

Debating "Cora Unashamed"

By Gail Lindenberg

Overview

"Fair is foul and foul is fair" from Shakespeare's *Macbeth* is a line that echoes certain realities about our human experience. In today's world of Jerry Springer and Ricki Lake, students are apt to mistakenly equate disagreement with little more than a loud brawl. While the Bard's bearded hags might say otherwise, debate should be an arena where fair is fair and foul is not allowed. English teachers sometimes avoid what can be a rich and rewarding part of the literary experience because students lack the skills to structure a debate and conduct civilized discourse—modes of communication that are not patterned by today's popular media.

A study of literature can be greatly enhanced through the use of debates to explore controversial issues. Requiring students to delve into the text, extract evidence to support their arguments and then verbally present their positions is a perfect way to go into, through and beyond a literary work. This unit, designed for Langston Hughes' "Cora Unashamed," primarily serves secondary students and can be modified for all grades and ability levels.

Objectives

- Analyze literature, noting controversial issues
- Demonstrate support for contentions
- Defend a logical and reasonable viewpoint
- Practice public speaking and topical discourse

Skills Attained

- Citation of textual support for personal opinion
- Close reading and analysis of literary text
- Recognition of logical fallacies
- Oral presentation of controversial issue

Lesson Outline

I. Introduction

Review with your students the terms, protocol, strategies and logical fallacies sections that are contained in "Literary Debate Guidelines" document included below.

II. Select a Debate Format

Depending on the number of students in and skills level of your class, select an appropriate debate format: Vote with Your Feet, Formal Team, Panel and Class Discussion, or Hot Seat. (See "Literary Debate Guidelines" below for descriptions of each format.) Divide the class into debate teams, making sure that students are aware of their roles (debate member, moderator, timekeeper, etc.).

III. Literary Debate Topics

Have students come up with topics for debate. Remind them that in preparing for debate of any style, topics should be written as affirmative resolution statements by the team members. This allows students to

explore terms, agree on areas of controversy and establish boundaries for the debate forum.

With regard to "Cora Unashamed" by Langston Hughes, here are some possible resolutions to consider:

Be it resolved that . . .

. . . Cora is trapped, a victim without choices.

. . . Cora, like Hester Prynne of Hawthorn's **The Scarlet Letter**, should move away from the community that views her as a sinner.

. . . the Melton Woman's Club members match the Puritans of Salem, Massachusetts, for their abuse of power and privilege. (i.e., in Arthur Miller's "The Crucible")

. . . for Cora, the ending is a victory.

. . . Cora, like Calpurnia from **To Kill A Mockingbird** by Harper Lee, is an archetypal figure.

. . . Cora's oppression is the same as that experienced by the Joad family in **The Grapes of Wrath** by John Steinbeck.

IV. Hold the Debate

Carryout the event using the instructions and guidelines for the debate format that you've selected.

Assessment

Student evaluations should be based on their strengths in the following areas:

- Oral expression of logical arguments
- Presentation of literary comprehension
- Use of literary piece as evidence in support of contentions
- Use of effective public speaking techniques

Gail Lindenberg teaches at Nogales High School in La Puente, California.

Literary Debate Guidelines

By Gail Lindenberg

This document provides useful tips for creating a debate unit for the classroom. The information has been organized into five sections that may be used to construct class handouts. In particular, students should have a copy of the protocol and strategies of debate so that they may refer to it throughout the year as different formats are employed.

Terms: Useful debate vocabulary that students ought to be familiar with

Protocol: Rules for debate conduct and etiquette

Strategies: Tips for organizing and communicating arguments

Logical Fallacies: Hints on how to identify poor arguments

Debate Formats : Outlines and instructions for four debate formats

Terms

1. Argument = a position or statement of opinion to be supported
2. Contention = as part of an argument, a contention is a statement to be proven
3. Affirmative = the positive side (pro) of the debate that supports the resolution statement
4. Negative = the side of the debate that is against the affirmative position (con)
5. Resolution = a specific statement of what is to be proven or refuted; the formal resolution statement begins: "Be it resolved that . . ."
6. Refute = to disprove
7. Rebuttal = questions to challenge points made by opposition
8. Summation = conclusion, the last appeal to the audience/jury
9. Brief = pre-planned statements of position before rebuttal

Protocol

1. Contentions should be stated clearly (perhaps listed) at the onset of the debate.
2. A moderator should serve as a source of appeal for rulings about etiquette or breach of protocol.
3. If the debate is timed, the timekeeper signals the moderator, not the debate members.
4. The moderator only interjects comments or rulings when appealed to by a debate member.
5. Questions or challenges should not be personal or insulting.
6. Initial briefs are to be offered without clash or reference to the statements made by the other side. Clash and refutation occurs only in rebuttal.
7. Each speaker is accountable for team position statements and research; speakers should be able to defend team positions.
8. Order and timing must be agreed upon in advance.
9. The moderator may declare a recess to consult with the instructor if in doubt concerning an appeal.
10. Members may appeal to the moderator for environmental or personal needs.
11. A debate member may appeal for a point of order at any time; the moderator may rule immediately or hold ruling until a later time.
12. Points challenged during rebuttal must be part of the initial brief statements; a member/team may not be challenged for information not discussed.
13. Rebuttal must be posed in question form and not further the brief position.

Strategies

1. If you don't want to debate a point, don't bring it up.
2. Don't get mad—get even through use of logic.

3. Use the moderator to your advantage. Know the rules and insist they be followed.
4. Control the floor when it's your turn. Asking an open question gives the floor to the other side.
5. Negative body language (like rolling the eyes) does not serve to give the judge/audience a positive impression of you.
6. Appear to be listening sympathetically—then devastate the other side with logical attack.
7. Use formal language. Slang, name-calling or cursing makes you appear unintelligent and ill-prepared.
8. Ham it up. Speak with passion and intensity, but not melodrama.
9. Loud is not logic. A quiet voice can command the most attention. An old trick of politicians is to lower the voice so that everyone listens more closely.
10. Choose your experts and sources wisely. One young woman who has had an abortion is not an expert on the subject.
11. Take time to read or quote the literature exactly.
12. Use short anecdotes and famous quotes when possible.
13. Know the position of the other side as well as you know your own. This way you won't be surprised.
14. Study the logical fallacies and hold the opposition accountable for logic blunders.
15. Save your best quote, strongest point and highest-impact emotional appeal for summation and final statement.
16. Don't sound patronizing or condescending. It doesn't come across well.
17. If possible, stand to speak. Walk around courtroom style. It's very impressive and intimidating to the opposition.
18. Don't overuse any single strategy.
19. Don't say "I don't know" or "you're right" without following it up with a redirecting statement such as, "That may be true, but have you ever thought about . . ."

Logical Fallacies

Fallacies are errors in thinking and mistakes in logic. A study of samples can assist the debate team member to think more clearly and to see the flaws in the arguments from the opposing side. These fallacies are given different names by different authors, but recognition of the term for the flaw is not important. Detecting the false pattern is. Note that in addition to the ones described below, there are many more types of logical fallacies that may be explored.

1. Post Hoc Fallacy: The assumption that because one thing happens before another, that one thing causes the other. The classic story is of the arrogant rooster who brags to the hens that he crows, causing the morning sun to rise. One old biddy who has been around the barnyard block challenges him. "Stay quiet tomorrow," she taunts, "and see if the morning stays dark." Poor old master rooster has to leave in disgrace the next day when the sun shines bright as ever without his cock-o-doodle-doo.

2. False Authority: A rock star is not an expert on the right kind of car to buy no matter how good he or she may look behind the wheel. Also, a criminal is not an expert on the causes of crime. An expert is one who has broad and creditable knowledge of the subject due to study and credentialed expertise in the field under discussion.

3. Part/Whole: Proving part of an argument wrong does not necessarily discredit the entire list. Proving part of an argument valid does not validate the entire argument. If a woman can run 100 yards in 10 seconds, then she should run 1000 yards in 100 seconds?

4. Either/Or: The assumption is that if one thing is true it makes the other choice false. Usually there is a third option. A man works 65 hours a week, and is too tired to enjoy life. He says he must either work himself to death or starve.

5. Rationalization: A fuzzy thinker can convince himself that an unpleasant outcome was due to uncontrollable external circumstances: "I rushed the essay and got an F, but it was because that teacher doesn't like me."

6. Red Herring: Originally, a strong-smelling fish was used to fool a blood hound by dragging the herring across the trail of scent. Some debaters can throw such distractions into the discussion and completely disrupt the course of the debate.

7. Improper Date: When generalizations are formed from a faulty understanding that the argument built is flawed. In literature, interpretation must be based on excellent reading comprehension and strong analysis.

Debate Formats

A. Vote with Your Feet Debate (entire class)

1. Students read the same piece(s) of literature.
2. Class is presented with an issue or controversy that is sparked by the literary selection.
3. The class works to write a resolution that is a positive statement of the issue.
4. Students are to take sides by physically moving to the left side of the room for pro (support of the resolution) and the right side of the room for con (refutes the resolution).
5. The teacher sits between (or other selected moderator) and calls on speakers from each side, in turn. Anyone may speak.
6. The object is to convince classmates to vote "with their feet" by joining the other side of the classroom. They may not move while someone is speaking, but should shift between speakers.
7. In a large class, a student monitor for each side might assist the instructor by keeping a list of students who contribute as well as the number of students who move.
8. The winner is declared according to the number of students who shift to the other side. The instructor may wish to award extra points to the winning side while assessing participation points to those who contribute.

B. Formal Team Debate Performance (Traditional Oxford Style)

1. Groups of six (3 each side) or eight (4 each side) work best. A moderator and timekeeper are selected. Time limits and recesses between debate sections are agreed upon in advance and announced.
2. Each whole group works to draft an affirmative resolution concerning the topic of controversy taken from the literary work. The moderator will read this resolution and introduce the teams to begin the debate.
3. Each drafts an individual brief, a speech of two minutes in length. The combined speeches form the case presented by each side.
4. The order of debate is:

a. Briefs

1. First affirmative (introduction)
2. First negative (introduction)
3. Second affirmative (body)
4. Second negative (body)
5. Last affirmative (conclusion)
6. Last negative (conclusion).

b. Rebuttal

1. First negative controls a minute of questions
2. First affirmative controls a minute of questions; rotation continues through panel until rebuttal is finished or becomes circular

c. Summation

1. Affirmative panel selects most effective speaker to sum up the strengths of their case and the weaknesses of the opposition
2. Negative panel sums up

d. Class Vote

Moderator calls for a class vote based on tally sheets noting logical points made by debate members as well as comments for individual speakers (these may be used to assess or as feedback).

e. Class Open discussion

C. Panel Debate with Class Participation

1. Teams are established of even sides with two to six members per side.
2. The teams work to write a resolution statement regarding a controversial issue from a literary piece.
3. Each speaker presents individual viewpoints as the moderator calls in turn, rotating from affirmative to negative until all have presented their views. There is no absolute time limit necessary.
4. While the debate members speak, classmates fill out index cards of questions addressed to the affirmative or negative side. These are collected by proctors and delivered to the moderator between speakers.
5. After views are presented, the moderator begins to read the questions from the class, again following a rotation and allowing members to respond to the questions posed to their side.
6. To close, each side selects one member of the panel to present a summation that points out the strengths of their side and the weaknesses of the opposition.
7. The moderator calls for a class vote. As time allows, open class discussion may follow.

D. Hot Seat Debate

1. An affirmative position statement is presented to the class who then divide according to the view they wish to support.
2. A "hot seat" is established on each side. One person sits on the "hot seat" and speaks for the side he/she represents.
3. Students may feed written comments, questions, and points to the person on the "hot seat."
4. The student on the "hot seat" may vacate the seat at any time. Someone from that side must take over the chair and duties.
5. An individual may tag the "hot seat" sitter, replacing him. Tagging may only take place during pauses or between speakers.
6. The instructor or a chosen moderator tallies logical points earned by each side. Double points are awarded for specific book citing in support of a position. If the "hot seat" remains vacant, then that side loses.
7. Points may be assessed for participation by taking names of those who speak from the "hot seat" as well as collecting cards at the close of the debate. This allows your less willing speakers to participate.

Gail Lindenberg teaches at Nogales High School in La Puente, California.

