From Fiction to Fact: Applying Character Analysis Techniques to Understand Historical Perspective

Reading *Salt of the Earth* as Historical Literature
Nicole Getz

Focus/Summary
The purpose of this lesson is to reinforce student understanding of literary character types while introducing the concept of alternative perspectives on history. Students will have viewed the 1954 production *Salt of the Earth* prior to the beginning of this lesson. Throughout the lesson, students will identify each of the main characters from the film as a literary type. Then, the class will collaboratively investigate the historical significance of such character types as they apply to real people. Finally, learners will hypothesize the effects of character development on historical perspective by creating interpretive oral histories through the eyes of varied individual figures. Through this process of mutual discovery, students will begin to apply reading comprehension strategies across disciplines to understand the importance of memory and perspective in the study of history.

Vital Theme and Narrative
Patterns of Social and Political Interaction

Habits of Mind
perceive past events and issues as they were experienced by people at the time, to develop historical empathy as opposed to present-mindedness.

Objectives
Students will be able to identify the roles of historical figures through the lens of fictional character development and transfer that knowledge to the analysis of primary historical sources.

Procedures

Opening the Lesson—Whole Class Discussion
Students will engage in a whole class discussion to review the previous lesson’s viewing of the film. The following guiding questions will incorporate lesson objectives in the conversation.
Did you like the movie? Explain.
With which character did you most identify? Explain.
How did each character change from the beginning to the end of the film?
How do you know that each character changed in the film?
What happened to the characters who stayed the same throughout the film?
If you had a time machine that would take you to a point in the film, when would you arrive?
Who told us the story, and what do we know about her?
Which character was most trustworthy? Which was the least trustworthy?
How would the story be different if Ramon had been the narrator?
Developing the Lesson—Reviewing Terms (Think, Pair, Share)

Students will first examine a list of terms on the board, and then work in pairs to define, in their own words, one of the following key terms used in the analysis of character types. Finally, each group will report to the class to define the terms on the board.

- Round character
- Static character
- Stock character (archetype)
- Flat character
- Protagonist
- Confidante character
- Dynamic character
- Antagonist

Developing the Lesson—Analyzing Characters

Each student will choose a character: Esperanza, Ramon, Barton, Frank Barnes, Ruth Barnes, Sheriff, Teresa, or Consuelo. Students will study the character by completing a character chart (attached), paying particular attention to the words the character used in the film or might use in a memoir. Students will finally write a short summary of the Empire Zinc Mine strike, using the character chart, from the perspective of the character they chose. Students should be writing from the first person omniscient perspective.

Concluding the Lesson—Effects of Perspective on History and Memory (Graffiti Wall)

Students will read their summaries aloud in small groups of four or five. Groups should be heterogeneous based on the characters addressed. After learning about the other stories, students will receive different colored markers to respond to questions posted throughout the classroom. Each student must respond to each question by writing on the white board or paper posted on the wall, but they may respond with a word, a phrase/sentence, an icon/graphic, or a picture. The posted questions should be:

- How are the summaries all the same?
- How are the summaries each unique?
- Which summary is the truest?
- Which summary lacks truth the most?
- What is history?
- How are history books similar to the film?

Through the graffiti wall, the students will likely form consensus understandings about each of these questions. A final discussion and lecture should emphasize the subjective nature of history as seen through the eyes of the characters who witnessed it. Most likely, a student will volunteer the correct assessment that history can only be understood by looking at events through several perspectives and that memories are influenced by the history writer’s lifestyle and bias. If students do not volunteer such information, the teacher must provide leading questions to elicit such sophisticated response and interaction with the activity.

Assessing Student Learning

Students will submit both character analysis and perspective summaries for evaluation. Character Analyses should be evaluated for accuracy and completion, and perspective summaries should be evaluated for writing style and craft, according to local and state standards.
**CHARACTER ANALYSIS**

**Circle your character:**
- Esperanza
- Ramon
- Sheriff
- Barton
- Frank Barnes
- Ruth Barnes
- Teresa
- Consuelo

**Character Types (Select all that apply.):**
- Round character
- Flat character
- Dynamic character
- Static character
- Protagonist
- Antagonist
- Stock character (archetype)
- Confidante character

**Experience Chart:** Record what your character experiences throughout the beginning, middle, and end of the film. Be sure to use vivid words that express the emotion and viewpoint of your chosen character.

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Character Name</th>
<th>Beginning</th>
<th>Middle</th>
<th>End</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>See</td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>List objects, events, people, sounds, and facts that your character experienced during each phase of the film.</td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
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<tr>
<td>Say</td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
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</tr>
<tr>
<td>List opinions, hopes, dreams, and words that your character expresses or thinks during each phase of the film.</td>
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<td></td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Sense</td>
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<tr>
<td>List other observations that your character experiences, such as emotions, during each phase in the film.</td>
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