

Curriculum Units by Fellows of the Yale-New Haven Teachers Institute 1978 Volume I: Language and Writing

# **Interpreting Ideas in American Literature**

Curriculum Unit 78.01.10 by Jessie O. Sizemore

## Purpose: To develop comprehension and appreciation for our literary heritage.

My first objective is to get my students to recognize and understand the ideas of innocence, tradition, salvation, and industrialism and the loss of innocence. We will study the works of well-known American authors whose writings meet the criteria of great literature. I feel that the lack of interest on the part of my students comes from their inability to read and their cultural withdrawal. I am hoping that the approach described here will create more interest and more appreciation for American literature. I also feel that presenting the cultural background which influenced creations in American literature will help students develop some appreciation for literature as an art as well as for their American heritage.

Students will read stories and novels containing the themes listed above. Innocence is man's beginning in a new land where he dreams and strives to be free, but is tormented by his religious background. Tradition is inner conflict between the old and the new. Salvation is man's battle to save his soul. Industrialism is the great machine and its role in the loss of innocence. To help explain why these ideas are a part of American literature, I have included folklore and witchcraft stories which will give students insight about their beginning and will be interesting reading.

Before I can get students interested, I must help them understand what a writer is saying. Most skillful writers construct sentences full of subordinated thoughts but place the main ideas in the main clauses. Students must be able to tell the difference between the lower-ranking idea and the independent idea. They must understand that the main clause is the basic structure of a sentence, and that modifying clauses and phrases add details or explain conditions which define or limit the meaning of the main clause. I feel that most of the students I teach are not aware of the importance of sentence structure. Most of them become confused when I talk about coordination and especially subordination. I believe that this causes their poor comprehension and their lack of interest and keeps them from being able to follow ideas and directions. Therefore, my second objective is to get students to understand the thought process in sentence syntax. This will be done through diagnostic testing and reviewing sentences taken from various forms of literature (excluding poetry, which will be discussed later). We will identify all kinds of sentences: simple, compound, complex, and compound-complex.

Students will learn about various sentence patterns and be able to identify subjects and predicates. They will know the difference between clauses and phrases, and remember that the important thought is always found in the main clause.

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Since creative writers use figurative language to heighten expression, students will familiarize themselves with symbolism, imagery, irony, allusion, allegory, and archetypes found in American literature. The following literary terms will be covered: short story, novel, drama, poetry, essay, biography, autobiography, plot, journals, characterization, setting, plays, conflict, protagonist, antagonist, point of view, tone, metaphor, analogy, mood, satire, foreshadowing, coincidence, climax. This list will grow as we progress because the works we read will contain unfamiliar references to myths and historical events. To give an example of defining the terms: the short story is one of the most popular and oldest literary forms. The short story is a brief narrative. Since primitive times, fundamental human instincts have been talked about using fiction.

Not unsimilar to these tales of old is the folklore of today. Contributions to our American literature have been made by Blacks, lumberjacks, cowboys, sailors, and others. A good example of the incredulous yarns which circulate about the fire in loggers' camps is the Paul Bunyan Saga. Many of these tall stories have been gathered and written down by James Stevens.—H. C. Sheikert, *Short Stories* (New York, 1934), p. xxv.

My fourth objective will be to teach four genres of literature in the following order: short stories, novels, plays, and poetry. Essays, biographies, autobiographies, personal letters, notebooks, sketchbooks, and diaries of authors will be explored in order to give students insight into the author's background and to point out to students that art and form are very much a part of the author. We also will use slides, artifacts of the author's times, filmstrips, recordings, and films. We will use as many different types of work by a single author as we can so students will get to know and understand him. We will get to know how the writer creates his or her art through style, characterization, setting, plot, point of view, theme, and tone. I want to get the students to respond to point of view and tone, and to think critically about the implications of the work. I hope to achieve these goals through this multiple approach.

Short stories and novels will be compiled from such authors as Hawthorne, Melville, Faulkner, James, Wright, Ellison, Jesse Stuart, James Baldwin, Toomer, Shirley Jackson, and others if time will permit. These stories will be taught not only as examples of art, but in order to increase students' awareness of the variety of human experience. All aspects of the short story and the novel will be taught. Hawthorne's *Scarlet Letter* will then be studied in class to help students recognize the ideas of innocence and salvation which are found in other American novelists' works. We hope to view the film *Scarlet Letter* in class. I chose the short story to teach first because students have a big adjustment to make upon returning to school. I have included rhetorical thought exercises and literary terms because students must be equipped to understand what they read.

The unit on short stories will last for eight weeks. One week will be spent testing and reviewing exercises to develop sentence sense. After students have grasped these exercises, homework assignments will be made, and one day each week will be devoted to discussions on homework and to answering any questions students may have. Some exercises have been included to develop understanding of syntax. Mimeographed sheets of literary terms will be given to students. They will keep these in their notebooks, identifying the terms they know and looking up the others in literary dictionaries which are in the school library. We will spend two class periods discussing these after the class has been given time to look the words up.

Four class periods will then be spent on Hawthorne and his background. Students will view slides and pictures of artifacts dating from the seventeenth through the nineteenth centuries, and will learn about the influence of historical customs and traditions on the works they will read. Each student will research a topic relevant to the period discussed, and will present an oral report to the class on what he or she has learned. (Two or three class periods will be devoted to these reports.) Students will pool their knowledge of historical topics to make a class scrapbook. Along with this activity we will read Hawthorne's stories "The Ambitious Guest" and "Young

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Goodman Brown," using the questions and exercises that accompany this unit.

Two of the five weeks left will be spent reading other short stories by Hawthorne and the other authors. During the last three weeks students will read *The Scarlet Letter* in class and at home. Class discussions will deal with Hawthorne's personality, style, point of view, use of symbolism, and ideas about innocence, tradition, salvation, and industrialism. Finally, we will view the movie and compare it with the novel. Class activities will include a "question box" for which everyone will write questions about characters and scenes; writing projects about characters, setting, and incidents in the novel; and a "newspaper" about important events that occurred in the stories or in *The Scarlet Letter*.

#### **Introduction to Unit**

The ideas of innocence, tradition, salvation, and industrialism and the loss of innocence have been present in American Literature since its origin. Before the colonists arrived around 1630, they thought their dreams were to come true in a new land which might be compared to a beautiful garden where nothing was blemished by all the sins of the Old World.

In the first writings, we see evidence of the writers clinging to nature because of its order and purity. Man's inability to cope with nature created many problems for him. So literary craftsmen used these human experiences to design fictional plots. Frontier life provided a setting for many fictional stories about man's purging himself to fit in with his new and pure surroundings. Innocent characters were featured in beautiful garden settings. The real encounters people had in the westward movement and Indian wars brought people back to their traditional ideas; failure to understand their new experiences led to superstition and witchcraft. Ancestral beliefs created many problems for the Puritans. So a battle to save themselves from evil laid the foundations for literary art. Growth in America brought about a great change. Railroads, shipping, mass production, foreign trade, and a change in political ideas are responsible for industrialism and the loss of innocence. So American authors used these ideas to create stories which present characters with points of view and moods woven into plots. These plots developed in settings from America's beginning through America's industrial age. We may derive the author's meaning through his use of symbolism. We will strive to discover artistry in American literature.

#### **Biographical Facts about Nathaniel Hawthorne**

The first American author we will study is Nathaniel Hawthorne, who spent most of his life (1804-64) in Salem, Massachusetts. Two events in early life enabled him to achieve the kind of perspective on human existence which is necessary for philosophical romance at its best. Because of an injured foot which Hawthorne acquired playing ball when he was about nine years old, he was not able to attend school or be with his friends for three years. His father, a sea-captain, died from yellow fever when Nat was four years old. This left him with a mother who isolated him from everyone except his relatives and his two sisters. With his isolated family and his wounded foot, all Nathaniel did was read and daydream.

Hawthorne's second period was his self-imposed retirement from the world after graduating in 1825 from Bowdoin College in Brunswick, Maine. This period lasted about twelve years. Hawthorne continued to live apart from normal existence in a world of dreams, spending most of his time in a dismal room on the third floor of the old house in which his family lived. In 1828, his first short stories and sketches appeared anonymously in gift-books and magazines. In 1837, these stories were collected and published as Hawthorne's *Twice-Told Tales*. His injury and his self-retirement did not make him a recluse but made him a modest, reticent, imaginative man. His contact with nature and his devotion to the past can be found in all of his

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works.

During the early years when Nathaniel was recuperating from his foot injury, his mother, Elizabeth, took him and his sisters to visit their uncles in Raymond, Maine. While there, Hawthorne enjoyed the backwoods.

Along with developing the habit of reading, he enjoyed hunting, fishing, swimming, skating, and walking. Legg's Hill, Rattlesnake Mountain, Thomas Pond, and Sebago Lake were places that Hawthorne dreamed of all year round.

Hawthorne destroyed all known copies of his first novel, *Fanshawe* (1828). He married Sophia Peabody in 1842, and they moved to Concord and lived in a house called the "Old Manse." These were the happiest years of his life. He worked at the Custom House as a measurer of salt and coal. He invested in the Brook Farm Experiment, in the hope that the community would provide a good place to begin married life. Realizing its lack of privacy, he moved back to Salem where he worked as a surveyor. He was removed from office by scheming politicians in 1849. His best friend was the fourteenth President of the United States, Franklin Pierce, who appointed Hawthorne as consul at Liverpool and Manchester, England. After living abroad for seven years, Hawthorne returned to Concord in 1860. He died in Plymouth, New Hampshire on May 19, 1864, and was buried in the Sleepy Hollow Cemetery.

He was a country gentleman, a product of the past because his ancestors interested him greatly. He was obsessed with the nature of sin. His first American ancestor, William Hawthorne, arrived from England in 1630 and was remembered for having given orders to have Quakers whipped in the streets. William's son John was one of the judges at the Salem witch trials and was said to have drawn a curse from one of the victims upon himself and his descendants. Hawthorne read much Colonial history and delighted in old documents. He studied the psychology of the Puritans and peopled his stories with characters who are either outright Puritans or who possess Puritan traits.

His theme is "unpardonable sin" found in the presumption and bigotry of the Puritans. Aspects of his local community and local people are used in most of his works. Hawthorne's other preoccupation was the use of the literary symbol, the significant object which could be manipulated to reveal ever-deeper sources of meaning. Most of his successful works concentrate on the forces of conflict in a single, often ambiguous object— a flower, a statue, an embroidery symbol. His use of symbolism greatly influenced later American fiction.

### LESSON PLANS

### **Questions for "The Ambitious Guest"**

- 1. Why does the author begin the story with the fireside scene?
- 2. How is the cheerfulness of the inside emphasized?
- 3. What does the author mean by saying that the family had found the "herb, heart's-ease?"
- 4. Describe the White Hills.
- 5. What picture does the word Notch suggest?
- 6. Where does the story really begin?

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- 7. Give a brief sketch of the young stranger
- 8. How does the young man's enthusiasm affect the father; the mother; the grandmother; the daughter; the children?
- 9. What is the "unutterable horror" of the catastrophe?

## Composition

- 1. Give a brief summary of the story in your own words.
- 2. Prepare a newspaper story of the tragedy.
- 3. Write a biographical sketch of the young man.
- 4. Write a short, short story from one of the character's points of view, assuming that the accident had not occurred.
- 5. Write a paper telling about a related personal experience using a theme from the story:
  - I. Explain the situation.
- II. Describe as effectively as you can your thoughts and feelings while involved in the experience.
  - III. Explain the outcome; what people, event, or conditions helped you?
- IV. After the above assignment, write a character sketch about the person who might be involved in the situation you created. Be honest and objective, give personal qualities and background, important influences and experiences, and physical appearances.
- V. Take the character you have developed through the event you created by giving a full description of both, using dialogue and point of view.

I am hoping to get my students to understand the narrative technique of developing character and plot.

The American history teacher and I will work together to get students to understand the context and source of the materials we will be using. I will work to show how the form is the author's vehicle for presenting his or her artistic creation.

#### **Procedure**

1. Have students study the highlights of the times in which the author lived or lives. Better groups will be assigned entire stories; slower groups will be assigned parts, and I will read orally the beginning of the story to clarify different references and to introduce characters.

### Questions for "Young Goodman Brown"

- 1. Trace the background of Goodman Brown.
- 2. What are the story's main themes? Give a full explanation of each.
- 3. Write a sentence or two which tell the story of Goodman Brown.
- 4. What might the names symbolize: Goodman, Faith, etc.?
- 5. How is the devil presented?
- 6. How is the idea of tradition presented?
- 7. How is the idea of salvation presented?
- 8. Who might Goodman Brown be?
- 9. How does the author present the past?
- 10. How does Hawthorne present good and evil in his characters?

Questions of this kind should help students recognize Hawthorne's style. Students will write character sketches, discuss and write about characters' points of view, and describe settings.

#### Research

- 1. New England Witchcraft.
- 2. New England Indians: history and traditions.
- 3. The Salem Delusion.

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- 4. The Puritan Stereotype.
- 5. New England Towns in the late seventeenth through early nineteenth centuries.
- 6. A school during these times.
- 7. Law in New England during this period.
- 8. Customs during this period.

These reports will be reviewed in class.

## **Write About the Story**

- 1. The name of the story.
- 2. The author and something about him or her.
- 3. A description of your favorite character.
- 4. A short paragraph about an interesting minor character.
- 5. Describe the opening or closing setting.
- 6. Write a summary of the story in no more than six sentences.
- 7. Describe or be able to discuss three of the following:
  - a. The major character's problems in growing up.
  - b. The type of housing in the story.
  - c. The clothing worn by the characters.
  - d. The ideas of the major characters.
  - e. The personality of a character.
  - f. The education of a character.
  - g. Your opinion.

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written by is a(an) story about a The story, which takes place during is
The most important character(s) in the story is(are)
He/she/they is/are who
His/her/their most important decision is when
The problem is finally solved when
l liked/disliked because
The lessons that teaches is that
I approve/disapprove of the ending because
The only change I might want to make in the story is that
I would recommend this book to other students who because

## **Further Short Story Projects**

- 1. Have students research comments in American writers' diaries, sketchbooks, notebooks, letters, etc.
- 2. Have students discuss parallels to actual history.
- 3. Try to get students to put characters into comparable roles in real life.
- 4. Have them write descriptions of characters.

## Suggested Reading

### Nathaniel Hawthorne's short stories

- 1. "The Gray Champion"
- 2. "The Minister's Black Veil"
- 3. "Mr. Higginbotham's Catastrophe"
- 4. "The Great Carbuncle"
- 5. "David Swan"
- 6. "Dr. Heidegger's Experiment"
- 7. "Rappaccini's Daughter"
- 8. "The Great Stone Face"
- 9. "The Custom House"

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- 10. "Endicott and The Red Cross"
- 11. "The Maypole of Merry Mount"
- 12. "Peter Goldwaite's Treasure"
- 13. "Drowne's Wooden Image"
- 14. "Roger Malvin's Burial"
- 15. "The Snow Image"

## Collections

- 1. Twice-Told Tales
- 2. Tales of the Province House
- 3. Mosses from An Old Manse
- 4. Snow Image and Other Twice-Told Tales

## Novel

- 1. Hawthorne's Letters
- 2. Edgar Allen Poe's Review of Hawthorne's Twice-Told Tales

Individual reports will be given in class from this list.

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### **Further Remarks on Teaching Literature**

Universal themes will have to be explained to students. Man's concern about birth, death, life, love, anger, parenthood, human relationships, ambition, fear, marriage, and family will help students understand character reactions in stories. Through the interaction of characters, they will understand that time and space do not change human behavior much. I will try to get students' input in planning activities which will reveal characters' internal and external conflicts. In a given situation, we will monitor individual responses to situations which create different behavior under pressures from other people, groups, and institutions. This will be done to motivate students to read selected literature. We will discuss how these outside pressures influence characters to act in specific ways.

We will get to know how an author reveals character. He may do so (1) by what a character says, (2) by how he says it, (3) by physical description, (4) by psychological description, (5) by probing what he thinks, (6) by what he does, (7) by what others say about him, (8) by his environment, (9) by his reaction to others, (10) by the reaction of other to him.

We will stress the importance of observation of surroundings and objects in the background and how important these things are to our reactions and responses. This will help reveal character in stories. Geographical locations, topography, and scenery will strengthen students' awareness of physical settings. They will see how the author relates character to setting.

To get students to understand plot, we will start by finding out where and how they have heard the word "plot" used. I will let them plan things step by step. Then we will follow the chain of events in stories. We will follow character development through one episode after another to a climax and a conclusion. Some emphasis will be placed on how to identify a change of episode. I hope to get students to see how much unity can be given to human experience through the author's plot.

Students will learn to associate fictional characters with human behavior. They will compare themes in the different genres we study. They will learn to contrast pastoral and mechanical, repose and tension, simple and complex, tranquillity and anxiety. We will look for other themes as we work with the unit.

Drama will help students realize how the power of language portrays human conditions. Students will see how playwrights create many-faceted characters as well as stereotyped ones. Students will get to know dramatic organization, the purpose of dialogue, climax, variety, human understanding, proportioning by the playwright, and humor and emotional warmth. Students will study transitions between scenes and settings, live action, the difference between comic and serious issues, and tragic consequences. We will discuss the division of plays, and they will create new dialogue and new scenes for a given play. I will review with them various techniques used by playwrights to reveal character. Some of the questions to be asked: What personal qualities do the characters reveal through conversation? Is there a change in character? What foreshadows a certain event or action? We will look for symbolism and imagery.

Students will learn how to do role-playing before classmates and will act out scenes they like. This will help them understand human beings and also themselves. They will realize that scripts are for the stage. Examples of class activities: Take a line or your favorite line and write a complete scene; divide class into troupes and rehearse scenes and present each to class; audition for character roles; direct a scene; write out the directions for a character to follow which correspond to the dialogue, including inflections, movement, gestures, lighting and sound; listen to dramatic recordings; and see live plays when possible.

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Because the form is the meaning in poetry, the skill of reading poetry will be developed. We will discover imagery, symbols, metaphors, paradox, irony, metrics, rhythm, and patterns. Students will work to paraphrase poems and make judgments about them, and to recognize various forms. Working with poems will stimulate their imagination, stimulate their creative ability with words, and help them to understand life. We will collect the best in poetry that contains the ideas of innocence, tradition, salvation, and industrialism and the loss of innocence.

Students will get to know how poets use language to achieve a certain stylistic effect. After analyzing style, they should use alternative ways of expressing ideas, construct better sentences, and create a variety of sentences for the right occasion. Various forms of poetry will be studied, such as lyrics, sonnets, narratives, poems, and ballads. We will also touch upon the American hero in American folklore.

Writing will be a part of the entire course. Because of the immaturity of students' construction and interpretation of sentences, I hope to see growth in these areas. I will get students to write all kinds of sentences; simple, compound, complex, and compound-complex. This will help them become aware of the form of their language. Topics will be given which they will develop as fully as possible in one sentence. Sentences will grow into paragraphs, compositions, and themes. Well-constructed sentences from literature will be used. An example from The *Good Earth*:

"All through the late spring and early summer the water rose and at last it lay like a great sea, lovely and idle, mirroring cloud and moon and willows and bamboos whose trunks were submerged."

We will write paragraphs after students' knowledge of sentence sense has increased. After they can write all kinds of sentences well, we will practice writing topic sentences and developing these topic sentences by using details, examples, comparisons, contrasts and summaries and conclusions. We hope to develop unity and clarity of thought. Besides emphasizing the presentation of ideas, we will give attention to the mechanics of writing. Class discussions will be held using the opaque projector to focus in on constant errors made by students. Persistence in errors will be dealt with in individual conferences.

During this year's work, students will practice reading and writing about the best there is in American literature. We will continue to search for the best writings and a variety of styles, forms, and sources. I feel that before I can get my students to read and think critically about American literature, I have to use all the techniques 1 have included. I am expecting to get them to realize that American literature is a definite part of their heritage. I hope to see a change in their attitudes towards reading and in their choices of reading. I am sure students will gain insight into why America is America.

#### Sentence Sense

Subject Predicate

What is talked about in a sentence. What is said about your subject.

Simple Subjects Simple Predicates

Talk about nouns and pronouns. Use verbs and verb phrases to talk about nouns and/or pronouns.

Subjects Modified Predicates Modified

Adjectives before and after nouns Adverbs before and after the verb

and pronouns. and/or the verb phrase.

Subjects with Prepositional Predicates with Prepositional

Phrases Phrases

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Prepositional phrases used as Prepositional phrases used as adverbs. adjectives.

Noun Clauses as Subjects Noun Clauses in Predicates

Gerunds as Subjects Gerunds in Predicates
Infinitives as Subjects Infinitives in Predicates

Participle Phrases in Predicates

#### Sentence Patterns

S+V S+V+O S+V+IO+O S+LV+C S+V+C+OC Any pattern or any part of a pattern may be combined.

#### Notes

- 1. Subjects are made from nouns and/or pronouns and can have modifiers.
- 2. The verb or verb phrase introduces the predicate; everything after the verb is a part of the predicate.

#### Kinds of Sentences

Simple Compound Complex Compound-Complex

#### Notes

- 1. A *phrase* is a group of words used together.
- 2. A *clause* is a group of words with a subject and a verb used together.

#### Noun Clauses

Students must be able to recognize noun clauses and how they work in sentences and also how they vary in position. They will work with transformation of sentences. Examples:.

- 1. Someone discovered that the building was on fire.
- 2. The trouble was that she had the pills, but no water.
- 3. The idea that matter and energy are different forms of one reality occurred suddenly to the young scholar.

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### Notes

1. Noun clauses are units of words which are used as nouns: subjects, direct and indirect objects, objects of prepositions, predicate nominatives, objective complements.

Making Complex Sentences
From these sentences make one sentence:
We streamed with perspiration.
We swarmed up the rope.
We came into the blast of cold wind.
We gasped like men.
We plunged into icy water.
Streaming with perspiration, we swarmed up the rope, and coming into the blast of cold wind, gasped like men plunged into icy water.
Identify each sentence as simple, compound, or complex.
<ol> <li>The rear tire needed no air, but the front tire did</li> <li>The ball circled the rim of the basket and finally slipped in</li> <li>Unless Henry can obtain a scholarship, he may not go to college next fall</li> <li>Dad is unhappy about his golf score, which has not been improving lately</li> <li>On this tour, you can take a side trip to Disney World at no extra cost</li> <li>At the end of the season, the team was given a banquet and was presented with trophies</li> <li>The campers said good-bye with regret; they would not meet again for a long time</li> <li>The motor sputtered and then stalled</li> <li>Did you know that the onion is a lily?</li> </ol>

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Make a sentence for each of the kinds of sentences.

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Scarlet Letter ; Hawthorne

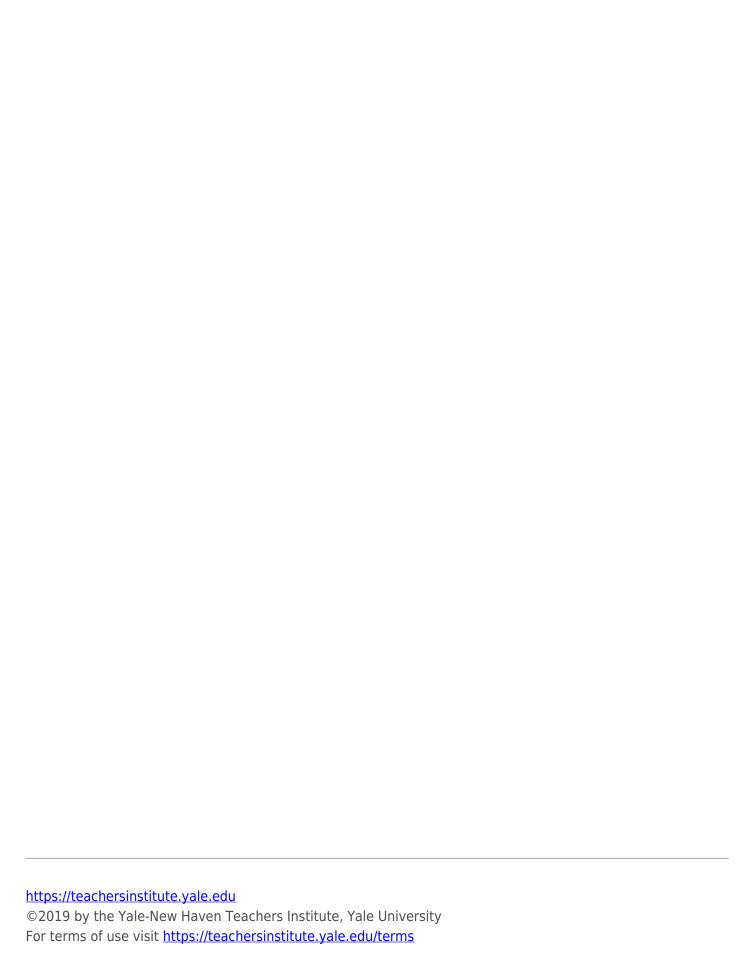
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