

## CULTURAL PERSPECTIVES ON DRESS: A NOVEL APPROACH

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I have developed a course entitled "Cultural Perspectives on Dress" which I teach in the Honors Program at NMSU. I wanted to create a term project that would enhance students' understanding of the complex relationship between appearance and identity. I began by developing a list of novels that treat a variety of interdisciplinary issues: age, anorexia, ethnicity, gender, mental health, obesity, physical attractiveness, physical ideals, race, sexual orientation, and socio-economic position. This project reflects the pedagogical benefits of incorporating literary inquiry into a social sciences-based discipline. Students learn to read novels with a careful "hands-on" protocol, thereby bridging the gap between emotional experience and critical analysis of issues related to appearance and identity.

Each student reads a different novel from the list. After identifying salient passages that highlight aspects of appearance and identity, students are required to write a critical essay which explores notions of self-worth, identity, and appearance. They are to examine the tone of each passage, its significance to the rest of the novel, and the main character's feelings of self-worth. Finally, students give an oral presentation, placing emphasis on their critical analysis of the novel.

This project has been successful beyond my loftiest expectations! Reading a novel allows for a profound experience, requiring the reader to create a visual world through the written word. Although students are often initially resistant to the project ("You mean we have to read a whole novel?!!"), as they become engaged, they develop an appreciation for the experience. By working with fiction, students are forced to frame questions by listening to alternative voices which give flesh and blood to topics covered in our textbooks.