

## Humanities Out There Lesson 3: Historical Allegory

The purpose of this lesson is to introduce the concept of allegory and have students put it into practice themselves. This should untangle the alienating context of *The Scarlet Letter* somewhat, and perhaps connect the book with issues that the students actually find relevant.

After completing this lesson, students will be able to analyze the use of images in a short passage, connect these images to historical context, understand how historical settings and characters could – through allegory – function to comment on current events, and construct their own allegories loosely related to the themes of *The Scarlet Letter*.

### Pedagogical Issues to Discuss:

#### 1) Dead discussions:

*"I would ask, they would keep quiet...i would explain in many different ways, give my own examples, and they would keep quiet... they told me that the topic was too difficult to understand ... i would give examples of the three words like Predestined election...rather than just spout out definitions...i gave examples and did what Aaron did with the "pure" and Puritans thing. like destiny...and to elect someone would mean what...? ....i did not pass go...i did not collect \$200...i would have been able to hear the crickets had it not been for the deafening silence... i had to coax them into looking for something...anything...so all in all, not a success for me this week... i was unable to corrupt the youth."*

#### 2) Improvisations:

*"Books, tv, music, is all about symbols and that's what makes them interesting and important. Let's face it, read on the surface, the scarlet letter is about a chick who rightly assumed her husband was dead and then had sex with an upstanding member of the community. not an original idea or even an interesting one... for the spirit walk, i tried to incorporate my own area of study... it is [misleading] to analyze something as if it was somehow a result of your own belief structure. the example i gave them was that americans tend to see asian movies as a result of american influence, and not as their own entity. That's a good place to start thinking about something if you have to, but the next step is to think about it on its own terms."*

*"One of my group members disappeared for a little bit when we did the symbol walk. So when they got back and started talking about the symbols, I told them that I took the disappearance of my group member as a sign that I'm a bad discussion leader and that I'm most likely going to hell."*

*"I like to think I arrive prepared to think on my feet and adapt my technique, but the reality is that I arrive with a plan and one or two alternate scenarios I feel I would be competent addressing, and then if something else occurs entirely I fall back on the basic plan... Ultimately, there was too much new and foreign content for my students to feel comfortable entering an animated discussion, and so I fell back on speaking straight from material. Nothing went \*wrong\* per se, but..."*

#### 3) Borderline behavior problems:

*"One was busy selling rice crispy treats for her volleyball team fundraiser"*

*"Everything, and I mean everything, I asked him, he answered with, 'trashcan.' "*

4) Basic structural improvements we can make:

*“I can see how the students wouldn’t be too interested in the lesson or the assignments or the book as there doesn’t seem to be any repercussions if they don’t participate or don’t fill out the worksheets or don’t read... My question is, ‘how do you get them to care when they don’t have to?’ Their grade is neither affected by this and I don’t know what Cindyann has planned for them after the book is done (essay, exam, etc).”*

5) Choose your own adventure...

### **Things you should do to prepare for Wednesday**

1) Read this packet thoroughly and make sure you are familiar with everything in it.

2) Read chapters 11-17 of *The Scarlet Letter*. It is likely that some students will never make it this far, but we can focus their attention on some key scenes, in particular ch. 13 and 17, which highlight Hester at her most intellectually rebellious.

3) Read the article I e-mailed yesterday. I don’t think it’s directly applicable to Santa Ana because it’s based on research about a high school in Colorado where Mexican-American students are a minority. But there are some correlations and it’s also interesting to see what kind of issues education researchers consider.

4) I passed around a packet of short commentaries that the students wrote about your first visit. Take the ones that your students wrote and read them. Should be quite illuminating as to their psychology as well as their writing ability, which we will deal with more directly next week.

4) If you haven’t already posted to the noteboard for the week, please do. Although the noteboard overall has been tremendously valuable, some of you are slacking off – not posting, posting really short, not addressing the particular points I asked you to consider. I remind you that this is a real course that you can pass or fail, and that the noteboard is 25% of everything: <http://eee.uci.edu/toolbox/noteboard/index.php?board=4380>

5) Marinate on this. The fact that you were all late to the first teaching session was entirely my fault. But a couple of you were late or even absent to the second session. This is not acceptable. You now know the distance and the route. You have all lived in Southern California for at least two years and you know how unpredictable the traffic patterns are. Furthermore, I gave you my cell phone number for a reason. One student had the courtesy to tell me 6 hours before his teaching session that he was very ill and had to go to the doctor. I would prefer more like 12-24 hours notice, but at least this gave me a chance to alter my planning. From this point, any lateness or absence is grounds for failing the class and being ineligible to do HOT in future quarters. In the case of a medical emergency, please notify me immediately. Given that the majority of Ms. Wood’s students eagerly anticipate our visits, please do not break your trust with these students, and please do not undermine the effectiveness of our role modeling agenda.

### **0:00-0:08      Aaron’s PowerPoint**

The purpose of the PowerPoint is to complete our brief survey of the historical context of *The Scarlet Letter* by considering why someone in 1850 would choose to address current events by writing a book about fictional events in the 1640s. All of this will remain rather abstract for the

students, but it guides them toward the idea that fiction can serve as a motivated critique of received ideas and current social issues.

1) I will begin by reviewing the Puritan ‘inheritance’ we discussed last week, reminding students how important the Puritans are to American history but also adding a precaution about overemphasizing their role on a continent that continued to absorb immigrants from all over for the next 370 years and counting. I will then emphasize to students the disparity between the book’s historical setting and its date of composition, a fact that is not readily apparent to high school students nor initially very interesting to them.

2) Introducing the concept of allegory by reference to contemporary examples, I will guide students toward considering *The Scarlet Letter* as a commentary on the many ‘revolutions’ of the late 1840s and early 1850s.

### **0:08-0:25      Group Exercise: Textual Analysis**

Both of our previous lessons included textual analysis exercises, but they weren’t given enough emphasis. The purpose of this exercise is for students to closely read a passage from *The Scarlet Letter*, drawing out key words and phrases and interpreting them by reference to the book’s historical context.

1) Your groups should be reasonably stable now, so it should be a bit easier to get things going.

2) Begin by reading the passage on the front side of the handout. It seems to help quite a bit if the students read aloud, although this will take longer. Offer help with vocabulary.

3) Try the following formula for questions #3 and 4. First have students give the literal meaning of the words. Then ask them to extrapolate the figurative meaning. Then ask why Hawthorne might have chosen this symbolic image as particularly effective for communicating this particular idea. I.e. a chain is something that binds your body and restricts movement. Fragments mean the chain is broken. Social restrictions are like physical restrictions, hence a chain is figuratively the force of law. Hawthorne may have chosen this image in particular to echo the idea of slavery or the language used in the Declaration of Independence, which the students supposedly read in their big textbook.

4) The remaining questions on this page are highly speculative, and honestly there isn’t a lot of really strong support for them here. The only important thing is that students use their imagination to connect the words in this passage with the different types of ‘revolution’ I touched on in the powerpoint. The questions about Hester as revolutionary really hinge on whether or not the reader identifies with her, which is a much more approachable concept for you to link to.

### **0:25-0:50      Group Exercise: Constructing a Historical Allegory**

The purpose of this exercise is for students to gain a more concrete sense of how and why *The Scarlet Letter* was written by imitating Hawthorne’s writing method.

1) Begin by reading the two book review passages. Again, it would help to have students read aloud. It isn’t necessary to do any in-depth textual analysis, just so long as it is clear that the book was very controversial upon its publication, but has lost a good deal of its provocative nature since as readers have become alienated by its language, style, and historical context.

2) Let the students choose whichever option they like. If they seem indifferent to choosing, go ahead and choose for them. You might need to give examples of how contemporary social issues could be treated allegorically (e.g. Chillingworth gets Dimmesdale addicted to his ‘herbs’?) and/or examples of the kinds of new historical settings they can use for the second and third options (e.g. the Vietnam War, a futuristic sci-fi setting, whatever). Just make sure you retain the basic allegorical structure of *contemporary issue + altered setting*. I’m also leaving it up to you to determine how your group will work. Some groups might benefit by collaborating from start to finish. Some might be better with five minutes of individual brainstorming, then voting on the best idea and proceeding in the group from there. Some might want to just write on their own for most of the time and share their ideas at the end. Ms. Wood tells me that, in general, the morning students are better at writing individually and the afternoon students are better at developing ideas in collaboration.

3) Be sure to wrap up in some fashion, because we won’t be meeting back in the classroom. You shouldn’t run out of steam with this exercise; if they finish sketching a plot, get them to write some dialogue or even act scenes. You can do more college chat if they seem amenable.

### **Follow Up Exercises for Ms. Wood’s Students**

1) Share your historical allegories with the rest of the class. Then develop them in more detail; you’ve come up with a basic plot, but now choose a key scene that happens in your plot. Write about the setting to the scene; where are the characters and what’s happening? Then write the dialogue that the characters in the scene say to one another.

2) Write about the following question for 10-15 minutes, and then discuss it with your class. *We discussed some of the reasons that a writer would choose historical allegory to communicate his or her ideas. Do you think it is better to write about current events directly, or to use allegory to write about them indirectly? Why?*

3) You’ve had a few brief chances to discuss college life with your UCI tutors. Think of at least three questions to ask your tutor about what college classes are like and what sort of classes he/she takes.