



Curriculum Units by Fellows of the Yale-New Haven Teachers Institute  
1991 Volume I: Regions and Regionalism in the United States: Studies in the History and Cultures of the South,  
The Northeast and the American Southwest

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## The South in Literature

Curriculum Unit 91.01.05  
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The literature of the South is replete with issues and questions of race, class and gender. Historically, the South has been primarily hierarchical in structure. From the aristocracy at the pinnacle to the African slave at the pit, everyone in the South was quite aware of the norms of behavior for his/her respective class in that society. When one thinks of the South it frequently consists of visions of the ruling class aristocracy and the planter class—the Southern “gentlemen” dwelling in large and stately white mansions with columns and Grecian architecture along with their “lovely ladies.” The vision, if accurate, then moves to the slave slums in squalor and wretchedness as they were made to labor relentlessly to preserve the class system. The vision cannot exclude that vague race lumped together as poor whites, often referred to as “white trash” who could not pass the gulf between them and the master classes. Harper Lee, in *To Kill a Mocking Bird*, poignantly depicts the class prejudice that was part of the very fiber of Southern life.

Apart from race and class, gender was the next most noticeable distinction in southern life. White women were expected to stick to certain specific codes of conduct. These “delicate lovely ladies” filling the role of appendage to their rich husbands, were contrasted to the Black women who were frequently used for breeding, field work, or concubines, often disguised as house slaves, to the white masters. The gender hierarchy, however, consisted of the white male at the top, the black male at the bottom and the women sandwiched between in order of color.

The old South was very divided with various accents, and religions. Even in agriculture there were wide variations in status of the large tobacco planter, the small tobacco planter, the cotton planter, the rice and indigo planter and the back country farmer. However, in spite of the divergences, the Southerners united in secession creating the Confederacy and in resisting the invasion of Union troops. There existed specific mental and social patterns consisting of established relationships and habits of thought, sentiments, prejudices and values that was common among a wide range of people in the region. Agriculture and slavery were the chief unifying forces in this effort. But slavery was the one institution that more than anything else bound the South together.

According to Thomas J. Wertenbaker in *The Old South*, even though slavery was stronger in some regions than in others, and some planters owned scores while hundreds of thousands of white families had none, “the presence of blacks influenced profoundly the life of every man, woman and child in the South, created a race aristocracy and a sense of unity of all whites.” When the North freed its slaves during or after the Revolution,

slavery became a distinguishing mark of the South.

In spite of the legend of the New South (with the Old South having been destroyed by the Civil War and the three decades following it) with the increasing transition from agriculture to industrialization, the issues of race, class and gender had grown roots too deep to be destroyed by a few decades.

This curriculum unit focuses on the South using literary works such as *To Kill A Mocking Bird* by Harper Lee , *The Adventures of Tom Sawyer* and *The Adventures of Huckleberry Finn* both by Mark Twain, and *Souther* by William Armstrong.

In order to fully understand the tensions surrounding race, class and gender in the region, students need substantial background information. Students will be given information on how the social, political and economic history has shaped the culture of the region establishing norms of behavior that have come to be recognized as almost a separate civilization from the rest of the United States. Although the unit will trace the social, political and economic history of the south that has formed a rich backdrop against which much of the great literature emerging from the South has been set, the primary focus will be on the issues of race, class and gender in the life and literature of the south. This information will provide a frame of reference which students can then use as the connection with which to interpret the literary works.

Students will have opportunities to compare issues of race, class and gender of the old South with the contemporary views of race, class and gender in the North, thereby making the information relevant to their own lives.

After reviewing the socioeconomic and political history of the region, students will respond to guided activities to help them construct meaning from the texts. With the background knowledge students will be better able to comprehend the authors' and characters' attitudes and attributes as well as authors' and characters' beliefs, knowledge, needs, goals and motives. This in turn will enable students to frame intelligent questions as they think critically/analytically to interpret texts. They will be able to go beyond the text to infer setting, plot, characters' actions and authors' intentions.

The unit is also aimed at helping students see how literature is created—particularly the connections between society and literature. To achieve this goal, the unit will integrate reading and writing in which students write/create short stories that reflect some aspects of their own or some one else's culture. In so doing, students will learn that constructing the meaning of texts and creating their own texts involve many of the same processes of generating ideas, planning, reviewing and revising. They will learn literary conventions such as the fact that writers deliberately use techniques to imply meaning. By developing a sense of what's involved in writing a story, they are likely to develop some appreciation for literature as an art.

Additionally, this unit focuses on the critical thinking skills associated with reading. Students will learn literal reading skills, as well as inferential and evaluative thinking skills. They will regularly use the ten critical thinking skills associated with reading: context and word meaning, sequence, remembering detail, identifying main ideas, judging adequacy of information, citing evidence, drawing conclusions, predicting outcomes, facts, probabilities and opinions and author's purpose and point of view. A didactic approach toward reading instruction will be utilized to enable students to be active readers by maintaining a dialogue with what they read, while relating to their own experiences, opinions and backgrounds.

Students will work extensively in cooperative groups to discuss and analyze the literary works. With cooperative learning, students get the opportunity to acquire good human relation skills, solve problems,

evaluate new ideas, and build bridges from what they know to new information, as well as between different subjects. This will help them to become active participants in their own learning as they acquire skills needed to function effectively in their adult lives. Cooperative learning is an extremely effective instructional strategy to use in multicultural education.

Essentially, cooperative learning places students of different abilities and backgrounds into situations where all participate equally in learning. Recommended for use with pairs of students up to groups of four to six, research has shown that cooperative learning improves achievement for all students.

The five necessary components of cooperative learning include: Positive interdependence—strategies that force the students to cooperate; face-to-face interaction; individual accountability—where students learn together but are tested individually; social skills development, where the teacher promotes the learning of skills such as trust building, leadership and communication that are necessary for effective group work; and group processing, that is, discussing how the group is working so it can improve its performance.

Cooperative learning highlights an important principle about the way we learn—We build our knowledge on the knowledge of others, we think of new ideas by listening to other people’s ideas, and we need the support of others to keep us going when we’re tempted to give up. This teaching strategy is built on the belief that people learn better when they learn together. Several decades of research has proven that productivity, academic achievement, and self-esteem improve dramatically when students work together. Students are motivated to work in groups because they can be with their peers. Cooperative learning manages their interaction by providing a solid group structure under which students work.

After wide discussion on the South, students will begin reading *To Kill A Mocking Bird* . This novel focuses on the role of African-Americans in Southern life and the problem of human dignity. Not only does it deal with prejudice by race but also by class.

Partly because of the need for cheap labor to pick and seed cotton on the large plantations, the enslavement of Africans took hold in the South during colonial days. Although the concern about labor on the cotton plantations does not seem to be a big issue, it was, because in actuality it was the question of race. The large plantation owners eventually became the aristocracy. Then there were middle-sized plantation owners, poor white farmers and sharecroppers. Hence, there were several distinct economic groups. As cotton planting increased with the invention of the cotton gin, so did slavery. After the Civil War, the sharecropping system took hold to supply the cheap labor planters needed. With the invention of the mechanical cotton picker and mass migration of blacks to the North, the advent of diversified farming and availability of jobs in industry brought on by World War II, the sharecropping system eventually died out.

Although slavery and the sharecropping system were no longer officially in existence, the legacy of prejudice necessitated continued divisions among the various classes of people. Hence segregation was born. When the Civil War ended slavery this brought on new problems for both the former masters and former slaves. The newly freed slave was no longer valued as property and was now regarded as a threat to whites in the South. Northerners had forced the South to end slavery and this left the former slave as a scapegoat as the treatment of the character Tom Robinson depicts in *To Kill A Mocking Bird* . Tom’s character also points out another important phenomenon in the South. The myth that Black men could not be trusted near White women and the resultant persecution and slaughter of Black males. Harper Lee’s novel, is set against this backdrop of Southern life in the early 1900s. The Finches are descendants of the landed aristocracy, the Cunninghams, poor whites who own some land; the Ewells are poor whites who own nothing; and the African-American, the newly freed slaves who own nothing and are generally unable to find work.

Mark Twain’s novels were written well before Harper Lee’s, however, similar techniques could be used in studying *The Adventures of Huckleberry Finn* and *The Adventures of Tom Sawyer*. In these two novels, the issues of race, class and gender in the South are also raised and could be valuable for use as a comparative study in how the two authors treat the issues in their respective works.

Similarly in *Sounder*, although the sharecropping system is the more prevalent issue, race, class and gender could also be examined as well as in Lorraine Hansberry’s *Raisin in The Sun*, which is set in Chicago.

## **LESSON PLAN # 1**

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Objective: To familiarize students with the social, economic and political history of the South.

Procedure: The class begins by brainstorming about the South in answer to the question “What comes to mind when you think about the South?” Ideas are listed or clustered on the chalkboard. Then the teacher clarifies the boundaries of the region by asking students to name the states comprising the South and then identifying them on a map. At this point a discussion could ensue about the geographical, political and economic differences between the North and South leading to a brief summary by the teacher of the South before, and after the Civil War incorporating as many of the students ideas on the board as possible.

Closure: Students are required to write a brief paper comparing their previously held ideas of the South with the information presented in class. This could be a homework assignment.

## **LESSON PLAN #2**

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Objective: Students will understand the term “prejudice” as it applies to race, class and gender.

Procedure: Teacher opens a discussion about the origins and meaning of the word. Then moves to a discussion of ways in which people prejudge others today including traditional gender roles and issues of class and race. The discussion will begin with cliques at school—how and why they are formed. Next students discuss prejudice in their the community and then the world. To get a broader understanding of prejudice, students could discuss how they view people of different ages for example, senior citizens, middle-aged people, college students etc.

Students then read a poem titled “Brotherhood” written by a student of the school. The poem centers on how the eight-grader feels left out because of his race. A class discussion follows.

Closure: Each student writes a poem about him/herself and how he/she relates to others in the school community or on how to survive in the school community.

## LESSON PLAN #3

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Objective: Students will identify causes of prejudice against newly freed slaves and poor whites in the South.

Procedure: This lesson ties together material discussed in the two previous lessons: the South and prejudice. First students read their poems from lesson 2 aloud after which students discuss the poetry or write their responses. A brainstorming session on “Why was prejudice so blatant in the South” follows.

Closure: Students write an essay titled: “Race, Class and Gender: The Past, the present and the Future.” With this piece of writing students get to express not only the gloomy past, but to come to terms with the present, and predict how they will like to see these three issues played out in their future world.

After these series of discussion and writing assignments students will be in a better position to deal with the issues of race, class and gender as they are presented in Harper Lee’s novel. After having built up their background knowledge, reading of the novel could then begin.

## ACTIVITIES TO EXTEND STUDENT THINKING

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A cooperative learning activity using the jigsaw structure.

### Phase 1:

Divide students into groups of three, in each group a member is responsible for researching one of the three issues: race, class and gender, and informing other members of the group about his/her area. To facilitate the research students form three large teams comprising all students researching class in one group, all researching gender in another and those researching race in another. In these larger groups students share their research findings and become experts on their particular issue.

### Phase 2:

After research and sharing information is complete. Students return to their original groups of three with each member now being an expert on a different issue. Here, students are responsible for imparting their findings to each other making all group members knowledgeable on all three issues.

Students are then held individually accountable for writing the essay titled “Race, Class and Gender: The Past, the Present and the Future.”

## OTHER ACTIVITIES

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View the movie then compare and contrast the film and the book:

Consider the title of the book, how does it capture the theme?

Compare the social classes depicted in the novel to those existing in your community today.

Discuss the important similarities between people of different races. Identify the differences.

## **OPEN BOOK COMPREHENSION TEST ON PART 1**

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Answer all questions in detail. Write complete sentences in paragraph form.

1. The setting of a novel is usually evident in the first few chapters. Describe the setting of this novel. Include location, atmosphere, characters' daily life, and historical period.
2. How is the education system in Maycomb portrayed in the novel. Cite examples to support your answer.
3. Using your own words, explain in detail what Atticus means when on pg. 93 he says "Maycomb's usual disease."
4. What was Scout and Jem's initial opinion of Atticus? What changed their minds and why. Chapter 10.

## **OPEN BOOK COMPREHENSION TEST ON PART 2@Text:Answer all questions in detail. Write complete sentences in paragraph form.**

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1. On pg. 203 Dolphus Raymond says to Scout ". . . but you see they could never, never understand that I live like I do because that's the way I want to live . . ."
  - a) What is he referring to when he says the way he lives?
  - b) To whom does "they" refer?
  - c) Why could they *never* understand that he really wants to live that way?
2. On pg. 223 Atticus says ". . . that white man is trash." On pg. 227, Aunt Alexandra says, ". . . he is trash." On pg. 163, Dill, speaking of Dolphus Raymond says, "He doesn't look like trash."
  - a) What does Dill mean?
  - b) According to Atticus who's considered trash in Maycomb County?
  - c) Who constitutes trash to Aunt Alexandra?
3. What is ironic about Miss Gates' lesson in democracy with reference to Hitler? before answering this question, read pgs. 248-249.
4. At the end of the novel on pg. 284, Atticus says to Scout, "Most people are, Scout, when you finally see them." Explain the relevance of this line to the novel.

BONUS QUESTION: What is the significance of the title to the novel?

\*\*\*Before administering this type of test to 7th or 8th grade students it is important to have class discussion that points out these issues.

## BIBLIOGRAPHY FOR TEACHERS

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was in antebellum times and the political and economic changes brought on by war and Reconstruction.

## **BIBLIOGRAPHY FOR STUDENTS**

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Armstrong, William H. *Souder* . New York: Harper & Row Publishers, 1969. A strong determination to survive keeps this sharecropping family from being destroyed in the face of poverty. An intriguing story whose central characters are a young boy and the family dog.

Hansberry, Lorraine. *A Raisin In The Sun* . New York: American Library, 1958. A vivid dramatic presentation of a black family in Chicago planning to move into a white neighborhood.

Lee, Harper. *To Kill A Mocking Bird* . Philadelphia: J. B. Lippincott Co., 1960. This book is about life in the South soon after the Civil War. A major incident in the plot is the unsuccessful attempt of a Black man to obtain justice on a false rape charge.

Lester, Julius. *To Be A Slave* . New York: E.P. Dutton, Inc., 1968. Students will be enlightened by these actual accounts of slaves as they describe the trials and tribulations of that notorious institution of the South.

Twain, Mark. *The Adventures of Tom Sawyer* . Chicago: The American Publishing Co., 1876. This story shows not only the coming of age of a young boy growing up on the Mississippi River but also the attitudes of whites towards blacks as well as the class structure among whites.

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