

Lesson Plan

“The Far and the Near”

Overview:

This lesson plan will provide teachers with additional information about Thomas Wolfe, and his short story “The Far and the Near,” with a brief background of the story’s historical context. The information attached, vocabulary and ideas for students, will also provide material for discussion of the text and comparison to student experiences.

Objectives:

1. Students will create a work of fiction based on their own personal experiences or the experiences of someone they know.
2. Students will be able to explain how Thomas Wolfe's writing was autobiographical.
3. Students will be able to identify major themes in “The Far and the Near,” and connect those themes to ideas from their own lives.

Suitable for classes in grades 4-12.

CCSS.ELA-Literacy.W.4-12.3

Grades 4-5: Write narratives to develop real or imagined experiences or events using effective technique, descriptive details, and clear event sequences.

Grades 6-8: Write narratives to develop real or imagined experiences or events using effective technique, relevant descriptive details, and well-structured event sequences.

Grades 9-12: Write narratives to develop real or imagined experiences or events using effective technique, well-chosen details, and well-structured event sequences.

CCSS.ELA-Literacy.L.4-12.2

Grades 4-5: Determine a theme of a story, drama, or poem from details in the text.

Grade 6: Determine a theme or central idea of a text and how it is conveyed through particular details; provide a summary of the text distinct from personal opinions or judgments.

Grades 7-8: Determine a theme or central idea of a text and analyze its development over the course of the text; including further grade appropriate analysis.

Grades 9-10: Determine a theme or central idea of a text and analyze in detail its development over the course of the text, including how it emerges and is shaped and refined by specific details; provide an objective summary of the text.

Grades 11-12: Determine two or more themes or central ideas of a text and analyze their development over the course of the text, including how they interact and build on one another to produce a complex account; provide an objective summary of the text.

CCSS.ELA-Literacy.L.4-12.4

Determine or clarify the meaning of unknown and multiple-meaning words and phrases based on (grade appropriate) reading content, choosing flexibly from a range of strategies.

Narrative for Teacher Reference

Thomas Clayton Wolfe was born on October 3, 1900 in Asheville, North Carolina. He was the last of eight children born to William Oliver Wolfe (1851-1922) and Julia Elizabeth Westall (1860-1945), but he would live together with his whole family for only a short time. Julia Wolfe purchased the Old Kentucky Home boarding house in 1906 to accommodate the numerous tourists visiting Asheville, and moved herself and a young Thomas to the house about a month after purchasing it.

Thenceforth separated from “the tumultuous, unhappy, warm centre of his home,” Wolfe chafed at the lack of privacy that came with sharing his living space with strangers from all over country. While losing any sense of privacy or home, Wolfe gained a considerable quantity of writing material. Wolfe would later earn his reputation as an autobiographical writer in his first novel, *Look Homeward, Angel* (published October 1929), where he used his “filing cabinet” memory to describe his experiences growing up in Asheville and the Old Kentucky Home.

The novel was well-received in much of the United States, but it earned him infamy at home. Asheville residents easily recognized themselves and people they knew within the work, and Wolfe received a horde of angry letters from Ashevilleans displeased with the book’s portrayal of themselves and people they knew. He would not dare return home until 1937.

While Wolfe did not return to Asheville for many years, he did continue to write about the world around him and his experiences within it. He carried notebooks with him and jotted down notes when he overheard interesting conversations or when inspiration struck. Wolfe, however, did not handle money wisely, and used his material to write short stories for magazines to make ends meet. One example of such a story is “The Far and the Near,” which was published in *Cosmopolitan* magazine in 1935 before incorporated into *From Death to Morning*, a collection of stand-alone short stories that were not later absorbed into one of his novels (as was the case for many of his short stories).

In “The Far and the Near,” Wolfe took particular note of the growing industrialism he observed around him. During Wolfe’s life time, many became disillusioned with the process of industrialization, especially after World War I, which took place from 1914-1919. The large scale violence that was possible as a result of new technologies, such as machine guns and tanks, caused many to feel pessimistic, rather than optimistic, towards the possibilities of the future and the promise of industrialization. “Modernism” in literature arose from this cynicism towards industry and technology, and focused more on the inner life and thoughts of individuals rather than the influences of society on people as a whole.

These feelings were amplified by the Great Depression, which became a nationwide concern when the stock market collapsed in October of 1929. The loss of savings and the widespread poverty that erupted during that time period called into question the infallibility of an industrialized age. Wolfe also would have been familiar with the “Agrarians,” who published a collection of essays titled “I’ll Take My Stand” in 1930, which, among other things, pushed for a return to an agricultural economy and romanticized the pre-Civil War South. The “Twelve Southerners” who spearheaded the ideals of “I’ll Take My Stand” sparked a “Southern Renaissance” in literature, in which written work addressed the world of the present while taking a glance back at the past. In his writings, Wolfe captured the both Modernist and Southern sentiments of the time period, and synthesized them to create his own understanding of modernity.

Despite the often controversial nature of his writings, his work was famous throughout the United States and other countries, particularly Germany (where his work was later banned after he raised the alarm on the Nazi government in 1937). As he lived and traveled, Wolfe continued observing and writing about the world around him until he died of tubercular meningitis in 1938. To capture the spirit of Wolfe's efforts, William Faulkner once said of Wolfe's writings:

He had tried hardest to take all the experience that he was capable of observing and imagining and put it down in one book, on the head of a pin. He had the courage to experiment...to write nonsense, to be foolish, to be sentimental, in the attempt to get down the—that single moving and passionate instance of man's struggle.

Wolfe's writings effectively illustrate the spirit of multiple ages, from the confidence in boundless growth in the early 1900s to the reevaluation of what the world was becoming in the 1930s. In writing about humanity and his adventures as a part of it, Wolfe captured moments in time, but also the essence of life as a human being in the United States and the world.

Procedures

Procedures may be adapted for the needs of the class

Estimated time: 60 minutes

Preparation:

- Download the “Thomas Wolfe and the 20th Century” Powerpoint Presentation along with “The Far and the Near Jeopardy” Powerpoint Presentation.
- Download and print out the following handouts for students:
 - Wolfe’s short story “The Far and the Near”
 - Vocabulary Sheet
 - Themes Worksheet (alternatively, the teacher may project this to save paper)
 - “The Far and the Near” Story Discussion Questions
 - The Writing Competition Introduction 2016, Guidelines and Instructions 2016, Submission Form 2016, Ideas for Student Consideration 2016

Step 1: Introduce Thomas Wolfe and his Writing:

Use the “Thomas Wolfe and the 20th Century” PowerPoint Presentation to introduce Wolfe and his writing, mentioning the following information with its corresponding slide:

- Slide 1: Tell class that you will be discussing Thomas Wolfe and his work.
- Slide 2: Thomas Wolfe, North Carolina’s most famous author was born on October 3rd, 1900 in Asheville. He spent most of childhood growing up in his mother’s boardinghouse, where he met many different people from many different parts of the country. ***For those unfamiliar with boardinghouses, they are houses used for short and long-term lodging. They are similar to a bed and breakfast.**
- Slide 3: One of his great skills was crafting “autobiographical fiction,” which involved taking experiences from his own life and reinventing them for writing fiction. His first novel, *Look Homeward, Angel* (1929), told the childhood story of Eugene Gant, a fictional version of himself, growing up in “Altamont,” a fictional version of Asheville. The book so closely resembled Asheville and its people that city residents easily recognized themselves and people they knew. They were not amused by their portrayal.
- Slide 4: While much of his writing was autobiographical, and often focused on feelings of loneliness Wolfe felt growing up and as an adult, Wolfe also inserted many fictional elements of drama, romance, and humor into his stories. Wolfe’s books sold well in both the United States and Europe, especially in Germany.
- Slide 5: In addition to weaving his own life into his fiction, Wolfe also took note of the changes in society and used those ideas into his stories. The world was changing rapidly while Wolfe was producing his work in the 1920s-1930s. During the process of *Industrialization*, society was shifting from a mainly agricultural economy to an industrialized economy, which meant there was growth in technology, such as trains and automobiles. Material goods, such as clothing, were more often produced in factories, rather than at home.
- Slide 6: Since Wolfe grew up in Asheville during the turn of the century, he noticed these changes in the South. He also took note of the changing attitudes towards

industrialization. After World War I when new technology, such as machine guns and mustard gas, was used for the first time on an international scale, many Americans noticed the darker side of some of these technological advances. Wolfe also lived through the bad economic times of the Great Depression, when many people lost their jobs and their savings. This created feelings of disappointment and frustration within American society, which Wolfe noted and wove into his stories.

- Slide 7: These social changes were reflected in American literature as a whole, Southern literature in particular. Written work shifted from focusing on society's influence on humanity in general, to the inner lives and thoughts of particular individuals. Many of Wolfe's works, including *Look Homeward, Angel*, adopted this style, going into detail on the thoughts and feelings of his main protagonist(s). Writers in the American South also asserted their own new writing style, in which their stories explored commented on present events, but also looking back towards how things were in the past.
- Slide 8: One example of a story that makes reference to the ideas and notions surrounding this time period was the short story we're going to read today, "The Far and the Near," which was published in 1935.

Step 2: Introduce the Story

1. Pass around copies of "The Far and the Near" and the "Vocabulary Sheet." Give students about 10 minutes to read through the short story (**Optional:** read the story together out loud. Allow 8-10 minutes for the teacher to read the story out loud, or 18-20 minutes for students to take turns reading a paragraph of the story). Go over vocabulary with students to see if they have any questions (refer students to "Vocabulary Sheet 2016").

Step 3: Analyze and Discuss the Short Story

1. Ask students to summarize the story they just read. Ask students what happened first in the story, writing down what they say on the board. Then, ask student what happened next, making a list on the board. Continue until the events of the story are written down in order.
 - Key points to consider:
 - The main character is a train conductor who spends years on the train.
 - He drives past the same small town for years.
 - He idealizes the town
 - He finally visits the town.
 - Up close, it is nothing like he expected.
2. Pass around the "Themes Worksheet" to students and briefly go over the material on it. Ask students to identify major themes in "The Far and the Near," using the infographic to help guide discussion. As students are identifying themes, ask them to point to textual examples. Some themes students may notice:
 - ❖ Time/change-In the story, the engineer works on the train for over twenty years. He had "grown old and gray in service." The mother's child grows from a small child to an adult. The engineer describes waving to them as "something beautiful and enduring, something beyond all change and ruin."
 - ❖ Expectations vs. Reality-The engineer feels he knows the family by the railroad tracks and has an idealized view of them: "He felt for them and for the little house in which they lived such tenderness as a man might feel for his own children, and at length the picture of their lives was carved so sharply in his heart that he felt that he knew their lives

completely.” However, when he actually visits the town, it is very different from what he expected: “Everything was as strange to him as if he had never seen this town before.”

- ❖ Home-The engineer fixates on the house and projects ideas of home onto it. For example, “The sight of this little house and these two women gave him the most extraordinary happiness he had ever known.” The narrator gives many descriptions of the house that are not only physically descriptive but emotionally descriptive. The house is “the destination he had longed for with such happiness,” but it also transforms into “this place he loved turned unfamiliar as the landscape of some dream.”
- ❖ Industry-The train plays an important role in the story and is described at length: “the heavy bellowing puffs of smoke that burst at spaced intervals above the edges of the meadow grass.” The progress of the train can also describe the fierce progress of industry, which cannot stop to prevent “the ghastly dot of tragedy converging like a cannon ball to its eclipse of horror at the boiler head.” The story concludes with “his heart, which had been brave and confident when it looked along the familiar vista of the rails, was now sick with doubt and horror.” The protagonist is clearly conflicted by the role of industry, but is also powerless to stop it.
- ❖ Nature (or Agriculture) -Nature is often described in contrast to railroads and industry. The town is a small town that lies between two large cities. The house is surrounded by “three mighty oaks” and a “border of gay flowers.” The changing of the seasons is viewed through the house and its yard through “the harsh light of wintry gray across the brown and frosted stubble of the earth, and he had seen them again in the green luring sorcery of April.” In this sense, the house in its rural setting seems to be in opposition to the power of industry. However, it is worth noting that the role of nature as a solution or foil to industrialism is undermined by the bleakness through which the engineer views the house when he sees it up close.
- ❖ Disappointment/loss-The engineer at the beginning of the story feels that his life is intertwined and deeply connected with the lives of the two women who live in the town he passes every day. However, this illusion is shattered and he experiences “confusion, doubt, and hopelessness.” He also describes a “sense of bitter loss and grief.” The reality of the situation doesn’t live up to his expectations, which is jarring to the engineer.

Step 4: Ask the students to apply the story to their own lives.

1. Pass out the “‘The Far and the Near’ Story Discussion Questions.” Give students 10 minutes to think about the following questions (which are printed on the worksheet) and write down their answers. They are to keep their worksheets to help them think about the writing prompts:
 - Have you ever been disappointed? What caused your disappointment?
 - Have you ever expected someone you don’t know very well to act a certain way, and then been surprised when they didn’t? Give an example.
 - In the story, the main character does the same thing every day for years. What is something you do every day or every week?
 - In the story, the main character feels uncomfortable when he meets the two women. Have you ever been in a situation where you’ve been uncomfortable? What happened? Did the discomfort go away?

Step 5: Review Activity.

1. Separate students into groups of approximately 5 people.
2. Using these groups as teams, use ““The Far and the Near Jeopardy,” PowerPoint presentation to play jeopardy (Optional: teacher may keep track of each group’s points on the board). For those unfamiliar with Jeopardy, explain that each group must try to get the most number of points/answers correct. To get points, a group member must raise their hand before the other groups and answer a question correctly. Since the “answers” to each prompt are actually “questions,” student/group responses must begin with “What is...”

To determine which group will pick the first category, think of a random number between 1-10, and have whomever chooses the closest number go first.

Answers:

- Biography:
 - 200: Asheville
 - 400: Autobiographical (Autobiographical Fiction or a related answer is also acceptable)
 - 600: Germany
 - Historical Context:
 - 200: World War I
 - 400: The Great Depression
 - 600: Individuals (Inner Lives and Thoughts of the Individual or a related answer is also acceptable)
 - Content:
 - 200: Railroad (Train or related answer is also acceptable)
 - 400: Hopelessness (Regret, Disbelief, Sadness, Loss, or a related answer is also acceptable)
 - 600: Wave (A related answer is also acceptable)
 - Vocabulary:
 - 200: Outskirts
 - 400: Falter
 - 600: Timorous
 - Final Jeopardy: *Look Homeward, Angel*
3. **Alternate/Extension:** Pictionary. As an extension to Step 5, gather the students together as one group again. Reiterate that in the story, the main character has a goal, to visit the small town he passes every day on the train. Ask the students to think about dreams or goals they may have. Ask a student to volunteer to draw a picture of one of their goals or dreams on the board. Have the other students try to guess what that dream is. Allow students to take turns drawing a picture.

Step 6: Introduce writing competition

1. Pass out the writing contest “Guidelines and Instructions” and “Ideas for Student Consideration” sheets to class. Reiterate/discuss further how Wolfe took from his own life when writing short stories and novels. Have the class think of some goals they have, along with some of the times when they have been disappointed. Go over writing assignment before wrapping up lesson.

Take Home Writing Assignment: Have students write short story based on the prompts on the “Ideas for Consideration” worksheet, and following the guidelines listed on the “Telling our Tales’ Guidelines and Instruction” sheet.