

Deceit, Despair, and Dejection

DECEIT, DESPAIR, AND DEJECTION: CONNECTING SPEAK AND THE SCARLET LETTER

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The Graffiti Strategy

(taken from *Tools for Promoting Active, In-Depth Learning* by Silver, Strong, and Perini)

Purpose: A technique used to generate many ideas, to question in different styles, and to stimulate physical movement.

Procedure: The teacher generates 16 to 20 questions concerning a particular content area. Each question is written on a large piece of paper and posted around the room. Each question represents one of the four types of thinking: remembering, reasoning, relating, and creating. Students are given markers and allowed 20 minutes to roam around the room and record a response to each of the questions. As they respond to the questions, students should think about which types of questions they enjoy answering, and which they find

difficult to answer. Students may also be asked to identify which style of thinking they believe each question represents. After students have had an opportunity to respond to each question, the teacher assigns a group of students or a spokesperson to study the responses and summarize them with the class.

Steps:

1. Teacher generates 16 to 20 question stems about a topic.
2. The questions should reflect four styles of thinking: remembering, reasoning, relating, and creating.
3. Students roam around the room responding to each question.
4. Teacher assigns students to summarize responses and report back to the class.

Graffiti Questions for Speak and The Scarlet Letter

- List one unwritten for surviving in high school.
- What comes to mind when you hear the word "clique?"
- How would you feel if you were ostracized from the members of your school or community? What could you do about it?
- What are some examples of sexual harassment that you have witnessed?
- List one characteristic of the Puritan era and explain, briefly, how things are now similar or different.
- List one clique that exists in this school.
- In what way do you conform to what is expected of you?
- Complete this simile: My family is like a (fill in blank) because (fill in blank).
- A new girl has transferred to your school. As she passes through the hall, you overhear some boys and girls in your class whisper that she is a slut. What is your response?
- Given the generalization "Everybody wants to fit in" identify a specific example where you have seen this to be true or identify an example that refutes the generalization.
- What does guilt look like? Draw a symbol for guilt.
- How instrumental is a parent's influence on their child's development?
- Your friends are angry at you. Would you rather get the silent treatment or be angrily confronted? Briefly explain your choice.
- Write a definition for "scapegoat." Add to the definition written by your peers by giving examples.
- What are some possible reasons someone might not speak up for themselves when they are being treated unfairly or are simply misunderstood.?

Pairing Themes: Deceit, Despair, and Dejection

Using both Speak and The Scarlet Letter, list instances where the characters are subject to feeling of deceit, despair, and dejection. List the characters involved and the page number of the text citation. Be prepared to discuss your findings.

The Scarlet Letter / Speak Discussion Questions

Both novels revolve around a strong central female character. Readers may consider them a statement about the status of women. What was the status of Puritan women as reflected in The Scarlet Letter and what was the changing status of mid-19th century women, the period in which the novel was written? If one sees Speak as a statement about the status of women today, what statement is being made? Has the status of women changed and, if so, how and by how much?

It has been said that Melinda is "more an observer to her own life rather than a participant. She holds herself back because it's too painful to engage." Melinda uses silence as her defense but, in reality, it causes her more problems. How is this similar to, or different than, Hester's response? Do their approaches to their unique traumas seem understandable? Healthy? Readers are often frustrated by both characters' inability/unwillingness to speak. What other ways, given their respective cultures, could they have regained their voices?

Speak deals very clearly with the issues of stereotypes. A number of stereotypical high school groups are represented in the novel. The Scarlet Letter deals with the issue of clearly defined gender roles and the preconceived notion that a "man of the cloth" is above reproach. Using issues/ideas in both novels, discuss the idea that people find it easier to jump to conclusions rather than searching to find the truth. In what ways do the novels show how people are sometimes not who we think they are? How is this reflected in your own high school experience?

Mr. Freeman, in Speak, has a way with words. Certainly these words resonate in Melinda's inner reality. His words also have implications for Hester. Consider both characters in regard to the following quotes:

"You must walk alone to find your soul." (p. 118)

"Art is about making mistakes." (p. 122)

"Nothing is perfect. Flaws are interesting." (p. 153)

Sample Questions for The Scarlet Letter and Speak

Character: Hester and Melinda

What are the differences between Hester and Melinda in terms of motivation? How they view the world around them?

Do you think Hester would have been better off if everyone just ignored her like they do Melinda, or do you think having to wear a scarlet letter was the easier of the two punishments?

Setting: The Forest

Both of the life-changing events happen to Hester and Melinda when they are in the forest away from their community. What do you think this says about the role of community in the outcome of their lives?

Theme: Culpability

Do Hester and Melinda deserve to be punished? How do their motivations equal up to their punishments?

Both Hester and Melinda do not speak up. Hester doesn't tell who the father of her baby is, and Melinda doesn't tell who raped her. Why do you think these women kept their silence, and what do you think would have changed in the story if they had spoken earlier?

Rationale: Connecting Young Adult Novels to the Classics

◦ The bulk of the “classics” are 19th and early 20th century works of American and British fiction, non-fiction, drama, and poetry. They are usually written by those who have traditionally held the power in our culture: white, male, Christian, Anglophiles.

◦ Familiarity and tradition have long been the criteria for using classics in the classroom, but many teachers stick so close to that familiarity that they ignore or dismiss student reaction to a text and end up leaving the students frustrated or discouraged.

◦ Like the classics, many young adult literature works share marks of literacy excellence; multiple and identifiable themes; well-developed characters; the protagonist confronts or challenges a test; the plot moves logically; the setting provides a function.

◦ Thus, to solve the dilemma of teaching classics to disinterested students, it is vital to link required classic texts to young adult texts and read them in tandem. This is why:

- Doing so provides a way to parallel literature in a contemporary, more appealing, readily understandable way.
- Students create links: difficulties with one text are addressed by understanding the other. New connections can emerge with comparison and contrast of the two texts.
- Students are more likely to read more, attempt projects, responses, and classroom activities.
- Doing so enhances the understanding and appreciation of reading.

◦ Making the Connection

- Select young adult literature of excellent quality (e.g. Newbery Award, School Library Journal)
- Use more than one piece of young adult literature as a link
- Choose comparison texts with real connections (similarities in theme, plot, characters, setting, genre)
- Be cautious and skeptical. It's often easy to insist on a connection when there is none. For example, all novels with a female character will not necessarily deal with issues of love, so research your novels first!

Source: Reading their world, the young adult novel in the classroom. Edited by Virginia R. Monseau and Gary M. Salvner. Chapter Two: "Natural, Necessary, and Workable: The Connection of Young Adult Novels to the Classics" by Leila Christenbury.

Websites for Connecting to the Classics

[ALAN Review](#) - A good place to start to familiarize yourself with YA literature. These works of adolescent literature will act as a transition towards more difficult classic works.

[Banned Books](#) - One way to introduce a unit or lesson on the classics. Exploring why, how, and when a book gets banned will spark reader interest. Many books still remain on the banned books list, with parents still in the forefront of the crusade against certain works.

[English Journal](#) - First published in 1912, English Journal is "the official journal of the Secondary Section of the National Council of the Teachers of English." It is published every other month with a readership of 45,000 teachers. Subscription is available online for a reasonable price. This website contains articles on how to teach the classics, how to choose them, and a wide selection of activities for use in the classroom.

Other sites:

[American Library Association](#)

[Journal of Reading](#)

[Booklist](#)

[School Library Journal](#)

[Media and Methods](#)

The idea is not to replace the classics with the new genre of YA literature, but to introduce the reader to experiences that he or she are more familiar with and can relate to on emotional and intellectual levels. In this transition towards classic novels, the reader will be more willing and able to make connections between what is happening on the written page and how that mirrors everyday experience.