

Exploring Narrative Voice and Structure Through Theater

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Overview:

This lesson runs two 60-minute periods and is meant to help students deepen their understanding of the narrative structure of Tim O'Brien's *The Things They Carried*.

Objective:

Students will be able to apply theater techniques to dramatize literature and will be able to analyze the effect of an author's ambiguity or contradictions on a narrative structure as a whole.

Rationale:

This lesson comes near the beginning of the year for a senior high school English class. It occurs in the middle of a unit whose summative assessments are a literary analysis examining narrative structure and a short personal narrative mimicking some of the stylistic devices used by the author of our core text. This lesson sequence assumes students are at least somewhat familiar with the pertinent chapters before coming into class.

At its upper reading strand levels, the Common Core asks students to understand a text's ambiguity or an author's unspoken opinion as well as to understand how an author structures a text. As a course team at Cupertino High, one of our goals for seniors is to be able to adapt writing and speaking to a variety of situations—from college to career—and using a richly ambiguous, and at times contradicting, text will equip the class to have a shared vocabulary to discuss adaptation for the rest of the year. Students are working up to writing a personal narrative, so the discussion and ideas of self-representation raised during this lesson sequence, will be directly applicable to their final work.

Common Core link

CCSS.ELA-LITERACY.RL.11-12.5

Analyze how an author's choices concerning how to structure specific parts of a text (e.g., the choice of where to begin or end a story, the choice to provide a comedic or tragic resolution) contribute to its overall structure and meaning as well as its aesthetic impact

CCSS.ELA-LITERACY.RL.11-12.7

Analyze multiple interpretations of a story, drama, or poem (e.g., recorded or live production of a play or recorded novel or poetry), evaluating how each version interprets the source text. (Include at least one play by Shakespeare and one play by an American dramatist.)

Materials:

- A class set of *The Things They Carried* by Tim O'Brien
- A class set of adaptation handouts
- Space to practice and perform small group skits

Lesson Sequence:

1. **Overview.** Give an overview of the lesson and objective for the day and lesson sequence.
2. **Warm-up (5 min).** In their journals as a quickwrite, students respond to the question: “What genre is *The Things They Carried* (Literary fiction? Creative nonfiction? Autobiographical fiction?) How do you know?” Have students share with partners how they characterize the text.
3. **Teach adaptation strategies (15 min).** Pass out the handout of “6 Adaptation Strategies of Literature to Theater” and go over the differences. Show examples using short YouTube clips if needed. As a check for understanding, while or after presenting the strategies, have students brainstorm examples they have seen from plays (or movies) that mimic these techniques. To demonstrate the last strategy (choral scripting), assign 7 students to read *The Grapes of Wrath* adaptation.
 - a. Fuse the narration: the internal monologue from *Psycho*:
<https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=dYDxxHrlmUg>
 - b. Create a separate narrator
 - c. Split the narration into two or more “I” voices: John Green’s teacher and former-student self: https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=Yocja_N5s1I (0:00-0:30)
 - d. Keep a single narrator-character (no split).
 - e. Use your body to create images.
 - f. Choral scripting.
4. **Assign Task (5 min).** Assign students to work in groups of 4-5 to use one of these techniques to put on a live 2-minute performance of a chapter from the book. Emphasize that it does not need to be memorized or even rewritten; they can use their books to read dialogue or narration. The emphasis of the task is for the group to decide how to represent Tim O’Brien on stage and how the structure of his writing informs its meaning. Have each chapter be covered by at two groups (so students can see multiple interpretations of the same scene). Depending on how much of the book students have read, chapters that lend themselves well to this type of analysis would be:
 - a. Chapter 4 “On the Rainy River”
 - b. Chapter 6 “How to Tell a True War Story”
 - c. Chapters 11 and 12 “The Man I Killed” and “Ambush” (together)
 - d. Chapter 15 “Notes”
 - e. Chapters 16 and 18 “In the Field” and “Field Trip” (together)
5. **Dramatize (30-40 min).** Students work together in groups to stage their chapter. As they work, students should use page numbers of instances when the text seems to suggest ambiguity in Tim O’Brien’s writing voice or how he should be portrayed on stage. If needed, chunk the task for students, by having them re-read or skim their assigned chapters in small groups for 10 minutes, looking specifically for key actions or pieces of dialogue, then begin working in groups.

6. **Perform (20 min).** Groups perform in the order of their chapters. After each performance, discuss with the class what decisions the student-actors made to transform the page into stage. Have them also record the page number from the group with moments of ambiguity.
7. **Whole group discussion (15 min).** Ask the class what they noticed about voice and narrative structure in these portrayals. You might also want to list on the board the types of performance techniques that the different portrayals used (such as multiple vs. a single narrator, the number of characters, an exploded moment vs. a condensed timeframe, contrasting volumes, etc.). Ask what they noticed about the textual examples they recorded about Tim O'Brien's use of ambiguity and untrustworthy points of view. Other possible questions: "How did two groups perform the same scene differently? How do O'Brien's moments of ambiguity or contradictions affect the narrative? Would anyone classify the book in a different genre now? Why do you think he tells his story with this particular narrative structure?"
8. **Endwrite (15 min).** Students draw a line below their original quickwrite (as a way for you to see growth in their thinking) and respond to a new writing prompt: "Analyze the narrative voice in one of the chapters. How does his use of voice contribute to the meaning of the chapter (or book)? Give at least one textual reference."

Adaptation Strategies for Using Live Performance to Explore Narrative Fiction

Developed by Matthew Spangler, San Jose State University

1. For third person narration, **fuse the narration with the point(s) of view of the character(s)**. If you use this strategy, the narration would be said from one of the characters on stage, serving as a kind of internal monologue. As a director, you would need to decide if you want to leave the language in the third person tense or change it to first person. Likewise, you will need to decide if the character speaks to the audience with a point of view that matches his or her emotions at that particular moment in the story or if he or she is speaking from a future moment looking back.
 - a. Examples: “She Wouldn’t Even Hurt a Fly” in Alfred Hitchcock’s *Psycho* or “The Hard Goodbye” in Quentin Tarantino’s *Sin City*
2. For third person narration, **create a separate narrator character, outside the story itself**. Then there would be two actors playing the same character. In literature, this strategy is sometimes adapted into a “frame story” in which a story happens within another story. If using this strategy, start by asking who would want to tell this story and why? Who would want to hear it? What is the narrator’s attitude toward the story’s characters and events? A novel about teens working on a group project at a friend’s house could be transformed on stage if the narrator were a nosy neighbor. Or perhaps the narrator is an older version of one of the characters in the story? Or perhaps a jealous outsider?
 - a. Examples: in literature, the narrator in Joseph Conrad’s *Heart of Darkness*; in theater, the narrator in Thornton Wilder’s *Our Town*
3. For first person narration, **split the narration into two or more “I” voices**. Start by identifying the contradictions in the narrator’s voice and create separate characters from these contradictions. A common strategy is to create an older and younger self, but the split could be based on any division within the character.
 - a. Examples: John Green’s YouTube videos on history, such as “The Agricultural Revolution”
4. For first person narration, **keep a single character-narrator without a split**. The narrator moves between speaking to the audience and playing moments of dialogue with other characters on stage. Think of the relationship between soliloquy and dialogue in Shakespeare’s plays.
 - a. Examples: Hamlet’s “To be or not to be” soliloquy
5. For first or third person narration, **use your body to create images**. Tell the story through a series of three visual images created with your bodies. You should give each image a title that will serve to distinguish it from the others and tie it back to the story.
 - a. Examples: In image number one, two actors hug while a third actor stands off to the side. One of the actors in the embrace says, “Home.” In image two, one actor leaves the embrace and hugs the third actor and says, “Away.” In image three, the first actor (the one left alone) crawls into a ball on the floor and tries to make herself as small as possible, while the other two actors face out and hold hands, as if preparing for a new life together. Together, they say, “Together.” The actor on the floor says, “Forgotten.”
6. For first or third person narration, **create a choral scripting**. This is different from the other strategies in that there is relatively little, or maybe even no consideration of character. Instead of a focus on character, the script is written based on the musicality and rhythm of language, like a piece of music, with the actors’ voices being the musical instruments. Repetition can be very effective.
 - a. Examples: an adaptation of John Steinbeck’s *The Grapes of Wrath*

From John Steinbeck's *The Grapes of Wrath* (pp 299-308)

- 1: Part Three: California
- 2: The disposed were drawn west from Kansas
- 3: Oklahoma
- 4: Texas
- 5: New Mexico
- 6: Nevada
- 7: and Arkansas
- 1: Hundreds of thousands streamed over the mountains and flowed into California
- 2: And suddenly they saw a great valley before them.
- 3: Vineyards.
- 4: Orchards
- 5: Gardens.
- 6: Green and beautiful trees set in rows.
- 7: Willows
- 4: Eucalyptus.
- 5: Peach trees.
- 6: Walnut groves
- 7: And dark green patches of oranges.
- 2: They stood silent and awestruck.
- 4: Embarrassed before the great valley.
- 3: Embarrassed because they were hungry.
- 1: Hungry and restless,
- 4: restless as ants,
- 7: currying to find work
- 2: to lift, to push, to pull, to pick, to cut,
- 3: to lift, to push, to pull, to pick, to cut
- 1: to lift, to push, to pull, to pick, to cut,
- ALL: to lift, to push, to pull, to pick, to cut.
- 2: Anything!
- 3: Any burden to bear for food.
- 6: The kids are hungry.
- 5: We got no place to live.
- 1: They had hoped to find a home, and they found only hatred.
- 4: They saw the golden oranges hanging on the trees,
- 7: and then the guards with shotguns patrolling the lines
- 4: so a man might not pick an orange for a thin child,
- 1: oranges to be dumped if the price was low.
- 2: So they drove their old cars to the edge of town where there was a Hooverville.