Unit 6/Week 1

Title: Invocation *from John Brown’s Body*

Suggested Time: 3 days (45 minutes per day)

Common Core ELA Standards: RL.8.1, RL.8.2, RL.8.3, RL.8.4; W.8.2, W.8.4, W.8.9; SL.8.1; L.8.1, L.8.2, L.8.3, L.8.4, L.8.5

Teacher Instructions

**Preparing for Teaching**

1. Read the Big Ideas and Key Understandings and the Synopsis. Please do **not** read this to the students. This is a description for teachers about the big ideas and key understanding that students should take away **after** completing this task.

Big Ideas and Key Understandings

The spirit or muse of America is difficult to get to know because she, like the country she symbolizes, is so varied and ever changing.

Synopsis

In “Invocation” *from John Brown’s Body* Stephen Vincent Benet calls on the muse of America to inspire him. He invokes the varied American landscape and the many kinds of people who have contributed to American culture and life.

1. Read the entire selection, keeping in mind the Big Ideas and Key Understandings.
2. Re-read the text while noting the stopping points for the Text Dependent Questions and teaching Tier II/academic vocabulary.

**During Teaching**

1. Teach/reengage the idea of epic poetry and literary allusions with your students. This invocation is the introduction to an epic poem and uses many allusions, references to places and events to represent the American spirit.
2. Students read the entire selection independently; give them a guide or something to look for: difficult vocabulary, identifying images, or sensory detail, etc.
3. Teacher reads the text aloud while students follow along or students take turns reading aloud to each other.
4. Students and teacher re-read the text while stopping to respond to and discuss the questions, continually returning to the text. A variety of methods can be used to structure the reading and discussion (i.e., whole class discussion, think-pair-share, independent written response, group work, etc.)

Text Dependent Questions

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| **Text-dependent Questions** | **Evidence-based Answers** |
| In line 1, the poem’s speaker calls on the American muse. How does the speaker describe this muse? What does he mean by this description? | The speaker describes the American muse as having a “strong and diverse heart.” (l. 1) This shows that he believes that one of the strengths of America is the country’s diversity. |
| What tone is the speaker attempting to establish in stanza 1? Support your claim with evidence from the poem. | The speaker feels that the American muse is difficult to understand because she is “as various as your land.” (L. 4) The speaker also explains that this diversity makes America illusive to understand and man’s attempt to do so “made it smaller with their art.” The speaker continues to say that America has a varied landscape including mountains as well as deserts. This diversity or variety is also seen in the different kinds of people who make up the country. Therefore, it is difficult to say the muse is any one kind of person. |
| An allusion is a reference to a place or event. In stanza 2, the speaker talks about what is “native” to America. What are the allusions the speaker refers to? | In line 7 the speaker makes an allusion to Navajo quivers to represent the Native Americans who are part of America. He also alludes to “the sea-voyaged rose.” (L. 8) which refers to the immigrants who crossed the ocean to come to America. Their descendants are now just as much a part of the country as the native Americans. |
| Reread the third stanza. What does the speaker compare America to? How does this comparison contrast to how America was described in stanzas one and two? | The speaker compares America to a “swift” running “seven-branched elk” that is illusive and “can never be “captured or subdued.” America’s illusiveness in lines 9-14 is because of its swiftness of change and not merely due to is diversity as stated in stanzas 1 and 2. |
| Alliteration is a literary device in which a number of words, having the same first consonant sound, occur close together in a series. How effective is the author’s use of alliteration in stanza 3? Explain your response with textual evidence. | The alliteration of the /h/ sound in stanza 3, line 11 “That half a hundred hunters have pursued” conveys the idea of the hunter’s exhaustion of trying to capture the illusive America. |
| In stanza 4, line 15, the poet uses thee words “buffalo-ghost, the broncho-ghost.” To what is he alluding? | In line 15, when the poet uses the words “buffalo-ghost” he is again alluding to the ancestors of the Native Americans. The “broncho-ghost” is the ancestor of the cowboys or settlers. |
| In lines 19-20, the speaker describes “the clipped velvet of the lawns/Where Shropshire grows from Massachusetts sods.” What does he mean by this? Why is this important? | In lines 19-20 the speaker makes an allusion to Shropshire, which is in England and an allusion to Massachusetts, which is one of the United States. By using these words, he is showing that the people who came from England to the colonies changed and became a part of the new country, which was more rugged than the old country they had left. |
| To what is the poet referring with the words “two tied oceans in her medicine-bag” (l. 34)?  Reread lines 33-34 of the poem. How does the speaker portray America in these two lines? Support your claim with evidence from the text. | The “medicine bag” is another allusion to the Native Americans who are a part of this country. The “two tied oceans” alludes to the Atlantic Ocean and Pacific Ocean. By using the image of them being tied, the poet is showing how the country stretches from one ocean to the other. These two lines show the paradoxical pairing of America’s vast possibilities of “a friend” with the warning that America can work against you and defeat you “an enemy” followed with the mysteries of the unknown of “a scared hag” and “her medicine bag.” |
| In stanza 11, what is the meaning of lines 35-38? In line 38 what does the catbird symbolize? What does the nightingale represent? | In lines 35-38, the speaker uses allusion to show that the English tried to make America be just like her. In line 35 he states, “They tried to fit you with an English song...” and then goes on to say, “The catbird pecked away the nightingale.” (L 38) The catbird is an American bird that symbolizes America while the nightingale symbolizes England. |
| How does the imagery in stanza 12 emphasize the United States as a young country that has broken with the past? | In stanza 12 the speaker uses more allusions to England and America. In this stanza he uses rivers to make his point: the Thames to represent England and the Mississippi River to represent America. By saying that “all the rivers of the kings…were drowned…”(L. 41-42) he wants to show that Americans broke with the past. |
| What does the speaker realize in lines 43-44? | In lines 43-44, when the speaker says “all of these you are” and “each is partly you” the speaker realizes that each of these symbols is only one aspect of America and that they do not represent the complexity of the whole nation. |
| Why is the speaker struggling to find the ‘essence’ of America in lines 45-49?” | In line 45, the speaker ponders, “so how to see you as you really are…” meaning that the muse is made up of so many different places and people that it is difficult to know how to describe her. The speaker continues to long to find the “essence of essence” meaning the search for the purest form of things in such a complex beauty. |
| Reread lines 49-54. What does the speaker say happens when someone tries to “hunt…down” the American spirit? What is “the American thing?”(l. 49) | The speaker tells the reader that when someone tries to hunt down or find the American spirit will see “a shadow” (l. 50) and risk missing its true dynamic quality. The speaker explains that to search for something that cannot be captured is to “pursue a shadow of our own”; to continuing chasing a dream and that is “the American thing.” |
| In the last stanza, what does the poem’s speaker come to realize about the American muse? | In this stanza, the speaker realizes that he has seen the American muse, “not as one,/But clad in diverse semblances and powers...” (l. 59-60) By this he shows that he now understands that even though he has trouble saying the muse is any one thing, the muse is always there in all its great diversity. In lines 61-62 he sums up his realization by saying that the muse is always there like the sun, but always different like the day progresses. |

Tier II/Academic Vocabulary

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|  | **These words require less time to learn**  (They are concrete or describe an object/event/  process/characteristic that is familiar to students) | **These words require more time to learn**  (They are abstract, have multiple meanings, are a part  of a word family, or are likely to appear again in future texts) |
| **Meaning can be learned from context** | Muse  subdued  pursued  quarry  arrogant  bleak | diverse  immortal |
| **Meaning needs to be provided** | Begot  whittled  semblances | invocation  essence  eternal |

Culminating Writing Task

* Prompt

In “Invocation”, Stephen Vincent Benet calls on the American muse to inspire him to write his epic poem “John Brown’s Body” and details the difficulty he has in describing the spirit of America. What are the poet’s struggles in explaining the country’s spirit? What literary techniques does the poet use to show his idea of this spirit? What conclusion does the poet make about the essence of the country? Write 1 to 2 paragraphs including evidence from the text to support your ideas. Make sure to edit your work for correct spelling, punctuation and grammar.

* Teacher Instructions

1. Students identify their writing task from the prompt provided.
2. Students will complete an evidence chart as a pre-writing activity. Teachers should guide students in gathering and using any relevant notes they compiled while reading and answering the text-dependent questions earlier. Some students will need a good deal of help gathering this evidence, especially if this process is new.

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| ***Allusions and Similes***  ***from the poem*** | ***Line number*** | ***Elaboration / explanation of how this evidence***  ***supports ideas or argument*** |
| “Navajo quivers” | Line 7 | This refers to the Native Americans who lived in America before Europeans came. The quiver is what they kept their arrows in. Their culture is an important part of the American muse. |
| “sea-voyaged rose” | Line 8 | This allusion represents the Europeans who came to America from England. The rose is often used to symbolize England. To understand the muse, we cannot forget this part of our past. |
| “the Thames and all the rivers of the kings…ran into Mississippi and were drowned” | Lines 41-42 | The reference to the Thames and rivers of the kings alludes to the monarchy governments of the Old World. They were “drowned” in the Mississippi, an American river because America started a new democratic government. |
| “Always the same, as light falls from the sun./And always different, as the differing hours.” | Lines 61-62 | This simile means that the muse is always there like the sun, but at the same time always different like the day progresses. |

1. Once students have completed the evidence chart, they should look back at the writing prompt in order to remind themselves what kind of response they are writing (i.e. expository, analytical, argumentative) and think about the evidence they found. (Depending on the grade/reading level, teachers may want to review students’ evidence charts in some way to ensure accuracy.) From here, students should develop a specific thesis statement. This could be done independently, with a partner, small group, or the entire class. Consider directing students to the following sites to learn more about thesis statements: http://owl.english.purdue.edu/owl/resource/545/01/ OR http://www.indiana.edu/~wts/pamphlets/ thesis\_statement.shtml.
2. Students compose a rough draft. With regard to grade level and student ability, teachers should decide how much scaffolding they will provide during this process (i.e. modeling, showing example pieces, sharing work as students go).
3. Students complete final draft.

* Sample Answer

In “Invocation”, Stephen Vincent Benet calls on the American muse to inspire him to write his epic poem “John Brown’s Body” and details the difficulty he has in describing the spirit of America. The reason he has difficulty explaining the essence of America is because of its great diversity, both geographically and culturally. To demonstrate this his ideas about this diversity, the poet uses the literary techniques of allusion and simile. For example, in line 7 he writes about “Navajo quivers.” This image refers to the Native Americans who lived on this continent before the Europeans came. At the same time, he uses the allusion of a “sea-voyaged rose” (l. 8) to represent those people who came from England. The poet also tries to illustrate that even though many Americans came from Europe, this country is unique. This difference comes from the fact that the very land itself changed the way people think. To develop this idea, he uses this image “the Thames and all the rivers of the kings…ran into Mississippi and were drowned.” (lines 41-42) The Thames is an English river and the “rivers of the kings” refers to the European monarchy form of government. When he says they drowned in the Mississippi, an American river, he is referring to the fact that America formed a new democracy that “drowned” the old ways of ruling.

In the end, the poet comes to realize that even though it is difficult to say that the American spirit is just one thing, it can be described as the sum of all these places and people to which he alludes. To illustrate this idea, he uses the technique of simile: “Always the same, as light falls from the sun./And always different, as the differing hours.” (lines 61-62) He sums up his realization by saying that the muse is always there like the sun, but always different like the day progresses. He has come to realize that even though he has trouble saying the muse is any one thing, the muse is always there in all its great diversity.

Additional Tasks

* Read the following articles and research Stephen Vincent Benet’s epic poem “John Brown’s Body”. Find out why this poem is a significant piece of American literature and what the reader can learn about American history and values from it. Write a response about this poem’s importance.
* <http://www.historynet.com/john-browns-body-stephen-vincent-benet-and-civil-war-memory.htm>
* <http://followingpulitzer.wordpress.com/2012/11/09/poetry-friday-stephen-vincent-benet-and-a-poem-that-isnt-exactly-from-1941/>
* <http://www.poemhunter.com/stephen-vincent-benet/biography/>
* <http://online.wsj.com/articles/SB10001424052748704471504574447301692263392>
* <http://www.historynet.com/john-browns-body-stephen-vincent-benet-and-civil-war-memory.htm>
* <http://www.poetryfoundation.org/bio/stephen-vincent-benaet>

Sample response

Throughout history, societies have produced epic works like Homer’s *Odyssey* to define a country’s culture. In 1928, Stephen Vincent Benet published *John Brown's Body*, an epic poem dedicated to celebrating the spirit of the American people. Writing about an important moment in American history the Civil War, Benet tried to describe America’s essence.

Note to Teacher

* Since this piece is part of a larger work about John Brown and the Civil War, teachers will need to think about what background knowledge students will need to understand the significance of “Invocation.”