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Colonial History and Race through Short Stories

Introduction:

The following activity was designed for the subject *Historia y Cultura de los Países de Habla Inglesa*, a first-year course for the English Studies major at the Universitat de València. The course intends to offer students a general overview of the history of English-speaking countries, as well as introduce theoretical aspects pertinent to the study of history and cultural studies (evolution of the understanding of both history and culture as concepts, the advent of Cultural Studies, the role of ideology in culture, different manifestations of culture, etc.).

The activity below is to be given in relation to Unit 3 –Outline of the History of the British Isles– and Unit 4 –Outline of the History of the United States. Said units offer a general look at major events that defined both regions up to 20th century. In Unit 3, one of the main focuses centered on the Industrial Revolution and its direct influence in the rise of the British Empire around the globe; in Unit 4, several classes were dedicated to the Atlantic Slave trade from its origins, to the height of American chattel slavery, to the Civil War, Emancipation and Reconstruction.

In order to offer another look at lasting effects of both British Colonialism and the Atlantic Slave Trade, students were asked to choose two short stories addressing racism, inequality, and other legacies of both slavery and colonialism. The intention for the students was twofold: 1) identify themes and events discussed in class in the short stories, and 2) react to the stories- did they like the story? Did they feel that had a better understanding of events from class after reading the stories? In their opinion, did one story do a better job a portraying the various ways experiences and legacies of racism, slavery and colonialism in the US, UK and elsewhere?

Materials:

The following short stories were made available to the students for their reading response paper:

- “Désirée’s Baby” (1893) by Kate Chopin (1830-1904)
- “The Passing of Grandison” by Charles W. Chesnutt (1858-1932)
- “The Lynching of Jube Benson” (1904) by Paul Laurence Dunbar (1872-1906)
- “Dead Man’s Path” (1953) by Chinua Achebe (1930-2013)
- “Yoruba Man Walking” (2015) by Bernadine Evaristo (1959)



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Instructions:

The activity was presented to the students in the following manner and with the objective listed below in mind.

- 1.** Students were given a brief introduction to the stories and their authors in class. In addition, students were given brief biographies of the authors (see document Appendix I).
- 2.** Students were asked to choose any two stories and were also given the explanation of the assignment, complete with rubric (see document Appendix II).
- 3.** Students were then given two weeks to write their papers and upload them to the virtual classroom.

Objectives:

- 1.** To introduce literature as a distinct expression of culture, as well as a tool to access history.
- 2.** To encourage students to *respond* to literature on a level beyond mere plot summary.
- 3.** To foment the students' ability to draw connections between the historical material seen in lectures to reading they carry out on their own.
- 4.** To acquaint students with various authors for the English-speaking world.

Competences

These objectives were developed in line with the specific course competencies as laid out in the course syllabus.

- Students should be able to gather and interpret relevant data (normally within their area of study) to make judgments that include a reflection on relevant themes of a social, scientific or ethical nature
- Working and learning autonomously and planning and managing work loads
- Working with different areas of study within the humanities

Further Reading

The following texts may be presented to students and used in conjunction with the short stories to introduce concepts such as postcolonialism and postcolonial



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theory, the importance of literature in approaching history and its link with politics and identity.

- Chapter 37 “Postcolonialism” in John Sutherland’s *How Literature Works*
- “English, national identity and cultural heritage” in Robert Eaglestone’s *Doing English: A Guide for Literature Students*

Bibliography:

- Achebe, Chinua. “Dead Man’s Path.” *Girls at War and Other Stories*, Penguin Books, 1991.
- Chesnutt, Charles W. “The Passing of Grandison.” *Short Stories and Classic Literature*, americanliterature.com/author/charles-w-chesnutt/short-story/the-passing-of-grandison. Accessed 6 June 2021.
- Chopin, Kate. “Désirée’s Baby.” *A Collection of Kate Chopin’s Short Stories*. First Rate Publishers, 2014.
- Dunbar, Paul Laurence. “Chapter 12: The Lynching of Jube Benson.” *Lit2Go*, Florida Center for Instructional Technology, etc.usf.edu/lit2go/100/the-heart-of-happy-hollow/1715/chapter-12-the-lynching-of-jube-benson/. Access 6 June 2021.
- Eaglestone, Robert. ““English, national identity and cultural heritage.” *Doing English: A Guide for Literature Students*, Routledge, 2000, pp. 103-113.
- Evaristo, Bernadine. “Yoruba Man Walking.” *Closure: Contemporary Black British Short Stories*, edited by Jacob Ross, Peepal Tree Press, 2015, pp. 255-68.
- Sutherland, John. “Postcolonialism.” *How Literature Works. 50 Key Concepts*, Oxford, 2011, pp. 148-151

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