

“Old Catawba”

Lesson Plan for Teachers, 2019

Overview:

This lesson plan will provide teachers with additional information about Thomas Wolfe, methods of analysis for his short story “Old Catawba,” and a brief background of the story’s historical context. The information will provide material for discussion of the text as a companion to the “Telling Our Tales” student writing competition.

Objectives:

By the end of this lesson, students will...

1. ...create a work of fiction based on their own personal experiences or the experiences of someone they know.
2. ...be able to explain how Thomas Wolfe’s writing was based on his experiences.
3. ...be able to identify major themes in the story “Old Catawba” and connect those themes to their own lives.

NC Standard Course of Study Grades 4-12 – ELA:

NC ELA Standards 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.

NC ELA Standards RL.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.

NC ELA Standards 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: context clues, word parts, word relationships, and reference materials.

NC ELA Standards L.4-12.5a

Demonstrate understanding of figurative language and nuances in word meanings.

a) Explain and interpret figurative language in context with grade appropriate reading and context.

Supplies/Preparation Needed

- Download photo Thomas Wolfe 1937 from our website to display on overhead.
- Download and print the following handouts for students about the student writing competition:
 - Thomas Wolfe's short story "Old Catawba."
 - Vocabulary List 2019
 - Guidelines and Instructions 2019
 - Submission Form 2019
 - Writing Prompts 2019
 - (optional) Thomas Wolfe's short story "Polyphemus" from our Lesson Plans page
 - (optional) review "Tom's Life" page in the History section of our Wolfememorial.com website

Historical Context & Story Analysis for Teacher Reference

Context:

Thomas Wolfe was born on October 3, 1900 in Asheville, NC. As an adult he lived in New York City and traveled the world, but never forgot his North Carolina roots. As a writer he drew heavily on his personal experiences for story material. His first novel, *Look Homeward, Angel*, followed the life of Eugene Gant, whose background and family closely resemble Wolfe's own. His fiction so closely resembled fact that the Asheville Times newspaper accused *Look Homeward, Angel* of taking people's negative features, making them seem like their defining features, and laying out the town's gossip for everyone to read.

The short story titled "Old Catawba" is an imaginary profile of a place and its people. Like many of Wolfe's writings, however, it is heavily based on real people and places, in this case the state of North Carolina. It begins with a physical description of Old Catawba – where it is, how big it is, and how many people it holds. The state is then compared to various European nations in terms of size and ethnic/cultural makeup, and to other states in terms of the culture of personal interactions. The physical profile of the state is identical to North Carolina: A mid-Atlantic state in the Southern United States that is a little over 50,000 square miles. Old Catawba is home to a little over 3 million people. That would have been the population of North Carolina about 1930 when Wolfe was writing the story. Wolfe notes that the Catawban, during three centuries living in the wilderness, has become native to the immense and lonely land. In Old Catawba people live in a special place defined by geography, a vast wilderness of mountains and pinelands. The history of the people of Old Catawba as described by Thomas Wolfe is somewhat different than what we know today to be the history of North Carolina. Wolfe believed the land attracted a certain kind of people. He thought that no one could change the hills of North Carolina, but even the landscape that Thomas Wolfe knew in the early 1900s is vastly different today.

Wolfe states that Old Catawba's name comes from a Native American tribe. There really is a tribe of Native Americans called Catawba, whose territory once encompassed much of present-day central North and South Carolina. During the late 17th to early 18th centuries the tribe enjoyed a status of relative affluence occupying an important position in trade routes with Charlestown, SC and Jamestown, VA. By the time Wolfe's story was published in 1935, the Catawba had declined considerably in number, and today live on a reservation in York County, South Carolina, just as described in the short story. The state of North Carolina's name, however, comes from "Carolus," which is the Latin version of the name of Charles. "Carolina" was formed as a British Colony when King Charles I granted what is now North and South Carolina to his Attorney General, Sir Robert Heath in 1629.

Wolfe writes that the name Old Catawba undoubtedly grew out of the spirit of the people who had dwelt there over a century. In Thomas Wolfe's Old Catawba many of the earliest European settlers were of Scottish descent. However, he admits the Catawban of the 20th century is not like this, nor would they want to be. They are not colonists, settlers, transplanted Europeans, but had become unique as an American. The Old Catawba described by Thomas Wolfe's was scarcely touched by 'foreign' migration. They lived in a state which had the largest percentage of native-born inhabitants in the country. Wolfe was proud of his ancestry and the deep roots both sides of his family had in the United States. However, he betrays a degree of nativism when expressing pride in his ancestry. While living in New York City for most of his adult life, Wolfe observed the sheer number of different ethnic and cultural groups who had recently immigrated to America, and was proud of the fact that he was one of "the Old Americans—the people who settled the country, who fought its wars, who pushed westward."

Nevertheless, Wolfe's story remains an effective profile of a fictionalized North Carolina and its people.

Thomas Wolfe's family possessed Scottish ancestry through his maternal grandmother, who was a Penland, rather than his mother, who was a Westall of English descent. Details on when Wolfe's maternal ancestors arrived in Western North Carolina are vague, but they had possibly moved to the region as early as 1805, when Wolfe's great-grandfather was born in Burke County. Thomas Wolfe frequently identified himself and his family with their Scottish heritage in his works, writing about his mother's "Scotch gift" or his own "wild Celtic superstition." Wolfe believed that Scottish people loved a good argument. They want to "reason a thing out" and "git to the bottom of a thing" through a discussion or debate. He himself was talented at debate and was a part of the debate team both in high school in Asheville and in college at the University of North Carolina at Chapel Hill.

The story "Old Catawba" was first published in the Spring 1935 issue of the *Virginia Quarterly Review*. It was later combined with "Polyphemus" in his first book of short stories *From Death to Morning* in a story titled "The Men of Old Catawba" published later in 1935.

Procedures

1. **Introduction** – Pull up the picture of Thomas Wolfe on an overhead and ask who within the class knows who Thomas Wolfe was. If no one knows, explain that he was an author from the early 20th century who was born and raised in Asheville and heavily based his writings on his own life experiences. As illustrated in many of his stories, Wolfe was raised by his mother Julia Wolfe, a shrewd businesswoman with deep roots in Western North Carolina, and his father W.O. Wolfe, a loud but eloquent man who moved to the south from Pennsylvania. While Wolfe inherited both of his parents' love of travel, he also inherited his mother's sense of place and never forgot his home state of North Carolina.
2. **Reading** – Pass out copies of "Old Catawba" and the "Vocabulary 2019" sheet and give students 20 minutes to read through the story.
3. **Story Discussion** – Determine as a class the overall structure of the story.
4. **Theme Discussion** – Have the class ponder Wolfe's description of Old Catawba and its people. How closely does it resemble North Carolina in the early 20th century? Does it resemble North Carolina today? Discuss how the state has changed, particularly culturally and demographically, since Wolfe wrote his story in the 1930s.
5. **Activity/Discussions:**
Activity/Discussion 1—Explain that Thomas Wolfe was very proud of his ancestry and having deep roots in America. However, he was proud of his cultural background to the point of looking down on people with different backgrounds. He considered himself one of "the Old Americans—the people who settled the country, who fought its wars, who

pushed westward." While the story does not state this overtly, his prideful description of "Old Catawba's" people is indicative of his views.

Ask students: Has someone ever looked down on you because of where you were from? Why? Did they ever change their mind?

Activity/Discussion 2—Ask students to think about the community they live in/go to school in and compare it to other communities they've visited or cultures they've learned about. An observation of a different culture can be something as simple as a family with different traditions than yours. How is another place/culture different from your own? What have you learned about yourself and where you come from as a result?

Make a list on overhead of places you and your students have been, or studied, and how they are different from where you are now. This can be anything from common foodways, geography (i.e.: mountains, beach, rivers, etc.), to manner of speech (i.e.: Thomas Wolfe description of the debaters' speech using a Southern dialect).

Adaptation/Extension: Explore both discussion topics.

6. **Assignment** – Pass out the writing contest "Guidelines and Instructions," "Submission Form" and "Writing Prompts" sheets to the class. Have students write a short story based on at least one of the writing prompts, if students would like to enter their story into the competition discuss the guidelines from the "Guidelines and Instructions" sheet.

Adaptation/Extension: Pass out copies of the short story "Polyphemus" and give them 10-15 minutes to read it. Ask them to compare the history of Old Catawba to that of North Carolina.

END OF LESSON