

Examining Language in "Cora Unashamed"

By Shery Row

Overview

One approach a secondary school instructor might take when studying Langston Hughes's short story "Cora Unashamed" is to focus on Hughes's language. This lesson plan works well as an introductory lesson. Students may not understand the connotations of the word "wench," and the emotionally charged word "nigger" probably needs addressing especially in a predominately Anglo school. Using both words together as Hughes does offers an opportunity to explore the added sexual stereotypes people of color have dealt with for ages. Reading literature containing emotionally charged terms has often led to misunderstanding and controversy within a community. Students should be given their own opportunities to judge the merits of controversial literature.

Objectives

Students will:

- Recognize that words have both denotative and connotative meanings
- Develop a better understanding of pejorative language so they can avoid using it themselves
- Demonstrate some basic interviewing skills
- Recognize the characteristics of various rhetorical models
- Understand that emotionally charged words can have ramifications beyond the local ken
- Identify stereotyping in the mass media

Skills Attained

- Conducting research on the Internet
- Analysis of language to evaluate if printed words contain an underlying message
- Application of learning in one assignment to another
- Careful listening skills when interviewing someone
- Accurate quoting of a source

Lesson Outline

I. Pre-reading Activities

1. Begin the lesson with a journal writing activity. Make the following assignment: In your journal, write about a time when someone called you a name that was especially hurtful. Try to describe how you felt at the time and what you said or did in response. Why do you believe you were called this name? Why do you believe you responded as you did?

2. Establish denotative meanings versus connotative meanings of words by first defining the difference between "denotative" and "connotative" for the students. Then have students do the following:

- a. Look up the word "wench" in a comprehensive dictionary, noting all the definitions of this word. Students should ask five or six adults what they understand this word to mean; two or three women should be included in each student's survey.
- b. Look up the word "nigger" in a comprehensive dictionary, noting the definition of this word.

- c. Write a journal entry about what they understand people to mean when they use the words "wench" and "nigger."

3. Lead the class in a discussion of pejorative language. The discussion should center on the reasons people use pejorative language, and the effects that this kind of language has on individuals and the consciousness of a society.

II. Post-Reading Activities

Several essays offer an opportunity to continue raising students' consciousness regarding pejorative language and racial and sexual stereotyping. In the list below, the first two news magazine articles testify to the emotionally charged atmosphere certain words can engender.

- Lynnette Clemetson's "The Slur That Wasn't" (*Newsweek* Feb. 8, 1999: 39) and Jack White's "The Other N Word" (*Time* February 8, 1999: 31) cover the Washington, D.C., flap over the mayor's aide's use of "niggard" in a budget meeting. These articles are useful for teaching the rhetorical models of the article versus the essay as they deal with the same incident but in two different rhetorical modes. Using a transparency of this article is one way to present this material.
- Gloria Naylor's essay "Mommy, What Does 'Nigger' Mean?" explains the various contexts African Americans have for using "nigger." I found this article especially helpful to my majority Anglo and Latino student body. This essay is used best in its entirety. This essay is useful for teaching the rhetorical model of definition.
- Judith Ortiz Cofer's essay "The Myth of the Latin Woman: I Just Met a Girl Named Maria" is especially good for exploring sexual/racial stereotyping. Pertinent portions of this essay would serve as well as the entire essay, although the essay is a relatively brief five pages. This essay is useful for teaching the rhetorical model of showing through example.
- Amy Tan's essay "Mother Tongue" offers insights into what she thinks about the various "types" of English she uses in her life, academic, "broken," and standard. Tan wonders what her ability to switch fluidly from one language to another indicates about her identity. Pertinent portions of this essay would serve as well as the entire essay, although the essay is a relatively brief six pages. This essay is useful for teaching the rhetorical model of classification.
(Note: All essays listed may also be used to teach expository writing.)

You should continue any discussion these brief works generate. They can serve especially to augment the discussion of the effect of pejorative language on the consciousness of society. I like them as well because of their first-person accounts.

Assessment

You may assess student performance by having them gather pictures and/or slogans from newspapers and magazines that they believe negatively stereotype a specific group. Each example must be accompanied by a brief explanation of the stereotyping.

Alternatively, they may be assigned to find one more example of a short story, song or poem that uses disparaging language toward a specific person or group. Some of these examples could be used as additional studies in class. Students may write an illustration essay examining the ways authors have used language to portray one group's stereotyping of another.

Suggested Related Works

One way to extend the study of "Cora Unashamed" is to broaden the lesson to include censorship issues. Of course examples abound, but the controversy over **Nappy Hair** serves as a timely example. Students may wish to research additional examples, such as the following:

- Clemetson, Lynette. "Caught in the Cross-Fire." **Newsweek** 14 Dec. 1998: 38-39. A report of a teacher in New York who resigned amid controversy over teaching the children's book **Nappy Hair**.
- Edwards, Tamala M. "What Johnny Can't Read." **Time** 21 Dec. 1998: 46-47. A report of book banning throughout the United States.
- "Anaya's Novel Under Fire." **The Dallas Morning News** July 21, 1996. A report of censorship in a Texas school district.
- White, Robert A. "Pat Conroy's 'Gutter Language': **Prince of Tides** in a Low Country High School." **English Journal** April 1992: 18-22. This article is especially interesting for Conroy's response to the controversy over teaching his novel.

Interdisciplinary Links

Social Studies

Have students research the websites of hate groups on the Internet. Students should be guided to carefully evaluate the language used in these pages. This assignment offers an opportunity to teach coded language and may help students read analytically and critically. After gathering data students could:

- Create a chart listing on one side the coded language they found and on the other side what they believe to be the actual intent of the language
- Write an argumentative essay against the position(s) advocated by one hate group
- Write an analysis essay explaining why they believe hate groups proliferate

Fine Arts

Have students research artists who have been censored. After gathering data they could:

- Create a chart outlining the artists, their controversial works, the individual or group who objected to the work(s), and the reasons given for objecting to the work
- Write a letter to the editor of their local newspaper defending a censored artist's work (the letter would not be sent unless the topic was appropriate for the community)
- Write an essay classifying the various ways artists have been censored

This lesson was submitted by Sheryl Row, a teacher at the Jesuit Preparatory School in Dallas, Texas.