

WHS Book Rationale

Title: *Waterland*

Author: Graham Swift

- **Intended Audience**

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

- **Brief summary and educational significance**

British high school History teacher, Tom Crick, is facing a crisis after his wife abducts a child and he is fired from his teaching job. As he awaits his firing, in response to a student's challenge of the significance of history as opposed to discussion of the "Here and Now," Tom begins telling his students his own personal history and the history of his family and the fens—England's "waterland." In the process of telling his stories, he addresses the nature of History and the complexities of human nature and relationships, and corollaries in the natural world. The novel provides for discussion of British literary, social, and economic history, and the relationships between literature, history, philosophies of the study of both. This book was shortlisted for the Booker Prize, and Swift subsequently won the Booker Prize for another novel; some literary critics believe he deserved the Booker for *Waterland*, and the later prize was an example of the committee correcting a past wrong.

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

This novel provides potential for answering nearly all past AP exam open-ended essay questions. This is due to the unique structure, narrative voice, characterization, thematic richness, social issues, and unique use of language. There are many passages that can serve as models for how to analysis brief prose passages, a skill test on the AP exam. Tom's narration allows for discussion of point of view and the reliability or unreliability of a narrator. Students have not previously been exposed to a contemporary British novel, so *Waterland* serves as a partner to the contemporary American works with which they are familiar and a point of comparison with older British works they have read over the years.

- **Potential problems**

Events in the plot, both from Tom's early years and the several centuries of his ancestors' stories, include the following: incest, murder, teen sex and sexual experimentation, teen pregnancy and abortion, and suicide. Tom very frankly describes the sexual experimentation between himself and his future wife when they were both still teenagers; in doing so, he uses language that is not considered by most readers to be profane or

vulgar, but conveys the characters' immaturity. For example, one brief chapter about Tom and Mary's early sexual encounters is titled "Holes and Things."

- **Addressing potential problems**

Class discussions include students' views of the characters' moral choices and the consequences they face. The nature of the novel's structure and the use of an unreliable first person narrator allows for discussion of why certain details are included and whether or not they are to be believed. This helps lead into discussions of one broad thematic focus of the novel—the nature of history. The sexual situations in the novel allow for testing and applying Foster's theory that in quality literature sex is never really about sex, but is a way to explore larger themes (see rationale for *How to Read Literature Like a Professor*).