

## **What It Means To Be An American: Assimilation, Dual-Identity, Freedom and the Survival Spirit Present in Multi-Ethnic Literature**

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### **INTRODUCTION**

Traditionally, ethnic writers have used literature to cope with their perception of second-class citizenry. Themes like dual-identity, freedom, and the survival spirit are fascinating topics for me as a teacher because they appear repeatedly not only in multiethnic literature but also in mainstream literature. Since the United States has a myriad of cultures represented from a multitude of countries, the issue of American identity is complex. Some ethnic groups have come to this country because of the freedom that the United States represents. However, other ethnic groups in America have the distinction of trying to incorporate American values into their tapestry of values from their home country.

First generations born in America often have the challenge of trying to understand their parents' old country values, while trying to assimilate into the country in which they are born. Many of my Hispanic students are first generation born in America. However, many of my Black students' families have lived in this country for years due to their ancestors' tragic forced migration during the Atlantic Slave Trade. My students are predominantly African American (44%) and Hispanic (54%) ("Dowling").

The themes of assimilation, dual-identity, freedom, and the survival spirit are topical and current due to the economic and political issues in this diverse country; therefore, literature is a therapeutic way for students to explore their multi-ethnic identity in America. Consequently, this three-week unit is geared towards middle-school students in Language Arts classes who are taking Reading or English.

### **OBJECTIVES**

#### **TEKS: Seventh Grade Reading**

##### *Speaking/Listening Critically*

Students will demonstrate their ability to listen critically, empathetically, and appreciatively by focusing their attention on the speaker, while interpreting the speaker's message (7.1) (A). Then they will present dramatic interpretations of experiences when reading their essays to the class (7.5) (C).

##### *Reading/Comprehension*

Students will use various reading strategies, such as predicting and evaluating while reading (7.10) (C). Then they will connect their personal experience to the characters in the story (7.10) (C). Students will determine how setting, plot, and characterization shape a text (7.12) (F) (G). They will then analyze text structures by comparing and contrasting the themes in each piece of literature (7.11) (D). Students will examine various literary devices, such as symbolism, as they relate to the overall theme of the story (7.12) (J). In addition, they will examine how the author integrates his purpose and perspective within the theme of the text (7.12) (A) (H). Finally,

students will make inferences and draw conclusions about the tone, style, and mood of the text (7.12) (K).

### ***Writing***

Students will use various forms, such as journaling and essay writing, to demonstrate understanding of the theme of the unit (7.15) (A) (D). They will create, revise, edit, and publish their own text on what it means to be an American in a multi-ethnic nation (7.18) (C).

### **RATIONALE**

The students will read literature by four ethnic minority groups in America. Students will have the opportunity to compare and contrast the cultural experiences of African Americans, Hispanic Americans, Jewish Americans, and Native Americans. Even though these four groups have different immigration stories, they have all experienced the desire for freedom and survival in America and the harmful effects of stereotyping. Students will learn how art has the power to heal both emotional and physical wounds. I want students to write personal essays about their experience as ethnic minorities living in the United States. I would also like students to reflect on how reading literature from different ethnic groups creates a commonality among all Americans.

Ultimately, students will connect their own personal experiences in this country with the viewpoints of authors and politicians from various historical eras or racial perspectives. Consequently, I want students to know and understand that their ethnic identity is included in the definition of who is considered an American.

### **UNIT BACKGROUND**

#### **American Identity (Assimilation, Freedom, Dual Identity, and Survival Spirit)**

##### ***African American Heritage (Social Commentary)***

Some historians believe that the abolition of African slavery in the United States is “the most dramatic” occurrence in the 1800s (Barrett 27). “The release of African Americans from the muteness and illegality of chattel slavery...marks the (re)emergent visibility of an excessive and residual Otherness” (Barrett 27). The “otherness” is a feeling of being different and excluded in a community of people who look or act similar to one another. Literature has played a part in continuing this feeling of otherness amongst African Americans and other ethnic minorities.

“Stereotypical images of the black female exist in writings of white and black writers who published from slavery through the Harlem Renaissance and beyond” (Bryant 3). There is the image of the Aunt Jemima who is the obese, dark black cook and/or mammy and the image of Sapphire, who represents the angry black female who emasculates Black men (Bryant 3). Then there is the stereotype of Jezebel, the bad, black girl who lacks morality (Bryant 3). The image of the mammy is deeply rooted in slavery when “nineteenth century planters rationalized the patriarchal system by relying on scientific ‘proofs’ that cast doubt on the humanness of the slave, and by perceiving themselves to be the patriarchs who existed in the Bible” (Bryant 5). White males who “demanded obedience from wives, children, and slaves” led the patriarchal system (Bryant 5). Independence exhibited by white females, slaves, or children threatened to destroy the patriarchal myth (Bryant 5). Therefore, “the image of the delicate white lady was” created and the image of the flawed Black female was necessary “to the continuation of the system of slavery and patriarchy” (Bryant 5). Stereotypical images were used to oppress African Americans socially and politically:

One of the objectives of cultural imagery is not only to legitimize and perpetuate stereotypes but also to encourage individuals to embrace certain values and beliefs. Through systematic exposure to cultural images, individuals are expected either to conform, to emulate, and [to] internalize the characteristics, values, beliefs, and behaviors

of these images....Each image was designed to justify the treatment that black women received during slavery. (Jewell as quoted in Bryant 7)

Students will contemplate how negative images in literature affect the audience who reads a novel. Also, students will discuss how Petry's positive portrayal of Harriet Tubman dispels the negative stereotypes depicted in some literature that has African American characters.

### ***Ann Petry: An African American Author***

Ann Petry, the author of *Harriet Tubman: Conductor on the Underground Railroad*, published her story for young adults in 1955 (Ervin and Holladay xviii). She was motivated to tell the story of this famous fugitive slave because she believed "that the majority of textbooks used in high schools do not give an adequate or accurate picture of the history of slavery in the United States" (Holladay 16). She was born in 1908 in Old Saybrook, Connecticut (Ervin and Holladay xvii). Her family was a middle-class African American family living in a predominately white community because her father was a pharmacist and a drugstore owner (Bloom 179). Despite earning a Ph.D. in pharmacy, she eventually decided to become a journalist and later an author ("Ann Petry" VG). While Petry's husband was a serviceman during World War II, she lived in Harlem and worked as a journalist. She was so "appalled by the conditions of poverty and degradation that she had witnessed in the ghetto that she wrote several stories" that resulted in a publishing contract with Houghton Mifflin to write *The Street* (Bryant 32). As teachers, we should ask our students why Ann Petry chose to acknowledge the struggles of African Americans in her literature, even though she led a privileged life in New England.

Ann Petry's novel, *The Street*, was the first novel by an African American woman to become a bestseller (Ervin and Holladay ix). The novel received both critical and popular success and quickly sold more than 1.5 million copies in hardcover and paperback" (Holliday 13). Petry "is the only female novelist of her generation whose fame approaches that of male counterparts Richard Wright, Ralph Ellison, and James Baldwin" (Ervin and Holladay ix). *The Street* was written for the purpose of social criticism. "Social reforms have often received their original impetus from novels which aroused the emotions of a large number of readers" (Bloom 183). Petry asserted that novels that explore "race relations have influenced the passage of the civil rights bills which have become law in many states" (Bloom 183).

Petry believed "that black men and women have formed an integral part of American history" ("Ann Petry" AALBC). She believed that Americans formed opinions on Blacks based on stereotypes without regarding their humanity (Bloom 181). She was quoted as saying, "I wanted to show them as people with the same capacity for love and hate, for tears and laughter, and the same instinct for survival possessed by all men" (Bloom 181). Students should discuss some stereotypes that they have heard about various racial groups. How do stereotypes rob people of their humanity? Then they should discuss why stereotyping individuals or a group is unfair, and how stereotypes limit a person's potential and harm race relations.

### ***African Americans in Literature***

In *Harriet Tubman* (1995) and *Tituba of Salem Village* (1964) Petry used historical narratives to address what she saw as a gap in educational literature for adolescents (Petry 228). This tool is a subtle way of teaching about historical figures in an entertaining way. "Petry intersperses narrative chapters with short, italicized summaries of American history paralleling Tubman's life" (Holladay 16). For example, Petry wrote "Thomas Jefferson, author of the Declaration of Independence, died at Monticello in Virginia on July 4, 1826...His original draft of the Declaration contained a "vehement philippic against Negro slavery" (Petry 27). However, this famous document did declare, "We hold these truths to be self-evident, that all men are created equal" (Petry 27). Because of this document, many slaves continued to carry the dream of

freedom (Petry 27). “Not because the slave had read them, but because they were written down somewhere, and other people had read them, and ideas are contagious” (Petry 27). As teachers we should ask our students how “one of the country’s noblest documents was incompatible with the idea of legalized slavery” in America (Petry 27)?

When teachers speak about slavery, we also must explore the issue of survival. Harriet Tubman was an example of a fugitive slave who not only escaped slavery but also achieved success as a lecturer after freeing others from slavery (Petry 185). Ann Petry chose to write about survivors when she wrote about children (Holladay 16). “The book places Tubman at the center of a history that until recently placed black slave women firmly on the margins” (Holladay 16). Despite Tubman’s work as a nurse, scout, and a spy during the Civil War, she will be remembered as the conductor of the Underground Railroad (Holladay 16). She was a former slave who helped runaways escape from the Southern plantations to the North freedom (Holladay 16). Students should analyze why the survival spirit is an important component of ethnic literature. How does reading about characters who survive mistreatment inspire an audience?

Petry continued to ignore stereotypical characters by providing powerful black female role models for children and teens while also filling in gaps in American history” (Holladay 16). Petry insisted on showing African Americans in her novels “as people with the same capacity for love and hate, for tears and laughter, and the same instinct for survival possessed by all men” (Bloom 181). Students will discuss how Tubman was a well-rounded historical figure who was multi-dimensional in character, then provide examples of how Tubman exemplifies the American spirit of survival. Then they will analyze the following quote from Petry: “Remember for what a long, long time Black people have been in this country, have been a part of America: a sturdy, indestructible, wonderful part of America, woven into its heart and into its soul” (Holladay 17). Have students compare and contrast Harriet Tubman to other Black historical figures who have created positive contributions to American life and defy the negative stereotypes of Black characters in literature.

### ***Hispanic American Heritage (Social Commentary)***

Latinos represent a myriad of ethnic backgrounds. Many “Latinos are mestizos, or people of mixed indigenous and Spanish ancestry” (Sirias 11). However, Latinos represent a spectrum of racial heritages, such as Asians, Blacks, Europeans, and other cultures (Sirias 11). Since some Latinos are monolingual or bilingual, they are not identifiable by just language, region or race (Sirias 11). What shapes the Hispanic people’s identity is sharing a common culture (Sirias 11). Despite their diverse culture, Latinos share the common experience of marginalization and exclusion (Mujcinovic 6). The “common experience of oppression is precisely the point that solidifies and brings together U.S. Latino/a literary expression” (Mujcinovic 6-7).

A wide range of possible national origins divides Latinos even further. Latinos can be Puerto Rican-Americans, Cuban-Americans, Chilean-Americans, Salvadoran-Americans, and on and on. Even among these groups there are pronounced differences according to socio-economic class, religion, race, educational level, geographic region of the United States in which they reside, political leanings, etc. . . . With the exception of American Indians, Latinos have lived longer in the United States than any other ethnic group. Juan Ponce de Leon’s 1513 expedition to Florida represents the first group of Europeans to set foot on what is today the U.S. mainland. (Sirias 12)

Hispanics have been chronicling their experience in the United States as far back as the 1500s. In 1542, Alvar Nunez Cabeza de Vaca published *The Shipwrecks* in Spain. “This narrative details the eight-year odyssey of the author and four other survivors of a shipwreck off the coast of Florida that claimed 400 lives” (Sirias 12). People of Spanish descent have been coming to this country for centuries. Historical intermingling of Spanish with the indigenous population and

Blacks from Africa has made the culture even more diverse. Their mixed heritage, exploration, language, and customs are an essential part of the American identity.

### ***Julia Alvarez: Hispanic American Author***

Julia Alvarez is a Dominican-American author who strives to understand her identity in the midst of a complex America. “She repeatedly claims in interviews that she writes to discover what she is thinking, to discover who she is, and to understand the world in general” (Sirias 9). Julia Alvarez was ten years old when she returned to New York City from the Dominican Republic (Applebee 45). She “grew up in a relatively affluent environment, surrounded by a troupe of maids” (Sirias 1). Her family was abruptly uprooted when her father was involved in an unsuccessful plot to overthrow their country’s leader, Trujillo (Sirias 2). Once she returned, she had a hard time adjusting because she felt like a “foreigner with a different language, name and, way of life” (Applebee 45). She began to pen stories and poetry to cope with her immigrant experiences (Applebee 45). One such story is “Names Nombres,” which is a personal essay about how her family’s “names changed almost immediately” when they arrived in New York City (Alvarez 38).

The most important issue in this story is how Alvarez expresses her beliefs about her Dominican name and how Americans interpreted her family (Applebee 43). Identity is the most pervasive issue in this personal essay because a person’s name sometimes tells people the language she speaks, her native origin, and her customs. However, since America is a country of immigrants, sometimes a name only tells society a person’s family history. Eventually, Alvarez learns to merge her Dominican background with her American life (Applebee 45). Every summer “she and her sisters would be sent to the Dominican Republic with the expressed purpose of remaining in touch with their roots” (Sirias 3). Alvarez’s “unique identity posed” the question of “Where does Julia Alvarez fit in the American Literary Horizon?” (Sirias 6). Therefore, she expresses the idea of feeling at home in two cultures in future writings (Applebee 45). Julia Alvarez continuously creates “female characters that consciously situate themselves at the crossroads of their native Dominican tradition and the adopted Anglo culture in order to seize the freedom of self-definition” in both their public and private life (Mujcinovic 58). Alvarez later says that she is a Latina author, but not just an author who writes for Latinos (Sirias 6). This idea of having a dual identity is integral part of the American Identity.

### ***Hispanic Americans in Literature***

“In spite of the Latinos’ long literary tradition in the United States, it is not until recently that their writings have begun to receive critical recognition and earn broad readership” (Sirias 12). *Bless Me, Ultima*, written by Rudolfo Anaya, was one of the first Latino books to successfully enter the American literary mainstream in 1972. Julia Alvarez is another Latina author who has enjoyed mainstream success.

At the beginning of her personal essay, Julia Alvarez recalls how once she began school, her classmates gave her a new American name, “Judy or Judith” (Alvarez 38). Her sister’s name almost changed in the hospital because her mother was ashamed to pronounce “the rich, noisy name of Mauricia,” amongst all the other ordinary American names like Sally and Jane (Alvarez 40). The theme of shame appears again in Julia’s essay when she states that her “initial desire to be known by my correct Dominican name faded. I just wanted to be Judy and merge with the Sallys and Janes in my class” (Alvarez 40). The feeling of shame is passed down from mother to daughter because they are not yet comfortable with their dual identity as Dominican-Americans.

Most of the Dominican population is biracial, with both African and Spanish heritage (Gaffney 16). Despite the practice of “antihaitianismo,” coloring and hair texture often reveal cultural mixture. The ideology “antihaitianismo” is the practice of “hatred on anyone or anything

French, Haitian, and/or African,” and the denial of African presence in the Dominican Republic (Gaffney 16). The author does not explicitly acknowledge her African heritage in this essay, yet she implies that her accent and coloring revealed her Dominican heritage (Alvarez 41). Even though Alvarez knew that students were just being curious when they asked her where she was originally from, she recalls that she “burned with shame whenever they singled me out as a ‘foreigner,’ a rare, exotic friend.” (Alvarez 41). The audience becomes aware that Alvarez cannot completely assimilate into mainstream American culture because of her Spanish name and mixed Dominican heritage.

In Alvarez’s novel, *How the Garcia Girls Lost Their Accents*, Alvarez represents the Garcia family as a member of the wealthy Spanish class who live in mansions located in the Dominican Republic (Gaffney 18). The family denies their African heritage, acknowledge only their European ancestors, and look down on their servants with darker skin, particularly the Haitians (Gaffney 18). The family immigrates to the United States, and they are immediately shifted down from the upper class to the working class (Gaffney 18). Then they are classified as Hispanics instead of Anglos (Gaffney 18). The family is placed on the bottom of the social ladder in America. The author relates to the disparate treatment in real life, too. As a child in the United States, she was taunted because she was different; therefore, she isolates herself from her classmates (Sirias 2). The idea of feeling different, alienated from your peers, is a common feeling amongst young American children no matter their ethnic heritage. However, when you are a minority, you wear your badge of difference on your forehead. Sometimes this can make children question if they are accepted as an American because their name, accent, or skin color makes them stand out from the majority of Anglo-Americans in this country. For example, Alvarez’s classmates used to beg her to say her full Dominican name, because according to custom, it included her middle names and mother’s and father’s surnames from four generations ago (Alvarez 41). Alvarez compared her “name as chaotic with sounds as a Middle Eastern bazaar or market day in a South American village” (Alvarez 41). Mouths in the classroom would hang wide open when Alvarez would rattle off her full name “Julia Altagracia Maria Teresa Alvarez Tavares Perello Espaillet Julia Perez Rochet Gonzalez” (Alvarez 41). Nevertheless, despite her classmates’ fascination with her Dominican name, Alvarez is quoted as saying that, “the bias against bilingualism in the United States made her feel silenced” (Gaffney 21). Earlier in Alvarez’s literary career, she felt that she had to hide her ethnicity and had to lose her accent if she wanted to write literature in America (Gaffney 21). Therefore, she worked extremely hard to master the written and spoken word in English (Gaffney 21). Dual identity may be compromised into adulthood when people are not encouraged to keep their native language.

Towards the end of the personal essay, Julia Alvarez is no longer bothered by the different names people call her. She asserts in the last paragraph, “Someday, the family predicted, my name would be well-known throughout the United States. I laughed to myself, wondering which one I would go by” (Alvarez 42). This essay is a wonderful example of the American survival spirit. Her childhood “trauma of isolation led her to discover books” (Sirias 2). Alvarez writes about “protagonists who learn to negotiate the problematic dislocation between two places by reclaiming a bicultural identity” (Mujcinovic 67). Alvarez demonstrates her transformation from shame to pride in her dual heritage as both a Dominican and an American by writing this essay. By the end of this unit, students will be able to write a 1-2 page personal essay about how their cultural identity has influenced their perception of their individual identity in America. Julia Alvarez demonstrates in her personal essay, “Names Nombres,” that writing is a therapeutic way to cope with issues of dual identity and survival when you are multi-ethnic in America.

### ***Jewish American Heritage (Social Commentary)***

Many academics are displeased with the exclusion of Jewish American Literature from multicultural curriculum, because Jewish American writers’ work is not mainstream either (Furman 3).

The contemporary Jewish American writer is “pigeonholed somewhere between the mainstream and the marginal” (Furman 100). Although Jews today are “perceived to be a part of the white mainstream,” many Jewish American writers feel like they have achieved marginal status (Furman 100); their experiences are considered “less” American than mainstream writers, yet “less” exotic than stories by other minority writers (Furman 100).

Due to the demographics of Jewish Americans, some Americans still view them as minorities in this country (Furman 3). The feeling of exclusion from mainstream America is a distinct characteristic of what it means to be an ethnic minority in America. However, there have been many successful Jewish American writers considered as part of the mainstream (Furman 4). In addition, there is some resistance to including Jews in the multi-cultural discussion because they “are thought to have made it, both in American society and in literature” (Furman 4).

Many people feel that because Jews have not “suffered economic or political oppression” in recent American history “their recent experience in this country can hardly be characterized as a true” ethnic experience (Furman 6). That statement is a matter of opinion. Jewish Americans who still feel the wounds of the Holocaust in their hearts and the discrimination during the Civil Rights movement may disagree with the aforementioned perception. The debate of whether Jewish American literature is multi-cultural or mainstream is an example of the “otherness” that many ethnic minorities feel in this country. I would like my students to engage in an intelligent debate on whether literature by Jewish Americans should be considered multi-cultural due to their demographics in the country.

### ***Chaim Potok: Jewish American Author***

Chaim Potok grew up in New York City and lived the strict life of a Hasidic Jew (Applebee 64). His parents emigrated from Poland and hoped that he would become a religious scholar (Applebee 64). Chaim had other ideas; therefore, he began to read “literature other than traditional Jewish texts” (Applebee 64). In addition to becoming a rabbi and serving as chaplain in the Korean War, he became a writer (Applebee 64). Perhaps his personal experience with war prompted him to create a character who is a World War II veteran and an art teacher in the short story “Zebra.”

Much traditional fiction about Jewish Americans explores the effects of the Holocaust; however, Potok discusses the “dissent within the ranks of the Jewish Orthodoxy” (Wade 153). Chaim Potok’s literature is primarily dialectic (Wade 152). In other words, he strives to teach the audience something about Judaism through logical debate. He deals with the “polarities of extremism and moderation, of compromise with assimilation and insistence on tradition” (Wade 152). Consequently, Chaim creates the option of integrating old worldviews with new worldviews for Jewish Americans. Even though the short story entitled “Zebra” does not describe the nationality of the main character, Adam Zebrin, it is a reflection of Chaim Potok who is a Jewish American. Potok claims that each of his characters represents a different aspect of himself; they tend to be loners, “very much involved with the world of the mind, and in the world of art and literature” (Applebee 64).

### ***Jewish Americans in Literature***

In America, nicknames are a derivative of a person’s original name or from a talent the person possesses. In Chaim Potok’s short story, Adam Martin Zebrin, the main character, is nicknamed Zebra (Potok 47). People call him Zebra because he loves to run (Potok 48). Each time, after only a few minutes of running, his legs would begin to feel wondrously light. He would run past the school and the homes on the street beyond the church. All the neighbors knew him and would wave and call out, “Go, Zebra!” Moreover, sometimes one or two of their dogs would run with him awhile, barking (Potok 48).

Unfortunately, for the main character, his freedom, identity and self-worth are called into question when he is injured in an accident and he is no longer able to run. In English class, Adam writes a sad “story about a bird that one day crashed against a closed windowpane and broke a wing. A boy tried to heal the wing but could not. The bird died, and the boy buried it under a tree on his lawn” (Potok 51). As teachers, we should ask students which of their talents is representative of their identity. Then ask students if they have ever felt lost when they were not able express that talent or ability.

The story “Zebra” is so important for children to read because it shows how two characters are injured physically and emotionally; therefore, they use art to gain back their identity and freedom. “Potok's characters, situations and symbols or associations are thoroughly archetypal or universal; they draw on the collective experience of the entire human species, and are, therefore, basically relevant to all cultures” (Buning). Most readers can relate to the search for one's identity while finding one's place in the world.

It is unclear whether Adam Zebrin of the short story “Zebra” is a Jewish American. The character does not refer to his parents’ ancestry or his religious faith. Susan Jacobowitz says, “What it means to be a Jew is often defined by or understood through interaction with family and community or by being born in a specific place, at a specific time” (Jacobowitz 40). For example, for a Jew to be living in Germany during the 1940s when the Holocaust began “was a death sentence during the years of the war. It is not surprising that many children of survivors describe being raised to ‘pass’ or talk about a sense of detachment and alienation” (Jacobowitz 41).

Perhaps Adam Zebrin is fully assimilated; therefore, the issue of ethnic or religious heritage is purposely ignored. Krupnick says that there is evidence of Jewish assimilation into American culture because “the number of Jews marrying non-Jews has passed 50 percent; attendance at Jewish day schools is dropping; temple members are living high but skimping on their contributions” (233). Nevertheless, the aforementioned authors call this “American-style assimilation, which is very different from what it was in old Europe” (Krupnick 233). In Germany “Jews frequently ceased being Jews. They converted, were baptized, changed their names, repressed the traces of Jewish ethnicity” (Krupnick 233).

There is the concept of “a new kind of Jew, who is fully acculturated in America” (Krupnick 234). This “new Jew” values “their right to free choice in lifestyle and personal identity... Yet they persist in ‘feeling Jewish,’ even if their Jewishness does not lead to their living day to day much differently from other Americans” (Krupnick 234-235). By this definition, Adam Zebrin could be perceived as an assimilated Jewish American character since the author of “Zebra” is a Jewish American. In addition, Adam Zebrin values his freedom and his personal identity.

Chaim Potok is proud of his heritage. Consequently, his characters in novels such as the *Chosen* are aware of their Jewish upbringing; therefore, it is strange that the audience is unclear of the background of Adam Zebrin. For example, in some scenes the main characters of the *Chosen* speak in Hebrew and feel connected to their immigrant experience as European-Jews (Wade 152). As teachers, we should ask ourselves whether the main character Zebra is assimilated or “passing,” because he is not bilingual or makes no mention of an ethnic or religious heritage. Adam Zebrin naturally blends in with mainstream American society and with other characters who are also not identified by a racial or cultural heritage.

Nevertheless, Adam Zebrin does express symptoms of detachment and alienation, which are characteristics of ethnic minorities living in America. This is evident by a comment made by another character in the short story. Adam’s classmate, Andrea, calls him “a very gloomy life form” (Potok 52). Later Adam demonstrates lament as he looks at his injured hand. “It was a dread and a mystery to him, his own hand. The fingers were all there, but like dead leaves that never fell... little fingers were rigid and curled, the others barely moved” (Potok 56). Evidently,



Adam feels detached from his own body and society, since he compares an extension of his body to inanimate objects such as leaves.

Despite his injury, after taking an art class with the war veteran John Wilson, he begins to gain use of his fingers. “From time to time his hand hurt, but the fingers seemed slowly to be coming back to life” (Potok 59-60). Eventually, Adam was able to take off the leg brace even though he needed more surgeries to regain full use of his leg (Potok 60). Students should ask themselves how the use of imagination and art assist in the physical and emotional healing process.

### ***Native American Heritage (Social Commentary)***

Prior to Scott Momaday’s *House Made of Dawn* and Hyemeyohsts Storm’s novel, *Seven Arrows*, books by Native American authors “were shunned or politely ignored” (Larson 2). The general public and publishers did not seem concerned about literary works about the Native American culture (Larson 2). Nevertheless, publishers with the consent of their authors attempted to hide the racial heritage of their Native American authors (Larson 3). Sadly, earlier works from an author named John Milton Oskison made no reference to his ethnic heritage on the dust jacket of his three books published in the 1920s (Larson 3).

Native American authors are not the first writers to have their racial identity erased by publishers who feared that if their real identity was known people would not read the book (Larson 4). “Paul Laurence Dunbar and Charles W. Chesnutt tried to conceal their racial identity” (Larson 4). Nevertheless, Oskison’s novels do not make much reference to Native American life (Larson 4). That fact further exemplifies the attempt to conceal or erase ethnic footprints in mainstream American life.

Interestingly enough, what determines “Indianness” is different from what determines African American heritage in America (Larson 6). In America, one drop of black blood classified a person as a Negro and “precipitated incredible social inequities” (Larson 6). However, the “prime distinction for determining” a member of the Native American culture is “identification with and acceptance by one’s fellow tribesman” (Larson 6). For those reasons, scholars and researchers use information “compiled by tribal leaders and kept in the tribal headquarters as well as in the Bureau of Indian Affairs” for determining the racial heritage of Native American writers (Larson 6). This process is necessary because first and last names can be misleading and pictures do not always confirm Indian origins (Larson 4). Sometimes what determines the “Indianness” of a writer is not their percentage of Native American blood; instead it is “their general acceptance by their own people” (Larson 8).

Early books by Native American writers “reveal only a limited concern with the social issues confronting Native Americans of the time” (Larson 36). Their works assimilate seamlessly into the mainstream (Larson 36). “Their characters accept white values and cultural traits, often rejecting their own traditional way of life” (Larson 36). They perpetrate the myth of the American Dream. If a person works diligently and lives right, “success, money, riches” are available to the masses (Larson 36).

Chief Simon Pokagon, John M. Oskison, and John J. Matthews were all sophisticated men who moved freely back and forth between the Native American and the white man’s cultures. As novelists, however, they were children of Pocahontas, caught in the problems of their dual identities. The horrors of the recent past (the Indian wars of the last half of the nineteenth century) had apparently shown them the total destruction of tribal life and the need for acceptance of the white man’s way of life. (Larson 37)

As teachers, we should ask our students if they ever felt the need to hide their racial heritage because they feared discrimination and mistreatment. Then we should encourage them to discuss the benefits of sharing their culture with other people in society.

***Native American Author: Michael Dorris***

Michael Dorris was a well-known Native American writer and American Indian scholar (“Michael Dorris”). He was born in 1945 and died in 1972 using “a combination of suffocation, drugs, and alcohol to commit suicide” (“Michael Dorris”). Dorris “claimed Modoc Indian, Irish, and French blood” (“Michael Dorris”). However, “there is no documentation of his Native American ancestry, and he was not an enrolled member in any federally recognized tribe” (“Michael Dorris”). Dorris grew up without a paternal figure because of his father’s suicide; therefore, he “was raised by his mother and aunt” (Rawson).

*The Broken Cord* won the National Book Critics Circle Award for its powerful depiction of Dorris’ “family’s struggles with fetal alcohol syndrome” (Rawson). Eventually, his story was depicted in an “ABC-TV movie that aired in 1992” (Rawson). Dorris was the first single American male to adopt a child. Sadly, all three of his adopted sons battled the harmful effects of fetal alcohol syndrome (Rawson).

Despite emotional hardships, Michael Dorris was committed to his Native American heritage. “In 1972 he founded the Native American Studies Program at Dartmouth College, where he taught off and on for the past 25 years” (Rawson). While working at Dartmouth, Dorris and Louise Erdrich met when she was a student in his class. However, they did not fall in love until three years later.

Louise Erdrich was also a Native American of mixed blood. She was “a registered member of the Turtle Mountain Chippewa tribe and was one of the first women admitted to the college” (Rawson). The couple regularly “continued to read, edit, and critique each other’s work” during their marriage and even after their divorce (Rawson).

Prior to Dorris’ suicide, “sexual abuse charges against Dorris were about to be filed in Hennepin County, Minn., where he [had] lived for the past several years with his family” (Rawson). It is believed that the police discovered “a diary kept by one of his daughters,” which may have raised suspicions of possible abuse (Rawson). Police had traveled to Denver to find out more information from “Jeffrey Sava Dorris, who had accused them both of abuse, made threats on their lives and demanded \$15,000 from the couple” (Rawson). Unfortunately for Michael and Louise, they lost the case. Nevertheless, prior to Dorris’ death, “no formal child abuse charges were ever brought against Dorris, and as a result of his suicide, none will be. Further, no official determination has been made as to whether the accusations were true or false” (Rawson).

“Dorris was severely depressed during the last months of his life. He had failed in his attempt to reconcile with Erdrich, whom he had referred to his as his ‘literary soulmate’” (Rawson). Dorris was also concerned about “a tense settlement concerning child custody, property, publishing contracts and royalties” (Rawson). In addition, he was unhappy with the sales of his most recent book, entitled the *Cloud Chamber*. It must be noted that “Dorris maintained his innocence and his lack of faith that the legal system would exonerate him” (“Michael Dorris”).

Nevertheless, many family and friends “have come forward and spoken, in part to set the factual record straight, and in larger part because now that his life has ended, the battle over his legacy has begun” (Rawson). His friends hoped that his legacy would not focus on “his suicide and the disturbing allegations, but about how he spent 30 years building Native American literature and studies...and how he almost single-handedly brought into existence a national movement against fetal alcohol syndrome” (Rawson). One friend is quoted as saying, “Michael’s

whole life was evidence that the legacy of oppression, agony, and heartbreak within the Native American community wasn't enough to silence their stories" (Rawson).

### ***Native Americans in Literature: Sees Behind the Trees***

Whatever personal torment he may have had to endure in his life and whatever pain he may have caused others, Michael Dorris did much, through his writing, to increase awareness and understanding of American Indian cultures and to advance the causes of American Indian People. American literature benefited greatly from his artistic craft and vision. (Charles)

Dorris wrote books without stereotypical depictions of Native Americans because of his concern over "the treatment of the American Indian experience in American public school curricula and classrooms" (Charles). "Dorris writes of the humanity of American Indians, vividly conveying the protagonists' universal human qualities. In this way, readers recognize many of the same attributes in themselves, their siblings, parents, relatives and friends (Charles). As children connect their personal experiences to the Native American characters in Dorris' books, students will personally grow in their understanding of themselves and others (Charles). For those reasons, Dorris' soiled reputation does not take away from the brilliance of his writing and his glorious appreciation for the Native American culture.

For instance, he wrote three books for young adults: *Morning Girl* (1992), *Guests* (1994), and *Sees Behind Trees* (1996). *Sees Behind the Trees* is a story about a boy named Walnut (Charles). He is "a young Powatan Indian afflicted with severely limited sight [who] discovers an ability within himself to 'see' through the use of his other senses" (Charles). The audience is aware that Walnut's sight is a problem when his mother is unsuccessful again at teaching Walnut how to shoot a bow and arrow (Dorris 4). His family makes excuses for him. His uncle tells him to practice more, while Walnut tells himself that he is able to do many other things (Dorris 4). "I could find wild strawberries, even clusters of violets, by closing my eyes and following the directions of my nose" (Dorris 4). As teachers, we should point out to the students how we have many talents that compensate for the abilities that we do not have. Students should share examples in their journal about their weaknesses and strengths.

The way Walnut's family continues to support him as he develops himself personally is an example of familial and intergenerational relationships in the Native American culture (Charles). "The mutual respect and caring between Walnut and Gray Fire, his grandfather, illustrates vividly the American Indian insistence on strong intergenerational relationships" (Charles). Walnut grows into his identity and new name, Sees Behind Trees, despite his warm feelings about his grandfather. "Gray Fire was my torch in the night, the hand on my shoulder, the voice that would answer when I asked a question" (Dorris 85). Nevertheless, the young man knows that an "adventure alone is different than an adventure that is shared" (Dorris 85). "My mother had taught me how to see inside my mind what I couldn't see with my eyes, but now I taught myself to hear when my ears were plugged" (Dorris 86).

The desire to stay connected to one's culture, yet seeking freedom and independence, is a very American theme. Dorris manages to teach students something about the journey from dependence on family to manhood in his writings about the Native American culture. "I am Sees Behind Trees," Walnut says in his mind. "I am a man." (Dorris 86). Students should examine what kind of inferences can be made about Walnut's transition from boyhood to manhood. Who helped in this transition? How does the change in his name symbolize his journey from childhood into adulthood? Dorris' themes of "the importance of family and of intergenerational understanding in the development of healthy adolescent identity...and the vision quest as a means to resolve adolescent identity" are concepts that have roots in adolescent psychology (Charles).

This view suggests that adolescents mature and develop when their view of the world is broadened, when their vision of their own potential is expanded, when their experiences lead them to a fuller understanding of who they are and what they can contribute to the well-being of others (Charles). Consequently, how does Dorris promote positive perceptions of Native American culture? Does he achieve this with his depiction of characters and his themes of familial relationships?

## **LESSON PLANS**

### **Lesson Plan 1: *Harriet Tubman and the Underground Railroad***

**Objectives:** TAKS (7.12) (A)(H), TAKS (7.12)(K), TAKS (7.12)(F), TAKS (7.12)(J)

#### ***Materials Used***

Harriet Tubman novel, brief bio of Ann Petry from the Internet (See Bibliography)

#### ***Introduction***

Teacher will discuss stereotypes present in African American literature; for example, the Aunt Jemima (mammy), Sapphire, and Jezebel. Teacher can show pictures on transparency of Aunt Jemima or other stereotypical figures. Discuss with students why these characters are one-dimensional and are not a full representative of members from the community. For more questions, concerning stereotypes, see unit background under Ann Petry. Discuss why Petry felt committed to showing African Americans humanity in the literature that she chose to write. See unit background under Ann Petry and About the Author section of Petry's novel (Petry 228).

#### ***Student Group Practice***

Students will read excerpts from the Harriet Tubman novel. Teachers will discuss a brief biography of Ann Petry from the overhead. For example, chapters 10-15 discuss in detail Harriet Tubman's escape from slavery and her method of leading others to freedom via the Underground Railroad. Students will discuss the meaning of such terms as Underground Railroad represent and the purpose of abolitionists during slavery.

#### ***Individual Practice***

Students will write a 2-3 paragraphs about how they have personally benefited from the contributions of heroic individuals, such as Harriet Tubman.

#### ***Individual Assessment***

Students will answer five short answer questions using text evidence to support their answers.

- 1) What were some of the strengths that Tubman possessed that enabled her to be the conductor of the Underground Railroad?
- 2) What were some of the obstacles that Tubman had to overcome in order to escape to freedom and survive in the North?
- 3) What were some of the sacrifices made by Tubman because she was an abolitionist versus a wife residing with her husband?
- 4) How did Ann Petry's depiction of Harriet Tubman differ from the negative stereotypes in some African American literature or media depicting African Americans?
- 5) What are some characteristics that they admire about Ann Petry or Harriet Tubman and how do these two women inspire them to have a spirit of survival despite obstacles?

#### ***Closure***

Reiterate to students the definition of terms such as characterization. Remind them of the meaning of the word stereotype and discuss how stereotyping is damaging. Reflect upon how

stereotyping denies a people their individuality and their humanity. Reinforce how Harriet Tubman was a remarkable African American, woman, American, and human being because she defied stereotypes.

### **Lesson Plan 2: *Names Nombres***

**Objectives:** TAKS (7.1) (A), TAKS (7.10) (C), TAKS (7.12) (F) (G), TAKS (7.11) (D)

#### ***Materials Used***

Interactive Reader (IA)/ *Language of Literature* book, “Names Nombres” (Audio CD), paper and pen

#### ***Overview***

Teacher will discuss with her students the fact that names may represent a person’s culture, parents, or destiny. Students should discuss if they or their family originated from another country. Ask them what they know about that country or that country’s primary language.

#### ***Introduction***

Students will complete Key to the Essay (IA 26). They will answer the question how they got their nickname, first name or last name.

#### ***Student Group Practice***

Students will get into partners. Have them discuss a time when they felt different because of their culture, heritage, or skin color. Was it something that a person said or did to make them feel excluded? Then ask them how they handled the exclusion. Next, students will read the story aloud or listen to the audio disk version of “Names Nombres”

#### ***Individual Practice***

As students read, they will answer the Focus and the Pause & Reflect questions after each section in the essay (IA 28-34).

#### ***Individual Assessment***

Students will write a 1-2 page essay on one of the following questions.

Teacher may encourage students to draw a Venn diagram for purposes of comparing and contrasting.

- 1) Compare and contrast Ann Petry’s childhood to that of author Julia Alvarez. Then explain how their multi-ethnic identity influenced their writings.
- 2) Discuss how they have felt like an outsider because of their coloring, accent, or language. Then connect those experiences to text evidence from “Names Nombres.”

#### ***Closure***

Reiterate to students the importance of knowing and understanding their heritage. Remind them how their history helps define their identity. Reflect upon a time when they felt excluded because of their racial background. Reinforce the importance of learning and embracing others and celebrating cultural differences.

### **Lesson Plan 3: *Zebra***

**Objectives:** TAKS (7.5) (C), TAKS (7.12) (F) (G), TAKS (7.11) (D), TAKS (7.12) (J)

TAKS (7.12) (A) (H)

#### ***Materials Used***

Interactive Reader (IA) and *Language of Literature* (LOL), “Zebra” (Audio CD), journal, paper (construction and loose leaf), colored pencils/markers and pen

### ***Introduction***

Students should discuss in their journal their definition of the word ethnic minority. In their opinion, does a group lose the classification of oppressed minority once they achieve economic and political success? Teachers and students will explore various answers from the class.

### ***Student Group Practice***

Students will read the biography of Chaim Potok in the *Language of Literature* on p. 64. Then students will read the story “Zebra.” Teachers should ask students to analyze how Chaim Potok’s experience as a chaplain in the Korean War and his interest in art may have influenced the characterization and the theme of the story.

### ***Individual Practice***

Students should complete the *Focus* activities and the answers to *Pause & Reflect* from the Interactive Reader (IA 40-65). Then discuss their answers with the class. Have students think about a talent they possess. Then have them write 1-2 paragraphs on how that talent is a symbol of their identity. Then they will write 1-2 paragraphs on how they would feel if they no longer had the freedom to express that talent. Finally, students will draw and color a symbol of their talent on a sheet of paper or cut the symbol out from a magazine. Next, they will attach their short essay to their artistic representation of their talent and identity. Students will then present their symbol and short essay to the class.

### ***Individual Assessment***

#### **Part A Directions**

Students should analyze the quote below from the short story “Zebra.” Then answer the questions 1-3 while using text evidence to support their answers.

“It was a dread and a mystery to him, his own hand. The fingers were all there, but like dead leaves that never fell...little fingers were rigid and curled, the others barely moved” (Potok 56).

- 1) Why does Adam compare his fingers to dead leaves?
- 2) What do leaves represent in nature?
- 3) How is the aforementioned quote evidence of Adam’s detachment from his own body and society, since he compares an extension of his body to inanimate objects such as leaves?

#### **Part B Directions**

Students should analyze the quote below from the short story “Zebra.” Then answer the questions 1-3 while using text evidence to support their answers.

“From time to time his hand hurt, but the fingers seemed slowly to be coming back to life” (Potok 59-60).

- 1) How did Adam’s relationship with his art teacher aid in the emotional healing process of his hand?
- 2) How does the use of imagination and art assist in the physical healing process?
- 3) Consider Chaim Potok’s ethnic heritage and personal experiences in the war. Then consider his habit of writing about Jewish Americans. Then explain this author’s purpose for writing a story about a boy learning to transcend his injuries and feelings of alienation.

### ***Closure***

Reiterate the meaning of terms such as alienation and detachment. Remind students that various ethnic minority groups feel this when they are living in the United States. Reflect on the power of artistic expression to heal and survive the harmful effects of alienation and detachment. Reinforce the importance of expressing our talents and remembering that our talents are a symbol of identity.

#### **Lesson Plan 4: *Sees Behind the Trees***

**Objectives:** TAKS (7.10) (C ), TAKS (7.12) (J), TAKS (7.12) (A) (H), TAKS (7.12) (K)

#### **Materials Used**

*Sees Behind Trees* the novel, journal, paper and pen

#### **Overview**

Teachers should discuss with their students how Michael Dorris was a great writer, but his life ended in suicide. Teachers can decide which facts they will share with students concerning his personal life.

#### **Introduction**

Students should write the answer to the following question in their journal. Is the author's perspective of his writings tainted, when his personal life ends in scandal?

#### **Student Group Practice**

Next students will discuss with their partners or groups how one unique ability makes up for one inability/disability in their personal life. Then they will be asked to show their partner or group a sample of this ability. Teachers may choose to model a gift they have mastered.

#### **Individual Practice**

For homework, students will be asked to read a portion of *Sees Behind the Trees* every night. Teachers may choose to review the previous day's reading with their class. Some teachers may choose to read the story aloud to their students everyday, while some teachers may choose to have students take turns reading aloud.

#### **Individual Assessment**

Ask students to answer the following short answer questions by using text evidence to support their answers:

- 1) How does the story of Walnut discovering his unique ability help young readers who read Michael Dorris' book?
- 2) Explain how intergenerational relationships affect the tone and mood of *Sees Behind Trees*.
- 3) Analyze how the new name *Sees Behind Trees* is symbolization of Walnut's new identity, and his transition from boyhood into manhood?

#### **Closure**

Reiterate how some writers had to hide their racial heritage from the general public. Remind students how a dual identity causes some people to feel that they do not belong anywhere. Reflect on disabilities or disabilities can lead someone to find out their strengths. Reiterate the importance of not feeling ashamed of who you are and where you come from.

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### Supplemental Resources

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