



American Identity As Shaped and Portrayed Through Southern Literature

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This curriculum unit is recommended for:
8th grade English Language Arts Students

Keywords: *To Kill A Mockingbird*, *Roll of Thunder*, *Hear My Cry*, Levine Museum of the New South, Socratic Seminar

Teaching Standards: See [Appendix 1](#) for teaching standards addressed in this unit.

Synopsis: This unit is intended to focus on the comparison of perspectives between the main characters of *To Kill A Mockingbird* and *Roll of Thunder, Hear My Cry*. Students will be able to draw on outside resources in order to discuss the relevancy of reading these novels amongst a backdrop of current civil unrest including the controversy surrounding the removal of Confederate monuments and the educational redistricting in the Charlotte-Mecklenburg School District. After students have read the novels they will not only be able to do a character to character comparison, but a character to self comparison, and a text to life comparison. Students will be able to tour the Levine Museum of the New South and specifically focus on their Cotton Fields to Skyscrapers exhibit. Students will also examine the existing Confederate monuments in Charlotte. In order assess student learning, the unit will end in a student led and teacher facilitated Socratic Seminar.

I plan to teach this unit during the coming year to 70 students in 8th grade ELA.

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Introduction

In the seminar “Memorials, Memories, and American Identity,” we spoke often about the monuments that we celebrate and that are considered to represent a concept of American Identity. We also came to consider those monuments, for example, those dedicated to the Confederacy, that we no longer esteem and that no longer shape American Identity. While our opinions have changed as a nation on the value of these representations, the more important concept to focus on is the shift in what it means to be an American. The memorials and monuments that we erect may not stand the test of time or the changing opinions and values of the American people. In some ways, books do the same thing, and the novels that I have chosen to focus on for this curriculum unit are a perfect example of the changing perspectives and values of American Identity. I have selected two novels, *To Kill A Mockingbird* by Harper Lee, and *Roll of Thunder Hear My Cry* by Mildred D. Taylor as comparative texts to be taught in the third quarter of this school year. According to the 8th grade English Language Arts planning guide, this is typically the time of the year that we focus on argumentative writing. Additionally, this unit would tie in well with the 8th grade Social Studies objectives as that unit focuses on the Civil War and its repercussions. I will spend 6 weeks teaching the novels and this curriculum unit will be implemented in the final week of the novel study.

The world in which my students are growing up today is a labyrinth of social, political and racial issues. Everyday there seems to be a new discussion of the way that race impacts our society. Some of these discussions are lighthearted and fun in tone, for example a recent Twitter hashtag that has gone viral - #BlackHogwarts - which encourages an entertaining examination of what the fictional school of witchcraft and wizardry would have been like with more diverse students. Yet on the same platform, there are more insidious discussions about race even from those in leadership positions at the heart of our nation’s capital. How are students meant to navigate these choppy waters of racial discussions on social media when both extremes are present without mediation? It is crucial now, more than ever in this current political and social climate, to provide students with a working knowledge of the history of race relations in the United States.

This novel study is meant to provide that context for what students see and hear on social media by starting an academic conversation about the state of race relations. These novels are a way to achieve this goal. A dissection of race relations in the United States throughout history is a topic that deserves more than six weeks however; this novel study will serve as focused microcosm through which to foreground the conversation. These books focus on a specific time and place and they will serve as the starting point for a dialogue that will also encompass current race relations in Charlotte, North Carolina.

Demographics

I teach 8th grade English Language Arts at McClintock Middle School. McClintock Middle School has a diverse population. The student body is 53% African American, 25% Hispanic, 12% White, 6% Asian, 3% of students identify as two or more races, 1% is American Indian or Alaskan Native, and the remaining students, totaling less than 1% identify as Native Hawaiian or Pacific Islander. 47% of the student body is female and 53% are male. McClintock identifies as a Title 1 School, meaning that a significant portion of its student population receives free or reduced lunch.¹

The demographics of my classroom closely match those of the school as a whole with some marked differences. I teach a total of 72 students. My classroom is divided evenly between male and female students. 41.7% are African American, 16.7% are American Indian, 6.9% are Asian, 8.3% identify as one or more races, 25% are White, and 1.4% are Pacific Islander. 38.9% of the students I teach are ethnically Hispanic. Compared to the school as a whole, I have a larger percentage of White students and a larger percentage of Hispanic students.

Rationale

Working on novels that focus on the exploration of identity is a relatable topic for many middle schoolers. *To Kill A Mockingbird* is fundamentally a coming of age text that touches on the themes of justice and inequality in the Jim Crow era South during the Great Depression. Not only will they find commonality with the narrator, Scout, I think they may come to embrace the book's setting as well. Our country remains in a state of unresolved racial conflict that has created pockets of civil unrest and riots, most notably in Ferguson, Baltimore, and Charlotte. With such unrest in their own neighborhoods, *To Kill A Mockingbird* becomes more relevant than ever.

Not only does this novel highlight the timeless themes of justice and equality, but it does so from the perspective a young Southern girl. The innocence in her narrative gives the book a startlingly refreshing perspective on topics that more jaded readers have taken for granted. It is because of this innocence that so many of my students were able to relate to the novel and the themes at hand. I chose this novel to incorporate into my curriculum unit because of how relatable the narrator is but also because the setting makes it a perfect candidate. So much of the story revolves around the small, Southern town of Maycomb. The people there are set in their ways; ways that have been shaped by the traditions and norms of a time far past. As a result their world is caught between what was and what will be, as evidenced by characters of the old guard such as Mrs. Dubose, and that keeper of wisdom and knowledge, Atticus Finch. This novel is a perfect way to introduce students to what American Identity was and the way that identity was kept and preserved through memory and history.

Roll of Thunder, Hear My Cry is similar to *To Kill A Mockingbird* in many ways. Both share a precocious narrator, both narrators are little girls, both take place in the South during the Great Depression and both focus on similar themes. While they share so many things in common, the perspectives from which they are told are vastly different. Cassie Logan and her family are African-Americans and as such experience a very different narrative than Scout and her family. So much of what drives the story in *Roll of Thunder, Hear My Cry* is the Logans' response to discrimination against their family and the ways in which it shapes them. The Finch family, while subject to some discrimination, is still only an outside perspective on the true racial injustices taking place in their town.

It is important for my students to be exposed to both perspectives. Looking at the demographics of my students and the climate of the United States, it is crucial for them to read narratives that are so closely linked to their own. They are growing up and shaping their own identities in a nation that is reevaluating so many of its own and amongst a period of civil unrest. The books themselves are the monuments to American Identity and its changing nature. This unit will be taught to all of my students, both in my standard classes and in my honors class.

Content Research

While I will be using both novels to discuss the concept of American Identity, it will be important for my students to have an understanding of that larger idea. I will use some text resources and videos in order to introduce what American Identity means and the ways in which it has changed. The most important topics for my students to know include the concept of American Identity, Confederate Memorials, and the Evolution of Race Relations as a part of Charlotte's Identity. We will of course build background knowledge on the Jim Crow Laws, and the Great Depression in order to understand the content of the novels, however, the three topics discussed below are additionally appropriate for our deeper discussion about memory and identity at the end of the unit.

American Identity

There are so many factors that contribute to what is considered an "American Identity" and many of them, especially in the current political climate, are debated and somewhat controversial. In order to begin a discussion on what American Identity was and now is, I have looked to two sources I found in readings from the course. The first is Pierre Nora's *Between Memory and History: Les Lieux de Memoire*. In his text he writes,

"This conquest and eradication of memory by history has had the effect of a revelation, as if an ancient bond of identity had been broken and something had ended that we had experienced as self-evident - the equation of memory and history."²

This quote is a concise way of indicating that much of what we consider to be American Identity is based on the memory of history if not the actual history itself. As the saying goes, "History is written by the winners," and nowhere is this platitude more true than in the creation of what it means to be an American. It conjures pictures of baseball games, apple pie, fireworks and white picket fences and neglects the many people for whom those images are not ideals.

The next text that I selected is Paul Connerton's *How Societies Remember*. In his text, he states,

"This way of seeing things depends upon isolating the practice of methodical understanding that takes place in the historical sciences from a more all-embracing phenomenon, the processes of interpretation that occurs implicitly and everywhere in the course of everyday life. And this leads on to a sense that the practice of historical research is creating a new distance from the past by setting people free from the tradition that might otherwise have guided their assumptions and behavior."³

This is another text that exemplifies the idea behind American Identity as it discusses the fine line where memory becomes history. Additionally, it delves into the fact that the way that we interpret the past is largely based on the way that we experience it. If the past is created based on the way in which it is experienced, then the evaluation of the perspectives of each of the narrators in the novels are equally valid because the experiences are vastly different. This is crucial in teaching students how to evaluate sources because they are so dependent upon the backgrounds of the source. Although the bulk of this curriculum unit focuses on the final week of the novel study, it will be important for students to understand the concept of memory and

how it impacts a society. The way that a society remembers things is especially important to the topic of this unit because our society today seems to want to forget the history of race relations that has brought us to the boiling point as a nation. However, if we want to engage in an honest discussion about next steps as a country then we have to acknowledge the disparities between races that have been apparent throughout our nation's history. It is particularly important for students to discuss this history as they have the most stake in the future direction of this country. I would use these quotes in a tangible way in my classroom and create a gallery walk (I would place the quotes on large chart size paper) and allow my students to walk around the classroom and comment on what they think these quotations mean and highlight any connections they see between these quotations and their community.

Confederate Memorials

Most recently, the idea of American Identity has been challenged by the removal of statues honoring the Confederacy all over the nation. In an interview on PBS News Hour, Pierre McGraw, president of the Monumental Task Committee states, "I think any time you're going to try and edit our history, you're asking for trouble. And monuments do mean different things to different people. But it's really unfair to judge historical figures by today's standards."⁴ Asking students to examine what American was versus what it is now is a way for them to understand, as McGraw said, how standards have changed over time.

The question of the removal of Confederate interconnects with the discussion of American Identity and what it is seen as now. The Confederate statues represent a specific idea of American Identity and for some they serve as a memory of a time past. Despite the fact that in this day and age these statues represent should remain in the past, people are still passionate about their visibility and representation. In the same interview on PBS, Peniel Joseph, a professor at the University of Texas, states,

"So, I think what some critics do is conflate the wish to remove the monuments with somehow politically correct advocacy of whitewashing or subbing American history. Nothing could be further from the case. Removing Confederate symbols is not the same as trying to remove the Washington Monument or symbols of Thomas Jefferson. Those founders owned slaves but their ideas about democracy and freedom, they were generative ideas that other groups, including people of color, women, LGBTQ have utilized to perfect the Union."⁵

It is important for students to understand the controversy surrounding the Confederate Memorials because they are still very much a part of Charlotte's identity and therefore part of the environment in which they are growing up. Additionally, these memorials are sparking a nationwide conversation about the relevancy of these objects to the concept of American Identity and what should be done with them. This is another quotation that I would use for the gallery walk that students would then be able to comment on. I think this quotation is a thought-provoking one because it's a jumping off point for a discussion on the way in which we believe our values as a nation have changed. Essentially the quotation contrasts the Confederate memorials with the memorials that we esteem and value, but there was a time when those monuments were celebrated.

Perhaps there is no more concrete reminder than the Confederate statues that remain in Charlotte. There are currently two memorials in the city - both are now located in a cemetery. One was moved in 2015 to join the other after it had been vandalized, but it stood for nearly 40 years next to Old City Hall. It was spray painted and therefore removed only days before former governor, Pat McCrory signed the “Historic Artifact Management and Patriotism Act” into law which would have prevented its removal on the basis that it commemorated an historical event.⁶ The debate about Confederate statues is more than merely one for academic contemplation. These monuments exist in our city and provide a very really marker for students growing up in their shadow.

The Evolution of Race Relations and Charlotte’s Identity

To speak of American Identity - and what has been considered a “traditional” American Identity is to speak simultaneously of race and the history of race relations. Our country was founded with segregation at its core - by allowing the continuation of slavery in the Southern colonies, our founding fathers created a phantom that would continue to plague this country to this very day. The concept of “whiteness” at the beginning of the nation seemed to apply exclusively to a specific group of people that even groups such as the Irish and Italians (who we would consider “white” today) were excluded from.⁷ Indeed, these two specific groups now benefit from the “whiteness” that was originally denied to them. Yet, by the Jim Crow Era, these ethnicities were more integrated into that idea of traditional “whiteness” while African Americans were more segregated in every aspect of life.

“From the turn of the twentieth century to the Second World War, North Carolina blacks faced a society hostile to their civil rights and unyielding in its devotion to white supremacy. Denied the vote and physically separated from whites residentially and in public accommodations, African American struggled to earn a living, to educate their children in underfunded and inferior facilities, and to contest the limits placed on their social, economic, and political lives.”⁸

The effects of the Jim Crow laws can still be seen in the current racial climate of the United States. Nowhere is this continuing disparity more apparent today than in Charlotte, North Carolina.

The city of Charlotte has been transformed time after time since it was established in 1768 by the British. The city has seen battles from the American Revolution, and secession from the United States during the Civil War. It relied first on textiles and then banking as its primary industry. Charlotte has even had its own gold rush.⁹ Despite its many historic events, Charlotte’s identity still seems to remain splintered. It is fractured between its past and its struggle to find its footing among such cities as Atlanta, which has embraced its Southern heritage. Charlotte, to me, is a city of paradoxes. Charlotte is a Southern city but lacks a distinctly “Southern” flair. Instead, Charlotte is multifaceted. It focuses on business and banking, yet is geographically very much a part of the South.

In order to fully appreciate the city in which they are growing up, my students will need an understanding of the history of this city. However, we must go beyond the mere facts and dates of when the city was founded and by whom, but instead delve into the racial history of the city. Our novels speak of the race relations in Alabama and Mississippi during the Great Depression and so my students too must examine the race relations of their own city. The violence of the riots and the tragedy of the shooting we have recently been touched by is that of ongoing and systemic racism that has evolved over generations and indeed since the founding of the city.

One of the most divisive issues in Charlotte has been the city's handling of education and segregation. There have been landmark court cases, for example, *Swann vs. Charlotte-Mecklenburg Board of Education*, which specifically addressed the issue of busing in order to integrate schools. Yet even before this case and now after, Charlotte-Mecklenburg has constantly been under observation for the equality of its schools.¹⁰ In the Spring of 2017, the Charlotte-Mecklenburg School Board approved new boundaries for its schools and with this approval came many concerns - some based on race and the equality of education to be found for students.¹¹ The changes will take place at the start of the 2018 school year.¹² Charlotte's educational past and present directly affect the daily lives of my students. They are not aware of their district's flawed legacy, yet it impacts them. They need to be informed of how the board's past decisions and current discussions affect them.

Education is not the only area that directly affects my students. In an article from *The Atlantic* from April 2017, Charlotte is named as one of the cities with the lowest economic mobility in the United States. This means that if a child is born into poverty, there are fewer opportunities for that child to move out of poverty. There are many reasons that Charlotte's economic mobility is so low and the Jim Crow laws that enforced segregation is one of them¹³. Despite the attempts to fully integrate schools, Charlotte itself remains woefully segregated with much of the city's wealth concentrated in pockets. As noted in the demographics section of this curriculum unit, my students attend a Title 1 school, which means that the school receives federal funding because of the level of students in poverty. The fact that they attend a school in a city that has the lowest economic mobility in the country directly impacts their future and what they can do with their education.

Charlotte's history has been one of segregation and paradoxes that have ultimately resulted in a city without a clear identity. Charlotte has such a concentration of wealth yet it is so sparsely distributed. Not only has this created almost nonexistent economic mobility but it has also introduced civil unrest as well. When Keith Scott was shot and killed by police in 2016 riots erupted throughout the city and saw an increased presence of the Black Lives Matter movement. These are incidents that have simultaneously been caused by a lack of understanding of the city's history and are now a part of history in the making.

These incidents are a hallmark of the history that will be studied for years to come. Not only are these important to history, but also they are important to the personal narratives of my students who are coming of age and finding their own identities amongst this backdrop.

Instructional Implementation

This unit will be implemented during a one-week period following the completion of the novel studies, which will have taken place over the previous four to six weeks. During the novel study, *To Kill A Mockingbird* will be read in class while *Roll of Thunder, Hear My Cry* will be read by students independently at home. The background building for the novel study will have included a sensitivity talk about the language they will encounter within the novel, a biographical video on Harper Lee, and information about the time period and social climate in which the novel takes place. This will include stations on the Jim Crow laws, the Great Depression, the Scottsboro boys, and a history of lynching.

We will finish the novels toward the end of third quarter and spend a final week on this Curriculum Unit in order to reflect more broadly on some of the themes in the novels and how they relate to the present. The unit will be broken down into four parts, the first two focused on characters and self and the second two focused on race and memory in Charlotte. The first part is the character comparison, part two is a character to self comparison, part three explores commemoration Charlotte, and part is an examination of other aspects of Charlotte's identity.

Part 1: Character Comparison

The first two days will be spent allowing students to evaluate each of the characters and the ways in which their similar situations are still so vastly different. They will also assess how each of these characters are impacted by their environments. They will begin with a worksheet (see Appendix 2) and be able to work with a partner to complete the comparison. The goal of the character comparison is to allow students to explicitly list the things that the main characters in each novel share and what they do not. In doing so they should be able to see the disparity between the two and their families based solely on race since they share so many other things in common. Additionally, the character comparison should allow students to make a connection to things that have not changed despite the time between when the novels were set, when they were written, and today.

As students are comparing the main characters of the novel, they will use a method of indirect characterization known as S.T.E.A.L. This method allows for students to understand the characters by analyzing the dialogue and the thoughts of the character. Additionally, by using this method, students must also consider the character's relationships with others in the book, and what the character does. Finally, students must also examine what the character looks like. Therefore, not only are students moving past the obvious comparisons of when and where the novels are located, they are having to dig deeper into the personalities of these characters to discover the depth of similarity.

Part 2: Character to Self Comparison

After they have spent time comparing the characters, they will be asked to relate the material to themselves. Students will create a self-portrait through words. This is not the same thing as a biography. Students will create a concrete poem about themselves and discuss any similarities they have found between themselves and one of the main characters from the novel. Students are more likely to engage in something if they can make it personal and so it is my goal for them to find some kind of common ground with either one of the main characters from the novels. Students will use a modified version of the same worksheet they used to compare the characters with the same prompts.

Part 3: Confederate Memorials

A key venue for exploring more tangibly the relationship between race and memory, which is a key context in the novels, is examining the monuments to the Confederacy in Charlotte. In order to help students understand the importance of the remaining monuments they will work on an online scavenger hunt to learn about them. I will use the following questions to guide them on their search:

1. How many memorials are in Charlotte?
2. When were the memorials constructed?
3. Where were the memorials originally placed when they were built?
4. Have the memorials ever been moved?
5. What message do the memorials communicate to the people who live in Charlotte?
6. Where do the memorials belong?

Asking students to answer these questions will be an important part of the knowledge building for the Socratic Seminar that will end the unit. Students should be able to discuss the identity of Charlotte on multiple levels, the changing meaning of the memorials over time and to different people, and the fact that Confederate memorials remain in the city is a point of interest.

Part 4: Charlotte's Identity

Finally, students will evaluate and question Charlotte's identity through a series of activities.

Museum Field Trip

Students will take a field trip to the Levine Museum of the New South to tour the permanent exhibit called "Cotton Fields to Skyscrapers," which is an interactive experience. Using this resources from the Levine Museum of the New South, students will be guided through a history of their city. They will be able to interactively connect with Charlotte in order to see where it has been, what it is now, and what it could become. As they work their way through the exhibit they will have two guiding questions: 1)What is Charlotte's identity? 2) Where do I fit in this city? (see Appendix 2)

Charlotte is not the fictional town of Maycomb from *To Kill A Mockingbird*. Yet, it is a Southern city and the issues of race that plague Maycomb have also plagued Charlotte, now and in the past. Students will be forced to look at the city through this lens and then ask themselves were they see themselves in this city.

Socratic Seminar

After students have finished working with the resources from the Levine Museum of the New South they will be a part of a Socratic Seminar. A Socratic Seminar is a way for me to assess their personal thoughts along with what they have retained from the unit. It is a discussion that is not so much led by the teacher as facilitated with carefully timed questions should there be a lull in conversation. I think this is the most appropriate way to evaluate this unit because students will be able to discuss the ideas of the unit that were most important to them and they will have to use evidence, either from the texts, their research on local memorials, or from the resources from the Levine Museum, to support those ideas. It is important that the activities occur in this order so that their final activity - the Socratic Seminar - can be held with minimal interruption from the teacher. The Socratic Seminar should truly be a student led discussion that reflects what they have learned and their interests from the unit.

A Socratic Seminar is a way for students to have an informed academic conversation and a way for me to assess what they have gained from the study of these two novels. Not only is this a way for them to draw on specific text evidence, but it provides a link between the text and the final activities. This is a final way for them to see the relevance of this unit and its timeliness. For example, Confederate memorial removal is consistently in the news. Additionally, the museum exhibit shows the history of the disparity of educational equality. These are two topics that students will be knowledgeable enough about by the end of the unit that they will be able to have an informed discussion. A Socratic Seminar is not teacher led and is meant to be a student-generated discussion. My job as a teacher is simply to facilitate this discussion by providing them with appropriate and timely resources.

Conclusion

In conclusion, after completing a unit in which the students read *To Kill A Mockingbird* and *Roll of Thunder, Hear My Cry*, students will use them to inspire a timely discussion that includes the controversy surrounding remaining Confederate memorials and even the local decisions of the Charlotte-Mecklenburg School Board. Students must be informed about the national and local things that continue to impact their daily lives, and ultimately these novels will serve as a jumping off point for this discussion.

Classroom Resources

In order to teach this unit I will be relying heavily on *To Kill A Mockingbird* and *Roll of Thunder, Hear My Cry*. Additionally, I will be relying on the resources provided by the Levine Museum of the New South. The exhibit, “Cotton Fields to Skyscrapers” is an interactive look at the history of Charlotte. It includes the growth that Charlotte has experienced as well as the history of racial inequality that can still be seen in the segregated landscape of the city and the lack of economic mobility.¹⁴ There is also an exhibit at the museum called “K(no)w Justice, K(no)w Peace” that we will rely on for information as well. This exhibit specifically speaks to the riots that arose after the shooting of Keith Scott and details even further the roots of racial disparity.¹⁵ As students enter the exhibit they will be presented with a timeline of race relations that detail everything from education to housing. Students are then encouraged to read the statements of people who were present at the Black Lives Matter Marches in Uptown Charlotte. The whole exhibit is filled with the sounds of protest and truly gives students a feel for what it would have been like to be there.

Appendix 1: Teaching Standards

While there are many ways for these novels to accommodate the Common Core standards for 8th grade language arts, there are a particular few that I anticipate emphasizing. They are as follows:

RL.8.1 Cite the textual evidence that most strongly supports an analysis of what the text says explicitly as well as inferences drawn from the text.

RL.8.2 Determine a theme or central idea of a text and analyze its development over the course of the text, including its relationship to the characters, setting, and plot; provide an objective summary of the text.

RL.8.6 Analyze how differences in the points of view of the characters and the audience or reader (e.g., created through the use of dramatic irony) create such effects as suspense or humor.

RL.8.9 Analyze how a modern work of fiction draws on themes, patterns of events, or character types from myths, traditional stories, or religious works such as the Bible, including describing how the material is rendered new.

SL.8.1 Engage effectively in a range of collaborative discussions (one-on-one, in groups, and teacher-led) with diverse partners on grade 8 topics, texts, and issues, building on others' ideas and expressing their own clearly.

Appendix 2: Classroom Worksheets

Character Comparison

	Cassie	Scout
Setting	_____ _____ _____ _____	_____ _____ _____ _____
Family	_____ _____ _____ _____	_____ _____ _____ _____
Character		
1)What they Say	1)_____	1)_____
2)What they Do	2)_____	2)_____
3)What they Think	3)_____	3)_____
4)Their Relationships with others	4)_____	4)_____
5)What they Look like	5)_____	5)_____

Levine Museum of the New South : Cotton Fields to Skyscrapers

What is Charlotte's identity?	Where do I fit in this city?
1. Charlotte's Past:	
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2. Charlotte's Present:	
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3. Charlotte's Future:	
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The second worksheet will be used as a reflection as students move through the exhibit at the Levine Museum of the New South

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