

Perception vs. Reality in Eudora Welty's **The Ponder Heart** and "The Worn Path"

By Lynn Lemmon

Overview

This lesson is an extension activity to be used after reading and viewing **The Ponder Heart**. Students must read "A Worn Path" before proceeding with the lesson. This unit asks students to compare and contrast the female protagonists of the two stories (Phoenix Jackson in "A Worn Path" and Edna Earle in **The Ponder Heart**) in terms of their perceptions/misperceptions of what is real. This lesson is appropriate for students in grades 9-12.

Objectives

Students will:

- Evaluate specific passages which show examples of each character's perceptions
- Interpret what is real and what is only perceived for each character
- Analyze Welty's rhetorical technique of leaving those decisions to her readers

Skills Attained

- Reading isolated passages for a purpose
- Analysis of author's purpose(s)
- Ability to compare and contrast devices within two writings by the same author
- Writing a critical analysis of a specific rhetorical technique

Lesson Outline

I. Anticipatory Set

1. Show students a black and white Rorschach print. Ask them to discuss what they see. Note that this picture may be interpreted in several ways. Repeat the process with other Rorschach prints. Ask students to draw conclusions about these prints. Introduce the concept of varying perceptions.

Copies of Rorschach prints can be downloaded from the following sites:

- <http://rorschach.test.at/>
- <http://www.rorschach.org>

2. Show students the print of a painting by Salvador Dali. Excellent choices for this activity include the following:

- The Hallucinogenic Toreador
- Disintegration of the Persistence of Memory
- Espara
- Living Still Life

Copies of these paintings can be viewed at the following sites:

- o <http://members.xoom.com/dali42/dalihomepage.htm>
http://www.artcyclopedia.com/artists/dali_salvador.html

Ask students what they see. Note that different people see different things in the painting. Also note that by looking at the painting from a slightly different angle, something altogether different might be perceived. Show students one or two more Dali prints and follow the same process.

3. Ask students to draw conclusions about these two activities. Encourage them to see that one's views are not right or wrong; the differences in views are due to differences in perceptions.

II. The Lesson

1. Divide students into small groups of three or four. Assign each group a portion of **The Ponder Heart**. Instruct each group to search for statements made by Edna Earle that have questionable accuracy. Below are suggested responses (page numbers are based on the Harcourt Brace edition):
 - a. "My Uncle Daniel's just like your uncle..." (p. 7).
 - b. "I was liable to have passed anybody...It's always taken a lot out of me, being smart" (p. 10).
 - c. "It was bad luck. The marriage didn't hold out. We were awfully disappointed in Miss Teacake..." (p. 27).
 - d. "I don't blame Bonnie Dee, don't blame her for a minute" (p. 49).
 - e. "Mr. Springer was the perfect listener until he had to go" (p. 74).
 - f. "...he had to let DeYancey, his grandson, argue Uncle Daniel's case, because he never realized how his strength was leaving him, and he had to go to Hot Springs" (p. 83).
 - g. "She just washed her hands of us. You can't count on them for a single minute" (p. 103).
 - h. "I'm the go-between, that's what I am, between my family and world. I hardly ever get a word for myself" (p. 120).
 - i. "...I'm sure Bonnie Dee and Uncle Daniel were as happy together as most people" (p. 156).
2. Invite groups to share their findings with the class, charting them on the board or overhead.
3. Brainstorm a list of Phoenix's thoughts and beliefs that may not be accurate. Some suggestions are listed below:
 - a. "Out of my way, all you foxes, owls, beetles, jack rabbits, coons, and wild animals!...Keep out from under these feet, little bobwhites....Keep the big wild hogs out of my path."
 - b. "Thorns you doing your appointed work."
 - c. "...when a little boy brought her a plate with a slice of marble cake on it she spoke to him."
 - d. "Big dead trees, like black men with one arm..."
 - e. "A pleasure I don't see no two-headed snake coming around that tree, where it come once."
 - f. "My little grandson, he is just the same..."
 - g. "He going to find it hard to believe that there such a thing in the world."

III. Debriefing

Debate whether Edna Earle and Phoenix Jackson are accurate or inaccurate in their perceptions. Point out that perhaps reality is a matter of perception, that what is real for one person may not be real for another.

Brainstorm a list of real-life examples of unreliable narrators. Examples might include political campaign speeches, witness testimony in a court of law, tabloid articles, and eyewitness accounts of newsworthy events. Conclude by asking students to discuss ways of assessing the speaker's or writer's credibility.

Assessment

Instruct students to write a critical analysis that compares Eudora Welty's use of perceptions in **The Ponder Heart** and "A Worn Path." The focus should be on why she uses this device, i.e., what it adds to the stories. Use the rubric below to evaluate their essays.

Expectations: (100 total points possible, 20 points for each criterion)

- Focuses on comparison/contrast of protagonists
- Cites specific examples of perceptions of each
- Concludes by stating why this device is utilized
- Is mechanically correct
- Is clear and concise

Suggested Related Works

Modern American Literature. Detroit: St. James, 1999.

Magill, Frank N. **Masterplots: American Fiction Series.** Englewood Cliffs: Salem, 1985.

Welty, Eudora. **The Bride of Innisfallen and Other Stories.** Orlando: Harcourt Brace, 1955.

———. **The Collected Stories of Eudora Welty.** (ISBN #0-15-118994-3)

———. **Delta Wedding.** (ISBN #0-15-625280-5)

Interdisciplinary Links

Below are suggestions as to how this lesson may be taught in other courses:

- Art – Particularly surrealist works such as Chagall and Dali—which present two or more realities within a single painting
- History – Contrasting perceptions of a concept or event (e.g., slavery as viewed by the North and South, the Cold War as viewed by McCarthy and others, and the Salem Witchcraft Trials)
- Law Studies – Witnesses' contrasting memories of a crime; Supreme Court decisions regarding constitutional matters
- Music – Individual evaluations of pieces of music
- Foreign Language – Multiple interpretations of a single word or phrase (e.g., the multiple meanings of "love" in Greek)

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