

Lesson Plan

The Legacy of Magical Thinking and Unlearning Myths

The Legacy of Magical Thinking and Unlearning Myths: “A New Future Requires a New Past”

Lesson Plan for American Literature — College Level

Student Learning Objectives (SLOs):

At the end of this lesson, students will be able to

1. Define magical thinking
2. Identify examples of magical thinking in poetry, song, and nonfiction texts (*The Second Founding* by Eric Foner, *Olio* by Tyehimba Jess)
3. Explain how magical thinking affects people’s actions in interpersonal relationships and in living with others in a democratic society
4. Find evidence to support the legacy of magical thinking in the Black Lives Matter movement

Assessments:

Reading Journals (SLO 1, 2, 3) – 60 pts.

- Students will write journals that summarize their reading of the two texts and ancillary material; journals will be double-entry format with quotations in the left column and reflections on the quotations in the right column. Three reflection journals will be required at 20 points each.

Reflection Project (SLO 4) – 100 pts.

- Students will produce a reflection project that explores Foner’s quote “A new future requires a new past.” Projects may be written reflections, dramatic presentations, poetry, visual art, choreography, or musical compositions. Questions will include:
 - What is implied by this statement?
 - How can the past be considered “new”?
 - What sort of future can be envisioned based on the readings?

Lesson Syllabus

Week	Topic	Readings	Assignments
One	Introduction to magical thinking How slavery and the founding of the United States was affected by magical thinking	Ch. 1 and 2, Foner “Jubilee: Isaac Dickerson (1852-1900),” p. 29; “Freedson: Dream Gone,” p. 74; “Coon	Four Corners Gallery walks Reading Journals Exit slips

	The 13 th and 14 th Amendments to the Constitution: Freedom and Equality	Songs Must Go!/Coon Songs Go On," p. 141, Jess	
Two	Magical thinking and reality The 15 th Amendment: The right to vote	Ch. 3, Foner "Freedson: of 1976," p. 84; "Roots of Boone," p. 102; "Blind Boone's Vision," p. 108; "Jubilee Indigo," p. 166, Jess	Reading journals Debate
Three	The legacy of magical thinking in politics and literature	Ch. 4, Foner "Dunbar-Booker Double Shovel," p. 142; "Sissieretta Jones, Carnegie Hall, 1902: O patria mia," p. 158; "Alabaster Hands," p. 181; "We've Sung Each Free Day Like It's Salvation," p. 203, Jess	Reading Journals Reflection project Presentations

Daily Activities

Day One, Week One	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Four Corners – Students go to the corner (SA, A, D, SD) that represents their views on the following statement: People believe what they want to believe whether or not their ideas are based on factual evidence. Follow up discussion will be based on Boorstin's (1961) statement: "We risk being the first people in history to have been able to make their illusions so vivid, so persuasive, so 'realistic' that they can live in them." • Poetry Reading – The instructor reads "Scripto Continua" by Ken Ronkowitz and a selection from "A Coda to History" by Kwame Dawes. Students will work in pairs to engage in a Turn and Talk to share their thoughts about the meanings of these poems and how they relate to Boorstin's quotation and their discussion from the Four Corners activity. • Students will write an exit slip before leaving that states in one sentence their most important take-away from the day. Students may choose to produce a drawing instead.
Day Two, Week One	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Instructor will have minstrel music playing in the background as students enter class. Images of black-faced minstrels will be visible on the white board. "The Witmark Amateur Minstrel Guide and Burnt Cork Encyclopedia" from pp. 131-132 in the Jess book will be on the white board for students to read. Students will write a brief reflection of the messages that they believe the music, the images, and the instructions for face blackening portray. • Students will break into groups and read selected articles on magical thinking. They will create graphic organizers on large post-its that define

	<p>magical thinking. Conduct a gallery walk with small post-its to respond to others' definitions.</p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Use the definitions to guide a whole-class discussion on how the creation of the 13th and 14th amendments as portrayed by Foner were needed to combat the magical thinking that rationalized slavery in the United States.
Day Three, Week Two	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Refer students to the post-it gallery from last week to refresh their learning • Play a clip from the film <i>Nightjohn</i> to show the brainwashing of plantation owners by Southern ministers • Use the quote from Henry D. Moore as found in Foner, p. 96 ("The Negro question [requires] common sense. We cannot overcome the prejudices of a lifetime at once.") to begin a discussion on the Black Lives Matter Movement, bringing in Jess' selections from Week Two to consider the long reach of magical thinking.
Day Four, Week Two	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Students will break into two groups and sit in Socratic Seminar circles. Each group will take a stance on the pros and cons of magical thinking, using Foner and Jess as well as other selected sources for their evidence. Each group must prove that magical thinking can be either beneficial or detrimental to society. • Using Jess' selected works for this week as models, students will create found poems to reflect on the debates.
Day Five, Week Three	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Show clips from <i>The Long Shadow</i> that show the intentional journey of the producer and director as they reject the romanticized vision of slavery from their slave-owning ancestors and embrace the reality of slavery and how the United States continues to "diminish the social role of black people and keep them in a perpetual state of suffering." • Students will discuss the clips in small groups of 3-4 people. Discussions will focus on the promises of the 13th, 14th, and 15th amendments and how they have been broken/misused/misinterpreted since the "second founding."
Day Six, Week Three	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • In-class readings of students' reflection papers. Presentations may include visual art, music, choreography, or dramatic depictions.

Poetry to be read:

Poetry:

Scripto Continua

It's what we call the writing
from early centuries
when papyrus was scarce
and Greek texts
to give us a Bible
were copied

without punctuation or spacing
allthewordsrunningtogether
no upper or lower case

and I see a line
godisnowhere

and know that it is a test question
Are you a theist?
 god is now here
Are you an atheist?
 god is nowhere

and I'm thinking that if I say my litany
God is now here,
God is now here,
God is now here,

then it will be so.

Ken Ronkowitz

From "A Coda to History"

28. It Is Not As If

*It is not as if I have not been thinking this,
and it is not as if we have not been thinking this.*
For what I mean when I will say *whiteness*, when I will say *white*
people, when I say *the whites* with such seeming assurance,
with such total confidence in the clarity of this locution,
as if we all know the etymology of this word's genealogy,
the lie of a cluster of marauding nations, building kingdoms
by destroying kingdoms, we have heard this all before, O Babylon.
So, yes, when I say this, what I mean is *Babylon*, as the Rastas
have constructed the notion, in the way of generosity,
in the way of judgement, in the way of naming the enemy
of history for who he is, in the inadequate way of symbols,
in the way of the bible's total disregard for history, and the prophet's
dance in the fulcrum of history, leaping over time and place,
returning to the place where we began having learned
nothing and yet having learned everything language offers us.
It is not as if I have not been thinking this.
It is not as if we have not been thinking this.
And I want to rehearse Thomas Jefferson and the pragmatism
of cost, the wisdom of his loyalty to his family's wealth,
the seat of the landed aristocrats reinvented on the plains

of the New World, the coat of arms, the courtly ambitions,
the inventions, the art, the bottles of wine, the French tongue,
the legacy, the faux Roman, faux Greek pretension, the envy
of the nobility of native confederacies, their tongues of fire;
the land, the land, the land, and the property of black bodies,
so much to give up, and who bears the sacrifice, who pays
the cost for the preservation of a nation's ambitions?
How he said no to freeing the bodies he said were indebted
to him for their every breath—the calculus of property;
oh, the rituals of flesh-mongering, the protection of white freedom.

It is not as if I have not been thinking this.

It is not as if we have not been thinking this,

And Bartholomew de las Casas, Bishop of Chiapas,

and his *Memorial de Remedios para Las Indias*,

the pragmatic use of Africans, the ones to carry the burden

of saving the Indians, to save the white man's soul—

this little bishop of pragmatic calculation, correcting sins

with more sins. And the bodies of black slave women,

their wombs, studied, tested, reshaped, probed, pierced, tortured,

with the whispered promise: "It will help you, too, it really

will and you will be praised for teaching us how to save

the wombs of white women, for the cause, all for the cause."

And Roosevelt and his unfinished revolution, O "dream deferred",

O Langston, you tried to sing, how long, not long, how long,

so long! And Churchill's rising rhetoric, saying that though cousin

Nazis may ritualize the ancient blood feuds by invading Britain,

her world-wide empire will rise up and pay the price for protecting

the kingdom, the realm, liberty, and so on and so forth. Everyone

so merciful, everyone so wounded with guilt and gratitude,

everyone so pragmatic. It is what I am saying, that I am saying

nothing new, and what I am singing is, *Babylon yuh throne gone*

down, gone down, / Babylon yuh throne gone down.

It is not as if I have not been thinking this.

It is not as if we have not been thinking this.

For no one is blessed with blindness here,

No one is blessed with deafness here.

And this thing we see is lurking inside the soft

alarm of white people who know that they are watching

a slow magical act of erasure, and they know that this is how

terror manifests itself, quietly, reasonably, and with deadly

intent. They are letting black people die. They are letting

black people die in America. Hidden inside the maw

of these hearts, is the sharp pragmatism of the desperate,

the writers of the myth of survival of the fittest,

or the order of the universe, of Platonic logic, the caste system,

the war of the worlds. They are letting black people die.

It is not as if I have not been thinking this.

No, it is not as if we have not been thinking this.

And someone is saying, in that soft voice of calm,
“Well, there will be costs, and those are the costs
of our liberty.” Remember when the century turned,
and the pontiff and pontificators declared that in fifty years,
the nation would be brown, and for a decade, the rogue people
sought to halt this with guns, with terror, with the shutting of borders?
Now this has arrived, a kind of gift. Let them die. The blacks,
the poor, the ones who multiply like flies, let them die, and soon
we will be lily white again. Do you think I am paranoid? I am.

It is not as if I have not been thinking this.

It is not as if we have not been thinking this.

And paranoia is how we’ve survived. So, we must march in the streets,
force the black people who are immigrant nurses, who are meat packers,
who are street cleaners, who are short-order cooks, who are
the dregs of society, who are black, who are black, who are black.
Let them die. Here in Nebraska, our governor would not release
the racial numbers. He says there is no need to cause strife,
this is not our problem, he says. We are better than this, he says.

It is not as if I have not been thinking this.

It is not as if we have not been thinking this.

And so in the silence, we do not know what the purgation is,
and here in this stumbling prose of mine, this blunt prose of mine,
is the thing I have not yet said, “They are trying to kill us,
they are trying to kill us, they are trying to kill us off.”

I sip my comfort. The dead prophet, his voice broken by cancer,
his psalm rises over the darkening plains, “Oh yeah, natty Congo”,
and then the sweetest act of pure resistance, “Spread out! Spread out!
Spread out!” We are more than sand on the seashore, so we will not
get jumpy, we won’t get bumpy, and we won’t walk away, “Spread out!”,
they sing in four-part harmony, spears out, *Spread out! Spread out!*

It is not as if I have not been thinking this,

and it is not as if we have not been thinking this.

It is how we survived and how we will continue to survive.

But don’t be fooled. These are the betrayals that are gathering
over the hills. Help me, I say, help me to see this as something else.

It is not as if I have not been thinking this.

See? It is not as if we have not all been thinking this.

Kwame Dawes

Resources

Anderson, K. (2017). “How America lost its mind.” *The Atlantic*. Retrieved August 20, 2020 from <https://www.theatlantic.com/magazine/archive/2017/09/how-america-lost-its-mind/534231/>.

Boorstin, D. (1992). *The image: A guide to pseudo-events in America*. NY: Vintage.

Brown University Steering Committee on Slavery and Justice. (2003). *Slavery and Justice*. Boston, MA: Brown University.

Burnett, C. (1996). *Nightjohn*. Hallmark Entertainment.

Causey, F. (2020). *The long shadow*. Passion River Films.

Dill, R. P. (1994). "A Rhetorical Analysis of Selected Pro-Slavery Sermons by Presbyterian Clergy in the Antebellum South." LSU Historical Dissertations and Theses. 5723.
https://digitalcommons.lsu.edu/gradschool_disstheses/5723

Fileva, I. (2020). "The magical thinking of white supremacists." *Psychology Today*. Retrieved August 20, 2020 from <https://www.psychologytoday.com/us/blog/the-philosophers-diaries/202006/the-magical-thinking-white-supremacists>

James, H. & Oliver, E. *The dangers of magical thinking: an interview with Eric Oliver*. Open Democracy.
<https://www.opendemocracy.net/en/dangers-of-magical-thinking-interview-with-eric-oliver/>.

Jeansonne, G. (1971). "Southern Baptist Attitudes Toward Slavery, 1845-1861". *The Georgia Historical Quarterly*, 55(4), 510-522. Retrieved August 26, 2020, from <http://www.jstor.org/stable/40579712>

Rae, N. (2018). "How Christian slaveholders used the Bible to justify slavery." Retrieved August 20, 2020, <https://time.com/5171819/christianity-slavery-book-excerpt/>.