

The Changing American Family

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In this unit on the American family students will reflect on the changing concept of the American family. Many high school students in Georgia live in small communities where the picture of a family is primarily a traditional one. However, the latter half of the twentieth century saw a rise in the number of non-traditional families in America. One article addressing the subject states: “According to the 1990 Census, only 16 percent of all American families comprised the so-called typical American family, that is, a married couple who are the biological parents of two children, where the father works outside the home and the mother is a homemaker. Families, like the people in them, are diverse!” (Hare and Gray, 1994). I realize that many of the student’s guardians will believe that it is their job to educate their children about family values, which is what may immediately come to mind when they consider the unit title, “The Changing American Family”. However, I do not plan to address “family values”, per se, in this unit. Rather, I wish to expose students to the different sources of tension and balance in families that may or may not differ from their own. Saying this, the only objection I anticipate is one that may come from the belief that I want to instill some sort of progressive values in the students, a view that, after reviewing the texts, would come to be irrelevant. I do not plan to address any particularly controversial subjects (such as gay and lesbian marriage or adoption) because I do not feel that it is my place to address the subject with my students who are, for the most part, still considerably influenced by the beliefs of their parents. As students move through high school and prepare for life

beyond their own communities it will be beneficial to have some perspective on the different families that make up a picture of the American family as we now know it.

I plan to begin the unit with a somewhat critical look at the portrayal of family in the media. We will examine clips from popular television shows of the last forty years. I believe that this will be an accessible medium for many students and therefore a good way to introduce the questions that I want the students to keep in mind throughout the unit. Some possibilities for viewing are “The Andy Griffith Show”, “Leave it to Beaver”, “The Brady Bunch”, “The Cosby Show”, “Roseanne”, “The George Lopez Show”, and “Malcolm in the Middle”. We will also examine the portrayal of family in some typical Sunday comic strips such as “Family Circus”, “Zits”, “Foxtrot”, and “Baby Blues”. My hope is that by thinking critically about the representations of families by the media we will be able to identify what, if anything, is authentic about the way fictional families are presented. Are the depictions realistic? Who is present in these pictures and who is absent? These questions will be the basis for a response based journal entry. The journal entry will then serve as the basis for a class discussion.

After completing the introductory activity we will move into some of the texts I have selected for the unit. As a class we will read Eugenia Collier’s short story, “The Caregiver”. This story brings to light some of the struggles an African-American family experiences when they have the responsibility for caring for an aging parent. I want the students to consider how the family in the story experiences their reality and how that reality is different from what we have been watching in the television clips. We will also read some poems intended to broaden the students ideas of the relationships that exist in the context of the family. Adolescents are commonly thought of as being self-centered so

I would like for students try to imagine the emotions and issues that their family members may be dealing with, or have dealt with in the past. I intend to have the class read “A Prayer for my Daughter” by W.B. Yeats, “All my Pretty Ones” by Anne Sexton, “Daddy” by Sylvia Plath, and “The Widow’s Lament in Springtime” by William Carlos Williams.

The goal of examining these portrayals of the American family with a critical eye will serve the students well as we move into our main text, The Joy Luck Club. I chose this text because it presents families that directly contrast with the families that the students watch on television and interact with regularly. We will use this text as the basis for our class discussions about how a family is defined by society and how different cultures challenge and complicate the picture of the American family that the media has painted for us. I plan to continue using the response-based journals as a way to encourage discussion about the texts as well as a way for the students to identify questions that come up as they read. My goal is to use these journals as a way to help the student in “developing a personal response to the unit” (Smagorinsky, 2002). Again, the journal entries will serve as the basis for class or small group discussions so the students will be able to relate their own experiences to situations that come up in the text, thus they will be directly contributing to the content and direction of the issues surrounding the text. I plan to have students work in groups to produce body biographies as the culminating assessment activity for The Joy Luck Club. Here, my goal is to encourage “opportunities to generate knowledge through texts and process that move beyond the conventional academic emphasis on analytic writing.” (Smagorinsky, 2002). Even though this assignment does not include the writing element in a traditional sense, it requires

students to illustrate how they understand a key character by choosing significant quotes, character traits, and objects to include in the body biography.

For the final assessment of the unit I will provide the students with options to choose from. They may either choose a research topic related to the American family (such as a single parents, adoption, etc.) or they may choose to write a personal family history, which requires research into the background of their own family. Again, should a student want to research a more controversial topic such as same sex marriage or the adoption of children by same sex couples, they would be required to obtain their parents written permission. While I am open to research on this topic I am well aware that the student's parents might have strong objections and it is my goal to avoid any misunderstanding. Both options will require the student to work independently. However, in light of the material we have covered in class, I hope that they will be able to think about the perspectives of others as they conduct their research.

Goals and Assessments

Reading Response Journal: Students will be expected to keep a reading log throughout our study of the changing American family. I would like the journals to be somewhat structured free writing, meaning that I would like them to address certain questions but I have no preference to the form in which they do this. They may write in traditional paragraphs, form webs, or write in the two-column format. The students should write in their journal at least twice per week. I will check the journals for completeness two times during the unit, at the end of the first and third weeks. The journals will not be assigned a letter grade, as their primary function is reflection in preparation for the final research project or narrative. The logs will be assigned a grade of pass or fail.

During this unit you will be required to keep a reading log. You may organize the log in the way you feel most comfortable with (traditional paragraph form, webbing, or two column question and answer format) but you must identify at least three issues for discussion/exploration per entry. These issues can be anything you are curious about as long as they stem from something in the text. In organizing your reading log please consider the following:

1. Reading logs should reflect on what you would like to discuss in class by recording passages that hold significance for you and commenting on them. Feel free to include examples relating to your own experience or to imagine how you would react to a situation that a character is facing in the reading.
2. The journals will be checked every three weeks. There should be at least two entries per week.
3. Grammar and usage will not count against you in the journal entries but you entries should be organized enough that I understand the points that you are making.
4. Please keep in mind that I must share any suggestions of harmful behavior with the school counselor.

Rubric for Reading Response Journal:

A passing grade will be assigned to logs that meet the following criteria:

- Log is turned in on time

- Have two entries each week
- Address questions that came up in the reading that you would like to explore further on your own as a final project, or in class discussion

A failing grade will be assigned to logs that that:

- Are not turned in on time
- Do not have at least two entries per week
- Have entries that do not identify topics for further exploration, either as a final project, or in a class discussion.

Body Biography Assignment

For the formal assessment of the novel we read during this unit I will require that student work in groups of four to produce body biographies depicting the main characters in *The Joy Luck Club*. I believe that requiring this type of project will help the students to represent some of the issues in family dynamics visually before they work on their final unit writing assignment. I will model the process for the students by completing a body biography of the narrator in Hemingway's short story "Fathers and Sons", which we will read prior to beginning the novel, so that they will have a better idea of what the assignment should look like.

For your major assessment on *The Joy Luck Club* you will be producing body biographies. You may form your own groups of up to four students. Each group will produce a biography on one of the main characters in the book. The purpose of this assignment is to create a visual representation of the characters we have been studying, what makes them tick, etc. Your biography should contain the following:

1. Four or more pictorial representations of objects that have significance to the character.
2. At least four significant passages from the text that have to do with your character's actions, emotions, etc.
3. A two-page paper explaining your motivation for the items included in the biography and how these items contribute to the character as a whole.
4. A representation of the main motivating factor for the character (the heart or the spine)

Rubric for body biography assignment (assessment for the text, *The Joy Luck Club*)

Biographies that meet the following criteria will receive an A:

- The biography contains pictorial representations of four or more objects that have significance to the character.
- A representation of the main motivating factor for the character (the heart or the spine).
- Significant passages from the text having to do with your character's actions, emotions, etc. (at least four).
- The biography is accompanied by a two-page paper, explaining the motivation for the items included in the biography and how these items contribute to the character as a whole.

Biographies that meet the following criteria will receive a B:

- The biography contains pictorial representations of at least three objects that have significance to the character.
- A representation of the main motivating factor for the character (the heart or the spine).
- Significant passages from the text having to do with your character's actions, emotions, etc. (at least three).
- The biography is accompanied by a two-page paper, explaining the motivation for the items included in the biography and how these items contribute to the character as a whole.

Biographies that meet the following criteria will receive a C:

- The biography contains pictorial representations of at least three objects that have significance to the character.
- A representation of the main motivating factor for the character (the heart or the spine).

- Significant passages from the text having to do with your character's actions, emotions, etc. (less than three).

- The biography is accompanied by a paper of between one and two pages, explaining the motivation for the items included in the biography and how these items contribute to the character as a whole.

Biographies that meet the following criteria will receive a D:

- The biography contains pictorial representations of fewer than three objects that have significance to the character.

- No representation of the main motivating factor for the character (the heart or the spine).

- Significant passages from the text having to do with your character's actions, emotions, etc. (less than three).

- The biography is accompanied by a paper of between of less than one page, explaining the motivation for the items included in the biography and how these items contribute to the character as a whole.

Biographies that meet the following criteria will receive an F:

- The biography contains pictorial representations of fewer than two objects that have significance to the character.

- The biography contains no representation of the main motivating factor for the character (the heart or the spine).

- The biography contains significant passages from the text having to do with your character's actions, emotions, etc. (less than two).

- The biography is turned in without the paper explaining the motivation for the items included in the biography and how these items contribute to the character as a whole.

Final Unit Assessment: Research Report

The final assessment of this unit will be a research report. Students will have a choice of topics but all projects must have original research as a major element. The students may produce a personal family history, or a paper on a topic they choose to research themselves such as psychology within the family, family make-up in the United States, adoption, or immigrant families in U.S. History. It is my hope that the texts that we have covered during the course of this unit will give the students different lenses (that is a way to consider families that are different from their own) with which to view the family in the U.S.

This assignment is a formal one so I will have the students in writing groups so that we can cover basic elements of composition and they can get feedback on their research and drafts before they turning their final draft to me for a grade. The student's participation in the peer writing group and the production of earlier drafts will constitute 25% of the grade for this assignment.

For the final unit assessment you will produce an independently researched report that is either (a) a family history or (b) a paper on a topic of your choice, as long as the research topic is related to our study of the American family (please have your topic approved by me). The paper should be approximately four typed, double-spaced pages. You will form writing groups where you will review each other's drafts in preparation for presenting me with your final paper. Your participation in the writing group and the production of a first draft will count for 25% of your grade. Remember to address topics that we covered in class discussion or that you wrote about in your log. Along with your final draft please provide me with a copy of your first draft with a brief (one to two paragraph) explanation of how your writing group helped you adjust your paper to its final form.

Rubric for Research Report:

Papers that meet the following criteria will receive an A:

- The paper is submitted on time
- The paper will address the specifications provided in the assignment
- The paper will have a clear opening paragraph
- The paper will have few errors in mechanics (errors should not interfere with the reader's ability to understand your thoughts).
- The first draft of the paper is included with the explanation of how your writing group helped you adjust it.

Papers that meet the following criteria will receive a B

- The paper is submitted on time
- The paper will address the specifications provided in the assignment
- The paper will have a clear opening paragraph
- The paper will have few errors in mechanics (errors should not interfere with the reader's ability to understand your thoughts).
- The paper is turned in without either the rough draft or the reflection on the suggestions of your writing group

Papers that meet the following criteria will receive a C:

- The paper is submitted on time
- The paper does not consider one or more of the specifications in the assignment
- The paper will have a clear opening paragraph
- The paper will have few errors in mechanics (errors should not interfere with the reader's ability to understand your thoughts).

- The paper is turned in without either the rough draft or the reflection on the suggestions of your writing group

Papers that meet the following criteria will receive a D:

- The paper is submitted on time
- The paper does not consider one or more of the specifications in the assignment
- The paper does not have a clear point
- The paper will have few errors in mechanics (errors should not interfere with the reader's ability to understand your thoughts).
- The paper is turned in without either the rough draft or the reflection on the suggestions of your writing group

Papers that meet the following criteria will receive an F:

- Papers that are seriously lacking any of the above may be given the grade of F.

Week One Plan

Day One (Monday)

5 minutes: Attendance, Housekeeping

45 minutes: Unit Introduction (Introductory Activity) “An Idea of the American Family”

35 minutes: Students break into groups of four to discuss the introductory activity. They pick out commonalities and/or differences in their perceptions to share with the whole class discussion.

30 minutes: Class discussion. Groups share their conclusions and have the opportunity to ask questions of each other. *What did your perceptions of a family have in common with the other members in your group? How did they differ?*

5 minutes: Clean up/ Rearrange desks.

Day Two (Tuesday)

5 minutes: Attendance/ Housekeeping

55 minutes: Media portrayals of the American Family (watching television clips and reading comic strips). Clips to be examined include “Leave it to Beaver”, “The Andy Griffith Show”, “Roseanne”, “Malcolm in the Middle”, and “The George Lopez Show” (I have the clips I plan to show on VHS). Comic strips include “Zits”, “Foxtrot”, and “The Family Circus”

30 minutes: Response journal (prompt)

At this point we have shared our own ideas about what a family is or is not. How are your ideas about the family similar to or different from the way the media portrays the lives of families?

Day Three (Wednesday)

5 minutes: Attendance/Housekeeping

30 minutes: Read “The Caregiver” aloud in class (I will do most of the reading unless I have an unusual amount of volunteers).

10 minutes: Discussion about sources of tension in the story (the story is about the relationship between two adult siblings who have the responsibility of caring for an aging parent).

45 minutes: Writing activity, re-telling the story (or a particular episode in the story) from another character’s point of view. There is a handout to guide the students in completing this task (included after week one plans).

Day Four (Thursday)

5 minutes: Attendance/Housekeeping

10 minutes: Read Yeats poem, “A Prayer for my Daughter” aloud in class (I will read the poem the first time and then I will ask a volunteer to do a second reading)

10 minutes: Play recording of Plath reading “Daddy”, have a volunteer read it aloud the second time or play the recording again.

30 minutes: Reading response (prompt)

We just read two very different poems about the relationship between a parent and a child. How were the perspectives of the poems different (how did they address different emotional elements in a father/daughter relationship)?

35 minutes: Class discussion (whole group) addressing questions explored in reading response (see above).

Day Five (Friday)

5 minutes: Attendance/Housekeeping

10 minutes: Read Sexton's "All my Pretty Ones" aloud in class (same protocol as day four)

10 minutes: Read Williams "A Widow's Lament in Springtime" aloud (same protocol)

5 minutes: Students arrange desks into groups of four.

30 minutes: Groups discuss the various points of view regarding death in these poems.

What sort of effects can death have on a family? How are different family members roles affected by death? One student in the group should record their ideas to share in the class discussion.

25 minutes: Groups share their opinions with the rest of the class.

5 minutes: Rearrange desks, prepare to leave.

Introductory Activity: An Idea of the “American Family”

I plan to have students complete a short assignment to introduce the concept of the changing American family.

Please choose one of the following assignments::

- (a) Write a dialogue depicting what they believe to be a typical exchange between family members.*
- (b) Write a one to two paragraph description of what they think of when they consider the phrase “American family”, or a description of their own family.*
- (c) Draw a picture of their vision of the American family.*

I would like to use these texts as the basis for small group discussions (ending in a whole class discussion, where I hope to say very little) to develop a class definition of the American family. I would also like to bring to the forefront the concerns that the students feel most families have. My hope is that this activity will enable the students to see that not every family has the same concerns and that this concept will be useful when approaching the various issues presented in the texts that we will be reading throughout the unit. We will revisit the initial class definition toward the end of our unit as the students are preparing to begin their research projects so that the students can identify issues they may not have initially thought of and consider them as possibilities for their own research.

Writing from Another Character's Point of View

In “The Caregiver” we read about a man who was very frustrated with his family because of their lack of help in caring for their aging mother. How do you think the story would have been different if it was told by this man’s wife, brother, sister, or even his mother? Imagine that you are one of these characters and choose a portion of the story that you found particularly interesting to re-tell from that person’s point of view.

While you are writing, please keep the following things in mind:

1. How is the perspective of this character different from the original narrator?
2. What does the original narrator know that the new narrator does not (or vice versa)? How will this effect the new narrator’s perspective?
3. How are the personalities of the narrators different (is the new narrator a different gender from the original narrator? Are they different ages?).

After you finish your draft work in groups of three to four students to revise your stories. Help the others in your group clear up any questions that might come up as your story is being read.

***This activity is modified from Peter Smagorinsky’s book, Expressions (1991, NCTE)**

Week Two Plan

Day 6 (Monday)

5 min. Housekeeping

15 min. Pass out copies of The Joy Luck Club. I will introduce the characters in the book and give a basic plot synopsis.

25 min. Read the first two chapters “The Joy Luck Club” and “Scar”, as a class.

25 min. Reading response journal (prompt)

Based on the first two chapters what do think the sources of tension between the mothers and daughters are? Are they the same for each family?

25 min. Students read chapter 3, “The Red Candle” silently in class. Finish the chapter at home if necessary.

Day 7 (Tuesday)

5 min. Housekeeping, move desks into groups of four.

40 min. Small group discussion

At this point we have read three narratives. What is your impression of the mother/daughter relationships in this novel? How is the way the mothers have experienced life different from the way their daughters are experiencing it in America? Please write down specific examples that you will turn in. Keep your ideas in mind as you continue reading the novel.

25 min. Read chapter 4, “The Moon Lady” in class.

25 min. Class discussion

We have just finished the first section of the book. How do the narratives relate to the vignette at the beginning of the section?

Day 8 (Wednesday)

5 min. Housekeeping

15 min. Read vignette at beginning of part two. Ask class what they anticipate from this section based on this vignette. Have them write down a few ideas.

25 min. Read chapter 5, “Rules of the Game” as a class.

25 min. Response Journal

As we have been studying perspectives on and within families what has been of the most interest to you? You will be producing a short research report or family history. Who or what are you interested in writing about? Why?

25 min. Silent reading, Chapter 6 “Voice from the Wall”. If chapter is not finished in class it finish it for homework.

Day 9 (Thursday)

5 min. Housekeeping

25 min. Introduce research project. Each student receives a hand out with the expectations of the project (see below). Give possibilities for topics (adoption, immigration, blended families, etc.)

60 min. Take class to library to begin research. They will have access there to several databases, as well as numerous books and magazines.

5 min. Return to class, prepare to leave.

For the final unit assessment you will produce an independently researched report that is either (a) a family history or (b) a paper on a topic of your choice, as long as the research topic is related to our study of the American family (please have your topic approved by me). The paper should be approximately four typed, double-spaced pages. You will form writing groups where you will review each other's drafts in preparation for presenting me with your final paper. Your participation in the writing group and the production of a first draft will count for 25% of your grade. Remember to address topics that we covered in class discussion or that you wrote about in your log. Along with your final draft please provide me with a copy of your first draft with a brief (one to two paragraph) explanation of how your writing group helped you adjust your paper to its final form.

Day 10 (Friday)

5 min. Housekeeping

90 min. The remainder of this class period will be used for silent reading of The Joy Luck Club (Finish chapters 7 and 8, "Half and Half" and "Two Kinds" and working on the research report. The students have access to laptops so they may begin writing while I am there for questions, etc.

Students should finish the two assigned chapters at home if they have not already done so. They will be bringing in a rough draft of their research report on Tuesday to workshop with their writing group.

Week Three Plans

Day 11 (Monday)

5 min. Housekeeping

30 min. Read chapters 9 and 10, “Rice Husband” and “Four Directions” in class.

30 min. In pairs or groups discuss these two chapters. Please keep the following questions in mind:

What do you think of the difference between the Lena and Waverly’s marriages? What sort of attitude do their mothers have toward their daughter’s husbands? Do you think that Waverly should have prepared Rich for meeting her parents? Take notes on your discussion and turn them in at the end of class.

30 min. Students should use this time to ask questions about their research projects or to work on their papers in class. Rough drafts are due tomorrow.

Day 12 (Tuesday)

5 min. Housekeeping

25 min. Read chapter 11, “Without Wood” as a class.

65 min. Students get into groups of three or four to workshop their essays.

Read each other’s essays in your group. Make comments if you see problems in content or clarity. In other words, be sure that the paper is accessible to the reader and provides enough supporting details. Provide constructive criticism in order to help improve the paper. Using the feedback of your group revise your essay before you turn it in next week. Be sure to include your explanation of how the comments of your group helped you improve your paper.

Day 13 (Wednesday)

5 min. Housekeeping

20 min. Read chapter 12, “Best Quality” aloud in class.

30 min. I will explain the body biography assignment to the class (see below). I will model the process for them using one of the eight main characters in the novel. At this time we will list some characteristics of the individual characters on the board so that students will have a better idea of how to get started on their own body biographies.

*For your major assessment on *The Joy Luck Club* you will be producing body biographies. You may form your own groups of up to four students. Each group will produce a biography on one of the main characters in the book. The purpose of this assignment is to create a visual representation of the characters we have been studying, what makes them tick, etc. Your biography should contain the following:*

- 1. Four or more pictorial representations of objects that have significance to the character.*
- 2. At least four significant passages from the text that have to do with your character’s actions, emotions, etc.*
- 3. A two-page paper explaining your motivation for the items included in the biography and how these items contribute to the character as a whole.*
- 4. A representation of the main motivating factor for the character (the heart or the spine)*

40 min. This time is to be used for working on research projects based on the feedback from yesterday's workshop (use laptops if needed and ask questions of teacher or writing group).

Day 14 (Thursday)

5 min. Housekeeping

45 min. Read chapters 13 and 14, "Magpies" and "Waiting Between the Trees" silently in class.

30 min. Reading Response Journal

How are Lena and Ying-Ying's accounts of the same event different (in "Waiting Between the Trees" and "The Rice Husband")? Look back over "The Rice Husband" if necessary. What, in your opinion, is the explanation for the differences in their telling of the same events. Where do they misunderstand one another?

**Homework: Read chapters 15 and 16, "Double Face" and "A Pair of Tickets".
Work on research report (due next Monday).**

Day 15 (Friday)

5 min. Housekeeping

90 min. Students work in groups to produce body biographies following the criteria we went over on Wednesday. They will receive their own copy of the requirements (above). If they do not finish their body biographies in class they will be able to use some of the class time on Monday to complete them.

Works Cited

Smagorinsky, P. (2002), *Teaching English Through Principled Practice*. (Merrill Prentice Hall, New Jersey)