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Don't Skirt the Subject

Using Canonical Texts as Opportunities for Race Discussion

Emily Gardner

Abstract: While administrators, parents, and scholars across the nation ceaselessly debate the issue of whether or not racially challenging texts, such as *Adventures of Huckleberry Finn*, *To Kill a Mockingbird*, and *Heart of Darkness*, should be included in English language arts curriculum, many English teachers are left to teach these controversial texts with often insufficient training in how to utilize them in their classrooms. It is the responsibility of teachers to help students become empathetic citizens by developing the skills necessary to navigate through a racially diverse world. Therefore, teachers ought to use texts containing racism as opportunities to open a conversation of race relations both in the past and present time, by using research-based methods, like those in this article.

Introduction

A first year teacher welcomes students into her new classroom during the first week of school. Once the bell rings, the teacher addresses the class and informs them they will be reading a novel for the next few weeks. Copies of *Adventures of Huckleberry Finn* are stacked on her desk, but before calling students over to sign out copies, she looks out into the class and judges what the students' responses will be. The classroom contains twenty students, twelve black, two Hispanic, and six white. As she nervously looks out at her students, the young white teacher, has several thoughts racing through her head. "Should I say 'nigger' when I'm reading? How would the principal react to hearing that I used that word? Would he support my choice? Should I ask the students when they heard the word, or will that bring up bad memories? Should we begin with the lesson on satire or the lesson on a history of the controversy? Should I just ask to teach *My Antonia* instead?"

This teacher is experiencing what many new and experienced teachers alike go through while teaching a racially challenging text which is a lack of confidence in their educational choices. Just like learning how to best differentiate instruction or challenge high achieving students, learning how to teach texts containing racism in a way that challenges students to think about race is an essential skill for English language arts teachers, but one that many do not receive training in. As a result, many teachers are left feeling like the example above, unconfident and questioning their instructional choices. Regardless of whether or not teachers are proponents of keeping texts like *Huckleberry Finn* in the classroom, the fact is they are there, and teachers have to figure out the most productive way to discuss them.

If schools seek to produce productive members of society, which our democratic government-funded public school system seems to suggest, students must know how to communicate with each other, a skill that includes the ability and willingness to understand others' perspectives. What this comes down to is a call for discourse on societal issues, such as gender, class, and, for the purposes of this article, race relations. While I argue it is a role of teachers of all subjects to address issues like these, this article focuses on addressing race relations in the English language arts (ELA) classroom. Because texts like *Adventures of Huckleberry Finn*, *To Kill a Mockingbird*, and *Heart of Darkness*, are staples in ELA curriculum in schools across the nation, teachers and their students are already confronting the topic of race in their classrooms. Although the topic of race is always a challenging one for students and teachers alike, there are three methods I focus on in this article, which many researchers have proven effective at producing productive conversations of race. Rather than explaining away the moments of racism within a text or the potentially racist perspective of its author, I argue teachers ought to use those moments as an opportunity to help students develop racial identities and the skills to navigate through a racially diverse world and one in which racism exists.

Methods for Teaching: Literacy Theory

The first method, exploring texts through different lenses in literary theory, can be used to help students better understand the multiple perspectives that exist around and within a text, specifically texts that contain racism. Appleman (2009) proposes teachers should become familiar with different lenses used in literary theory, such as reader response, privilege and social class, gender, post-colonialism, and deconstruction, in order to utilize them when teaching a text. The job of teachers is not just to teach students how to read and write, but how to use reading and writing skills to make sense of the world around them. In order to do this, students must become familiar with ideologies, which Appleman (2009) defines as "the system of values and beliefs that help create expectations for individual behavior and for social norms" (p. 2). Although they can be harmless at times, some ideologies need to be questioned or resisted. A familiarity with ideologies helps students examine and potentially resist ideologies surrounding them, such as the racism present in *To Kill a Mockingbird*. What this means in regard to the racism present in the novels students read for school and in their lives is they may learn to identify racism and resist it.

Although examining texts through literary theory may seem like something useful only to literary scholars, taking on the perspectives of others, even people you may not agree with, is a skill students practice when using literary theory in the ELA classroom. This is also a skill they will use outside of school that will make them more empathetic to the lives and concerns of their fellow men who they may struggle to understand. Many of the activities Appleman (2009) suggests involve different groups of students taking on diverse lenses through which to view a piece of literature, reflecting through those lens, and then sharing the differences between all the perspectives present in the work. One particular lens that Appleman (2009) describes that is specific to my purpose is the postcolonial lens, which she applies when teaching *Heart of Darkness*. She recommends asking students to rephrase the statement “Christopher Columbus discovered America” from a postcolonial perspective. Some examples she provides of actual student responses suggest the students were able to reevaluate the common phrase they had likely grown up hearing, such as one student who wrote, “Columbus took control of land inhabited for centuries by native people, and in the process stripped them of their independence and unique culture” (Appleman, 2009, p. 91). Encouraging students

to reconsider their preconceived notions as this student did, should be the goal when teaching texts that include racism. Appleman (2009) finds the postcolonial lens increasingly more important to utilize in classrooms due to the changing demographic of students:

As more immigrants and refugees enter our classrooms, we must consider a broader range of literary texts in order that our students may see themselves and their circumstances in the works they read. In addition, we need to consider the perspectives and identities of populations that historically have not seen themselves as part of the American mainstream. If we can successfully demonstrate for students from such groups that alternative ideologies belong within the American imagination, we will reveal the emancipating power of literary interpretation. (pp. 84-85)

Unrepresented groups are often presented in literature from an outside view, as we see in *Heart of Darkness*, which demands readers to question the accuracy of the view and the influences involved in the presentation of those people. Utilizing the postcolonial lens when approaching texts creates, therefore, a more inclusive classroom.

Methods for Teaching: Juxtaposition of Texts

The second method, using the same thought process behind literary theory, is juxtaposition. Instead of looking for different voices or perspectives within the same text, juxtaposition is providing students with alternative texts written from a different perspective and comparing their views on the same topic. An example of juxtaposition is the use of slave narratives like *The Interesting Narrative of the Life of Olaudah Equiano*, or *Gustavas Vassa, The African or The Narrative of the Life of Frederick Douglas* to juxtapose with *Adventures of Huckleberry Finn*. As Chadwick-Joshua (1998) argues the influence of slave narratives on Twain’s character, Jim, it is important for students to have the ability to judge for themselves what influence Twain’s portrayal of a black man has on the statement he may be making in his novel. Similarly, texts written from an African’s perspective can juxtapose readings of *Heart of Darkness* in order to help students identify what aspects of Conrad’s novel can be viewed as instances of racism and help point out some of the inaccuracies inherent in the text. Writing on teaching *Heart of Darkness*, Blake (1982) describes her use of Ousmane Sembene’s *God’s Bits of Wood*, offering a colonialism-era African perspective to juxtapose with Conrad’s novel. Whole novels may not be necessary for juxtaposition, as Chinua Achebe’s renowned article, “Images in Africa,” written in response to Conrad’s novel, may also be valuable to compare with the text and offer students another voice from Africa. Echoing back to Appleman’s (2009) suggestion of teaching texts through multiple lenses, Blake (1982) notes:

Comparing novels written from different social assumptions shows students how the technical elements of fiction function to produce meaning, how the implications of point of view govern the entire work, as art as well as social construct, and how literary values are tied to social values. (p. 400)

Heart of Darkness can be taught without an emphasis on the racism inherent in it, instead with a focus on Marlow’s psychological journey. However, ignoring the issues of race and racism present in these novels is only a means of inadvertently perpetuating racism. Calling students attention to racism and misconceptions of race in socially accepted texts enables them to identify racism and misconceptions of race within other aspects of society.

Methods for Teaching: Open Discussion

The first two methods to approach teaching texts containing racism may be viewed as somewhat safer than the third: open discussion of historical and contemporary race relations. Researchers encourage teachers to utilize open discussion of race in their classrooms as a way to make the literature more relevant to their students’ lives (Agbaw, 1998; Alberti, 1995; Borsheim-Black, 1998; Martin, 2014; Thomas, 2015). According to Thomas (2015), however, the common approaches to literary analysis used in classrooms today, such as reader response and

new criticism, in which teachers focus on style, characterization, and personal reactions don't emphasize or encourage discussions of race. While teaching these texts through those limited lenses, teachers are "concomitantly developing social, cultural, and political attitudes in students alongside the teaching of reading and writing, and forming shared ethical positions around the most pressing contemporary issues" (Thomas, 2015, p. 155). Instead of perpetuating socialized racism or racial stereotypes by ignoring the racism present in texts and focusing on the purely literary value of a text, teachers ought to utilize those moments of racism to open a discussion with their students of what the author is saying about races or racism and analyze how or why this was a common conception then and if it still is today.

Although many research articles cite open discussion as necessary and effective for making texts that contain racism more relatable to students' lives, there are some problems teachers may encounter during such an open conversation on a frequently perceived controversial topic. Some of these problems are inherent in the text, such as the use of "nigger," while others are a result of social surroundings, such as "white talk" and "color blindness." Borsheim-Black (2015) states that this type of talk prevents white people from realizing their personal or collective role in the perpetuation of racism and a lack of acknowledgement of racial differences that only serves to perpetuate racism. Although these issues may be unresolvable for some students and in some scenarios, there are some methods that can be used to help reduce them.

Discussion Problems and Solutions

Perhaps the largest problem teachers will encounter in any of the three texts mentioned in this article is the use of "nigger" in *Huckleberry Finn*, and for good reason. The word cannot simply be dismissed, Alberti (1995) argues, as a colloquialism of the time, nor can teachers *inform* their students that the word was used as part of Twain's satire to further effect the reader. Because teachers do not know what weight that word carries for each of their students, they must be careful not to dismiss it and to approach its use carefully. To make the discussion over the word more relevant to students, rather than keeping it in the 1800's or 1930's, a discussion of the contemporary use of it seems necessary. Martin (2013) included the use of "nigger" in hip hop to analyze the evolution of the word and to help students reevaluate their own actions and views regarding race. Letting students into the controversy over the word in the novel is another method to approach it, especially allowing students to decide which version (original or censored) should be used in schools and defending their choice. Although discomfort will likely remain regarding use of the word, these practices may help alleviate some of it and allow for more genuine discussion.

Similar to the strategies above, there are also methods that can be used to help reduce white talk and color blindness. One strategy Thomas (2015) recommends for promoting genuine discussions of race is utilizing digital tools, such as online message boards, to help alleviate the discomfort students may feel when talking about race with their teachers and classmates. This is a tool that can easily be used in classrooms that may reduce the politically correct claims of color blindness or the socially accepted use of white talk, by allowing students to express their true opinions without fear of judgement. Another instance of color blindness was exhibited by Agbaw (1998) whose students did not want to focus their reading of *Heart of Darkness* on the presentation of the Africans and would rather have focused on other, less controversial themes of the novel. Claims of color blindness are also combatted by using close reading to demonstrate racist portrayals of Africans his students had initially missed and utilized those instances to generate discussion of the portrayal of race within the novel. Agbaw (1998) noted after those discussions, "[the students] came to realize how much their own reading of a text such as *Heart of Darkness* has been based on assumptions that have never been closely examined, and how much texts have helped to establish and to reinforce such assumptions" (p. 191). Open discussion holds the risk of running into the problem of white talk, color blindness, and discomfort with the use of "nigger," but these strategies can help alleviate the effects of these problems.

Conclusion

While administrators, parents, and scholars across the nation ceaselessly debate the issue of whether or not racially challenging texts should be included in ELA curriculum, many English teachers are left with these contested and, thus, controversial texts in their classroom with often no guidance in how to present them to their students. Rather than avoiding a discussion of racism within texts, I argue teachers ought to use those instances of racism found in classic literature as an opportunity to help students develop racial identities and the skills to navigate through a racially diverse world and one in which racism exists. By utilizing the strategies described in this article, literary theory, juxtaposition, and open discussion, English teachers may use texts that contain racism more productively to open a genuine conversation of race and provide their students with the necessary skills to communicate with others.

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