

TITLE OF LESSON

American Literature Unit 1 Lesson 5 – The “N” Word
Do Ideas Change as Language Changes?

TIME ESTIMATE FOR THIS LESSON

One class period

ALIGNMENT WITH STANDARDS

California – Eng 11-12: R1.0-3, 2.0, 3.0-5, W1.0-5, W/O1.0-2, L/S1.0, 2.0, 2.3

MATERIALS

The “N” Word – A History – Reading
“Incident,” Countee Cullen – Reading
Poetry Toolbox – Student Page
Poetry Toolbox Key – Teacher Page
“N” Word Discussion – Teacher Page

LESSON OBJECTIVES

- To read and reflect on the poem “Incident”
 - To discuss feelings engendered by the use of the “N” word
 - To establish ground rules for discussions using the “N” word during this unit
 - To discuss the history of the “N” word
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FOCUS AND MOTIVATE STUDENTS – WARM-UP ACTIVITY

- 1) Homework Check – Stamp/initial all checklists from the previous night’s homework. Have students keep them for an upcoming activity. Collect all **American Literature Permission Forms**.
- 2) Vocabulary – Ask students to take out their Unit 1 Vocabulary List and write the following words: pejorative, epithet, slur. Tell them to define the vocabulary words tonight, using their handout from class today to help them. Tell them that they may also use a dictionary to define the words, but they will still need to write the sentences from the handout that help them figure out what the words mean.. Distribute a new **Vocabulary Worksheet** and tell students to write the word “pejorative” at the top of it. They will continue to fill out the previous two worksheets, and begin a new one tonight. They must complete the worksheets through item 9. Item 9 is “root/prefix/suffix”. Tell students that they must list the root word and any prefixes or suffixes used in the vocabulary word. Tell them that the dictionary should help them do this, because it usually lists different forms of the root word at the end of the entry, so they will be able to distinguish the root word from its prefixes (attachments at the beginning) and suffixes (attachments at the end).
- 3) **Daily Log** – Tell students to copy the Daily Log below.
- 4) **Sustained Silent Reading** – Read for fifteen minutes. Make sure to read silently while the students read. Ask students if their books contain any words, expressions, or characterizations that they find disturbing or offensive. Be sure to ask them why they find them offensive. Share examples from your own book, if there are any.

Date	Journal	Lecture Discussion	Activity	Readings	Homework
		The History of the “N” Word	1. Silently read “Incident” 2. Establish ground rules for discussions 3. Discussion of “N” word 4. Poetry Toolbox	“Incident,” Countee Cullen	1. Write an “Incident” poem. 2. Define Vocabulary words. Begin new Vocabulary Worksheet and continue old ones

					(through Item 9). 3. Continue reading novels.
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ACTIVITIES – INDIVIDUAL AND GROUP

1. **Silent Reading** – Distribute the poem “Incident,” and instruct students to read it to themselves silently. Tell them that the poem may make them uncomfortable. Have them look up at you when they are finished. Allow them a few moments of reflection about the poem, and point out that the discomfort the poem causes allows them to understand the intentions of the poet.
2. **Mini Lecture** – When all eyes are on you, tell students that they are going to read a few different texts in class which use the word in the poem, a word many people refer to as the “N” word. Tell students that they are reading this poem to precede the reading of *The Adventures of Huckleberry Finn*, a novel that uses the word over two hundred times. Today they will be discussing the different ways people use this word, in literature and in other contexts. Discussing the way this word is used in literature will help them understand the controversies surrounding the use of *Huckleberry Finn* in the classroom, and the strong emotions engendered by language in general. *The Adventures of Huckleberry Finn* has been banned from some schools because of Mark Twain’s frequent use of this word. At the same time, it is on the State of California’s required reading list. How is it possible that a text that would incite some people has been approved by an entire state for mandatory readings by 11th graders? Allow students an opportunity to think about the question. Tell them you will come back to it later.
3. **N Word Class Policy** – Tell them that it is natural for them to have strong feelings about this word. Today, they will discuss how this word has been used to “dis-empower,” to take power away from people. They will also examine other ways people use the word, and evaluate for themselves whether or not they agree with its usage. It is important to establish rules for discussing the word “nigger” and how it is used. For example, should the word be said aloud in class? Or should it always be referred to as the “N” word? Different teachers have different opinions. Some feel it is necessary to use the word to understand the ways that Twain uses it in his satire. Some feel that it is disrespectful to African-American students to use the word. You will want to decide your policy about this before the discussion. It is unlikely that you will want to leave this decision entirely up to the students. However, you will want to tell them your decision and your reasons for your decision before you begin to discuss their ideas.
4. **Teacher Read Aloud** – Distribute *The “N” Word – A History* (Reading) to each student and read it aloud to them, or have them read it. Remind them of the work they have been doing as linguists, tracing how language changes over time and changes according to context. Point out that the poem “Incident” was written in the 1920s. Do they feel like it could have been written in the present day? Does the “N” word still hold the same power?
5. **Whole Class Discussion** – Now, tell students they are going to conduct a whole class discussion. Their job will be to get through each of the questions listed below thoroughly, allowing time for all ideas to be heard within the 15 minute time frame they are being given. You will not interrupt their discussion, except if they are not abiding by the ground rules you have established. The purpose of this activity is twofold 1) you are allowing the power dynamics in the classroom to unfold in order to identify help students to identify them and 2) you are giving students the opportunity to deal with a powerful issue in a safe, contained environment, as an introduction to the novel they are about to read. This discussion, how you handle it, and how they handle it is crucial to your construction of a community of autonomous critical, inquiring students. Be careful. Be vigilant. Be observant. You will debrief with them afterwards and your observations both of the content of their discussion and the way they discuss as a group is important. Take your own notes.
6. **Assigning Roles** – Ask for volunteers for the following roles (for responsibilities of each role see *Group Roles* below): 1 class notetaker, 1 class timekeeper, 1-2 facilitators, and 2 process observers. If no one steps up, assign them or have the class elect them. Then allow them 15 minutes to have a discussion addressing the questions below. If they have time, and they would like to insert their own questions, they may do so. Make sure to

establish the ground rules clearly for the class before the discussion, and tell the timekeeper to stop the discussion after fifteen minutes. Absolutely no exceptions to the time limit, regardless of whether or not students want to keep going. If it is that important to them, they will continue their discussion on their own time, which is ultimately what a good discussion inspires.

- How does it make you feel to hear this word?
 - Are there times and places when it is okay to use the word? Where and when?
 - Is it okay for some people to use the word, but not others? Who may use it and who may not? Why?
 - Is it okay to hear it in a formal literary context, but not in a casual conversation? Why or why not?
 - Why does this word have so much power? Why does it take power away from some people and give it to other people? (Here, you want to encourage students to see the relationship between the language and the speaker, and the fact that it is the speaker’s status that gives power to the language.)
 - Has the power of this word changed during your lifetime? How? Why? Has the word changed as the world has changed?
7. Debrief – Ask Process Observers to point out the power dynamics in the class during the preceding discussion. Which students assumed power? Which students were given power and by whom? Which students were heard and which students weren’t? What did the Process Observers (and everyone else) notice about the connections between language and power? The connections between language and ideas? Do changes in one effect changes in the other? If the students do not cover it, encourage students to look at the relationship between language and the speaker and the fact that it is the speaker’s status that often gives power to the language. Point out to students your observations about their whole class discussion. What were their strengths? Their weaknesses? How might they effectively work together to accomplish a task and allow for equity in terms of power? Tell them that while they study the power of language in class, you would like them to study the power of language they share with each other. So when they work together like today, there will most likely be a debrief like this where they are asked to look at how they work together for the sake of improving their social skills, and everyone can stand to improve. Point out that as they move towards graduation, they must develop their ability to work well alone and in group situations because whether they choose to go to college or they choose to work, they will ALWAYS have to work with others. Sometimes they will like the people they work with and sometimes they may not like the people they work with. However, the point is that they will have to find ways to work with all people. The best way to do that is to practice and practice and practice some more. The best place and time is now. So throughout this class, they will not only be asked to improve their study skills, their reading skills, their writing skills, their thinking skills, they will also be asked to improve their social skills. They should get used to working in groups, in pairs, and as a whole class.
8. **Poetry Toolbox** – Hand out the **Poetry Toolbox** to each student. Tell them to work in groups to fill out the toolbox for the poem, “Incident”. Even though they are working in groups and may help each other with ideas, each student must fill out a toolbox of their own. This toolbox houses all of the poetry terms students learned as tenth graders. However, should you wish to briefly review with them, you can find the **Poetry Toolbox Key** in the Teacher Pages of this unit. If they do not finish in class, it is homework tonight.
9. Review Homework – Tell students to think about an incident in their own lives, when they heard someone use language to “dis-empower,” to take power away. It could have happened to them personally, or someone they know very well. Tell them to write a poem about this incident. Tell them to do as Cullen does, and write about the specific time and place that it happened. You may wish to have them follow the format precisely. (For example, begin the first verse with a statement of where the incident happened: “In my school in New York...” Begin the second verse with the time: “I was ten years old...” End the final verse with how you feel about the incident now.) Instruct the students to use the literary devices in the **Poetry Toolbox** in their poems.
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HOMEWORK

- 1) Write an “Incident” poem.
 - 2) Define vocabulary words. Begin new **Vocabulary Worksheet** and continue old ones (through Item 9).
 - 3) Continue reading novels.
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GROUP ROLES

Facilitator – Your job is to keep the class focused on the subject of the discussion and to help ensure that everyone gets a chance to speak. It is not your job to lead the discussion alone. It is your job to encourage/help classmates to share the floor.

Notetaker – Your job is to write out the important points being made by your classmates. As the students explain their feelings and refine the class policy, you should make sure to write clear notes that the teacher can refer to later.

Timekeeper – Your job will be to make sure the discussion does not exceed fifteen minutes, and that the report from Process Observers does not exceed five minutes. During the discussion, you should give a five minute warning before the time is up.

Process Observer – Your job will be to pay attention to power dynamics during the discussion. Watch who is leading the discussion, who remains silent, and how your classmates speak to one another. You will need to report out on this after the discussion.

DOCUMENTATION FOR PORTFOLIO

Unit 1

None