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Lesson Plan For Teaching Tobias Wolff's "That Room"

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Swarthmore College / English 71D: Short Story in the U.S.
Professor Peter Schmidt
Fall 2014

Have you been to “That Room”?

A 3-5 day lesson plan for teaching Tobias Wolff’s short story “That Room”

Text available from Tobias Wolff’s collection of short stories [Our Story Begins](#), 2008

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Overview

This lesson plan is intended for a student's high school English class (though it should work for other high school grade levels as well). The lesson discusses serious issues such as the exploitation of migrant workers, the concept of privilege, religious beliefs, and sexuality. While high school students are undoubtedly exposed to material of this level in their everyday life, the classroom presenting this lesson plan should strive to create as safe and open of an atmosphere as possible in order to give these topics the gravity they deserve. These topics also have the potential to inspire incredible curiosity, and questions and discussions brought up by students that stray slightly from the intended lesson plan should be addressed in a way that encourages such open thought.

The entire lesson on "That Room" should take 3-5 days of classroom time, assuming about 45 minute class periods. The first day of this lesson will be the literary elements relevant to later discussion of the story. Then, students will be expected to read the "That Room" independently outside of class. During the next class period, background information pertinent to the story will be discussed, in addition to an overview of the plot. Students will be expected to read discussion questions after class and come prepared to speak knowledgeably about any of them the following day. The third day will be dedicated to addressing the discussion questions as a class. Students will research and write additional assignments in several days outside of class time.

Goals

By the end of the unit, each student should:

1. Understand the concept of privilege and explore his or her personal relationship to it
2. Be able to apply strategies for tracing character development throughout a story
3. Understand the basic features of allegory and how they are used in “That Room”
4. Recognize dramatic irony and its effects in a story

Lesson Plan

Literary Devices

Allegory

An allegory is a narrative that can stand alone apart from the situation it is commenting on. Most importantly, it serves as an extended metaphor for describing other correlated events. Abstract concepts, virtues, vices, and events are represented by a story’s characters or objects in an allegory (Nellen, 2012).

Ask students if they can think of any examples of allegories in books they have read or movies they have seen. The teacher should also have examples from popular media to supplement the discussion. One possible example for a teacher to use is Harry Potter and The Deathly Hallows, a story most students will be familiar with in its book or movie form. Have students think about the story as an allegory for the Holocaust. Some things to think about include the violence against half-bloods and muggle-borns, propaganda, discrimination against creatures of other species, and the role of the death-eaters.

Character Development

Important categories in tracking character development are physical appearance, actions, speech, behavior, and interactions with other characters.

Have students choose a character from a story read previously in the class, or one familiar to all students through popular culture. Write the character's name and three columns of development categories. One column should represent the character at the beginning of the story, one the middle, and one the end. Have students take turns filling in the sections with the categories of character development mentioned above or other details they deem relevant. For example, Katniss from the Hunger Games could be analyzed. For example, here is one category of a potential character analysis of Katniss:

	Beginning	Middle	End
Appearance	Functional clothes, appropriate for hunting and working. Dark and not expensive. No makeup	Expensive clothes, extravagantly dressed for Capitol functions. Looks bewildered constantly	Dressed in same jumpsuit given to all contestants. Looks injured, desperate

Dramatic Irony

Dramatic Irony is a situation in which the reader's point of view differs from the character's point of view. Dramatic irony often places the reader in a significantly expanded point of view compared to that of a character and allows the reader to judge the character in a forgiving or unforgiving way (Schmidt, 2013).

Once again, teachers should try to relate this concept to other works that students know well. If students have read any Shakespeare during the year, his plays have many well-known moments that are examples of dramatic irony. Consider *Romeo and Juliet*, *The Twelfth Night*, or *King Lear*. In *Romeo and Juliet*, the highest point of dramatic irony comes when readers are aware that Juliet is not dead, only drugged, and Romeo kills himself rather than live without her.

Background Information

“The bales were heavy with dew when we started bringing them in. The air in the loft turned steamy from fermentation, and Eduardo warned the farmer the hay might combust...”

Wet hay is a known fire hazard by those in the agricultural community. The more moisture in the hay, the more conducive the hay is to bacterial growth. Large amounts of bacteria are packed into many bales of hay, enclosed in a small, cramped barn loft. Because so many respiring organisms are packed into an area with limited oxygen, an alternate process known as fermentation (an anaerobic process) soon takes over when the oxygen runs out. The well-insulating hay traps the heat released by the fermentation process and the temperature within the bales slowly begins to climb to dangerous levels (Vough, 2012).

“Or you board a bus with thirty other young men. It’s early, just before dawn. That’s when the buses always leave, their lights dimmed, to avoid the attention of Quakers outside the gate, but it doesn’t work and they’re waiting, silently holding up their signs...”

Quakers are members of the Religious Society of Friends. One of the central tenants of their religion is peace testimony, or activism for peaceful policies and against violence and war. During wars in the United States Quakers have often claimed conscientious objector status, refusing to participate in military service on the grounds that it conflicted with their religious

beliefs. They also staged many peaceful demonstrations starting during World War I and continuing to modern-day conflicts (QICadmin, 2011).

“But although I griped with Clemson and Eduardo, I was secretly glad to take my place beside them, to work as if I had no choice.”

The narrator has a privilege that he recognizes some aspects of, if only in retrospect. The aside later in the story comes from a narrator clearly more aware of his positionality. His life does not depend on his job, unlike the brothers and the presumably less well-off Clemson. Instead, the job that condemns Eduardo and Miguel to a life of poverty offers him freedom from his family. He is able to leave the situation whenever it stops being fun for him, and will most definitely stay no longer than the length of his summer vacation. We say that the narrator has “privilege” in this situation because he has opportunities, resources, and rights given to him simply because of the position he was born into. The following link provides an in-depth explanation of what privilege is, how it is acquired, who has it, and many of its consequences.

http://www.createwisconsin.net/events/ConferenceHandouts/Tuesday/845am/What_is_Privilege.pdf

Discussion Questions

Introductory

1. The narrator spends a lot of time talking about how he is growing up, and maybe even more talking about how proud he is about it. He opens his narration with the proclamation “The summer after my first year of high school, I got a case of independence”. Through what other thoughts or actions does he present himself as a man? Is this confidence ever challenged in the story?

2. What do you think about the narrator's strategy to "smile and hope for a change of subject" when faced with Miguel's sudden anger? Is it the most effective strategy in his situation? What were his options? What would you have done in his situation?
3. Where is the narrator going when he boards "a bus with thirty other young men"? Why do the Quakers watch "not with reproach but with sadness and sympathy"?

Intermediate

4. Why is Miguel so angry in the motel? The narrator says he "was looking at me, but I knew he was seeing someone else". Why does Miguel lump the narrator, his current boss and his past bosses together?
5. Is the whole story a flashback? Consider the importance of the aside that seems to describe events later in the narrator's life. Who is he speaking to in this section when he refers to "you"?
6. Does Miguel or Eduardo have more of a lasting influence on the narrator by the time the story ends? Which brother's influence is more superficial in the way it affects the narrator? Support your answer with evidence from the text.

Concluding

7. In what ways, if any, has the narrator grown by the end of the story? In what ways, if any, has the narrator failed to grow from his experiences? Support your conclusions with evidence from the text.
8. What does "that room" represent in the story? What features of an allegory do you recognize in the narrator's description of "that room"? In what ways is "that room" difficult to define as an allegory?

Independent Writing Assignments

Students should also choose one research question and one creative writing assignment. Each assignment should be at least 500 words, although creative writing assignments can be longer. The research question can also be addressed through a thoughtful PowerPoint presentation.

Creative Writing Prompts

1. Eduardo is described as “rakish” and speaks about himself “as a trickster and a deft, infatigable swordsman”. On the other hand, Miguel “labored silently”, “never flagged, and never laughed”, and “watched his brother with what appeared to be mild curiosity”. Additionally, the dramatic scene with the narrator in the motel further characterizes Miguel. How did these two brothers come to be so different? Write a short story about Miguel and Eduardo’s past that gives some insight into their character development.
2. In his aside the narrator describes many moments when “you remember where you are”. Write a short narrative in which a character experiences another situation that makes them “feel that dark ceiling close overhead”. If you feel comfortable, you can also write about a time when you experienced “that room”. Reread the section of “That Room” that begins “That room—once you enter it, you never really leave” before you begin writing.

Research Question Topics

All research questions involve complex topics— give them the research they deserve. Don’t bite off more than you can chew! Focus your efforts only on the amount of information you feel you can understand and explain adequately in about 500 words.

1. Give a brief overview about the phenomenon of migrant workers in the United States, or explore a specific topic of migratory labor that especially interests you. Some questions to consider include: What groups are primarily employed as migrant workers? What are their motivations for working outside their own country? What kind of challenges do migrant workers face? In what conditions do they live? Why are migrant workers employed by those who employ them?
2. The narrator taunts Clemson: “‘Come on, Clem,’ I said, ‘don’t be a homo.’” Why does the narrator use this slur to shame Clemson? How is it more effective than calling him a loser or goody-two shoes? The narrator is clearly contrasting Clemson’s “homo” behavior with his own straight, masculine behavior of being reckless, drinking, and boasting. The current definition of masculinity has been criticized as being extremely limiting for many men who don’t naturally practice such behaviors, and also homophobic in that it condemns those men as “homo” or “fags” and therefore not true men. Research the idea of masculinity and how it interacts with the phenomenon of homophobia. Some potentially helpful resources:

<http://faculty.ucc.edu/psysoc-stokes/Masculinity.pdf>

<http://www.ncbi.nlm.nih.gov/pubmed/11206420>

<http://www.apa.org/monitor/2012/06/masculinity.aspx>

Discussion of Lesson Plan

Although this story contains many difficult ideas and somewhat dark themes, I chose to write it for high school students, perhaps especially sophomores, for two reasons. The first reason was previously stated in the Overview. Many high school students are already exposed to the ideas of exploited workers, poverty, privilege, and many other similarly complex topics.

However, they often lack the vocabulary to talk and think about these issues in the way they have the potential to. Addressing these issues in the classroom gives students this skill and offers students a safe and open environment where they can begin to form well-informed opinions about these ideas. The second reason why this lesson was geared toward high school students is because during a majority of the story the narrator is a rising high school sophomore. He is having incredibly difficult and confusing experiences— but they are not unlike the difficult and confusing experiences the students this lesson is written for are experiencing.

I thought it was important to include brief information about the features of an allegory and how to track character development in a story because both are useful for understanding “That Room”. The aside in which the narrator presumably compares “that room” to other events later in his life is challenging to analyze. Understanding the basic features of an allegory give readers to tools they need to pull such a challenging section apart, rather than to just dismiss it as a peripheral, eccentric section of the text. Similarly, the character development of the narrator is crucial to the story. Examining what the narrator has learned and what he has not allows us to reflect on what we as readers have learned through his story. Understanding the effects of dramatic irony lets us reflect on how we came to the conclusions that we did and examine if there are other possible interpretations. The introductory lesson also focuses on relating the literary terms to works that are well-known to students. Many of these concepts are difficult to understand from a textbook definition. Examples are by far the best route to take when trying to explain them. It is very important for students to have a strong grasp of these terms before trying to apply them to “That Room”. “That Room” is much more subtle in its use of character development, allegory, and dramatic irony than the examples that will be provided in class are.

Some background information about the story has been provided in the lesson plan. The factual information about the process of spontaneous hay combustion and Quaker peace testimony allow for a fuller understanding of the meaning of the story by explaining potentially obscure references. The information about privilege was included because it provided a useful lens for understanding parts of the story that were not explicitly stated. These issues were not addressed directly because the narrator himself did not have the vocabulary to understand the issues he was grasping at. I also think it's interesting and important to create interdisciplinary lessons whenever possible. Here, an English lesson incorporates biology, history, religion, and social justice.

I included the independent writing assignments because I felt students should have a chance to explore aspects of the text in a different way besides the classroom discussion. The classroom discussion allows students to share ideas with others and think about ideas and opinions they hadn't considered. The independent writing assignments are a chance to reflect on these new ideas and synthesize them with their own to create an original project. The creative writing assignments encourage students to empathize in a powerful way with some of the characters in the story by describing experiences or feelings both the student and the narrator have shared. The research questions are extremely open-ended, and primarily serve to encourage students to make links between the story they are reading in English class and other parts of the world.

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