



Curriculum Units by Fellows of the Yale-New Haven Teachers Institute
1978 Volume II: 20th Century Afro-American Culture

Parallel Studies in American/Afro-American Literature

Curriculum Unit 78.02.07
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Rationale

The purpose of this unit is to point out parallels and similarities between selected writings of white and black Americans that appeared during the last part of the nineteenth century and the first half of the twentieth, illustrating that they share common traditions, aspirations, and dilemmas. While there are those who feel that the study of Afro-American writings should be separated from those of white Americans to ensure adequate coverage, the rationale for a joint, comparative study emphasized the fact that white and black writers, under the same canopy of artistic and humanistic expression, have shared interests in the same themes, have experimented with similar writing styles, and have found themselves facing the same artistic conundrums.

This particular unit is divided into three sections. Within each section, representative writings of white and black writers will be discussed and compared. This unit may be taught as a whole, or may be taught in independent sections, depending on available time and ambition of the students and teacher. This course is designed as an elective for high-ability high school juniors and seniors.

Section 1 . The Plantation Tradition: George Washington Cable, Joel Chandler Harris, and Thomas Nelson Page.

George Washington Cable, Joel Chandler Harris, and Thomas Nelson Page were three among many white writers at the end of the nineteenth century who wrote about the Old South in the romantic plantation tradition.

Page stood out as the leading portrayer of what E.C. Stedman sentimentally termed “the unspeakable charm that lived and died with the Old South.” In such volumes as *In Ole Virginia* , or *Marse Chan and Other Stories* (1887), *The Old South: Essays Social and Political* (1892), and *Social Life in Old Virginia* (1897), Page, adopting a condescending and benevolent attitude, creates an appealing plantation scene, the main characteristics of which are summed up by Hugh Gloster:

Stately mansions are presided over by lovely ladies and gallant gentlemen who wear imported finery, enjoy horseracing and other gentle diversions, and dispense prodigal hospitality. The attitude of these cavaliers toward their slaves is cordial, kindly, benign, and sometimes devoted. The contented bondsmen appear proudly engaged as servants in the big house or as laborers in the fields. Near the quarters are prankish pickaninnies romping gleefully in youthful abandon and black veterans resting comfortably in their declining years. (*Negro Voices In*

“More than the retrospective romancer of a vanished civilization, Page was also the partisan defender of the patriarchal South,” Gloster writes. In *Pastime Stories* (1894), in his novel *Red Rock* (1898), and in an essay in *The Old South* (1892), Page reinforces the belief that the black man, being unprogressive as well as mentally and socially inferior, is not prepared to assume the unlimited enjoyment of citizenship. Though demanding Anglo-Saxon supremacy, Page at least looked with favor upon Negroes like Booker T. Washington, and felt that the two races could thrive in a system of social separation. Unlike Thomas Dixon, the Negrophobe of the plantation cult novelists, Page never attempted to excuse the anti-black terrorism of the KKK in the South. In the fiction of Thomas Nelson Page and Thomas Dixon, the “mixed-blood” is portrayed as the embodiment of the worst qualities of both races and hence as a menace to the dominant group. By contrast, George Washington Cable, a native of New Orleans and a Confederate veteran, wrote favorably about the exotic *gens de couleur* of Louisiana during the early 1800’s. In the lives of these persons of mixed blood, as presented in *Old Creole Days* (1879) and *The Grandissimes* (1880), Cable discovered distinctive subjects for local color and romance. A collection of short stories, *Old Creole Days* contains two narratives noteworthy for their interpretation of problems of the color line, “Tite Oulette” and “Madame Delphine,” which both present awe-inspiring mulatto characters. His novel *Grandissimes* also provides further sympathetic treatment of mixed bloods in old Louisiana. Unlike the advocates of racialism and the plantation tradition, Cable unblinkingly faced the facts of race and caste in the southern setting which he described.

In his excellent anthology of selections from George Washington Cable, Arlin Turner tells us that the story “Bras Coupé,” originally entitled “Bibi,” had been incorporated by Cable into a larger novel, *The Grandissimes*. Removed from the novel and restored to its original status as a short story, “Bras Coupé” stands as a powerful and tragic tale of slavery and passion. It is important to know that Cable hated slavery and was angered by the power it gave the white man over the lives of the Negroes. Likewise useful is the realization whites feared voodoo as a great and terrible force. The curse Bras Coupé puts on the plantation is effective. The story itself is a magnificent study of a savage temperament trapped by patterns of life it cannot understand.

Of all of the American writers of this period, Joel Chandler Harris has made the most permanent contribution in dealing with the Negro. According to Alain Locke in *The New Negro*, there is in his work a deepening of both interest and technique. “Here at last we have something approaching true portraiture,” Locke notes. The Uncle Remus stories of Joel Chandler Harris are fashioned after the original folk tales of the African slaves, but these stories reflect only a fraction of “the rich variety of story forms, legends, saga cycles, songs, proverbs, and fantastic, almost mystical material from which they are taken.” We must keep in mind, however, that the Uncle Remus stories are not tales but adaptations. The dialect used to represent Negro speech is of questionable accuracy. The works of Joel Chandler Harris were “consciously devised, artistically wrought, patiently carved-out expressions of a story writer who knew his art and employed it well.” They too have the flavor of the Thomas Nelson Page tradition, and though they endeavored to give a faithful portrait of the Negro, it cannot be denied that such portraits as they gave were highly romanticized, interpreting the Negro in a manner neither objective nor realistic.

While their handling of subject matter is questionable, the importance of Cable, Harris, and Page rests in their participation in the “local color movement” that dominated American fiction from the Civil War to the turn of the century. It was local color, delighting in the picturesque and romantic, that popularized the short story and helped establish it as a distinct form.

Black Writers Respond to the Plantation Tradition: Paul Lawrence Dunbar and Charles W. Chesnutt

Although several white writers undertook to portray the Negro realistically in fiction written after the Civil War, their works, when sympathetic, dealt chiefly with the problems of mulattoes in American society, an approach to Negro character that kept many white writers from painting the whole picture. Few characterizations existed of the dark-skinned Negro who suffers, hates, rebels, and aspires. Few bothered to explain or imply that when mulattoes succeeded better than full-blooded Negroes they did so not because of white blood but because of higher social status or the position of their families. It thus became chiefly the responsibility of the Negro writers of the time to correct this picture and to counteract the propaganda of racialism and the plantation tradition. Negro novelists like Paul Lawrence Dunbar and Charles W. Chesnutt reacted in various ways to caste in America as it existed in letters and in life. Although they chose in certain cases to give little attention to controversial racial issues, writing narratives about white people or plantation tales about Negroes, they also undertook to defend the black man and to make a case for social justice.

Paul Lawrence Dunbar dealt primarily with white characters in three novels, *The Uncalled* (1890), *The Love of Landry* (1900), and *The Fanatics* (1900) as well as in "Ohio Pastoral," a series of five short stories which appeared in 1901 in *Lippencott's Monthly Magazine*. Dunbar imitated the idyllic romancing of Page and Harris in three books of short stories: *Folks from Dixie* (1898), *In Old Plantation Days* (1903), and *The Heart of Happy Hollow* (1904). However, in *The Strength of Gideon* (1900), Dunbar's best attempt to realistically portray Negro life, the Harris-Page formulas are challenged.

As Darwin T. Turner points out in his introduction to Dunbar's *The Strength of Gideon and Other Stories*, Dunbar, in securing the help of sympathetic white readers, emphasized the virtues of Negroes by reminding America of the loyalty and devotion they had exhibited as slaves. But Dunbar had difficulty distinguishing slaves from freedmen in his works largely because he was born, reared, and educated in the North and never knew southern Negroes, to whom he must have felt superior. He felt far enough away from the southern situation to idealize and ridicule "benignly" stereotypes already molded by Joel Chandler Harris and Thomas Nelson Page. Dunbar's ignorance of the life of the southern Negro makes us somewhat suspicious of the authenticity of the dialect speech that so popularized and characterized many of his shorter works.

According to Darwin Turner, *The Strength of Gideon* reveals the complete spectrum of Dunbar's thought and prose style. "Mammy Peggy's Pride" and the title work, "The Strength of Gideon," typify the plantation stories that he wrote to champion his race. "Mammy Peggy's Pride" shows how some slaves identified themselves with the families of their masters. "The Strength of Gideon" asks respect for slaves who placed honor and duty above their personal interests.

"The Fruitful Sleeping of the Rev. Elisha Edwards," "Uncle Simon's Sunday's Out," and "The Case of Ca'line" are meant to be humorous. However, "Viney's Free Papers," "The Finding of Zach," "Silas Jackson," and "The Trustfulness of Polly" are intended as moral lessons for young Negroes. "Ingrate" and "The Tragedy of Three Forks" focus on injustices to Negroes in the South, while "An Old-Time Christmas," "Mr. Cornelius Johnson: Office Seeker," "A Mess of Pottage," "A Council of State," and "One Man's Fortune" deal with injustices in the North. These stories reveal both the talent and the limitations of a writer whose fiction never approached the artistry of his poems.

Dunbar's contemporary, Charles W. Chesnutt, was concerned primarily with the "color line" and the contacts and conflicts of the two worlds it separated. In the five volumes to his credit, he has revealed himself as a fiction writer of a high order. Like Dunbar, Chesnutt portrayed white life, as in the superbly constructed tale

“Baxter’s Procrustes,” which appeared in *The Atlantic Monthly* in 1904. Also a conformist to the plantation tradition, Chesnutt wrote *The Conjure Woman* (1899), admitting indebtedness to Joel Chandler Harris. This collection of tales showed that cruelty and oppression were occasional practices on the slave plantation. *The Wife of His Youth and Other Stories* (1889) together with three novels, *The Marrow of Tradition* (1901), *The House Behind the Cedars* (1900), and *The Colonel’s Dream* (1905), are serious efforts by Chesnutt to correct the distortions of reconstruction fiction and offset the school of Page and Cable.

The publication of Chesnutt’s first short story, “The Goophered Grapevine,” in *The Atlantic Monthly* in 1887, brought him to the attention of George Washington Cable. They soon became close friends and corresponded often. “The Goophered Grapevine” drew deeply upon the wealth of Afro-American folklore whose surface had been merely touched by the Uncle Remus tales of Joel Chandler Harris. Harris’s tales were amusing, genteel, moralistic children’s tales told mostly by Uncle Remus, a kindly slave who gained nobility by serving his white master. Remus, though, is little more than the stereotyped “happy darky” of the plantation school of Thomas Nelson Page. Chesnutt had no intention of perpetuating this stereotype. In 1890 he wrote George Washington Cable:

I notice that all of many Negroes (excepting your own) whose virtues have been given to the world in the magazine press recently have been blacks, full-blooded, and their chief virtues have been their dog-like fidelity to their masters, for whom they have been willing to sacrifice almost life itself. Such characters exist. ...But I can’t write about those people, or rather I won’t write about them.

Instead, he created Uncle Julius McAdoo, a freedman of mixed blood, whose shrewd tales of witchcraft manipulated white people into doing his bidding. In “The Goophered Grapevine,” a northerner who has moved South after the war plans to buy a vineyard but is advised against the purchase by Uncle Julius, who relates the strange and tragic events caused by the “goopher,” or magic, placed on the vines. After buying the land, the northerner discovers that Uncle Julius has been profiting from the sale of the produce of the vineyard. Not aware of the racial identity of the author of these manufactured folk tales, the publishers demanded more. Chesnutt, however, wanted to write about more controversial matters. In a letter to Cable, dated June 5, 1890, Chesnutt wrote:

The kind of stuff I could write, if I were not all the time oppressed by the fear that this line of this sentiment would offend somebody’s prejudices, jar on somebody’s American-trained sense of propriety, would I believe, find a ready sale in England. ...

To the accusation from a critic, a Mr. Gilder, that Chesnutt is too bitter, he wrote in the same letter:

Pardon my earnestness, I write *de plein coeur* —as I feel. Mr. Gilder finds that I either lack humor or that my characters have a “brutality, a lack of mellowness, lack of spontaneous imaginative life, lack of outlook that makes them uninteresting.” I fear, alas, that those are exactly the things that do characterize people of that kind, the only qualities which the government and society had for 300 years labored faithfully, zealously, and successfully to produce, the only qualities which would have rendered their life at all endurable in the 19th century. I suppose I shall have to drop the attempt at realism and try to make them like other folks.

The kind of story Chesnutt wanted to write is represented in “The Sheriff’s Children,” which became part of his collection *The Wife of His Youth*, in which a mulatto son tries to kill his white father, the sheriff, but dies instead by deliberately not attending to his own wound. Other examples of controversial stories include “The Wife of His Youth” in which a prominent “blue-vein” Negro reveals after a struggle of conscience that the black woman who has come to his house is his former slave bride, and “Her Virginia Mammy” in which a

heroic black mother denies that she is the parent of her fair-skinned daughter so that she may marry into social prominence.

Chesnutt's three novels, *The Marrow of Tradition*, *The House Behind the Cedars*, and *The Colonel's Dream*, were far more bitter and biting. His white southern audience protested that Chesnutt was vilifying the South and soon many lost interest. As had Dunbar, Chesnutt found that "the American public preferred spurious values to the genuine; the coinage of the Confederacy was at literary par." Where Dunbar, the sentimentalist, was welcomed, Chesnutt, the realist, was barred. We remember Dunbar for his idyllic poetry of the black peasant slave; we remember Chesnutt for his courageous attempt to show the other side of the coin in his stories.

Lesson Plans: The lesson for this section will be the directed reading of representative short stories from each of the writers mentioned in this section: Cable, Harris, Page, Dunbar, and Chesnutt, followed by a comparative analysis in writing and oral discussion.

Section II : Structure and Vision of Region

Sherwood Anderson

Jean Toomer (Waldo Frank)

It required many years for white and black authors in the United States to treat southern interracial relations, particularly those involving sex, without squeamishness, apology, propaganda, and racial preconceptions. In 1923, however, two friends, Waldo Frank, a Jew, and Jean Toomer, a Negro, handled this subject matter without bias or race consciousness in *Holiday* and *Cane*, respectively. As a portrayal of southern life, *Cane*, for which Frank wrote a forward, stands in a class by itself.

Toomer's *Cane*, a potpourri of stories, sketches, poetry, and drama, handles inflammatory interracial themes without abandonment of the artist's point of view. As Waldo Frank observes:

For Toomer, the Southland is not a problem to be solved; it is a field of loveliness to be sung: the Georgia Negro is not a downtrodden soul to be uplifted; he is material for gorgeous painting: the segregated self-conscious brown belt of Washington is not a topic to be discussed and exposed; it is a subject of beauty and of drama, worthy of creation in literary form. ...

Cane, experimental in its quest for appropriate literary forms and diction, was inspired by Waldo Frank. Gorham Munson in "The Significance of Jean Toomer" has noted the architectonic influence of Sherwood Anderson upon "Fern" and "Avey," character sketches within *Cane*, as well as that of Frank in "Theater." *Cane* is noteworthy because of its departure from argumentation and apologetics in the treatment of interracial subject matter as well as because of its prefiguration of southern realism and Negro self-revelation. As Waldo Frank says:

It is a harbinger of the South's literary maturity: of its emergence from obsession put upon its minds by the unending racial crisis—an obsession from which writers have made their indirect escape through sentimentalism, exoticism, polemic, "problem" fiction, and moral melodrama. It marks the dawn of direct and unafraid creation.

The pioneer fiction of the New South was the realistic fiction of Negro life, new not merely in its modernity of

style, but in its vital originality of substance. Jean Toomer digs deep into the underoil of the race life. He writes:

Georgia opened me. . . . And it may well be said that I received my initial impulse to an individual art from my experience there. For no other section of the country has so stirred me. There one finds soil, soil in the sense the Russians know it, the soil every art and literature that is to live must be imbedded in.

The new motive, then, for stressing race is to do so purely for the sake of art. As in many of the realistic stories of this period, the emphasis of *Cane* is on characters as well as setting. The sections entitled "Karintha," "Becky," "Carma," "Fern," "Esther," "Rhobert," "Avey," and "Bona and Paul" illustrate psychological realism and truths about human nature. We are drawn into the characters' lives, and learn by sharing their everyday trials and feelings. Their characterizations become indistinguishably merged with the landscape that surrounds them.

There is no doubt that *Cane* was directly influenced by Sherwood Anderson's *Winesburg , Ohio* , which had appeared in 1919, four years earlier. By the same token, *Cane* influenced Anderson's writing of *Dark Laughter* (1925) in dealing with racial themes. Sherwood Anderson was so much affected by Toomer that he wrote him:

I wanted so much to find and express something clear and beautiful I felt coming up out of your race but in the end gave up. ... And then McClure handed me the few things of yours I saw and there was the thing I had dreamed of beginning.

Toomer's *Cane* resembles Anderson's *Winesburg , Ohio* in its structure. Charles T. Davis, in "Jean Toomer and the South: Region and Race as Elements within a Literary Imagination," analyzes the structural unity of *Cane* . He cites Toomer's own comments on the book's structure in a letter to Waldo Frank dated December 12, 1922:

From three angles *Cane*'s design is a circle. Aesthetically, from simple forms to complex ones, and back to simple forms. Regionally from the South up to the North, and back into the South again. Or, from the North down into the South, and then a return North. From the point of view of the spiritual entity behind the work the curve really starts with Bona and Paul (awakening), plunges into Kabnis, emerges in Karintha, etc., swings upward into Theater and Box Seat, and ends (pauses) in Harvest Song.

In the lesson plans to follow this section, we will explore further what Toomer may have intended by the spiritual entity, or unity, in *Cane* . The only apparent unity in *Winesburg , Ohio* is achieved through the character of George Willard, who appears in most of the stories, sometimes as the central character, sometimes as a minor character, and sometimes simply as an observer. *Cane* , by contrast, has thematic unity based upon one artist's vision during a single year. "Poems link, separate, echo, and introduce the stories," which deal with the loves of blacks in the fertile South as well as the barren North. While not based on a racial theme, *Winesburg , Ohio* is an interesting work to compare with *Cane* . Such a comparative study is important in order to emphasize how both writers, one black, the other white, were pioneers in experimental fiction of realism.

Sherwood Anderson in his *Memoirs* testifies to the nearly miraculous sense of ease and liberation with which the stories of *Winesburg , Ohio* were written—poured out in a Chicago room in a concentrated fury of creation, sometimes two or three stories in a week. Their birth echoes the creative exuberance of the Twenties. The *Winesburg* stories rebel against the middle-class repression, midwestern piety, Puritan hypocrisy, and small-town narrowness of the age. While individual stories within *Winesburg* do not represent the best work of

Anderson, as a collection they are impressive as revolutionary protests in the form of literature. Not stories in a conventional sense, they are rather “little vignettes of buried lives, throbs of muffled desire, sketches of characters foundering among the village tribalisms, glimpses of torment behind the drawn and undrawn blinds.” Plotless, impressionistic, and flat, the stories have nevertheless the quality of presenting people in a warm and compelling way that escapes the explanation of Anderson’s best admirers. The reader learns something unspeakably personal about each character. As in *Cane* , the characters’ suppressed emotions burst out of them like moans or cries.

Together Jean Toomer and Sherwood Anderson share the spotlight as early twentieth-century writers who penetrated into the soil of their settings and into the lives of their characters, giving the American public a realistic, vigorous, perceptive artistic vision of region.

Lesson Plans: The lesson for this section will be the directed reading of *Cane* by Toomer and *Winesburg , Ohio* by Anderson. Discussion and written work will center on the thematic and structural similarities and differences of these works. Emphasis will be placed on the fact that Toomer and Anderson shared a similar artistic vision.

Section III : Naturalism in the Urban Scene

James T. Farrell Richard Wright

The history of American fiction in the twentieth century is marked at its beginning by a surge of interest in naturalism. Influenced by the theory and practice of Zola, it produced one of the giants of American literature, Theodore Dreiser, and became one of the continuing forces in American fiction. In the thirties especially, when a literature of social relevance and social protest absorbed the creative energies of writers, naturalism was the most respected and firmly established way of writing.

James T. Farrell and Richard Wright are clearly disciples of naturalism. As naturalists, they claim to correct the distortions, the incomplete pictures, of the realist, emphasizing the elements in man which make him like an animal. We find in naturalistic works man as the victim of disease, pain, dirt, cruelty, horror, and death. The theme of naturalistic fiction is the way in which society shapes man, an often shocking process.

James T. Farrell’s *Studs Lonigan* trilogy (1932, 34, 35) provides a beginning point for a discussion of naturalistic fiction. Clearly in the naturalistic tradition, Farrell’s writing is vigorous rather than poetic or elegant. His diction creates a mood appropriate to the characters and events about which he happens to be writing. He does not hesitate to use vulgar words to describe vulgar thoughts. He is not primarily a storyteller; to him, incident is more important than plot.

The central character is William “Studs” Lonigan, a product of the Irish Catholic neighborhood of Chicago. We first meet him smoking a forbidden cigarette in the bathroom on the day of graduating from parochial school. The novel lets us see through Studs’ own eyes his growth to manhood and his attempts to assert himself against a society that he does not understand, a society in which to survive requires him to reexamine more closely his own ties to family, Church, neighborhood, and friends. His background, we discover, has not adequately prepared him for the difficult life he has to face. Racial and religious prejudice which he has inherited from his family and friends, together with alcoholism, pneumonia, and heart disease, plague him to his death. At the end, he finds himself alone, helpless, removed from the society that created him and yet was

responsible for his demise.

The naturalism of *Studs Lonigan* lies principally in Farrell's treatment of both the large social environment and the intimate family group. His characters are people to whom things happen. The naturalism is expressed in a feeling for the incomprehensibility of life. If Farrell's vision, with its rush of discrete detail and apparent insensitivity, appears incoherent and shapeless at times, this must be attributed not to a callousness or bluntness of feeling, but to the naturalistic vision, hazardous in its method, that can control its characters no more than one can control life itself. Under the influence of Marxism, Farrell believed that class struggle between the wealthy exploiters and the poor exploited provided the constant potential for violence and destruction. The poor, the weak, the minority, the underclasses seem wantonly swept away by forces that they do not understand.

This loss of control over the forces of nature also plagues Richard Wright in *Native Son* (1940). In recognition of his kinship with Richard Wright, Farrell writes in "Social Themes in American Realism" in *Literature and Morality*:

In the short stories of Richard Wright, in *Uncle Tom's Children*, (1938), . . . we see lynch violence breaking out over seeming coincidences or accidents. Thus, a white woman sees a colored boy naked after he has been swimming. Coincidences such as these, in a society of acute class and racial tensions, flare into the social tragedy of violence. . . . And with *Black Boy* (1945) . . . the problem of awareness, of development, is shown to be as important among the lower strata of American society. . . . This bottom-dog literature has now begun to combine a treatment to awareness with an account of conditions of life in America.

Native Son has its sources clearly in the American naturalistic tradition in literature, but draws also upon Wright's experience with the Communist Party and his attitude toward the urban experience of Negroes. The novel utilizes Communist ideas, but they do not provide a resolution of the Negro problem or of Bigger Thomas's individual problem. Communism remains as a consequence on the periphery of the book. Closer to the center of what Wright tries to do in *Native Son* are certain concepts which may have been drawn from the University of Chicago Department of Sociology. In two essays published in *Twice A Year*, Wright attempts to assess the impact of the urban experience upon a simple folk like the southern Negroes, showing the overwhelming difficulties they face in trying to adjust to a white, urban culture in which the machine is dominant. He concludes that in the city, especially, the Negroes are really a colonial people who are forced to live side by side with their exploiters. As a consequence, the Negro is the victim of serious psychiatric disorders. He is subject to what Horace Cayton calls the "fear-hate-fear complex." The Negro, living in a hostile environment, and a highly complex one that he has not mastered, is a creature of fear. He comes to hate the white man's society, which constantly attacks his personality. Realizing that he may be punished if his emotions are discovered or expressed, he becomes again the victim of fear. Bigger Thomas is at the center of this emotional cycle.

Native Son opens with a conventional naturalistic symbol, one drawn from the animal world—a rat cornered and killed in the Bigger Thomas home. What happens to the rat will happen to Bigger. The accidental murder of a white girl out of fear leads Bigger into a flight away from a society that kindled his fear and into his new identity as a killer. The theme of *Native Son* reaffirms that in death there is life, for it is the death of the white Mary and the impending doom of Bigger that force us to recognize black humanity. It is Bigger's stark realization (and our own) of the forces that have shaped his life and have failed him that makes this work a powerful statement. Bigger reaches this realization within weeks, in contrast to Studs Lonigan, who endures almost a lifetime of struggle and dies without ever realizing how he has been a victim of his culture.

Lesson Plans: Time and ambition permitting, a comparative study of two products of a Chicago environment, *Bigger* and *Studs*, may prove to be provocative and revealing.

LESSON PLANS

Section I. The Plantation Tradition

Prerequisite for understanding any of the short stories of the writers of this school is the study of the basic elements of the short story itself. An understanding of the term “local color” is also essential in underscoring the fact that each writer of this period, white or black, is representative of this movement.

Elements of the short story to be discussed are:

- A. Local Color
- B. Character
- C. Point of View
- D. Tone
- E. Humor, Satire, Irony
- F. Themes

Students will be assigned all of the short stories under Section I of the *Student Reading List* and will be required to write a short plot summary for each story. Discussion and writing exercises will be based on the questions that follow:

- A. Local Color

Writers of the local color tradition, according to Sylvia Lyons Render in *The Short Fiction of Charles W. Chesnutt*, expressed a, “fidelity to a localized setting, to the appearance and peculiarities of the people of the area—including their folkways, dialects and superstitions.”

Questions:

1. How does each selected work of this period represent “local color”?
2. Does one perceive a difference in the rendition of “local color” in the representations of setting by Page, Cable, and Harris from that by Chesnutt and Dunbar? Explain.

- Chesnutt and Page are perhaps the most accurate in their use of dialect. The Louisiana French and African dialect in “Bras Coupé” is most interesting. How does the use of dialect enhance local color and character portrayal?

*Students may be asked to read segments of dialogue aloud as an attempt to grasp the variety and richness of speech.

B. Character

Most characters in the plantation tradition, whether black or white, fall into stereotypes or stock characters that never change. Students should have a clear definition of “stereotype” in mind before they study this section. The black stereotypes which most frequently were portrayed were the contented slave, the wretched freeman, the brute Negro, the tragic mulatto, the comic Negro, and the exotic primitive. Others included the worshipful servant and the superstitious Negro.

White characters also fall into molds of the benevolent father of the mulatto, the kind aristocrat, the northern liberal, the mean planter, the brutal overseer, and the poor white villain.

Questions:

- a. Locate examples of each aforementioned stereotype in the selections of Page, Harris, Cable, Chesnutt, and Dunbar. b. Cite instances, especially in the works of black writers, of attempts to veer away from stereotyping.
1. Charles W. Chesnutt admits indebtedness to Joel Chandler Harris’ “Uncle Remus” for his own creation of “Uncle Julius.” How do these two figures compare? (Clue: What do we learn about Uncle Remus from reading the first few tales? What do we learn about Uncle Julius from “The Gophered Grapevine” and “Po’ Sandy”?)
2. How does Dunbar’s portrayal of Gideon in “The Strength of Gideon” compare with that of Sam in Page’s “Marse Chan”?
3. George Washington Cable is noted as a white writer of the plantation tradition who sympathetically portrayed black characters. Do you feel that this sympathy is represented in his portrayal of Palmyre, Honore f.m.c. and Bras Coupé in “The Story of Bras Coupé”?
4. Point of View

Who tells the story? That is what is meant by “point of view.” Does a narrator who is not involved in the story give a “he, she, they said, did, thought” telling of the story, or does one of the characters become the “I” to tell his role in the tale, or does he remove himself to become the narrator within the structure of the tale? We will find various points of view in the stories of this section.

Questions:

- Who tells the story in each of the selections in this section? What advantage does the reader
1. have from learning about the details of the story in this fashion? Are there any disadvantages of using this point of view?

- Why does Dunbar write the story "Ingrate" from the point of view of the master instead of the
2. slave? Why would a white narrator be more palatable to white readers? How does the reader feel toward Joshua; toward Leckler?

D. Tone

Tone reflects the writer's sensitivity to the actions of the story. Stories in the plantation tradition are usually characterized by the evocation of sentimental tears or mild laughter.

Question:

What devices are used to establish the tone in each selection?

E. Humor, Satire, and Irony

Humor, satire, and irony saturate the short fiction of Chesnutt; to a lesser degree this is true of Dunbar. Satire attempts to make fun of established beliefs, while irony depends on rendering the exact opposite of what is expected. Black writers in writing about slavery used irony heavily. Although humorous, "Ingrate" by Dunbar reveals a bitter irony that cannot escape notice.

Questions:.

1. Locate examples of irony in "Ingrate" by Dunbar.
How is irony achieved in "The Goophered Grapevine" and "Po' Sandy" by Chesnutt? (Clue: How does the northern visitor's reaction to the stories of Uncle Julius differ from that of his wife?) How is bitter irony achieved in "The Sheriff's Children"?
3. How do white writers use irony in their portrayal of life on the plantation? Cite specific examples.
4. Uncle Remus tales are noted for their humor. What do they reveal about Harris' view of blacks?

F. Theme

According to Sylvia L. Render, "the most recurrent themes of Chesnutt's fiction are the humanity of Afro-Americans, the mistreatment of blacks in this country, and the universal fallibility of human nature."

Questions:

1. How would you contrast or compare these themes of Chesnutt with the themes of the white writers of the plantation tradition?

- Consider the ending of “Bras Coupé”—the baby on the breast of the fallen giant, the “ecstatic upward smile,” the whispered phrase, “to Africa.” What clues do these provide to the theme of this story?

Section II. Structure and Vision of Region

- Students will be instructed to read *Winesburg , Ohio* by Sherwood Anderson before they read *Cane* by Jean Toomer. Students will then be asked to outline the basic structure of each work.
- A. The basic structure is merely a listing of each subtopic, i.e. character sketch, poem, or anecdote. The basic structure resembles the following design:

Winesburg , Ohio	Cane
The Book of Grostesque	I. Karintha
Hands	Reepers
Paper Pills	November Cotton Flower
Mother, concerning Elizabeth “	
Williard	etc.
The Philosopher, concerning	Blood Burning Moon
Doctor Parcival	
Nobody Knows, concerning	II. Seventh Street to
Louise Truunion	Bona and Paul
Godliness (I, II, III, IV)	
“ III. Kabnis	
etc.	
Departure	

- The term “architectonic” was used to characterize the writing structure of *Cane* and *Winesburg, Ohio* by Gorham Munson. Basically what this means is that the work is constructed in blocks based on sketches of characters, poems, thoughts, etc. The interconnection of these blocks forms a superstructure which must be viewed as a complete
- B. entity, yet one which does not totally supersede or dwarf the importance of each individual block. Indeed, in *Cane* and *Winesburg, Ohio* each part represents the whole structure and theme (this is a type of synecdoche). Students will be asked to summarize the prevailing thought or theme of each block within the superstructure of *Winesburg* and *Cane* . This may be done orally to save time.

Clue: According to Malcolm Cowley, who provided the introduction to *Winesburg, Ohio* in the Penguin edition, the book “lies midway between the novel proper and the mere collection of stories. ... It is a cycle of stories with several unifying elements, including a single background, a prevailing tone, and a central character. These elements can be found in all the cycles, but the best of them also have an underlying plot that is advanced or enriched by each of the stories.” The underlying plot, centered around George Williard, is

summarized by Cowley on pages 14 and 15 of the introduction. This must be required reading to enable students to understand the work.

Similarly *Cane* is not a novel, but a work in a three-part structure—"a series of writings constituting one artist's vision during a single year." The first section, set in Georgia, focuses on stories about women whose behavior conflicts with the established mores of the society. The second section, set in the black middle-class life of Washington, D.C. and Chicago, shows a schism in the relationship between black men and women. The third section, returning South, shows Kabnis, a black northerner who has difficulty adjusting to a rural southern setting.

The introduction by Darwin T. Turner is also required reading, for it gives deeper insight into an analysis of thematic structure.

Questions:

1. In what way does George Williard become the voice of the people of *Winesburg, Ohio* ?
2. In what way does the observer in *Cane* become the voice of the people in Georgia, Washington, and Chicago?
3. Which voice is more accurate, more perceptive? Why?
4. Compare the themes of *Cane* and *Winesburg* . (Clue: To what degree are sexual or human relationships consummated? What forces prevent this consummation?).
5. How is the artistic vision of *Cane* and *Winesburg, Ohio* representative of the particular region?

Section III. Naturalism in the Urban Scene

- Studs Lonigan* by James T. Farrell, a trilogy of *Young Lonigan* *The Young Manhood of Studs Lonigan*-*Judgement Day* , may be too long to read in its entirety. I would recommend that students read *Young Lonigan* . The action of the sequel *Young Manhood* could be summarized by the teacher in class. Students may finish the trilogy with *Judgement* .
- A. *Native Son* by Richard Wright, not a trilogy, but also divided into three sections ("Fear," "Flight," "Fate"), must be read from cover to cover.

In comparing these two novels, students should be directed to answer the following questions:

1. What do we learn about Studs Lonigan in the opening pages of the first book? How is this introduction representative of naturalistic fiction?
2. What do we learn about Bigger Thomas in the opening pages of *Native Son* ? How is this introduction representative of naturalistic fiction?
While clearly not identical characters, there are some similarities between Studs and Bigger.
3. What are they? (Clue: How does Studs relate to his family—father, mother, siblings? Bigger? How does each relate to his friends?)
4. What role does religion play in Stud's development? Bigger's? With whom does religion play the larger role? Explain.

5. Both Studs and Bigger live in Chicago. Perhaps Bigger's family lives in Studs' old neighborhood. How has the urban scene influenced their lives?
6. How does each character define "manhood"? To what extent is this defined manhood achieved by both?
7. What role does "fear" play in each character's development? What is Bigger most afraid of in the beginning of the novel, at the end? What about Studs?
8. What role do the following "isms" play in the development of plot and character in each work?
 Racism (Anti-Semitism)
 Capitalism
 Communism
9. Naturalistic fiction is characterized by the citing of true historical events within the structure of the story. What historical events surround *Studs Lonigan* and influence the action of the novel? *Native Son* ?
10. To what degree are Bigger and Studs aware of the forces of nature and of society that have brought about the "Fate" and "Judgement" of each?
11. What do you think would happen if Bigger were to meet Studs in a Chicago park?

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