

## Understanding Conflict through Perspectives in Zadie Smith's *White Teeth*

This lesson is designed as the opening lesson setting the stage for high school juniors studying Zadie Smith's debut novel *White Teeth*. This novel follows the lives of three families after the diaspora of Great Britain's colonies in the 1970s and the effects of living in a multicultural community on one's identity following their lives through the 1990s. One family is comprised of a middle aged, working class British man, a young Jamaican, former Jehovah Witness woman, and their racially mixed daughter. The other is of two working class Bengali, Muslim immigrants and their twin sons, one who is an atheist and the other a Muslim fundamentalist. The final family is comprised of two middle class, Caucasian, scientists and their three sons. The mixture of socio-economic, cultural, and religious beliefs between all these characters leads to many conflicts, most of them controversial in nature. This opening lesson tries to get students to understand not only the perspectives of the characters, but how their own cultural experiences can shape their reading and judgments about characters. While this lesson is designed for high schoolers, the same lesson can easily be modified for any text being taught at any level. This is designed for a 90 minute block schedule.

### Concept:

Understand how one's experience shapes their beliefs and views, as well as how their own understanding of literature is shaped by their socio-economic, cultural, and religious beliefs.

### Common Core Standards:

- [CCSS.ELA-Literacy.SL.11-12.1b](#) Work with peers to promote civil, democratic discussions and decision-making, set clear goals and deadlines, and establish individual roles as needed.
- [CCSS.ELA-Literacy.SL.11-12.1d](#) Respond thoughtfully to diverse perspectives; synthesize comments, claims, and evidence made on all sides of an issue; resolve contradictions when possible; and determine what additional information or research is required to deepen the investigation or complete the task.
- [CSS.ELA-Literacy.W.11-12.3](#) Write narratives to develop real or imagined experiences or events using effective technique, well-chosen details, and well-structured event sequences.

### Goal:

Students will begin to evaluate their biases when analyzing literature and how others' perspectives are shaped and lead to potential conflicts.

### Objectives:

- Evaluate bias in students' own lives and literature (characters or writers').
- Communicate with peers to work toward a solution.
- Determine the origins of conflict and how perspectives are all equally valid in the eyes of the individual.

### Materials Needed:

- Situation Character Role Cards
- Student notebooks

### Anticipatory Set:

- Explain to students that today you will be participating in a role playing exercise in which they need to adopt the perspective of someone who might be very different from themselves. Thus, have them write down what they think are the top four guidelines they should follow during this activity to make sure that everything runs smoothly in their notebooks. This should take about five minutes
- Once the students are done, have them share their ideas as a class and list them on the board. You will probably have over ten, so ask students to see if there are any ways they can

categorize them. Try to keep prompting the students until you get back to the original four guidelines, as it is much more easy and manageable for students to keep track if they are adhering to them if there are not many. My classes generally get at exactly what I want them to follow:

- Be respectful of others.
- Make sure that everyone speaks equally.
- Avoid making stereotypes/being negative towards others.
- Be an active listener.

#### Procedures:

- Have students copy these four guidelines in their notebooks. Instruct them that this is what you will be using to monitor and evaluate them throughout the class period.
- Hand out one of the situation character role cards to each student. I generally print these so that all the roles that relate to one character are on the same color, making it easy for me to say all the purple characters get together.
- Before students get in their groups, have students write down their ideas about how the character would respond to the situation described on the card in their notebooks. This will help students that tend to get stuck when it comes to speaking off the cuff. Prompt students to think about how their social and economic levels, cultural practices, religious beliefs, profession, gender, and age all affect their views of this situation. For students that struggle to remember all these things or are learning impaired, you can use the provided graphic organizer to help them develop these ideas. This will take students roughly 10 minutes to 15 minutes.
- Inform students that when they get in groups, they will be discussing these issues as if they are at a town hall meeting. As a result, they need to come to a consensus as a group in regards to what their view is on the situation assigned to them and how they would act. This means that they need to negotiate and evaluate all views, listening and hopefully looking for commonalities. Note, while you are telling students this, the way the activity is designed is to make this very challenging to actually do, so do not be surprised if students are not able to do so as they work together in groups. I also generally invite students to take notes on the differing perspectives as they talk to help inform what they will respond with next, beginning to teach them active listening skills. With younger students, you might need to make them a listening note guide. I tend to use Cornell Style notes and have provided an example with this lesson.
- Monitor students as they work together, facilitating when students seem to come to a road block and remind them of the guidelines they wrote as a class. Give students 15-20 minutes to discuss. Often this activity takes a while, but if you give them too much time, they will not try to come to a consensus.
- Have groups read their situation to the class and then explain what their consensus was and why. Record their results on the board. I usually ask how they worked toward together given their varying viewpoints to help students grasp how to work together in a group in a more explicit fashion.
- Ask students how they felt about the role they were asked to adopt. These are general questions to help you facilitate this:
  - What were the challenges they faced?
  - How were they able to accurately portray the views of this individual?
  - What prior knowledge did they draw on and where did they gain it?
  - Did the character's views and opinions match their own?
  - How did you cope with this? Or did you succumb to your own views?
- Once you have students discuss these issues, inform them that this lesson was meant to introduce them to the characters and conflicts in the novel. However, it more importantly was to make them look at how their own views can often inform their perspectives on characters and conflicts in literature. Thus, it is important to gauge how one's experiences inform their beliefs and views.

- Select two or three students that had very different character views on one of the situations you provided. Chart their views and how they came to those based on the graphic organizer brainstorming they did prior to the discussion. I often make a chart that looks like the following and fill it in, but you can make handouts for students to do this as well as they follow along:

<b>View/Character</b>	Character 1	Character 2	Character 3
<b>Socio-economic</b>			
<b>Culture</b>			
<b>Religion</b>			
<b>Profession</b>			
<b>Gender</b>			
<b>Age</b>			

- Ask students the following:
  - Are any of their circumstances more valid than the other?
  - Are any of their beliefs more valid than the other?
  - Who has the most correct view? How do you decide this? Can all of them be right?
- After fielding student’s responses, address more explicitly their answer to the last question. Explain to them when it comes to one’s ideas about different issues that are informed by their beliefs, the community a person associates himself with and his experiences make them equally valid, even if you might not agree with them. This is when we have problems in terms of what we know is “true” and how to react. Therefore it is essential that we understand how our experiences inform our knowledge when we are looking at literary analysis, as it shapes our views of literature, and our dealing with those who have different views than us. These two are linked in that they shape conflict, both in and outside of literature.
- Review the different types of conflict relationships, man vs.: man, self, society, nature, fate, and the supernatural. Ask the students to remain in their groups and look at how each of the issues given to them could be seen through one of these conflict lenses. I like to provide them this verbal example, but you might want to chart it on the board as I have done below:  
***Sandy is a first generation Pakistani-American who wants to go to prom, but her family is conservative and does not believe in dancing and dating.***

Man vs. Man - Sandy vs. her Parents

Man. vs. Self - Sandy’s desire to be American and fit in vs. her desire to stay true to her parents’ vie of her

Man vs. Society - Sandy’s desire to fit in based on advertisements and the media vs. her desire to remain true to her self.

Man vs. Nature - Sandy’s struggle to not give into teenage rebellion

Man vs. Fate - Sandy’s resistance to go to the prom even though she is fated to meet the love of her life there!

Man vs. the Supernatural - Sandy’s desire to go to the prom even though God specifically told her not to.

- Have students work on these charts in their groups, recording their ideas in their notebooks. These will serve as their predictions for the novel. Have students share their ideas and ask them how they came up with these different types of conflicts based on the background of their characters. If they are having trouble, ask them what part of their profile for their characters they looked at when determining the potential conflict.

### Independent Practice:

- Inform students that they are now responsible for tracking that character over the course of the novel. As the class reads further, they will reconvene in groups to discuss the issues from the perspective of their character.
- To aid them prepare for these events, students will keep a journal from the perspective of their character, much like a reader's journal, but instead they will reflect on their character's actions and the main conflicts of the novel. This will help build their skills of understanding how their experiences shape their interpretation and reading of texts, as well as interactions with others.

### Adaptation:

- For students that struggle with oral communication due to impairments, you may turn this into a written activity in by using a websafe chat feature such as one Moodle.com or Edmondo.com.

### Extension:

- For gifted students that need to be further challenged, have them also incorporate a technique that Smith uses for each of their journal entries.
- To culminate the unit, have students write a multi-genre piece that addresses one of the novel's themes or conflicts by incorporating at least three character perspectives.

### Connections to Other Subjects:

Social Studies- have students look at the issues in the novel that are social issues and research the different perspectives on them from community members, such as stem cell research or immigration reform. Have them debate the issues in character.

Math and Science: have students address how the beliefs of famous mathematicians and scientists informed their research and discoveries.

IB Theory of Knowledge: link to lessons on knowledge communities, truth vs. true, and knowledge claims.