

# Into, Through and Beyond Cora Unashamed

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## Overview

This lesson allows students to construct their own meanings of the story. We've employed open-ended questions and projects that include the use of graphics to help students organize their thoughts and ideas. Extended activities include group discussion, class presentations and essay writing.

## Objectives

- Participate in class and group discussion
- Pose appropriate questions and suggestions to peers
- Use clear and audible language for public speaking
- Analyze values and issues in both fiction and nonfiction
- Develop a well organized essay
- Incorporate strong, vivid, precise and interesting vocabulary into assignment
- Proofread, edit and evaluate essays according to standard written English criteria
- Discriminate literal from implied meaning by using graphic organizers
- Develop plausible interpretations of literature

## Skills Attained

- Use graphic organizers to show relationships among characters, themes, conflicts or settings
- Compare and contrast issues, values and ideals in a literary work
- Create a visual display analyzing a literary theme
- Write autobiographical and reflective essays
- Discuss in small groups and make oral presentations

## Lesson Outline

### I. "Into"

Select one or all strategies to introduce the story.

#### 1. Personal Connection

Tell students that they are going to read the short story "Cora Unashamed" by Langston Hughes, an African American writer. Use the Quick Write assignment. Ask students to share their responses in pairs or trios. Then ask for volunteers or recommendations to share with the whole class.

Quick Write: Sometimes, no matter what the consequences, people have to speak their minds. Write about a time when you (or someone you know) spoke out when you (or he/she) were not supposed to. Describe the situation. What happened? Who was involved? What was the outcome? Share your writing with a partner or in a small group.

#### 2. Historical Connection

Tell students that they will understand the text better if they have a historical perspective of the story and its author. First, check to see if any students have prior knowledge of the period.

"Cora Unashamed" was published in 1934 in a collection of short stories entitled **The Ways of White Folks** by Langston Hughes, an African American author. The story is set in a tiny, almost allwhite town in the Midwest. Consider the time period in which Hughes wrote and in which the story took place. The Civil Rights Movement was a full thirty years away, and blacks still suffered the vestiges of racism and oppression which lingered from slavery.

### 3. Literary Connection

Tell students that prior to reading the story, they will read a poem, "I, Too" also written by Langston Hughes (included below). Hand out copies of the poem and the response prompt. Review the prompt with the students. Allow time for their written and oral responses, repeating the process used with the Quick Write.

**Response prompt for "I, Too":** In a Langston Hughes poem entitled, "I, Too" the speaker describes the relationship between African Americans and white society. What is your first response? Write down any thoughts, questions or opinions you have. Next, choose a line (or lines) which jump out at you or intrigue you in some way. Copy the line(s) and write an explanation of why it (they) appeals to you and or what it means to you. Share your responses with a partner.

### 4. Preview "Cora Unashamed"

Conduct a class-wide discussion on possible interpretations of the title. To enhance their understanding as they read the story, direct students to make notes and save them along with their other responses.

## II. "Through"

Assign "Cora Unashamed" and select from the following Reading Response assignments.

1. What is your response to this story? Take a few minutes to write down your first impressions which may include any thoughts, feelings, questions or opinions. You should be able to elaborate and explain your ideas on the basis of the story itself, your own experiences and other literary works that you have read.
2. Choose one of the following quotations from the story to write about. Interpret the quote based on its meaning in the text and your own personal thoughts.
  - A. "The Studevants thought they owned her..."
  - B. "Cora...So humble and unashamed about life."
3. Choose a short passage from the story that interests or intrigues you in some way. Copy the quotation. Interpret this selection based on its meaning in the text and your own personal thoughts.
4. An "open mind" is an outline of a head that lets you show what a character might be thinking or feeling. In the "open mind" below, use symbols, images, drawings and or words to show what Cora might have been thinking or feeling during the story. (**Teacher's Note:** If you have access to such a graphic image, please use it to facilitate your students' response. If not, reconstruct this prompt without mentioning the image.)

5. Explain how the symbols, images, drawings, and or words that you put into your "open mind" represent your ideas about Cora.

6. Reread the poem "I, Too" by Langston Hughes and answer the following questions:

- A. Who is the speaker in the poem?
- B. Read lines 16-17. To whom is the speaker referring?
- C. Who will be ashamed? Why?

7. Think about the story title, "Cora Unashamed." Are there characters in the story who have reason to be ashamed and or unashamed? Reflect upon the actions and beliefs of the people in the story. On a separate sheet of paper, create two columns and label them "Ashamed" and "Unashamed." Place each of the main characters in one of the two columns. Justify your decision by describing the character's behavior and explain why you feel your categorization is appropriate.

8. Langston Hughes gave his story a title that indicates Cora's steadfast ways in dealing with obstacles. What else might make a good title for this story? Make up an alternate title. Explain why you think your title might be appropriate. Support your ideas with specific reasons and references from the text.

### III. "Beyond"

Select from the following three choices.

1. As a class, discuss the following:

- A. How do Cora's reactions reflect the attitudes of the times?
- B. How might she react if these incidents happened today?

2. In your class or group, share some of your reading responses. Of the eight reading response questions asked in the "through" assignment, focus on discussing your response to the first question. Then meet in small groups and plan a literature portrait presentation for the class.

#### Literature Portrait Group Project Assignment

A. Border of Significance

Create a border for your portrait as if you were framing a picture. You may decorate this border with words or pictorial images to illuminate the significance of "Cora Unashamed."

B. Symbol of the Big Idea in the Work of Literature

Inside the border, in the portrait area, draw the big idea that you conceive of as the centerpiece or central message in "Cora Unashamed."

C. Theme of the Literature in Words

Somewhere within the portrait, write the theme (e.g., Hughes' message, the "big idea" or the moral) of "Cora Unashamed" in your own words.

D. Quotation from the Literature

Elsewhere on the portrait, choose a quote from the text that reflects the theme.

E. Class Presentation

Each group member must speak during the presentation. So plan what to say; something short is appropriate.

3. Make essay assignment by giving students a choice between the Autobiographical Incident and the Reflective Essay.

**Essay Assignments**

A. Autobiographical Incident Essay

**Writing Situation**

Cora was not ashamed to speak out about her beliefs even though she had lost her job and was ostracized by the whites in Melton. Think of a time when you spoke out when you weren't supposed to. What were the consequences of your actions?

**Writing Directions**

Write about a time when you spoke out when you weren't supposed to. Your English teacher and classmates will want to know (1) who was involved, (2) what the people and surroundings were like, (3) what happened and (4) how you felt about the incident. Try to make your readers understand why this particular event is memorable to you.

B. Reflective Essay

**Writing Situation**

In "Cora Unashamed," Cora had the courage to speak out about what she believed. Consider the meaning of this quotation from Ralph Waldo Emerson's "Self Reliance" essay: "The great man is he who can, in the midst of a crowd, keep with perfect sweetness, the independence of solitude."

**Writing Directions**

Write an essay in which you reflect on the implications of speaking out or taking an unpopular stand. What if your action results in censure or harsh disapproval from your community or society at large? Begin with specific observations and personal experiences. Explore your ideas thoughtfully. You do not have to convince your readers that your ideas are the "best" or right. You are merely sharing your ideas and trying them out in an exploratory way.

**IV. Hughes Poem**

**I, Too**

By Langston Hughes

I, too, sing America.  
I am the darker brother,

They send me to eat in the kitchen  
When company comes,  
But I laugh,  
And eat well,

And grow strong.

Tomorrow,  
I'll be at the table  
When company comes.  
Nobody'll dare  
Say to me,  
"Eat in the kitchen,"  
Then.

Besides,  
They'll see how beautiful I am  
And be ashamed –

I, too, am America.

## **Assessment**

Teachers may set up their own rubrics for assessing student writing and group participation.

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