"Only the Dead Know Brooklyn"
Lesson Plan for Teachers 2023

Overview:

This lesson plan will provide teachers with additional information about Thomas Wolfe, methods of analysis for his short story "Only the Dead Know Brooklyn," and additional information about the story's historical context and theme. This information will provide material for discussion of the text as a companion to the "Telling Our Tales" 2023 Student Writing Competition.

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 based on his experiences.
3. Students will be able to identify major themes in the story "One of the Girls in Our Party" and connect those themes to ideas from their own lives.

Suitable for classes in grades 4-12.

NC ELA Writing Standards

Grades 4-5: W.4.3/5.3- Write narratives to develop real or imagined experiences or events using effective technique, descriptive details, and clear event sequences.

Grades 6-8: W.6.3/7.3/8.3- Write narratives to develop real or imagined experiences or events using effective technique, relevant descriptive details, and well-structured event sequences.

Grades 9-12: W.9.3/10.3/11.3/12.3- Write narratives to develop real or imagined experiences or events using effective technique, well-chosen details, and well-structured event sequences.

NC ELA Reading Standards

Grades 4-5:

RL.4.2 Determine a theme of a story, drama, or poem from details in the text; summarize the text.

RL.4.3 Describe in depth a character, setting, or event in a story or drama, drawing on specific details in the text.

RL.4.4 Determine the meaning of words and phrases as they are used in a text, including words that affect meaning and tone.

RL.4.6 Compare and contrast the point of view from which different stories are narrated, including the difference between first- and third-person narrations.

RL.5.2 Determine a theme of a story, drama, or poem from details in the text, including how characters in a story or drama respond to challenges or how the speaker in a poem reflects upon a topic; summarize the text.

RL.5.3 Compare and contrast two or more characters, settings, or events in a story or drama, drawing on specific details in the text.

RL.5.4 Determine the meaning of words and phrases as they are used in a text, recognizing specific word choices that contribute to meaning and tone.

RL.5.5 Explain how chapters, scenes, or stanzas provide the overall structure of a particular story, drama, or poem.

RL.5.6 Describe how a narrator's or speaker's point of view influences how events are described.

Grade 6:

RL.6.2 Determine a theme of a text and how it is conveyed through particular details; provide a summary of the text distinct from personal opinions or judgments.

RL.6.4 Determine the meaning of words and phrases as they are used in a text; analyze the impact of a specific word choice on meaning and tone.

RL.6.5 Analyze how a particular sentence, chapter, scene, or stanza fits into the overall structure of a text and contributes to the development of the theme, setting, or plot.

RL.6.6 Explain how an author develops the point of view of the narrator or speaker in a text.

Grades 7-8:

RL.7.2 Determine a theme of a text and analyze its development over the course of the text; provide an objective summary of the text.

RL.7.4 Determine the meaning of words and phrases as they are used in a text; analyze the impact of rhymes and repetitions of sounds on meaning and tone in a specific line or section of a literary work.

RL.7.6 Analyze how an author develops and contrasts the perspectives of different characters in a text.

RL.8.2 Determine a theme of a text and analyze its development over the course of the text, including its relationship to the characters, setting, and plot; provide an objective summary of the text.

RL.8.3 Analyze how particular lines of dialogue or incidents in a story or drama propel the action, reveal aspects of a character, or provoke a decision.

RL.8.4 Determine the meaning of words and phrases as they are used in a text; analyze the impact of specific word choices on meaning and tone, including analogies or allusions to other texts.

RL.8.6 Analyze how differences in the perspectives of the characters and the audience or reader create such effects as suspense or humor.

<u>Grades 9-10</u>:
RL.9-10.2 Determine a theme 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.
RL.9-10.3 Analyze how complex characters develop over the course of a text, interact with other characters, and advance the plot or develop the theme.
RL.9-10.4 Determine the meaning of words and phrases as they are used in the text; analyze the cumulative impact of specific word choices on meaning and tone.
RL.9-10.9 Analyze how an author adopts or adapts source material in a specific work.

<u>Grades 11-12</u>:
RI.11-12.2 Determine two or more 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 provide a complex analysis; provide an objective summary of the text.
RI.11-12.3 Analyze a complex set of ideas or sequence of events and explain how specific individuals, ideas, or events interact and develop over the course of the text.
RI.11-12.4 Determine the meaning of words and phrases as they are used in a text; analyze how an author uses and refines the meaning of a key term or terms over the course of a text.
RI.11-12.6 Determine an author's point of view or purpose in a text in which the rhetoric is particularly effective, analyzing how style and content contribute to the power, and/or persuasiveness of the text.

NC ELA Language Standards
L.4.4 – L.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: context clues, word parts, word relationships, and reference materials.

NC ELA Speaking and Listening Standards
SL.4.1 – SL.12.1 Engage effectively in a range of collaborative discussions with diverse partners on (grade appropriate) topics and texts, building on others' ideas and expressing their own clearly.

Historical Context & Story Analysis for Teacher Reference

Context on Thomas Wolfe:

Thomas Wolfe (October 3, 1900-September 15, 1938) is considered by many to be North Carolina's most famous author. His 1929 novel, *Look Homeward, Angel*, was largely based on his childhood growing up in his mother's boardinghouse and set the standard for many of his writings to be rooted in his personal experiences.

Wolfe lived most of his life in North Carolina, but he lived a majority of his adulthood in New York City, so many of his writings take place there. During his 15 years there, Wolfe lived in 11 different apartments, 4 of which were in the borough of Brooklyn. Starting in his graduate school years at Harvard University, Wolfe carried pocket notebooks with him and recorded interesting conversations or notes when inspiration struck. This habit continued through the rest of his life, and his notebooks contain multitudes of observations about his life in New York City.

He did not manage money wisely. In between writing books, he often used notes from his notebooks to create short stories for magazine publication and generate smaller paychecks to make ends meet. One example of such a short story is "Only the Dead Know Brooklyn," which was published by the *New Yorker* magazine in June 1935. It appeared again later in 1935 in *From Death to Morning*, an early collection of Wolfe's short stories.

Refer to pages under the "History" tab of our webpage at www.wolfememorial.com for more information about Thomas Wolfe, his family, his work, and the history of Asheville.

Context on Brooklyn, New York City:

New York City is by far the largest city in the United States at about 8.47 million people (2021 estimate from U.S. Census Bureau). Many large cities like NYC are split into smaller sections, or "boroughs," to help with governing and organization. New York City has 5 boroughs: Manhattan, the Bronx, Queens, Staten Island, and of course Brooklyn. Brooklyn surpassed Manhattan as the most populous borough sometime between 1920-1930, and has hovered around 2.5 million people over the decades (which is a larger population than 15 U.S. states individually). In terms of physical size, Brooklyn is the second largest of the boroughs at 69.4 square miles. This isn't particularly large for a city, which is about half as large as Winston-Salem, NC, but Brooklyn has enough neighborhoods and streets to accommodate ten times Winston-Salem's population.

Plot for Teachers:

Unlike many of his works, Wolfe's short story, "Only the Dead Know Brooklyn," is likely drawn from his observations of life in New York City. The story opens with the Narrator explaining that it's impossible to truly know Brooklyn, since it takes a whole lifetime to just get to know your way around. The Narrator then regales the reader with an example of what he means. The Big Guy is wandering around a train station asking for directions and asks the Small

Guy how to get to a particular spot in town. The Small Guy doesn't know, so he asks others if they know the way. The Narrator gives the Big Guy directions, but his directions are immediately criticized by the Wise Guy who butts into the conversation. After a brief argument that almost comes to blows, the Narrator brings the Big Guy onto a train with him and leaves the scene.

Conversation with the Big Guy reveals that he was not traveling to various places around town for any reason other than to simply see them, and he has a map that gives him information about the places he explores. After hearing about the Big Guy's recent travels, the Narrator tells him to avoid the rougher parts of town, though the Big Guy seems unable to understand why. The Big Guy asks the Narrator how long it takes to get to know Brooklyn, and the Narrator fervently replies that it's impossible to really know the area. The Narrator is then startled by the conversation suddenly changing to swimming and drowning. The Big Guy seems particularly fixated on drowning, which unnerves the Narrator and prompts him to get off at the wrong stop and wait for another train. The story ends with the Narrator wondering what happened to the Big Guy, and then reiterating that only the dead truly know Brooklyn.

Themes:
- Identity/Sense of Place - Thomas Wolfe was well known in his lifetime for the importance of place and its use in everyday life and personal identity demonstrated in his writings. This is possibly in part due to the heavy focus on place in his first novel *Look Homeward, Angel*. In "Only the Dead Know Brooklyn," however, Thomas Wolfe immediately sets the scene in a particular place by writing the entire story in a Brooklyn dialect (or at least his attempt at one). Also apparent from the beginning is that Brooklyn is simultaneously known well by its long-time residents, but also known by those residents to be so vast as to be unknowable. Long-time residents will argue amongst themselves as to how to get from place to place but are just as quick to tell any newcomers that they will never fully know Brooklyn no matter how many maps they have or how hard they try.
- Connection – Thomas Wolfe's writings are peppered with "here and gone" moments, in which one meets a person for only a short time but remembers the interaction forever. The Narrator spent not more than a few minutes with the Big Guy, but was so confused, unnerved, and concerned about the Big Guy's behavior that he never forgot about their interaction and continued to wonder about how the Big Guy was doing.
- Pride – Everyone but the Little Guy at the beginning of the story appears to display some form of pride. The Narrator and Wise Guy put so much stock in their knowledge of the area that they almost come to blows when their directions differ. The Big Guy is proud of the map he carries and his ability to use it to get to know all of Brooklyn. The Narrator seems to have a somber pride in his knowledge that no living person can truly know Brooklyn.

Characters, Setting, and an Outline:

- Characters:
  - *The Narrator*: An unknown voice provides context within the story.
  - *The Big Guy*: A large, drunk man who is exploring seemingly random places around Brooklyn with a map.
  - *The Small Guy*: The first person the Big Guy asks for directions but doesn't know what directions to give.
  - *The Wise Guy*: The one who almost gets in a fight with the narrator over who gives better directions.
  - *The Little Guy*: The first one approached for directions by the Big Guy. Doesn't know what directions to give.
- Setting: Train/Train Station, Brooklyn, New York City, NY. c.1935.
- Outline:
  - Big Guys asks multiple people for directions at the train station.
  - Narrator and Wise Guy get in short argument over directions. Narrator takes Big Guy on train with him.
  - Big Guy tells Narrator about places he's explored with the map he carries. Narrator admonishes him against going to Red Hook.
  - Big Guy suddenly asks Narrator if he can swim and changes the conversation to drowning.

- *OF NOTE: It is up to the discretion of the teacher if a conversation is warranted on the use of foul language, and on how writing in accents, as in the case of Wolfe here, isn't meant to be derogatory, but was instead meant to capture cultural components of people in a specific place and time.*

Preparation

- Follow the link for an audio clip of Thomas Wolfe's short story (begins in the second paragraph and runs about a minute long): https://youtube.com/clip/UgkxCP9N1-HTHjmSIGuXiXZiM34TUk6f5ag6?si=DtFVPt6udS0ZyDlV
- Click here to access the link to the Prezi presentation: https://prezi.com/view/InzqMWs3GAAM8HoNU00Y/
- Pull up "Map of NYC Boroughs" on screen or print copies to distribute to class (included on Prezi).
- Pull up Prezi on screen and follow for details on Thomas Wolfe and "Only the Dead Know Brooklyn."
- Print out copies for class:

- "Only the Dead Know Brooklyn"
- Guidelines and Instructions 2023
- Ideas for Student Consideration

Procedures

Step 1: Ask who among the class knows who Thomas Wolfe was and what he wrote about. For anyone who does not know, explain that he was an internationally famous author born in Asheville in 1900, and his work was so autobiographical that it made him both revered and reviled in his own lifetime. However, he often took notes in a pocket notebook of everyday things he saw in his life and would use them for story materials. These stories were usually based on other people instead of himself and were sometimes written in the dialect of the characters within.

Step 2: Pass out the "Dialect Aid" sheet and "Only the Dead Know Brooklyn" to your students, then read Thomas Wolfe's story as a class or individually.

Step 3: Dialect Telephone Map Activity – Tell the class you're going to experiment with dialect a bit. Have students get in a line. Choose from one of the following accents for a student to mimic. Optional/Extension: Refer to any/all of the links for accent examples.
- Boston: https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=2e_9f5YbpPs
- Southern British/English: https://www.youtube.com/clip/UgkxkXyNeqIxGnpJA83WDyxdJlhVyM87DzUY
- German/Austrian (Arnold Schwarzenegger): https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=t_FRWUPcR7Y
- Southern (American South): https://www.youtube.com/clip/UgkxaGrKxP-L1UUNzDOv2PH3Uy7_FbPRZ0NJ
- Australian: https://www.youtube.com/clip/UgkxRHPqaWu4z2hl9IcvYB11PRAg0NrWI6m6

Have the student at one end whisper something in the chosen accent to the next student in line, then have the next student repeat the phrase in the same accent, and so on down the line until the last person tries to guess the original phrase.

Step 4: Directions Activity – Use your smartboard to pull up a large map of an area your students may be familiar with (ex: your town, city, or county). Have a volunteer come up front and give directions between two points on the map. Multiple other students can raise their hand to challenge the volunteer if they think they have better directions. After a few minutes (determined at teacher discretion) have the class vote on whose directions are the best.

Step 5: Ponder these questions (and the notes for teachers in italics) as you reflect on the story and activities you just went over:
- Why do you think people write in dialect/use accents when telling stories?
  - *To help set the scene where the story is taking place.*

- o *To tell you something about a character, even if just where they are from. Could reflect personality, intelligence (actual or perceived), socio-economic class, or other things.*
- Whose story is this? Is it the Narrator's? The Big Guy's?
  - o *The story is told in the first person from the point of view of the Narrator, but focuses heavily on the Big Guy.*
- What are themes found within the story? Where/within whom in the story do you see these themes reflected?
  - o *Connection: How "here and gone" moments, where you have a brief but memorable interaction with a stranger and never see them again.*
  - o *Identity/Sense of Place:*
  - o *Pride & Conflict: The Narrator and the Wise Guy almost coming to blows over whose directions are better, and the Big Guy being self-assured that his map will help him get to know Brooklyn in spite of the Narrator's statements otherwise.*

Step 6: Do you think Brooklyn is unique since it's such a large area, or is any city only truly known by "the dead"? Discuss how well students believe they know their area.

Step 7: Pass out 2023 "Telling Our Tales" Flyer, Guidelines & Instructions and Ideas for Students' Consideration sheets to class. Go over instructions for assignment and inform them of the writing competition.

<div align="center">End of Lesson</div>