

How Determining a Sense of Place Leads Us *Inside Out & Back Again*

Purpose: In constructing this unit, I hope to make it one that is wholly cross-curricular, encompassing eighth grade language arts, math, science, and social studies. In completing the unit across disciplines, students should have a more well-rounded context of Vietnam during the war, the nature of their own hometown, and expression through both text-based questions and narrative poem construction. In relation to the Steinbeck Institute, I hoped to successfully integrate awareness of a sense of place, insight into the lives of those who are forced to migrate, as well as Steinbeck's letters from Vietnam to assess his notable descriptions of the land and diverse point of view.

Essential Questions

- What is home? What creates a sacred sense of place?
- How do major conflicts reveal depth of character?

Objectives:

- Students will be able to analyze the historical context and geography of Vietnam by synthesizing information from various nonfiction sources.
- Students will be able to analyze the migrant experience of Ha as she is forced to relocate to Alabama from Vietnam.
- Students will be able to compare and contrast points of view through the analysis of Steinbeck's letters and Ha's poetry.
- Students will be able to determine their own sense of place through the exploration of the vernal pools and woods of Pepperell, Massachusetts.
- Students will be able to construct narrative poetry to demonstrate their own sense of place. This poem will emulate Ha's style and use of symbolism.

Standards

- Reading Literature- Standards 1, 2, 3, 4, 6
- Reading Informational Texts- Standards 1, 2, 3, 4, 5, 6, 9
- Writing- Standards 3, 4, 8, 9
- Speaking and Listening- Standards 1, 4, 6

Texts

- *Inside Out & Back Again* by Thanhha Lai (anchor text)
- *Steinbeck in Vietnam- Dispatches from the War* by John Steinbeck
- "The Vietnam Wars" (Scholastic Update 1995) by Tod Olson

Activities

- Students begin everyday with a Do Now. These are mainly quick writes where students have 8 to 10 minutes to get down their thoughts. Usually, this transitions into a ten minute class discussion or a turn and talk, depending upon the time allotted. Relevant examples from the first few days of class will include:
 - What is migration? Why do people migrate?
 - What is your safe place? Why is it safe for you?

- How do you define your home?
 - Would you ever want to leave Pepperell? Why?
 - A KWL (Know, Want to Know, Learned) Chart about Vietnam
- In groups, students will read “The Vietnam Wars” in a jigsaw style. We will read the first section, *The Chinese Dragon*, as a group, taking notes together, and I will provide a model of a presentation on that segment. Students will then be separated into 5 groups. The group will read its segment aloud, while highlighting and annotating the text. On poster paper, students will write down the 5 most important aspects of the article. At the close of class, students will present their specific segment to the class. The posters will also be hung up as reinforcement. This allows the whole class to have basic comprehension of the time periods (from 208 B.C. to 1975), leading up to the fall of Saigon.
- Students begin reading *Inside Out & Back Again*. There will be multiple open responses requiring students to incorporate textual evidence to justify analysis. Examples are:
 - Who is Ha? What traits does she demonstrate?
 - What is the papaya a symbol of? Why is it so important to Ha?
 - How is Ha’s life affected by the turmoil in her homeland of Vietnam?
 - How does Ha’s description connect to the background knowledge depicted in “The Vietnam Wars”? (must cite both sources)
- After completing Part 1: Saigon (pages 1-69), students will read two excerpts from John Steinbeck’s *Steinbeck in Vietnam*.
 - The first is his letter dated December 31, 1966. This article demonstrates Steinbeck’s more carefree attitude as he flies over Vietnam in his “oversized fatigues,” which Alicia would find much delight in. Steinbeck mentions a new housing development, paid for by a company out of Alabama (where Ha will soon be relocated in the anchor text).
 - The second is his letter (undated), but that comes after January 6, 1967. The letter is classic Steinbeck as he describes Vietnam’s beauty in stunning prose, rife with imagery and figurative language. He states, “This is one of the most beautiful countries I have ever seen.”
 - After reading and annotating both letters, students will have to compare and contrast Ha’s point of view of Vietnam with Steinbeck’s in an essay format, citing textual evidence from both pieces.
- As students continue reading *Inside Out & Back Again*, the focus will shift to Ha’s metamorphosis as she travels onboard an overcrowded ship, constantly concerned about lack of food and violence. She will eventually end up in Alabama, where she faces racism and a lack of empathy. Despite her “better life” in Alabama, Ha remains nostalgic for Saigon and the life that she has lost due to the war and forced migration.
 - Students will use this nostalgia for a wartorn country as a springboard to find Ha’s sense of place. We will discuss the terminology and our own sense of place. Where do we feel safe? Where do we find beauty? What culture/identity/family factors help in carving out that sense of place? These discussions and analysis will hopefully be done in conjunction with the science teacher. Otherwise, I will take students outside during my class time to assist them in appreciating the beauty and nature of Pepperell, a place so many of them see as too “small town” and hope to escape as quickly as possible.

Culminating Activity

- Students will craft three narrative poems emulating Ha’s style. The first poem will describe Vietnam through Ha’s eyes, finding its beauty amidst the disaster. The second will be Alabama through Ha’s eyes. This poem will demonstrate an evolution of the

place-one at first so misunderstood by Ha that she later comes to appreciate and find beauty. Finally, students will craft their own sense of place poems about Pepperell. They will include aspects of Pepperell's culture, nature, and familial ties to create a multi-faceted sense of place. Students will be tasked with including a main symbol as Ha did, along with using metaphor, simile, and alliteration. These pieces will be taken through the writing process and eventually compiled into three classroom "books", one for each place.

Extensions across Curriculum

(These are my current concepts, but I need to refine them with my team to make sure they have a stake in what is being taught and have both the resources and time to integrate these concepts seamlessly into their schedules.)

- Social Studies
 - Background on the geography of the Vietnam
 - Background on the conflict itself, coupled with media resources
 - Background on migration, including connections to current events
 - Potential inclusion of excerpts from *Grapes of Wrath* with honors block
- Math
 - Graphing statistics from war, including imports and exports, numbers displaced over time, fatalities, etc.
- Science
 - Study of ecology in Vietnam
 - Imports and exports-focusing on papaya (main symbol for Ha) and chicken (main symbol for her brother)
 - Nature walk and analysis of Pepperell ecology
 - Behind school, areas filled with vernal pools