An Approach to Roll of Thunder Hear My Cry

Curriculum Unit 19.02.09
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Synopsys

This unit introduces instructional moves for how teachers can use their classroom libraries for deep critical thinking on issues of race, racism, and inequality. This unit uses a middle school level novel *Roll of Thunder, Hear My Cry* (Taylor, 1976), but the content objectives, teaching strategies, and activities are applicable to any novel study. Building upon how classroom libraries function as resources for thought provoking literature and discussions from the 2019 Yale Teachers Institute Seminar Teaching about Race and Racism Across the Disciplines, this unit primarily explores the historical context of the novel primarily using the language of music to analyze characters. Students will develop interpretations about how these conditions influenced characters’ traits, roles, or conflicts and construct a central thesis on a character of their choice. It incorporates pedagogical tools and resources expanding curricular strategies and provides a framework for student discussion beyond the text on issues about race, racism, and forms of inequality.

Introduction

As a middle school English Language Arts teacher, I have taught this novel using traditional English Language Arts strategies in which students examine how dialogue, scenes and setting serve to reveal the characters’ true nature, motivations and intentions. The novel is historical fiction, so an overview of the historical content of the socio-political structures of the Jim Crow era where the plot is set were referenced, but not foregrounded to meet curricular scope and sequence pacing. Lesson outcomes reflected mastery of standard language conventions (such as punctuation in dialogue) and inferred character traits (traits determined by what is said, done, and believed). Although these are important skills, my approach to teaching this novel missed the opportunity to take a deep dive into issues of race, racism, and inequality. It could be argued that my teaching defaulted to a neutral approach to teaching this novel that reinforces issues of colorblindness in the curriculum. This unit considers an approach to de-neutralize perspectives in favor of critical thinking that promotes students’ engagement in character analyses about “aggrieved peoples who have always had to negotiate state violence and cultural erasure, but who also work to build the worlds they envision.”

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Recognizing the argument that “it isn’t enough to include texts by historically aggrieved populations in the curriculum and classroom without producing new approaches to reading,” this unit presents a different approach to reading the text by foregrounding the socio-political forms of power preluding the Civil Rights era. Students will engage in critical character analysis by analyzing the antecedents of these forms of power that shape the larger story and underpin character motivations.

**Rationale**

*Roll of Thunder’s* literary elements are on par with thought provoking classics like *To Kill A Mockingbird* (Lee, 1960) and *The Color Purple*, (Walker, 1982). Like these classics, it was critically acclaimed but stirred public controversy because of its confrontation of issues on race, racism, and inequality. These issues remain controversial and apropos to Milner’s observation that “some teachers don’t consider race germane to their math or English syllabus. Others strive for colorblindness in the classroom, wanting to believe we live in a post-racial society.” As I was developing this unit, an internet search of ROT units and lessons shows this in action reinforcing the popular pervasive, yet incomplete narratives that “…on December 1, 1955, the modern civil rights movement began when Rosa Parks, an African-American woman, was arrested for refusing to move to the back of the bus in Montgomery, Alabama…” In fact, a large body of research recognizes that the racial ideology of the pre–civil rights era is often untaught, unknown, or not fully understood. Historians caution, “popular narratives create the impression that a small group of charismatic leaders, particularly Rosa Parks and Dr. Martin Luther King Jr., were primarily responsible for civil rights gains.” The caution is explained in greater detail:

“Often cast in a ‘Montgomery to Memphis’ frame that parallels the public life of Martin Luther King Jr., the Civil Rights Movement has taken on an air of inevitability in the popular imagination. Images and film footage have frozen the movement in time as an era when people risked their lives to end the crippling system of segregation in the South, and to secure the rights and privileges fundamental to American citizenship. For many young people, it looms as a shining moment in the distant past, with little relevance to contemporary issues concerning race, democracy, and social justice.”

Taking a deeper dive into the curricular strategies for centering examinations on race and racism helps students to critically interrogate the text beyond conventional character investigation and avoids “reducing lessons about a handful of heroic figures and the four words “I have a dream.” This script is so well defined that it leaves students conceptually stranded. This unit creates a counter narrative and resources for pedagogical tools to unpack these dominant approaches.

I want students to fully understand the author’s position to “tell the truth about what life was like before the Civil Rights Movement,” which led me to rethink how I can teach this novel in a developmentally appropriate way for middle school students. I thought about best practices using comprehensible input, the deliberate teaching of content in way that is accessible for all students from diverse backgrounds and knowledge (this may include visual aids, gestures, and cognates), that confronts issues of race and racism through historical
analysis of laws and social norms shaping understandings about how “racism has contributed to all contemporary manifestations of group advantage and disadvantage.”

Thus, I approach this unit with renewed intention to build stronger agency between teaching and learning to spotlight that the movement, an ongoing intentional act of people working to advance shared political and social change, “was much bigger than its most notable leaders, and that millions of people mustered the courage to join the struggle, very often risking their lives in the process.”

This is at the heart of the characters in the novel expressed by Taylor upon accepting the 1997 Alan Award given by the by the National Council of Teachers of English to honor significant contributions to the field of young adult and adolescent literature. Taylor notes:

“I envisioned presenting a family united in love and self-respect, and parents, strong and sensitive, attempting to guide their children successfully without harming their spirits, through the hazardous maze of living in a discriminatory society. I wanted readers to know this family, based upon my own, and I wanted them to feel akin to them and to walk in their shoes.”

Objectives:

This defining time in history has implications for rich interdisciplinary learning. ELA and History content standards recognize these opportunities, but formalized integration is not readily addressed in the ELA or History curriculum despite a plethora of resources. How then might teachers trouble their pedagogy to counter colorblindness in the classroom? First, as a reference point for teachers, institutions like the Southern Poverty Law Center and the Equal Justice Initiative are easily accessible resources that teachers can use in their curricular approach. Additionally, the National Endowment for the Arts summer institute Stony The Road We Trod: Exploring Alabama’s Civil Rights Legacy provides resources and an extensive in-depth critical examination of the pre-post-Civil Rights Movement. Finally, pre-existing curriculum units like Teaching Tolerance through the Civil Rights Movement, integrates ELA and Social Studies curricula. As a reference point for students, background knowledge is needed to understand the conditions underpinning the novel as the era in which the novel is set predates the movement, and students need to understand familiar historical figures did not exist during this time. These are further discussed in the strategies and classroom activities section of this unit.

Common Core alignment between ELA and History objectives provides opportunities for successful cross-disciplinary engagement. In fact, many ELA and History objectives share the same literacy standards. Both standards in this unit integrates knowledge and provides multiple entry points to achieving the unit’s overall purpose. Objectives RI-RH ground student learning in the historical context of the novel while building character analysis skills. Objective W.7.2 provides opportunities for students to reflect both ELA and History objectives by showcasing their character analysis through writing.

CCSS.ELA-LITERACY.RI.7.3: Analyze a fictional character (through dialogue, plot, conflict, and resolution) by examining the interactions between individuals, events, and ideas in a text (e.g., how ideas influence individuals or events, or how individuals influence ideas or events). This objective will be achieved as students create character profiles.
CCSS.ELA-LITERACY.RH.6-8.8 Distinguish among fact, opinion, and reasoned judgment in a text. This objective drives the primary purpose of the unit. This objective will be achieved as students build background knowledge of the novel’s historical era.

CCSS.ELA-LITERACY.RH.6-8.7: Integrate visual information (e.g., in charts, graphs, photographs, videos, or maps) with other information in print and digital texts. This objective will be achieved as students analyze the lyrics and connect to the historical music of the era.

CCSS.ELA-LITERACY.W.7.2: Write informative/explanatory texts to examine a topic and convey ideas, concepts, and information through the selection, organization, and analysis of relevant content. This objective will be achieved after reading when students write a short piece about a character of their choice. The written piece should succinctly integrate their learning from Objectives RI-RH to showcase their character analysis.

**Strategies**

It is universally understood that critical thinking is at the core of how students interrogate texts. Sternberg\textsuperscript{xvi} notes the important role of critical thinking including active skills like analyzing arguments, claims, or evidence, making inferences using inductive or deductive reasoning, judging or evaluating, and making decisions or solving problems.\textsuperscript{xvii} Newly revised Common Core State Standards punctuate this by recognizing its importance as a vital skill for college and career readiness\textsuperscript{xviii} as an overall goal. Strategies are driven by Common Core State Standards for English Language Arts Literacy and History. Research based frameworks for leveraging critical thinking skills will be used to achieve unit goals such as revised Bloom’s Taxonomy\textsuperscript{xx} (Bloom is universally agreed upon as the standard educators use to define hierarchical thinking skills) and Marzano’s high-yield instructional strategies, (identification of relational patterns, visual representations, and graphic organizers).\textsuperscript{xx} The strategies used for this unit incorporates didactic journaling, a character profile organizer, a lyric analysis organizer, a timeline picture walk, and an essay outline:

Strategy 1: Didactic journaling (also known as a double entry journal or reader’s response notebook) will use open-ended questioning to deeply engage with the ideas in the text. This strategy supports CCSS.ELA-LITERACY.RI.7.3: where students will use questioning to create a character profile.

Strategy 2: Timeline picture walks will be used as a primary source and build important background information. This strategy supports objective CCSS.ELA-LITERACY.RH.6-8.8 The timeline will organize historical events and the accompanying pictures will provide visual aids to help students grasp the context and historical era of the text.

Strategy 3: A graphic organizer will help students analyze the music of the era to help them understand the historical content of the novel and develop deeper character analysis. This strategy connects to objective CCSS.ELA-LITERACY.RH.6-8.7.

Strategy 4: Writing graphic organizers will be used to help students plan and organize their written essays. This strategy connect to objective CCSS.ELA-LITERACY.W.7.2.
Classroom Activities:

Three classroom activities for this unit can take place during reading and writing workshop and are highly adaptable to any classroom. Students will also have the option of using audio supports as they read the novel. Audio is available for free online making for easy access for teachers and students. Pacing incorporates on average three chapters per day which will most likely be assigned as homework. Reading and writing workshop activities are designed to take place before, during, and after reading and can be used in any order. Pacing for activities is according to classroom discretion.

Activity 1:

Reading Workshop:

As a reference point for students, background knowledge is needed to understand the conditions underpinning the novel as the era in which the novel is set predates the movement. Students need to understand familiar historical figures, and civil rights organizations did not exist during this time. The initiating activity uses a timeline picture walk as a primary source, and as a framework to introduce the structural and institutionalized oppression underpinning the conflict and plot in the novel. The purpose of this activity is to “enhance students' ability to use mental images to represent and elaborate on knowledge.”

From this activity, students will categorize the facts and their opinions to make reasoned judgements about the novel’s historical content, and extend class discussion about how those issues exist today. To help guide their thinking, students will analyze the living conditions of the Jim Crow era by examining wordless pictures before reading. They will write questions based on their observations and discuss in small groups. From this entry point, students be given a timeline picture walk to learn about historical events targeting critical points in history like Jim Crow, Reconstruction, the 14th and 15 Amendment, and Plessy vs. Ferguson. The timeline will help students chronologically organize historical events and the accompanying pictures will help bring context to the events as students analyze to draw conclusions. Teacher resources from History.com’s civil rights page, the Smithsonian’s National Museum of African American History, and Library of Congress’ Segregation Exhibit and Culture are recommended sites with historically accurate information containing accessible timeline picture walks.

Extension Activity 1:

During this extension activity, students will engage in conversations examining the connotative meaning of the word “movement.” Through this activity, students will understand that word “movement” can have multiple perspectives and influences meaning. Students will learn that connotation means words can have emotional associations and do not exist in definition alone. Students will be given a graphic organizer where they will create visuals representing the connotative meaning of the word. This activity will help students to conceptualize the fight for civil rights as fluid, not just an static event that started with the denial of a bus seat and ended with the assassination of an iconic leader.

Writing Workshop:

During reading, students will place characters of their choice on the picture walk timeline and discuss their choices in small groups. For example, where might a student place a sharecropper? How does that placement
change or remain the same today? Students will also think about modern day figures and compare their characteristics to a character in the novel. Students will consider open-ended questions like what modern day figure best shares similar/different characteristics with your chosen character from the novel and why? Students will record their responses in their didactic journals. Didactic journals help students synthesize their understandings through the practice of conversation by constructing open-ended questions and answers based on what they learn, read, and understand. The journals are meant to help students engage in deep conversations with the text.

**Activity 2:**

**Reading Workshop:**

During reading, students will create a log of open-ended questioning to create character profiles. Students will mainly focus on the socio-economic and political forces driving the novel’s conflict in order to analyze a character of their choice. Using the picture-walks during reading, students will explore the references to the people, places, and events from key eras pre-dating and leading up to the Civil Rights Movement. Using didactic journals, students will create two-three open-ended questions as they research during the picture walks. Students will engage in academic conversations designed to probe their observations and craft possible responses to questions. Students are encouraged to illustrate any historical relevant information gleaned during their research. Students will follow-up their learning using a modified KWL organizer. KWL traditionally stands for three reading comprehension questions: 1. What do I already know? 2. What do I want to know? and 3. What have I learned? For this unit, students will use the questions 1. What did I believe before reading? 2. What most surprised me? And 3. What understandings did I confirm or change?

**Activity 2 Extension:**

Character Hypothesis: Static vs Dynamic: Using the picture walks, journals, and KWL, students will formulate their understandings about a character of their choice. This process is ongoing and will develop as students read. Students will form a hypothesis on their analysis by comparing or contrasting a character’s static or dynamic traits germane to story specifics by examining the character’s traits according to the text and who they would have been during the Civil Rights era. Students will write about their conclusions drawn in their journals

**Writing Workshop:**

Students will use a character profile graphic organizer (teacher or student created) to record their understandings using three main headings: 1. Questions: under this heading, students will consider both dialogue and plot to craft questions as they develop their interpretations. Questions will be open-ended like how did Jim Crow laws prevent characters from owning land or hold an elected position within the community? Or how/why did characters engage in civil disobedience to change societal conditions despite Jim Crow laws? 2. Timeline: under this heading, students will create, draw, or describe the daily life of the characters. They will be encouraged to choose the most important events or details that shape the character’s perspective. Here, students may need guidance on avoiding a chapter by chapter summary as the goal is to record significant events instead of small details. Using the pre-work completed on their timelines in the initiating activity is useful in helping to organize student work. 3. Research: under this heading, students will use text details and their timelines to include information needed to accurately portray their character.
Activity 3:

Reading Workshop:

Students will create a character soundtrack. There is a growing academic field called Sound Studies focused on the "cultural politics of sound and listening." Williams who notes, "probing the identity of a literary character in terms of popular songs and popular culture may help students understand their own motivation and identity." Through this approach, students will explore this emerging field by interrogating characters through the language of music in order to build tighter context, deeper critical thinking, and stronger character analysis. This activity seeks to put in dialogue the exploration of characters through music and to develop broader understandings about the role of music within the context of liberation from oppressive political norms. Students will study and connect to the historical music of the era. History shows that African American spirituals, gospel, and folk music played a central role during this time - a topic of study that can be a curricular unit unto itself. I argue that the lyrics of this era serves as a secondary source. In fact, the novel’s title Roll of Thunder was derived from an African American spiritual. Buckner et. al assert, “because music was such a vital part of the movement, it can be merged with the ideological history to provide students with a richer understanding of the period.” Songs of activism, resistance, and perseverance are hallmarks of the novel and connects to Armstrong et. al noting, “Music can be analyzed intellectually within the context of the struggles that informed the Civil Rights Movement, and can summon the emotional and aesthetic energy that was pivotal during that time.” Using song lyrics as secondary sources, students will use selected lyrics as interpretive tools to critically analyze characters. From this activity, student learning is scaffolded into the character analysis essay. During reading, students will take a musical walk cataloging songs apropos to their learning. They will make deeper connections using the resources from the documentary Soundtrack for a Revolution. This documentary is used as a secondary resource and is expected to be a classroom favorite as students as they will hear songs of the movement sung by popular contemporary artists, while exploring archival footage and listening to interviews. Using their dialectical journals, students will take notes using the open-ended questioning strategies from activities 1-2.

Writing Workshop:

Character Soundtrack: Students will create a 5-song playlist for a character of choice detailing his or her traits, beliefs, and actions spanning the novel’s plot line. Selected songs will include its title, a line from the song, and a rational that best synthesizes the character(s). Students will use their journals to explain song choice and rationale. Students will present their conclusions in peer groups. During this time, students will evaluate the strengths and weaknesses of each members’ character analysis citing compatible or contrary text based evidence and research in completed from their character profiles completed in Activity 2. Students will integrate their learning from all activities to write a draft essay analyzing a character of their choice.

Primary Resources for Teachers:


This is a critical essay by Blake presenting arguments on issues of racial justice. It is a good read for teachers.
interested in denaturalizing colorblindness within the curriculum.


This critical essay addresses the hard conversation around race and racism. It is a good read for teachers who wish to address the issue of colorblindness in the curriculum.


This is an excellent web-based resource for teachers and students. Its mission is to educate and promote active participation in diverse democracy. It provides resources and curricular supplements that are easily accessible for teachers and students.

Equal Justice Initiative: https://eji.org/

This is a great resource in helping students understand the roots of racial injustice. This web site has a plethora of resources that teachers can access in understanding issues on race and racism.

Stony The Road We Trod: Exploring Alabama’s Civil Rights Legacy: https://www.stonytheroad.org/

This is an amazing professional development for teachers in partnership with the National Endowment for the Humanities and the Alabama Humanities Foundation. This intensive professional development is an interactive field study on Alabama’s role in the modern Civil Rights Movement.


This resource discusses Bloom’s taxonomies, the foundation for high ordered thinking skills. It details the levels of taxonomies is a can be used to help teachers develop lesson plans aimed at higher ordered thinking activities and learning outcomes for students.


This is a key read for teachers. It reorganizes Bloom’s taxonomies to meet the expectations of the new Common Core Standards. It is a useful resource for teachers in helping to craft learning expectations and outcomes using newly revised Bloom’s taxonomies.


This book is a valuable resource for teachers who want to learn about and teach the Civil Rights Movement.
The book provides multiple perspectives on how to present materials related to the era and student centered high interest strategies.


This publication is a great short read on how to use nonlinguistic representations in the classroom. It defines what nonlinguistic representations are and gives examples of how this strategy is effectively used in the classroom.


A good read examining characters through popular songs and cultures and why this approach is appealing to student learning.

https://www.marzanoresearch.com/robert-j-marzano

This website presents Marzano’s nine high yield strategies and their percentage gains. It is a useful tool for teachers who want to use this as a resource guide.

https://static.pdesas.org/content/documents/M1-Slide_19_DOK_Wheel_Slide.pdf

This a great resource for teachers who need a reference for lesson planning. The Depth of Knowledge (DOK) are presented as The resource uses an easily accessible graphic to present the DOK’s and suggests activities to reinforce them.

Newly Revise Bloom’s Taxonomy:
https://www.evms.edu/media/departments/medical_education/New_Blooms_Taxonomy3-7-14.pdf

This is a useful resource guide presenting newly revised Bloom’s Taxonomy. The chart provides categories, examples, and skill based verbs. This is a handy resource for teachers to have on hand when lesson planning.

Primary Resources for Students:

Sound Studies: https://soundstudiesblog.com/sound-studies-blog/mission/

A great blog for students to use and easily applicable. This weekly online publication brings together sound studies scholars for discussion on a variety of topics. Sound studies is an emerging field.

Soundtrack for a Revolution:
https://www.thirteen.org/programs/american-experience/american-experience-soundtrack-for-a-revolution/

A great web based resource for students and teachers presenting the Civil Rights Movement in a student friendly way. Students hear songs of the movement sung by popular contemporary artists while exploring archival footage and listening to interviews.
Primary Resources for the Classroom:


This book highlights perspectives on segregation. Students reading this text will be able to make connections to similar issues in *Roll of Thunder*.


This book is student friendly and presents the Reconstruction Era in a way that brings this era in history alive for students. Students will be able to make connections between *Roll of Thunder* and this book.


This book is about what American life was like during the Reconstruction Era and what the living conditions under Jim Crow. Students will make connections between *Roll of Thunder* and the era in which the novel takes place.

Appendix:

I want students to engage in critical thinking habits to aptly critique characters evidencing higher-ordered depths of knowledge in the strategic and extended thinking domains. Care and attention are paid to developing unit objectives that meet these criteria using both ELA and History standards interchangeably. Newly revised Common Core State Standards emphasize that critical thinking is at the core of how students interrogate texts, master higher ordered thinking skills, and recognizes its importance as a vital skill for college and career readiness. Common Core Standards and the New Haven Public Schools ELA curriculum focuses on students developing their critical and extended thinking skills in preparation for college and career readiness. To meet these expectations, this unit implements academic standards such as research based strategies and higher ordered cognitive skill- based lessons.


https://www.thirteen.org/programs/american-experience/american-experience-soundtrack-for-a-revolution/

https://static.pdesas.org/content/documents/M1-Slide_19_DOK_Wheel_Slide.pdf