Text Set:

Women of American Realism Literature

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TEDU 562
Introduction

Traditionally, out of all of the Realist authors in American literature, only a single female, Kate Chopin, is discussed. Contrary to what the average American Realism lesson would imply, several women published novels, short stories, poems, critical essays, and nonfiction pieces. Yet, for some reason, these women are rarely discussed in depth. I would like to use my text set in conjunction with the Realism lesson to show students that there were several notable female authors from the period.

All of the text selections are short, many of them being short stories. This is because of the way I intend to use the set. What I would like to do is assign pairs or trios of students a particular text from the set to have them read together. After the groups have finished their selection, they would then develop a brief presentation for the class about the piece. This might be through a short skit that gives a synopsis, a power point, posters, timelines, or any other way the group decides that they can properly discuss the piece with the class. This will allow for a larger number of authors to be read and discussed in a relatively short amount of time.

This set is intended for 11th graders at all reading levels. The lesson will cover SOL 11.3: The student will read and analyze relationships among American literature, history, and culture, and the presentation is part of SOL 11.1: The student will make informative and persuasive presentations.

Item 1: “The Yellow Wallpaper”

The Yellow Wallpaper, by Charlotte Perkins Gilman, is the story of the wife of a doctor that is restricted to bed rest after the birth of her child. Despite the fact that she suffers from what
would now be known as post-partum depression, the heroine is diagnosed as having “female ailments” that were commonly cured by seclusion and bed rest. The readers are given brief sights into her descent into madness. This story is an excellent way for students to understand what really happened to women with psychological issues in the early 1900s.

According to the Flesh Kincaid formula, “The Yellow Wallpaper” has a readability of the 6th grade. However, based on the SMOG test, the story is placed at an 8th grade level. This story is not particularly difficult to read or understand. However, I do think that it should only be read after the introductory lesson on the period so that students will know about the way women were medically treated at the time. I believe that way the ideas are presented in the text make them more accessible for 11th grade students, despite the seriousness of the topic.

Item 2: “The Revolt of Mother”

Mary Wilkins Freeman’s story is that of the wife of a farmer that refuses to go on sacrificing the needs of her family so her husband can have what he wants. This is a good story that shows that not all women were weak and subject to their emotions.

Flesh Kincaid Grade level was determined to be 5th grade while the SMOG placed the story suitable for the 7th grade. I find this to be slightly misleading because while the story is very simplistic in plot, I believe that the dialect will give the students some difficulty. However, I feel like this text is easily on a level well below the 11th grade level.
**Item 3: “A White Heron”**

This is a story about a young girl living with her grandmother after she decides to leave the city. The girl loves nature and spends much of her time playing in the woods. One day, she encounters a stranger looking for a rare bird. The young girl begins to question herself and whether she should help the ornithologist hunter or save the bird.

The Flesh Kincaid Grade level was 9 while the SMOG gave the story a 10th grade reading level. There are many simple words but some of the dialogue may be problematic for some struggling readers that are not familiar with southern dialect. However, I do not think that understanding these dialectical issues are imperative to understanding the story. Rather they would just slow many readers down, forcing them to sound out the words. This is a rather accessible story for students reading on or just below the 11th grade level.

**Item 4: “The Little Room”**

This story revolves around an interesting family and the house they share. The majority of the information comes through the dialogue the characters rather than narration. The story moves slightly slower than many of the others but the ending well makes up for the beginning.

The Flesh Kincaid Grade level is 6 while the SMOG level is 8. I believe that this is a fair assessment, as the vocabulary, dialogue, and plot are relatively simplistic. However, the majority of the story is written in dialogue with minimal narration. This form of writing might throw students in the beginning and make the back track to keep characters straight. However, I would feel comfortable having my students read this text on their own.
Item 5: “A Wagner Matinee”

Willa Cather writes about a woman that left her cosmopolitan life for marriage and a new life in the prairie from the perspective of her nephew, Clark. The aunt comes for a visit and seems haggard and disheveled. Clark decides that she would benefit from a day at the symphony, something she once loved dearly. The close of the story is both moving and disheartening as Clark sees how life for his aunt has changed.

Both the Flesh Kincaid and the SMOG place this story at the 12th grade reading level. This text is denser and more verbose than the other stories. However, many of the words that drive up the readability formulas are sensory words that students would already be familiar with. Despite that fact, the story should still be reserved for the stronger readers because struggling readers might be put off or discouraged by the overwhelming details and longer sentences that are absent in the other stories. However, even strong readers may need some extra support with this text. Good tools for this text might be Inference Notes for character analysis and Graphic Organizers for plot clarification.


Davis’ story “Life in the Iron Mills” is one of love, poverty, dreams, and despair. The story revolves around Deborah and her lover, Hugh, who works in the iron mills. As the story evolves, the reader learns that Hugh is brilliant sculptor but he has no money to continue his dream of sculpting women. Deborah steals in order to get the couple out of poverty and help Hugh achieve his dream. The plot then takes on a dimension of moral ambiguity as the characters grapple with where to go next and the consequences of their decisions.
According to the Flesh Kincaid Readability, this story is on a 5th grade level and the SMOG places it in the 8th grade. Though this piece is longer than the others, the story is gripping and should prove enjoyable for a large variety of readers. There are a few uses of dialect that might confuse some readers, but as with some of the other stories, understanding this dialect is not imperative. Overall, I would still place this text below reading level and would recommend it for a wide variety of students.

**Item 7: “King David”**

This is the story of a man that feels called to travel to the south to educate the blacks of the region. He attempts to teach reading, writing, and mathematics to the native “negros” but he soon finds that another Yankee has more influence over his pupils. This story is steeped in racism and how ignorance of people and places perpetuates that racism.

After applying the Flesh Kincaid assessment, this story appears to be on the 7th grade level. However, the SMOG model indicates a 9th grade reading level. This story is somewhat dense when compared to the other text set items. The structure of the story alone may deter some struggling readers. However, I feel like most students reading at least at the 9th grade level can handle this text independently. Something like the DR-TA or SQ3R could help students with this story because it will allow them to break it down into sections rather than attempting to tackle it in a single chink.
Item 8: “My Contraband”

Alcott centers her story around the Civil War and the war hospitals. The story focuses on an encounter between a white nurse and a mulatto contraband. This is a story that explores gender and race dynamics in a time when both were clearly defined.

Both the Flesh Kincaid Grade level and the SMOG level assessments place the story at the 9th grade reading level. I feel like this assessment is appropriate for this text. There are few instances of difficult/unfamiliar vocabulary uses. Both the dialogue and narration are straightforward. The main reason I would keep the story at a higher grade level is the overt sexual tension between the two main characters. This subject matter is much more appropriate for a upper classmen (11th and 12th graders). Therefore, I do not worry about giving this text to students that are not reading too far below grade level.

Item 9: “In The Land of the Free”

“In the Land of the Free” is Sui Sin Far (aka Edith Maud Eaton) is the story of an Asian-American family that has immigrated to the United States. The husband and wife are thrown into despair when the American government takes their child from them. The couple struggles to find a way to reunite their family against great odds (lack of money, connections, status).

According to the Fry readability formula, this story is on the 5th grade reading level. I would agree that the text is very simplistic as is the plot. Even high level struggling readers should find this story accessible.
Item 10: “Violets”

A very short text that is almost poetic in nature. It details the love of a man and woman through the beauty of violets. This piece is an excellent contrast to the more traditional short stories presented through the other pieces in the text set.

The Flesh Kincaid placed the story at a 10th grade reading level while the SMOG index is at the 9th grade level. I find this slightly misleading because there are quite a few difficult words that my students would be unfamiliar with. The form might also prove difficult for many struggling readers as the predictability of form is low. I would only give this story to my stronger readers who are reading at or above grade level. With this text I would offer Semantic Feature Analysis and Jot Charts for the vocabulary and Graphic Organizers for help with plot.
References


