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Lesson Plan For Teaching Mohsin Hamid's "Exit West"

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ENGL 052C, Contemporary US Fiction

Prof. Peter Schmidt, Swarthmore College

This lesson plan provides a framework for about 150 minutes of class-time for a college literature class focusing on Mohsin Hamid's novel *Exit West*.

Learning Goals

After completing the lesson plan, students will hopefully have an enhanced understanding of the learning goals listed below:

1. The similarities between different types of internal and external migration, and the effects migration has on individuals and their senses of identity
2. Why nativism is so prevalent, the negative impact it has on humanity, and how it can be overcome by shared experiences between people
3. How authorities such as governments and mass media corporations use technology to deter immigration, via both force and influencing the public, in ways that dehumanize immigrants
4. How the narrative voice's level of omniscience with respect to both the thoughts of characters and time can be altered to emphasize different perspectives and opinions
5. Here are some basic definitions of narrative voice to give to your students:

- *First-person narration*: Uses “I” or “we”; shows us one point of view at a time; not always reliable, so we must question their views and understandings.
- *Second-person narration*: Uses “you” to address the reader; common in the choose-your-own-adventure type of novels.
- *Third-person close narration*: Uses “he” or “she”; gives us a person’s thoughts and feelings but not necessarily identifiably in their voice.
- *Omniscient narration / third-person distant*: presents an all-knowing narrator to provide insight into the thoughts and feelings of the characters; the characters may not understand happenings as they occur, unlike the narrator who gives a broader knowledge to the reader. This voice is not the voice or point of view of the character; thus it is “distant.”
- *Indirect narration*: quotes a character without using quotation marks (such as voicing their thoughts or even something they say), but this is *marked as the narrator speaking*
- *Free indirect narration*: allows for the narrator to switch between people, and it does not necessarily need to be linked to an individual – this type of narration can be either moving among several different characters’ points of view or giving a group’s opinions (despite the group not necessarily being named). Free indirect narration can also do all of the above, switching back and forth between the type of narration—it is “free indirect” narration because it is rather unpredictable in its choices.

Note: In using the above terms, ask the students what kind of narrator(s) does the story use, and how does the narrator function? Tell your students that some narrative voices remain consistent throughout; others rapidly switch between narrator voices depending on the needs of the story. When the narrative voice shifts back and forth among some or all of the above narrative styles, it’s important 1) to track *where* and *when* this happens, and then 2) to ask *why* (what is accomplished when the narrative voice switches?).

Activities

Pre-class activity: In a class forum, have students write a short blog post about how their transition from home to college life has affected them, and then comment on three

similarities between their own transition and the transitions of their classmates. This activity can be done either before or after reading the novel, but should be done before the first discussion. By creating a personal connection between students and migration, this activity should prime the class for discussions regarding the different types of migration.

Passages to discuss in class (arranged in order of appearance in the novel):

A note on the “class questions”: These questions are not meant to have right or wrong answers. While the teacher should steer the discussion away from tangents which are clearly not pertinent to the book or its themes, these questions are intended to start class discussions in which the teacher is merely another participant, so as not to intimidate the students into silence if they feel like they don’t know the “right” answer.

- P. 29-31: “While Nadia and Saeed were... his pocket as he went.”

Note to teachers: This is one of the first times Hamid uses **third person close** to voice new character’s perspective—in this case, a rather nativist and racist (anti-immigrant) views of “a young man” in Tokyo. Hamid’s use of this voice here implies many important things about nativism and the type of people who subscribe to it. *It’s important for your class to explore this “voice” and for them to realize Hamid (or his narrator) is not necessarily endorsing this voice’s views and language, but rather highlighting them so that readers can understand and question them.*

Class questions:

- How does Hamid characterize the man in the passage? What literary techniques does he use, and what traits of the man does he emphasize?

- Why does this scene take place in Japan, a country which is not mentioned again for the rest of the book?
- Why does Hamid choose to use third person close narration in this passage?
- P. 33-34: “Nadia had been seeing a musician...and she would never know.”

This scene is characterized by narrative omniscience with respect to both time and the thoughts of characters. Additionally, the fluidity of the switching between the perspectives of Nadia and the musician makes it a good example of free indirect narration.

Class questions:

- Why does Hamid choose to use **free indirect narration** in this scene?
- Why does he choose to tell the reader about future events here and in some other cases throughout the novel, but not all of the time?
- What is the effect of including so much detail about a character who is only mentioned once throughout the novel?
- P. 90-93: “As the days passed...resist or scatter or run.”

The use of technology to prevent immigration is prominent in this passage. The passage also features third person narration that shifts its degree of closeness as different perspectives are focused upon.

Class questions:

- How does the narrative voice in this section portray the immigrant family and the technology that is observing them?

What differentiates how the family is seen through the security camera, the drone, and the cameras of tourists? What are the reasons for these differences? [*Note to teachers: this moment both links and contrasts seemingly innocent uses of tech (like tourist selfies) with military surveillance cameras & facial recognition software monitoring everyone. The next question below allows a discussion of what is “recognized” vs. what is ignored by “facial recognition” software.*]

- Why does the Hamid choose to give fewer details about this family than he does for most of the other sections focusing on immigrants?
- P. 149-153: “Saeed, though, was less comfortable...it would have taken to kiss.”

This passage exhibits Saeed’s inherent nativism and the ways it makes his migration experience differ from that of Nadia, who does not feel the same desire to be with people from their home country. Because this is such a long passage, the professor may want to paraphrase it or choose some selections from it.

Class questions:

- Why might Nadia have fewer qualms about being around people of a different race and ethnicity than Saeed?
- Is Saeed’s desire to be with people of his own ethnicity justified? If so, is the nativism of the British also justified? Is it possible for Saeed’s nativism to be justified due to his circumstances, but for the British nativism to not be justified? This last question provides a good opportunity for a class debate, and the professor can attempt to foster this if they believe there is sufficient time.

- P. 157-158: “A thriving trade in electricity... actually not her at all.”

This passage does a great job of showing how mass media portrayal of immigrants can exacerbate and worsen the identity issues that one endures during migration.

Class questions:

- What is the significance of Hamid using repetition in the seventh through tenth lines of the passage? What message is he sending regarding the media’s depiction of immigrants?
- Why does Hamid choose to use one massive sentence instead of breaking up the passage into shorter sentences? (This question pertains to many more sections of the book as well)
- What is the significance of Nadia feeling “split into two” and “as if time is bending” when she sees an image that she first takes to be a photo of herself? How do these feelings pertain to media depictions of immigrants and refugees?

- P. 207-209: “Not far to the south...we are all migrants through time.”

In possibly the most profound passage of the book, Hamid explores the type of migration one experiences even if they never move: migration through time.

Class questions:

- Unlike most of the other sections on the book focusing on characters not directly connected to Saeed and Nadia, this passage tells the story of the woman’s life without actually informing the readers of what she is doing in the immediate present. Why does Hamid choose to present the passage this way, and what are the impacts of setting this section in the past?

- The penultimate sentence of this passage is very long, and the final one is one of the shortest non-dialogue sentences in the novel. What are the effects of this juxtaposition of sentence length?
- What is the significance of the one granddaughter who regularly visits the woman? What does she represent with respect to the other types of migration mentioned in the story?

References to research

These are allusions that students may not fully grasp upon their first reading of the book, and which will most likely require outside-of-class research to understand. Guidelines for (brief) research projects are given below.

The Heart of Darkness

When the first immigrant to come through a door in the novel is depicted on page 8, he is described as coming out of “the heart of darkness”, a reference to Joseph Conrad’s 1899 novel *The Heart of Darkness*.

Have students research *The Heart of Darkness* and write a brief response connecting their research to themes and motifs present in *Exit West*. If students struggle to find meaningful connections between the two novels, advise them to direct their research towards the following areas:

- The mistreatment of minorities/people of color by colonial powers, which occurs in both novels
- Critical responses to *The Heart of Darkness* arguing that Conrad’s writing dehumanized Africans. Could the same argument be made about *Exit West*’s depiction of any racial/ethnic group?

Kristallnacht

On page 135, as nativist backlash is becoming increasingly violent in Britain, there are warnings on social media of “a coming night of shattered glass.” This is a reference to Kristallnacht, a government-organized event that occurred on November 9th, 1938, in Nazi Germany in which Nazis destroyed Jewish property and killed Jewish people.

Have students research Kristallnacht, and connect their findings to events of *Exit West* in a brief written response. Encourage students to move past the obvious xenophobic violence similarities, and to delve into deeper topics, such as the significance of a Kristallnacht-like event occurring in modern-day Britain or the U.S.

Broad, Overarching Questions/Discussion Topics

These questions do not pertain to one specific passage of the book, but instead involve motifs, themes, and processes that take place throughout the course of the whole novel, or at least a wide swath of it. These questions can be used as paper topics, or as questions to be tackled by small groups in class if there is enough time to do so.

1. Analyze the rise and fall of Nadia and Saeed’s relationship. How does it pertain to their travels? What message does it send about migration, both physical and personal?
2. What is the significance of the role played by doors, windows, and houses in *Exit West*? Identify and discuss key passages reflecting on these.
3. How do doors/windows/houses relate to the mysterious portals in houses or apartments that allow immigrants to travel from one country to another? Why do you think the novel

gives us so few details about how those portals actually work, except to suggest passing through them is dangerous and frightening and also rather like being newly born?

4. How can we overcome nativism and learn to accept each other as equals? (This is a vague one: it may be helpful to direct students towards certain passages, including “The cherry trees exploded on...the stuff of a thousand fantasies” [p. 138-139] and “The news in those days...and grin with a wildness.” [p. 158- 159])

Optional outside-of-class readings

Washington Post - “The news media usually shows immigrants as dangerous criminals. That’s changed - for now, at least.” https://www.washingtonpost.com/news/monkey-cage/wp/2018/06/27/the-news-media-usually-show-immigrants-as-dangerous-criminals-thats-changed-for-now-at-least/?noredirect=on&utm_term=.1d7885a6a616

Brene Brown - “Dehumanizing Always Starts With Language”

<https://brenebrown.com/articles/2018/05/17/dehumanizing-always-starts-with-language/>

Reflections on this Lesson Plan

Many difficult decisions regarding the target audience, the passages to focus on, the types of activities to include, and the themes to focus on went into the making of this lesson plan. In the process of making these decisions and re-reading *Exit West*, I felt that I developed a deeper understanding of the novel and the messages Hamid sends through it.

I decided to make this lesson plan targeted towards only college students and not high school students for two reasons: *Exit West*’s depiction of marijuana, and my desire to engage with the more mature judgment and understanding of many college/university students.

While I didn't mention marijuana in the lesson plan, and don't believe it plays a particularly important role in *Exit West*, Saeed and Nadia do use it fairly frequently throughout the novel. I don't think that the way Hamid writes about marijuana necessarily glorifies it or promotes its use in an unsafe way - in fact, I think it very likely could help relieve some of the stress caused by harrowing journeys such as those undertaken by Nadia and Saeed. However, there is considerable scientific evidence that regularly using marijuana as an adolescent can impair brain development, so while it may be ok for Nadia and Saeed to share a joint every once in a while, fifteen-year-old English students emulating them would be disastrous. College students probably should not be using marijuana on a regular basis either, as their brains are also not yet fully developed, but they are generally going to be wiser and more capable of making their own decisions than they were in high school.

The second and more important reason that I chose to exclude high school students from the audience of this lesson plan was that high schoolers are not guaranteed to have undergone a significant migration, while college students, by virtue of leaving home for college, have done so. I'm fairly sure that I would not have been able to understand the experiences of characters in the novel on as deep of a level as I did had I read *Exit West* before coming to college. While some high school students may have moved schools or undergone another significant type of migration, and would be able to deeply connect with the themes of the novel before leaving home for college, others may lack a significant migration experience, which could cause a disparity in levels of understanding within a class. This issue is avoided by only teaching the book to college classes.

Choosing which passages to focus on for the in-class discussion sections was probably the most difficult part of making the lesson plan. I honestly felt like every section of the novel focusing on characters other than Nadia and Saeed was worth going into in great detail, and was considering making the division between Nadia/Saeed focused passages and new-character focused passages skewed towards the new-character passages. Because they don't have to further any plot, these sections tended to be much richer in terms of thematic content, and there were many of these passages not included in the lesson plan which easily could have been used in the place of the ones in the lesson plans. However, I chose not to include too many of these passages in the in-class reading section because I thought that Nadia and Saeed ultimately are at the heart of the story and deserved at least half of the class time for their passages. Additionally,

there were many passages focusing on Nadia and Saeed which I did not include in the lesson plan but which are certainly deserving of analysis. I tried to sneak some of these passages in as suggestions for students struggling with the broader questions, and professors may want to refer to these suggestions if they desire different passages to analyze in class.

I limited the total number of in-class readings because I feared that having too many of them would force the class to either rush through each section or devote a disproportionate amount of time to a short novel, both of which seemed like undesirable options. In the end, I chose the passages mostly based on how well they fit in with the most broad and overarching themes of the novel, as well as based on how clearly they showed different styles of narration and different literary techniques.

After I decided on which passages I wanted to include in the in-class section, choosing the references to research and the broader paper/discussions topics was much easier. I knew that I didn't want to use references that were mentioned in the in-class passages, and that I wanted the broad topics to not connect too obviously to the passages while still staying pertinent to the learning goals. Also, I knew that I wanted the broad topics to be long-term things that could not easily be covered in a single passage, such as Nadia and Saeed's relationship and the role of doors.

I learned a lot during the process of making this lesson plan. By picking specific passages from the book to present in class, I felt as if I was isolating some of the most important messages Hamid sent in the book, and by closely reading them I felt as if I gleaned a better understanding of the techniques he used to send them.

I think that the most important theme in *Exit West*, the one thing that Hamid is trying to tell us above all (provided there is such a thing), is that nativism is a negative ideology that is preventing humanity from moving forward as a species. Hamid does a great job of expressing this theme through showing instances of humans reaching out to new people, places, things or ideas in ways that are viewed as unnatural and scary by those around them, but which provide great benefit and happiness for them.

A further topic to think about, which teachers are welcome to address in their own versions of this lesson plan: Ask students to compare and contrast the advantages and disadvantages of Saeed's and Nadia's clear differences responding to new worlds and new people over time (and their eventual separation by mutual consent). In my opinion, the novel is

clearly NOT endorsing one over the other, but asking us to understand and to consider the advantages (and perhaps also the limitations or dangers) of both these ways of living in the world and dealing with loss and displacement. Your students should be able to “see” themselves in Saeed and in Nadia and to reflect on their character and values.

Hamid’s depiction of and commentary on how the government and mass media use techniques to foster nativism among the general public via the dehumanization of immigrants was another aspect of *Exit West* that I came to understand better during the making of this lesson plan. The narrative voice sharply changes from its normal flow in almost every section of the book focusing on government authorities trying to prevent immigration, usually becoming extremely shallow and only informing the reader of the physical appearances of the immigrants, not of their emotions or backstories. This narrative voice is representative of the use of mass media to spread nativism: by feeding the public a carefully selected narrative on immigrants instead of letting people interact with immigrants on a personal level before drawing conclusions on them, powerful people and institutions can dehumanize immigrants in such a way that people who consider themselves natives form strong negative stereotypes of immigrants.

Hamid doesn’t suggest that nativism will be an easy thing to overcome - taking in large numbers of immigrants put serious stress on the political, economic, and social structures of countries, and this creates some natural nativism even without the influence of the media or government. Hamid gives credit to this type of nativism, and does not demonize or vilify it - a good example is Saeed’s interaction with the foreman on page 179. However, in the world of *Exit West*, where all it takes to go from one country to another is stepping through a door, immigration is going to occur regardless of how the residents of any country feel about it.

I think that the doors of *Exit West* may represent the future that Hamid believes we are headed towards. As technology continues to improve, getting from place to place will continue to get easier (though of course not all types of people will have equal ease of movement or access to mobility) ... and governments will no longer be able completely to prevent people from entering their country, regardless of how strict they make their policies. As this process occurs, it will become increasingly important to view immigrants as fellow humans and not as the one-dimensional caricatures the media tries to make them out to be.