Holes
Concept/Vocabulary Analysis

Literary Text: Holes by Louis Sachar (Yearling 10th Anniversary Edition)

Summary

Stanley Yelnat’s family has been cursed ever since his “no-good-dirty-rotten-pig-stealing-great-great-grandfather” forgot to carry Madam Zeroni, a gypsy in his town, up the mountain as he had promised (37). When a pair of tennis shoes falls from the sky, hitting Stanley in the back, he believes that luck has finally turned around, but when he is arrested for stealing the shoes, he realizes that the curse still hangs over him. Stanley is sent to build character at Camp Green Lake, a desolate desert accompanied by harsh hot weather, rattlesnake, and the deadly yellow spotted lizards where juvenile delinquents dig holes to build character. At first Camp Green Lake is tough; Stanley is not very good at digging holes; it’s unbearably hot, and he’s different from the other boys. But as he serves his 18-month sentence at Camp Green Lake he builds lasting friendships, and he begins to question if digging holes for character is the only reason they are digging. Perhaps the warden is looking for something, something huge?

Organizational Patterns

Holes is organized into both chapters and parts. Part One: You are Entering Camp Green Lake consist of almost half the book, chapters 1 through 28 are incorporated in the section. Part Two: The last hole consists of chapters 29 through 49. And finally Part Three: Filling in the Holes is the shortest section and finishes off the book. There are 233 pages with the 10th Anniversary Edition and is made up of 50 chapters in all. The chapters average to be about 4 pages.

The Central Question/Enduring Issue

What makes a good/true friend?
Stanley doesn’t have much luck when it comes to friendship. He is different from most kids at his school, and is picked on by both teachers and his peers. When he goes to Camp Green Lake he is surrounded by other boys, other boys that he, yet again, is different from. But while at Camp Green Lake, he meets Zero, by the end of the book, Zero and Stanley build a
The friendship between Zero and Stanley is special and different from what either of them had experienced before.

**How can you tell if a friendship is superficial?**

While at Camp Green Lake, Stanley attempts to make friends with the other boys. He even begins adopting some of their characteristics. At times it appears these boys are his friends, especially when they accept him into the group and give him the nickname, Caveman. But something is not quite right with the friendship that develops between Stanley and the other boys in the group. They seem to be nice and willing to be Stanley’s friend when it benefits them or when there is no threat to them, but when something good happens to Stanley these “on the surface friends” become jealous and hostile at times, even threatening Stanley until he complies with what they want.

**What would you do for a friend?**

In the end, both Stanley and Zero risk their own safety and even their lives to stand up for one another. When Stanley gets into a fight with Zigzag, Zero chokes Zigzag almost to the point where Zigzag passes out. This action results in him running away and wandering the desert with no water or food. Eventually Stanley also runs away from the camp to find and save Zero. Later, when climbing the mountain, Zero saves Stanley by using the shovel to help him climb the mountain, which results in Zero’s palms getting cut up by the head of the shovel. Later Stanley carries Zero while he climbs up the rest of the mountain, saving Zero’s life.

**Background Knowledge**

Louis Sachar provides a clear picture of the story, and not much background knowledge is needed in order to enjoy the novel. Although not necessarily needed, it may be beneficial to research a few issues before reading this book. While this novel is a fairly simple read, various harsh or darker themes are intertwined within the story. Stanley, though he himself did not break the law, he is sent to a detention camp where most the boys have committed some sort of crime, though the book does not go into detail about what these crimes may be.
Students may not have a firm grasp on what a juvenile delinquent center is, so background knowledge could be used. Also one character, Zero, was homeless prior to being admitted into Camp Green Lake. Later readers discover that one day his mom left him at the park and never came back. A closer look at the subject matter of poverty and the homelessness will enhance students understanding of Zero’s character along with the story.

Lastly the novel deals with prejudices and ethnicity difference, especially in its flashbacks. The flashbacks introduce a white school teacher Katharine and an African American, Sam. As Sam and Katharine’s storyline plays out, they develop a romance, and are caught by the community kissing. Sam is killed for this action. Research into the prejudices and injustices that were committed towards African Americans during the time period Sam and Katharine live (the late 1800’s) would be a definite benefit to student's understanding of the novel.

**Issues related to this study of this study**

**Theme**

**Individuality VS Following a group:** A major theme of *Holes* involves the concept being true to oneself, even if it mean not fitting in with "the group." Stanley is bullied at his school and is different from his peers. The novel also notes that Stanley’s great-great-grandfather was also different from the rest of the boys in his village. When Stanley goes to Camp Green Lake, he tries to conform to the group to fit in, but when he does this, readers witness how he changes. He becomes more hardened and calloused and is no longer the Stanley readers witness at the beginning of the book. This is demonstrated mostly in the middle of the book. Near the end, Stanley softens again, and no longer worries as much about fitting in with the other campers. It is only after Stanley decides not to conform to the rest of the groups that he makes a significant and lasting friendship with Zero, who also does not fit in with the rest of the group.

**Responsibility and Consequences:** This book demonstrates how decisions do not only affect the decision maker, but dwells on the fact that actions and decision that are made often affect others around them. Stanley’s no-good-dirty-rotten-pig-stealing-great-great-grandfather began the curse that haunts the Yelnats family for centuries. He had a task to do, and because he made foolish choices, he didn't fulfill certain responsibilities, and for one foolish action the entire Yelnats line was cursed. The consequences from
Stanley’s great-great-grandfather, did not only affect himself, but rather affected the entire Yelnats line. Stanley eventually takes responsibility for his great-great-grandfather’s action and carries Zero up the mountain (Chapter 38). The curse could have been avoided centuries ago if only the great-great-grandfather would have done what he was supposed to do in the first place. Another example that illustrates this concept in Holes is when Zero stole the shoes in which Stanley ends up getting accused of stealing (184-187). If Zero would have taken responsibility for his actions, then Stanley would have never been in trouble with the law. There are various other instances where this concept is illustrated in the novel such as when Magnet steals the sunflower seeds, and Stanley (Chapters 19-20) is punished by Mr. Sir for it.

**Social Class Distinction:** There are several examples of social classes in Holes and the hierarchy that takes place within a society. The boys at Camp Green Lake are split up into various groups. The group Stanley is assigned to has approximately 7 boys. It can be assumed that all the groups contain around this many members. Within these groups, distinctions are made between the various boys, and although all are seen as criminals by the law, they develop their own social class hierarchy. In Stanley’s group, it is clear that X-Ray is the leader, the upper class. He tends to create the rules, and all the other boys listen to him. If anyone finds anything interesting, X-Ray get’s to take ownership and show it to the warden to get the day off. X-Ray gets first pick on what shovel he uses and is first in line for food and water. Sachar describes the line order early on in the book. The line order represents what social class the boys are in while at Camp Green Lake. Stanley begins at the back of the line, as the newcomer, he is in the lowest level. But as the story progresses, he eventually moves up one level, and gets to receive his water before Zero. Zero is on the lowest rung of the social ladder through the majority of the book. This is demonstrated by at least two very distinct instances. One is when illustrated when Stanley is moved up in front of Zero in the water line on page 63. Another one is shown when the narrator tells us how Stanley feels towards Zero when he states, “He didn’t care what Zero thought. Zero was nobody (81).”

**Destiny:** Throughout the story, certain happenings occur which seem completely out of Stanley’s control. He is wrongly accused of stealing a pair of sneakers from the homeless and for this is sent to a juvenile detention center; he is then wrongly accused of stealing sunflower seeds and when Zero runs away; he has to dig both holes. Just because bad things were happening to Stanley, regardless of whether he deserved them or not, it doesn’t mean that he has no control of what happens to him. He still has the ability to choose, and these choices also lead him down on path or another. Sometimes there are instances that can be controlled and other times there is nothing that can be done. There is always the ability to choose, and one can choose how to respond to these
events. Stanley throughout the entire book stays fairly positive and still has the ability to choose. He chooses to go to Camp Green Lake, rather than prison, he chooses to give the lipstick tube to X-Ray, he chooses to teach Zero to read, he chooses to steal the water truck, he chooses to leave camp, he chooses to dig one more hole, which is where they find his treasure. Some things happen to Stanley that are unfair and not his fault, but he responds to these events positively, and chooses the path which he regards as the best.

**Other Themes:** True Friendship, Diversity, Problem Solving, Bullying, and Homeless

**Setting**

*Holes* takes place in deserted area in Texas, a place where it hasn’t rained in 110. The majority of the book is set at a place called Camp Green Lake, a juvenile delinquent center. The camp is ruled by uncaring and almost abusive adults; it’s a dictatorship. The boys sleep in tents and spend the day out in the barren, desolate, desert, building character by digging holes in the heat. The setting tends to be a bit metaphorical; it is as harsh and tough as the boys at the camp are. It can also be seen as the boy’s hope. There is nothing much there, and most of the boys feel this way about their own life. At one point a cloud comes, and the boys wish that it might rain, but it eventually the cloud dissipates, dashing their hopes on the barren land. Certain events also take place in the country of Latvia. The book is told during present day, but has flashbacks that go back to the mid and late 19th century.

**Conflict**

**Internal:** Stanley’s main internal conflict arises with fitting in. So many of the decisions he makes often lead back to whether the action would be accepted by the rest of the group or not. Stanley decides to give the lipstick tube that he found to X-Ray because he figures that it is better to be in good terms with X-Ray rather than get the day off, even though he is a slow digger and has worked as hard to dig his hole as X-Ray did. What he says and does often has to do with whether it will help or hurt him being accepted in the group, even if it is something he would not normally say or do. He has to negotiate his way through various people, and work at pleasing them. Slowly Stanley becomes more calloused because of this particular conflict. Another internal conflict that Stanley must cope with is his own
attitude. With so many unlucky things happening to him, does he have control over any of it, or is all of it do to the curse on his family? A conflict that is evident near the end of the book is Stanley’s guilt when Zero runs away. It plagues him, and is the only thing he thinks about until he takes action to save Zero. In the end Stanley has to decide whether to go back to camp or remain on the top of the mountain.

**External:** The major external conflict deals with survival and freedom. Most the book, besides the flashbacks, deals with Stanley at Camp Green Lake. He must survive harsh conditions such as blistering heat and little water, especially when Mr. Sir angry with him and refuses to refill his canteen. But the landscape and weather are not the only things Stanley must survive. Stanley must also try and survive living with harsh people. Most the boys and adults at Camp Green Lake are hard, bitter, and selfish. They look out for themselves only, and therefore they often step on Stanley and kick him when he’s down. Ultimately Stanley is trying to survive his 18-month sentence at Camp Green Lake. Later in the story he must survive even harsher conditions when him and Zero travel to God’s Thumb.

**Point of View**

*Holes* is told from the third person perspective of an omniscient narrator. The narrator tells the story during present time, allowing one to see Stanley’s thoughts. Other than presenting flashbacks of the mid and late 19 century, dispersed throughout the story, the narrator focuses in on Stanley. His job is to inform the reader Stanley’s actions, thoughts, and life. Although the narrator is omniscient he does not divulge everything. He leaves a lot open for foreshadowing and inferences to be made. The narrator on occasion will address the reader, however, he mostly informs the reader of events of the past and permits the readers to know exactly what is in Stanley’s head.

**Literary Terms**

**Foreshadow:** There are several examples of foreshadowing throughout the entire novel. Almost all of the flashbacks are foreshadowing events that occur later in the novel. Beginning with Stanley’s no-good-dirty-pig-stealing-great-great-grandfather not carrying Madam Zeroni up the mountain, along with Sam and Kissing Kate’s story, the stories intertwine to
foreshadow upcoming events, which connect with Stanley, Zero, and even the Warden of Camp Green Lake. There are also plenty of other examples of foreshadowing that occur during present day. Within the first couple of pages of *Holes* the narrator introduces the yellow spotted lizards, and their deadly bite, while describing later in the novel that Sam’s onions keep the yellow spotted lizards away. Another foreshadowing dealing with the yellow spotted lizards is found on page 42 when the narrator mentions that up to twenty lizards will live in a single hole at once. He reiterates later on in the story that the lizards live in the holes. At the end of the novel, when Zero and Stanley are digging holes, they disrupt the yellow spotted lizards home in the hole they are digging.

**Flashback:** Dispersed throughout the novel are several flashbacks, pertaining to the mid and late 19 century. These flashbacks may seem random and unimportant at first, but are actually very important to the entire story. The book flip flops from present day to the story of Stanley’s great-great-grandfather to Sam and Katharine’s story, to Kissing Kate. Although it may not seem like there is a connection between these four events, they are in reality tightly connected, and by the end of the book, all the stories come together like puzzle pieces. There are several instances of flashback in this novel, over eight main instances where a flashback occurs, each one containing just a bit more information, each bringing one more piece to the puzzle.

**Characterization:** Stanley is a great character to use for teaching characterization. He is a dynamic non-static character. One understands who Stanley is before he enters Camp Green Lake and during the beginning of his sentence. Stanley changes a great amount throughout the book, which makes him interesting. He goes from being a soft compassionate character, and as a result of the day to day life at Camp Green Lake and the people he associates with, he becomes more hardened and calloused. He is not bad, he just isn’t as soft and friendly as he was before he entered Camp Green Lake. This is mainly demonstrated in chapter 18 when it talks about Stanley’ hands becoming tough and calloused. One might wonder if the word calloused is not only describing is his hands, but also a change that has happened to him on the inside. It’s even more evident when later on he refers to Zero as “a nobody” and refuses to help him learn how to read. At this point he has become much more selfish and hardened than he was at the beginning of the book. By the end of the story, Stanley has balanced his character out. He becomes very compassionate, but is no longer a push over. He is willing to stand up for himself and what is right, whereas before he would not have done that.

**Imagery:** Several examples of imagery are dispersed throughout the story. The description of the yellow spotted lizards is given great detail so that readers can picture...
them perfectly in their heads. Sachar also describes many of the various people including Stanley with great detail. It’s easy to picture Zigzag with his wild hair and long skinny neck through Sachar’s use of description (pg 37). Another great description of Zero is found after he runs away from Camp Green Lake and Stanley finds him under the over turned boat on page 155. There are several examples where the landscape is described just enough for the reader to create an excellent picture in his or her head of Stanley’s surroundings.

Affective Issues Related to the Work

Many students can relate to being blamed or punished for something they did not do, which is exactly what happens to Stanley. Stanley is wrongly accused of stealing a pair of sneakers, and then is punished for this action by being sent to Camp Green Lake. Students should be able to relate to the scenario of being falsely accused. Stanley also gets in trouble for stealing sunflower seeds, but in all actually, is covering for Magnet. Students can relate to the fact that Stanley takes the fall for a friend.

Stanley is the slowest digger in his group. Students can relate feeling like they are the slowest person at a certain activity, or feel like they are the only ones that don’t understand a concept. Most students will be able to understand how Stanley feels at this point. Stanley improves immensely in his hole digging by the end of the book, though he is still the slowest it is no longer by very much. This gives students something to hold onto and shows that there is room and a chance for improvement.

Another fun aspect that students can relate to in this novel is Stanley’s and Zero’s friendly competition that they have on their way back to Camp Green Lake from God’s Thumb. Both Stanley and Zero refuse to take a drink of water before the other one does. It turns into a competition, the loser being the one who drinks first. Many students love competition, they thrive on it. Students are constantly engaging in friendly competition with each other.
Vocabulary Issues Related to the Work

*Holes* is a pretty simple book which should not give students too much trouble understanding the word choice Sachar uses. Some words, however, can be difficult, mostly these words are used for description, and would therefore work well for vocabulary lists that would be beneficial when teaching this novel for students ranging from upper elementary through 7th grade. Some of these words that could be included on a vocabulary list include; vast, perseverance (8), barren, desolate (11), forlorn (30), deftly (32), calloused (80), and grotesque (105), just to name a few.

Implications for Student Diversity

There are multiple passages in *Holes* where ethnical diversity is apparent among the various characters. The narrator, through Stanley’s eyes, tells the various ethnicities of the main characters. The book specifically mentions that Stanley, ZigZag, and Squid are white, Armpit, X-Ray, and Zero are black, and Magnet is Hispanic along with Stanley’s lawyer at the end of the book, Ms. Morengo. Stanley makes an interesting observation about all the boys in his group on page 84. He realizes that at Camp Green Lake, digging holes, they are all the same color, the reddish brown color of the dirt they dig. This scene would work well for teaching about ethnicities and diversity.

Slavery is another aspect that is brought up in this story, although it is a small part of the book. When Zero starts helping Stanley did his hole, the other boys out of jealousy, begin harassing Stanley, bringing up the point that he is white, and is making a black kid do his work for him.

One important aspect of the book deals with racisms and the unjust laws that were placed upon African Americans during the mid and late 19th century. Sam, an African American, lived in a town where Camp Green Lake now stands 110 years prior to Stanley’s stay there. He and a white school teacher, Katherine Barlow, become romantically involved with each other. At one point, they are discovered kissing in the school house. Because of this action, Sam is killed. The Sheriff tells Katherine that it is against the law for a “Negro to kiss a white woman (113).” Shortly after he says that it is not against the law for a white woman to kiss a black man and that is why she is not going to be killed. During these flashbacks, the word “Negro” is used multiple times to describe Sam.

Lastly there is some social diversity within the camp between the boys in Group D. This is apparent by how the boys treat each other. X-Ray is obviously the leader and
therefore makes a lot of the rules that the boys must abide by that are not necessarily rules at Camp Green Lake. Zero is in the lowest class level, and is treated as such by the other boys, and even the counselors. The social classes are made clearly apparent by the order the boys line up to receive their water, especially when X-Ray bumps Stanley up in line in front of Zero.

Gender Issues

There are not many gender issues that arise from the novel Holes. It is set at an all boys juvenile detention center, so there are not too many girls in the novel besides Stanley’s mom, the Warden, and Kissing Kate Barlow. The women within the novel seem to be treated the same as the males. The Warden is actually in charge of all the boys at the detention facility as well as Mr. Sir and Mr. Pendanski. She is a very strong and independent character. Kissing Kate is also an example of a strong female character.

Project Ideas

Green Lake vs. Camp Green Lake

Have students work in groups or on their own to create a physical replica of how the town of Green Lake might have looked during the late 19th century and then create a physical replica of how Camp Green Lake looked present day when Stanley stayed there. Students should use the details Sachar gives in order to create these models of the area. The class could also be split in half. Half the class could be in charge of creating the town of Green Lake and the other half would be in charge of creating Camp Green Lake. These models should be clear and have several details from the novel incorporated in them.

Character Collage

Have students choose a character and create a collage. The collage should depict the character; his/her likes, his/her dislikes, actions he/she does, or other objects that could be used to represent the characters. A written explanation should be included with the collage explaining why the student chose to use that picture/color/object/texture to represent the character and why it represents their character, as well as who their character is. Students could present these to the rest of the class.
Desert fact

Have students research the deserts in Texas. What is the temperature like? What is the humidity like? What animals live in the desert? How long could one survive in the desert without a water source? Did Sachar describe the desert accurately in the book? Have students include pictures with their report.

5 Feet Tall, 5 Foot Round

In the book, Stanley and the other boys at Camp Green Lake had to dig a hole each day that was five feet tall and five feet round, using their shovel as a measuring stick. Have students cut out a string that is five feet long. Students go around that classroom, using their string as a measuring stick and try and find a classmate that is about five feet tall. Create circle on the ground with masking tape that has a five foot diameter. Have student who is closest to five feet tall stand in circle. Students can now see how big the hole Stanley and the other boys had to dig each day was.

Irony Tales

Discuss the concept of irony with the students. The novel *Holes* is littered with ironic aspects. For example, the name of the camp, Camp Green Lake, is ironic because the camp does not have a lake; in fact it hasn’t even rained there for 110 years. Have students find other examples of irony. Use other examples to show how irony can be funny. Have students in partners write a small story that has an aspect of irony in it.

Other Great Resources

http://english.byu.edu/novelinks/Novel pages/Holes.htm

http://www.eduref.org/cgi-bin/printlessons.cgi/Virtual/Lessons/Language_Arts/Reading/RDG0048.html

http://www.ucmp.berkeley.edu/glossary/gloss5/biome/

http://www.nancypolette.com/LitGuidesText/holes.htm