

Knife and Butterfly – Classroom Lesson Plan

By Ashley Hope Pérez

Includes Virtual Author Interview

Book Synopsis

Knife and Butterfly follows Azael Thompson, a teenage boy in juvenile detention after a violent altercation leaves another student injured. Through reflective narration, Azael recounts the events that led to his incarceration while confronting issues of race, masculinity, family expectations, friendship, and identity. As he builds new relationships inside the facility, he begins to question cycles of anger and redefine his sense of self. Themes include redemption, accountability, trauma, justice, and transformation.

Banned / Challenged Status

Knife and Butterfly has been challenged in some districts due to strong language, depictions of violence, and themes involving sexuality and identity. Critics argue that the content may be mature for school settings. Supporters emphasize the novel's focus on personal growth, accountability, and empathy, as well as its realistic portrayal of adolescent struggles and justice system experiences.

Essential Questions

- Can individuals break cycles of violence?
- How do systemic pressures shape personal choices?
- What does accountability look like in the process of growth?

Lesson Objective

Students will analyze characterization and narrative structure to evaluate how the novel portrays redemption and identity transformation.

Lesson Structure (60 Minutes)

- Warm-Up (5 minutes): What factors influence how someone responds to conflict?

- Direct Instruction (15–20 minutes): Examine nonlinear narration and internal conflict. Define key terms: accountability, redemption, systemic pressure, perspective.
- Guided Practice (15 minutes): Analyze a reflective passage from Azael. Synthesis Question: How does Pérez challenge stereotypes about incarcerated youth?
- Independent Practice (15 minutes): Choice-based analytical or reflective response.
- Exit Ticket (5 minutes): Identify one moment that signals change.

Independent Practice Options

- Option A: Analyze how setting shapes character decisions.
- Option B: Reflect on the theme of redemption.
- Option C: Write a letter from Azael to his past self.

Creative Interpretation Option

- Character transformation timeline
- Justice system concept map
- Symbolism poster (knife vs. butterfly imagery)

All creative responses must include an artist statement citing specific textual evidence.

Reader Impact + Student Voice

- How does the novel humanize youth in the justice system?
- Why might books about incarceration face challenges?
- How can stories of redemption influence readers?
- Should schools include literature about systemic injustice? Why or why not?

Intellectual Freedom Connection

Writing Prompt: Should schools provide access to literature that explores violence, incarceration, and systemic injustice? Support your reasoning with textual evidence.

Author Interview

Author interview provided by UNBAN COOLIES.
Visit: <http://www.youtube.com/@unbanCOOLIES>

Lesson materials developed in partnership with UNBAN COOLIES.