**Bodily and Reproductive Autonomy in *As I Lay Dying:***

Dewey Dell's Journey

Throughout *As I Lay Dying*, Dewey Dell confronts an unwanted pregnancy and struggles with barriers in the way of seeking medical treatment. Reproductive and bodily autonomy is a common theme in the American Literature canon and this lesson plan uses Dewey Dell's journey as a map for charting a similar fight for bodily and reproductive autonomy in other stories found in the *Norton Anthology of American Literature*. By using the DY Event Search to plot Dewey Dell's journey, students will analyze the impediments in the way of women seeking bodily and reproductive autonomy, including gender roles and socio-economic divisions. This in turn can be used as a strategy for charting similar journeys for reproductive and bodily autonomy in other classic texts from American Literature.

Instructions for Charting Dewey Dell’s Journey:

1. Go to the Digital Yoknapatawpha Events Search page (<http://faulkner.iath.virginia.edu/family/events/>)

2. Click on the drop down menu under “Text” and choose *As I Lay Dying*

3. Go to “Character” and type in “Dewey Dell”

4. Next to “Character” and click on “Present”

5. Go to the drop down menu under “Cultural Issues” and choose “Health and Illness”

6. Click on the drop down menu next to “Cultural” Issues” and choose “Abortion”

7. Click on “Search.” This will create a list of key passages from the novel that depict Dewey Dell’s struggle with her unwanted pregnancy. Click on each highlighted passage. An event record will pop up. Read through the description of the event and the location and take notes on how the event and location could be related to Dewey Dell’s struggle for bodily and reproductive autonomy.

**Respond:**

After you have reviewed the sections of *As I Lay Dying* highlighted in the search above, consider how they tell the story of Dewey Dell’s struggle for bodily and reproductive autonomy. Choose one quote from the novel that you believe best explains Dewey Dell’s main problem, one that best demonstrates her attempt to gain reproductive and bodily autonomy, and one that illustrates the ultimate results of her endeavor. For each quote, briefly explain why you picked it and what you learned about bodily and reproductive autonomy from the quote. Are there any other scenes about her pregnancy not listed on the DY site that you would add to her journey?

In a short response, answer the following question:

Now that you have surveyed the important events and places that make up Dewey Dell’s struggle for bodily and reproductive autonomy, examine the barriers that were placed in her way. What kinds of impediments did she experience and how did they affect her? Consider how her identity as a poor, rural teenager may have contributed to the adversity she faced. What insights can we learn about the nature of reproductive and bodily autonomy in Faulkner’s era from Dewey Dell’s experience?

**"The Yellow Wall-Paper" By Charlotte Perkins Gillman**

In "The Yellow Wall-Paper," Charlotte Perkins Gillman chronicles the deteriorating mental health of a woman experiencing what we would today diagnose as postpartum depression. She is confined to her bed by the orders of her doctor, and her husband removes any kind of mental stimulus to avoid triggering her hysteria, a now debunked medical diagnosis. The protagonist struggles to be heard in her pleas for social and intellectual stimulation, but her infantilization by her husband causes her mental health to further decline.

*Comparative Questions:*

Although the protagonist never leaves her bedroom, we could argue that she goes through a journey in her own mind as she struggles with her mental health and becomes obsessed with the imaginary world of the wallpaper and the woman in it.

If you were to create your own map of the protagonist's quest for bodily autonomy, which key passages would you choose? Pick three passages that best illustrate this struggle: one that explains her main problem, one that best demonstrates her attempts to assert herself, and one that illustrates the results of her endeavor. How does her journey for bodily autonomy compare to Dewey Dell's? What kinds of similar barriers did both women encounter? What do their experiences tell us about the nature of women's bodily autonomy in their respective eras in American history?

**“Hills Like White Elephants” By Ernest Hemingway**

In “Hills Like White Elephants,” Ernest Hemingway depicts a conversation between a young couple at a bar in Spain as they consider an abortion. Using his famous iceberg model in which all subtext and exposition are erased, Hemingway gives us only the surface level of the problem and we have to piece together the plot and character motivations from the dialogue and the sparse description.

*Comparative Questions:*

Many of Hemingway's stories are about journeys in far away lands, but in this story, the characters are confined to the bar as they discuss what they want to do about the female protagonist's pregnancy. They avoid talking directly about the issue and try to come to an agreement by subtly dancing around it and using euphemisms. We can read the dialog like a journey as the characters try to navigate each needs and feelings.

If you were to create your own map of the female protagonist’s attempt to express her need for bodily autonomy, which key passages would you choose? Pick three passages that best illustrate this struggle: one that explains her main problem, one that best demonstrates her attempts to assert herself, and one that illustrates the results of her endeavor. How does her attempt to express her need for bodily autonomy compare to Dewey Dell's attempts to discuss the same with the pharmacists in her story? What kinds of similar barriers did both women encounter? What do their experiences tell us about the nature of women's bodily autonomy in this time in American history?

***A Streetcar Named Desire* By Tennessee Williams**

One of the most riveting and tragic subplots in Tennessee Williams' classic play *A Streetcar Named Desire* involves the pregnant Stella's suffering at the hands of her abusive husband, Stanley. Despite the urging of her sister Blanche to leave Stanley, Stella feels trapped due to her lack of economic means and opportunities for women in the 40s.

*Comparative Questions:*

Although Stella doesn't leave on a journey, we can analyze the pain of trying to support her pregnancy in an abusive household as its own journey to retain some form of bodily and reproductive autonomy. If you were to create your own map of Stella's attempts to express her need for bodily autonomy, which key passages would you choose? Pick three passages that best illustrate this struggle: one that explains her main problem, one that best demonstrates her attempts to assert herself, and one that illustrates the results of her endeavor. What kinds of similar barriers did both women encounter? Consider in particular how both endured physical and sexual abuse from men in positions of power and that they are both southern women living in relative poverty. What do their experiences tell us about the nature of women's bodily autonomy in this time in American history?

**“Bloodchild” By Octavia Butler**

In “Bloodchild,” Octavia Butler imagines a future in which humans (called Terrans) live confined to a preserve on an alien planet in which they are used as hosts for the parasite-like children of the Tlic civilization. Butler's narrative centers on an adolescent boy as he confronts the reality of his fate to serve as a host for the alien family that raised him.

*Comparative Questions:*

Although Gan is a boy, he, like Dewey Dell, faces pressure from his culture to carry a child. If you were to create your own map of the Gan's quest for bodily autonomy, which key passages would you choose? Pick three passages that best illustrate this struggle: one that explains his main problem, one that best demonstrates his attempts to assert herself, and one that illustrates the results of his endeavor. Even though “Bloodchild” is set in an alien land, we can read Sci Fi as a commentary on social issues from the time when it was written. How might this Sci Fi tale give us insight into issues regarding bodily and reproductive autonomy in the 80s? How does Gan's journey for bodily autonomy compare to Dewey Dell's? What kinds of similar barriers did both characters encounter?

**“Woman Hollering Creek” By Sandra Cisneros**

In "Woman Hollering Creek," Sandra Cisneros tells the story of a pregnant young woman obsessed with telenovelas as a form of escapism from her increasingly abusive husband. Cisneros invokes the mythological figure of La Llorona, an indigenous character from Mexican folklore who drowns her children after her white lover abandons her. In the second half of the story, Cisneros depicts the protagonist's escape from her husband with her baby and unborn child.

*Comparative Questions:*

Although Cleofilas lives in more modern times, she, like Dewey Dell, also flees home and crosses a river into a new town in order to seek bodily autonomy. If you were to create your own map of Cleofilas' quest for bodily autonomy, which key passages would you choose? Pick three passages that best illustrate this struggle: one that explains her main problem, one that best demonstrates her attempts to assert herself, and one that illustrates the results of her endeavor. How does her journey for bodily autonomy compare to Dewey Dell's? What kinds of similar barriers did both women encounter? What do their experiences tell us about the nature of women's bodily autonomy in their respective eras in American history and geographical locations? What does Cleofilas find in her journey that allows her to succeed unlike Dewey Dell?