

Reflections on Mental Illness: Accessing One Flew Over the Cuckoo's Nest

Adolescence is a confusing time for any person, and it seems to be a condition of its own; incurable, the best way to deal with it is to let time pass. For some students, time passes too slowly, and as a society we lose them to teen suicide. Mental illness is something that affects the lives of teens as well as adults, and is one of the hardest struggles for adolescents to cope with and understand. A canonical text for juniors and seniors in high school is One Flew Over the Cuckoo's Nest. This particular novel allows for teachers to have the unique opportunity to teach not only the beautifully written and challenging Ken Kesey book, but to touch on and explore issues of mental health. By doing this, students can look at deep history of America's relationship with the mentally ill. As recent as the 1960's American policy on management and education of the mentally ill was inhumane, and it was not until the passing of the ADA, IDEA, and the civil rights movement that America started to shift views on mental health. However, students still have limited exposure to and knowledge on mental health, which leads to ignorance and intolerance. Even as attitudes towards the mentally ill changes and moves towards understanding and acceptance, Americans with disabilities are still not always treated as equal. Many student use words and actions that hurt and offend, and this may be because they fear the unknown. As Elyn Saks states in her TED Talks lecture, "we all have moments of insanity." The difference is that some of us move past it, while others become trapped in a world that does not seem comprehensible, and in a mind that may betray them. Hopefully, with the help of positive mentors and arming adolescents with information, the next generation will have an educated and understanding view on mental illness. Education will help to elevate confusion, as well as bullying. When the unknown becomes the known students are less likely to fear and stigmatize mental illness.

The center piece I chose is One Flew Over the Cuckoo's Nest by Ken Kesey, this novel epitomizes the theme of mental health; it takes place in a mental institution and demonstrates the real life severity of treatment in America at this time. It was important for me to highlight this text and the issue of mental health, because I feel personally that this is a concern that gets swept under the rug by educators and society in general. The students will need help in accessing this text because not only does it have strong themes, but it also deals with problematic scenarios that can be troubling and moving for teens. Also, this semester I have taken both Health Education and Including and Supporting the Exceptional Student; in both these classes I have obtained knowledge of what affects teens, and have found that mental illness is a problem going unaddressed. This project is a cumulating effort of the two classes mentioned and Young Adult Literature, and I believe has vastly open my mind. In this unit poetry, music, young adult novels, lectures, and movies are used to help the students access the complexity and seriousness of mental illness.

Unit Introduction:

The unit begins with the introduction of two songs; "Comfortably Numb" by Pink Floyd and "The Girl Anachronism" by The Dresden Dolls. Both of these songs can be related to the text, and to the central theme of mental health. I chose to use two songs because it may be hard for students to understand one of them, this way they can see two examples of how mental illness can be translated into music. "Comfortably Numb" connects to the text because it is a conversation between a patient and doctor, the doctor has treated the patient with drugs which have caused him to become comfortably numb. This can relate back to the text in several ways, mainly that this is what happens to McMurphy, he also becomes numb. "The Girl Anachronism" is about a woman who is not fitting into the norms of society, and doesn't know how to relate to

the world because she is unstable. The song relates back to the text because many lines of the song may represent how the inmates feel.

The Activity that follows the listening and reading of these two songs is a quick write, and then a pair share. The students will be given about fifteen minutes to write about their feelings and understanding of the songs. I provided some questions to guide writing, but the students can take it into the direction they like, just as long as they are reflecting upon the emotions and themes the songs draw upon. Afterwards, the students will share what they thought with a partner, then we will come together as a class to analyze the songs overall. This activity will help to interest the students in the central theme of mental health, and give them a “sneak peak” of what is to come.

One Flew Over the Cuckoo’s Nest Title Activity:

The next activity is a class discussion exploring the title of the book, and a modified version of KWL (know, want to know, have learned). We will explore the book title and ponder why Kesey would use this rhyme in the title of his book, and what this preview leads us to believe about the book. The students will brainstorm as a class some ideas about the title, and then think about what the book could be about. They will fill out their notes: what do they know now about the book? What do they want to know about the book? Next, I will provide some information on Kesey, the Beat era, and the hippie generation that spawned exploration and questioning civil liberty. This background is pertinent to understanding the theme of personal rebellion, but also to understanding why this book is so popular and significant for the students to read.

One Flew Over the Cuckoo's Nest Synopsis and Significance:

Kesey brings to life the real-life trauma of mental institutions in the novel One Flew Over the Cuckoo's Nest, and exposes a world that most people in society at that time had forgotten about. The story is narrated by a patient, Chief Bromden, who tries to go unnoticed by the rest of the patients and staff by pretending to be dumb and deaf. The novel takes place at an Oregon mental hospital in the 1950's, at a time when the practices of institutions like this were still inhumane and cruel. McMurphy is a transfer into the hospital who brings rebellion and spirit into the otherwise silent and "dead" ward. The patients are forced into submission by Nurse Ratched and her cruel practices of shaming and militaristic scheduling.

This book inspired a generation to rethink the current medical procedures and treatment of the mentally ill. Not only is the book significant historically, for the influence it had upon the Beat generation and the shift in ideology, but the overall metaphor for the counterculture of America is time honored. American rebellion against authority and tyrants is a tradition dating to the country's origins, and the extended metaphor for the 60's protests and rebellion is important for students to understand and embrace. Teenaged years are a time of self-discovery and rebellion, this novel not only personifies the struggle for adolescents, but also can expand their understanding of a culture and gain insight on the issue of mental health.

Activity One:

The first activity will be a Web quest in which students will complete part of in the library and part at home. First, I will demo how to use search tools online to create a research paper. This will be a short one page write up of their finding, so not too intensive. The students will research practices employed by mental health facilities in the 1950's in order to provide context for the novel. The students at this point will have begun reading the book, and will

hopefully have some interest in what things were really like in the time period. After, they will research how mental hospitals operate today, and what changes have been made. I will provide a few resources for each question to direct them towards credible sources. After they have completed their research, the students will write a short one page response about how mental health practices have changed. This will give the students insight into the significance of the text, and how the book influenced change in mental health practices.

Breaking Boundries Activity:

The students will watch the fifteen minute TED Talks lecture given by Elyn Saks. In this speech Elyn speaks candidly about her illness, schizophrenia, and recounts her experiences and the success she has gained regardless. This activity will help students to understand that the mentally ill are not just “throw-away” people, and many can go on to live happy and healthy lives, however they do still struggle. The students will be exposed to real life mental illness, and break the walls of fear and misunderstanding. Elyn Saks is a USC law professor, and is extremely well respected in her field; however her schizophrenia challenges her. The students will then reflect upon how they felt about mental illness before the speech, and how their beliefs and attitudes may have changed from watching this interview. Hopefully their attitudes will have shifted to a more compassionate and less discriminating view about mentally ill people, and what they can achieve.

Activity Two:

In this activity students will use two books which are geared towards educating teens about mental illness and how they can understand their own mental health. Both books are within the young adult genre, and are informative or self-help texts. This activity will consist of looking up three mental illnesses and writing a paragraph describing each one. This activity is designed

to help student to gain understand about mental illness, and with understanding should come tolerance and acceptance. Also, this will help the students to better understand the characters and their illnesses.

50 Signs of Mental Illness: A Guide to Understanding Mental Health by Dr. James Whitney Hicks- This book outlines treatments and symptoms of mental illness in a clear way to allow for students to understand each illness. It can also help students who may be struggling with mental illness to realize they may need to seek help.

Behind Happy Faces: Taking Charge of Your Mental Health - A Guide for Young Adults by Ross Szabo and Melanie Hall- This text is written specifically for teens to access information about mental health. This book is specifically empowering because it utilizes first person accounts.

Linking to Young Adult Literature:

Students will now have the opportunity to choose from four young adult novels I have selected to relate the characters to One Flew Over the Cuckoo's Nest. This should help students to use a young adult novel, which can be an easier more enjoyable and accessible text to read, to compare and connect with the main text.

We Were Here by Matt de la Pena- This young adult fiction is about three boys who escape from a youth group home, all are committed for criminal activities. The story follows their escape and reflection upon their actions. Students can use this text to relate any of the three main characters: Mong, Rondell, or Miguel, to the characters in One Flew Over the Cuckoo's Nest. Also, the theme of escape and rebellion are prevalent in both books.

Cut by Patricia McCormick- A young girl in the novel cuts herself, only to feel the pain. She is obviously mentally disturbed, but when she is taken to the mental hospital she does not

identify with any of the other girls. Similarly to Chief in One Flew Over the Cuckoo's Nest, Callie the main protagonist also chooses to not speak. Many comparisons can be made between the two books, such as the overall themes and character development.

Bird-Eyes by Madelyn Arnold- This book takes place recently after the time period of One Flew Over the Cuckoo's Nest, and also follows a woman who is put into a mental hospital. However, this woman is like McMurphy, and has been placed in a mental institution purely for acting on natural urges which have been shunned by society. Also, the main protagonist in Bird-Eyes has a best friend in the hospital, Anna, who like Chief pretends to be is deaf.

It's Kind of a Funny Story by Ned Vizzini- In this novel the author takes a more humorous approach to a dark subject. While every novel suggested specifically focuses on teens, this one may be the most modern and edgy. The book was recently made into a film, which may contribute some of its popularity with the students. The story follows a boy who is set to go to a challenging college, here he experiences a mental break and lands himself in a mental hospital after attempting suicide.

Closing Activity:

In the last piece the students will watch the Stanley Kubrick film, "One Flew Over the Cuckoo's Nest." They will compare the film and the movie, and gain more insight on the book by watching it acted out. Jack Nicholson's portrayal of McMurphy is frightening, but really brings him to life. In the concluding essay the students will write, wrapping up the unit, will be a three page paper about the theme of mental illness and a reflection upon this theme in One Flew Over the Cuckoo's Nest. The purpose of watching the film is to imagine issues today's teenagers may not be familiar with, especially if they have never been to a mental hospital or known anyone who is

mentally ill. The film will help to complete the circle of understanding, and help them to write the final paper.

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Unit of Study

Pink Floyd-Comfortably Numb

- Hello,
Is there anybody in there?
Just nod if you can hear me
Is there anyone home?

Come on
Now
I hear you're feeling down
I can ease your pain
Get you on your feet again

Relax
I'll need some information first
Just the basic facts
Can you show me where it hurts?

There is no pain you are receding
A distant ship's smoke on the horizon
You are only coming through in waves
Your lips move
But I can't hear what you're saying

When I was a child I had a fever
My hands felt just like
Two balloons
Now I've got that feeling once again
I can't explain
You would not understand
This is not how I am
I... Have become comfortably numb

- O.K.
Just a little pin prick
There'll be no more aaaaaaaah!
But you may feel a little sick

Can you stand up?
I do believe it's working
Good
That'll keep you going through the show
Come on
It's time to go

There is no pain you are receding
A distant ship's smoke on the horizon
You are only coming through in waves
Your lips move
But I can't hear what you're saying

When I was a child
I caught a fleeting glimpse
Out of the corner of my eye

I turned to look but it was gone
I cannot put my finger on it now
The child is grown
The dream is gone
I... Have become comfortably numb
- https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=Bpzxf_flm8M

Dresden Dolls-GIRL ANACHRONISM

- You can tell
From the scars on my arms
And the cracks on my hips *[one version]*
And the stains on my skirt *[another version]*
And the dents in my car
And the blisters on my lips *[one version]*
And the veins about to burst *[another version]*
That I'm not the carefulest of girls

You can tell
From the glass on the floor
And the strings that're breaking
And I keep on breaking more
And it looks like I am shaking
But it's just the temperature
And then again
If it were any colder I could disengage
If I were any older I could act my age
But I don't think that you'd believe me
It's
Not
The
Way
I'm
Meant
To
Be
It's just the way the operation made me
- And you can tell
From the full-body cast
That you're sorry that you asked
Though you did everything you could
(like any decent person would)
But I might be catching so don't touch
You'll start believing you're immune to gravity and stuff
Don't get me wet
Because the bandages will all come off

And you can tell
From the smoke at the stake
That the current state is critical
Well it is the little things, for instance...
In the time it takes to break it she can make up ten
excuses...
Please excuse her for the day, its just the way the
medication makes her...

I don't necessarily believe there is a cure for this
So I might join your century but only as a doubtful guest
I was too precarious removed as a caesarian
Behold the worlds worst accident
I AM THE GIRL ANACHRONISM *[x5]*
I'm the girl... *[x3]*
I AM THE GIRL ANACHRONISM
- <http://www.youtube.com/watch?v=sO5APfKnR5o>

Activity

- Quick Write and then Pair Share:
 - Quick write: How did each make you feel? What images came up? What about the overall tone? What emotions did you feel? How did the accompanying music add to the mood or message?
 - Pair Share: Talk about this with a partner.

One Flew Over the Cuckoos Nest

Vintery, mintery, cutery, corn,
Apple seed and apple thorn;
Write, briar, limber lock,
Three geese in a flock.
One flew east,
And one flew west,
And one flew over the cuckoo's nest

- What does this tell us about the title of the book?
- Previewing: What do we know? What do we want to know?
- Provide information on the author and context

One Flew Over the Cuckoo's Nest

- Activity One:
 - Research Mental Hospitals in 1950 and contrast the procedures with Mental Hospitals today. What was most shocking?
 - Write a short essay comparing and contrasting mental hospitals in the 1950's to today's.

Documentary on Mental Health

Mental Illness from the Inside

<http://www.youtube.com/watch?v=f6CILJA11oY>

- How does Elyn Saks story differ from your expectations of someone with mental illness?

One Flew Over the Cuckoo's Nest

■ Activity Two

■ Mental Health Research:

- 50 Signs of Mental Illness: A Guide to Understanding Mental Health by Dr. James Whitney Hicks
- Behind Happy Faces: Taking Charge of Your Mental Health - A Guide for Young Adults by Ross Szabo
Melanie Hall

Research 3 mental issues and write a paragraph describing each one.

One Flew Over the Cuckoo's Nest

- Read one of these books on your own and compare a character in the book you choose to a character in One Flew Over the Cuckoo's Nest. Make a poster to share with the class relating your two characters.
 - We Were Here by Matt de la Pena
 - Cut by Patricia McCormick
 - Bird-Eyes by Madelyn Arnold
 - It's Kind of a Funny Story by Ned Vizzini

Watch the movie

- We will watch the movie One Flew Over the Cuckoos Nest
- Write a 3 page essay on a the theme of mental illness and One Flew Over the Cuckoos Nest.