



Religious Worlds of New York • Curriculum Development Project

What's Your Scarlett Letter?

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Abstract:

As an early assignment in Junior year American Literature, students will be asked to examine their own perspective. Students need to be aware of the particular "lens" they use to view everything they read, see or hear, especially "other" people's narratives and opinions, which might be very different than their own. Although this exercise is valuable for all students, I see it as especially critical for those white, upper-middle class students who are in the majority at my particular high school. We (since I am one of them) tend to see ourselves as the rule, and what is different than us, the exception to that rule. We tend to find understanding or make excuses for the "other" by reaching for a cultural connection to explain what we don't understand. This might be half the job needed at most, if we are unaware of how our culture informs what we perceive. Cornel West calls this the "normative gaze". Through this lesson, students will discover that their lens is informed by the values of our "American" culture, as well as that of their particular family, heritage, and religion. This is highlighted by focusing on how those values are lived; the way in which the particular individual might express and/or rebel against these values. This will also serve as an introduction to our study of *The Scarlet Letter* by Nathaniel Hawthorne. Writing the novel some 200 years after the years in which it was set, Hawthorne depicts Puritanism, early America and its residents from his own perspective, informed by his time, his culture, and his personal values.

Class and School

College prep 11th grade American Literature, Terra Linda High School (public), Marin County, California

Demographics:

Approximately 65% white, upper-middle class, 30% Latino (predominantly Guatemalan and Salvadorian, some Mexican. Students generally came to this country when very small, certainly before 5th grade, or were born here, of immigrant parents who generally speak little or no English. Generally families are low literate in any language.), 5% Asian, small percentage of African Americans.

Learning Objectives:

Students will be able to:

- Think critically, including in self-reflection. Students practice being critical of their own thought processes and perspectives before they can begin to be critical of any ideas outside themselves.
- Understand perspective
- Summarize a variety of nonfiction documents, identifying main ideas and details
- Approach *The Scarlet Letter* with a basic understanding of Hawthorn's perspective and the setting of the novel.

Materials Needed:

Overheads and handouts of written selections:

1. "City on a Hill", John Winthrop
2. Excerpts from Obama and JFK speeches referencing "City on a Hill"
3. Archbishop Hughes' letter on "The Protestant Influence Over Public Education"
4. Excerpt of Justice Brennan's opinion on the decision to end school prayer (*Arbington v. Schempp*, 1963)
5. Water-colors or colored pencils

LESSONS

Day One

- Brief lecture on Puritans and Boston Colony (students are simultaneously enrolled in US History), including reference to the fact that our secular state was founded by decidedly religious people.
- Define "values" (ethical, moral, personal, aesthetic, etc...)
- Read and annotate excerpt of "City on a Hill" sermon by John Winthrop.
- Students brainstorm possible implications, historically and generally, of envisioning one's society as a "City on a Hill". Discuss.
- Read excerpts of two presidential speeches, in which they refer to the "City on a Hill" (JFK and Obama). Students write in their own words how these leaders envision this idea. Discuss.

HOMEWORK:

Write two lists:

1. From what we read and discussed, AND anything you might add which you could support, what are American values?
2. What are your values? Consider your family, heritage, religion, culture, personality. (If some of these conflict, you may want to split this into 2 or more lists.)

Assessment:

Exit Ticket: Give an example of a type of value (ex: aesthetic value: well groomed)

Day Two

- Brief lecture on the role of religion in American publicly sanctioned life, giving living examples (shops closed on Sundays, laws regarding marriage).
- Read and annotate (specifically making note of the authors' main points) Archbishop Hughes' letter on "The Protestant Influence Over Public Education" and an excerpt of Justice Brennan's opinion on the decision to end school prayer (*Arbington v. Schempp* (1963), page 19, referring to the fact that public schools should be helping students to "assimilate a heritage common to all American groups and religions").
- Put two authors' ideas into a Venn Diagram to see what is the same and different about their perspectives. Discuss why.
- Take out homework and put two (or more) lists into a Venn Diagram, adding anything that they think of in the moment.
- Share with a partner and see if the two students can come up with a consensus as to what are "American" values. Number that list so that we can see how they are prioritized.
- Pairs share out as teacher collects their information on the board.
- When all groups have shared, class discussion regarding the grande list on the board. (Reflect on the process. How difficult was it to come to a consensus? Why? How does public school help us to assimilate towards these values? How do we see these values played out in everyday life?)

HOMEWORK:

With all the information we learned today, look again at the two lists of values. Write a paragraph that explains how your values manifest in your everyday life and the choices you make. (For example: I value my individuality, and therefore, after high school, I plan to go to college in another state and may or may not end up living close to my family. OR: I value family above my individuality, so although I would like to go to art school in New York, I have decided to stay in California and go to College of Marin, so that I can help my family.)

Assessment:

Tell your partner one example of how the religion of our founding fathers shows up in our every day lives.

Day Three

- Share around the room how one of your values plays out in your life.
- Brief lecture on perspective and how our values, and who we are informs everything we come into contact with. This leads into an introduction to Hawthorne and the perspective from which he writes his story about early American society.
 - Read first chapter, "The Prison Door" twice (it's two pages), as students illustrate (I use water-colors, which is not necessary, but they do need color) what they hear.
 - Brainstorm what you see as Hawthorne presenting in a negative light and positive light. Discuss. What are your first impressions about this community?

HOMEWORK:

Read Chapter two.

Assessment:

Hand in all work.

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