

Rationale for U.S. Literature Unit

My rationale for this unit is really the driving force of my teaching philosophy: I teach U.S. Literature to high school juniors, in part, to enable students to discover the racial, historical, and cultural identity of the United States and include it as part of their identity. It is my goal that they will come to both appreciate and learn from the rich multicultural collage of our country's literature as they move on toward college and adulthood. I am always searching for new avenues from which to approach this goal, and I already know that African American Literature, especially of the 19th century and earlier, is a major American voice still much too marginalized. The mid 1960s trend for Black Studies or "Afro-American" Literature courses springing up in universities as I was doing my undergraduate work has still not achieved its potential in U.S. classrooms, and in the meantime other American voices clamor for attention as well. How can we hope to have a better, more inclusive world someday unless we as teachers of American identity really help define for every person how he or she is a part of that identity?

The theme, then, which I elected to study in this NEH Institute and take back to my own colleagues and students---slavery, literacy, and freedom---represents a contingent of voices calling for freedom that is part of human nature's quest for independence and one that cannot be a complete and accurate picture for our students if any one of these voices is missing from the study or given second rate status. It is time, this Institute suggests, for we as teachers to "think dangerous thoughts," as Dr. Maurice Wallace suggests, or change will never happen.

Do I expect challenges or resistance to my aims? Not really. From many of my colleagues and students I expect polite interest and a fairly open mind to hear what I

have to say. Rather, my challenge is more subtle, more along the lines of battling complacency, of thinking OUR minority students probably never feel like “the other”. I hope to enlighten them a bit as I have been enlightened.

The unit of study present here is an integral part of a yearlong course in U. S. Literature which already includes some African American Literature but will add in more each quarter of the school year than was present in the past. (New additions are italicized) The year will begin with the theme “Early Voices: What is America? Who is America?” studying Native American myths and chant/song poems, then *spirituals and their blend of sacred/secular*, and onto a comparison of the New England poetry of Puritan Anne Bradstreet and *Phyllis Wheatley*. Then it moves into “Independence, Radical Ideas, and Christianity,” examining *The Declaration of Independence*, *Jefferson's Notes on the State of Virginia* and *Patrick Henry's speech*, along with *David Walker's Appeal*, Jonathan Edwards' “Sinners” sermon, Sojourner Truth's speech, and *Henry Highland Garnett's “Address to the Slaves...”* Next the study moves to “Quest for Freedom and Social Reform” in the 19th century with study of Emerson and Thoreau and their written opinions of slavery, then on to the parallel voices of Frederick Douglass and *Harriet Jacobs'* narratives. The last theme for the semester will be “Literacy Demonstrated through Literary Forms” during which students will spend about three weeks developing group research projects on African American literature and culture to share with the class in the form of a multimedia presentation, which will lead us to a short study of excerpts from ***Clotel***. The semester finishes with Civil War era literature including some of Mark Twain and Kate Chopin's fiction dealing with slavery and a short excerpt from **Stowe's *Uncle Tom's Cabin***.

A Quest for Freedom and Reform

Course: United States Literature, Grade 11 Honors

Time Frame: Five days, 85 minute blocks

Goal: To enhance students' understanding of America's 19th century literature as an important agent of reform, especially as it relates to the issue of slavery.

Background Information: Just prior to this unit, we will have studied the radical documents of David Walker and Henry Garnett and these writers' passion for the shared moral ideal of freedom from oppression. These African American writers help to illustrate the transition from the 18th century Age of Reason to the 19th century appeal to emotion, self-reliance, reform, and the importance of the individual.

Objectives:

To encourage close reading

- To write responsively as well as objectively
- To enhance research and presentation skills
- To develop the skills of literary analysis through reading and discussion
- To practice cooperative learning

Materials: *Literature of the American Experience*. Boston: Houghton Mifflin.
Matthews, Wall and Aleta Green. *The Color of Dusk*.
 Audio CD. Clean Cuts, Inc., 1996.
Narrative of the Life of Frederick Douglass, an American Slave and Incidents in the Life of a Slave Girl. Ed. Appiah. New York: Random, 2000.
The Norton Anthology of African American Literature
 Second ed., Gates and McKay. New York: Norton, 2004.
Slavery in American, Part 3. PBS video.

Activities:

Day 1 Begin class by playing “Lucy Sleeps With Master Muford” and “Leah: In Freedom” from the CD *The Color of Dusk*. Ask students to follow along with the lyrics as they listen. Then, talk about the subject matter of the songs and go on to discuss the images in the songs. Students will then use pastels or markers to quickly draw one of the images and then volunteers would be asked to share and explain their drawings. Next, the discussion would move to the

connections students see between these contemporary poems set to music and any other literature we've read to this point.

As the issue of slavery surfaces, students will be directed to their literature text commentary concerning the age of reform when the young America is struggling to improve itself, recognizing the serious concerns of slavery, women's rights, and public education. **For homework**, students will read background information on Utopian communities, Transcendentalism, Ralph Waldo Emerson, and Henry David Thoreau.

Day 2 Class discussion of the homework will begin the day, followed by small group reading and discussion of Emerson's thoughts on slavery in "Self-Reliance," Thoreau's essay "Civil Disobedience," and Whitman's section on slavery in his poem "Song of Myself." After sufficient group discussion, students will journal on some point of discussion from their small group; sharing the journals will prompt some large group discussion. **For homework** : Read assigned selections from Emerson and Thoreau, and also search the Bible for any and all references to slavery.

Day 3 Students will report on their search for slavery references in the Bible as I list them on the board. Lecture information with PowerPoint on the issue of slavery and Christianity will present examples from sermons and other primary source documents that illustrate various demoninations' views on the

“peculiar institution.” **For homework:** Read Wm. Lloyd Garrison’s “Preface” and Frederick Douglass’ “Appendix” in *The Narrative of the Life of Frederick Douglass* and answer study questions about the reading.

Day 4 Discuss the reading and response questions; then read Wendell Phillips’ letter in Douglass text aloud and discuss, stressing the need for authorizing the narrative. View film on Harriet Jacobs, *Slavery in America, Part 3*. **For homework:** Read Douglass’ *Narrative* Ch 1-3.

Day 5 Assign the research project on the theme “Slavery: A Different Look” (See attached appendix). Begin discussion of Douglass’ *Narrative*. **During the next 2 weeks as students work on their research projects, they will continue reading *Narrative* chapters 4,5,and 10 and then Harriet Jacobs’ *Incidents in the Life of a Slave Girl*, chapters 1,5,10, and 41 to compare for purpose,content, style, form, etc.**

Evaluation:

class discussion participation	25 pts
journal response	20 pts
reading questions	10 pts
small group participation	10 pts
research project	150 pts

appendix

Multimedia Research Project

Slavery: A Different Look

Due date_____

This is a group research project with a presentation component as well as an individual essay component. The project is worth 150 points, 50 of which will be the individual essay. As a group, you will prepare a 10-15 minute multimedia presentation to teach the class what you have discovered about your slavery-related topic. The guiding questions as well as topic choices are listed below, and you should sign up for the topic which most interests you. On the presentation day, each group should have the technical equipment ready (bring laptop or reserve mine) and double check the connections to the monitor before class.

Each group should hand in a typed outline of the presentation with bibliography in correct MLA form. **Each individual** should hand in a 2-page typed essay explaining the most significant discovery or new insight about slavery that your research supports. Use specific, cited examples from primary or secondary sources to support your claim. Please also attach your own bibliography to this essay.

Topic choices: (4 persons per group)

17th, 18th, or 19th century Spirituals and/or Speeches

Slave Narratives

African American Novels of the 19th century

Secret codes: Quilts or the Spoken (or Sung) Word

Gullah language and /or West African Language Origins

20th & 21st Century Examples of Opression themes (music, poetry, art, etc.)

The Guiding Questions:

How is the literacy of the speaker, writer, or culture apparent?

What are examples of the literary devices used ?

What literary form is your focus, and what are its characteristics?

Waht does your research suggest about the connection between literacy and freedom?

What was the group's most important discovery about the topic?

Rubric:	Individual essay	50 points
	Presentation bibliography	10 points
	Quality of material	25 points
	Technical skill	15 points
	Clarity	20 points
	Visual appeal	15 points
	Audio appeal	15 point

Total 150 points

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