

Implementation Plans

Exploring the New American Dream: A Study of Gentrification, Language, Borders, and Immigration in T.C. Boyle's *The Tortilla Curtain*

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Grade Level: 11-12

Context: English 3 or 4 AP or Honors; lessons designed for 50-minute class periods

Overview: Although Boyle's *The Tortilla Curtain* was published in 1995, the complex issues of immigration, borders, racism and prejudices, gentrification, the American dream, and the idea of a universal American language are as salient today as ever in our collective American history. It seems that little has changed in terms of progress when dealing with many of the issues Boyle alludes to in the novel. Students will read *The Tortilla Curtain* and analyze these ideas, themes, and motifs as they relate to the United States as well as in their own states and local communities. This unit is designed for upper secondary grades. Additionally, the unit is divided by the novel's themes and into readable chunks of the text. Teachers may choose to omit certain sections in case of time constraints.

Objectives:

- Students will work in collaborative groups.
- Students will analyze poetry and relate to a novel's theme.
- Students will select accurate textual evidence to support their ideas.
- Students will compose a monologue and create tableaux.
- Students will analyze specific scenes as they relate to theme.
- Students will perform a close reading of nonfiction and uses close reading techniques such as annotation and Cornell notetaking.
- Students will have a basic understanding of the issues of gentrification, borders, immigration and how it applies to their own personal lives.
- Students will use persuasive techniques to compose an editorial letter.
- Students will engage in academic discourse through a Socratic Seminar.
- Students will utilize academic language in the Socratic Seminar.
- Students will compose a well-written essay following a compare and contrast text-structure.
- Students will create an original performance piece that is a reflection of their cumulative knowledge gained from the unit.
- Students will integrate the use of technology including but not limited to word processing.
- Students will utilize metacognitive strategies to reflect upon their learning.

Resource List:

Books:

- T.C. Boyle's *The Tortilla Curtain* (Each student will need a copy of the text.)
- Pat Mora's *Borders* (Can be purchased online)

Non-fiction Resources/Sites:

(Note: These sources are separated by theme and are only a sampling of the articles and videos readily available. It is suggested to search for articles relating to the immigrant communities that exist in your own city and state.)

Gentrification:

- [“What is Gentrification?” PBS Site](#)
- [“There Are Actually 4 Types of Gentrification That Could Change Your City” by Jessica Cumberbatch](#)
- [“The Way to Address Gentrification” YouTube Video “Spike Lee Keeps it Funky About Gentrification...”](#) Originally found on HipHopWired.com (Warning: At approximately 1:40, Lee uses an expletive.)
- [Mi Casa No Es Su Casa Student-Film Documentary](#)
- [Socratic Seminar Guide by ReadWriteThink](#)

Language

- Articles: [“Language Barriers” by Robbie Brown](#); [“Official American” PBS.org](#); [U.S. English Chairman Responds to Debate Over Language Restriction in Texas School](#); [Official American language would be contrary to national values](#); [Congress Wants You to Learn English](#); [English Proficiency of Immigrants Statistics](#)
- [“Preparing a Debate with a Class” by NoisyClassroom.com](#)

The American Dream

- [SJSU Organizational Patterns for the Comparison/Contrast Essay](#)
- [Video: Defining the American Dream](#)
- [Series of NY Time Articles Lesson](#)

Borders

- Pat Mora's Poetry Collection *Borders*
- [TP-CASTT handout for poetry analysis by ReadWriteThink](#)
- [Motifs in Literature Video](#)
- Tableaux Resource: [Drama Resource: What is Tableaux?](#)

Immigration

- [U.S. Civics Exam](#)
- [For the Sake of Argument New York Times Editorial Resource](#)
- [The Jigsaw Classroom in Ten Steps](#)
- [Jigsaw Strategy by Penn State](#)

- Articles/Non-fiction: [“Civics Education Testing Only Required in Nine States”](#); [“State seeks to boost student knowledge about government”](#); [Understanding the 14th Amendment](#); [Citizenship exam may not be fair, study says](#); [Study: One in Three Americans Fails Naturalization Civics Test](#)

Additional Resources

- [The New York Times Upfront: The News Magazine for Teens Immigration Articles](#)

Part I: Introduction Activity (1 class period)

Before introducing the novel, create a gallery-walk of quotations relating to the novel's themes. Prepare the quotes on poster boards or butcher paper to allow room for students to write on the blank space around the quote in an annotation-style. Students will rotate the room in small groups (3-4 students) in the gallery-walk and respond to each of the quotes. Allow a few minutes at each station, but continue to increase time as students begin reading the previous groups' responses and begin annotating peer responses as well. Afterwards, engage in a whole class discussion and share some student responses. Ask the class for any common themes they found among the selected quotations.

Homework: Have students choose one quote and compose a well-written reflective response and how it applies to their own lives. Students should keep in their journals as they will return to this initial response at the end of the unit.

You may select from the collection of quotes below or search for additional/alternative quotes.

Quotation Collection (Choose 6-8, depending on class size):

1. "They ain't human. A human being wouldn't live like they do. A human being couldn't stand it to be so dirty and miserable." --John Steinbeck, *Grapes of Wrath* (located at the beginning of *The Tortilla Curtain*)
2. "We all should know that diversity makes for a rich tapestry, and we must understand that all the threads of the tapestry are equal in value no matter what their color." --Maya Angelou
3. "I have no country to fight for; My country is the Earth; I am a citizen of the world." --Eugene Victor Debs
4. "If we cannot end now our differences, at least we can help make the world safe for diversity." --John F. Kennedy [Commencement Address at American University, June 10 1963]
5. "The essence of America – that which really unites us — is not ethnicity, or nationality or religion – it is an idea — and what an idea it is: That you can come from humble circumstances and do great things. That it doesn't matter where you came from but where you are going." --Condoleezza Rice
6. "A nation that cannot control its borders is not a nation." –Ronald Reagan

7. "Prejudices are what fools use for reason." –Voltaire
8. "Remember always that all of us...are descended from immigrants and revolutionaries." -- Franklin Delano Roosevelt
9. "Freedom is never voluntarily given by the oppressor; it must be demanded by the oppressed." --Dr. Martin Luther King, Jr.
10. "Your life depends on a random stranger who could kill you, will probably disrespect you, and will most likely pay you much less than you deserve. But even those prospects are better than the ones you used to have. This is the life of los jornaleros – the day laborers."
— Gustavo Arellano, *Ask a Mexican*
11. "Give me your tired, your poor, your huddled masses yearning to breathe free." -- Emma Lazarus, engraved on a plaque on the Statue of Liberty's pedestal
12. "There are three choices in life: give up, give in, or give it all you've got." --Unknown

Part II: Motif of Walls/Borders (throughout the unit)

Procedures/Activities:

1) After students have read Chapters 1-3 (pg. 1-47), students should begin tracing the motif of borders throughout the novel. Students should be familiar with the idea of a motif. Teachers can use the "Motifs in Literature" video listed in Resources to introduce motifs to students. Guide the students with finding several examples of motifs from Ch 1-3 and explain that borders are not only physical, but often invisible. (i.e. psychological, political, cultural, emotional, sociological, socioeconomic) Each group will keep a running list of the motif. Have students cite each example with the page number. It is important to provide class time throughout the reading and discussion of the novel to have students add to their list and for small group/whole class discussion. Divide students into groups so students share the responsibility of searching for textual evidence.

Ex. "*No, all Delaney's neighbors could talk about...as if were the key to all existence, was gates...To b erected at the main entrance and manned by a twenty-four-hour guard to keep out those very gangbangers, taggers, and carjackers they'd come here to escape*" (39). **(1 period)**

3) Divide students into small groups and assign one of the following poems from Pat Mora's *Borders*: "Tomas Rivera," "Immigrants," "Sonrisas," "Border Town: 1938", and "University Avenue." Have students use the TP-CASTT strategy to analyze the poem (See resources for TP-CASTT handout.) Have each group share their poem and their analysis with the whole class. This activity will further connect the idea of borders to the novel. **(1 period)**

4) After reading the novel, students will use their motif list to work in their groups to create a series of tableaux of the theme of borders that permeate the lives of the characters in *The Tortilla Curtain* Students may integrate a poem from Pat Mora's *Borders* that they analyzed as well, or another poem of their choosing. Students should also prepare a brief accompanying narration or

description for the series of tableaux. The purpose of this activity is to allow students to experience performing in a low-key manner to prepare for the culminating integration of theatre and literature project at the end of the unit. **(2 periods)**

(Note: An optional, additional or alternative assignment is to have students create a photo essay exploring the theme as it pertains to the novel, their own personal lives, and their community. However, this itself would not prepare students for the final project.)

Part III: Language (4-5 class periods)

Introduce this during or after reading Part I: Arroyo Blanco

Essential Questions: Should America adopt English as its official language? What are the benefits of having an official U.S. language? Does adopting an official cause further divisions between immigrants and citizens?

1. The debate whether the United States should adopt an official language of English is an ongoing debate. Students will read the sources provided and collaborate in groups to hold a debate either supporting an official language or not mandating a universal language.
2. Refer to the articles listed in the “Language” section of the Resource list. Use the Debate Resource to guide the debate.
3. Divide the students into 4 groups if you have a large class, or two groups if class is small. All students should have an identical set of article available to them so they may construct their arguments and counterarguments. Assign two groups in the class to argue for an official language and the other two against, or one and one if a smaller group of students. There will be two separate debates. Students may find themselves on a side that is opposite of what they believe; however, the goal is for students to prepare a solid argument. Students should be able to support both sides of an argument to strengthen their own beliefs. Each group will construct their argument. Students must cite their texts in during the debate. To maximize the number of students participating, assign each student a role: ex., introductory argument, rebuttal, counterargument, etc. Again refer to Language resources.
4. After students have prepared, engage in a formal debate. Not every student will have a speaking role, but every student will have had a role in preparing for the debate. For those not participating in the actual debate, giving them the task to take minutes and then present a summary is a suggestion.

Part IV: Gentrification (3-4 class periods)

Introduce this during or after reading Part Two: El Tenksgeevee

Essential Questions: Is gentrification a solution to social and political inequalities? Who benefits most from gentrification? Does gentrification hurt the people it is designed to help or hinder them? What are some possible solutions to gentrification?

1. Introduce students to the term *gentrification*. Students will explore the page "What is Gentrification?" found on the PBS website for the documentary *Flag Wars*. Have students take notes in their journals and allow for a think-pair-share with a partner. (Note: The documentary itself is not available for free viewing.)
2. View the Spike Lee video clip and the short documentary *Mi Casa No Es Su Casa* (24:08 min). Have students take notes and share in a whole-class discussion.
3. Students should reflect upon their understanding of gentrification by having students discuss the examples present in the novel as well as the two articles under the Resources list. Conduct a Socratic Seminar to discuss the articles and instances in the book. See resources for an introduction guide to Socratic Seminars. (pg. 156-159 and 183-185 are two examples that allude to gentrification in *The Tortilla Curtain*)
4. Students will research local resources (i.e. local newspapers) for examples of development in their towns and cities for evidence of gentrification. Students may also search for gentrification in other American cities, of course. A quick search will yield many articles. Students will share examples with the class. A suggestion is to post any example on a bulletin board and students add to it.
5. Additionally, students can brainstorm ideas of possible solutions to gentrification in their city. Have students share their ideas.

Optional: Students can also search for examples of gentrification in their own city and take photos of developments to share with the class and post on bulletin board/display or make short videos.

Part V: Immigration (3-4 class periods plus HW time)

Introduce this during or after reading Part 2: El Tenksgeevee

Note: This section is just the tip of the iceberg of the ongoing immigration debate. This section is meant to introduce students to a specific topic in the canon of immigration issues.

Essential Questions: How important is civic knowledge? Is the U.S. citizenship test fair? Should successful passing of a U.S. Civics Exam be included as a requirement for high school graduation?

Procedures/Activities:

- 1) Students will respond to the following question in a quickwrite in their journals: Should high school students successfully pass a U.S. civics exam in order to earn their diploma? Have students share and discuss responses.

2) Students will take a 20-question Civics Exam on the Citizenship First website and record their score. (See Resources above for link.) Have students share their score with the class or in small groups.

3) Have students work in groups to jigsaw the listed articles related to this topic in the Resource List: Immigration. Have students use take notes from listening to their peers. For more information on how to jigsaw groups, again access the link in the Resource List. Students may need to refer to the original articles throughout this lesson.

4) Students will write an editorial-style letter either for or against the idea of a law mandating a requiring successful passing of a U.S. Civics Exam to graduate. Utilize the *New York Times*' The Learning Network resource for editorial writing listed in the Resource List.

Part VI: The American Dream

Introduce this during or after reading Part 3: Socorro

Essential Questions: How does *The Tortilla Curtain* a modern novel about the American Dream? Do all Americans have access to the American dream? Immigrants? Is the American Dream a myth or a real possibility?

1) Students will respond the following question in a quickwrite: What is your dream for your future? How will you achieve your dream? What factors can you think of that will hinder your dream?

2) Show students the short video clip titled “Defining the American Dream.” Have students work together to create a class definition of the American Dream. Students will begin tracing the dream as it applies to both the Rincón and Mossbacher families.

3) If time permits and to gain a deeper understanding of the American Dream, use the articles in the NY Times Resource to again jigsaw with various groups. Students will gain an understanding of the history of the American Dream throughout the various decades of American history.

4) Students will write an essay that will compare and contrast the dreams of Cándido and América Rincón with that of Delaney and Kara Mossbacher. Students can work in their collaborative groups to search the text for examples of both their individual dreams and the attainment/failure of those dreams.

5) Use the Compare and Contrast handout to prepare students to write the essay. Follow the writing process of prewriting, drafting, revising, editing, and publication for this formal essay.

Part VII: Final Culminating Project (3-4 class periods, additional time outside of class may be required)

Students will choose one of the themes studied throughout the unit to create an original piece that incorporates both a scene from the novel *The Tortilla Curtain* as well as any research related to their theme. Students will use Matthew Spangler's "Adaptation of Literature" handout to guide their piece. Set a time limit for the performance pieces (suggested time is 8-10 minutes). Students will perform their final product to their peers. If time allows and a performance space exists, create a program for students to perform for a wider audience. Invite parents, administration and faculty, the student body, and community for an exciting evening event.

Part IX: Reflection (Homework)

After the completion of the unit, students should reflect upon both the activities and their individual learning. Use the following questions to guide students' reflections. Suggested Length-500-600 words.

- Return to your quotation response at the start of the unit. How have your thoughts changed upon completion of the unit?
- Choose two of the themes discussed in this unit and thoroughly reflect upon your new understanding of those themes: gentrification, borders, the American dream, immigration, universal language.
- What was your favorite part of the unit? Least favorite part?
- What difficulties, if any, arose in your collaborative groups?
- What comments or suggestions do you have for your teacher regarding any component of this unit?