

***National Endowment for the Humanities: Immigrant Experience
in Literature and Theatre Institute – San Jose State University,
July, 2014***

**AP English Literature: Adaptation Strategies for Using Live
Performance to Explore Narrative Fiction**

By Susan Disbrow, Whitefish Bay High School, Whitefish Bay, WI

Texts Used: *Heart of Darkness* by Joseph Conrad
Tess of the D'Urbervilles by Thomas Hardy
Beloved by Toni Morrison

Title: “The Unspoken Voice”

Overview:

While studying the immigrant experience this past summer, I came to realize the extent of how little we know about the lives of the vast majority of the immigrants coming to our country. Their voices are minimal at best, muted, or lost forever simply because history has forgotten about them because they were historically insignificant or seemingly lacking in power. Likewise, when I began to think about the literary texts that I teach, I began to think about the “voices” that we fail to acknowledge, analyze, or pay attention to simply because they are not our main focus, or we simply do not have enough time to create a meaningful character analysis of less powerful characters, especially women. Additionally, in a jam-packed AP curriculum, at times we fail to fully analyze the effects of place, home, or sense of community and its impact on a character’s dreams, thoughts, or spoken “voice.” Thus, the “Unspoken Voice” in literature intrigues me.

Procedures:

In my AP English Literature class, the students are adept at writing scholarly literary analyses and research essays; however, how could I introduce more of a “voice” in their writing and a sense of excitement and power as they explored their **own literary imaginations**? I wanted to explore alternative creative ways to analyze literature and hopefully explore more of the imaginative craft of writing while staying true to the text being studied. Therefore, I chose to use the handout given to us by Matthew Spangler entitled, “Adaptation Strategies for Using Live Performance to Explore Narrative Fiction” (attached at the end of this document) to explore the “unspoken voices” in three of the AP class texts: *Heart of Darkness*, *Tess of the D'Urbervilles*, and *Beloved*.

**Before giving the following assignments, the class as a whole would be given workshops in creating small vignettes using these adaptation strategies, so they would be familiar with these techniques before engaging in a final project. The students could work in pairs, or in small groups to synthesize the following*

techniques within each of the literary texts. Their final presentations would be presented to the class, or possibly an invited audience.

A. *Heart of Darkness* by Joseph Conrad: Using Choral Scripting

Choral scripting is an adaptation technique “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 and changes in volume can be very effective here” (Spangler Handout, “Adaptation Strategies...”).

The students would explore the following voices in this novel using choral scripting:

- Kurtz’s “Jungle Voice”
- The Intended – at home
- The African Mistress
- Marlowe (any place within the novel that the student feels should be explored, explained, or further analyzed, or even the character’s “voice” as a youth)

B. *Tess of the D’Urbervilles* by Thomas Hardy: Using First Person Narration: split into two or more “I” voices

Using the adaptation strategy of first-person narration in which the narration is split into two or more “I” voices, the students will, “Start by identifying the contradictions in the narrator’s voice and create separate characters from these contradictions. A common strategy is the creation [of] an older and younger self....But the split doesn’t have to be based on age; it could be based on any division within the character” (Spangler Handout, “Adaptation Strategies...”).

The students would explore the following voices in this Victorian novel using first person split narration:

- Tess’ younger self – before she must go to work for Alec
- Tess’ feelings of displacement with regard: to her family, the village of Marlott, May Day festivities, Alec’s d’Urberville estate, Talbothay’s Dairy, or Flintcomb-Ash (the plethora of choices for first person split narration is unlimited with this particular novel, since Hardy leaves much to the imagination).
- Tess’ older self before she is captured at Stonehenge and dies.
- Liza-Lu’s voice (Tess’ younger sister) – could be incredibly creative since the reader receives little of this character’s voice from Hardy

C. *Beloved* by Toni Morrison: Using Third Person Narration to create a single character for the narrator, a character outside the story itself

The students will “start by asking the following questions of the story’s narrator: (a) Who would know this information? (b) Who would want to tell this story and why? (c) What is the narrator’s attitude toward the story’s characters and events? Some common choices: a nosy neighbor; an older version of one of the characters in the story; a sympathetic, or not, outsider. Think of the narrator in Thornton Wilder’s *Out Town*” (Spangler Handout, “Adaptation Strategies....”).

For this third person narration I would like the students to explore the voice of Baby Suggs, Halle’s mother. The reader only sees her in several scenes within the novel, as she cares for Sethe and her wonderfully illuminating scene where she preaches in the clearing. Using the character of Baby Suggs as a ghost, she could address each of the following characters giving added insight and depth to their characters and the choices each man or woman made in order to survive.

Baby Suggs could address the following characters at any point in their life:

- Sethe
- Denver
- Beloved
- Paul D
- Halle
- Stamp Paid

Goals & Summary:

The goal of this assignment is to teach a different, more stylized way in which to analyze literature, perhaps in a more creative manner. At our high school we do not have a specific course entitled “Creative Writing,” and many of our students, by the time they reach their senior year, would like to explore different avenues in which to analyze literature, rather the standard literary analysis essay or daily class discussion. Also, with the variety of techniques in the adaptation strategies presented, their creativity is unlimited. The students could employ music, art pieces, dance and/or movement and active participation from the audience to enhance their written work. The ideas are almost limitless to explore character’s voices in a literary text.

(I have listed two texts within the next section, Studs Terkel in his book *Working*, in order to provide evidence of a character’s narrative voice. Additionally, I have included Swartz and Nyman’s text to introduce creative drama ideas into a classroom for further reference.)

Sources & Resources:

Conrad, Joseph. *Heart of Darkness*. London: Penguin Books, 1995.

- Hardy, Thomas. *Tess of the D'Urbervilles*. London, Penguin Classics, 2003.
- Morrison, Toni. *Beloved*. New York: Knopf Doubleday Publishing Group, 2004.
- Spangler, Matthew. "Adaptation Strategies for Using Live Performance to Explore Narrative Fiction." NEH Handout for Immigrant Experience in Literature and Theatre Institute – July, 2014. San Jose State University.
- Swartz, Larry, Debbie Nyman. *Drama Schemes, Themes & Dreams: How to Plan, Structure, and Assess Classroom Events that Engage all Learners*. Markham, ON: Pembroke Publishers, 2010. Print
- Terkel, Studs. *Working*. New York: Pantheon Books, 1974.

Adaptation Strategies for Using Live Performance to Explore Narrative Fiction

Matthew Spangler, Ph.D.
Associate Professor, Performance Studies
San José State University

Six adaptation strategies:

1) **For third person narration: fuse the narration with the point(s) of view of the character(s).** The stage play of T.C Boyle's novel *The Tortilla Curtain* does this. Candido, América, and Delaney perform narration that applies to their respective points of view with the emotional attitude of their characters at that particular moment in the story. The narration serves as a kind of internal monologue. A decision to make it whether to leave the third person tense or change it to first person (as *Tortilla Curtain* does).

2) **For third person narration (another strategy): create a single character for the narrator, a character outside the story itself.** Start by asking the following questions of the story's narrator: (a) Who would know this information? (b) Who would want to tell this story and why? (c) What is the narrator's attitude toward the story's characters and events? Some common choices: a nosy neighbor; an older version of one of the characters in the story; a sympathetic, or not, outsider. Think of 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 the creation an older and younger self (Act I of my adaptation of *The Kite Runner* does this). But the split doesn't have to be based on age; it could be based on any division within the character.

4) **For first person narration: no split.** The narrator moves between speaking to the audience and playing moments of dialogue with other characters on stage (Act II of my adaptation of *The Kite Runner*). Think of the relationship between soliloquy and dialogue in Shakespeare's plays.

5) **For first or third person narrator: choral scripting.** This is different from the other strategies discussed here 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. See the enclosed adaptation of *The Grapes of Wrath* (opening of Part I and Part III).

6) **For first or third person narrator: images.** Tell the story through a series of three visual images created with your bodies. You should give each image a title, which will serve to distinguish it from the others and tie it back to the story. For example: 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 tires to make himself as small as possible, while the other two actors face out, and hold hands, as is preparing for a new life together. Together, they say, "Together." The actor on the floor says, "Forgotten."

