

Binary Oppositions

The Activity

One of my favourite classes to teach is *Classics of Children's Literature*, a course that not only examines what constitutes a “classic,” but also makes students realize that most children’s novels are as much written for adults as for children. C. S. Lewis, the author of *The Narnia Chronicles* went so far as to say, “I am almost inclined to set it up as a canon that a children’s story which is enjoyed only by children is a bad children’s story” (234).

Salman Rushdie’s fabulous story *Haroun and the Sea of Stories* (1990) explores mature subjects such as story-telling and freedom of speech. Rushdie describes two very different societies that live on the moon Kahani: The Guppees are democratic, freedom-loving, happy-go-lucky citizens, whereas the Chupwalas live under a tyrannical regime that enforces silence.

Given that Rushdie wrote the book in hiding, after receiving death threats for publishing *The Satanic Verses* (1988), it would be understandable if he insisted on a black and white contrast between the Guppees and Chupwalas. But Rushdie is also a postmodern writer and realized that any set of binary oppositions (e.g., subject/object, reason/emotion) must be deconstructed.

To demonstrate this tension in the text, I’ve devised a simple activity. At the start of class, I distribute slips of paper, each with a single term taken from the following list:

List A: Positive	List B: Negative
Light	Darkness
Guppee	Chupwala
Advanced technology (powered by a P ₂ C ₂ E)	Primitive and underdeveloped
Free speech	Censorship
Graceful	Inelegant
Freedom from oppression	Tyrannical rule
Warm	Cold
Happy	Sad
Right	Wrong
Love	Hate

Language	Silence
Friend	Foe
Relaxed and fun-loving	Fanatical and obsessed
Known	Mysterious

The class is capped at 30, but attendance is always a bit lower, which means that the 28 terms are easily enough. Occasionally, I have to give some students an extra slip of paper.

Next, I tell each student to wander through the class and try to find their opposing term(s). For example, a student who has “language” would have to find “silence.” While a few terms can cause confusion, students typically have no trouble finding their match.

Afterwards, students are asked to stand at opposite ends of the room, negative terms on one side and positives on the other. The students have now become the Guppees and Chupwalas, and they sense how easy it is to create an “us vs. them” mentality. Just like in the novel, where the societies are divided by Chattergy’s Wall (reminiscent of the Iron Curtain or Berlin Wall during the Cold War), so the students are separated by desks and physical distance. Each group then reads off their list of terms separately, making the contrast even clearer.

The entire activity takes less than 10 min. and provides a great introduction to a closer analysis of the novel, where we discover that in actual fact “silence had its own grace and beauty (just as speech could be graceless and ugly); and that Action could be as noble as Words; and that creatures of darkness could be as lovely as the children of the light” (125).

I always look forward to doing this activity. It gets students out of their seats and makes them experience the effect of an uncritical adoption of totalizing categories, a practice that often leads to suspicion and xenophobia. Having witnessed marginalization, students are keen to participate in our subsequent discussion of the text, as well as a more probing analysis of postmodernism.

Works Cited:

Lewis, C. S. “On Three Ways of Writing for Children.” In *Children and Literature: Views and Reviews*, ed. Virginia Haviland, Bodley Head, 1973.

Rushdie, Salman. *Haroun and the Sea of Stories*. Penguin, 1991.