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Challenging Perceptions: Persepolis Beyond the American Lens

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Introduction

"If people are given the chance to experience life in more than one country, they will hate a little less. It's not a miracle potion, but little by little you can solve problems in the 'basement' of a country, not on the surface. That is why I wanted people in other countries to read *Persepolis*, to see that I grew up just as other children do."— Marjane Satrapi ¹

For this unit, students will be examining the ways their eyes see other cultures, in particular, Middle Eastern culture. The graphic-novel-memoir *Persepolis* will be the central text. This unit will encourage students to question their own perceptions and will also allow them to recognize the ways in which different countries and cultures are seen from different points of view. Many of my students are limited in their exposure to other cultures. Many of them rarely leave the city of Chicago. Most of their knowledge of other countries and cultures comes from the Internet, books, or television; the messages they receive through these mediums, however, are often not critically analyzed in the classroom. In order to analyze cultures outside the United States, students must first reflect on their own values, reflect on how those values were formed, and then must question them. The goal for this unit is for students to discover a wider global lens by learning about the Middle East and analyzing their own perceptions.

Now, more than ever, we are a visual society. Students must learn to make meaning and interpret information from images the same way that they learn to make meaning of words on a page. In her book, *The Graphic Novel Classroom*, Maureen Bakis defines *visual literacy* as "the ability to interpret, negotiate, and make meaning from information presented in the form of an image, as well as to produce visual messages." ² Visual literacy must be explored in the English class curriculum in order to prepare students for our visual world. In addition, to be prepared for the global world, students must have an understanding of cultures from outside the United States. By reading the graphic-novel- memoir *Persepolis*, other supplementary texts, and by seeing photographs and videos, students will learn about Iranian history and culture. Furthermore, they will take ownership in the development of their visual and verbal literacy through various activities.

Rationale—Why the Content and Skills?

"You've never seen anything like *Persepolis*. Marjane Satrapi may have given us a new genre." ³ —Gloria Steinem

As an English teacher, I hold on tightly to books that engage my students. I find there are certain texts that seem to speak to particular groups of students in both immediate and powerful ways on their own. Books that get students excited about discussing both inside and outside the classroom are the books I want to teach. After speaking with my English Department Chairperson, we decided to add a graphic novel to our curriculum. (In different accounts, *Persepolis* is referred to using different terms: i.e. "graphic novel," "memoir," etc. For the sake of clarity and consistency, I will refer to the text as a *graphic-novel-memoir* as *New York Times* writer Dave Iltzcoff did in a 2009 article. ⁴) We chose *Persepolis* for many reasons. First, we do not have any books about the Middle East in our English department collection. In my ninth-grade class, we read several young-adult novels that my students find extremely enjoyable, such as *The Secret Story of Sonia Rodriguez* by Alan Sitomer and *Copper Sun* by Sharon Draper; but we were lacking a graphic novel. Second, I taught *Persepolis* once during my student-teaching experience and another time in a Freshmen English Recovery evening class. As I observed the students reading this book, I found that there was something unique about the ways in which they seemed to fluidly absorb the reading and easily engage in discussion of complex topics. Also, they were excited about learning about a culture that is so different from their own. After reflecting on the ways I have taught this book in the past, I realize I have been merely skimming the surface of what was possible with this text. Because the book is so engaging, the boundaries of learning can be pushed further.

The reading of this book will encourage critical discussion of religion, gender issues, politics, and culture in the classroom. During the unit, the students will become aware of Middle Eastern culture and modern politics, which most of them know little to nothing about. Most of my students know a lot about American and Hispanic culture; however, there is a deficit of knowledge when it comes to cultures outside of their own. Moreover, most everything the students know about the Middle East comes from a westernized perspective. The content of this unit seems a very appropriate way for my students to widen their cultural lens and global understanding. Students find this text relatable, even though most of them are learning about Middle Eastern culture for the first time. Students find the story relatable because they are struggling to figure out their world, just as Marjane, the main character, does. Students find this text engaging, not only because of the interesting storyline and the relatable main character, but also because of the medium the story is told through. Because the story is written as a graphic novel, the students must engage visually, a skill that comes naturally to them because of the visual world in which they have grown up. I've never explicitly focused on visual literacy in the classroom. Teaching a graphic novel, such as *Persepolis*, will help develop this skill and encourage discussion.

School Background

When teaching a unit, teachers must understand the demographics of the school for deeper understanding of the needs of the students. Hubbard High School is a public school located on the southwest side of Chicago. The school is comprised of fewer than 1700 students. Hubbard consists of a largely Hispanic student

population at 87%. The second largest demographic is black at 5%. Furthermore, 97% of our students are enrolled in free or reduced lunch, and 11% are categorized as special education students. We also have a small Asian population, and many of these students are English Language Learners. In total, 13% of our students are English Language Learners. There is a small population of Caucasian students. Our school offers the International Baccalaureate Program and Advanced Placement courses. Hubbard is also home to an award-winning ROTC program and chorus. Moreover, we also boast a successful football team; we even had several students from Hubbard go on to the NFL.

Like many Chicago public schools, our school has dealt with problematic issues, yet it is referred to as one of the best public neighborhood schools on the southwest side of the city. Hubbard opened in 1928 as an elementary school, and years later it was turned into a high school. In the past, our school has suffered from overcrowding, but this problem has been alleviated somewhat. Still, many teachers move from room to room to teach classes. Our teachers and administrators always praise our "family-like" atmosphere because of the tight-knit community. Our school has one of the highest attendances in our network, among its other accomplishments. However, last year was the first year our school did not meet our AYP (Annual Yearly Progress) goal for NCLB (No Child Left Behind). Our staff and community are working to meet the needed requirements to take us off academic probation. ⁵ In the hopes of improving reading test scores, our administration is requiring all students take a "Reading and Writing" class in addition to an English class during all four years of high school. We also have a literacy team that focuses on sharing literacy lessons with the staff. Our teachers are working to build curriculum that speaks to our students and addresses the skills they need to develop. *Persepolis* will help achieve this goal.

Chicago Public School students, in general, face many challenges. Furthermore, the city of Chicago has one of the highest crime rates in the country. My students are witnesses to violence. Most of my students have been affected personally or know someone who has been affected by gang, gun, or drug crimes. *Persepolis* is a book about a young girl who is dealing with violence just as my students do. Even though the issues and situations are different, the students can understand the turbulence of Marjane's life. Marjane is exposed to many violent incidents in relation to the Islamic Revolution and the Iran-Iraq War. She has difficulty dealing with authority such as teachers, religious figures, and officers. She deals with terrible loss on multiple occasions; however, she is resilient. The students will be able to understand her resiliency. Through this unit, my students will not only tap into the historical events of Iran; they will also examine the violence they face in their own lives and their relationships with authority in their own community. The richness of the content will allow the students to achieve the objectives of the unit.

Objectives—What Content and Skills?

At the end of this unit, students will be able to discuss images through a critical lens and will be able to write about the events depicted in *Persepolis* with a critical understanding. The students will understand the Islamic Revolution, along with the events that led up to it and then the events that came after. They will gain knowledge about Middle Eastern culture by looking at Iran through the eyes of Marjane, the main character. As a class, students will also think about the intended audience of the book and the effect that gives. The students will be looking at the theme of perception by analyzing the lens through which Marjane Satrapi tells the story. We will examine certain aspects of her life that mold her perception, such as her parents' values, her family's economic status, and the location of her home. We will look at the perception of culture from the

outside looking in and the inside out. The students will be able to compare other accounts of growing up in Iran to Marjane's. They will explore the culture from different angles. We will look at the images from the text through our own American lens and will also attempt to widen that lens through the reading of non-fiction articles. Furthermore, the culminating project will include a presentation by the students. The presentation will evaluate their ability to combine words and pictures into their own memoir. The teaching of this unit will align with many of the Common Core Standards. ⁶ (For standards used, see Appendix.)

Essential Questions

Here is a list of essential questions that will guide the unit. In alignment with its objectives, the students will be answering these questions. Through the study of the content, the students will gain a further understanding of these concepts and terms.

- What is a graphic novel and what is the educational value?
- What is a memoir?
- What is visual literacy and how can it be explored best to help us learn?
- How do we make meaning of images?
- What is perception and how do we form our perceptions?
- What is a revolution?
- How are other cultures perceived from the outside and how do images and media mold those perceptions?
- How can graphic novels build our understanding of cultures from outside the United States? How can they skew them?
- How are judgments made?
- Why is it important to learn about cultures outside of our own and what are the best ways to learn about those cultures?

In order to scaffold learning for students, the class will start with basic terms and concepts and work up to more challenging higher-order thinking. We will start with the understanding of the graphic novel. The students will understand the purpose of the graphic novel, a brief history of the graphic novel, and the value these texts add to the development of strong visual literacy. From this basis the students will work their way up to more complex skills, such as comparing their own culture with Marjane's and analyzing the differences and similarities.

Content and Background Information

What is a Graphic Novel?

The term is not strictly defined. Most academic articles claim that graphic novels can be fiction or nonfiction. These books blend images and text in the form of comics and are written in chapter form. The images and words work together to convey the meaning of the story. A graphic novel is different from a comic book; however, there are similarities. If one does not know what a graphic novel is, it may be easy to confuse the term because the word *graphic* is often associated with violent or sexual content. Moreover, some educators consider graphic novels to be "easy books" or "not real literature." Many educators gravitate toward teaching these books because of their literary value and popularity amongst young adults. "Publisher's Weekly reported that sales of graphic novels in 2011 reached \$340 million and included a rapidly growing market of graphic novels for children." ⁷ Those numbers continue to rise.

How did Graphic Novels Become Popular?

People have always been using pictures to tell stories; however, we could call Lynd Ward's *Gods' Man* one of the first American graphic novels. Published in 1929, *Gods' Man* is a novel about an artist who makes the deal with a figure of darkness and in return receives a magic paintbrush. The series of events that leads to the main character's demise is told in woodcut images, without any words. After the publication of *Gods' Man*, comic books like Superman and Batman became popular in the 1930s and 40s. Comic books/strips are closely related to graphic novels in that they combine images and words. The difference is that graphic novels are written in chapters and comics usually are not. Graphic novels also contain a beginning, middle, and an end to the story. Comic strips or books are often on going. The Sunday Comics, or the Funnies, have been staples in the American newspapers for decades. Popular comic strips such as *Peanuts*, *The Far Side*, *Dick Tracy*, *Dilbert*, and *Zits* have at one time graced the Funnies section of the newspaper. Some other graphic novels that have made their way into pop culture include, *V for Vendetta* by Allan Moore, *Maus* by Art Spiegelman, and the *Walking Dead* by Robert Kirkmand. These are graphic novels that students find engaging. I also hear from my students that "Manga" or Japanese comics are quite popular as well.

What is the Value in the Graphic Novel?

Essentially, graphic novels come from the roots of storytelling. But what is their educational value? And do they even have any? The answer is yes. The counterarguments from teachers range anywhere from "the students read these too quickly" or "the images take away from the literary value." Yet research shows that these types of books are quite beneficial to students. In his many studies concerning research on youth literacy, Stephen Krashen found that "comics and graphic novels offer 20% more rare vocabulary than traditional chapter books." He also discovered that graphic novels are helpful to the literary development of low-level reading students and English Language Learners and that "graphic novels help students develop a taste for reading and serve as a bridge to other types of literature." Moreover, studies have also proven that graphic novels increase the reading interests in students with disabilities. Furthermore, "researchers have demonstrated that graphic novels help make the curriculum more relevant for students by allowing them to connect with and explore popular culture." ⁸ In *The Graphic Novel Classroom*, Mareen Bakis claims that because students take less time to read graphic novels, they can easily reread them for deeper understanding. She also claims "students must exercise more skills not fewer when reading graphic novels." ⁹ In addition to reading words, the students must read pictures. Teaching a graphic novel therefore also opens

up the discussion of visual literacy in the classroom.

Teaching Visual Literacy and Perception

We live in a visual world. As W.J.T. Mitchel suggests in his book *Picture Theory*, "What we need is a critique of visual culture that is alert to the power of images." ¹⁰ It is necessary for students to understand the images and messages that they are bombarded with by the media. Through its activities, this unit will heighten awareness of those messages. Students must learn to make meaning of images and communicate their messages. Students are constantly texting, looking up videos on their phones, and posting pictures on Facebook, Instagram, and Snapchat. They are exercising the use of words and images to process information. Their eyes are like sponges. Billie Elliam makes a good point when she says, "in the Western world today, knowledge about representations is implicitly absorbed through individuals' rich visual experiences rather than being taught formally as recommended for the instruction of cognitive skills." I plan on using an explicit approach to teaching visual literacy. We will spend quite some time on the concept of *Perception* in my lessons. Students will examine their perceptions of images and then will learn that, as Elliam suggests, "the images we perceive through our senses are not necessarily identical to 'objective' reality." ¹¹ By reading *Persepolis*, the students will practice critical interpretation of images.

The Story of Persepolis

"Persepolis forces the Western reader to work hard to understand the complexities of contemporary Iranian political and social dynamics." ¹²

Persepolis: The Story of Childhood was first published in France in 2000, and it was later translated into English (and later many other different languages) in 2003. The word *Persepolis* refers to the ancient capital of the Persian Empire, which is now Iran. Since its publication, the book has gone on to sell millions of copies and was even made into a film. There is also a sequel to this text, called *Persepolis 2*. Both the books and the film have gone on to win awards. And both the books and the film have gone on to cause controversy. They were both banned in Iran. *Persepolis* was also taken out of some Chicago schools for a short period of time, and then later put back after the controversy went public. ¹³ This book causes problems in some schools because of its violent and graphic images.

Persepolis is a graphic-novel-memoir written through the lens of a young girl coming of age in Iran during the Islamic Revolution and the Iran-Iraq War. It is Marjane Satrapi's story of her childhood. Her story is at times heart wrenching and dark and at other times quite funny. The story is written entirely in black-and-white comic strip images. The memoir covers her life from age six to fourteen; it is told through her perspective as a child. Before the story begins, there is a brief history of Iran and a political message from the author on why she wrote the book. She says that Iran is discussed mostly in relation to "fundamentalism, fanaticism, and terrorism"; and she goes on to say, "this is far from the truth," and this concern is the reason for writing the story. She explains the revolution that took place in 1979, the Islamic Revolution. She also explains her life in the capital of Iran, Tehran. ¹⁴ The first chapter opens with the strong image of Marjane as a ten-year old, in 1980, wearing a veil at school with other young girls. Before the revolution, Marjane went to a progressive school with boys and girls. After the revolution, the school was shut down, and boys and girls no longer were allowed to go to the same school. The story begins by showing the veil as a symbol of Islamic fundamentalism and the *non-veil* as a sign of "freedom." ¹⁵ The first chapter sets the tone for the book and emphasizes the divides amongst the people. Some of the themes found in the book include coming of age, modernity vs. fundamentalism, the relationship between child and parent, contradictions between home life and public life,

and the loss of faith.

Marjane's family witnesses the fall of the Shah, the rise of the Islamic Revolution, and the turmoil of the Iran-Iraq War. Marjane tells the reader how her family is affected by the Shah's reign. Marjane's grandmother lived with the family for a while, and we learn that Marjane's grandfather had been a prince and was named Prime Minister by the Shah. The story tells of her grandfather's communist beliefs, for which he was tortured. Furthermore, her uncle Annoosh is arrested by the people in the Islamic Regime and is later arrested again on the false accusation that he is a Russian spy. He is eventually killed. Satrapi also emphasizes the torture that other characters experience under the Shah's regime. This is done through bold, captivating images and words. Satrapi often contrasts terrible events with lighthearted images on the following page to show how Marjane is forced to constantly move forward with life after tragedy. Satrapi explains the devastation of the Iran-Iraq War and her family's personal loss from the war. All the while, the story is told through the eyes of a child, making it easy to understand yet still intelligent and emotional.

As I mentioned above, this story is a coming-of-age story. We see Marjane rebel against her parents and society, something that many American teenagers can relate to. At the same time, Marjane deals with some very heavy issues. She is growing up during a time of political and social upheaval. Her parents experienced the repressive rule of the Shah, the people overthrew him, and the Islamic Regime took power in a way that led into the Iran-Iraq War. Marjane describes the Islamic rule as even more repressive than that of the Shah. She and her family disagree with the fundamentalist views of the regime. There is a scene late in the memoir, at Marjane's school, when she stands up in class and speaks out against the government and then accuses her teacher of lying to the class.¹⁶ The principal calls her parents, and Marjane is scolded. Her mother is particularly upset and warns Marjane that she could be arrested for such behavior. Her parents decide to send her to Vienna, Austria for boarding school. The story ends with an image in the airport as Marjane's father is holding his wife, who has presumably fainted. Her parents send her away because they fear that her bold ideas and outspoken nature might get her put in prison or killed.

A Brief Account of the Islamic Revolution

Satrapi does a nice job of explaining the history of Iran. At the same time, it is beneficial for students to obtain more information about the history from other sources while reading *Persepolis* so that they gain a better understanding of the revolution and the Iran-Iraq War. Furthermore, the geography of the land greatly affects the political story of Iran. Iran is nestled between Afghanistan and Iraq. The Middle East is a land of ancient civilizations. Richard Frye, in his book *Iran*, points out that because Iran has a mixed landscape, consisting of high mountain ranges, deserts, and semitropical forests, the nature of the geographical terrain keeps the people physically separated instead of uniting them. Also, he points out that Iran is a link between the East and the West and that this physical location puts the country at the center of political, cultural, and economic influences, and power struggles.¹⁷ Iran has a long, complicated social and political history. The first dynasty was formed in 2800 BC.

Prior to the twentieth century, "Iran was a feudal state with tribal chiefs vying for favor with religious leaders at the court of the Shah," the king. Iran stayed a feudal state until 1907, when it became a constitutional monarchy. In the early 1900s, the people of Iran fought for a constitution. A system of parliament was put in place. The parliament was eventually organized into two sections of government, the "senate" and the

"national assembly." The national assembly, when it was established, consisted of 162 people who were elected. The senate consisted of 60 members, half of whom were elected, and the Shah appointed the other half. "The prime minister was elected by the national assembly and appointed by the Shah."¹⁸ In the constitutional monarchy, the Shah still had a good amount of power, even though there were limits to that power.

The events of the early and middle 1900s led the Islamic Revolution of 1979. Much before the revolution, though, Reza Shah ruled from 1925 to 1941. He valued nationalism, secularism, and anticommunist sentiments and ruled with an authoritarian government. In 1941, he was removed by the Anglo-Soviet invasion of Iran during World War II. His son, Mohammad Reza Shah Pahlavi took over in 1941 at the age of 21 as an absolute monarch. The people protested against his dictatorship. The new Shah was in favor of the westernization of Iran; however, his rule is described as repressive. The U.S. supported Pahlavi and many Iranians resented the U.S. for that. The Islamic Revolution transformed Iran from a monarchy to an Islamic Republic, as it is known today. Ayatollah Khomeini led the revolution and is known for founding the Islamic Republic. The revolution began with the slogan "Down with the Shah."¹⁹ People were tired of the oppression that the Pahlavi regime promoted. They were weary of the relationships he was building with the United States. People used the Islamic religion as the foundation for the movement to overthrow the Shah. The ideology behind the revolution denounced western culture, Americanism, and capitalism. The people wanted to take back Iran and protect it from westernization. In 1979, Mohammed Reza Shah Pahlavi was overthrown and exiled.

Eyes from all over the world have always been on the Middle East, but the Islamic Revolution was the first televised revolution. Images and video of mass protests and riots were broadcast all over the world. Through the power of Islam and their opposition of the Shah, the Iranian people were able to change their society. Ayatollah Khomeini was named the "supreme leader," the most powerful man in Iran. In 1980, Abolhasan Bani-Sadr was elected the first President of the Islamic Republic, the second most powerful. In November 1979, when Jimmy Carter was the American President, "Islamic militants took 52 American hostages inside the US Embassy in Tehran," and they were not released until January, 1981.²⁰ This action increased tension between Iran and the United States. Just as the revolution came about, the Iran-Iraq War began in 1980 and ended in 1988. Iraq invaded Iran first over border disputes and oil. Iran, at that time, was in a very vulnerable position because of the revolution. Iran has been vulnerable to the rest of the world as well because of its possession of oil, among other things. Since the Iran-Iraq War, the relationship between Iran and the United States has not improved greatly. The progress of the Taliban, the 9/11 attacks on the U.S. World Trade Center and Pentagon, the threat of weapons of mass destruction, the Iraq War, and the War on Afghanistan, have affected the lives of all Americans and have been broadcast all over the world. Because of this history, Americans do not tend to be empathetic to those in the Middle East. Looking forward, Hasan Rowhani is set to become president of Iran in August of 2013, and with this new leadership, Western leaders hope to build a better relationship with Iran and the Middle East.

Teachers using this unit should ask students to compare the events in *Persepolis* to the events that are happening now in the Middle East. By teaching *Persepolis*, teachers can open up discussions about current events. By looking at the past, students can develop a better understanding of what is happening now. Students can look at the events of the past through non-fiction articles, videos, and possibly interviews with people who have lived in the Middle East. Teachers can ask students how the history of Iran has shaped their perception of Middle Eastern culture.

What is Not Taught in *Persepolis*?

Does Satrapi do a good job of representing the culture of Iran and the events of the revolution? According to the actual history, yes, she does. It is important to remember, however, that this story is written from her childhood memories. Did she leave anything out? It would be impossible to cover the entire revolution in one small book. Also, she titled the book *Persepolis: The Story of Childhood*, not, *Persepolis: The Story of a Revolution*. She was never claiming to document the revolution; she was documenting her childhood. Satrapi grew up during this time, and she depicted the events that she saw in the best way she could. Her intention for writing *Persepolis* is clearly stated in the introduction of the book. She states that she does not want Iran to be "judged by the wrongdoings of a few extremist."²¹ She wants to prove that these connections do not paint a true picture of her birth nation. So then how do Satrapi portray Iran? She shows the human side of the people by explaining individuals' stories. At the same time, she is writing for a Western audience.

Is this a Western novel or is this a Middle Eastern novel? *Persepolis* was never published in Farsi, the Persian language. It has been published and printed in various Western countries. The character Marjane grows up in a home with liberal parents. Her family is established; they have a significant income. With that said, is Marjane a typical representation of a child growing up during the time of the Islamic Revolution? As she becomes a teenager, she begins idolizing Western culture. She wears tight pants and a denim jacket. She loves the music of Michael Jackson and Iron Maiden. Did most young Iranian girls feel the same way as she did? Perhaps Satrapi's identification with Western culture is what allows Western readers to relate to the book and enjoy it. Would the book be as popular in the U.S if the main character did not identify with Western culture? As Americans, or furthermore, as people, do we gravitate toward characters we can relate to? Instead of solely focusing on how students relate to Marjane, it is important for teachers and students to look beyond the universality of Marjane's character, thus digging deeper into the differences between our students and Marjane and other Iranian children. It is important for students to understand where Satrapi is coming from and how she may have a different perspective than many of the other young girls growing up during this time period. This further investigation by students must be done through non-fiction articles, historical images, and videos.

Classroom Strategies

Gallery Walk: What do You See? What do You Infer?

This is a strategy that I will implement several times throughout the unit. This strategy is adapted from "The Model for Interpreting Art," developed by Linda Friedlander, Curator of Education at the Yale Center for British Art.²² This exercise will be dual purpose. My students will learn how to read pictures and develop their visual literacy through this exercise, and they will also deal with their perceptions of culture. This strategy is suited especially to kinesthetic learners because they have to walk around the room. The images I choose will be placed around the room in an art-gallery fashion, so the students can have space to talk about the images without crowding each other. The point of this activity is to get the students talking about their perceptions, their interpretations, and their misconceptions. For the first activity, we will use images from the Islamic Revolution.

Think, Pair, Share

As educators, sometimes we forget that our students need time to think and process information. This purpose of this strategy is to give students time to develop and prepare ideas and build confidence before sharing those ideas with the class. Because they are given time and space, they are able to construct meaning about a topic or question without pressure. This also allows them to release excited energy by talking with their peers. Not only is this strategy fantastic for idea development, it is also a classroom management strategy. Because students have a directed time to talk with one another, they will be less likely to talk out of turn or get off topic during class. "Think, Pair, Share" is best used in an opening question for class. With a question on the board, the students will think for two minutes about the question, they will write their answer down in their notebook, then the students will pair up with a partner and share answers, and lastly students will share their responses with the class. This strategy can also be used in the middle or end of class. It works to help students process information. Also, this strategy can be used as an informal or formal assessment

Possible "Think, Pair, Share" Questions:

What do you know about the Middle East?

What first comes to mind when you think of the word "veil?"

How can a book with pictures help you understand the text?

What do we know about Marjane's family and how do her parents help her form her identity?

Do you think Marjane is like the other children in the book or is she different?

What is a visual learner? Do you consider yourself a visual learner?

How is your life similar to Marjane's and how is it different?

Free Writing

This is a strategy I have used in the past. Students thoroughly enjoy free writing. I often do "Free Write Fridays" in my class where I give students five minutes to write about whatever is on their minds that they want. Sometimes free writing is extended to the entire period, depending on the topic. Free writing is a brainstorming activity in which students write without pressure of having to turn in or read their writing aloud. The purpose of free writing is to let the writers clear their thoughts and construct new ideas. In my class, I use free writing to give my students space to be creative. Sometimes I give them a topic or question, and sometimes I just let them write about whatever is on their minds.

Independent Reading, Chunking the Text, and Guided Reading

Because of the way the text is written, I find it better for the students to read *Persepolis* independently. Normally with other texts, I switch up the type of reading style we use (i.e. listen to the audio, read aloud, popcorn style reading, etc.) Independent reading gives them time to look at images/ frames that they may need to study to process. Since most of the reading is handled this way, we must stop class frequently to discuss the content of the story so I can assess the level of comprehension of the students. I have chunked the text into sections and created a reading guide for each section. The reading guides contain questions

about what is happening and also contain certain illustrated frames for further analysis. Chunking the text makes the book seem less intimidating and gives time to insert activities into class to increase their comprehension.

Chunking the Text

I recommend chunking the reading in the following way:

Introduction-Page 32; Page 33-46; Page 47-72; Page 73-93; Page 94-110; Page 111-125; Page 126-142; Page 143-153.

Literature Circles

The purpose of the literature circle is to give students time to work collaboratively to analyze a text. This strategy is very student centered as the students are leading the discussion. They will practice speaking and listening skills, as they will have to listen and respond thoughtfully to interpret the text. The day before a literature circle, I will assign students each a role. Each student will have a different role, including: a group leader, a recorder, an illustrator, a vocabulary finder, and a quote finder. We will use this strategy several times throughout the unit, and I will change up the roles so that students get variety in their tasks. The roles will be broken down in the following ways:

- The **group leader** is responsible for keeping all students on task. The group leader is also responsible for making sure that every student has a voice in the discussion. Also, the leader is responsible for creating ten questions the night before the literature circle. These questions will be asked during the discussion.
- The **recorder** is responsible for taking notes on the discussion.
- The night before the literature circle, the **illustrator/ picture finder** will draw a scene from the reading and will write an explanation on the back of the paper.
- The **vocabulary finder** will find five words from the text that are difficult to decipher. The student will define these words and also give an explanation of their meaning within the context of the text.
- The **quote finders** will find five meaningful quotes from the text and will explain their meanings.
- The **article finder** will bring in a non-fiction article related to the text.

During the literature circle, the students will each share their work with the class and the leader will make sure everything is working smoothly. The students will assess their own work in the form of a written reflection.

Classroom Activities

Activity One: "Gallery Walk Through The Islamic Revolution"

The objectives for this lesson are that students will gain a stronger understanding of the Islamic Revolution by looking at and analyzing images from this time period. The students will also be utilizing their visual skills by interpreting images based on their own prior knowledge. The students will gain an understanding of their own perception of these events. They will understand that their perceptions are molded by their experiences. They

will compare their interpretations of the images with the captions and then will understand when they misinterpreted information based on lack of knowledge. This lesson will come before the reading of *Persepolis*. The students will look at images and explain what they see, then they will explain what is happening, and then they will explain how they know what is happening or they will ask questions about what they don't understand. I will use the BBCs "The Islamic Revolution- -In Pictures" as a resource to implement this strategy. ²³ This is a nine-picture slide with different images from the Islamic Revolution. Later, the students will look at each picture with the caption included, and the students will find out what is really happening in each image. They will discuss how we interpret images based on prior knowledge and how prior knowledge can skew the reality of what is actually happening. (The class will do this exercise a few times using illustrated frames from *Persepolis* and other forms of Islamic art.)

To begin the activity, I will post the nine pictures on the walls all around the classroom, and I will number each one. The students will break into groups of three or four and will have a pen and a notebook with them. I will ask them to say only what they see. I will walk around the room and make sure the students are not interpreting yet; they should be discussing only what they see. They will stay at each picture for two minutes, and the first time around the room, they will take notes as well. I will ring a bell, after two minutes, and they will rotate to the next photograph. The second time around the room, they will interpret each photograph. I will ask them explain what is happening in the photograph. For the third and final lap around the room, I will place the caption that explains and fits with each photograph right next to the image. This time around the room, the students will read the caption, and then they will discuss how their interpretation of the image was different from the reality of what was actually happening. The lesson will close with a written self-reflection on the experience of completing the activity. The self-reflection will act as a self-assessment.

Activity Two: "Digging Deeper into The Revolution Through Literature Circles"

This activity will take place over two days and can be used multiple times throughout the reading. This lesson will facilitate student-led small group discussion. Students will be put into groups of six, and each student will have a particular role. See above to the "Classroom Strategy" section for specific role assignments. The objective for this lesson is to get students talking about the material and responding to each other's opinion.

After reading the assigned section of text, the students will prepare for their literature circle role as their homework. The class will be broken into groups of six, and the students will sit in circles around the room. For the first literature circle, we will focus on the reading from the introduction to page 32. This section covers the chapters, "The Veil," "The Bicycle," "The Water Cell," and "Persepolis." The group leader will keep the group on task and will guide discussion by asking questions. The group leader might ask questions like, "What does the veil symbolize for Marjane?" or "Why is the Shah overthrown?" The students will respond to questions and will share their role assignment with their group. The article finder will bring a copy of the non-fiction article he or she found based on the assigned reading. The group will read the article and will discuss its relation to the reading. Each student will share his or her specific role and findings. The students will be assessed by their participation in the group. They will also assess themselves and each other at the end of the lesson through written reflection.

Activity Three: "Reading Pictures"

This lesson will take place toward the end of the unit, after the students have finished reading *Persepolis*. The objective is for the students to grasp a deeper understanding of selected frames in the story and to articulate that understanding in writing and also verbally. Through this activity, students will practice visual literacy

skills. The students will be required to choose a panel or series of panels from the text, and they will write an essay on the effect of the images and Satrapi's use of the illustrations to add meaning to the text. The students will focus on the techniques used in the illustration such as shading, pattern, repetition, contrast, size, etc.

This activity will take place over three to four class periods. The students will be given class time to choose an image or series of images to analyze. They will write a short essay on the effect of the images. After students have completed the writing assignment, they will partner with a classmate who has completed the task as well. They will share their observations with each other. Once students have finished their written analysis and shared their analysis with a partner, they will give a short presentation to the class that communicates their analysis. I have access to a document camera in my classroom, so the students will project the images or series of images onto the Promethean Board. They will give a five-minute verbal presentation to the class of their analysis. The students will be assessed by their ability to discuss the images in relation to rest of the text.

Annotated Bibliography

Resources for Teachers

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the Literacy Classroom.." *Afterimage*. 37, no. 2 (2009): 33-36. (accessed July 8, 2013).

<http://search.ebscohost.com/login.aspx?direct=true&db=aph&AN=84897657&site=ehost-live>. This is a good article if you are interested in understanding the benefits of using graphic novels in the classroom.

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Iran since 1979. Syracuse, N.Y.: Syracuse University Press, 2002. Print. This book gives a detailed account of the Islamic Revolution.

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University of Chicago Press, 1994. This is an essay on verbal and visual representation in literature. It provides relevant and useful knowledge of theory for teachers.

Moeller, Robin. "Convincing the Naysayers...." *Knowledge Quest*. 41, no. 3 (2013) 12-17. (accessed July 8, 2013).

<http://search.ebscohost.com/login.aspx?direct=true&db=aph&AN=84897657&site=ehost-live>. This is a wonderful article, again, on how graphic novels are useful in the classroom. This would be a good article to give to skeptics of the graphic novel in the classroom.

Monnin, Katie. "Aligning Graphic Novels to the Common Core Standards" *Knowledge Quest*. 41, no. 3 (2013): 50-56. (accessed July 8, 2013). <http://search.ebscohost.com/login.aspx?direct=true&db=aph&AN=84897664&site=ehost-live>. This is an excellent resource that provides information for aligning graphic novels to the Common Core Standards. It is a great resource for teachers. This would be a good article to bring to administration in defense of teaching the graphic novel.

O'Malley, Andrew and Nima, Naghibi. "Estranging the Familiar: "East" and "West" in

Satrapi's *Persepolis*." *English Studies in Canada*. 31.2-3 (2005): 223-247. (accessed July 8, 2013). This article provides good analysis of Satrapi's blend of Eastern and Western culture throughout *Persepolis*.

Pellico, Linda; Honan, Linda; Friedlaender, Linda; and Kristopher Fennie. "Looking is not seeing: using art to improve observational skills.." *Journal of Nursing Education* 48 no. 11 (2009): 648-653. (accessed July 15, 2013).

http://www.healio.com/~media/Journals/JNE/2009/11_November/10_3928_01484834_2

0090828_02/10_3928_01484834_20090828_02.pdf. This article

provides an explanation of Linda Friedlaender's strategy for analyzing art.

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Dictatorship? London: Zed Press, 1983. This is another book on the Islamic Revolution in Iran. It provides useful background information for teachers. It is a bit dense.

Resources for Students

"BBC News , In Pictures." *BBC News - Home*. (accessed August 1, 2013).

http://news.bbc.co.uk/2/shared/spl/hi/pop_ups/04/middle_east_the_iranian_revolution/html/1.stm. The images found in this BBC collection will help students to understand the Islamic Revolution. These images will prompt questioning from students and create classroom discussion.

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"CPS 'Persepolis' Ban? Marjane Satrapi's Graphic Novel Inappropriate For 7th Graders,

District Says." *Huffington Post*. (accessed July 15, 2013).

http://www.huffingtonpost.com/2013/03/15/cps-persepolis-ban_n_2883999.html This article explains examines the controversy

caused by *Persepolis* in Chicago Public Schools. This article prompts great discussion amongst students. Teachers can use this article to talk about censorship with students.

Satrapı, Marjane. *Persepolis: The Story of Childhood*. New York, NY: Pantheon Books, 2003. Print. This is the main text the students will be reading for this unit. The sequel, *Persepolis 2*, would also interest students.

Satrapı, Marjane. "Why I Wrote *Persepolis*." *Reading and Writing Link*. 26, no. 3 (2003): 9 and 3. (accessed July 9, 2013). <http://search.ebscohost.com/login.aspx?direct=true&db=aph&AN=11142799&site=ehost-live>. This is an excellent article for teachers and students. Marjane Satrapı explains her reasons for writing *Persepolis*.

Notes

¹ Marjane Satrapı, "Why I Wrote *Persepolis*," in *Reading Writing Link*, 9 and 3.

² Maureen Bakis, *The Graphic Novel Classroom: Powerful Teaching and Learning with Images*, 7.

³ Marjane Satrapı, *Persepolis*, Back cover.

⁴ Dave Itzcoff, "'Persepolis' Updated to Protest Election," *New York Times*, August 21, 2009, (accessed July 12, 2013). <http://www.nytimes.com/2009/08/22/arts/22arts>

⁵ "Chicago Public Schools: Hubbard High School," Chicago Public Schools: (accessed July 12, 2013), <http://www.cps.edu/Schools/Pages/school.aspx?id=609741>.

⁶ "Common Core State Standards Initiative , Home," *Common Core State Standards Initiative , Home*, (accessed July 12, 2013), <http://www.corestandards.org/>

⁷ Qtd. Robin Moeller, "Convincing the Naysayers," 12-17. (accessed July 8, 2013).

⁸ Qtd. Robin Moeller, "Convincing the Naysayers," 12-17. (accessed July 8, 2013).

⁹ Maureen Bakis, *The Graphic Novel Classroom: Powerful Teaching and Learning with Images*, 3.

¹⁰ W.J.T. Mitchell, *Picture Theory: Essays on Verbal and Visual Representation*. Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 1994.

¹¹ Billie Ellum, *Teaching, Learning, and Visual Literacy*, xix and 118.

¹² Andrew O'Malley, and Naghibi Nima, "Estranging the Familiar: 'East' and 'West' in Satrapı's *Persepolis*," 224.

¹³ "CPS 'Persepolis' Ban? Marjane Satrapı's Graphic Novel Inappropriate For 7th Graders, District Says." *Huffington Post*. (accessed July 15, 2013). http://www.huffingtonpost.com/2013/03/15/cps-persepolis-ban_n_2883999.html.

¹⁴ Marjane Satrapı, *Persepolis*, Introduction.

¹⁵ Marjane Satrapı, *Persepolis*, 5.

¹⁶ Marjane Satrapi, *Persepolis*, 144.

¹⁷ Richard Frye, *Iran*, 2

¹⁸ Richard Frye, *Iran*, 11.

¹⁹ Suroosh Irfani, *Revolutionary Islam in Iran*, 149.

²⁰ "BBC News - Iran Profile - Timeline," *BBC - Homepage*, (accessed August 1, 2013),

<http://www.bbc.co.uk/news/world-middle-east-14542438>.

²¹ Marjane Satrapi, *Persepolis*, Introduction.

²² Linda Pellico, Linda Honan, Linda Friedlaender, and Kristopher Fennie, "Looking is not seeing: using art to improve observational skills," *Journal of Nursing Education* 48, no. 11 (2009): 648-653, (accessed July 15, 2013),

http://www.healio.com/~media/Journals/JNE/2009/11_November/10_3928_01484834_20090828_02/10_3928_01484834_20090828_02.pdf.

²³ "BBC News , In Pictures," *BBC News - Home*, (accessed August 1, 2013),

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²⁴ Katie Monni, "Aligning Graphic Novels to the Common Core Standards," 50-56. (accessed July 8, 2013),

<http://search.ebscohost.com/login.aspx?direct=true&db=aph&AN=84897664&site=ehost-live>.

Appendix

Implementing District Standards

The students will focus on the idea of perception; and using this topic, they will be able to cite textual evidence from the book to support critical analysis, and they will be able to write arguments to support claims that they develop. "Combined print-text literacies and image literacies, like those found in graphic novels are reflected and valued in the Common Core Standards because they rely on both traditional print-text literacies alongside more visual, image-based literacies." ²⁴ The standards were designed to be relevant to the student's lives and also reflect the knowledge that students must have for success in college, career, and life.

The unit will include/ emphasize the following standards:

1. CCSS.ELA-Literacy.RL.9-10.6 Analyze a particular point of view or cultural experience reflected in a work of literature from outside the United States, drawing on a wide reading of world literature.

Marjane Satrapi, who was born in Iran, wrote *Persepolis*. She gives the reader a peek into her childhood memories of growing up in the Middle East. The students will see Iran through this memoir, through her eyes. The students will have numerous opportunities for analysis of culture and point of view. In addition to *Persepolis*, the students will be reading non-fiction articles relating to the Islamic Revolution. The students will

be pulling information from both texts and will be using that information to analyze what is said. They will do the same with images. By comparing these texts with the graphic novel-memoir, the students will establish a wider view of the culture and will be able to make claims and arguments about the meaning of the culture.

2. CCSS.ELA-Literacy.SL.9-10.1 Respond thoughtfully to diverse perspectives, summarize points of agreement and disagreement, and, when warranted, qualify or justify their own views and understanding and make new connections in light of the evidence and reasoning presented.

We will be discussing issues of race, gender, and politics, among other topics. These issues can be controversial and the students must learn to be thoughtful of the opinions of others. Through small and large group discussions, students will be asked to form opinions about issues and will be asked to respond to others in a way that leads to a better understanding of the text.

3. CCSS.ELA-Literacy.SL.9-10.5 Make strategic use of digital media (e.g., textual, graphical, audio, visual, and interactive elements) in presentations to enhance understanding of findings, reasoning, and evidence and to add interest.

For the culminating project, students will create a Prezi or a PowerPoint presentation memoir of their own childhood and culture. They must include images and text.

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