

Awareness: Teaching Black Literature in the Secondary School

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AWARENESS

Teaching Black Literature in the Secondary School

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To say that the black American has been, for the most part, overlooked in the teaching of literature is an understatement. To say that something must be done about it is also an understatement. What must be dealt with before something is done about teaching black literature is the teacher himself. "Oh," you might say, "the black American is definitely more in literature than he used to be. I just have to get around to working him in." This is not all you must do, teacher of English. You must look at yourself as a human being relating to others, understanding how they feel. You must move beyond that teacher-self into that inner-self to see if you can really do black literature justice. Can you relieve yourself of fears, inhibitions, and prejudices and bring out the issues as they are? You must not simply give lip service to the fact that black students need literature that is relevant, and white students need to know more about their black brothers.

Ultimately, you must prepare yourself to teach literature by and about the black American by becoming acutely aware of the black man's background, his thoughts, his attitudes, his dreams, and his hopes. It is time to get away from the

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superficiality of statements such as "I can imagine how you must feel, but we think you are just being sensitive." Yes, we are sensitive, and we have every right to be so after all that we have had to and must continue to deal with. We want Langston Hughes designated as black because, right now, this makes him and his literature special. In time, perhaps, this will not have to be so. It is time, teachers, to actively and sincerely try to reach out and touch the world of the black American. If you think we are too sensitive, why not attempt to find the reason. It might make you sensitive, too.

FROM NEGRO TO BLACK: THE SEARCH FOR IDENTITY

"And suddenly the question of identity has become compellingly important. Since white America seems unready to assimilate blacks, the new black conscious leaders respond by rejecting white America. Even the term "black" has become a badge of honor" (Newsweek, 1967). This quotation points out an important element in the discussion of awareness and teaching black literature. For the most part, the Negro today has begun to feel a sense of pride in his heritage and no longer wishes to hide the light of his "Negro-ness" under a bushel. This has not always been so.

The quest for identity began early in the days of slavery. Within the race, there have always been those comrades of other colors, either lighter or darker. This was a sore point with most of the slaves, in that the lighter ones of them were taken into the house and educated. The darker slaves were left in the fields to toil in the hot sun. The house slaves looked down upon these darker brothers and hence came about the rhyme:

If you're white, you're right; If you're light, you're all right; If you're brown, hang around; If you're black, step back! These lighter slaves, offspring of "Massa's" nocturnal indulgences with the slave women, had the advantage when it came to opportunity.

Eventually a compromise was affected, by creating a privileged group of mulatto house servants who were relieved of the more arduous duties of the darker field hands. A division of labor resulted, roughly corresponding to complexion, and soon hardened along class lines.... It was this privileged group, together with the free colored population, which formed the nucleus of the Negro middle class [Bone, 1958].

The history of this atmosphere within the Black race continued for many years, and this was one main element that kept the race divided. "Black" was a dirty word and perpetuated its evil connotations within the syntax of the English language. People were "blackballed" from organizations. They were put on "black lists" or were given "black looks" by those who felt they were behaving in a socially unacceptable manner. Even in the game of pool, the eight ball is black and we all know what can happen if you are "behind the eight ball." On the campuses of black colleges, very often lighter girls were preferred over darker ones and hence the term "high yellow" came into existence. These girls were the Homecoming, May Day, and Greek queens.

This color criterion caused many Blacks to want to "act white." They, particularly if dark, were often ashamed of their features and tried in vain to lighten their skin with bleaching creams, straighten their hair with hot combs and chemicals, and turn away from what was considered typical behavior of Blacks. "The Negro," says Elijah Muhammed, titular head of the Black Muslims, "wants to be everything but himself. He wants to be a white man. He processes his hair. Acts like a white man. He wants to integrate with the white man, but he cannot integrate with himself or his own kind. The Negro wants to lose his identity because he does not know his own identity" (Silberman, 1964).

More has been written and said concerning the black man and his struggle for an identity, but it is not the purpose of this paper to pursue that now. We can assume from the brief evidence presented, however, that this is the way it was for a long time. Now, and since the decade of the sixties, Black Americans basically accept their color, features, Blackness, if you will, and no longer feel ashamed. "Often deliberately rude, like the Populists of old, Black men and women are asserting pride in self, skin and all. If they sound racist, race is what they must affirm" (Look, 1967). With the onset of the au naturel of "afro" hair style, both men and women are saying "kinky hair is right on!" Few are trying to lighten themselves with Nadinola, for these days "Black is beautiful!" Many blacks, especially younger ones, are asserting themselves and saying "I'm black and I'm proud!"

WHY "BLACK" LITERATURE

With this new "black and proud" attitude, the cry for black studies now swells on the campuses throughout our country. Listed under various names, they all indicate a desire on the part of black students to seek and discover more about themselves. Sick they are, frankly, of their own heritage being shunted to one side to make places for the Patrick Henrys, Abraham Lir.colns, and George Washingtons of this world. Bogged down by T. S. Eliot, Thoreau, or Faulkner, they ache to see some of their "own" set forth as important names of history and literature. Black students, as Black Americans everywhere, want the members of their race who have given time and talents to the building of this country duly recognized. They want Black Americans, past and present, to stand and receive their long overdue applause.

Your next statement is rather predictable. Why do we all of a sudden have to make such a big deal about the blacks? Because we are a big deal and have been ever since we were brought to these shores in 1619. We have been "drawers of

water and hewers of wood" for all these many years, building a country of which we are so little a part. It's like putting Mother out to sleep in the garage after she has cooked, cleaned, washed—yes, slaved all day for her family. Such a crime defies a fitting punishment.

Why have "Black" literature? Because Blacks are different. Not because, however, we are said to be so by those advocates of white supremacy. Not because our skin is dark and our hair kinky. We are different because our history has deemed us so.

Season it as you will... the thought that the Negro American is different from other Americans is still unpalatable to most Negroes. Nevertheless... the Negro is different. An iron ring of historical circumstance has made him so. But the difference is of little depth [Bone, 1958].

That little depth is enough to make it important to study the Black American.

The Negro novel, like Negro life in America, is at once alike and different from the novels of white Americans....It is no accident that approximately eighty-five percent of the novels by American Negroes deal principally or exclusively with Negro characters in a Negro setting. This racial emphasis is simply a literary echo of cultural reality. Whether this reality is desirable or not is another matter. When and if the Negro minority becomes fully integrated into American life, tendencies toward cultural autonomy will presumably disappear [Bone, 1958].

The purpose for teaching separate black literature is more than simply an appeasement of black students. At least it should be. The purpose of teaching black literature is to fill the void left by the exclusion of the black American in many aspects of American education. Without realizing it or wanting to realize it, teachers of English have cheated hundreds of students out of a well-rounded education by excluding Langston Hughes, Countee Cullen, Claude McKay, or Lorraine Hansberry. Perhaps these have been mentioned in

passing, but mentioning is not enough. English students must be made aware of the total literary contributions of all people in this country. This includes the black American.

Let us also address comments as to the types of black literature to be taught. Certainly as professional people we want to give our students the best that has been written. And, since the black American is slowly coming to be recognized, some of the black literature has been evaluated as to its literary value-form, method, theme, and so on. As teachers, we should want our students exposed to a wellrounded curriculum. Some will question, then, the inclusion of writers such as H. Rap Brown, Eldridge Cleaver, or Stokely Carmichael. We feel, however, it is possible to include these authors. With their writing's role in the English department clearly defined, we do not see why they could not be used to illustrate that aspect of black literature dealing with protest, since this is an issue important to our country at this time in history. One problem, though, is that administrators would be likely to frown, fearing the ideas set forth by Cleaver or Carmichael as too forceful or unsettling for secondary students. This inclusion might have to be an individual teacher's prerogative, based on student maturity to deal with these writers after others, still Black but less resounding, were read. Even though many may not consider them on the level of supposed master writers, these authors still have a message to give—a message students certainly should be aware of. For authors such as these, we would suggest a class of high school iuniors or seniors.

So it is necessary right now to specify Langston Hughes, Arna Bontemps, Claude McKay, and others as black because they are of a race too long denied cognizance. It will not be long, we are hopeful, before they will cease to be special and will just be taught along with Drieser, Faulkner, Hemingway, and Steinbeck.

AWARENESS DEFINED: TO THOSE WHO ARE WHITE

Reginald Tompkins, student at Columbia University said in an interview: "We have had to learn the white man's way of thinking. He must learn the black man's way of thinking" (Time, 1967). This sums up what the white teacher of English must do if he is to teach black literature. One of the hardest things to accomplish is to speak objectively and not let one's prejudices color a classroom presentation. Yet this responsibility falls squarely into your lap.

After all, how can a white man adequately interpret literature based on social experiences he knows little or nothing about? One thing is certain, he cannot hope to relate adequately to black literary forms if he suffers the usual hang-ups of white, middle class society. If he should try to do so, it is difficult to imagine which setting would suffer most—an all white class or a predominately black one. Both would certainly be socially raped as a result of such mishandling of art as would inevitably result [Tinney, 1969].

The white teacher of English must realize that he does owe his students an objective presentation, perhaps not fully agreeing with one side or the other, but presenting them nonetheless. Whether he teaches the full drama-A Raisin in the Sun-and must discuss the black matriarchal structure and the prejudices of white people, or whether he merely teaches a poem, Claude McKay's "If We Must Die," for example, there are issues that should be dealt with, and the discussion of these issues should enable students to see that piece of literature in something more than a superficial light. To discuss these issues, the teacher must read widely to expand his own ideas and knowledge. "One general prerequisite for the teacher of Negro literature, therefore, is evident. He must [and here white teachers are addressed although some less militant Negro teachers may listen] have a proper attitude about all the environments which have

produced Negro art-in-writing" (Tinney, 1969). There are three general areas where we feel there must be an awareness on the part of the white teacher if he is to achieve this attitude: (1) the historical background of the black American, (2) the historical development of the Negro novel, and (3) contemporary currents in black thought.

Why should there be an awareness of the history of the Negro? Because within history, events that have occurred can point to later attitudes and behaviors. For example, slavery had something to do with the onset of a black matriarchal society. This life style is a significant element in Lorraine Hansberry's A Raisin in the Sun. A teacher must be able to bring this into focus if he is to deal with the more obvious element of Walter Lee's struggle for manhood. He must also understand the Black's struggle for identity if he is to deal fairly with Beneatha and her whims of Africa. "Also, if he is ill-acquainted with Negro history, he cannot hope to interpret adequately Negro literature [all who aspire to teach black literature should first read Bennett's Before the Mayflower]" (Tinney, 1969).

Second, an awareness of the development of the Black novel will help him put the works studied into proper chronological sequence. Just as we study English history, know the signs of the times and the eras in which their writers wrote, so should the white teacher know the Black novel's place in American literature. As each white author wrote from 1900, let us say, to 1965, there was a corresponding piece of black literature written. If we are to look at the "signs of the literary times," let us look at both the white and the black of them.

Third, there must be an awareness of contemporary currents in black thought. Many of the later pieces of black writing—Cleaver's Soul on Ice, Carmichael's Black Power, Bennett's The Negro Mood, and King's Why We Can't Wait—contain the feelings, hostilities, suspicions, and hopes that Negroes have about white America today. These currents

of thought, too, should be discussed in class. Here is where a knowledge of history can play an important function as these hostilities and hopes often have historical foundations. As the class perhaps deals with their individual attitudes, these currents of thought could help them place their feelings into some type of framework.

To be aware of these three main areas is all well and good, but the white teacher of black literature must also be aware of the kind of students he teaches. There is a difference between white middle-class students and Black ghetto students, and each group will have its own distinctive ideas of you and the course. Whether these students are in classes together (racially mixed) or in classes separately (all black or all white), you must be prepared to handle certain situations as they arise.

White middle-class students may or may not have had much contact with blacks. It is important, therefore, to present all issues to ensure or at least stimulate well-rounded consideration when these white students hear about, read stories in newspapers, or see on television news concerning black Americans. The impact of all white books upon 39,600,000 white children is probably even worse. How can they understand the news on television and in the newspapers? Increasingly isolated from their darker contemporaries, how well are these white children being prepared for the larger adult world in which they are globally a minority?

White middle-class students may also come to the classroom with prejudices conceived at home and might be hostile to the material being presented. If these students are in a class with Black students, their feelings must be dealt with before any attempt is made to have them do the readings because their attitudes will certainly be noted and resented by the Black students. Perhaps open discussions, panels, or round tables, could be used so that members of both races could vent their feelings. As teachers, you must not seem to take sides, but (here again the key word) remain objective and let the students explore themselves. Once this preliminary exploration has concluded, the readings can begin, very possibly with little opposition and a bit more interest and curiosity. If there are no blacks in the class, these hostilities or prejudices should still be discussed and the point made that to be close-minded about the idea of reading black literature is illogical if you have never been exposed to it.

Finally, white teachers must preview books that they plan to use to be sure they are not written, if *about* Black Americans, by people who give a distorted viewpoint. Through that racism can appear in print. "To do the job, the whole realm of the black man's world must be presented. But make no mistake, the time is out for these materials to be presented from the white man's viewpoint. We must be ever watchful for the devious forms racism takes in print" (Tate, 1969).

Black students possess similar problems but they might be a little more threatening for the white teacher. Black students' hostilities, as white students' hostilities, come from the home where the seeds of suspicion and distrust of the white American are sown. They may look upon the white teacher of Black literature as not knowing "where it's at." They may also wait for his prejudices to show by his using a touchy word or phrase that "just don't sound right." Beware of the reaction to "Nigra" instead of "Negro" or "Colored" instead of "Black." "Let the white teacher in a Negro class... permit his students to exploit fully their racial interests in discussions and compositions. If a teacher is willing to teach his unit—willing to let his students identify with black characters for a change—then let him give them time to make that identification" (Tinney, 1969).

The white teacher of English, in order to overcome some of the problems associated with reaching black students, must just act natural. He should not feel as if he must go out of his way to be nice to them or talk about how "simply awful it is the way they have been treated." This kind of

patronization will only cause him to be labelled a phony, and the class will have negative responses to his attempts to teach. If the class is racially mixed, he should avoid putting the black students on the spot by asking questions shaded with the implication, "Since you're black, you'd know." His purpose should be simply to teach a piece of literature, pointing out important issues and discussing them with the class as a whole. Occasionally, he can ask students about their own experiences as he tries to relate the literature to something more familiar, but if the class is mixed, he should ask these questions equally to blacks and whites.

It is necessary for us to bear in mind that, although the dynamics of prejudice are complex and the roots of hostility deep and often beyond our power to control, there is a part we can play in mitigating and lessening the effects of prejudice and hostility upon the minority group student. Our success in this venture will depend not only upon our awareness of the many problems that confront these students, but also upon our courage and our creativity in making the appropriate efforts to overcome them [School and Society, 1967].

In summary, the white teacher must prepare himself to teach the several issues that occur in Black literature. He must override his concern about proper English when a book is assigned that is written with the "them theres" and the "dis heres." He must try to overcome his fear of what will happen in a racially mixed class when white injustices are brought out in a piece of literature. He should be ready to handle profanity, militancy, sex, and other sensitive subjects. In dealing with these, however, it goes without saying that he should consider the grade level and maturity of the students before going too deep. But since these things exist in real life, there's no point in running from them. "As teachers, it is not for us to turn away from such ugly facts, but rather to confront them directly and in doing so, to recognize the depth and tenacity of feelings hostile to minority group members in many sectors of this country" (School and Society, 1967).

AWARENESS DEFINED: TO THOSE WHO ARE BLACK

"Blackness" in all its shades, represents no mystical guarantee of an "understanding" of the black man's problems, life, or culture (Blassingame, 1969). Too often, just because a person is black he is thought to have all the answers. Anything having to do with "Black" is felt to be that person's responsibility. This is not so. The black teacher, as the white teacher, has fears and inhibitions that he too must overcome.

The main factor at work here is that most black teachers have achieved middle-class positions and tend to forget "from whence they came." Many have been brainwashed by the middle-class values they now claim and find it hard to relate to the ghetto black whose values may not be compatible with theirs. This type of black teacher has the same hang-ups to overcome as the white teacher. If this teacher has, on the other hand, come from a middle-class environment anyway, he may not understand the lack of motivation, hostilities, and suspicions of the ghetto black. This teacher also may not be able to objectively present all issues, since he could be removed from the more militant and earthy aspects of black life.

The problem involves prejudices of class as well as color. For example, teachers who have just moved up into the middle class feel threatened by contact with lower class children; the youngsters remind them too much of their own origins. Thus, using Negro teachers for Negro youngsters frequently backfires; the Negro teacher—having pulled herself up out of the slum by her own bootstraps—may be more contemptuous of her slum charges than any white [Silberman, 1964].

The main responsibility of the black teacher in the white school is to feel proud of the contributions that his people have made to literature. Too often, we find black teachers behaving in an "Uncle Tom" manner because somehow they feel certain authors are unfit for white students to read. It is usually a matter of their just not wanting to discuss ethnic problems. But with this country being multiethnic anyway, there are so many groups who are proud of their culture and welcome the opportunity to talk about it. Due to brainwashing by the white race, blacks have been made to feel there is something inferior about their culture and therefore hesitate to discuss it. This concern must cease to exist. In any discussion of the black culture, the black teacher must be ready to point out some of the sociological reasons why the race reacts as it does. In order to do this, the black teacher, just as the white, should have a knowledge of black history, history of the Black novel, and currents in contemporary black thought. Here again, blackness is no guarantee that these things will be known.

In a black school, the black teacher must be able to, as Langston Hughes said, "dig all jive":

I play it cool
And dig all jive
That's the reason
I stay alive.
My motto,
As I live and learn
is:
Dig and be dug
In return.

He must be able to do this in order to establish a workable relationship with his students. Black students can sometimes really turn against a black teacher if he seems to be too "proper" and "uppity." We most certainly do not advocate getting completely down to the level of a student. Then you can lose your effectiveness as an adult. On the other hand, you can be down-to-earth enough to understand that this is what these students "dig." This is their "thing." In teaching black literature to a black class, let them discuss freely, even act out the parts (if drama) so that they can be motivated.

Nothing is more sterile than a black English class studying black literature in the same way they would study Chaucer or Shakespeare. Since motivation is sometimes difficult, the type of situation where there is freedom to express would be the perfect place for students to be remotivated.

The black teacher should also attempt to structure her approach so the lessons become more than black literature just for the sake of black literature. Admittedly, there are those students who feel that just being black is enough and do not take the idea of the new "Black identity" seriously. It is the teacher's responsibility to let her students know that part of helping the race be recognized is to take seriously the contributions of the authors they study. They should also be made to look at both sides of the issues to realize that with blackness comes responsibilities. By doing this, knowing a little of the latest jargon, and knowing where he stands in his black environment, the black teacher of English can truly dig and be dug in return.

A FINAL APPEAL: WHAT HAPPENS TO A DREAM DEFERRED?

At this point, there are those of you still not sold on the idea of teaching Black literature as Black literature. You refuse to have it identified as such because you feel Blacks should just be like anyone else and not receive special treatment. Superficially, this is so, but realistically it is not. This is simply a cheap cop-out. Until the void is filled and until Blacks are acknowledged by white America as having contributed to the development of many fields, we will continue to insist on Black literature.

America would not have been America without Blacks and America cannot become America until it confronts not only the Blacks but the gifts the Blacks bear. What is required now is an act of spirit. We must abandon our shallow trenches and confront each other as co-inheritors of a common land, which is to say that

we must meet and know each other as brothers in a marriage of visions, as coconspirators in the making of a dream, as fellow passengers on a journey into the unknown (Bennett, 1964).

We want to be hopeful, as we are sure other Black educators are hopeful, that soon our literature, our history, our *whatever* can become a part of the total American educational picture. But until white racist, institutionalized America chooses to or is forced to wake up to the real and present issues facing Black Americans, we will assert blackness because blackness *must* be asserted.

White youngsters must be made aware that certain "all-American" symbols are not really so "all-American."

But think how the Goddess of Liberty welcoming the world's poor and oppressed must look like to a Negro teen-ager.... I was not aware—I had no way of learning—that the Goddess of Liberty was saying "But not for you" to large numbers of my fellow citizens. We have to tell young people about this, particularly white youngsters [Sterling, 1968].

Indeed, they must be told but very often they are not. Jonathan Kozol, author of *Death at an Early Age*, relates an incident about a poem by a black poet being read and voluntarily memorized by his students. He was called in by a "higher up" and told before he was fired: "No literature which is not in the course of study could ever be read by a Boston teacher without permission by someone higher up. No poem by any Negro author could be considered permissible if it involved suffering" (Kozol, 1967). An appeal to overcome this type of narrow-mindedness and evasion is what this paper has been about. Teach it all. Let the students decide how it fits into the scheme of things. Do not try to hide the facts of racist American life!

Very often, teachers think that just teaching good black authors will fill the void mentioned earlier. They feel like Judy Headlee (1970):

English teachers have habitually selected pieces of English literature for the classroom according to their creative and inspirational worth. It is by such selectivity that Shakespeare, Dickens, Wordsworth, Coleridge, Keats and others have become worthy of our study and have projected an aura of dignity and authority that recommends them to the student. This same dignity must not be denied to Black literature by the teaching of Eldridge Cleaver rather than Countee Cullen. Negroes deserve the recognition afforded by selectivity of what their inspired efforts and artistry can produce, in spite of environmental deprivation.

We strongly and angrily disagree!! This is evasion of the facts. Teach Cleaver and Carmichael. Read the *Autobiography of Malcom X*. Check out H. Rap Brown's *Die Nigger Die*. These men have a message, and that message must be known. Too long we have had delays and excuses. Too long we have been put off. Fill that void *now* before it gets too deep.

What happens to a dream deferred?

Does it dry up like a raisin in the sun?
Or fester like a sore—
And then run?
Does it stink like rotten meat?
Or crust and sugar over—
like a syrupy sweet?
Maybe it just some

Maybe it just sags like a heavy load.

Or does it explode?

-Langston Hughes

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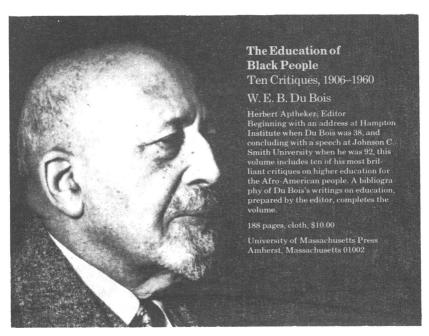
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