

WHS Book Rationale

Title: *Middlesex*

Author: Jeffrey Eugenides

- **Intended Audience**

A.P. English Literature and Composition students (seniors)—this is a college level course.

- **Brief summary and educational significance**

Middlesex is narrated by Cal Stephanides, who learns at age 14, after having been raised as a girl, that he is, biologically, a boy. In order to tell the story of his life, Cal takes us back to Greece (sometimes Turkey), where his Greek family began, and traces their flight from there to Detroit where his grandparents began a new life. We see their adjustment to their new country, the development of a family business, and eventually, the relationship of Cal's parents, leading to the birth of Calliope, whom everyone initially believed was a girl. When Calliope is 14 and living on Middlesex Ave. in Grosse Pointe, an accident takes her to an Emergency Room where doctors discover she is really a he, biologically. After several weeks of meeting with specialists, Cal decides to run away rather than undergo surgery to "fix" him. He spends a difficult time in San Francisco before returning home after his father's death. It is at his father's funeral that Cal learns how he came to have his rare genetic mutation.

Cal's narration employs elements of epic Greek poetry, makes multiple references to Classic literature, and examines the very contemporary issue of gender identity and acceptance. The historical sweep of the novel includes the Turkish atrocities in Smyrna, Prohibition, The Great Depression, World War II, the Vietnam War, Watergate, and the many social and family changes that accompanied those moments in history. *Middlesex's* subject matter is thoroughly modern, and its style and techniques are classic.

- **Purpose of teaching the work and how it will be used**

As summer required reading, it provides a great introduction to the close study of novels. It includes nearly everything outlined in Thomas C. Foster's *How to Read Literature Like a Professor* (allusions to sacred and classical texts, symbolism, motifs, etc), and it also pairs extremely well with the other required novel for summer: *Tess of the D'Urbervilles*. Both novels explore fate vs. free will, gender roles and expectations, society vs. the individual, and other common themes in works of literary merit. We will begin the school year with students demonstrating how the elements of literature described in Foster's book appear in both *Middlesex* and *Tess*. Both books also provide excellent material for practicing 2 types of essays found on the AP English Lit. exam.

- **Potential problems**

Given the premise of the book, there are several events that could be challenging for less mature students than seniors in AP English: Cal's particular genetic mutation is the result of incest between his grandparents who marry and hide their brother/sister relationship when they flee to America; given his female socialization and his male biology, Cal's early adolescence is plagued with concerns about her/his body and sexuality, and she/he experiments as most adolescents do, but with more dire and distressing results than most. Given that the novel begins just as the Turks are committing atrocities against the Greeks and spans 3 wars, riots in the 1960s, and the social upheaval of the 60s and 70s, there are multiple reference to violence and drugs in particular, though the main characters' involvement in both is minimal. When Cal runs away, he ends up in San Francisco where, to survive without being subject to attacks when living on the street, he performs in a peep show, where his rare physical condition is on display. It doesn't take him long to realize this is not what he wants from life, and he eventually returns home, goes to college, and winds up where we find him as the book opens—working for the U.S. Foreign Service in Berlin.

- **Addressing potential problems**

Class discussion of the connections between Callie/Cal and the Greek classics upon which much of the story is modeled will help to put in a literary/historical context much of what could be problematic. Understanding of Cal as an intersex individual and the medical/scientific facts of his "case" will be made easier by having Mrs. Montgomery as a resource (she is also reading the book and will help to answer questions and provide background).