory

“Where I’m From,” by George Ella Lyon (a poem about identity and memories)

“My Name,” “The House on Mango Street,” “Hairs,” “Eleven,” and “Mericans,” by Sandra Cisneros (from *The House on Mango Street* and *Woman Hollering Creek*)

Springboards for Reading and Writing

These pre-reading and pre-writing activities will take place over several class periods as we prepare to write our memoirs.

Quilt Making and Storytelling

1. On the overhead projector, I will have an excerpt from Nikki Giovanni’s “Hands: For Mother’s Day.” (See earlier discussion in the narrative for the excerpt.) Since we will have already discussed the importance of quilt making to Miranda in *Mama Day*, this excerpt will serve as a nice segue into the short stories “Everyday Use” and “Beacon Hill.”

2. As another connection to the purpose of quilt making and the sharing of stories, I will show a segment from the film *How to Make an American Quilt*. The segment will concern the character of Anna, who narrates a twelve-minute segment approximately one hour and ten minutes into the film. This segment discusses the idea that a story quilt is meant to be read and its stories remembered and shared.
3. Students will then read and discuss “Everyday Use” and “Beacon Hill.” Specific ideas for discussion for each of these short stories is found in the narrative section entitled “Literature Studied in the Unit.”
4. We will discuss how the quilts in each selection connect the descendants to their history and how each scrap in the quilt tells a story. The intention of this part of the unit is to inspire students to write about their own family stories.

“Where I’m From”

I have found that writing poetry is a fairly easy and painless way of getting students to start thinking and writing about their childhood. Their poems should trigger memories that can form the basis of their memoirs or personal narratives. (See excerpts from student poetry in the narrative section of the unit.)

1. On the overhead projector, I will share and discuss the poem “Where I’m From.” Then I will share my version of the poem, also on a transparency.
2. Students will then brainstorm and complete a prewriting worksheet divided into the different categories that are described in the poem, such as things found around their homes, names of relatives (especially those that link them to their past), old family sayings, and favorites—toys, movies, games, food, etc.
3. Students will share this worksheet in small groups as a means of generating new ideas.
4. Students will then write their own poems and share them in small groups. Each group will select at least one to be shared with the rest of the class.
5. The best poems will be submitted to the school’s literary magazine.

Creating a Writer’s Notebook

After writing their “Where I’m From” poems, students will need to brainstorm possible topics for their personal narratives.

Possible categories in the writer’s notebook for student narratives include memories about their names, their homes, places visited or places where they lived, their families, their neighborhoods, their dreams, their disappointments, family stories, descriptions of a room they know well, a person from their childhood (including the student’s perception of them then and now), a job, a memorable party, their schools, their pets, embarrassing moments, their first crush, and things that annoy them. Ideas about some of these categories should be jotted down in a writer’s notebook.

At this point, I would also discuss the characteristics of a memoir and how it differs from an autobiography. The memoir is a true story written with dialogue and metaphor

that can evoke emotions such as humor, sorrow, sarcasm, and joy. It is also called a reflective essay. It is conversational and reflects the writer's voice. Unlike an autobiography that is supposed to capture all of a person's life, the memoir or personal narrative does not represent a whole life, but just a short segment of it. A successful reflective essay or personal narrative should:

- be written in the first person,
- describe an important experience in the student's life,
- use figurative language, dialogue, sensory details, or other techniques to help re-create the experience for the reader, and
- explain the significance of the event or make an observation about life, based on the experience.

Selections by Sandra Cisneros

I intend to use several vignettes from Sandra Cisneros' *The House on Mango Street* and *Woman Hollering Creek* as models for student writing. As well as using the vignettes as models, my AP students will analyze several of them, discussing the tone, style, theme, and point of view. These short selections give my students great practice pieces for the essay part of the AP exam. "Eleven" has even appeared on an old AP exam as the passage for the prose essay question.

"My Name" is a good selection to use to have students write about their own names. After reading and discussing this narrative, students will write about their own names, discussing some of these ideas--what their names mean, why their parents chose these names, and, if they don't like their names, why they don't and what names they would prefer.

"Hairs" is a very short selection that is a model for a short descriptive piece on a family member.

"The House on Mango Street" is a good selection to use as a model for a description of a place. It also can serve as an example of the integration of student expectations and attitudes into a descriptive piece.

"Eleven" is just a great vignette about a memory and all of the emotions associated with that memory.

"Mericans" can be used to trigger memories about identity and cultural heritage. It concerns the struggle of children coming to terms with their dual heritage, being both Mexican and American, and an adult's perception of their heritage.

Procedures for Writing Personal Narratives and Creating a Memoir

After reading and discussing each selection by Cisneros, the students will write short narrative drafts about their own memories that relate to each vignette. Students will share

their drafts in small groups, with at least one narrative per group being shared with the entire class.

Students will then choose three additional ideas from their writer's notebooks to expand into personal narratives. Depending on the time allotted in class to this assignment, students may need to work on these additional drafts at home.

In brainstorming their memories, students need to keep a sensory chart, listing the sensory details that they remember about the memory. What do they "see"? What do they hear? What smells do they associate with this memory? What about the sense of taste or touch, or what textures do they remember? Students should complete a sensory chart before writing.

From these short drafts (the ones based on Cisneros' short stories and the ones inspired by ideas in their writer's notebooks), each student will choose to revise and refine five narratives. These narratives will be "published" in student-created memoirs. Their poem based on "Where I'm From" should also be part of the final copy of their memoir, and students should use illustrations or pictures to enhance their publication. Students will also be encouraged to submit their favorite narrative to the school's literary magazine.

Lesson Plan Three: "Barbie-Q" and *The Bluest Eye*

This section of the unit can be part of the memoir writing section or can be used separately to inspire students to discuss identity issues. The two pieces will be used by my AP classes to write a comparison/contrast essay on the two passages. Each passage reflects a young girl's attitude on her perception of her cultural identity. The doll in both selections symbolizes the white American idea of girlhood or womanhood. This theme is discussed in more detail in the narrative section of this unit.

Objectives

The student will:

- write a well-developed comparison/contrast essay based on an AP-style question,
- focus on major points that provide a competent response to the question as asked,
- draw conclusions about themes of each selection,
- analyze the character of each narrator,
- use elements of the text to defend his or her own responses and interpretations, and
- discuss the diction, imagery, tone, and point of view of each selection.

AP Question

Read the two selections carefully. Then write a comparison/contrast essay analyzing how the authors (Sandra Cisneros and Toni Morrison) use literary techniques to characterize

the narrators of each piece. You may wish to consider such elements as diction, imagery, detail, point of view, and tone.

Assessment

Students are graded according to a rubric similar to those used on the AP exam. The following rubric has been adapted for this particular novel.

Possible Scores on the Nine-Point AP Scale:

8-9: These essays show a careful analysis of the characterization of each narrator, as well as a thoughtful comparison of the two passages. The essay discusses several of the literary techniques listed in the question and uses specific examples from the texts to defend his or her interpretation. The essay is fluent and well written.

6-7: These essays less adequately explain and analyze the characterization of each narrator and contain a less thoughtful comparison. They are less perceptive and specific than the 8-9 papers and are well written but may lack the fluency and control of the 8-9 papers.

5: These essays are more superficial than the 6-7 papers. They offer a discussion of each narrator, but they tend to be more plot summary than analysis and comparison. They are also less well written than a 6-7 paper.

3-4: These essays may fail to discuss both selections or do not compare them. They may also contain misinformation and misinterpretation and often contain problems with diction, organization, or grammar.

1-2: These essays are weaker than the 3-4 paper. They are so poorly written that errors in grammar and mechanics detract from the flow of the essay. Although the writer may have attempted to answer the question, the answer is vague or very brief.

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Videos:

How to Make an American Quilt. Directed by Jocelyn Moorhouse. Universal Studios, 1995. (117 minutes)
This film depicts women sharing their memories during a quilting bee, as the women make a wedding quilt. Each memory is told in flashback, weaving the past and present together. This is an excellent film to use with Naylor’s *Mama Day* and with Walker’s "Everyday Use."

The Joy Luck Club. Directed by Wayne Wang. Hollywood Pictures, 1993. (136 minutes)
This film based on the novel by Amy Tan describes the experiences of four women who emigrated from China to the United States and how their horrendous experiences in China and the choices they made affected their relationships with their four American-born daughters.