

## Intergenerational Impact of Trauma As Seen in American Literature

*Author: Tairen McCollister*

*“Intergenerational trauma is very real, as is cultural trauma such as genocide. Our brains carry this information since we are built to serve our survival.”*

*—Dr. Sebern Fisher*

### Introduction

St. Georges Technical High School is located in rural Middletown, Delaware. It is the one of four public high schools in the New Castle County Vocational Technical School District. The school population is one of diversity, both socio-economic, race, and location. Students attending the school live in rural parts of New Castle County, urban and suburban areas of Wilmington, and Newark. The school has both academics and career/technical studies. Students begin their career completing rotations to all career areas as Freshmen, choosing and applying for acceptance into their chosen area. In addition to their career path, students complete the required academics, including traditional, honors, dual enrollment, and inclusive courses. According to the Delaware Department of Education, there are 1,123 students enrolled for the 2019-2020 school year.

As an academic content teacher, my courses include traditional and Honors level English 11 courses, English 12 Short Story, and English 12 Contemporary Ethics. This unit focuses on my traditional English 11 course, *The American Dream and American Literature*. The content could be modified for the Honors course as well, which focuses on American Literature. The unit would be unit 1, The American Dream, which begins with establishing the founding of the country and delves into various texts. The unit focuses on how the social constraints of society make achieving the American Dream difficult or impossible for most marginalized groups.

The vocational/technical trades school environment offers students a unique high school experience. Each student completes course work, leading to a certificate or license in their field of study upon graduation. The trades range from nursing to HVAC, plumbing to informational technology, and more. According to the school's data for 2018—2019, out of 802 upperclassmen (sophomores, juniors, and seniors), 20% study a trade in the Public/Consumer Services cluster, 23% study a Construction trade, 35% study in the Health Career cluster, and 23% study in the Business and Technology cluster.

## **Rationale**

The 11th grade curriculum created and mandated by the district focuses on American Literature and The American Dream. Many of the texts read focus on the American experience from the beginning of this country's establishment. The content focuses on the pursuit of The American Dream—the success of achieving it, the failure, obstacles, shortcomings, and challenges as well. Of the content used, a great deal of it focuses on the challenges that marginalized groups face in their pursuit based on history, experience, and systemic barriers found in American democracy and society over all. Many of the challenges faced that create the inability to obtain said dream can be traced back to the traumas resulting from many incidents and circumstances going back as early as the establishing the country, previous inequalities and social inequities in immigrant circumstances. The unit will focus on the ways that trauma can be intergenerational, leaving groups feeling the effects and repercussions generations after the event or circumstance has occurred.

## **Content Objectives**

This unit begins with foundational documents and ends with modern literature as the theme of the American Dream is analyzed. The idea of focusing on Trauma, intergenerational in particular, would work well. The main texts of the unit include Lorraine Hansberry's play *A Raisin in the Sun* and United States Foundational Documents such as the Declaration of Independence. The connection between these two is never lost on the students: all created equal versus what actually transpired over the years. The play, students find, is an example of how the idea of the American Dream is elusive for certain populations. The idea of focusing on intergenerational trauma with this play in particular is ideal. Over the course of the unit, students read informative texts on a variety of issues. With this prospective unit, incorporating intergenerational trauma would work well. Students also read a novel at the end of the unit, *The Great Gatsby*, which could still be incorporated. However, the idea is to incorporate the memoir, *The Glass Castle*, by Jeanette Walls.

For the purposes of this unit, students would begin with exploring the idea of Trauma and its impact on development, they would also explore intergenerational impacts of Trauma, epigenetics, and Post-Traumatic Stress. This would provide the foundation students need to begin to use this as a lens for exploring literature. Students would first gain an understanding of how trauma is defined, impacts the brain development and brain function of individuals, and the science behind epigenetics in relation to trauma. With this knowledge, students would begin to explore various texts focusing on the American experience ranging from the Native American *Black Elk Speaks*, to the poetry of the Harlem Renaissance (i.e. Langston Hughes) and other authors of color. Students would also read informative texts and excerpts from Maya Angelou and Toni Morrison on race,

class, and gender to draw a connection with Trauma. This would lead to exploring Hansberry's play *A Raisin in the Sun*. The unit would end with the reading and analysis of *The Glass Castle* focusing on class, gender, and trauma. Students would complete various writing pieces over the course of the unit, narrative, informative, and argumentative in style.

The unit would serve as an exploration of how the early establishing of this country was one of classes: the haves and the have nots, men versus women, and finally, race. The impact of these inequities would impact the lives of various groups, which in itself is a trauma. The resulting experiences could be traced back to these times, events, etc., and students would be able to explore literary and informative texts through the lens of trauma, particularly intergenerational. Through the course curriculum's focus, American Literature and the American Dream, students will explore the journey marginalized groups.

Trauma is an aspect of society that requires a great deal of discussion. It is a topic of concern for all age groups, races, genders, and groups. The idea that a traumatic event can impact a person is nothing new; it is understood that there are conscious and subconscious aspects is widely accepted. However, trauma is not just deeply in the psyche of individuals, but it can be a genetic, inherent piece of a culture's DNA. In the United States of America, a country founded on trauma, this is evident in all areas of society, including the literature studied at high schools and colleges around the country.

Through the analysis of trauma theory, epigenetics, which refers to "in addition to changes in genetic sequence" (Weinhold, 2006), and literature covered in an American Literature course, the connection between the intergenerational trauma experienced by various, marginalized groups in the country, would be explored. Trauma is a part of the body's DNA, meaning, generation after generation has specific traumatic experiences coursing through the blood of all that follow the traumatic event itself.

### **Essential Questions/Objectives**

- How did the early experiences of Americans help to shape our national identity, both collectively and individually?
- What is the American Dream?
- How does the work of an author reflect his personal beliefs?
- How is trauma defined and what impact can it have on the psychological development of marginalized groups?
- What is intergenerational trauma and how can it impact individuals?
- How are effective arguments developed?
- What are the intergenerational impacts of trauma (societal, personal, etc.) on

historically marginalized groups in America?

## **Content**

Teachers executing this unit will need to be familiar with various aspects of Trauma in order to effectively present the information to their students in student-friendly, content. There are three areas that teachers need to have a working knowledge of how trauma is defined, what intergenerational trauma looks like, and the impact of trauma on the mind, body, and spirit.

### *Trauma defined and Impact of trauma on the mind, body, and spirit*

Dr. Bessel van der Kolk, an renowned expert in trauma, defines it as “specifically an event that overwhelms the nervous system, altering the way we process and recall memories” that leaves an imprint on the lives of those that have experienced the trauma. This imprint can impact not just the psychological aspects of an individual (i.e. anxiety, depression, etc.), but also the physical side of an individual with increased cortisol levels, oxidative stress, nervous system issues, and more. The mind, body, and spirit connection can be a combined detriment to an individual with trauma left untreated and not addressed.

Dr. van der Kolk characterizes the impact of trauma as leaving the inability to take the actions an individual is required to take in order to effectively protect themselves; this is due to the fact that the areas of brain that for most individuals, those having not experienced trauma, will not always behave appropriately based on their level of trauma. As a result of the traumatic experience, the brain can become overwhelmed and the perception of the situation can become skewed. Having experienced a traumatic event can leave an individual in a state where they believe that there is no power in overcoming situations, protecting oneself, etc., this can lead to additional issues that might lead to mental, emotional, spiritual, challenges.

The brain is a complex piece of the puzzle when it comes to the impact of trauma and traumatic events or histories. The amygdala, an area of the brain that can serve almost as a ‘detector’ of danger, can find itself in constant fear of dangerous situations or threats, even when they might not be perceived as such for other individuals. The resulting stress this can bring about can cause heightened secretion of cortisol leaving a person with a history of trauma in a state of hyperarousal and helplessness. While the amygdala senses the perceived danger, the medial prefrontal cortex, an area of the brain that ideally gives an individual a sense of control, or ‘I can do this’ can find itself inactive and unable to properly behave. The combined impact of these two examples can create an endless cycle of fight or flight on an individual; all of which, can impact not just the mind, but the body (i.e. physical ailments resulting from stress hormones, the nervous system being impacted and impaired, possible oxidative stress, etc.), and spirit. A traumatic event can make its way beyond the event itself, consciousness, and find its place deep in the psyche of a person, and even a group of people who have experienced it collectively and independent of one another.

### *Intergenerational Trauma and Epigenetics*

Trauma can become an enduring aspect of a culture and human condition. The recovering from and even the succumbing to of trauma, can leave an indelible mark on a group within society. While the idea of culture can be a positive aspect of society; the shared experiences and the combine resolve to conquer and overcome oppressive aspects of said society, the loss via trauma can be felt for generations to come. While in some ways, a sense of culture can offer marginalized groups connection, understanding, and a sense of belonging, it can also offer the negative aspects of all these things. In some ways the idea of culture can provide a sort of buffer to members of the community, it can also impact the stress found through those shared experiences. The knowledge, the mutual understanding and values, can also be a disruptor and way to ‘remain in the trauma’

because of the challenges found through the experience, as well as the cultural disparities found as a result.

Epigenetic means *in addition to changes in genetic sequence*. The term, which is ever evolving, refers to anything that alters gene activity but does not fully change the DNA sequence, but it can lead to modifications that might be transferred to daughter cells. Geneticists explain repression of transcription, or the transfer of genetic information from DNA to RNA, as one route by which epigenetics can have adversely impact the health of an individual. There is now evidence that traumatic experiences can alter an individual's DNA. As the area is explored more, it would support the belief that these genetic variations can be passed down between generations and leave a sort of predisposition on individuals to not just aspects of the trauma itself but the stressors that can lead to, or be 'triggered' and lead to some sort of PTSD effect, or psychological and societal issues. Dr. Sebern Fisher, an expert in trauma and the nervous system, believes that "intergenerational trauma is very real, as is cultural trauma such as genocide. Our brains carry this information since we are built to serve our survival." The findings, that again are constantly changing, lead experts to believe in the idea of "epigenetic explanation" for the impact trauma leaves on individuals, families, and groups of people. The impact does not directly damage a gene, but it can alter it.

### **Teaching Strategies**

The strategies for the unit will vary and focus on blended and personalized learning in addition to traditional strategies, as well as modifications in the current remote learning model.

Guided and independent annotating activities

Students will be given annotating and interactive protocols, expectations, etc., as they read independently, as well as with the class or partners. Instructor will provide terms to define, ideas, tips, etc., to ensure that students are focusing on annotating appropriate information. In some instances, teacher will model with text (i.e. Black Elk Speaks, as

the activating strategy) to ensure that students are aware of the process and can see effective representation of annotating.

Guided reading questions should focus on aspects of the text that the teacher deems most important and in need of highlighting; this will be a strategy to not only ensure that students are reading, but more importantly, gaining insight and exhibiting strong reading comprehension throughout reading not just literary texts, but the informative texts that provide insight into trauma, intergenerational trauma, and the brain/neuroscience behind trauma and its impact.

Annotating practices and activities can, and should focus on, enhancing student annotating practices, both in a group setting or situation, as well as independently. Students tend to 'highlight everything' - with guided annotating activities, the teacher can not just model effective annotating practices but also encourages students to develop their own system of annotating texts based on the objective and goals of the texts being read. For example, reading an informative text about epigenetics would lend itself to encouraging students to be sure that they are incorporating vocabulary as one of the items being annotated, and defined, to ensure comprehension. While, reading a literary text might find the instructor providing students with items, or specific information, to have students focus on and look for as they are reading. Eventually, an opportunity for independently annotating texts, both informative and literary, should be explored to ensure student efficacy with annotating. By the time students reach the more complex reading, they should have had enough practice with guided and explicit annotation practice, to be not just independent but also feel confident in their annotation practices.

### Close reading

Students will read and analyze texts over the course of the unit that use close reading as a during reading strategy. Guiding questions, vocabulary, interaction with the text as students tackle literary and informative texts will add in student comprehension, as well as best practices. Close reading is meant to provide students with critical analysis of a text by focusing on important, significant, aspects of the text. This can be done with both literary and informative texts, similar to the purpose and process of guided and independent annotating activities, students will, ideally, find this practice not just beneficial, but also, find themselves feeling more confident in working independently as they tackle texts.

### Socratic Seminars

For *The Glass Castle*, at the end of the unit, students will read independently and as a class, in an effort to prepare for a Socratic Seminar to wrap up the unit and text. Students will utilize prior close reading and annotating practices to ensure they are interacting with, and properly analyzing the text. Students will tackle questions, discussion stems, etc., as they prepare for the graded culminating activity.

Some examples of objectives for students to explore and discuss include plot, theme, characterization and development, as well as conflict. Students can spend time tracing the novel as they read, and then, as a result, find themselves prepared to discuss with their peers based on their notes, annotations, activities, etc., from the reading of *The Glass Castle*. Instructors should provide discussion stems for students to use in both practice and the final Socratic seminar. Stems can help not only guide the conversation but also ensure that students feel comfortable discussing the topics and information. Stems, such as “I agree with your comment” or “In addition to the evidence you provided” can enrich the conversation by taking the pressure off of students to be prepared to discuss and also feel comfortable enough to do it.

**REMOTE LEARNING:** Flipgrid responses Screencasting/Screencastify  
Virtual Break Out Rooms (i.e. via Zoom or Microsoft Teams)

In an effort to incorporate similar interactive discussions, the use of these strategies can prove beneficial in ensuring students have the chance to discuss readings. A Socratic Seminar can be completed via Breakout Rooms and students can prepare and practice via Flipgrid Responses.

### **Classroom Activities**

Three examples:

Activation Activity: *Black Elk Speaks...*

Students are introduced to the unit and course through a foundational document about the Native American experience. Through excerpts, students can not only explore the early experiences of America, but the trauma experienced by the genocide of Native Americans. This will provide an opportunity to begin the view literature through the lens of trauma.

Close Reading: “Can we really inherit trauma?” & Parents’ emotional trauma...” articles

Students read and answer questions from the two articles focusing on understanding trauma and the connection between individuals and their families.

Flipgrid Response: *A Raisin in the Sun*

Students respond to the unit essential question via Flipgrid as an informal, formative assessment, as they read and analyze the play. This will allow the teacher to assess understanding and connection between the text and trauma lens. It also allows students the opportunity to practice for the Socratic Seminar.

## **Bibliography for Student Resources**

Black Elk. (1998). *Black Elk speaks: Being the life story of a holy man of the Oglala Sioux*. Lincoln: University of Nebraska Press.

Students will begin the unit exploring the Native American experience in the early founding of this country through reading excerpts of this text. *Black Elk Speaks* presents the story of Black Elk, an Oglala Lokata Native American. It provides insight into his experiences as well as the collective experiences of his family and culture; the genocide of Native Americans or Indigenous People is a great entry into not just the world of American Literature (i.e. this course's topic) but the idea of trauma by a marginalized group within American Society. Instructors should use this to slowly introduce the idea of trauma/activating strategy.

Hansberry, L. (1958). *A Raisin in the Sun*. New York: Vintage Books.

Students will read and analyze this text through the lens of not just the American Dream but also the impact trauma has on generations. *A Raisin in the Sun*, a play, focuses on a Black family struggling to find their way through America (Chicago) as each member of the family attempts to obtain/achieve their idea of the American Dream. However, there are many obstacles and struggles they face that are the direct result of systemic, racist policies in place. The trauma of slavery, Jim Crow, segregation, etc., is a part of the cultural DNA.

Walls, J. (2006). *The glass castle*. New York: Scribner.

Students will read and analyze this text through the lens of not just the American Dream but also the impact trauma has on generations. *The Glass Castle*, a memoir, tells the story of the author and her dysfunctional family. Walls, the author, tells the story of an inconsistent, poverty-based, unconventional childhood that she and her siblings experienced with their parents who suffered from the effects that remained from their own childhood dysfunction, mental illness, and alcoholism. Through her story, the long term impact and generational impact that trauma can have on family is explored.

## **Bibliography for Investigated Readings/Resources**

Carey, B. (2018). *Can we really inherit trauma?* Retrieved from <https://www.nytimes.com/2018/12/10/health/mind-epigenetics-genes.html>.

This source will provide insight into exploring the idea of epigenetics and the im

impact it can have on marginalized groups. The science behind the idea of epigenetics and the biological impact, as well as the possible social and emotional impact potentially experienced. In addition, this article provides a cultural connection in terms of how trauma can impact a marginalized group, how it can be viewed by said group, as well as how it can in fact provide some positive aspects, such as a buffer, sense of belonging, and a sense of community.

DeVries, M.W. (1996). *Trauma in cultural perspective*. In B.A. van der Kolk, A.C. McFarlane, & L. Weisaeth (Eds.), *Traumatic stress: The effects of overwhelming experience on mind, body, and society* (p. 398-413). The Guilford Press.

This article provides an in-depth view of various articles focusing on aspects of trauma and the connection on aspects of culture. Insight into the way that the brain processes trauma, the areas of the brain impacted by, as well as guided by trauma and traumatic events and how it can influence and guide an individual is explored. In addition, this article provides a cultural connection in terms of how trauma can impact a marginalized group, how it can be viewed by said group, as well as how it can in fact provide some positive aspects, such as a buffer, sense of belonging, and a sense of community.

Francis, R., and Elftmann, K. (2011). *Epigenetics: The ultimate mystery of inheritance*. New York: W. W. Norton and Company.

This source will provide insight into exploring the idea of epigenetics and the impact it can have on marginalized groups. The science behind the idea of epigenetic impact, the biological impact, as well as the possible social and emotional impact potentially experienced is explored.

Hartman, G. H. On traumatic knowledge and literary studies. Retrieved from [https://www.sas.upenn.edu/~cavitch/pdf-library/Hartman\\_Traumatic.pdf](https://www.sas.upenn.edu/~cavitch/pdf-library/Hartman_Traumatic.pdf).

This text provides an in-depth view of various articles focusing on aspects of trauma and the connection on individuals and society. The text also provides insight into trauma and the literary world, which is beneficial in an English/Language Arts course and/or curriculum focusing on trauma.

van der Kolk, B. (2014). *The body keeps the score*. New York: Penguin Books.

This text provides an in-depth view of various articles focusing on aspects of trauma and the connection on mind, body, and society. Insight into the way that the brain processes trauma, the areas of the brain impacted by, as well as guided by trauma and traumatic events and how it can influence and guide an individual is explored.

van der Kolk, B., McFarlane, A., and Weisaeth, L. (2007). *Traumatic stress: The effects of overwhelming experience on mind, body, and society*. New York: Guilford Press.

This text provides an in-depth view of various articles focusing on aspects of trauma and the connection on mind, body, and society. Insight into the way that the brain processes trauma, the areas of the brain impacted by, as well as guided by trauma and traumatic events and how it can influence and guide an individual is explored.

Weinhold, B. (2006). Epigenetics: The science of change. Retrieved from <https://www.ncbi.nlm.nih.gov/pmc/articles/PMC1392256/pdf/ehp0114-a00160.pdf>.

This source will provide insight into exploring the idea of epigenetics and the impact it can have on marginalized groups. The science behind the idea of epigenetic impact, the biological impact, as well as the possible social and emotional impact potentially experienced is explored.

Zama, Mirel. "What is intergenerational trauma?" Accessed October 17, 2020. <https://www.refinery29.com/en-us/2020/06/9848448/what-is-intergenerational-trauma>.

This source serves as foundational/informative piece to build content knowledge prior to exploring trauma as a lens through which to view the literature being studied. The instructor, as well as the students, should view this as a text to help gain understanding about trauma as it impacts not just individuals but also groups, particularly, exploring it as the lens to which the literature for the course and unit is viewed.

## **Appendix A: Implementing District Standards**

### **Content Standards**

The following standards are mandated and pre-determined by my district, however, they apply to the activities that I have in mind for the texts chosen focusing on

intergenerational Trauma. The state follows the Common Core Standards for English/Language Arts and the focus is on literary and informative texts. The standards for grades 11-12 are similar but specific to the genre of reading. The focus is on citing textual evidence to support analysis of texts, either literary or informative, determining the meaning of words and phrases as used in a text, and writing both informative and argumentative writing pieces.

In addition, the focus on content falls under the students demonstrating a knowledge of eighteenth, nineteenth, and early-twentieth century works of American literature. The combination of these areas of focus is the premise for the structure of the course in general and is fully seen over the course of this unit in particular. The standards should guide not only the curriculum but also serve as the compass for the course overall. The standards are presented below:

[CCSS.ELA-Literacy.RL.11-12.1](#) Cite strong and thorough textual evidence to support analysis of what the text says explicitly as well as inferences drawn from the text, including determining where the text leaves matters uncertain.

[CCSS.ELA-Literacy.RL.11-12.4](#) Determine the meaning of words and phrases as they are used in the text, including figurative and connotative meanings; analyze the impact of specific word choices on meaning and tone, including words with multiple meanings or language that is particularly fresh, engaging, or beautiful. (Include Shakespeare as well as other authors.)

[CCSS.ELA-Literacy.RL.11-12.9](#) Demonstrate knowledge of eighteenth-, nineteenth- and early-twentieth-century foundational works of American literature, including how two or more texts from the same period treat similar themes or topics.

[CCSS.ELA-Literacy.RI.11-12.1](#) Cite strong and thorough textual evidence to support analysis of what the text says explicitly as well as inferences drawn from the text, including determining where the text leaves matters uncertain.

[CCSS.ELA-Literacy.W.11-12.1](#) Write arguments to support claims in an analysis of substantive topics or texts, using valid reasoning and relevant and sufficient evidence.

[CCSS.ELA-Literacy.W.11-12.2](#) Write informative/explanatory texts to examine and convey complex ideas, concepts, and information clearly and accurately through the effective selection, organization, and analysis of content.

[CCSS.ELA-Literacy.SL.11-12.1](#) Initiate and participate effectively in a range of collaborative discussions (one-on-one, in groups, and teacher-led) with diverse partners on grades 11–12 topics, texts, and issues, building on others' ideas and expressing their own clearly and persuasively.

## **Appendix B: Virtual Learning Implementation**

For the remote learning environment, some modifications have been made for assignments (i.e. assignments such as FlipGrid, Discussion Boards, etc.). Should the course be fully remote the following could assist:

### **STRUCTURE:**

- Using your school/district LMS (Learning Management System), i.e. Schoology, Google Classroom, create unit folder and subsequent folders for each concept of the unit to house each portion of the unit to following the Learning Focused Map/Student Learning Map
- Set the unit up chronologically to ensure continuity and progression.
- Label folders by weeks, date, etc., some sort of time order to ensure students can find information in real time, in addition to when the need to return or revisit work arises.
- Each concept will include all materials necessary for successfully navigating the unit/concept.
- As you progress, add, modify, etc. according to materials being used.
- In terms of teaching methods/procedural information:
  1. Include teacher created screencasts of instructions on a daily OR weekly basis to ensure students are aware of the necessary components to complete along the way.
  2. Provide students with a detailed calendar (complete with weeks, dates, days off, etc.) for the entire unit with daily activities.
  3. Provide students with a daily/weekly agenda with schedule outlined; include live links to assignments, documents, etc., to ensure streamlined work process for students.
  4. Have students create a Google Drive folder specific to your course, within that folder, they should create folders to sufficiently complete the units, concepts, etc., of the course- this can be determined by you but it should be uniform to ensure that students are aware of the structure and remain organized throughout the course. It can be modified as deemed necessary but this should be a collective change for the entire class to, again, allow for a consistent structure.

### **ACTIVITIES:**

- FlipGrid for informal and formal assessments
- Discussion Boards for informal and formal assessments
- Incorporate Screencastfiy (or respective Screencasting application) to allow students choice/personalized response choices
- Google Docs/Google Suite for word processing.

The thing to keep in mind during the transition to a remote learning environment/program or virtual learning is that ensuring that students are aware of the process; maintaining that all work is consistent as well as streamlined is key. Students need to have explicit instructions, organization within the Learning Management System (i.e. Schoology or Google Classroom) to alleviate any possibly problems or frustration that can arise in general, but most important, due to the actual pandemic and situation itself. Staying organized will ensure that not just students are successfully navigating the program, the course, the unit, etc., but also for teachers to feel confident in the move and their work, as well as teaching.

### **Attachments**

1. Synopsis
2. Learning Focused Map