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Cotton Agriculture as Symbolic Image: Cotton Iconography in the American South,
1865-1965
Academic Discipline Focus: Literature

Introduction:

Each of these selections has something unique to say about the culture of the American South during the late 19th century and into the 20th century. The specific subject matter of each of these selections is unique in regards to the author's distinct point of view. Each of these authors lived or spent significant time in the American south within the 100 years following the Civil War. They witnessed the evolution of the cotton and agricultural industry and how it affected all aspects of southern culture. As this unit addresses the representation of cotton culture in various academic disciplines, this lesson will allow students to see the cotton culture of the South represented in various literary texts by southern writers. It is important to note that even though a text may not deal with cotton directly, the characters, environments, and themes are all affected by the culture that the cotton industry helped create. As you teach and discuss the following texts for the purpose of studying cotton culture, challenge students to read them through the lens of southern white gold and question how cotton shaped the authors, texts, and the overall southern environment.

Each of the following authors deals with cotton culture in many of their works. Please feel free to explore the overall body of work by each author. Some academic links relating to each author and text are listed with each selection.

Selections for High School Students (available links to online texts and websites are provided):

- "The Man Who Was Almost a Man" – Richard Wright
 - http://www.english.illinois.edu/maps/poets/s_z/r_wright/r_wright.htm
- "A Rose for Emily" – William Faulkner
 - <http://www.wnorton.com/college/english/litweb05/workshops/fiction/faulkner1.asp>
 - <http://www.mcsr.olemiss.edu/~egjbp/faulkner/faulkner.html>
 - <http://www.semo.edu/cfs/index.htm>
- "A Worn Path" – Eudora Welty
 - <http://www.theatlantic.com/past/docs/issues/41feb/wornpath.htm>
 - http://www.olemiss.edu/mwp/dir/welty_eudora/
 - <http://www.eudorawelty.org/>
- Selections from *Cane* – Jean Toomer
 - <http://www.poemhunter.com/jean-toomer/>
 - <http://www.georgiaencyclopedia.org/nge/Article.jsp?id=h-1241>
 - http://www.english.illinois.edu/maps/poets/s_z/toomer/toomer.htm
- "The Displaced Person" – Flannery O'Connor
 - <http://www.andalusiafarm.org/>
 - <http://www.georgiaencyclopedia.org/nge/Article.jsp?id=h-498>

- “The Wonderful Tar Baby” and others Uncle Remus Tales -- Joel Chandler Harris
 - <http://www.en.utexas.edu/amlit/amlitprivate/texts/remus.htm>
 - <http://www.wrensnestonline.com/>
 - <http://www.georgiaencyclopedia.org/nge/Article.jsp?id=h-525>

Procedure:

1. The instructor should divide the students into groups and assign a different text to each group.
2. Have students read and annotate the text for homework specifically making comments on how the cotton culture of the South is represented.
 - a. Refer to the historic overview presented at the beginning of the unit in the history lesson.
 - b. Observe specific settings in the text.
 - c. Focus on the characters that are presented in the text.
 - d. Notice the developments and resolutions of various conflicts.
 - e. Evaluate the various elements to derive a textual theme.
 - f. Consider how the text represents southern cotton culture.
3. In class have each group discuss the annotations that were made during the reading.
 - a. Assign a moderator for each group that will lead a discussion of the annotations that were made during the initial reading.
 - b. Have the group come to a consensus of their thoughts and report these initial thoughts using a chart, outline, or another graphic organizer.
 - c. Provide each group with a set of discussion prompts (provided below) that will generate additional analysis of the text in relationship to southern cotton culture.
 - d. For Honors Students: instructors could choose to have honors students incorporate notes and discussion related to a specific literary theory. Honors students may also conduct additional research on the author to gain additional perspective on his/her life and works.
 - e. The instructor should rotate through the various groups to both provide guidance and to assess the analysis and learning of the group.
4. Group-Led Instruction: each group should lead whole group instruction and bring the class to an understanding of how cotton iconography is depicted in the text, what those images suggest about the theme of the story, and how the overall culture of the South is represented.
 - a. Report on the literary text and provide the class with author information, characters, plot summary, etc.
 - b. Discuss the specifics of the text in how cotton and/or cotton culture is represented
 - c. Present information and/or lead a discussion on how this story and the specific items discussed to this point connect with the bigger picture of cotton culture in the American South
5. After each group presents, or after all groups have presented, the instructor should provide whole group instruction on the texts covered.
6. Culminating activity: some possible activities, other than quizzes and tests, for this lesson are listed below
 - a. Choose a text that the student has not read during this lesson and ask him/her to read it and provide a written response answering the items listed in 4b-c above. Additional research items can be required at the instructor’s discretion.

- b. Have each student write a fictional account of the south in which he/she incorporates both the historical elements learned in this unit, as well as some of the literary representations discussed and evaluated in this lesson.
- c. Have each student choose one author from this lesson and conduct research on how he/she treats the topic of cotton and agriculture in other literary texts. This research can include information on the author's overall perspective of the southern economy, as well as literary analysis of the text(s).

* Please alter this lesson to what will work in your class more effectively and efficiently. Some teachers may want to skip the group aspect and have the whole class cover the same text(s) at once. Again, this lesson is a guide to help the class study cotton culture through literature.

Discussion Prompts and Questions for the Texts (students should consider the overall cotton culture when answering): Students should answer each question in an analytical sense and provide proper citations from the text when appropriate.

- “The Man Who Was Almost a Man” – Richard Wright
 - What environment and atmosphere is presented in the text?
 - What are the dynamics of Dave’s relationship to his family?
 - What does the gun symbolize?
 - What does Jenny symbolize? What role does she play in both farm life and Dave’s perception of life?
 - What does the train symbolize?
 - What will allow Dave to become a man in this culture?
- “A Rose for Emily” – William Faulkner
 - What environment and atmosphere is presented in the text?
 - What social hierarchy does Emily and her family represent?
 - What conflicts does Homer represent in the changing dynamics of Jefferson?
 - How is race portrayed in the text?
 - How does the text’s ending reflect the overall culture of the time and its psychological implications on Emily and what she represents?
- “A Worn Path” – Eudora Welty
 - What environment and atmosphere is presented in the text?
 - What social hierarchy does Phoenix represent?
 - How does Phoenix’s odyssey parallel the human experience from various groups during the cotton culture of the south?
- Selections from *Cane* – Jean Toomer
 - What is the overall voice and tone of Toomer’s speakers?
 - What does this voice suggest about the speaker’s southern experience?
 - What types of imagery and figurative language does Toomer use in the poems?
 - What mood and/or message do these devices develop?
- “The Displaced Person” – Flannery O’Connor
 - What are the economical dynamics present on Ms. McIntyre’s farm?
 - According to Ms. McIntyre, what is the social hierarchy on the farm?
 - Is this hierarchy that same for Ms. Shortley, the African American workers, and the Gruizacs?
 - How does modernity affect the farm’s agricultural and social constructions?

- What roles do the priest and the peacock play in the text?
 - Is redemption present at the end of the story? What does this answer suggest about the culture O'Connor is presenting in the story?
- Various Uncle Remus Tales -- Joel Chandler Harris
 - What is the relationship between the black and white races in the frame story of the tales?
 - What various social groups do the animals in the tales represent?
 - What are the dynamics of this relationship? Who is victorious? What is this victory obtained?
 - Is the dialect necessary for these tales in terms of local color?
 - In evaluating these selections holistically, what is more important to consider—the frame story or the tale?

* Please note that the lesson procedure is a suggestion and a guide. Please modify the procedure, as well as the texts in order for your individual classroom to be most successful.