LESSON: Conversations about Johnny Depp as Tonto, and Representations of Native Americans in Popular Culture

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For “Native Americans in New England,” a National Endowment for the Humanities Summer Institute
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Introduction

This three-day lesson is intended to help students write short essays in which they synthesize multiple pieces of source material into their own arguments. Moreover, it is intended to introduce students to a series of public conversations taking place around media representations of Native American characters, and to see how the various arguments and perspectives intersect within that conversation. As stated on the essay question found below:

The cinematic representation of Native Americans has been a problematic issue since the early days of film. In recent years, Native and non-Native insiders and outsiders to Hollywood have expressed concern about how Native Americans are portrayed, reliance on stereotypes, and which actors step into those roles. In the spring and summer of 2013, those conversations got a higher profile with the release of Disney’s big-budget summer film, The Lone Ranger, in which Johnny Depp played the well-known character Tonto.

Over three days, students will wrestle with these ideas through (a) reading and viewing a total of seven sources, (b) articulating ideas about those sources, and the arguments and perspectives within them, through class discussion, and (c) writing a 40-minute timed essay conveying what they think are the most important ideas within those seven sources.

Guiding Questions

- What objections do critics have to the representation of Native Americans—especially Johnny Depp’s character “Tonto”—in the 2013 film version of The Lone Ranger?
- What counterarguments do supporters of the film, including those who helped create it, use to respond to those concerns? Which objections do you think the creators of the film anticipated before the film was released?
- How does the history of Native American representation inform this discussion, among supporters, critics, and others?

Learning Objectives

After completing this lesson, students should be able to:
- Articulate the dominant perspectives and arguments in the public debate over representations of Native Americans in The Lone Ranger;
• Discuss how those sources can be used in concert with one another to get a more complete picture of those different perspectives and arguments; and
• Effectively communicate a position on what factors are most relevant.

Background

Since nearly the beginning of film, minorities have been represented in ways that used negative stereotypes. Likewise, protest and critique of those stereotypes also reach back to the first days of film. The most famous early example was the film *Birth of a Nation*, which critic Andrew Sarris said “was regarded as outrageously racist” even when it was released in 1915 (Ebert, 2003). The NAACP protested the film at the time; the organization now calls that protest “the beginning of a profound and ongoing commentary on Hollywood and the power of media to shape our world” (NAACP, 2010). Such representations, created by white filmmakers, largely for white audiences, have been contested throughout history, even if protests have not always been successful in the short term.

Native Americans have a different history of stereotypical representation in popular culture and mass media. Representations of Native individuals and peoples have ranged from savage raiders to noble savages. “Either an enemy or a friend,” writes John E. O’Connor, “he was never an ordinary human being on his own terms” (1993, p. 17). The treatment of Native Americans in the TV show *The Lone Ranger* exemplifies both stereotypes, none more enduringly than in the Indian sidekick Tonto.

From the time Disney announced they were not only going to revive *The Lone Ranger*, but turn it into a summer “tent-pole” blockbuster starring Johnny Depp, those invested in representations of Native Americans began voicing concerns (cf., Adrienne Keene’s *Native Appropriations* blog). These voices of concern were met by assurances that the producers, writers, director and actors were all sincere in their intentions to move away from the old Tonto, even going so far as to claim that the film is told from a Native American perspective. However, given Hollywood’s long history of problematic and sometimes outright racist representations, critics were not comforted by those assurances, and the debate continued up to and beyond the release of the film.

Daily Plan

Day One
1. As homework, students will have read or looked at the seven sources listed below, each of which is available online, and have taken notes on each.
2. At their tables, in groups of 3-4, students should briefly discuss the sources (15 minutes)
3. As a full class, discuss each of the seven sources: main arguments, context, etc. (35 minutes)

Day Two
1. Continue discussion of seven sources (30 minutes)
2. At table groups, students should discuss which combinations of sources are most revealing or useful, and why (10 minutes)
3. Each table group reports back with ideas (10 minutes)
Day Three

1. As soon as students are seated, the instructor will hand out the question (2-3 minutes)
   a. The Question: “Of all the factors that writers, directors, and producers of films should consider before creating films that depict Native Americans, which do you think are most important?”
   b. Students should have access to their notes and, if available, to the sources themselves
   c. Students should quote evidence from at least three sources

2. Students will handwrite an essay response to the question (40 minutes)

3. Instructor and students will debrief after the essays are turned in (10 minutes)

Assessment

Students will write a 40-minute timed essay in which they must convey which aspect of this conversation is most important for filmmakers to consider when representing Native Americans in film. They must use at least three of the sources available to them, but they can use as many as they want. Rubrics for scoring this assignment could range from a standard four-point scale to those used in scoring the AP Language and Composition essay questions.

The exam question reads as follows:

*The cinematic representation of Native Americans has been a problematic issue since the early days of film. In recent years, Native and non-Native insiders and outsiders to Hollywood have expressed concern about how Native Americans are portrayed, reliance on stereotypes, and which actors step into those roles. In the spring and summer of 2013, those conversations got a higher profile with the release of Disney’s big-budget summer film, The Lone Ranger, in which Johnny Depp played the well-known character Tonto.*

*Read the seven sources carefully, including the introductory information for each source. Then, in a well-organized essay that synthesizes at least three of the sources for support, examine the factors that writers, directors, and producers of films should consider before creating films that depict Native Americans.*

Basic Lesson Info

Grade Level: 11-12

Time Required: 3 class periods

Subject Areas

- History and Social Studies > People > Native Americans
- Literature and Language Arts > Place > American
- Art and Culture > Visual Arts
Skills
- Close reading
- Critical thinking
- Critical analysis
- Cultural analysis
- Persuasive writing

Resources

Sources for student readings


Sources for further teacher background information


