

# READING OUR SOCIAL WORDS: UTILIZING NOVELS IN TEACHING SOCIOLOGY COURSES

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## **Abstract:**

*This paper discusses the assignments used to analyze the novel using sociological concepts as well as the general outcomes. Students report enjoying the book and they are less hesitant to dig into difficult issues such as alcoholism, violence, sexuality, racism, and other forms of inequality. The ability to examine events on both macro- and microlevels improves over the course of the semester and students often integrate examples from the novels into class discussion and other assignments. The use of cultural artifacts such as film, poetry, music, or novels in sociology courses is certainly not a new phenomenon. As with other instructors, one of my main goals of using these types of materials, including novels, is to encourage active learning by students, as they are often comfortable working with these materials and can relate them to their own lives. Students are able to use their creativity and enhance their critical thinking skills when using cultural artifacts as tools of understanding sociological concepts. Novels in particular, offer a unique means to cover a wider range of social issues than can often be addressed in an introduction to sociology course. Another challenge of the course itself is to explore the complexities of diversity in society. Due to the pace of the course, students often maintain some sort of emotional or intellectual distance from the issues we examine, often discussing social issues as being outside of or disconnected from their own reality. Novels help to humanize the topics we cover as students often feel a connection with one or more main characters, which then helps them to apply the characters' experiences to their own lives.*

## **Keywords:**

*literature, novel, sociology courses*

## **Warming Up!**

In a glance at the available literature for teachers in training in a range of educational subject matters reveals a strong tendency toward revealed truth. Unfortunately for these trainees, however,

the pathway towards this goal is not couched in terms of personal exploration but is expressed more as a set of percept for teachers' actions, tied to injunction and homilies about desirable classroom behaviors.

Similar to many lower level undergraduate courses, most introduction to sociology courses present a survey of the main areas that the discipline covers, relying heavily on empirical studies and theories to provide students with a glimpse into the science.<sup>1</sup> Often students use anecdotal experiences as examples in class, which is helpful but can also lead to a tendency to individualize most concepts, resulting in incorrect analysis as well as too much personal information being revealed in class. This can make conversation more challenging to negotiate as students may be afraid to offend other students who have divulged personal information when participating in class discussion.<sup>2</sup> The practice of relying on individual anecdotes easily translates into examples in written assignments, which obviously may complicate assessment.

In an attempt to bridge the learning gap between macro and micro sociology

and to reduce the use of personal stories as primary “evidence” in support or negation of a sociological concept, I introduced the use of novels into my introduction to sociology course. One of the main motivations in using these novels is to allow students to approach these texts as representative of a society, while reducing their fear of saying something that is potentially offensive to others or simply, uncomfortable. Memoirs and autobiographies can accomplish similar things, but my experience has been some hesitancy on the part of students to take risks in their applications or draw strong conclusions out of fear of critiquing someone’s personal experiences.

### **GOALS AND NOVEL ASSIGNMENTS**

The key to success with this exercise is choosing novels<sup>3</sup> (fantasy written) that are accessible to a wide range of students.<sup>4</sup> The novels are pri-

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<sup>1</sup>As the days goes on, several books or parts of books are read or referred to. Some weather poems are read as a springboard into a science unit on weather. Pictures and captions from an art book or magazines are shared as students begin an art lesson. Patricia M Cunningham, *Classroom That Work They Can All Read And Write*, (United Stated: Pearson Education, Inc, 2003), p.1.

<sup>2</sup>The offering of the strategies on learning are steps taken by the students to enhance their own learning. Strategies are especially important for language learning because they are tools for active, self-directed involvement, which is essential for developing communicative competence. Read more, Rebecca L Oxford, *Language Learning Strategies what every teacher should know* (United States: New burry House Publisher, 1990) p.1.

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<sup>3</sup>Novel is a form of literature which sometimes tell the condition of society, it sometimes criticizes human life of gives us information about some historical accounts or past events. Accordingly, by reading a novel, the readers can get an understanding of more general aspects thought it such as social theme, oppression of the poor, love, mistery, adventure, mothers’ sacrifices and so fort. It often speaks about real world and life. Even, we find similar persons in life eventhough they are not exactly the same as the ones present in the novel. See, Mosleh Habibullah, *Man’s Adventure of Life in Defoe’s Robinson Crouoe* (the article criticize one of Lieterary works in Daniel Defoe’s *Robinson Crouoe*) (Pamekasan: Okara Jurnal Bahasa & Sastra, Vol. IV, thn 1, mei, 2008), p.425

<sup>4</sup> The aim and purpose of fantasy in literature are necessarily different from those of the most exacting realism. What is called ‘truth’ in fiction is often hypothetical: if a character has

marily written for a general audience and students are told to read them for pleasure, to focus on the story and characters without attempting any sort of literary analysis<sup>5</sup>. The intention behind this is for them to get the richness of the social worlds these characters negotiate and to ease them into a sociological analysis of the novel, which is often more difficult than many anticipate. These stories illustrate complex issues that are culturally relevant and, for many students, offer a glimpse into lives, albeit fictionalized, that are often distinctly different than their own.

Each novel used lends itself well to an intersectional analysis (Collins; hooks) because strong themes focus on race/ethnicity, gender, sexuality, ability, age, and social as well as economic class. Many of these novels also address issues connected to the environment, politics, education, and law, illustrating different types of tensions between macro- and micro levels. Many of the characters are struggling with issues connected to

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certain traits, then one is likely to find, or enlightened by finding in him, other related traits: also if a character has certain traits then his actions and responses are already to some extent circumscribed. T.E. Apter, *Fantasy Literature, An Approach To Reality* (Hongkong: Mac Millan Press Ltd) p.1

<sup>5</sup> In this type of assessment, students read or listen to text and then retell the main ideas or selected details. As with the other assessment activities listed here, this type of assessment is authentic because it is based on or closely resembles actual classroom activities. See. J. Michael O'Malley & Lorraine Valdea Pierce (United States of America: Addison-Wesley Publishing Company, Inc, 1996) p11

their own identities particularly in relationship to society's expectations of "who" they are versus their own concepts of their sense of self.

For assessment purposes<sup>6</sup>, students write papers about the novel. The overarching goal of the papers is to have students apply sociological concepts to their novel. From the beginning of the course, they learn to examine society using Mills's theory of the sociological imagination. This concept requires that one examines society and therefore, societal issues, on both a macro- and microlevel. Mills describes this as the combination of "personal troubles" and "public issues". Students use this theory as one of the foundational components of the course and ideally, integrate this way of viewing society into their lives as a means to see connections between their own experiences in relationship to larger social structures and historical events. Other goals of this assignment include strengthening writing skills, practicing problem solving, developing critical-thinking skills, exploring issues related to inequality, and ideally, taking risks in their analysis, to move beyond what is comfortable for them.

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<sup>6</sup> Assessment is the process of gathering information for the purpose of making a decision. Everyone engages in assessment. As human being, we all gather information, sift and weight that information, and make decisions based on our judgements and conclusions. James A. McLoughlin & Rena B. Lewis, *Assesing Students With Special Needs* (New Jersey: Pearson Merrill Prentice Hall, 2008, seventh edition) p. 3

### **APPLYING SOCIOLOGICAL CONCEPTS**

Students begin to read their novel the first week of class. At four different points in the semester, approximately every four weeks, students write a short paper (five to six pages), applying recently discussed course materials and concepts to their novel as a means of understanding and analyzing the social structures, situations, and characters experiences (see Appendix). They are required to write only three of the four papers, but everyone must write the first paper. While students can read the entire book right away, and often many do, they are expected to focus on certain parts of the novel for each paper. The writer have found that this helps them to concentrate their analysis and work on their critical-thinking skills, because they are limited in scope; instead of discussing a wider range, they are forced to dig deeper. Many often end up rereading part of or their entire novel, which results in a greater understanding of the book and often a stronger analysis as they look at it differently with each rereading.

For the first assignment, students focus on a topic of their choice that they think is central to the story and occurs within the beginning chapters of the book. They examine it from both a micro approach and macro approach and utilize the sociological imagination as the foundation for their analysis (see Appendix). This paper is most difficult due to the amount of new tasks they are required to do, such as applying

sociological theory and methods, using a new writing style, and creating a strong analysis based on evidence from their novel and materials from class readings. Issues related to inequality are quite prominent, so students are not allowed to discuss these with the first assignment. This is partially because they have not learned how sociology studies inequality and also because it directs students' attention to the assignment, back to discussing topics that may be less interesting for them such as social theory or methods of research. Hints at how to format the paper, provide support for their ideas, and reference their examples are provided with the first assignment. The format of their paper parallels the format of studies they read in the course as well as the way in which we discuss and analyze topics in class.

Students are expected to define the concepts they use, to only use class materials, to provide appropriate citation, and to clearly apply the concepts to analyze and explain what they are discussing. For example, if a student decided that the topic he/she wanted to discuss was how the main character felt alienated in the school he/she attended, he/she would be required to clearly explain and provide the definition of alienation as posited by Marx. He/she would be expected to show examples from the novel, usually involving some direct dialogue or text, that illustrate his/her points and also to discuss how Marx's theory helps him/her to under-

stand what is happening in the novel. Students also read studies that use the concepts we are covering in class. These serve as another source of discussion and support for their novel papers and a means to illustrate similarities and differences between reality and fiction.

#### WRITING SKILLS

For many, this first paper is challenging for a wide array of reasons, including learning a new style of writing. One of students' biggest challenges is to not provide a summary of the story but rather an analysis of events and conditions utilizing concepts they have recently learned.

Another technique used to improve their writing and to illustrate how this is a process is the use of a writing workshop for the first paper. Right after they receive their first assignment back and get the second novel paper assignment, a class period is set aside for students to meet in groups and work through their papers. They divide according to novel and give them a list of steps, usually three or four points to address to guide them through their discussion. This includes compiling a list of questions for me. Leaving for approximately thirty-five minutes (or about half of the class time) and then return to review what they have discussed and to answer questions they have about the next paper.

Students have the option to rewrite the first paper. This is done to support the work they have done during

the workshop and to reinforce writing as a process. As a class, we discuss the positive and negative points to doing a rewrite. For many students, they choose to write a new paper primarily because, for most, their grade would not dramatically change and the focus of the first paper is more challenging. Students who have rewritten the paper have shown strong improvement in their second draft. Students have commented that the workshop helped them to feel more comfortable talking about their work with others and reinforced the point that first drafts of papers are not as strong as they believe them to be. Many report spending more time and effort on the remaining papers. The second paper usually reflects strong improvement for all students. The third paper has mixed results as some students believe they "got it" with the second paper and fall back into the habit of writing it at the last minute. Approximately one-half to two-thirds of the students will write the fourth paper and at least half write all four papers.

#### **PROBLEM SOLVING AND CRITICAL THINKING**

Each novel paper requires that students use a variety of materials and concepts to analyze their novel, rather than focus on one specific area of sociology. They need to integrate concepts and view issues from multiple perspectives, thus building problem-solving and critical-thinking skills. Every

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point made or concept used must be supported with evidence from their novel and studies from class materials. This increases their skills at sociological writing and ability to make an argument. In both the second and third paper assignments (see Appendix), students continue applying theoretical concepts to a theme in their novel and explore the connections of culture and identity or deviance, identity, and socialization. They examine how these things operate independently in society as well as relate and interrelate on micro level and macro levels.

For example, one of the elements of culture is language. In addition, using different kinds of dialects, many of the novels chosen for the class use English, to illustrate how characters exist in multiple social worlds and often struggle to find ways to negotiate their daily lives as well as their identities in relationship with these cultures. A student's micro analysis might focus on discussing the experiences of a character attempting to find a job and being unable to do. The student could also examine this situation from a macro perspective discussing the types of jobs available for people with limited English skills speaking population, particularly immigrants. He/she could also discuss other ways in which a different language is a benefit by illustrating how it is used to maintain the character's family and traditions. Another possibility would be to apply theories about deviance to how the character behaves, feels, and is

treated like an outsider in various contexts of the novel. By exploring the same issue from different angles, students are able to strengthen their skills of critical analysis while also exploring the complexities of society through a sociological lens.

The fourth paper asks students to identify two different systems of inequality, discuss how these operate in the novel, and then propose a specific solution to address and possibly remedy the situation. Often students will develop a solution that deals with their issue on both a micro level and macro level, although many continue to have difficulties proposing changes in large social systems. The purpose of the final paper is to specifically discuss issues related to race/ethnicity, class, gender, and sexuality that they have been exploring throughout the semester and reading about in their novels. At this point in the semester, they have worked with foundational concepts enough that they are comfortable applying them to their argument, thus making stronger sociological analyses than they could accomplish midway through the course. Asking them to develop a solution assists students in recognizing that they are "creators and holders of knowledge"<sup>7</sup>

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<sup>7</sup> As they are able to develop and support their ideas for societal change in their novel. Students often connect their solution to existing issues in society both in this paper and other class assignments. See. Ross, Susan M., and Janet McNeil Hurlbert. "Problem-Based Learning: An Exercise on Vermont's Legalization of Civil Unions." *Teaching Sociology* 32 (January 2004): p.81

### **TAKING “RISKS”**

The writer initial interest in using novels was to see whether these would be a useful means to help students take more chances in their writing and analysis, while also helping them to work beyond surface examinations of the topics we discuss in the course. I wanted to have the students read about issues related to people and cultures that were probably different from their own and to have this occur over the course of the semester rather than in a couple of short instances in the course. Issues connected to diversity typically get placed in their own section within introduction to sociology texts or are handled according to topic, such as having a section on race and ethnicity followed by one on gender. Due to the nature of the structure of the course and what students need to be exposed to before they deal with these often-challenging subjects, addressing these topics at the end of the course makes sense. I have found that by the time we reach these subjects, however, we have little time to spend on them, and once discussion starts around these issues, students want to spend quality time on them. The introduction of the use of novels has given them an opportunity to read about these topics and become more comfortable with them, and the students gain a better sense of the ways inequality and diversity are imbedded throughout our society.

The use of novels has helped many students expand their depth and

breadth of analysis, particularly concerning explorations of race, gender, sexuality, and class. These stories provide a means for students to take chances with their scholarship. For example, in using novels, when students wrote about race and racism, it was usually framed as an “us” versus “them” situation. They would present the definitions and theories we covered about race, but the application tended to focus on conflict—for example, on a discussion of how they knew of a white person who was discriminated against because of their race, or how people of color manipulate our social systems for personal gain, as if whites did not do the same thing. For many, applying a macro level analysis got lost in these discussions.

After novels were introduced, students would bring in short comments about race in their papers or class discussion, often in the context of the story, early on in the term. This allows them to think through the complexities of the topic for a longer period of time. When they write about race toward the end of the semester, they are better able to make connections to how racism affects everyone on micro and macro levels. Instead of the tendency to make proclamations in connection to their use of sociological concepts, students have become more willing to present an argument and to take a chance on what they write, rather than write what they think the writer want them to say. They

may still talk about the white person who was discriminated against, but they are better able to support their point with materials from the class reading and the novel as well as bring in some discussion on a macro level. Their interpretation of events in the novel may still reflect their bias or frustrations, but their argument is stronger, more in depth, and less of a knee-jerk reaction. Before novels were introduced, students were less willing to write about what they thought and were more likely to write about what the course readings covered as if they were in complete agreement with the studies.

The use of novels was a risk for the teacher. The teacher should initially decided to use them as a sort of an experiment, to simply see what would happen. By knowing the assignments were well received by the students and that there was a visible improvement in students' use and understanding of course concepts. One of the challenges for the teacher is to ensure that students fully understand the rationale behind using the books, that they are to serve as mini-societies for them to study but that they do not replace existing social phenomenon or serve as a substitute for sociological research<sup>8</sup>. The four novel

papers are designed to help students remember that their book is a work of fiction and that only by using course readings, particularly the studies we explore, can they examine and understand the social condition(s) they are addressing.

### **SUCCESSSES AND CHALLENGES**

The use of novels has proven to be an effective teaching tool. There has been strong improvement in use and understanding of course concepts as well as a better integration of sociological materials overall. This is partially due to the fact that students are spending more time with the material, because they find the novels accessible and interesting and therefore are more comfortable examining them. There has been a reduction of the hesitancy that students have when talking about sociological studies or concepts. In class discussion, students will often give qualifying comments before speaking about a concept or study, noting that they realize they may be wrong in their assessment or acknowledging that researchers know more than they do about the subject. When analyzing the novels, however, students don't question the intent of the author but instead focus on the issues at hand. This translates into a reduction of qualifying statements during class discussions.

Many students learn the concepts a bit more quickly and therefore are able to concentrate on honing their critical-  

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sity Press, 1999), p. 109–38.

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<sup>8</sup> DeVault address the complexity of this situation, noting that while sociologists understand that we must pay attention to the social context in which novels and all cultural works are created in, many readers easily forget this and believe that the social issues presented in novels can be taken as fact, read, DeVault, Marjorie L. "Novel Readings: The Social Organization of Interpretation." In *Liberating Method*, (Philadelphia: Temple Univer-



thinking skills, which also increases their willingness to analyze course topics, including studies, more closely. When examining issues that may be personally challenging for students in class, some have resorted to using situations in their novels as examples, which enables many to more easily enter into tough discussions. Since four or five books are chosen for the course, this creates another means by which to divide students when doing group exercises in class. It also adds another way for students to connect with one another during class discussions and when they are in the process of writing their novel papers; many students have talked about their novels outside of class.

There are limits to this exercise. As with any subject, improvement is connected to the amount of time spent studying or reading class materials; students who skim the novel or wait until the last minute to write their paper do not perform well nor do they learn with as much depth. This assignment can be seen as a barrier to students who are uncomfortable with their reading or writing skills as well as to those who prefer taking tests. This assignment has only been used in smaller classes with forty or fewer students. The writer believe it would do well in a larger class, but it is grading intensive and sometimes requires a fair amount of meeting time with students outside of class. Although the writer have only used this approach in the introduction to sociology course, the

writer believe that using novels would work well in a variety of classes, particularly including courses on social problems, race and ethnicity, sex and gender, as well as courses on globalization or women in developing nations.

Progress in writing and analysis are difficult to track when courses are large, because some of the improvements are small and unless you know the student's work well, these shifts can easily be missed. Moving students into creating an analysis rather than a summary of the novel is a constant struggle with a few students every semester. Plagiarism, particularly the recycling of papers, may be difficult to catch in larger classes. To help counter this, novels are rotated at least once every two or three semesters (see Appendix). This also helps to keep the assignment fresh and interesting when grading. Students will often chose books based on price and size. Many of the titles used are current but a bit older and therefore available in libraries and as used copies. The novels that are used vary in style and content, but the writer try to pick ones of similar length in the hope that each student will chose a book that looks interesting.

## **CONCLUSION**

As noted at the beginning, the main objective of using novels in Introductory to Sociology concepts was to provide an alternative way of learning and applying sociological concepts as a means of understanding society. Through

the combination of the accessibility of the novels and requirement to analyze these books on a micro- and macro level, students more quickly grasp the sociological imagination, thus becoming successful in their ability to analyze society. This change in perspective helps them to make connections between course materials and their own lives. Use of the novels moves students beyond seeing the course as consisting of simply memorizing terms and repeating them back to their instructor. It provides one example of an interdisciplinary approach to examining our social worlds. Students are more successful in practicing problem solving, applying course concepts, developing their critical-thinking skills, and connecting sociological concepts and techniques to their lives.

## **APPENDIX**

### **Assignments: Basic Parameters**

Each paper provides a list of things that students are to address and the directions are vague enough that they can approach the paper with some flexibility, which allows them to bring more of their own ideas into the assignment. The mechanics for the paper are provided each time. Students are required to remain within the five to six page limit primarily to assist them in providing a strong, focused argument. Longer papers often end up being filled with extra information or background material from the novel, which turns the paper into more of a summary piece than an analysis.

When grading, students receive a short rubric with comments addressing areas for which they lost points. They receive points for organization and flow (5 or 10 percent), mechanics (15 or 20 percent), and then content (75 percent). The percents change for the first two areas as the class progresses to serve as a means to reinforce proper grammar, spelling, and citation, which sometimes becomes sloppier the nearer we get to the end of the semester. The content area replicates the list of things they are to address from the assignment sheet. The writer usually assign different point values for each of these areas to help with assessment. For example, items such as focusing on one topic would receive five of the seventy-five points, whereas using class materials for support is twenty-five or thirty points.

### **Novel Paper One: Applying Sociological Theories**

Since the beginning of the semester, each of you has been required to read one of four novels. The purpose of these papers is to see how you understand course concepts, using the novel as your own "mini-society" to examine. Each assignment is designed for you to focus on applying specific concepts from the course material to your novel. Each paper will be a bit different in nature. If you have questions, it is best to meet with the teacher rather than e-mailing or calling, or sending a message.

For this paper, the teacher want

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the student to do the following:

Find one or two emerging themes or topics that interest you in your novel so far. These topics should be tied to one or two main characters and her/his/their relationship to society in some way. For this first paper do not focus on an -ism (racism, sexism, classism, and so on). We are just beginning to understand these from a sociological perspective and you will be addressing isms in a later novel paper.

Once you pick your theme(s)/topic(s), use Mills's sociological imagination as a tool to discuss and analyze them. For example, if your main character murdered someone, how would you explain that using Mills's concept? Think about how we talked about the "Hernado Washington" article in class.

Remember to discuss your theme(s) on both a macro level and micro level.

Utilizing one of the main bodies of theory we've discussed and McIntyre has outlined (structural functionalism, conflict theory, Marxism, or symbolic interaction), explain your topic/theme(s). How does the theory you choose help you to understand your topic/theme(s)? Be sure to use material from the readings and/or class to support your points. For example, if you decide to give me a definition of the theory you're using, provide a reference as to where you obtained/learned the definition. This definition must come from class materials, DO NOT use materials from the Internet

or other sources. When discussing a concept, be sure to define it using the original source (that is, Mills's words or the other experts).

#### Novel Paper Two: Culture, Social Structures, and Identity

For this paper, The Teacher want the student to do the following:

Choose one or two different things that are important to the culture of your main character. Discuss/analyze this/these utilizing concepts from the class and readings in Core Concepts. Pay particular attention to different elements of culture.

Discuss different roles and statuses your main character or other characters have in their society. How do these work in relationship to various social structures and social institutions in their lives?

Use Goffman's theory (every teacher could apply any experts) of "The Presentation of Self" as a tool to understand and analyze one or more of your characters. Hint: You should be able to combine this with your discussion of one or both of the two areas above.

OR

You can rewrite the first novel paper. This can focus on the same material but you need to also integrate in Goffman's theory of "The Presentation of Self." For example, if you wrote on Mills and functionalism then you'd need to also add Goffman as well.

### Novel Paper Three: Deviance and Social Control

This paper is a continuation of what we've been exploring in terms of identity and socialization on individual and group levels. Remember that you are showing me you've read and understood the texts we're using as well as applying material from class discussion to support your points.

For this paper, the teacher want you to do the following:

Discuss one or two things about your main character(s) that could be considered "deviant." This includes a deviant act but even more so, something about their identity that can be considered "deviant." How does (or doesn't) this deviant status affect your character(s) identity?

Analyze your choice of deviant behavior/status in relationship to socialization and how people "learn" how to behave or misbehave in society. Bring in society's viewpoint here (macro), what exactly makes your choice deviant? Discuss this in relationship to the role that deviance plays in terms of maintaining the status quo. Obviously, you can tie in previous concepts here particularly socialization and resocialization.

Apply the McIntyre readings from both Core Concepts in Sociology and the Readings in Sociology text to support your points and analyze deviance. For example, how does Durkheim's idea of crime support or counter your view? What has Merton theorized that might

help explain your points? Think about what we've read and the ways in which "who" is held accountable for deviance differs, and the types of excuses people use to justify their deviant behavior in relationship to what you are examining in your novel.

### Novel Paper Four: Stratification and Inequality

This paper is a continuation of what we've been exploring all semester. Remember this paper is to show the teacher that you've read and understand the readings in both Core Concepts and Readings in Sociology texts and that you can apply concepts from these to your analysis of your novel. Feel free to use material from class discussion throughout your paper but remember that if there's a "solid" definition of a concept in our readings, then you should be using those first. Do not use materials that are not directly related to the class.

For this paper, the teacher want you to do the following:

Discuss two -isms that appear throughout the book. These can include but are not limited to racism, sexism, classism, ageism, and heterosexism.

What are some of the ways that the -isms affect your character(s) on both a micro level and macro level ?

If you could change something, one thing that you believe perpetuates one of the -isms you've addressed, what would you change? Be specific.

Apply any other concepts we've learned to your discussion. Strong papers

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should have some integration of other ideas from throughout the course all of these things are related and interrelated. Remember, if you've addressed a concept before (that is, dramaturgy, socialization, identity, and so on) then you don't need to define it.

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