Teaching Merle Hodge’s *Crick Crack, Monkey*: A Lesson Plan

**I. Introduction**

Merle Hodge’s *Crick Crack, Monkey*, first published in 1970, is a significant text in the body of anglophone Caribbean literature. The term “crick, crack” refers to a Caribbean oral tradition, call and response technique in which, at the beginning or end of a story or folktale, the storyteller calls “Crick?” and the audience responds “Crack!” The exchange signifies that both the audience and the storyteller are aware that the story is fictional or separate from reality. *Crick Crack, Monkey* is a bildungsroman or a coming-of-age novel that focuses on the development of a young female protagonist, Tee (Cynthia), in Trinidad. Readers witness the development of Tee under the care of her two aunts, Tantie (Rosa) and Beatrice.

This teaching guide focuses on the fifteenth chapter of Hodge’s *Crick Crack, Monkey* because that chapter introduces a number of key themes present throughout the novel as well as provides insight into the critical development of the character. Three main themes present within chapter fifteen are: the influence of two imperial powers on Trinidad, namely the United States and the United Kingdom; the role of colonial education (in inculcating British culture); and the divisive socioeconomic class structure within Trinidadian society. Mikey’s gifts from the United States represent the U.S. model of modernity and upward mobility based on material or consumption; Tee’s oppressive preparation for the exams represents the oppression of British colonial education; and the hostility between Tantie and Aunt Beatrice highlights the effects of class, color, and ethnic hierarchy.

The chapter opens with Tantie unwrapping gifts from Mikey who is abroad in the United States. This short section segues into another scene where Tantie awakens Tee, who is talking in her sleep, from a dream she is having about school and the paddling the teacher gave when students did not know the answers to his question. The final segment of the chapter consists of a community celebration for Tee because she wins a scholarship to advance in her school studies. Tantie allows Tee to go live with Aunt Beatrice where she can attend St. Ann’s, a prestigious school. This chapter represents a transition for the protagonist and the author. The protagonist embarks on an experience of another “world” or social class while living with her Aunt Beatrice. Additionally, Hodge accelerates her interrogation of the values of the class of West Indians who privilege modernization and eschew “old” ways or tradition. Can the two be reconciled? Simon Gikandi argues, in “Narration in the Post-Colonial Moment: Merle Hodge's *Crick Crack, Monkey*,” that features of the novel “challenge the assumption that modernism and modernization necessarily liberate the Caribbean subject from the tyranny of tradition” (14).

**II. Central Themes**

1) *Crick Crack, Monkey* is abildungsroman, which focuses on the development of a young female protagonist in Trinidad. The bildungsroman is “one of the central genres of Caribbean fiction” (Booker and Juraga 50), and this chapter represents a key/common element in the bildungsroman: the experience of loss associated with transformation. The
theme of exile, which is central to Caribbean literature, also links to the exploration of the bildungsroman genre.

2) This chapter engages three major concepts/themes of the novel: the privileging of the U.S. and England, colonial education, and socioeconomic class structure/politics. The first theme focuses on characters’ desire to go abroad (specifically to the U.S or England) and can also be linked to the theme of exile. Students will analyze these themes and explain their relation to and presence in other parts of the narrative.

**III. Historical Context**

- Hodge published *Crick Crack, Monkey* in 1970, and it is the first major novel of its kind by a female writer in the postcolonial era. During this time, Trinidad was under the leadership of Dr. Eric Williams who helped lead the nation to its independence in 1962 (Booker and Juraga, 62). See bibliography.

- Hodge’s narrative does not directly mention WWII (1939-1945) throughout its chapters. However, the novel shows the influence of both U.S. and British power on Trinidadians which reflects a historical transfer of power from the British to the U.S. in the Caribbean during the first half of the 20th century. The U.S. acquisition of military bases in Trinidad during WWII signals the change in power. Also, it is pertinent to note the momentum and national pride won during the 1937 riots of Trinidad dissipated during war time. Booker and Jaruga states that “the cultural, economic, and social fabric of the island was powerfully altered by the presence of large numbers of American troops on bases established on the island by the United States” (62). In the narrative, readers see the presence of the U.S. mainly via the character Mikey who works on a U.S. base and then emigrates to the U.S. to work. Hodge urges a closer examination of the role the U.S plays in the Trinidadian society.

- Hena Maes-Jelinek’s chapter “The Novel from 1950-1970” reveals that Caribbean fiction “tends to be oriented toward the folk and the community, while the values it explores concerns the group, rather than individual, achievement” (128). Hodge certainly challenges readers to assess the characters’ and their own values. There is also tension in the novel between representing matters of the community and of the individual. Tee’s individual struggles represent and engage with the community’s struggles and difficulties in regard to color, ethnicity, class, etc. Hodge, however, provides readers with insight on the perspectives of various community members. The novel includes creole language in the sections set in Tantie’s home and community and oral tradition in the sections at Ma’s home. Instructors can assist students with underscoring such aspects of the narrative. See “The Novel from 1950-1970.” *A History of Literature in the Caribbean: English- and Dutch-Speaking Countries*. Albert Arnold, ed. Philadelphia: John Benjamins Company, 2001. 127-148.
IV. Discussion Questions/Paper Prompts

1) Schooling or education can play a major role in the development of a child. Booker and Juraga’s *The Caribbean Novel in English: An Introduction* reveals education of the protagonist is an important part of the bildungsroman genre (50). What is the impact of colonial education on Tee? Does the colonial educational system in *Crick Crack, Monkey* impede the development of a healthy self-image for Tee? Use passages from chapter fifteen in your answer. Note: Students can also examine additional passages in the text that provide examples of discussion on whether or not the educational system represented in the novel offers irrelevant information or information that promotes self-hatred. For example, the students do not know what sleet is because it never gets cold enough to sleet in Trinidad. Additionally, the instructor can hand out the lyrics to the three songs mentioned in chapter fifteen and play the YouTube videos of someone singing the songs.

Song and lyrics: “Men of Harlech”
http://video.google.com/videoplay?docid=1030890399539911654#

Lyrics: http://www.contemplator.com/ireland/minstrel.html

Song: “Loch Lomond” - http://www.youtube.com/watch?v=eDee-mHMdwY
Lyrics: http://www.thebards.net/music/lyrics/Loch_Lomond.shtml

Sample Answer Abstract:

The educational system represented in the novel appears to impede healthy self-esteem formation and to offer irrelevant information to the Caribbean children; these claims can be supported by an analysis of the three songs that the students sing in chapter fifteen. Sir Joseph Barnby wrote a version of the lyrics to “Men of Harlech,” which is about the defense of the Welsh Harlech Castle against seizure by the English in the 15th century. Thomas Moore wrote “The Minstrel Boy” which is a song about Irish patriotism honoring his friends who participated in the Irish Rebellion of 1798 against the British. “Loch Lomond” is a Scottish song about the captures of the British in the Jacobite Uprisings of the 18th century. Clearly, these songs have nothing to do with West Indian culture, and they are not similar to the songs or music of the Caribbean either. Also, it is not a coincidence that the school songs are all about the triumphs of the British. The songs highlight Welsh, Irish and Scottish resistance to British rule and remind readers that the British empire itself is comprised of colonized countries. Because these British songs are taught to the exclusion of Caribbean culture, they ultimately reinforce the myth of European superiority. Hodge is aware of this and writes in her essay “Challenges of
the Struggle for Sovereignty: Changing the World versus Writing Stories”: “We never saw ourselves in a book, so we didn’t exist in a kind of way and our culture and our environment, our climate, the plants around us did not seem real, did not seem to be of any importance—we overlooked them entirely” (qtd. in Gikandi “Narration” 13). Note: The information in this abstract about the songs comes from the websites listed above.

2) To what socioeconomic classes do Aunt Beatrice and Tantie belong? Highlight specific passages that led you to your answer. You may expand your analysis beyond the chapter to examine what defines Aunt Beatrice’s class and how it affects Tee once Tee gets to her home. Additionally, instructors may want to consult Daniel Segal’s “‘Race’ and ‘Colour’ in Pre-Independence Trinidad and Tobago.” See Kevin Yelvington, ed. Trinidad Ethnicity. Knoxville: U of Tennessee Press, 1993:81-115.

Sample Answer Abstract:

It is obvious to readers that Aunt Beatrice and Tantie belong to different socioeconomic classes. Scholars note the difficulty in defining class. In her book Where We Stand: Class Matters, bell hooks notes there are no “neat binary categories of white and black or male and female … when it comes to class” (6). hooks also notes Rita Mae Brown’s definition of class: “Class is much more than Marx’s definition of relationship to the means of production. Class involves your behavior, your basic assumptions, how you are taught to behave, what you expect from yourself and from others, your concept of a future, how you understand problems and solve them, how you think, feel, act” (qtd. in hooks 103). For simplicity’s sake, I will say that Aunt Beatrice belongs to a higher class than Tantie. Power and wealth are variables of class. (See James Coleman’s chart on PBS website). Aunt Beatrice is able to pay a maid to clean her home, iron, etc. They also have a vacation home. An ideology of respectability governs Aunt Beatrice as well. She uses standard English as opposed to creole, she does not mention sex and bodily functions, and she certainly does not use curse words like Tantie. Her children belong to dance troupes and have gone to top schools since they were young. Even Tantie allows Tee to live with Aunt Beatrice because she has access to the top school, which is Catholic and unlike the government-run Anglican schools. Beatrice’s daughters have better quality clothes, so they pick at Tee’s clothes that Tantie made for her which causes her (class) shame. Tantie’s household does not have the privileges of Beatrice’s household. At one point readers become aware that Mikey had difficulties finding employment. He later moves to the U.S. for financial increase. Aunt Beatrice’s disdain for her sister’s decision to marry a darker-skinned man from lowly origins also illustrates Tantie’s family’s background. Aunt Beatrice assimilates European cultural models and as a corollary maintains that having lighter skin makes one better. Thus, a rejection of blackness is implicit in the class tension and in the ideology of respectability as it is performed by Aunt Beatrice.
3) Both America and England are present in the novel. How are these countries represented? How does the novel handle the desire to go abroad? Do the countries possess, for the characters, a superior image than their own country? If so, is that problematic? Note: Instructors may want to ask a question about the two specific influences – Mikey’s path upward through exile in the U.S. and through gaining purchasing power and Tee’s path upward through the acquisition of British cultural capital (education) and exile in England.

Sample Answer Abstract:

At the narrative’s end, the narrator calls England the “Golden Gates.” Tee becomes like a superstar in the eyes of others when they find out she is going to live in England with her father. Even her cousin Beatrice brags about Tee to her friends. The teacher, Mrs. Wattman, who tells her that she will never amount to anything becomes friendly with her. Certainly the European myth, in which Europe (in this case, England) is a great place, is present in the novel. When Mikey goes away to the U.S., he constantly sends parcels with gifts for the family. He was unable to buy like this when he was on the island. Thus, some readers may interpret the narrative as portraying the U.S. as a sort of promised land that offers more opportunities and consequently see the novel as validating desire to go abroad and leave your own country. However, Hodge urges a closer critique. Mikey is sending gifts that do not materially lift Tantie from one class to another; he is not necessarily increasing (cultural) capital. Unfortunately, the characters seem to look outward towards other nations, (specifically, the U.S and England) as offering more than their own country. This view is problematic because they are not fully appreciating, privileging, or investing in their own nation. See George Lamming’s “The Occasion for Speaking.” He explains the cultural superiority British colonial assumed and the material gains some Caribbeans associated with the U.S.

V. Activities

1) Have students use magazines/newspaper clippings, the internet, clip art, etc. to create a poster display of Aunt Beatrice, Tantie and a room in each of the women’s homes. The purpose of this activity is for students to recognize the painstaking detail Hodge took in her portrayal or description of the two women. Students will have to pay close attention to detail to portray the social class of these women.

2) Assist students with the analysis of the concept of double-consciousness explored in W.E.B. Du Bois’ “Of Our Spiritual Strivings,” where he writes:

   After the Egyptian and Indian, the Greek and Roman, the Teuton and Mongolian, the Negro is a sort of seventh son, born with a veil, and gifted with second-sight in this American world,—a world which yields him no true self-consciousness,
but only lets him see himself through the revelation of the other world. It is a peculiar sensation, this double-consciousness, this sense of always looking at one’s self through the eyes of others, of measuring one’s soul by the tape of a world that looks on in amused contempt and pity. One ever feels his two-ness,—an American, a Negro; two souls, two thoughts, two unreconciled strivings; two warring ideals in one dark body, whose dogged strength alone keeps it from being torn asunder. (2)

Then have students write a letter to each of the aunts. The letters should offer advice on how they can better communicate with Tee and explain the experience of duality Tee undergoes as a result of living in both their worlds. The purpose of this assignment is to help students understand the concept of double consciousness.

3) Write up a short description of Aunt Beatrice and Tantie, including as many determinants of class as possible (e.g. education, occupation, interactions, value orientation, interactions, etc.). Then, have students interview people (after allowing them to read the descriptions) asking them with which aunt should Tee live. The purpose is to examine people’s attitudes and beliefs about class differences.

VI. Intertextual Comparisons

1) How is the fifteenth chapter of Merle Hodge’s *Crick Crack, Monkey* similar to the eleventh chapter of George Lamming’s *In the Castle of My Skin* (where G. wins a scholarship to attend high school)?

2) How does *Crick Crack, Monkey* compare with Jamaica Kincaid’s *Annie John* and Paule Marshall’s *Brown Girl, Brownstones*?

VII. Annotated Bibliography of Key Secondary Sources


The fourth chapter of this text highlights key points within Hodge’s narrative. Booker and Juraga praise Hodge’s construction of the female West Indian. They concentrate a great deal on the theme of class in the narrative and its connection to Tee’s identity formation. The chapter ends with a useful account of Trinidad’s history.


Cobham analyzes three Caribbean narratives: Hodge’s *Crick Crack, Monkey*, Marshall’s *Praisesong for the Widow*, and Erna Brodber’s *Jane and Louisa*. Concerning Hodge’s novel,
Cobham focuses on the oral tradition of the text with particular attention to the Anansi tales told by Ma. The call and response of “crick crack” “emphasizes the hiatus between fantasy and reality” (302). Cobham also notes the African connections in the narrative and the representation of motherhood as having a communal focus.


Gikandi concisely underscores some of the significant features of Hodge’s narrative. He comments on voice: “The voice is a synecdoche of the unwritten culture of the colonized … and its privileging in the text signifies an epistemological shift from the hegemony of the written forms …” (15). He also discusses the novel’s relationship to both male-centered nationalism and colonialism. Gikandi stresses that alienation and language are critical elements of the narrative as well.


Hodge clearly and concisely articulates that Caribbean culture has great value, but people (including Caribbean people) do not recognize its value. In particular, she expresses that Caribbean literature should be political and it can be used to liberate Caribbean people: “Fiction which affirms and validates our world is therefore an important weapon of resistance” (206).


The fourth chapter of this text offers theoretical analyses of Hodge’s role as an author in writing Crick Crack, Monkey. Mahabir acknowledges that Hodge is aware of her political activism via writing, and Mahabir reveals, “Implicit in the novel’s representation is the suggestion that the school functions, in Louis Althusser’s words, as an ‘ideological apparatus’ of the State” (101). This chapter emphasizes the difference between the traditional intellectuals, who are described by Gramsci as supporting the ruling class, and the organic intellectuals “who emerge to serve their class” (111). The title of organic intellectual fits Hodge.


Zodana focuses on the intersections of Africa, Europe and the Caribbean in Hodge’s narrative. Ma represents a connection to Africa, while the British colonial education “separates Tee from her Afro-Caribbean reality and identity” (147). Zodana also incorporates a discussion on the importance of language and the oral tradition.
Bibliography


