

Character and Class: Eudora Welty's **The Ponder Heart** and William Faulkner's "A Rose for Emily"

By Boris Kolba

Overview

This lesson is a writing unit for use with Eudora Welty's **The Ponder Heart**. Students must have also read William Faulkner's "A Rose for Emily." The lesson is an extension activity comparing the two literary works, but it can also be used as a core writing unit. Students will use Eudora Welty's photographs to highlight the social structures of the southern small towns of **The Ponder Heart** and "A Rose for Emily." Through discussion and group work, students will explore the networks of social relationships in the two works. The lesson culminates in an essay comparing and contrasting the social positions of Uncle Daniel Ponder and Miss Emily Grierson. The unit is suitable for upper-level students in grades 10 through 12.

Objectives

Students will:

- Connect photographic images with literary texts
- Identify and distinguish between narrators and protagonists of literary works
- Recognize patterns of social class as a literary theme
- Apply these concepts in an essay

Skills Attained

- Analysis of narrative perspective
- Analysis of class and character in literary texts
- Pre-writing skills, including brainstorming through discussion and mapping
- Incorporation of pre-writing activities into a finished essay

Lesson Outline

I. Anticipatory Set (one to two sessions)

Present Eudora Welty's photographs of small town life in The American South. Explain that the photographs were taken in the types of communities upon which Clay in **The Ponder Heart** and Jefferson in "A Rose for Emily" were most likely based. Ask students to connect the photographs with elements/characters from the two works. Possible elements from **The Ponder Heart** include the Ponder home, the Beulah hotel, the courthouse, Uncle Daniel Ponder, Edna Earle Ponder, Judge Tip Clanahan, Narciss, Miss Teacake Magee, Eva Sistrunk, Bonnie Dee Peacock, Mrs. Peacock, and Mr. Springer. Possible elements from "A Rose for Emily" include the Grierson house, Miss Emily Grierson, Homer Barron, Judge Stevens, and Tobe.

Students should offer specific details from the texts to support the connections they make, such as a description of Miss Emily's house, Uncle Daniel's face, or Uncle Daniel's white jacket. When clothing is mentioned, ask what clothing reveals about social status in the photographs and in the literary works. What social classes do the students see in the photographs? Do these categories also apply to the literary characters? Near the end of the session, ask students if the photographs have changed their understandings of **The Ponder Heart** and "A Rose for Emily." Do the images give them new insights about the characters in the two works?

II. The Lesson

A. Class Discussion (one to two sessions)

On a blackboard, prepare areas headed *Ponder Heart* and "Rose for Emily." Begin discussion by asking students to identify the protagonist or main character of each work. Guide students to identify Uncle Daniel as Welty's protagonist and Miss Emily as Faulkner's, possibly by asking which characters' actions are at the center of the two stories. Next, ask students to identify the narrator or speaker of each work. Edna Earle is obviously the narrator of **The Ponder Heart**, but "A Rose for Emily" is more challenging. Suggest that the story is narrated by the "townspeople" of Jefferson, as indicated by Faulkner's use of the word "we." Point out that in both works, the story is told by a narrator who watches the main character.

Now present the discussion question: In each work, what is the relationship between the narrator and the protagonist? From what perspectives do the narrators see the protagonists? Responses may begin with emotional details, such as Edna Earle's protective love for Uncle Daniel and the town's pity for Miss Emily. Students should also recognize that Edna Earle sees Uncle Daniel as a social equal, while the townspeople both look up to and resent Miss Emily. Highlight these details of social class by writing them on the board. Ask students to copy material from the board into their notes.

Follow-up question: If Edna Earle sees Uncle Daniel as her social equal, how does she see other characters in the story, such as Eva Sistrunk, Miss Teacake, Bonnie Dee, Narciss, and the Peacock family? How do these characters see Edna Earle and Uncle Daniel?

B. Group Work (one session)

1. Divide the class into small groups of three to four students each. Present each group with one of the following lists of characters:
The Ponder Heart: Uncle Daniel Ponder, Edna Earle Ponder, Miss Teacake Magee, Narciss, Bonnie Dee Peacock, the Peacock family
"A Rose for Emily": Miss Emily Grierson, Colonel Sartoris, Judge Stevens, Homer Barron, Tobe, the townspeople of Jefferson
2. Ask each group to organize the characters according to their social positions in their communities. You may want to check on the groups' progress as they work. Each group should construct a chart that demonstrates the social relationships among the characters. The charts should include each listed character and brief quotations or specific references to the appropriate text describing the characters' places in their communities. Students should draw lines between the characters' names to identify how each character is connected to the others.
3. Collect the charts at the end of the session. Successful charts should illustrate the social stratification of Clay and Jefferson. Charts on *The Ponder Heart* should identify Uncle Daniel and Edna Earle as part of an upper social class, Miss Teacake as part of a middle class, and Narciss and the Peacocks as outsiders; Bonnie Dee's position may vary. Charts on "A Rose for Emily" should identify Colonel Sartoris and Judge Stevens as part of an upper social class, the townspeople as a middle class, and Homer Barron and Tobe as outsiders; Miss Emily's position may vary.

C. Group Work Review and Discussion (one to two sessions)

1. Prepare copies or transparencies of the charts. Present the charts to the class and review the networks of social relationships the groups have identified. The charts should be fairly consistent; there should be a significant degree of consensus on the social structures of the two fictional towns. Highlight these social structures students have used to categorize the characters.
2. After reviewing the charts, present the following discussion question: How do the two protagonists--Uncle Daniel and Miss Emily--fit into Clay and Jefferson, respectively? What roles do they play in their communities? Students should recognize that both characters are from upper

social classes, and that their social positions are acknowledged in various ways by their communities. Students should also recognize that both characters have only tenuous grips on reality. Students may feel uncertain about categorizing the characters, especially Miss Emily, whose family's fortunes have declined. Summarize student responses on a blackboard.

3. Next, ask students for details from **The Ponder Heart** and "A Rose for Emily" that support their conclusions about Uncle Daniel and Miss Emily. Add the details to the blackboard. Finally, ask students to consider what the narrators of each work reveal about the social positions and roles of the protagonists. Responses to this question should recall information from earlier discussions and from the charts. Students should recognize that while Edna Earle is Uncle Daniel's close relative and social equal, the townspeople are outside of Miss Emily's past social world and current life. Add key observations to the blackboard. Ask students to copy material from the blackboard into their notes.

III. Essay Assignment

Present students with the following essay assignment:

Compare and contrast Uncle Daniel Ponder's social position in the town of Clay in **The Ponder Heart** with Miss Emily Grierson's social position in the town of Jefferson in "A Rose for Emily." In what ways are their positions similar? In what ways are they different? How does social class shape the stories in **The Ponder Heart** and "A Rose for Emily"?

Be sure to do the following in your essay:

- Identify the social positions of Uncle Daniel and Miss Emily.
- Explain what the narrators reveal about the protagonists' social positions.
- Support your explanations with details from **The Ponder Heart** and "A Rose for Emily."

Essays should be 2-3 pages.

Encourage students to draw on their discussion notes. Allow three to seven days for completion of the essays. You may want to have students turn in outlines and rough drafts, if time allows.

Assessment

Essays evaluation should be based on the following rubric.

A: The essay should present a clear thesis placing the social positions of Uncle Daniel and Miss Emily at the centers of **The Ponder Heart** and "A Rose for Emily." The essay should clearly identify the similarities and differences between the two characters' places in their communities, demonstrate an understanding of the narrators' perspectives in the two works, and integrate these issues into its central argument. All points should be supported with specific examples and quotations from the texts. Paragraphs should be unified and focused, and the essay as a whole should be focused on its central argument.

B: The essay should present a clear thesis connecting the social positions of Uncle Daniel and Miss Emily with the plots of **The Ponder Heart** and "A Rose for Emily." The essay should clearly identify the similarities and differences between the two characters' places in their communities and should demonstrate an understanding of the narrators' perspectives in the two works. Points should be supported with specific references to the texts, including some quotations. The essay may fail to move beyond obvious comparisons and may lack strong overall focus. Paragraphs should be unified, with recognizable topic sentences, and grammatical and mechanical problems should be minimal.

C: The essay should identify the social positions of Uncle Daniel and Miss Emily and describe the similarities and differences between the two characters. The essay should include specific references to the

texts. The essay may lack a clear thesis, a clear sense of the social differences between the two protagonists, and a fully developed sense of the narrators' perspectives. Paragraphs should be distinct, and grammatical and mechanical problems should not obscure meaning.

Essays that fail to accomplish the goals for the assignment, fail to meet the minimum page requirement, lack recognizable paragraph divisions, or are unclear due to grammatical and mechanical errors should receive grades of D or F.

Student participation in class discussions and group work should be considered, but should not be a part of the essay grade.

Suggested Related Works

Eudora Welty Photographs

Images of the South: Visits with Eudora Welty and Walker Evans. Memphis: Center for Southern Folklore, 1977.

Welty, Eudora. Photographs. Jackson: University of Mississippi Press, 1989.

Literary Works

Agee, James. **A Death in the Family.**

Burns, Olive Ann. **Cold Sassy Tree.**

Faulkner, William. "Barn Burning."

Welty, Eudora. **Delta Wedding.**

The Optimist's Daughter.

"Why I Live at the P.O."

Interdisciplinary Links

This lesson can be used to connect **The Ponder Heart** and "A Rose for Emily" to the study of United States history. The analysis of class structures in southern small towns can lead to a broader study of social class in the United States South since the Civil War. The changing social status of the Griersons and, to a lesser extent, the Ponders can be connected to the impact of technological and economic development in the South in the early 20th century. Discussion of the social positions of Narciss and Tobe can be linked to a study of race relations and the struggles of African Americans. Finally, Eudora Welty's photographs can lead to discussion of the Works Progress Administration photographers and artists during the great depression.

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