

Relationship:

A Thematic Language Arts Curriculum

for Adolescent Readers

by
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Connectedness is a condition of the human experience. We exist in relationship with self, with others, with animal and plant life, with ecological systems in the natural world, and with inventions and technologies. Relationship is critical in individual human lives and between large institutions, nations, and cultures.

As technologies expand, natural resources flag, and the meaning of our potential for nuclear annihilation is grasped, cross-cultural understandings and shared languages emerge under the heading of "survival skills." Empathetic regard for other persons and close attention to their linguistic meanings are whole and complex processes of relationship. They are often difficult and uncertain even between individuals who share culture — between family members and friends. They call for whole response of human thought and feeling. Empathetic regard and attention to meaning are respecters of human diversity and uniqueness while they are collectors of commonalities. They call for valuing connectedness, human universals, and deep threads of collective life story, parable, and memory.

Language and art are human processes for literal and symbolic expression. Art mirrors and imagines lives and relationships. Creating and appreciating art enables us to voice our themes and questions and to come to understandings. We can move closer to one another in the web that exchange of language weaves. Dialogue permits human expression and interplay of feeling, thoughts, memories, and needs. Relationship can be both furthered and held at bay by humans' use of language.

Ernest Boyer and The Carnegie Foundation for the Advancement of Teaching hold language study as the first priority in secondary school curriculum. The disciplines of history and literature, for example, lend themselves to thought about language and to study of human stories and relationships through time and between cultures. Boyer describes as a goal in the study of literature that students come "to feel a relationship with the human family" (Boyer, 1983, p. 96). He recommends that "all students discover the

connectedness of the human experience and the richness of other cultures: (Boyer, 1983, p. 103).*

While human connectedness and relationship are critical throughout our life spans, the theme of relationship is particularly important in the lives of adolescents. Adolescence is a time of both being and becoming. An adolescent has his or her own life history and present everyday concerns and values. He or she lives shaping vision for a personal future and the changing world. Adolescents — like all persons — find themselves in relationship with self, with others, and with the natural world. Adolescents feel the fullness of support and challenge when relationships are healthy, imaginative, and growing. They create and face expectations. They pull toward independence while, ideally, flourishing in the safety of relationships in families, between peers, and with pets and animals. Adolescents are attentive to language. They are attracted to wordplay and idiomatic inventions with peers and attuned to popular culture and the language of music, television, advertisements, and film. An adolescent struggles to make himself or herself clear to self, to peers, and to adults. Outside of school settings adolescents often turn to personal letters, diaries, poems and lyrics as vehicles for expression.

A language arts curriculum developed around the theme of relationship can help school students encounter the meaning of connectedness in human lives. It can raise issues and questions around the concepts of human independence, dependence, and interdependence. The place of the individual in families, in communities based on particular beliefs or values, in geographic communities and on landscapes, and in nations and cultures can be considered. Specific themes emerge from the larger theme of relationship. For example: human relationship to work, to play, to art, and to the shaping of the future; relationship with the earth and human care for and use of animals, plants, and resources; the generations and human relationship to time and collective, historical memory; kinship and friendship in human lives; and, relationship to illness and death.

The general goals of a thematic language arts curriculum developed around the idea of relationship could include:

- to facilitate understanding and valuing of connectedness in human lives
- to raise what Elie Wiesel calls the “ancient questions,” to voice the issues of relationship
- to enhance openness to and empathetic regard for the diversity and universality of human experience
- to facilitate attentiveness to language as a mode of expression and to the role of language in relationship

* Ernest L. Boyer, *High School: A Report on Secondary Education in America* (New York: Harper & Row, Publishers, 1983).

- to engage with language as readers, speakers, and writers, to experience a range of literary genres, to attend to voice in literature from a range of eras and cultures, to open discussion to facilitate writing for varying audiences that expresses thoughts and feelings about language, literature, and emerging themes of relationship
- to facilitate experience of class, community, collegiality and collaboration, and independence as learners

The bibliography of literature and film that follows portrays adolescents and young adults. The literature raises enduring human concerns and from it myriad themes emerge. It is literature of relationship. It portrays humans as having places and roles in a common world, as finding pleasure and security in relationship, as anguishing over troubled or absent relationship, as experiencing belonging and connectedness, rejection and isolation, as making moral choices and decisions, as exercising power and care.

Thematic headings are used to organize the bibliography and suggest an approach to particular selections. The headings are not absolutes nor are they meant to suggest narrow categories. Teachers and students will find themselves naming headings and themes, patterning and connecting the selections in their own ways. What is here is a beginning.

Language study, fastened to the texts and situations in the literature, could focus on dialogue between characters and voice in literature. A general question to be asked is: What is the role of language in human relationship? Study of dialect, idiolect, regionalisms, idioms, and the denotative and connotative qualities and usage of language could be traced in popular song lyrics or other medium of interest to students.

Writing activities could include journal entries around the theme of relationship, response to reading and discussion, and narration of students' own stories of connectedness or separation. Letter writing and folklore or oral history activities could establish or further relationships. Student letters to family or friends could be encouraged. Letters regarding issues related to the theme of relationship, such as animal protection, environmental safety, or nuclear disarmament, could be written and mailed to a diverse audience. Oral histories of families or communities could be gathered independently or as a cooperative learning activity. Study of the theme of relationship and use of language in contemporary magazine or television advertisements could be undertaken individually or collaboratively.

The suggested reading list for teachers that follows includes selections developing the concept of connectedness and relationship and describing curriculum philosophies and activities.

Annotated Bibliography

Literature and Film of Adolescence and the Theme of Relationship

Overview: Universals in Human Relationship and the Role of Art

Faulkner, William. "Address upon Receiving the Nobel Prize for Literature." 1950. Rpt. in *Essays, Speeches and Public Letters*. Ed. James B. Meriweather. New York: Random House, 1965, pp. 119 - 121.

Faulkner describes general, human universals: "love and honor and pity and pride and compassion and sacrifice." The essay provides a description of the human spirit, the human condition in the nuclear age, the tasks of writers, and the role of literature in human lives.

Nin, Anais. "My Turkish Grandmother." 1976. Rpt. in *Reading in English*. Eds. Dorothy Danielson, et. al. 2nd ed. Englewood Cliffs, New Jersey: Prentice-Hall, Inc., 1980, pp. 15 - 17.

Nin describes a "universal" relationship that is temporary, born of need, existing without common language, crossing cultures and generations, and mutually satisfying. "Guarded by universal grandchildren, Turkish grandmothers always travel safely." (Nin).

Sandburg, Carl. "Prologue." In *The Family of Man*. New York: Museum of Modern Art publication by Maco Magazine Corporation, 1955, pp. 2 - 3.

Sandburg's essay is an introduction to the photographic exhibition *The Family of Man*. The writing describes human themes, passages, and conditions. It provides a description of art — the photographic story of human faces, "a drama of the grand canyon of humanity, an epic woven of fun, mystery and holiness" (Sandburg).

Family Membership and Relationships Between Adolescents and Adults

Armstrong, William H. *Souder*. New York: Harper & Row, Publishers, Inc., 1969.

Parable-like, Armstrong's novel is a story of universals in human lives. The novel includes themes such as: an adolescent's early

acceptance of adult responsibility, perspectives on justice, relationship to animals and to the soil, and an adolescent's relationship to self, to learning, and to work. (The novel is set in the contemporary rural South.)

Cacoyannis, Michael. dir. *Iphigenia*. With Irene Papas. Greek Film Center Production, 1977. (In Greek with English subtitles.)

The film is based on Euripides' play *Iphigenia at Aulis*. Agamemnon faces the threat of his army turning against him if he does not obey the oracle command to sacrifice his adolescent daughter, Iphigenia. A *New York Review of Books* film reviewer writes: "[The scenes] between father and daughter produce that almost unbearable pathos most tragic of the poets." (February 9, 1978.) Clytemnestra appeals for her daughter's life — for justice and family preservation. Iphigenia pleads for a future and for family. Agamemnon, father and military leader, realizes the winds to move the ships have begun to blow without the sacrifice. But, Iphigenia has gone, with dignity, to her death.

Laurence, Margaret. "A Bird in the House." In *A Bird in the House*. Toronto: McClelland and Stewart-Bantam Limited, 1970, pp. 75 - 95.

Laurence's story portrays Vanessa's relationship with and memory of her father. Vanessa narrates as a young adult, recollecting adolescence and reflecting on her perspective emerging through time. The story includes themes such as: search for independence from parents, changing values and perspectives, and an adolescent's realization of her father's human dreams and shortcomings. (The story is set in rural and small-town Canada during the 1930's.)

Mason, Bobbie Ann. "Graveyard Day." In *Shiloh and Other Stories*. New York: Harper & Row, Publishers, 1982, pp. 165 - 178.

Mason's characters include Waldeen, her ten-year-old daughter, Holly, and Joe McClain whom Waldeen may marry. The family's ritual of clearing the leaves and trash away from McClain's great-great-grandfather's tombstone, and a picnic, are the activities for an afternoon of contemporary, everyday dialogue. Holly reads a Vikki Barr novel, and questions her mother "Don't you know *anything*?" when Waldeen takes off her shoes and jumps in a pile of leaves.

Ortiz, Simon J. "The San Francisco Indians." In *The Man to Send Rain Clouds*. Ed. Kenneth Rosen. New York: Random House, Inc., 1975, pp. 9 - 13.

Ortiz's story portrays a grandfather who goes into the city to look for his young adult granddaughter. He has come to look because her

parents have not. He feels out of place and tired after a day of searching and returns home without her, believing she will be all right. The story includes the themes of family bond and the sharing of a vision for the future.

Ozu, Yasujiro. dir. *Tokyo Story*. With Chisu Ryu. 1953. (In Japanese with English subtitles.)

The film portrays the story of three generations in contemporary Japan. Grandparents come to visit their children and grandchildren. Their presence crowds the city apartment and disrupts the daily routine of working parents and studious children. They return home and the grandmother becomes ill and quietly dies. A *New Republic* film reviewer writes: "If I had to choose one word as the theme of *Tokyo Story*, it would be 'passage.' Time passing, life passing, with the ache and (if we admit it) the relief that this implies." (February 26, 1977.)

Roethke, Theodore. "Elegy for Jane." In *The Collected Poems of Theodore Roethke*. New York: Doubleday & Company, Inc., 1950, p. 102.

Roethke's poem expresses a teacher's loss. It explores friendship and regard shared by an adult and an adolescent. It describes adolescent intensity and way of being in the world.

Shakespeare, William. "Romeo and Juliet." First Folio 1623. Rpt. in *Romeo and Juliet*. New York: The New American Library, Inc., 1964.

Shakespeare's play traces a tragedy of adolescent love in the context of ancient family hostility and rivalry. It portrays an adolescent relationship of belief, hope, love, and self-sacrifice. It portrays adult relationships of distrust and power. The play includes themes such as: adolescents' decision making and adults' learning forgiveness and acceptance.

Vivante, Arturo. "The Bell." In *Run to the Waterfall*. New York: Charles Scribner's Sons, 1962, pp. 100 - 115.

Vivante's story portrays a young adult son's relationship with his ill and aged father. The son and family's old cook care for the father who rings his bedroom bell when he needs medicine or company. The son's impatience, the father's embarrassment and longing for company, and the cook's compassion are portrayed. The son moves from Italy to America and absent from his father's death, realizes the family cook had been the better caretaker and companion. (The story is set in Italy during the 1950's.)

Vivante, Arturo. "The Conversationalist." In *Run to the Waterfall*. New York: Charles Scribner's Sons, 1962, pp. 7 - 14.

Vivante describes a family, each member recalled and portrayed. The story is narrated by an adult who recollects his youth. (The story is set in Italy during the 1950's.)

Everydayness and the Shaping of a Vision of the Future

Forche, Carolyn. "As Children Together." In *The Country Between Us*. New York: Harper & Row, Publishers, 1981, pp. 39 - 41.

The poem describes an adolescent's dream for her future, her choices toward that dream, and her life's eventualities.

Frost, Robert. "Out, Out—." 1916. Rpt. in *The Poetry of Robert Frost*. Ed. Edward Connery Lathem. New York: Holt, Rinehart and Winston, 1969, pp. 136 - 137.

The poem narrates a young boy's loss of a hand, his loss of physical image of himself as a whole person, and his loss of life.

Guest, Judith. *Ordinary People*. New York: Random House, Inc., 1976.

Guest's novel tells the story of Conrad Jarrett and his family. The work details everydayness, traumatic accident, and an adolescent's coping. It explores Conrad's relationship to self, to memory, to friends, and to parents. The novel includes themes such as: self-expectations and others' expectations, the shaping of self-acceptance, a will to live, and a vision of the future. (The novel is set in contemporary suburbia.)

Knowles, John. *A Separate Peace*. New York: The Macmillan Company, 1960.

Knowles' novel portrays the story of friendship between adolescents, during the early years of World War II, at Devon School. Gene is quiet and bookish. Phineas is full of nerve and athletic. The novel includes themes such as: companionship, growth and questioning, the depth of bond of friendship, and passage into young adulthood and readiness for war.

Kurys, Diane, dir. *Peppermint Soda*. With Eleanore Klarwein, Odile Michel, and Anouk Ferjae. Gaumont/New Yorker Films Release, 1978. (In French with English subtitles.)

The film portrays the story of sisters, thirteen and fifteen years old, growing up in Paris in the early 60's. A *Newsweek* film reviewer writes: "It succeeds precisely because it is devoid of high drama and full of the exact rich details on the giddy *angst* of adolescence" (July 23, 1979). The film explores family relationships, school relationships, naivete and growing political awareness, and the importance of both a love letter and of a ban-the-bomb campaign.

Laurence, Margaret. "Horses of the Night." In *A Bird in the House*. Toronto: McClelland and Stewart-Bantam Limited, 1970, pp. 109 - 132.

Laurence's story is a portrait of rural fifteen-year-old Chris narrated by Vanessa, his younger, small-town cousin. The story explores the dreams Chris holds for his future and Vanessa's belief in and hope for Chris. Its themes include: striving for education, relationship to self, others' expectations, and relationships to nature. Vanessa, now returned home from college, narrates her memory. (The story is set in rural and small-town Canada during the 1930's.)

Laurence, Margaret. "The Loons." In *A Bird in the House*. Toronto: McClelland and Stewart-Bantam Limited, 1970, pp. 96 - 108.

Laurence's story describes the summer when thirteen-year-old Piguette joins Vanessa's family to rest from tuberculosis. Vanessa narrates her memory of the quiet half-Cree, half-French Piguette. The story traces the shaping of two adolescent lives. Vanessa's young adult perspective fills in blurry memory. Relationships to families are described. (The story is set in rural and small-town Canada during the 1930's.)

Plath, Sylvia. *The Bell Jar*. 1963. Rpt. New York: Harper & Row, Publishers, 1971.

Plath's novel is autobiographical fiction, the story of her twentieth year. It explores a young adult's creativity and scholastic success, unresolved emotions and memories of childhood, and struggle with self-expectations and others' expectations.

Salinger, J. D. *The Catcher in the Rye*. Boston: Little, Brown and Company, 1945.

Salinger's novel is the story of sixteen-year-old Holden Caulfield who leaves his prep school for three days spent underground in New York City. It explores Holden's school relationships with teachers and friends, and his relationships with strangers whose lives and values he encounters briefly but observes closely.

Toth, Susan Allen. "Nothing Happened." In *Blooming: A Small Town Childhood*. Boston: Little, Brown and Company, 1978, pp. 3 - 21.

Toth's story blends the voices of adolescent naivete and adult retrospective. It explores memories beginning with a child's question "What was it like in the old days?" The old days are the late 50's in Ames, Iowa. "Nothing Happened" describes the times, the town, the customs, and the people of the narrator's adolescence.

Truffaut, Francois, dir. *The Story of Adele H.* With Isabelle Adjani and Bruce Robinson. 1975. (In French with English subtitles.)

The film is biographical fiction based on the diaries of Adele Hugo, daughter of Victor Hugo. It portrays Adele's young adulthood, her obsessional love for Lt. Pinson, an Englishman who rejects her after a brief relationship while a guest in the Hugo household. A *Chairman's Choice* film reviewer writes: "In Truffaut's *The Story of Adele H.*, we are shown an identity crisis of early adulthood that ends in madness and resignation." (Spring, 1977.)

Adolescent Moral Choice, Decision Making, and Self-Reliance

Faulkner, William. "Barn Burning." 1939. Rpt. in *The American Short Story*. Ed. Calvin Skaggs. Volume 2. New York: Dell Publishing Co., 1980, pp. 374 - 392.

Faulkner portrays an adolescent's conflict with his father and the selfhood he gains by betraying him. The story's themes include: the pull of family "blood," the shaping of an adolescent's own moral vision, and the struggle of choice and decision making.

Fitzgerald, F. Scott. "Bernice Bobs Her Hair." 1920. Rpt. in *The American Short Story*. Ed. Calvin Skaggs. Volume 1. New York: Dell Publishing Co., Inc., 1977, pp. 151 - 175.

Fitzgerald's story portrays the adventure of an adolescent's social education at the hands of her popular cousin. Bernice ultimately comes into her own, confident, assertive, independent.

Sillitone, Alan. "The Loneliness of the Long-Distance Runner." In *The Loneliness of the Long-Distance Runner*. New York: Alfred A. Knopf, 1959, pp. 7 - 47.

Sillitone portrays a rebellious, alienated youth sent to reform school. Colin resents being the schoolmaster's pawn, used as an athletic representative of the school and for the headmaster's glory.

Oates, Joyce Carol. "Where Are You Going, Where Have You Been?" In *The Wheel of Love and Other Stories*. New York: Vanguard Press, 1970, pp. 34 - 54.

Fifteen-year-old Connie likes to listen to pop music, to make trips to the shopping mall and drive-in restaurant with her friends, and to check her face in mirrors. Connie daydreams. Images from the world around her and lyrics from music swirl in her head. Mental clutter keeps her from recognizing danger and what is actually happening to her when 40-year-old Arnold Friend comes to her door. Events move too fast for Connie's clear decision making.

Updike, John. "A & P." 1962. Rpt. in *The Art of Fiction*. Eds. R. F. Dietrich and Roger H. Sundell. 2nd ed. New York: Holt, Rinehart and Winston, Inc., 1974, pp. 240 - 245.

Updike portrays an adolescent responding to his store manager's ridiculous and obvious voice of authority. But the issue remains a question. Does the youth take a stand on a principle, or, does he sacrifice himself?

Adolescent Place in the World: learning, working, crossing cultures, membership in social circles, membership in political or religious community, exposure to war

Bolt, Robert. "A Man for all Seasons." New York: Random House, Inc., 1960.

Bolt's play is historical fiction. It presents the story of Sir Thomas More's trust in England's law and his refusal, as a Catholic, to sign approval of King Henry VIII's divorce from Catherine. The play includes portraits of young adults, Margaret, More's intellectual daughter, and Richard Rich, a legal clerk who, ascending to power, turns against More. Included are themes such as: family relationship, self-expectations and moral decision making, and relationship to church and state.

Borland, Hal. *When the Legends Die*. 1963. Rpt. New York: Bantam Books, 1969.

Borland's novel portrays a contemporary Native American, from boyhood to manhood, and his experience with Ute and white cultures. The novel includes themes such as: relationship to self, to others, and to nature, memory of the past, vision for the future, and moral choice and decision making.

Frank, Anne. *Anne Frank: The Diary of a Young Girl*. Introd. Eleanor Roosevelt. New York: Random House, 1952.

Anne's diary, kept from age thirteen to fifteen, is an account of her family's hiding from the Nazis in occupied Holland. It is a description of Anne herself growing physically and emotionally. "Written by a young girl—and the young are not afraid of telling the truth—it is one of the wisest and most moving commentaries on war and its impact on human beings that I have ever read." (Eleanor Roosevelt).

Miller, Arthur. "The Crucible." 1953. Rpt. New York: Bantam Books, 1974.

Miller's play is historical fiction. It presents the story of a witch trial in Salem, Massachusetts, in 1692. It is Abigail, an adolescent, who, with her friends, "cries out" an accusation, initiating the fears and suspicions that mount into hysteria. The play includes themes such as: relationship to friends, relationship in community, adolescent choice and decision making, and questions of law and conscience.

Santoli, Al. *Everything We Had: An Oral History of the Vietnam War by Thirty-Three American Soldiers Who Fought It*. New York: Random House, 1981.

Santoli has collected stories from American young adults—men and women who were soldiers, medics, nurses, and clergy in Vietnam. From the preface: "It is often said that it is impossible for the uninitiated to understand war. But in our book we hope you will see what we saw, do what we did, feel what we felt." The stories are short, one to seven pages. The work traces how individuals came to find themselves in uniform and in war.

Sheridan, Richard Brinsley. "The School for Scandal." 1777. Rpt. in *Sheridan Plays*. Ed. Cecil Price. New York: Oxford University Press, 1975, pp. 217 - 300.

Sheridan's play is an 18th-century comedy of manners. Gossipy characters combine friendship with character assassination. Names include: Teagle, Surface, Back-bite, Sneewell, Candour, and Snake. The play presents a humorous view of malicious social competitiveness in friendship. (Several recordings of stage productions are available. Hearing the lilt and cadence of dialogue enhances humor in characters' wordplay.) Although there are no adolescent characters, the changing rhythms of friendship, as Sheridan satirizes them, are universally descriptive of adolescents and adults.

Twain, Mark. *The Adventures of Huckleberry Finn*. 1885. Rpt. New York: Dell Publishing Co., Inc., 1967.

An adolescent — Huck — narrates. The novel explores family relationships, friendships, and adventures. Huck shapes a view of the world and makes choices and decisions toward his future.

Suggested Reading List for Teachers

Berman, Louise M. *New Priorities in the Curriculum*. Columbus, Ohio: Charles E. Merrill Publishing Company, 1968.

Basic to Berman's thinking is a principle associated with John Dewey: education of benefit to growing individuals is education of benefit to society. Berman begins with a view of man as a process-oriented being. Human processes (perceiving, communicating, loving, knowing, decision making, patterning, creating, and valuing) are defined and described.

Boyer, Ernest L. *High School: A Report on Secondary Education in America*. New York: Harper & Row, Publishers, 1983.

Boyer's report includes description of language and its priority in curriculum, general goals for the study of literature, and a view of human relationship and the necessity for connectedness.

Buber, Martin. *I and Thou*. Trans. Walter Kaufmann. New York: Charles Scribner's Sons, 1970.

Buber finds meaning in active regard between beings. The I - Thou relationship, rather than the I - it relationship, is one of connectedness. I - Thou extends to human relationships with the natural world.

"From Snakehill to Spring Bank: A Classroom Publishing Project." National Writing Project. Berkeley: University of California, 1980.

A videotape presentation of Marian Mohr's Fairfax County Public Schools foxfire project. Teachers and students are shown interviewing local residents, transcribing recordings and writing oral histories, organizing for publication and distribution in the community. Cooperative learning is illustrated.

Gilligan, Carol. *In a Different Voice*. Cambridge, Massachusetts: Harvard University Press, 1982.

Gilligan's study describes patterns in male and female voices. She explores the role of reasoning and separation in men's relationships

and the role of emotion and connection in women's relationships. The moral necessity for integration of these human strands and capacities is described.

Johnson, David W., et. al. *Circles of Learning: Cooperation in the Classroom*. Alexandria, Virginia: Association for Supervision and Curriculum Development, 1984.

The study presents a description of "the importance of relationships with other children and adolescents for *constructive* socialization and healthy cognitive and social development" (p. 6). Differences between traditional group work in schools and cooperative learning are explored. Suggestions for facilitating cooperative learning are included.

Rogers, Carl. *A Way of Being*. Boston: Houghton Mifflin Company, 1980.

Rogers presents issues in humanistic psychology and humanistic education. Person-centeredness and themes of relationship are valued.

"Spirit of Place: American Writers Look at People and Places." Sixth Annual University of North Dakota Writers Conference, Department of English. Grand Forks, North Dakota: University of North Dakota, 1975.

The videotape presentation explores the concept of human relationship to setting and landscape. Writers both read and discuss their work.