Comprehensive Exam Task 2

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Context

This classroom unit is created for an 11-12th grade Modern American Literature course with 25-30 students. The course is an elective that covers post-Civil War American literature. The two texts I’ve chosen to pair are John Steinbeck’s *Of Mice and Men* and Josh Neufeld’s piece of graphic journalism *A.D.: New Orleans After the Deluge*.

Rationale and Objectives

One reason these texts fit together well is the number of thematic connections across texts. Each deal with major American historical events, extreme uncontrollable hardships and individual responses to those hardships, government and societal failure, companionship, class warfare, and the concept of the American Dream. The fact that this many thematic connections can be made across texts written decades apart allows for a broader analysis of American society in general.

These also work because they are fairly simple texts in terms of comprehension. While they are masterfully crafted, the texts are not taxing to understand, therefore allowing students more time and energy to devote to analysis, comparison, and literary elements.

Additionally, they are both highly respected in their individual genres. Neufeld’s text is a “New York Times Bestseller” and is at the forefront of the modern graphic journalism movement. *Of Mice and Men* has long been canonized in high school classrooms, and Steinbeck is one of the premier voices for 20th Century America.

Most importantly, the texts effectively accomplish several objectives of the Modern American Literature curriculum. The primary objectives for this unit are as follows:

* Students will explore the strengths and weaknesses of diverse literary genres as well as the literary strategies of each. Of specific interest for comparison in this unit are fiction vs. nonfiction and print vs. graphics.
* Students will come to an understanding of distinct American values, traits, and behaviors across a range of literature.
* Students will connect the literature of America to the historical events that influenced them and to present day.

Literary Background

The unique value of *Of Mice and Men* lies in the fact that it offers a specific picture of Depression Era life, specifically for the often marginalized migrant worker. It individualizes the experience of economic hardship, wandering, powerlessness, and hope through a Modernist approach. Specifically, the disillusionment with the America Dream so common in the collective spirit of the time period resonates. Steinbeck, like other Modernist writers, provides no happy ending. Instead, he prefers to present the harsh reality for the non-privileged in society.

Additionally, Steinbeck uses foils throughout the novel to point out his themes of companionship and hope. While Lennie and George have each other and a specific dream they are chasing, they are in sharp contrast to the characters who don’t. Crooks, Candy, and Curley’s wife, while minor characters, exist to show what a life without hope and companionship looks like. Ultimately, they represent the dark future George faces after his dream and his friend are dead at the book’s conclusion.

One approach in teaching this text is historical. Students will be required to ask themselves as they read what they learn about the time period, rural life in that period, and the economic realities and their effects on individuals within that period. Students will also be asked to question what social commentary Steinbeck is presenting regarding this period. A thematic approach will also be taken, as students will be comparing common themes across texts. Additionally, students will be asked to analyze how specific literary elements (foils, characterization, symbolism, narration) affect Steinbeck’s portrayal.

*A.D.: New Orleans After the Deluge* is unique in that most of my students will have not been exposed to graphic journalism before. Neufeld says it best about the genre, stating that it is “less than journalism and less than art but . . . somehow bigger than both.” The genre combines aspects of literary journalism and graphic novels, requiring students to recognize defining features such as an emphasis on the ideas and emotions of the human element, the sequencing of panels, the mutual dependence of text and image, and the use of color and drawing style.

Neufeld’s text offers a more personal look at the events of Hurricane Katrina through first-hand accounts. *A.D.* follows seven real people in their experiences before, during, and after one of the greatest disasters in our nation's history. Neufeld's chronicle of this natural disaster portrays several aspects of this experience. Major themes from the text include motivations behind staying or evacuating, the experience of loss from both near and far, the progression of the damage in different areas of New Orleans, and the recovery effort.

Similarly to *Of Mice and Men*, the literary lens through which this text will be read will include time period, thematic analysis, and literary techniques. Students will be asked to connect not only the events of Katrina but also the emotions and experiences of the disaster to those of the Great Depression. Themes of loss, desperation, and hope will be juxtaposed with similar themes from *Of Mice and Men.* In addition, students will look at Neufeld’s color choices, visual depictions, pacing, dialogue, etc. to explain the unique strengths of this medium.

Pre-reading Activities

The goals of the pre-reading activities are threefold. First, I want students to understand the historical background for each of the two texts. As a majority of students who choose to take this course are juniors who haven’t completed a U.S. History course, a certain amount of background information regarding migrant workers, the Great Depression, and Hurricane Katrina is necessary. Second, I recognize the need to introduce to students the graphic novel format and some of the techniques that Neufeld uses. Finally, I hope to get students started at exploring how one can learn uniquely from fiction vs. nonfiction and print vs. graphics.

One aspect of the pre-reading activity is for students to examine an introductory website I’ve created for *A.D.* The site is located at <http://adneworleanspreview.weebly.com/index.html>. On the site students will learn about the events and settings involved in the text, the graphic novel format and more specifically graphic journalism, and major themes they will encounter in the text.

Students will also engage in background reading and viewing for *Of Mice and Men*. First, students will read the first part (out of seven) of Steinbeck’s T*he Harvest Gypsies* (located at <http://newdeal.feri.org/steinbeck/hg01.htm>). *The Harvest Gypsies* is a collection of newspaper articles Steinbeck wrote for the *San Francisco Chronicle*, detailing the plight of migrant workers in California. Secondly, students will view Depression Era color photographs from around the country, which are located at <http://extras.denverpost.com/archive/captured.asp>.

Taken in total, analyzing these three sources will allow students to begin the conversation regarding the strengths of each genre, the power of visuals, and common themes they expect to match across texts. Having these conversations will provide a framework through which students can target their reading experience for the unit.

Mid-Reading Activity

Students will complete a writing (and a follow-up whole class discussion) following these directions:

*What is true about American society from both of the time periods represented based on these two texts? Using direct quotes and citing specific passages in each of the texts, choose two similarities in American society and explain how the authors show that. Writing for each should be 1-2 pages. Include in that writing a paragraph of commentary explaining whether or not you see that particular trait in the community in which you live.*

During the post-writing discussion, the class as a whole will create a larger list of statements about American society to examine throughout the reading of the rest of the texts.

**Post-Reading Activity**

Using the list created during the mid-reading activity, students will choose three common themes/statements about American society on which to focus. For each of the three, students will be required to explain how each particular genre was used to effectively present that message.

Students will present their findings in a formal essay. They must include at least three direct quotes from *Of Mice and Men* and three panels from *A.D. New Orleans* for each of the themes discussed. They must also refer to specific literary techniques unique to print fiction and graphic journalism. The paper will conclude with students evaluating which of the two genres was more effective in presenting these themes with clear and specific justification for their choice.