



Teaching African Literature in English

Curriculum Unit 82.04.01
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Edgar Rice Burroughs, the creator of the Tarzan movies, had never set foot in Africa, yet his vision of a “savage Africa” stuck in the mind of millions of people. Africa, for the most part, is no longer perceived by students as being a country filled with wild and uncivilized people. ¹ Thanks to “20/20,” “60 Minutes,” and “The McLearn Report,” The Tarzan and Jane syndrome has been shattered. Even *National Geographic* is making great strides in presenting African people in a more sophisticated light.

The mass media are contemporary vehicles for expressing and propagating modern man’s understanding of culture and heritage. Because of the media, the world knows that McDonald’s and Coke have multi-million dollar franchises in Africa, and that Nigeria is the major source of crude for the Gulf Oil Company. Students are now willing to say that Africans are like us in that they too eat Big Mac’s and drink cokes. Students also know that oil companies are establishing friendly ties with Africa because Africa is abundant in a commodity that America desperately needs.

Thanks to the media, students are knowledgeable of the exotic plant life and animal kingdom of Africa. With the improvement in photographic lenses and color precision, students can almost experience the sensation of actually being in the presence of African plants, animals and people.

All of this has been good for students; yet, the media have not been successful in presenting the African point of view of Africa and other Africans. Not that it is the media’s responsibility to educate the world; but the media have not satisfactorily focused on the thoughts, biases and idiosyncrasies of individual African people. While images of under-developed Africa and starving babies have been proven not to be the general condition of Africa, students are still baffled when it comes to understanding how Africans feel about the European powers that penetrated African soil, culture and tradition.

Therefore, the purpose of this unit will be to introduce the students to a brief history of the European powers that were of tremendous influence on African lifestyles. This brief history will be a comparative study of Britain, France and Germany. The following comparisons will be made:

- the stability of domestic affairs of each country before African exploration;
- the technological advancements of each country;
- the philosophy of each country;

the area of conquest each country made in Africa;
the contributions each country made in Africa.

Also in this unit, the students will be introduced to novels that depict an authentic point of view on African tradition and culture.

This brief history will enable the students to associate places and events in the novels with the political and social situations presented in the novels. The students will be able to explain how the authors' subject matter and writing style have been influenced by Britain, France and Germany.

The students will be required to read four novels. *Things Fall Apart* by Chinua Achebe and *Cry The Beloved Country* by Alan Paton will be read in class. *Mine Boy* by Peter Abrahams and *The Dark Child* by Camara Laye will be read out-of-class. (See bibliography for annotations).

The teacher will guide the students through the first two novels and relate events and ideas in the novel to African history. The latter novels will be a mandatory out-of-class assignment, which is intended to be a pedagogical device that moves the students towards improving their independent reading skills.

The students will be quizzed on the independent reading assignments as well as on the in-class assignments. The final examination depends on the students having read the four novels. The students will be required to write a composition that ties in ideas from the four novels.

Since most students have been taught that Africans are uncivilized, to prove to the students that Africans had a rich civilization before the advent of the Europeans, the students will be provided with a working definition of "civilization." This definition will involve several characteristics of a civilization, which are:

1. A civilization must have some urban development;
2. A civilization must have some form of government;
3. The people must use metal;
4. The people must have a specialization;
5. The people must have a sense of time and leisure.

These characteristics will help the students determine the degree of sophistication that existed in Africa before the advent of the missionaries. The students will use these definitions to analyze each novel. This method will allow the students to be consistent in determining the civility of African tradition and culture.

The remainder of this paper will include “British, French and German Influence in Africa” or the brief history mentioned above. The teacher may have students take notes on this section or the teacher may have copies of this section made for student use.

Sample Activity #1

British, French and German Influence in Africa

Early theories of African society were based on the presupposition that Africa had no organized community, that Africans could not think and that Africans had no destructive instruments. Based on these assumptions the missionaries gave Africans a religion and organized the society into a political entity. All of this was done in the name of humanity.

When Europeans found out that the Niger River was passible, trade immediately began. By 1880 a great scramble for African land occurred. ² European nations fought one another to own African territory. The procedure involved getting to the territory and pinning the flag of the country on the land and signing treaties with the chiefs.

Britain’s presence was highly recognized in Africa. Because Britain experienced tremendous problems with individual rights at home, the British in Africa made their presence known. However, Britain had very little contact with the African people. A government of indirect rule was established. The British, in other words, dealt with the Africans through the chiefs. Despite the government’s indirect dealings with the Africans, the missionaries worked directly with the Africans. The philosophy of the British was to keep a stiff upper lip, the maintenance of appearance, a sense of brotherhood and the code of fair play. The public schools emphasized discipline, reserve, order and command. The British had a need to explore new territory because raw materials, secure markets, investment opportunities were lacking. Those British who desired to find a new way of living in Africa had to do so on foot or in dugout canoes because of the topography. Soon gunboats and then the advent of the steamboat resulted in the advancement of trade. Still the risk of catching an incurable disease discouraged many explorers, yet Britain got a lion’s share of West and South Africa: Egypt, Kenya, Uganda, Limpopo, Zambezi, Upper Nile, Nairobi, Sierre Leone, Accra, Gold Coast, North and South Rhodesia and Transvaal. ³

French presence was also recognized in Africa. The French came up with the notion of association and assimilation. The French were traditionalists, racists, Calvinists and suspicious of change. They believed that colonial rule was selfish and cruel. They believed that the French should associate with the Africans, in order to educate them, but not to the extent of combining cultures or assimilating. In other words, the French policy was to propagate among the “natives” the language, the methods of work and the spirit and civilization of France. ⁴ Africans were made to feel they had all the rights of a Frenchman yet there were few African legislatures.

France was an industrial state with democratic ideas. France believed that colonialism was a great cost to the mother country and France strongly believed that people should govern themselves. Yet, France conquered, but for psychological reasons. France lost the Franco-Prussian war and she needed to divert the attention of domestic affairs. French trade was limited. Palm oil was a major consumption in Africa. It was used to make soap and lubricants, but France didn’t need it. The sugar cane was not useful because the French used the

sugar beet. The French made its greatest contribution in the field of fine arts: reading, writing, cooking and music.

The accomplishments made by the French that enabled other countries to conquer parts of Africa came in the field of medicine. Alphonse Laveron discovered plasmodium, a parasite that destroys the red blood cells. Pierre-Joseph Petelier and Joseph Bienaine-Coventou extracted an alkaloid of quinine from cinchona bark to commercially produce the drug quinine that destroyed the plasmodium. The French hydrologist, Victor Prompt, developed a water system that enabled the Nile Valley to be controlled. French colonial rule took place in West Africa, Algeria, Tunisia, Morocco, Madagascar and Chad. ⁵

In the 1900's Germany experienced rapid economic changes. It changed from an agrarian state to the greatest industrial power of Europe. In 1914 Germany became the leader in steel making, chemical engineering and electrical enterprises. As Bismarck ruled, the domestic scene in Germany worsened. Many Germans began to look for living space outside of the Reich. However, Bismarck refused to use the nation's elaborate administration and machinery for the purpose of ruling distant, little known, ill-defined possessions.

The Germans had an elaborate hierarchy of positions. The racial attitudes toward the Africans ranged from undisguised contempt to sincere respect. The Germans felt separated from the Africans by color, caste, class and culture. Cooperation with the Germans often paid off for African chiefs, youths and the sons of outcasts and slaves. For example, Paul Zampa, a Camerounian African, was taken to Berlin by a German officer who had previously observed Zampa's precociousness. Zampa was to receive his military training in Berlin. Zampa felt miserable about his dark skin, so he painted himself with white paint. When Zampa marched onto the field, the German officers laughed at him. Zampa became a rebel thereafter, and was then executed by the very white men whom he had once worshipped.

The Germans also ruled the Africans indirectly. Gustav Warnick, a major figure in the German missionary world, believed that the Africans must be converted. The Germans trained the Sudanese, Samalis, Zulus from Mozambique as soldiers. Other Africans were trained to work in the diamond mines or on farms. Most of German land possessions was in Togo, South West Africa, East Africa and Kamerun.⁷

Activity #1

1. Students may do a research project on one of the European countries and develop the points in detail.
2. Students will write an essay from the facts gathered in this history.

Activity #2

Study Questions, *Mine Boy*

1. What is the theme of the novel?
2. What do you think was the purpose of this novel?
3. What is the picture of South Africa that the author presents?
4. How do the role of the female characters compare with the male characters?

5. Explain the significance of the following symbols in the novel:

bee
sun
stars
moon
the mine
winter
the mine dump

Activity #3

Study Questions, *The Dark Child*

1. What is the theme of the novel?
2. What do you think was the purpose of the novel?
3. What is the picture of French Guinea that the author presents?
4. Is the book autobiographical?
5. Camara Laye offers much insight in the life of an African. Expound on the following topics:

family

religion
naming system

polygamy
attitudes toward life
community spirit

Activity #4

Study Questions, *Things Fall Apart*

1. What is the theme of the novel?
2. What do you think was the purpose of the novel?
3. When did the climax of the novel occur?
4. Why does the novel have this name?

Concluding statement:

Much of this unit could be taught in a history classroom. However, it would be difficult to have students read African literature without first introducing them to some of the historical factors that nurtured the literature. Since this unit will be taught to college seniors in an English classroom, the teacher must also discuss the literary techniques of the novels as well as the political implications.

As stated earlier, the students will receive a set of definitions that they will use to determine the sophistication of African tradition and culture that have been degraded by the media.

Notes

1. Robin Winks, *Other Voices Other Views* (Connecticut: Greenwood Press, 1978), p. 344.
2. James Morrison, *Farewell the Trumpet* (Boston: Farber and Farber, 1978), p. 36.
3. Robert Collins, *Problems in the History of Colonial Africa* (New Jersey: Prentice Hall, Inc., 1970), p. xv.
4. Prosser Gifford and William Roger Louis, *France and Britain in Africa* (New Haven: Yale University Press, 1971).
5. *Ibid.*, pp. 443-513.

Student Annotated Bibliography

Abrahams, Peter. *Mine Boy* . London: Heinemann Educational Books Ltd. 1969.

A protest novel. Abrahams attempts to present a situation that is not known to the rest of the world. He lets the world know of the disparity that exists between the black Africans and the white Africans. He employs symbols and fictitious characters to get his point across concerning the forced and poor working conditions in the mines.

Achebe, Chinua. *Things Fall Apart* . New York: Astor-Honor, Inc. 1959.

Novel saturates the reader with tribal customs, the position of tribal members, the marital status of individuals, the preparation involved in ceremonies, etc. The author subtly shows the decadence that takes place in the tribe. He shows how missionaries were able to colonize and, surprisingly, not always by force.

Laye, Camara. *The Dark Child* . London: Heinemann Educational Books Ltd. 1969.

An African boy receives his education in French Guinea. The boy's family tradition does not coincide with the beliefs of the educated.

Paton, Alan. *Cry The Beloved Country* . New York: Charles Scribner's Sons. 1948.

Depicts the black/white issue in South Africa. Much of African history is told in this novel. Apartheid concept can be grasped.

Teachers' Annotated Bibliography

Bellow Saul Henderson *the Rain King*. New York: Penguin Books. 1976.

An American stumbles upon a remote African tribe and finds intellectual competition and stimulation.

Collins, Robert. *Problems in the History of Colonial Africa* . New Jersey: Prentice Hall, Inc. 1970.

An excellent map to indicate European occupation of African soil. Includes chapter on German bid for African colonies.

Gifford, Prosser and William Roger Louis. *France and Britain in Africa*. New Haven: Yale University Press. 1971.

A historical account of France and Britain in African. Text discusses land conflicts between France and Germany.

Headricks, Daniel R. *The Tools of Empire* . New York: Oxford University Press. 1981.

Discusses the technology used by Europeans to advance in and control African territory.

Morrison, James. *Farewell the Trumpet* . Boston: Farber and Farber. 1978.

A narrative history of the decline in European imperialism.

Ngugi, Wa Thiango. *Weep Not Child* . London: Heinemann Educational Books Ltd. 1964.

African point of view of European imperialism.

Winks, Robin. *Other Voices Other Views* . Connecticut: Greenwood Press. 1978.

Excellent chapter on European investments in West Africa. Excellent chapter on effects of Tarzan movies on world.

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