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Final Project: The Most Southern Place on Earth (NEH Institute)

**Unit Overview:**

Journeying Through Mississippi:

Comparing and Contrasting Faulkner’s *As I Lay Dying* and Ward’s *Sing, Unburied, Sing*

**Subject:**

ELA/Literature

**Grade Level:**

11th and 12th Grade

**Texts:**

* [*As I Lay Dying*](http://www.powells.com/book/as-i-lay-dying-9780679732259), by William Faulkner
* Excerpts regarding the Great Depression from [*The Most Southern Place on Earth*](https://www.amazon.com/Most-Southern-Place-Earth-Mississippi/dp/0195089138), by James C. Cobb
* [*Depression and Hard Times in Mississippi: Letters*](http://www.mshistorynow.mdah.ms.gov/articles/221/index.php?s=extra&id=223) [Primary Source]
* [*Sing, Unburied, Sing*](http://www.powells.com/book/-9781501126079), by Jesmyn Ward
* “[Racism Is ‘Built into the Very Bones’ of Mississippi](https://www.theatlantic.com/magazine/archive/2018/02/jesmyn-ward-mississippi/552500/),” by Jesmyn Ward
* “[Inside Mississippi’s Notorious Parchman Prison](https://www.pbs.org/newshour/arts/inside-mississippis-notorious-parchman-prison),” by Hannah Grabenstein
* “[On Mississippi’s Gulf Coast, what was lost and gained from Katrina’s fury](https://www.washingtonpost.com/local/on-mississippis-gulf-coast-what-was-lost-and-gained-from-katrinas-fury/2015/08/26/2c00956a-4313-11e5-846d-02792f854297_story.html?noredirect=on&utm_term=.d58a57acd01a),” by DeNeen L. Brown

**Introduction:**

Literature on its own is a powerful force. Literature in conversation with relevant history and other literature is even more so. In this unit, students will be exploring William Faulkner’s *As I Lay Dying* (1930), one of the most lauded modernist novels of the twentieth century, and Jesmyn Ward’s *Sing, Unburied, Sing* (2017), which has already garnered significant praise and won the National Book Award.

Though written 87 years apart, the books have a remarkable amount in common. Both novels test the boundaries of the form and tell a disjointed story from multiple perspectives. Of course, for Faulkner, it was far more revolutionary and has become fairly common in the twenty-first century. Both chronicle a poor family’s journey across Mississippi in the name of a family member. For Faulkner’s Bundrens, it is a journey across the fictional county of Yoknapatawpha County in and around of the hills of Mississippi to bury the matriarch, Addie, in her hometown. For Jojo, a young man grappling with his racial identity and all of the strings that comes with, and his family, it is a journey north from the Gulf Coast of the state to Parchman State Penitentiary in the Delta.

While both texts are very much rooted in Mississippi, they also both speak to the greater American experience. For *As I Lay Dying*, the main experience is dealing with the ramifications of the Great Depression. For *Sing, Unburied, Sing*, the characters cannot escape the legacy of American racism: slavery, failed Reconstruction, Jim Crow laws, and those who violently cling to the idea of white supremacy even to today. Together, the two books also tackle reproductive rights, substance abuse, the effects of poverty, forgiveness, and grief.

But for any comparative study of literature to be worthwhile, the two works must also have significant differences. A principle one in the case of these two books is the authors: One is a wealthy white man living enjoying all the privileges that come with being a white man in the South (no matter the time). The other is a woman with an incredibly diverse racial background (white, black, Choctaw) who grew up poor in a society that was not kind to her. Attending to this difference and how it affects each author’s work will be a primary focus in this unit.

**Context and Rationale:**

Given the subject matter and density of these texts, it is best for 11th or 12th grade English literature course. Its primary aim in terms of literary skills is to give students practice in comparing literature in a deep, thorough, and meaningful way. Its primary aim in terms of content is to give students an opportunity to dig deeper into some of the more unsavory aspects of American history that are often glossed over or not explored in history courses. (No disrespect meant to history teachers. It is an enormous amount of content in a very short amount of time.)

**Course Work:**

This unit requires an enormous amount of reading. The reading of the novels will be done outside of the classroom. Because these texts are dense, the reading is spaced out, and the class will be spent reviewing, discussing, and writing about the reading in order to ensure not only comprehension but understanding. Discussions will be held in a variety of formats: whole-class, small-group, pair, and silent (writing and passing). Students will respond to a variety of prompts in writing to check for understanding and to process their thoughts. They will keep these gathered in a notebook in order to be able to use them as a resource for their final project.

In addition to reading the novels, the students will also be reading articles in order to deepen their knowledge of the historical context of each novel. Whole-class texts will be given to kickstart their research, and then students will form research groups to focus on one aspect that interests them. After researching, students will give a presentation on one aspect of the Great Depression and its effects on the rural South or the evolution of women’s reproductive rights (*As I Lay Dying*) and on either the effects of Hurricane Katrina in the rural South, the Parchman State Penitentiary, or Jim Crow laws between 1865 and 1965 (*Sing, Unburied, Sing*). At the conclusion of this research, each group will give a 10-minute presentation on their chosen topic.

For the final assessment of this unit, students will write an essay comparing the two novels. While students have freedom to decide what they want to focus on, options will be provided, such as comparing and contrasting the representations of women, race, or poverty. The writing will be done both in class and out of class, with workshops targeting such tasks as thesis writing, organizing and planning writing, and finding and incorporating literary criticism. Within this workshop-approach to essay writing, there will also be peer editing in small groups, to allow the editors to work with writers over an extended period of time.

**Texts:**

* *As I Lay Dying*, by William Faulkner
* Excerpts regarding the Great Depression from [*The Most Southern Place on Earth*](https://www.amazon.com/Most-Southern-Place-Earth-Mississippi/dp/0195089138), by James C. Cobb
* [*Depression and Hard Times in Mississippi: Letters*](http://www.mshistorynow.mdah.ms.gov/articles/221/index.php?s=extra&id=223) [Primary Source]
* *Sing, Unburied, Sing*, by Jesmyn Ward
* “[Racism Is ‘Built into the Very Bones’ of Mississippi](https://www.theatlantic.com/magazine/archive/2018/02/jesmyn-ward-mississippi/552500/),” by Jesmyn Ward
* “[Inside Mississippi’s Notorious Parchman Prison](https://www.pbs.org/newshour/arts/inside-mississippis-notorious-parchman-prison),” by Hannah Grabenstein
* “[On Mississippi’s Gulf Coast, what was lost and gained from Katrina’s fury](https://www.washingtonpost.com/local/on-mississippis-gulf-coast-what-was-lost-and-gained-from-katrinas-fury/2015/08/26/2c00956a-4313-11e5-846d-02792f854297_story.html?noredirect=on&utm_term=.d58a57acd01a),” by DeNeen L. Brown