

“All right, then, I’ll go to hell”: Language, Power and Racism in The Adventures of Huckleberry Finn

4+ weeks
11th or 12th Grade AP Literature

DESIRED RESULTS:

What are the “big ideas” that drive this lesson?

- Through an analysis of *Huckleberry Finn* students can assess the impact of the racial slur “Nigger” and evaluate the common conventions of American Realism, including dialect usage, first person narration, and imagery.

What are the “essential questions” that students will need to answer in order to understand the “big ideas”?

- How can an individual use language in order to gain power over another individual?
- How do dominant groups subjugate marginalized groups through language?
- What is the relationship between language use and identity formation?

CORE UNDERSTANDINGS:

Students will need to know:

- The relationship between language and a person’s ideas, beliefs, and values.
- How language can be used to subjugate an individual or an entire group (racial, religious, ethnic, etc.)
- How the conventions of American Realism (such as dialect usage, imagery, and first person narration aid in depicting the racial tensions present in Reconstruction America.
- Analyze literary prose in writing and verbally, specifically commenting on the way the narrator/author uses language to establish power dynamics within the text.

SUGGESTED ASSESSMENTS:

- Perform and/or write a script based on a portion of a novel.
- Quiz students on identification and comment on examples of language that showcases the psychology or identity formation of a particular character.

LEARNING EXPERIENCE:

Lesson One: The History of the “N” Word and *Huckleberry Finn*

1. Students will read a variety of sources independently, including Morrison’s “This Amazing Troubling Book”, Kaplan’s “Selling ‘Huck Finn’ Down the River” and Katutani’s “Light Out, Huck, They Still Want to Sivilize You”.

2. Students will also watch the *60 Minutes* episode from 2011 on the decision of NewSouth Books to publish the text without the “n” word.
3. Students will discuss the following questions in class:
 - Why would someone in 2012 want to remove the word “nigger” from a book?
 - Does a publishing company have the right to remove a word from a book that has been previously published with the word in it? Why or why not?
 - What arguments do Kaplan, Morrison, and Kakutani provide for leaving “nigger” in the text? Do you agree or disagree with these arguments? Why?
 - What arguments do NewSouth Books and John Wallace provide for removing the word from the text? Do you agree or disagree with these arguments? Why?

Lesson Two: How True is a True Story?

1. Students will read and analyze “A True Story, Word for Word as I Heard It” (1 to 2 days). The teacher will lead the class in a reading of “A True Story”. Students will annotate as the story is read. The reading of the story may be interrupted by students’ observations and comments.
2. Students will discuss the following questions in class:
 - Whose voices are heard in the story? When are these voices heard? Whose voice is the loudest? Why?
 - What are the features of the first narrator’s voice? In other words, what kinds of words does he use? What are his sentences like?
 - What are the features of the second narrator’s voice? What kinds of words does she use? What are her sentences like?
 - How is the story structured? Think about the way the paragraphs are structured and the story as a whole.
 - Do you think this story is, as its title says, “A True Story, Word for Word as I Heard It”? Why or why not?
 - Who has power in the story? How is power gained, maintained, or taken in the story?
3. Students will then watch a performance of “A True Story, Word for Word as I Heard It”. These questions should follow:
 - Was Aunt Rachel different than how you imagined her? Explain.
 - How does the story sound when it is performed out loud? How does the performance further understate Rachel’s character?
 - Do you notice any body movement? How do these body movements add to your understanding of Rachel’s character and her relationship to the first narrator?

Lesson Three: Language, Power and Race in *Huckleberry Finn*

4. This lesson begins with an analysis of the reader’s introduction to Jim in chapter 2 of *Huck Finn*. Pertinent questions include:
 - How does Huck characterize Jim? What do you think Huck thinks of Jim? Why?
 - How does Tom interact differently with Jim than Huck? Explain.

- Does Huck’s characterization of Jim reinforce any stereotypes that whites might have had about blacks in the nineteenth century? Does it challenge or deviate from any stereotypes?
 - What do you think Twain thinks of Jim? Does he have the same opinion of him as does Huck? How do you know?
5. Once students have completed this activity, they will be introduced to the Commonplace book. Commonplacing is the act of selecting important phrases, lines, and/or passages from texts and writing them down; the commonplace book is the notebook in which a reader has collected quotations from works he/she has read. Commonplace books can also include comments and notes from the reader.
 6. For this assignment, students will be asked to keep track of the relationship between language and race and language and identify formation in the text. Key questions include:
 - How does Twain use language to characterize his narrator?
 - How does the narrator use language to characterize other characters?
 - How do dialects inform our understanding of a particular character?
 - How do dialogue and the structure of dialogue influence our understanding of a character?
 - What do dialogue and the structure of dialogue reveal about the author’s opinions regarding a particular character?
 7. Students should look for examples of the following:
 - Figures of speech
 - Euphemisms
 - Refusal to say someone’s name
 - Silencing someone
 - Caricatures/caricatured speech
 - Calling someone a name
 - Structure of narration/dialogue
 - Length of responses in dialogue
 - Dialects
 8. Students should be prepared to share and discuss their findings with the class.
 9. Students will also work in groups to select a scene with more than one character from the text. Students must turn their selected section of the text into a script using Twain’s original language and including stage directions and blocking notes.
 10. Students should have the experience of reading through the script with their group members. The hope is that by turning a section of the script they can better identify and discuss the subtleties of power dynamics between characters.

“COMMON CORE” CONNECTIONS:

- CCSS.ELA-Literacy.CCRA.R.4 : Interpret words and phrases as they are used in a text, including determining technical, connotative, and figurative

- meanings, and analyze how specific word choices shape meaning or tone.
- CCSS.ELA-Literacy.CCRA.R.1: Read closely to determine what the text says explicitly and to make make logical references from it; cite specific textual evidence when writing or speaking to support conclusions drawn from the text.

SUGGESTED LESSON EXTENSION:

- Research and report on other examples of where language has been used in American history to help subjugate a specific group (racial, religious, ethnic).

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