

Understanding the (Hi)Story

Teacher's Introduction:

What an author decides to write within a literary text, or what an individual decides to put within a document that later becomes historic, is all influenced by that individual's personal decisions and environment. This environment is often referred to as historical context, which is the social, religious, economic, and political conditions that existed during the time and place in which something occurs. It is those conditions, or details, that enable us--as readers and historians--to interpret and analyze these works of the past, or even the future, rather than merely judge them by our contemporary standards.

This lesson plan revolves around understanding the history that surrounds the story or document. By means of example, the students will be breaking down one of Flannery O'Connor's short stories, *The Displaced Person*. Not only was the setting of this story inspired by the farm, Andalusia, but the experiences and beliefs of the characters are all influenced by WWII and mid-20th century America, with notions of segregation, racism, and concerns over immigration playing a large factor. These are the social, religious, economic, and political conditions that Flannery was living through, and add deeper meaning to the story.

For historical summary, World War II came to fruition for multiple reasons, one of which was the continual conflict from World War I. Political and economic instability in Germany, and lingering resentment over the Versailles Treaty, fueled the rise to power of Adolf Hitler and the National Socialist German Workers' Party, aka the Nazi Party. After becoming Chancellor of Germany in 1933, Hitler quickly consolidated power and made himself the supreme leader in 1934. Obsessed with the idea of a "pure" German race, which he called "Aryan" and believed to be superior, Hitler started making preparations for war. He believed war was a way to gain the necessary space for the German race to expand. Hitler began invading countries across Europe, creating alliances with Japan and Italy (Axis Powers), and continued with little pushback, as the US, USSR, Britain, and France had their own internal conflicts and were hesitant to engage in war again. In fact, Hitler and Joseph Stalin, leader of the USSR, even came to a peace agreement in the late 1930's, which delayed Soviet involvement even further. However, on September 1, 1939, Hitler invaded Poland from the west; two days later, France and Britain (Allied Powers) declared war on Germany, beginning World War II.

In addition to his grab for land and power, Hitler also strove to eradicate what he believed to be inferior races and people from Germany and Europe. Historically called the Holocaust, this was the "ideological and systematic state-sponsored persecution and mass murder of millions of European Jews (as well as millions of others, including Romani people, the intellectually

disabled, dissidents and homosexuals) by the German Nazi regime between 1933 and 1945.”¹ Believing they were a threat to German racial purity, the Holocaust became Hitler’s “Final Solution,” in which innocent people were displaced, removed, and forced into ghettos, concentration, and death/labor camps. Many were experimented on, tortured, starved, murdered, and more. Though many tried to flee persecution, most were unable to escape. By the end of the war, approximately six million Jews and about 5 million others--targeted for racial, political, ideological and behavioral reasons--died in the Holocaust.

On the war front, 1941 brought two additions to the Allied powers. In June of that year, Hitler ordered an invasion of the Soviet Union, whose abundant land he hoped to use in his German expansion, bringing the USSR into the fight against the Nazi Regime in Europe. On December 7 of that year, Japan attacked the U.S. naval base at Pearl Harbor in Hawaii, taking America completely by surprise and claiming the lives of more than 2,300 troops. The attack on Pearl Harbor unified the American public opinion in favor of entering World War II, and on December 8 Congress declared war on Japan, of which the Axis powers responded by declaring war on the United States. Being fought against in Europe and in the Pacific, with initial victories and then numerous losses, Germany and its allies began to slowly fall, and finally in 1945, WWII came to an end.

After the war, survivors of the holocaust camps found it nearly impossible to return home, as many lost their families, friends, and livelihood in the war. As a result, the late 1940s saw an unprecedented number of refugees, POWs and other displaced populations moving across Europe, parts of Asia, and the United States. The war also exposed a glaring paradox within the US. as African American soldiers who fought for equality and justice abroad were forced into segregated units and faced further racism, segregation, and hate at home. All of these historical conditions play into the context of *The Displaced Person*, which was written in 1953, and reflects upon the world in which Flannery was living in the United States at the time.

A Teacher’s Note on this Lesson:

This lesson hopes to encourage students to look at literary works and historical documents through the context and standards of the period. They should also understand the causes and basic facts of the World War II, the Holocaust, and segregation within the United States.

Social Studies Georgia Standards of Excellence:

Grade 5: **SS5H1** Describe how life changed in America at the turn of the century

Grade 5: **SS5H4** Explain America’s involvement in World War II.

¹ History.com

Grades 6-8: **L6-8RH2** Determine the central ideas or information of a primary or secondary source; provide an accurate summary of the source distinct from prior knowledge or opinions.

Grades 6-8: **L6-8RH8** Identify aspects of a text that reveal an author's point of view or purpose (e.g. loaded language, inclusion or avoidance of particular facts.)

American Literature: **ELAGSE11-12RL3** Analyze the impact of the author's choices regarding how to develop and relate elements of a story or drama (e.g., where a story is set, how the action is ordered, how the characters are introduced and developed).

American Literature: **ELAGSE11-12RL9** Demonstrate knowledge of eighteenth-, nineteenth- and early twentieth-century foundational works (of American Literature, British Literature, World Literature, or Multicultural Literature), including how two or more texts from the same period treat similar themes or topics.

American Literature: **ELAGSE11-12RI1** Cite strong and thorough textual evidence to support analysis of what the text says explicitly as well as inferences drawn from the text, including determining where the text leaves matters uncertain.

American Literature: **ELAGSE11-12W3** Write narratives to develop real or imagined experiences or events using effective technique, well-chosen details, and well-structured event sequences.

Lesson Objectives:

- Understand how historical context can provide additional meaning to a literary work or historical document.
- Explore the causes, actions, results and eventual consequences of WWII and the Holocaust.
- Analyze textual examples and cite appropriate resources.

Lesson Duration - One class period or one hour. *This can be modified to fit your class period length or divided across class periods or days.*

Lesson:

Have your students read *The Displaced Person* before the day of the lesson. Begin the lesson by having your students summarize the short story. Please note to your students that there is language used in the story that is not appropriate to use outside of the story's analysis within the class.

1. Start with an introductory discussion. Have them break down the story:

- a. Who is involved in this story?
 - b. What was each character's individual job?
 - c. How did they end up on the farm?
 - d. What happened to them at the end of the story?
 - e. What were your thoughts on the story?
 - f. Why do you think the Guizacs were considered “displaced”?
 - i. Does it mention a specific war? Does it give anything by name? Any location?
 - ii. If they mentioned a specific war, ask them why they came to that conclusion.
2. Have your students analyze these sentences at face value.
- a. “There had been a great deal to do to get ready for them because they didn’t have anything of their own, not a stick of furniture or a sheet or a dish...and Mrs. McIntyre had said that after what those people have gone through, they should be grateful for anything they could get. She said to think how lucky they were to escape from over there and come to a place like this.” (196)
 - i. If they didn’t know about WWII or the Holocaust, what would this tell you? *Answers of interest: This family is poor. They escaped something tragic, but what that is is not stated.*
 - b. “They ain’t Eye-talians, they’re Poles,” she said. “From Poland where all them bodies were stacked up at. You remember all them bodies?” (201)
 - i. Same question as above, but now we have a location. *What does this tell you? Why are there bodies stacked in Poland? Are they building the largest human tower or is Poland killing its citizens?*
 - c. “Mr. Guizac,” she said, beginning slowly and then speaking faster until she ended breathless in teh middle of a word, “that nigger cannot have a white wife from Europe. You can’t talk to a nigger that way. You’ll excite him and besides it can’t be done. Maybe it can be done in Poland but it can’t be done here and you’ll have to stop. It’s all foolishness. That nigger don’t have a grain of sense and you’ll excite...” “She in camp three year,” he said... “She no care black,” he said. “She in camp three year.” (222-223)
 - i. What can you understand from this? *From this, we can understand that Mrs. McIntyre doesn’t want Mr. Guizac to bring his cousin over to marry one of her African American farm workers simply because she is white and he is black. Mr. Guizac claims she won’t care because she is in camps, but what type of camps is unsaid.*
3. Now summarize the information related in the teacher introduction above. Present it in whatever way is most comfortable for you and works best for your students.
- a. Ask your students if they noticed that The Displaced Person never uses the words “World War II/WWII” or “Holocaust” or “Segregation.”

