

ENGL 611
Sample Lesson

college

Grade Level: Freshman Basic Literature/High School Seniors

Duration: 60 minutes, though with discussion and in class writing assignments could be extended to 90 minutes quite easily.

Objectives: Students will be able to differentiate between the vernacular dialogue and traditional English narration in Zora Neale Hurston's "Sweat", develop an internal voice or character to use when reading Hurston to himself, identify the reading modifications one must make when studying such literature (meta-cognition) and move towards developing a substantiated and defensible opinion about the literary, social and political implications of Zora Neale Hurston's vernacular heavy literature.

Reasoning: I very much appreciate Sheridan Blau's anecdote about the entry in Tolstoy's diary recounting the "habitual and unconscious" act of cleaning a room" (11). I believe that the act of reading a text can become equally as unconscious as the mundane task of cleaning a room, and for our less experienced (and therefore less confident) students, reading difficult or unfamiliar texts become even more unconscious and rote than texts they can easily access. Have you ever read a page-maybe from a chemistry text, a computer manual or a very dense literary text (*Ulysses* anyone?) and reached the end just to realize you have no idea what you just read? I predict that the vernacular dialogue in Zora Neale Hurston's short story will have the same mind-numbing effect on students. I also predict that the roadblock they bump into when they read this language will cause them to "declare themselves incompetent readers" of Hurston (Blau, 6).

Blau contends that "confusion represents a necessary starting point for any act of interpretation" and I hope to use the vernacular dialogue in Hurston's story as the starting point from which we can move toward a greater understanding of the importance and relevance of "Sweat" and other examples of Hurston's work to history, race relations, stereotypes and the idea of literature as a reflection of real life and a possible historical document (Blau, 22).

Materials: "Sweat" Photocopy (with designated note-taking templates depending on student independence), highlighters/markers, chart paper or overhead projector

Procedure: (Students should understand the words "vernacular" and "dialogue")

1. Pair students up and ask them to read page 2 (319 in Brereton) quickly to themselves and then discuss with their partner what happened or the plot/sequence of events. (5 minutes)
2. Ask class: What is hard about this text? What slows you down and makes you pause, think, or re-read? (Hope that they say slang/vernacular, if not, very quickly develop a new lesson in your head and use that.) (2 minutes)
3. On chart paper or overhead demonstrate how to divide another (much smaller) section of "Sweat" into dialogue/narration. (3 minutes)

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(ch. 17)

4. Ask partners to work together to divide page 2 into dialogue/narration sections using 2 types of writing utensils. (7 minutes) Circulate the room making sure each pair is doing it correctly.
5. Ask partners to divide their page in half. For the first half, partner A should read dialogue out loud and partner B should read narration. For the second half, they should switch roles. When they are done reading they should discuss their experience with each—which is harder, is it easier to read when you have already done the work of sectioning it off? (10 minutes)
6. Brief classroom discussion: What kind of modifications does the dialogue ask you to do to your reading? List these modifications on board and encourage students to note them if there is not a specific place on their handout (ex: slow down, read in a Southern accent) (10 minutes)
7. Ask each class member to pick one (substantial) line or sentence of dialogue to become an ‘expert’ on. They should figure out how this line should be pronounced, how loud it should be, what pauses to make, etc. Practice your expert line out loud with your partner several times and give each other feedback. (5 minutes)
8. Ask for several volunteers to read their expert line to the class. (5 minutes)
9. Based on the choices the experts made in their interpretations of their lines, brainstorm as a class modifications we might make to our traditional ways of reading in order to more consciously read Hurston. (7 minutes)
10. Pair up with your original partner and answer this question: Why does Zora Neale Hurston write with such heavy vernacular? What is she trying to accomplish? What affect does it have on you (please consider your historical, racial and socio-economical status) specifically as a reader? (3-5 minutes)
11. As a class make a list of the conclusions the pairs have made (encourage students to write these conclusions down if there is not a specific place in the handout). (5 minutes)
12. Require a re-reading of “Sweat” (as homework or with class time) in light of the Hurston reading tools your class has developed and listed.

Possible Homework/In Class Writing/Continuation of Discussion For the Next Meeting: What assumptions do you make about Hurston’s characters strictly based on the way they speak? Hurston has been criticized and praised (both excessively) for the way she depicts Black Americans. For what specific reasons might her heavy use of vernacular merit both criticism and praise? What role might a text such as “Sweat” play in teaching people about history? Based on the vernacular, to whom might this text appeal? Who might be turned off by it? Would this story be as ‘good’ without it?

Notes/Hesitations/Questions: I have taught “Sweat” in a classroom setting, but I have never presented it in this way. One of the hesitations I have about this lesson has to do with Blau’s philosophy of presenting literature. He contends that teachers should not “anticipate and prevent <student> confusion” (21). I very clearly anticipate that students will have problems with the vernacular, grammar, usage, syntax, etc. Hurston is famous for. Is this a reasonable prediction to make and act on, or is it presumptuous in presenting too much scaffolding to students who might not have demonstrated a need for it yet? My second question about this particular lesson is where in a sequence on Hurston

or "Sweat" it might come. I assume that reading the complete text before the lesson would be beneficial, but is there a possibility that doing this lesson before the students have been exposed to the text could be helpful? If it is agreed that students should have read the complete text first, would this be a helpful first lesson, or might it come later on in a sequence after things such as symbolism, characterization, and allusion are discussed?

Source Material

Blau, Sheridan D. *The Literature Workshop*. Portsmouth, NH: Heinemann, 2003. Print.

<http://www.pbs.org/speak/seatosea/powerprose/hurston/#1>

<http://www.merriam-webster.com/dictionary/vernacular>

<http://rpp.english.ucsb.edu/classroom/genre/lesson-plans/lesson-plan-black-vernacular-hurston-hughes-and-toomer>

Hurston, Zora Neale. "Sweat." *Living Literature*. Ed. John C. Brereton. New York: Pearson Education, 2008. 318-326. Print.

Wall, Cheryl A. "Mules and Men and Women: Zora Neale Hurston's Strategies of Narration and Visions of Female Empowerment." *Black American Literature Forum*: 23.4, 1989. 661-680. Web 2 Feb 2010.

