Ahimsa Center- K-12 Teacher Institute Lesson Plan

Title of Lesson: Creating Nonviolence: A Theater of the Oppressed Approach to Things Fall Apart

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Grade Level/ Subject Areas: English II- World Literature

Class Size: 10-30

Time/ Duration of Lesson: 5-8 days

Goals/ Objectives of Lesson:
- Students will develop a strong understanding of Ahimsa and how it applies to their lives.
- Students will develop a definition of violence and relate personal examples from their lives.
- Students will adapt a piece of prose literature into a dialogue that can be reenacted in groups.
- Students will engage in a personal analysis of the various elements of violence that are acted out in scenes and revitalize subsequent reenactments with their own interpretation of nonviolence.
- Students will evaluate what characteristics within an individual need to change in order to effectively resolve potential violence.
- Students will practice ahimsa.

Lesson Abstract:
The purpose of this lesson is to teach 30 tenth graders with an emphasis in World Literature about the transformative power of ahimsa, or the pursuit of truth through nonviolence. Incorporating Augusto Boal’s Theater of the Oppressed techniques, students will engage in adapting a piece of violent prose to dialogue, performing a group skit of the scene, and reenacting the scene multiple times in order to reach the ideal, peaceful scenario. While this lesson is written specifically within the context of Things Fall Apart, its methodology is applicable to any piece of literature that contains violence.

Lesson Content:
Mohandas Gandhi, in his explanation of ahimsa, states, “Nonviolence is the greatest force at the disposal of mankind. It is mightier than the mightiest weapon of destruction devised by the ingenuity of man. Literally speaking, ahimsa means non-violence towards life but it has much higher meaning. It means that you may not offend anybody; you may not harbor uncharitable thought, even in connection with those whom you consider your enemies. To one who follows this doctrine, there are no enemies. A man who believes in the efficacy of this doctrine finds in the ultimate stage, when he is about to reach the goal, the whole world at his feet. If you express your love—ahimsa—in such a manner that it impresses itself indelibly upon your so-called enemy, he must return that love. This doctrine tells us that we may guard the honor of those under our charge by delivering our own lives into the hands of the man who would commit the sacrilege. And that requires far greater courage than delivering of blows. Ahimsa or non-injury, of course, implies non-killing. But, non-injury is not merely non-killing. In its comprehensive meaning, ahimsa or non-injury means entire abstinence from causing any pain or harm to another living being, either by thought, word, or deed. Non-injury requires a harmless mind, mouth, and hand.” It is these very principles of nonviolence that can be assessed in any
situation of violence, including violence within literature. The author of Things Fall Apart, Chinua Achebe, grew up in a very violent and hostile environment and subsequently wrote about violent situations through his characters’ lives, all of which can be looked at through a lens of ahimsa.

Chinua Achebe grew up in a very transitional atmosphere in Nigeria. Born in 1930, he was raised in the crossroads of a Nigerian culture that was feeling the effects of approximately 50 years of British colonization. Born into a converted Christian family, Achebe developed a critical approach to all forms of nationalism. One of his most prominent stances against the government occurred within the Nigerian-Biafra conflict from 1967-70. Clinging to the age-old model of tribal allegiance, many communities found it unnecessary and unjust to adhere to the political pressures of the national government when the expanse of their loyalty reached only to the edges of their respective villages. One region in particular, Biafra, seceded from the nation, and was subsequently quarantined by the military, resulting in the death of scores of women and children due to hunger. During this time, Achebe worked for the Biafran government as a journalist, indicting the national government for their excessive and inhumane acts of violence. It becomes clear that Achebe, in exposing injustices in his journalism, broadcasting, and literature, is firmly against any form of violence.

Achebe’s most renowned novel, Things Fall Apart, is riddled with instances of violence towards the self, children, women, and society. The violence that he presents in his characters is manifested in emotions, thoughts, body language, actions, customs, laws, and policies. Firmly rooted in a patriarchal system, the Ibo people establish a firm and unchangeable social hierarchy with women at the bottom. This inherently violent system begins to be threatened by the invasion of the Christian religion due to its acceptance of women converts. Feeling the threat to the very culture that validates his violence and superiority, the main character, Okonkwo, engages in a series of violent outbursts. Only capable of showing the emotion of anger, it is his children and wives who are the victims of his bouts of violence. Essentially, Achebe shows the reader the insufficiencies of a patriarchal order through the dominance of Okonkwo’s character and its painful effects on his family members.

Gandhi believed that the aforementioned notions of Ahimsa needed to focus on both the means and the ends. The process of achieving nonviolence must come, according to Gandhi, through an internal process of nonviolent experimentation, which ultimately will lead to a more peaceful outcome concurrent with personal transformation. Using literature as a cultural context, the philosophical means, or process of ahimsa, can be practiced through the techniques of Augusto Boal’s Theater of the Oppressed. Boal, a native Brazilian, developed and refined a plethora of drama activities that strive to not only assess and transform various forms of violence, but to also engage everyone present, including the audience. His revolutionary theater techniques, similar to the concept of ahimsa, force the individual to focus on the process of personal transformation as a necessary component in creating a nonviolent society. One method in particular calls for the perpetual reenactment of a scene until the “ideal” is accomplished. If we set Gandhi’s ideal of a peaceful, nonviolent outcome as the ultimate goal, then we can measure and evaluate the means that it takes within the individual or society in order to transform violent situations to accomplish that goal. More specifically, as students reenact the two spousal abuse scenes from Things Fall Apart, critical attention should be placed on the necessary changes that
would need to occur within Okonkwo in order to avoid a violent climax. In the end, students are not just creating ahimsa, but practicing it as well.

North Carolina State Content Standards: English II
Students will:
- (1.03) demonstrate the ability to read, listen and view a variety of increasingly complex print and non-print expressive texts appropriate to grade level and course literary focus.
- (2.02) create responses that examine a cause/effect relationship among events by effectively summarizing situations [and] showing a clear, logical connection among events.
- (2.03) pose questions prompted by texts and research by accessing cultural information or explanations from print and non-print media sources.
- (3.01) examine controversial issues.
- (3.04, 5.03) identify and analyze personal, social, historical or cultural influences, contexts, or biases.
- (5.01) make comparisons and connections between historical and contemporary issues [and] understand the importance of cultural and historical impact on literary texts.

Guiding Questions:
- How do we define violence? What are different modes of exhibiting violence? (body language, verbal language, actions, thoughts, emotions, practice of customs, laws, etc.)
- What are ways that individuals exhibit violence consciously? Unconsciously?
- How do we avoid violent situations from happening in the first place?
- What is the benefit of empowering women in society?
- What is the benefit of personal transformation on society?

Materials Needed:
- Things Fall Apart by Chinua Achebe
- Open area for performance
- Gandhi, the movie
- Gandhi, Autobiography

Lesson Context:
This lesson would be conducted over the course of a few days while reading Things Fall Apart. The treatment of women is a central issue that can be traced throughout the entire text. Ideally, the methodology for this lesson would be repeated with various chapters in order to create a more thorough investigation and analysis of violence in Things Fall Apart. Another consideration would be to use the same Theater of the Oppressed techniques but trace the systemic implications of Colonialism through religious or economic violence. This investigation would need to take place with a group that has become accustomed to the techniques, because the ideal nonviolent outcome would be more debatable and controversial than violence towards women.
Teaching Activities:

**Introductory vocabulary discussion: (30-60 minutes)**
Students should be introduced to the term *Ahimsa* and evaluate the various components of the definition in anecdotes from Gandhi’s life and the Biafran National Anthem. **First,** provide a working definition from the aforementioned quote. Discuss various individuals and social, political, or religious movements that have embraced the concept. Discuss the effectiveness of nonviolence in an age of abundant terrorism. Students should begin to formulate an opinion on whether or not they find ahimsa to be an effective concept. **Secondly,** review chapters 8 and 9 of Gandhi’s Autobiography (the train and subsequent carriage ride in South Africa) and show them the salt march scenes from the Gandhi movie. Discuss the ways that Gandhi uses Ahimsa as both the means and the ends in each respective situation. It is important that students establish a sense of not only the ideal peaceful outcome, but the ideal peaceful means to bring about that outcome. **Thirdly,** have students read the Biafran National Anthem that follows. Drawing a connection to the separatist government that Achebe endorsed, ask students to write about and discuss the manner in which the anthem supports the definition of ahimsa and which portions of the anthem are not in congruence with its definition.

**LAND OF THE RISING SUN**

*Biafran National Anthem*

Land of the rising sun, we love and cherish,
Beloved homeland of our brave heroes;
We must defend our lives or we shall perish,
We shall protect our hearts from all our foes;
But if the price is death for all we hold dear,
Then let us die without a shred of fear.

Hail to Biafra, consecrated nation,
Oh fatherland, this be our solemn pledge:
Defending thee shall be a dedication,
Spilling our blood we’ll count a privilege;
The waving standard which emboldens the free
Shall always be our flag of liberty.

We shall emerge triumphant from this ordeal,
And through the crucible unscathed we’ll pass;
When we are poised the wounds of battle to heal,
We shall remember those who died in mass;
Then shall our trumpets peal the glorious song
Of victory we scored o’er might and wrong.

Oh God, protect us from the hidden pitfall,
Guide all our movements lest we go astray;
Give us the strength to heed the humanist call:
‘To give and not to count the cost" each day;
Bless those who rule to serve with resoluteness,
To make this clime a land of righteousness

**Brainstorm Writing exercise: Defining Violence (60-75 minutes)**
Directions: Tell students that they will be using all of the ideas that they can come up with about violence and how it is spread to create an organized group paragraph. Explain the difference between *connotation* and *denotation* and encourage students to use both in the process. Students should be in groups of 4-6, depending on class size, and seated in desks in a close circle.

Deliver the instructions one step at a time:
1. **Brainstorming:** Every student should have his or her own sheet of paper. When the activity begins, students should write down any definition, personal experience, memory, or historical example that relates to violence. Instruct students that they need to write in complete sentences and that phrases or words will not suffice. Once a student has finished a statement, she/he should place it in the middle of the circle and take a new paper from another student. After reading the comment on the paper, which may or may not generate a new idea or memory in the reader, the student should write another idea about violence. Again, the student should place the paper in the middle, grab a new one, read the comments, and write a new idea. This process should repeat itself for approximately 8 minutes until the pages are relatively full of ideas. Note: inform students that the whole idea behind swapping pages and reading comments is to allow other people’s ideas to call upon ideas in their minds that they might not have thought about unless they were prodded.

2. **Selecting and sharing comments:** Instruct students to get their original paper back, read all the comments, and circle the one that has the most substance and carries a strong impression. This does not have to be the longest idea on the page, but rather the comment that the individual student relates to the most. One at a time, students should go around the circle, read the comment, and explain why they selected that particular statement. Students should also inquire as to who wrote the statement and if they have anything else to add about its importance.

3. **Writing an organized Paragraph:** Instruct students that they are to work together to create an organized paragraph using all of the circled statements. You can steer them in the right direction as much as necessary- some students will need to be told more explicitly to figure out what the comments have in common, how to decide upon an order of statements, etc. Inform students that they can add new sentences and minimally change a few words in circled statements, but that they must keep the validity of the statement intact. Since this portion of the exercise focuses on organized writing, teachers may want to review the importance of topic sentences and transitions. Ultimately, the goal should be to get students to write a highly organized paragraph with sound structure, not just a string of circled statements. Encourage students to edit final products for organization and grammar.

4. **Large group sharing:** Have one representative from each group read their paper to the larger group. The teacher (or student representative) should write down bullet points on the board that includes all the aspects of violence that are discussed. Feedback can be given by the teacher or solicited from the students on the effectiveness of paragraph organization and depth of ideas.
5. additions, omission, or revisions?: Ask students if they have any feedback about the various definitions and examples of violence and how it is spread. Encourage them to add anything to the list that they see as pertinent to its complete definition. Leave the bullet points on the board as a working definition. It may become necessary to repeat this step of the process throughout the next few activities.

Pre-reading: (Homework or 25-30 minutes in class reading)
Students should read Chapter 4 in Things Fall Apart. While this lesson is written directly for this passage, the method can be used for multiple scenes in the text or other pieces of literature. Other chapters that contain an element of violence for theatrical study are:

- Chapter 7: The murder of Ikemefuna
- Chapter 9: The search for Ezinma’s iyi-uwa
- Chapter 17: Nwoye’s conversion to Christianity
- Chapter 22: The burning of the church
- Chapter 23: The arrest and torture of the Ibo leaders

Group Script Writing: (90 minutes)
Place students in groups of 4-6. I recommend smaller groups at first and expanding the number of group members as students become accustomed to the techniques of Theater of the Oppressed.

In groups, students are to write a 2-page dialogue of the major events in the chapter, paying specific attention to the details that result in the climatic beating of Ojiugo at the end of the chapter. The following characters should be employed in the dialogue: Okonkwo, Ezinma, Nwoye, and Ojiugo. Tell students to focus the dialogue storyline around Okonkwo, and his wanderings around the complex as he waits for his wife to return. Students do not have to rely on quotes alone from the text, but can create quotes that the are reflective of the character’s nature within the context of the chapter. If there are more group members than roles, then instruct students to add in other characters from the novel, carefully considering how they would interact if they were present in the scene. However, it is imperative that these characters do not distort the preexisting textual validity. The ultimate goal should be to write a dialogue as close to the textual prose as possible.

Note: Each teacher should decide the best way to encourage full group participation. Some groups work well with having one person as the group scribe, while other groups may need to pass the script from student to student in order to achieve full participation in the writing process.

Gandhian Theater of the Oppressed: (1-3 class periods)
The tenants of this pedagogy are adaptable in a myriad of ways; teacher experimentation with various formats is highly recommended.

1. The Reality Scene:
After students have had the opportunity to practice their scenes a couple of times, focusing on movement within a space, fluidity of dialogue, and believability of character portrayal, the
presentations for the class will begin. I recommend trying to procure a theater space in your school, but making space in the front of the classroom works great too. Another consideration is to form a circle with the desks/chairs and have the performances in the middle. This arrangement structurally supports the idea of group theater and encourages audience participation of the “spectactors” as Boal has called them.

Ask for a group to volunteer to go first. It is ideal for students to present without the actual scripts in order to more fully connect with body language, verbal language, and emotional reactions of their respective characters. Allow the group to go through the entire reenactment without any interruptions.

2. The Personal Critique of Violence:
Once the group is finished, ask students, with reference to the previously created group definition of violence, to journal what elements of violence that were presented in the scene. Encourage students to consider which aspect of the scene that they feel is the most important to change in order to bring about a peaceful resolution. What is the most critical change that needs to take place?

OR

The Group Critique of Violence:
Once the group is finished, ask students, with reference to the previously created group definition of violence, to brainstorm what elements of violence that were presented in the scene. Encourage students to consider which aspect of the scene that they feel is the most important to change in order to bring about a peaceful resolution. What is the most critical change that needs to take place?

3. Scene Revitalization…a Process of Experimentation:
This is the part of the process where a lot of freedom can and should be taken by the teacher to experiment with different techniques of scene revitalization. The goal is to get students, at various points in the scene, to alter the previous actions or language of a character. It is best to experiment with a single character or element of violence at a time, which is called the primary experimenter. This enables the class to put a closer lens on the specific actions, emotions, or language of a character. For instance, if a student really identified with the passivity of Okonkwo’s first wife and wants to change her behavior, the scene could be reenacted with only the change in her character. All of the other characters would then be forced to alter their performance given the new changes of the primary experimenter. The important thing to remember is that only the experimenting character should initiate changes while others change in response to her new presence in the scene. This can be repeated several times, with each character taking turns as the primary experimenter. Another method is to work with one element of violence at a time. For example, if students feel that the aggressive and passive body language of the male and female characters, respectively, is a deterrent to a peaceful outcome, then the scene can be reenacted with only changes in body language. It is possible for language and actions to change as a result of the new body language, but these changes should be reactive, as opposed to the primary, proactive experiment in the scene.

The teacher or students should decide in each succeeding round of scene revitalization which
elements or characters should serve as the primary experimenter(s). Ultimately, the goal is to reach an ideal, peaceful outcome, so if it cannot be achieved through the changes of a single primary experimenter, then we must add a secondary or tertiary experimenter into the scene.

Another important factor to keep in mind is that it is important to have students act out the changes for the characters that they are connected to. It is important to discuss the concept of empathy and how it relates to the overall energy and passion that students can bring to the stage.

Once the experiment has been altered enough to the point that it reaches an ideal, or peaceful outcome, which should be a unanimous decision from the class, then the debriefing session takes place. (If the ideal is not unanimous, then it is important for whoever objects to continue experimenting with changes to the character or element that still contains violence).

Debriefing Session: Students should respond to the following questions in writing before the teacher facilitates a class discussion:
1. Given the specifics of this chapter of literature, who and what needed to change in order to create nonviolence?
2. Was nonviolence achieved in the end? Was nonviolence used as a means to achieve that end? Explain your answers fully.
3. Do you find the outcome to be realistic? In other words, does the possibility or impossibility of the ideal scene offer any insights about the nature of violence/nonviolence?
4. How do we see Gandhi’s concept of ahimsa in the ideal scene? Is the ideal scene in complete congruence with Gandhi’s term, or could the scene attain an even higher ideal?
5. Think of a time when you experienced and a time when you perpetrated an act of violence. How could the concept of ahimsa prevent or resolve the conflict in a nonviolent manner that brought about a sense of dignity for both parties.

Assessment/Evaluation:
- The ideal form of evaluation for this exercise is to have students create the standards and norms for a successful participation rubric and then grade each other. Creating a scale of 1-4 on the board, with 4 being the highest, ask students to list components of each respective score in the categories of participation, creativity, adherence to textual validity, and adherence to the concept of ahimsa. As creators of the grading rubric and graders of each other, students will inevitably take more of an interest in active participation.

Extension Activities/Enrichment
Using the theater of the Oppressed model, act out and assess the degree to which various instances of historical cases of colonization and invasion into other countries has adhered to the principles of ahimsa.
- [www.theatreoftheoppressed.org](http://www.theatreoftheoppressed.org) has much more information on the background of Theatre of the Oppressed and workshop opportunities
Bibliography:


Niagara-Biafra Civil War. biafra.info/biafra/nigeria-biafra-civil-war-republic-of-biafra.html