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Features of Independence: Teaching “Theresa - a Haytien Tale”

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Just Teach One

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Overview

One of the core beliefs of the Illinois Math and Science Academy (IMSA) states that we believe that “diverse perspectives enrich understanding and inspire discovery and creativity,” and in keeping with that aim, I chose to participate in the Just Teach One: Early African American Print project. As a school primarily focused on STEM subjects, IMSA still offers a robust English curriculum that values and supports a diverse literary canon, and our incoming sophomores are asked to complete a two-part Literary Explorations course that features American texts from colonial era up to the 21st century.

During the first semester of this course, I assigned my students to read “Theresa: A Haytien Tale” as part of my “Slavery, Speeches, and Politics” unit that examined fiction and non-fiction such as excerpts from Stowe’s *Uncle Tom’s Cabin* and selections from *The Life and Times of Frederick Douglass*. The “Theresa” short story was assigned earlier in the unit as the class studied rhetorical strategies and discussed the persuasive qualities of different genres of writing.

Activity and In-Class Discussion

Students were asked to read the story in advance of our in-class discussion and to make note of passages of that they found notable or confusing. They were also encouraged to investigate the historical context of the story, but this was not explicitly required.

On the day of the class, students were arranged into small groups of three or four and asked to consider the following task:

Each of your groups is a newly formed nation that has fought long and hard to earn its independence. You want to write a story that describes the importance of your independence and connects your national struggle with a wider audience. As a group,

come up with a list of elements or themes that your story would showcase. After you compile your list, we will share your group's list with the rest of the class, and you will be able to explain your choices.

Each group deliberated for fifteen minutes and afterwards shared their choices, which I wrote on the board. Most groups emphasized particular themes such as a “self-sacrifice” and “individuality” as being necessary for a national story of independence. Other groups focused on other aspects of the story such as setting and the type of characters that should be featured. One group explained that “a national story should feature generals and the people who fought for it.” Another group disagreed and suggested that a story about independence should feature “everyday citizens because a country is not well-represented by a military.” Other students emphasized the need to vilify the enemy of their new nation, and the class quickly came to a strong consensus that any violent revolution needed to be firmly justified if they wanted to earn the approval of a broader audience.

After roughly fifteen minutes of sharing their group work, I shifted the discussion to “Theresa” and asked whether or not the short story matched their blueprint for their conceptualized stories. In responding, students were quick to draw connections between Theresa and her family and the “everyday citizens” mentioned during the group reports. Similarly, students pointed out that the French military was characterized by its violence and cruelty. From these connections, I asked the students to expand on the characterization of Theresa and her family. One student pointed out that the story highlighted the actions of women instead of men, which he found surprising. Another student remarked how Theresa chose her patriotic duty over the love for her family and how that helped the author establish the need for sacrifice in a revolution or act of independence.

Reflection

Generally, the students found “Theresa” to be an interesting artifact, and after our discussion, I took the opportunity to explain the nature of the Just Teach One initiative and to describe some of the broader points expressed in Foster’s article. My students were particularly interested in the fact that the “Theresa” story represented something of a lost artifact in the record of African American writers. As Foster points out, “African Americanists can never be sure of what may have once existed but does no more,”¹ and for my students, the idea that our American literary canon was not firmly locked down but an ever-evolving concept was an exciting prospect. For students that often – however wrongly - associate the humanities with student-centered interpretations and discussions that have no bearing in the real world, Foster’s assertion that “the professional humanist is obliged to provide the most complete and accurate definitions, narratives, and assumptions possible to those who provide the general public with its collective memories and its individual models”² provides much needed context about the mission and importance of literary studies.

What I like about the “Theresa” text is its novelty in the sense that students will not have encountered it previously, and the Internet will be insufficient in providing them quick answers about how to read the text. Having the students conceptualize their own stories of independence helped them to consider the author’s strategy in writing the short story, but in future units I will separate this group activity from the reading of “Theresa.” I suspect that some students were able to anticipate the direction of the activity and borrowed somewhat from their reading experience.

¹ Frances Smith Foster, “How Do You Solve a Problem Like Theresa?” *African American Review*, Vol. 40, no.4 (Winter, 2006), 632.

² *Ibid*, 633.

One aspect of the story that I found difficult to incorporate into the unit was the backdrop of the Haitian Revolution, which was somewhat outside the constraints of our exploration of American literature. The depiction of tyrannical French soldiers did provide an interesting point of discussion when compared to works covered earlier in the semester such as Crèvecoeur's *Letters from an American Farmer*, but for many of the students, a brief overview of the Revolution seemed insufficient.

Overall, the "Theresa" text provided an interesting mystery for my students. Having them imagine themselves as participants in a revolution helped to root them in the nature of the document, and Foster's article provided some interesting insights into the professional side of literary studies.

Bibliography

Foster, Frances Smith. "How Do You Solve a Problem Like Theresa?" *African American Review*. Vol. 40, no.4 (Winter, 2006): 631-645.