

## FRONTLINE TEACHER'S GUIDE: *The O.J. Verdict*

### "Murder Trial or Race on Trial?"

#### **ABOUT THE FILM:**

In *The O.J. Verdict*, FRONTLINE examines what began as a double homicide in 1994 near Santa Monica, Calif., and quickly became a media mega-story. In the 372 days that the O.J. Simpson murder trial lasted, television recorded, discussed and analyzed the proceedings. Public opinion polls showed that America quickly polarized along racial lines. "Most white Americans believed Simpson was obviously guilty before the trial ever started, [and] most white Americans feared that the defense would do something unethical and use racism to get a predominantly African American jury to acquit an obviously guilty defendant," says UCLA law professor and former ABC News consultant, Peter Arenella. Marc Watts, who was a correspondent with CNN at the time and one of the few African Americans covering the trial, says, "[In] the trial, everything is about race. Black people deal with race everyday. Whites who said it's not a trial about race speak that way because they haven't been on the receiving end of injustices at the hands of a white person."

The FRONTLINE documentary, *The O.J. Verdict*, examines both the trial and the explosive reaction that erupted afterward along racial lines: black men and women celebrating victory in the streets, while outraged white Americans decried a miscarriage of justice. Ten years afterward, as the documentary shows, the verdict still evokes heated and disparate opinions.

For classes in Social Studies, American Government, Current Events, Language Arts, Media Studies. Grade level 9th – 12th.

#### **A NOTE TO TEACHERS:**

Discussing race in the classroom poses enormous challenges since students are often reluctant to speak openly if they are afraid of insulting other classmates or being misunderstood. Before watching the documentary, students and their teacher should discuss what rules they would like to establish for discussing the difficult issues surrounding race. How can students agree to deal with an uncomfortable moment or with someone who says something inappropriate?

Teachers can find useful guidelines for "Facilitating Discussions on Racism, Prejudice, and Discrimination" in the FRONTLINE Teacher's Guide for another documentary: *A Class Divided*. The link to these guidelines for discussion is:

[<http://www.pbs.org/wgbh/pages/frontline/teach/divided/assignment1.html#note>]

#### **DISCUSSION QUESTIONS:**

A list of questions focusing on media awareness for students to discuss before viewing the film.

#### **FEATURED LESSON PLAN:**

##### **Re-Creating The Era Of The Trial**

Students will:

- Become familiar with the main points of the accusation against O.J. Simpson and

- the prosecution and defense strategies
- Become familiar with the issues of race that lie behind the trial and the reaction to the verdict

#### **ADDITIONAL LESSON IDEAS:**

##### **Examining Race through Poetry**

Through irony and understatement, Langston Hughes's poem, "Dinner Guest: Me," invites an examination of the relationship between blacks and whites in America.

##### **Creative Responses to *Invisible Man***

This lesson invites imaginative responses (poems, spoken word, music, art) to quotations from *Invisible Man* by Ralph Ellison, a novel that traces, through its main character, the choices open to African Americans during the 20th century.

##### **Parallels and Differences: Exploring the Rodney King Trial**

Students interested in law and legal history can explore the 1992 Rodney King trial for parallels and differences to the issues of the O. J. trial.

##### **Purchasing the Film**

*The O.J. Verdict* can be purchased from Shop PBS for Teachers

[<http://teacher.shop.pbs.org/home/index.jsp>]

Also, teachers and students can watch the film streamed in its entirety on FRONTLINE's Web site [<http://www.pbs.org/wgbh/pages/frontline/oj/>]

##### **Credits**

This teacher's guide was developed by Simone Bloom Nathan of Media Education Consultants. It was written by Ellen Greenblatt of University High School, San Francisco. Advisers were Patricia Grimmer of Carbondale High School, Carbondale, Ill.; Debra Plafker Gutt, Stuyvesant High School, N.Y.; and Greg Timmons, curriculum writer/educational consultant.

## DISCUSSION QUESTIONS

1. What do you know about O.J. Simpson and his murder trial?
2. Look at the covers of two national magazines on which the same police "mug shot," taken after Simpson was arrested for the murder of his ex-wife and a friend, appears.
  - The first photograph appeared on the cover of *Time* magazine. URL: [[http://www.authentichistory.com/diversity/african/images/1994\\_OJ\\_Simpson\\_Time\\_Magazine.html](http://www.authentichistory.com/diversity/african/images/1994_OJ_Simpson_Time_Magazine.html)]
  - The second photograph appeared on the cover of *Newsweek* magazine. URL: [[http://www.authentichistory.com/diversity/african/images/1994\\_OJ\\_Simpson\\_Newsweek\\_Magazine.html](http://www.authentichistory.com/diversity/african/images/1994_OJ_Simpson_Newsweek_Magazine.html)]
  - a) Compare these two magazine covers. Look carefully and note both similarities and differences. Explain how you "see" the pictures differently?
  - b) Think of adjectives to characterize the Simpson on the *Time* cover. Think of adjectives to characterize the Simpson on the *Newsweek* cover.
  - c) What editorial decisions do you think might account for the different presentation of the same "mug shot"?
3. The article in the link that follows discusses one of the media issues that Hurricane Katrina raised. URL: [<http://www.chron.com/cs/CDA/ssistory.mpl/features/3359081>]
  - a) Scroll down to the photos in the article. Pay attention to the captions accompanying each photograph, noting especially the circled words.
  - b) What are the *connotations* of "looting" and "finding"?  
Note: Connotation means "the set of associations implied by a word in addition to its literal meaning." [<http://dictionary.reference.com/search?q=connotation>]
  - c) What might you hypothesize about the reasons for the different captions?
  - d) The source of photograph #1 is the AP (The Associated Press), an American-based organization, which claims to be "the oldest and largest news organization in the world." [<http://www.ap.org/pages/about/history/history.html>]
  - e) The source of photograph #2 is AFP. With headquarters in Paris, AFP claims to be "the world's oldest established news agency, founded in 1835 by Charles-Louis Havas, the father of global journalism." [<http://www.afp.com/english/afp/?pid=history>]
  - f) What might you hypothesize about the different effects, both in the United States and throughout the world, of these two images and captions placed together? You can read one sample article at: [<http://newsobserver.com/24hour/world/story/2704792p-11257710c.html>]
4. What can you conclude from these two exercises in "reading" photographs? What factors determine *how* and *what* we see?

## LESSON PLAN

### Re-Creating The Era Of The Trial

#### Lesson Objectives:

Students will:

- Become familiar with the main points of the accusation against O.J. Simpson and the prosecution and defense strategies
- Become familiar with the issues of race that lie behind the trial and the reaction to the verdict

#### Materials Needed:

Internet access

A copy of the documentary: *The O.J. Verdict*

Student Handouts/Viewing Guide

#### Time Needed:

- 30-45 minutes to look at and discuss the images in the Discussion Questions (the preparation part of this can be done at home)
- 30-45 minutes to familiarize themselves with the facts of the trial and to read the excerpt from *Playing the Race Card: Melodramas of Black and White from Uncle Tom to O. J. Simpson* by Linda Williams (can be done at home)
- 60 minutes to watch the film
- 45-60 minutes for each of three groups to consult and present their information to each other and to vote on a verdict
- 30-45 minutes to discuss the class' verdict and to compare their verdict to the jury's verdict
- 45 minutes (out of class possible) to write editorials if they and the teacher choose.

#### Procedure

1. The class as a whole will prepare for viewing the film by familiarizing themselves with the main points of the accusation and the trial, using the following Web sites:

##### **Chronology of the murder and trial:**

[<http://www.usatoday.com/news/index/nns053.htm> ]

[<http://www.courttv.com/trials/ojsimpson/photogallery/index.html> ]

##### **Biographies of O.J. Simpson:**

[<http://www.law.umkc.edu/faculty/projects/ftrials/Simpson/oj.htm>]

[<http://www.answers.com/main/ntquery;jsessionid=26i0p9m22swh8?tname=o-j-simpson&method=6&sbid=lc04a>]

##### **Court TV's "Crime Library" narrative of the trial**

[[http://www.crimelibrary.com/notorious\\_murders/famous/simpson/index\\_1.htm](http://www.crimelibrary.com/notorious_murders/famous/simpson/index_1.htm)]

2. Everyone will read a short selection (provided on Student Handout: The Main Characters and Issues of the Case) from *Playing the Race Card: Melodramas of Black and White from Uncle Tom to O. J. Simpson* by Linda Williams.

3. Students will then break into three groups before they watch the film. To facilitate attentive note taking, each group will be assigned people and issues to focus on. Although *all* students will receive the entire viewing guide, students will be responsible *only* for

responding to the issues and people in the group to which they have been assigned. Note that the Jeffrey Toobin quotation appears in all three groups. (Student Handout: The Main Characters and Issues of the Case follows.)

4. After watching the film, the groups will present their people and issues.

- A whole-class discussion will follow (or might, since the issue is highly charged, occur during the group presentations), after which students will vote, by secret ballot, on Simpson's guilt or innocence. Refer to URL: [<http://www.pbs.org/wgbh/pages/frontline/teach/divided/assignment1.html#note>] for ideas about facilitating this charged discussion.
- After the vote (and the results will differ from school to school), students will discuss what factors influenced them and what factors they believe influenced the actual jury. They will probably focus on the role of race, class and culture in the decision.

### **Lesson Extensions:**

Invite students to discuss or write about any or all of the following statements:

- In a society whose court system is based on the notion that a person is innocent until proven guilty, the prosecution bore the burden of proof in the O.J. Simpson trial. Did they successfully make their case?
- On two occasions, people in the film note that the Los Angeles Police Department "framed a guilty man." What are the implications of that statement? Do you agree with the statement? Explain.
- Write an essay analyzing and assessing the following statement: "The O.J. Simpson case is important because of what it represented, not because of O.J. himself."

### **Method of Assessment:**

- Completion of note sheets and viewer guides
- Participation in discussions
- Editorial for a national newspaper applauding or decrying the verdict in the O.J. Simpson case
- Editorial for the school newspaper about the source of racial or ethnic issues in school, including suggestions for possible solutions

## **ADDITIONAL LESSON IDEAS**

### **Examining Race through Poetry**

Through irony and understatement, Langston Hughes's poem, "Dinner Guest: Me," invites an examination of the relationship between blacks and whites in America. A series of questions on the Student Handout : "Dinner Guest: Me" by Langston Hughes, will guide teachers and students through a reading of the poem. The poem is available at: [<http://www.poemhunter.com/p/m/poem.asp?poet=6691&poem=31566>]

### **Creative Responses to *Invisible Man***

This lesson invites imaginative responses (poems, spoken word, music, art) to quotations from *Invisible Man* by Ralph Ellison, a novel that traces, through its main character, the choices open to African Americans during the 20th century.

- "I am an invisible man. No. I am not a spook like those who haunted Edgar Allan Poe; nor am I one of your Hollywood movie ectoplasms. I am a man of substance, of flesh and bone, fiber and liquids—and I might even be said to possess a mind. I am invisible, understand, simply because people refuse to see me. Like the bodiless heads you sometimes see in circus sideshows, it is as though I have been surrounded by mirrors of hard, distorting glass. When they approach me they see only my surroundings, themselves, or figments of their imagination—indeed, everything and anything except me." (Prologue, page 3).
- "I am not ashamed of my grandparents for having been slaves. I am only ashamed at myself for having one time been ashamed." (Chapter 1, page 15).
- "America is woven of many strands; I would recognize them and let it so remain. It's 'winner take nothing' that is the great truth of our country or of any country. Life is to be lived, not controlled; and humanity is won by continuing to play in face of certain defeat. Our fate is to become one, and yet many-- This in not prophecy, but description." (Epilogue, page. 577).

### **Parallels and Differences: Exploring the Rodney King Trial**

Students interested in law and legal history can explore the 1992 Rodney King trial for parallels and differences to the issues of the O. J. trial:

[<http://www.law.umkc.edu/faculty/projects/ftrials/lapd/lapd.html>]

[<http://www.courttv.com/archive/casfiles/rodneyking/>]

[<http://archives.cnn.com/2001/LAW/03/02/beating.anniversary.king.02/>]

[[http://www.pbs.org/newshour/authors\\_corner/jan-june98/cannon\\_4-7.html](http://www.pbs.org/newshour/authors_corner/jan-june98/cannon_4-7.html)]

**STUDENT HANDOUT:**  
**The Main Characters and Issues of the Case**

**Part One Directions:** Using the Web sites provided, identify the following.

- 1) What was the accusation against O.J. Simpson?
- 2) Why had O.J. Simpson become famous before the murder case?
- 3) Who was the main defense lawyer for O.J. Simpson?
- 4) What was the role of the bloody glove? What role did DNA play in the prosecution case?
- 5) How did the defense rebut the prosecution case?
- 6) What role did the Los Angeles Police Department's Mark Fuhrman play?
- 7) Generally, what was the reaction to the verdict in the African American community? Generally, what was the reaction to the verdict in the white community?

**Part Two Directions:** In the short passage below from *Playing the Race Card: Melodramas of Black and White from Uncle Tom to O. J. Simpson* by Linda Williams, Dr. Williams uses *To Kill A Mockingbird* to set the reader up for the contrast she sees in the O.J. Simpson trial and aftermath.

"In the post-civil rights era, the classic version of the race trial has been Harper Lee's 1960 novel *To Kill a Mockingbird*, followed in 1962 by a popular film directed by Robert Mulligan. In this story, a black man is falsely accused of rape by poor white southerners, and a noble white defense attorney endures the scorn of his racist neighbors to defend him...It is a story typically told from either a safe historical or geographical distance, permitting the racial victims and villains to be clearly marked as figures out of a racially prejudiced time (the past) or place (the deep South). We can tell by his sweat in the overheated courtroom that the white man has falsely accused the black man. We know that even if justice is not done, that we, the audience-jury, will feel righteously condemnatory about the racial injustice—it is southern, it is archaic. If put in the position of jury we can be certain that we would judge more fairly" (p. 259).

- In your own words, explain the point she is making in the passage.

In the short passage that follows, Dr. Williams describes and analyzes what happened when the verdict was read at the televised Simpson trial.

"In the climactic verdict of the O.J. Simpson criminal trial...the melodrama of black and white became a melodrama of the differences in black and white perception...Finally, there was the subsequent phenomenon of the embittered reactions to the reactions: 'black indignation at white anger at black jubilation at Simpson's acquittal'"(258).

- In your own words, explain the point she is making in the passage.



## STUDENT HANDOUT:

### Viewing Guide: Focus on Issues and People

**Directions:** Before watching the film, review the questions for your group, circling the names of people for whom you should watch. As you watch the documentary, take notes on a separate sheet on the people or issues on which you will be expert. You will need the notes for discussion after the film. (Some groups will be addressing the same quotation.)

**Note: The issues and people do NOT occur in the order that they appear in the film. Pay attention!**

<u>Group One</u>	<u>Group Two</u>	<u>Group Three</u>
<p>What role did domestic abuse play in the prosecution case? What was the role of DNA?</p> <p>What was the role of the bloody glove?</p> <p>Jeffery Toobin of <i>The New Yorker</i> coined the phrase "the race card" and said he had "not a shred of doubt that O.J. was guilty." <b>What did he add about the role of race in the jury verdict?</b></p> <p>David Margolick (formerly of <i>The New York Times</i>) said "white America has underestimated the racial divide," adding, "we (whites) just all assumed he was guilty." <b>What was the difference between white and black perceptions?</b></p> <p>Michael Eric Dyson, a professor at the University of Pennsylvania, said that black people celebrated the verdict because of a "system that never paid attention to them," adding that "O.J. represented every black person that got beat up by the criminal justice system." <b>Explain.</b></p> <p>Dyson added that O.J. was the "very guy you (whites) thought was so perfect." <b>Explain.</b></p> <p><b>What is the importance</b> of the barber shop conversation 10 years after the verdict, where one man adds that the government "framed a guilty man"?</p>	<p>"It didn't fit, and you must acquit" (Johnnie Cochran, chief defense attorney). <b>What does this phrase mean?</b></p> <p>Jeffery Toobin of <i>The New Yorker</i> coined the phrase "the race card" and said he had "not a shred of doubt that O.J. was guilty." <b>What did he add about the role of race in the jury verdict?</b></p> <p>Why did L.A. police officer Mark Fuhrman play such a crucial role in the case? Think about immediately <b>after the murders and during the trial.</b></p> <p>David Perel said that the Mark Fuhrman's tapes proved a "head-nodding moment for black people." <b>Explain why.</b></p> <p>Kerman Maddox, a political science professor at USC who thinks O.J. was guilty, said he still applauded the verdict because "at the end of the day, you really are an African American, and you're really different." <b>Explain what he means.</b></p> <p>Marc Watts, the CNN correspondent at the trial said, "Based on the trial I saw, all the evidence, the jury rendered the right verdict." <b>What is the difference between his statement and simply saying O.J. was not guilty?</b></p> <p>Ted Koppel said he "felt embarrassment" about the amount of coverage, but it raised ratings. <b>Explain what he meant.</b></p>	<p>What did Alan Dershowitz, one of the defense attorneys, say about the "<b>adversarial system</b>" in American trials? (Note: an adversary is an opponent)</p> <p>Jeffery Toobin of <i>The New Yorker</i> coined the phrase "the race card" and said he had "not a shred of doubt that O.J. was guilty." <b>What did he add about the role of race in the jury verdict?</b></p> <p>At Johnnie Cochran's funeral in April 2005, Al Sharpton said: "We were clapping for Johnnie Cochran—not O.J." <b>Explain.</b></p> <p>Kimberlé Crenshaw, a law professor, asked "in what game is it off-limits to talk about racial bias?" <b>What is she talking about?</b></p> <p>Marc Watts, the CNN correspondent at the trial said, "Everything's about race; black people deal with race every day." He added: "Whites haven't been on the receiving end of injustices." <b>Explain.</b></p> <p>Robert Ball, an African American attorney, said that, after the verdict, "white people looked at you with disdain" if you smiled, adding that the verdict was more "divisive than you could imagine." <b>Explain.</b></p>



9. Langston Hughes wrote this poem in the middle of the 20th century. Explain why you believe it is or is not still relevant.

## **ADDITIONAL RESOURCES**

### **A Note about Internet Resources**

Students need to be aware that Web sites sometimes present only one view of an issue. Encourage them to think about Web sites even as they are reading. Guiding questions as they review Web sites are: What did you learn from this site? What didn't you learn from this site? Who sponsors this site? What bias might the sponsor have? How current is the site?

## **WEB SITES**

### **The O.J. Verdict**

[<http://www.pbs.org/wgbh/pages/frontline/oj/>]

The companion Web site to the FRONTLINE film provides extended interviews with defense, prosecution and journalists, analysis of significant issues, readings and links, and a Web-exclusive video roundtable with African American women talking about the trial's impact.

### **O.J. Simpson Murder Case**

[<http://www.courttv.com/casefiles/simpson/>]

This site includes additional material for students who want a more interactive site with additional material. The site contains trial transcripts, video interviews, photo galleries, and updates.

## **BOOKS/ARTICLES**

### **Black and White**

This 2002 article from CBS News gives a short but focused examination of the continuing role that race plays in the film industry.

[<http://www.cbsnews.com/stories/2002/03/22/sunday/main504435.shtml>]

### **Invisible Man** (Vintage 1947, ISBN 0-679-73276-4)

Ralph Ellison

This novel, copyrighted in 1947, still moves and stirs students of all races and backgrounds. Through the nameless main character, Ellison explores the roads open and closed to African Americans, and his words ring true even today.

### **O.J. Simpson Facts & Fictions: New Rituals in the Construction of Reality** (University of Southern California Department of Sociology)

Darnell Hunt

In this long article, Dr. Hunt discusses the volatile role that race plays in American society. It includes an extensive list of references. Download in PDF format at

[<http://www.usc.edu/dept/geography/SC2/sc2/pdf/hunt.pdf>]

### **To Kill A Mockingbird** (Available in several editions)

Harper Lee

This classic middle school or early high school novel presents a story of racial injustice and racial justice. The novel is a sure-winner with students.

Playing the Race Card: Melodramas of Black and White from Uncle Tom to O. J. Simpson (Princeton University Press, ISBN 0-691-10283-X)

Linda Williams

This scholarly but accessible book looks at the beginnings of racial stereotyping and its presence in books, films, and theater. Williams argues that we must be aware of the stereotypes ingrained in our minds if we are to have honest discussions about race.