

The Legacy of Slavery Revealed Through Personal Narrative and Poetry

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English Grade 9**

Massachusetts History and Social Science Curriculum Frameworks Standards:

USI.29 Describe the rapid growth of slavery in the South after 1800 and analyze slave life and resistance on plantations and farms across the South as well as the impact of the cotton gin on the economics of slavery and Southern agriculture.

Massachusetts English Language Arts Curriculum Frameworks Standards:

Standard 8: Understanding a text

Standard 14: Poetry

Standard 19.25 Write poems using a range of poetic techniques, forms, and figurative language.

Historical Thinking Benchmarks Addressed:

Analysis of primary and secondary sources
Understanding of bias and point of view

Essential Questions

1. What common themes or motifs are found in slave narratives?
2. What do slave narratives reveal about the emotions felt by slaves?
3. How is the legacy of slavery and oppression revealed in poetry?
4. What was Harriet Jacobs' dream and how was it deferred? What was her reaction to the postponing of her dream?

Learning Objectives

1. Students will be able to find common themes or motifs in four slave narratives.
2. Students will be able to analyze how poems written after the slaves had been freed reflect continued oppression.
3. Students will write a poem that reflects the experiences and emotions of a slave.
4. Students will relate the theme of the poem "A Dream Deferred" to Harriet Jacobs' own dream.

Learning Activities

1. Students will read the excerpts from three slave narratives as well as the book *Incidents from the Life of a Slave Girl* and work in groups of three or four to fill out the activity worksheets. They will have already read Harriet Jacobs' book and will read the excerpts from the other three slave narratives the night before.

2. Students will share the common themes and emotions that they found with the class by writing their ideas on poster paper using the carousel model. In that model there is a poster paper for each of the four slave narratives and students must begin at one station and then continue around the room adding ideas to the ones written above theirs.
3. Students will analyze three poems to relate the theme of oppression and the deferring of dreams to the slave narratives. As a class we will use the poem analysis sheet to focus the discussion.
4. After discussing the poem "A Dream Deferred" by Langston Hughes, students will write a three paragraph essay about Harriet Jacobs' dream and how she reacted when it was deferred. In the first paragraph they will describe what her dream for the future was, in the second paragraph they will explain why and how her dream was deferred, and in the third paragraph they will discuss Harriet's reaction to deferring this dream.
5. Students will write an original poem that creatively expresses what they learned about slavery from the slave narratives using the criteria given to them. I will distribute examples of this type of poem from other units that they have worked on earlier this year.

Assessment

1. Students will be graded on their original poems using a rubric.
2. Students will write a short essay on dreams deferred as that topic relates to Harriet Jacobs. This will be graded using a rubric.

Annotated Bibliography

Curry, James. In *Narrative of James Curry, A Fugitive Slave*. The Liberator, 10 January, 1840.

Grandy, Moses. In *Narrative of James Curry, A Fugitive Slave*. The Liberator, 10 January, 1840.

Jacobs, Harriet. *Incidents in the Life of a Slave Girl*. West Berlin: Townsend Press, Inc., 2004.

Singleton, William Henry. In *Recollections of My Slavery Days*. Peekskill, New York: Highland Democrat, 1922.

Excerpt from William Henry Singleton slave narrative

William Henry Singleton was born into slavery in eastern North Carolina. This excerpt from his memoir describes his experience of being sold to a "slave farm" in Atlanta -- a place where young slaves were bought for a low price and then raised until they could be sold for a higher price.

From William Henry Singleton, *Recollections of My Slavery Days*. Peekskill, NY: Highland Democrat, 1922.

Courtesy of Documenting the American South / UNC Libraries.

One day when I was about four years old a strange man came to this central house where all us children were and asked me if I liked candy. I told him yes. So he gave me a striped stick of candy. Then he asked me if I liked him. I said, yes, sir, because he had given me the candy. There was a colored woman with him and he asked me then how I would like to go and live with him. Of course I did not know him nor the woman, but without saying any more the man took me away with him and gave me to the strange woman who took me to Atlanta, Georgia, and delivered me to a white woman who had bought me. That night when my mother came to get me and my brothers I was not there. I had been sold off the plantation away from my mother and brothers with as little formality as they would have sold a calf or a mule.

Such breaking up of families and parting of children from their parents was quite common in slavery days and was one of the things that caused much bitterness among the slaves and much suffering, because the slaves were as fond of their children as the white folks. But nothing could be done about it, for the law said we were only things and so we had no more rights under the law than animals. I believe it was only the more cruel masters, however, who thus separated families. I learned afterwards that the reason I was sold was because there had been trouble between my master and his brother over me and as my presence on the plantation was continually reminding them of something they wanted to forget my master sold me to get me out of the way. I suppose they sold me cheap for that reason.

I was bought by a white woman in Atlanta, a widow, who ran a slave farm. That is, she would buy up young slaves whose pedigrees were good and would keep them till they grew up and sell them for a good price. Perhaps she would have them taught to do something and thus add to their value. These slave farms were quite common. Most of the work of the South in those days was done by slaves.

slaves were ginnerers, that is, they knew how to run cotton gins; they were carpenters, blacksmiths, ship carpenters and farmers. An ordinary slave sold for from \$500 to \$600 to \$700, but a slave of good stock who was a good carpenter or a good ginner would be worth from \$1,000 to \$1,500. And when such a slave got on a plantation he would not be apt to be sold. They would keep him on the plantation to do their work. So it was to a slave's advantage to learn to do some work, because then he would be treated better and would not be sold. A slave like that would have his wife and he would be of higher standing among the other slaves. But his children, of course, would belong to his master and he would have no legal right to keep his wife if his master chose to take her away from him. But a slave that was lazy or shiftless or inclined to run away would not be wanted on a plantation and he would be sold for almost nothing.

Excerpt from Moses Grandy slave narrative

Moses Grandy was born a slave in Camden County, North Carolina around 1786. He became the property of his master's son, James, when both Moses and James were eight years old. Moses was hired out yearly until James was 21. This excerpt from his memoir describes Moses' experiences during those years.

From Moses Grandy, b. 1786? *Narrative of the Life of Moses Grandy, Late a Slave in the United States of America*. London: Gilpin, 1843.

Courtesy of Documenting the American South / UNC Libraries.

The first who hired me was Mr. Kemp, who used me pretty Well; he gave me plenty to eat and sufficient clothing.

The next was old Jemmy Coates, a severe man. Because I could not learn his way of hilling corn, he flogged me naked with a severe whip made of a very tough sapling; this lapped round me at each stroke, the point of it at last entered my belly and broke off; leaving an inch and a-half outside. I was not aware of it until on going to work again it hurt my side very much, when on looking down I saw it sticking, out of my body: I pulled it out and the blood spouted after it. The wound festered, and discharged very much at the time, and hurt me for years after.

In being hired out, sometimes the slave gets a good home, and sometimes a bad one: when he gets a good one, he dreads to see January come; when he has a bad one, the year seems five times as long as it is.

I was next with Mr. Enoch Sawyer of Camden county: my business was to keep ferry, and do other odd work. It was cruel living; we had not near enough of either victuals or clothes; I was half-starved for half my time. I have often ground the husks of Indian corn over again in a hand-mill, for the chance of getting something to eat out of it, which the former grinding had left. In severe frosts, I was compelled to go into the fields and woods to work, with my naked feet cracked and bleeding from extreme cold: to warm them, I used to rouse an ox or hog, and stand on the place where it had lain. I was at that place three years, and very long years they seemed to me. The trick by which he kept me so long was this: — the Court House was but a mile off; on hiring day, he prevented me from going till he went himself and bid for me. On the last occasion, he was detained for a little while by other business, so I ran as quickly as I could, and got hired before he came up.

Mr. George Furley was my next master; he employed me as a car-boy in the Dismal swamp; I had to drive lumber, &c. I had plenty to eat and plenty of clothes. I was so overjoyed at the change, that I then thought I would not have left the place to go to heaven.

Next year I was hired by Mr. John Micheau of the same county, who married my young mistress, one of the daughters of Mr. Grandy, and sister to my present owner. This master gave us very few clothes, and but little to eat; I was almost naked. One day he came into the field, and asked why no more work was done. The older people were afraid of him; so I said that the reason was, we were so hungry, we could not work. He went home and told the mistress to give us plenty to eat, and at dinner time we had plenty. We came out shouting for joy, and went to work with delight. From that time, we had food enough, and he soon found that he had a great deal more work done. The field was quite alive with the people striving who should do most.

He hired me for another year. He was a great gambler; He kept me up five nights together, without sleep night or day, to wait on the gambling table. I was standing in the corner of the room, nodding for want of sleep, when he took up the shovel, and beat me with it: he dislocated my shoulder, and sprained my wrist, and broke the shovel over me. I ran away, and got another person to hire me.

This person was Mr. Richard Furley, who after that hired me at the Court House every year, till my master came of age. He gave me a pass to work for myself, so I obtained work by the piece where I could, and paid him out of my earnings what we had agreed on; I maintained myself on the rest, and saved what I could. In this way I was not liable to be flogged and ill-used. He paid seventy, eighty, or ninety dollars a year for me, and I paid him twenty or thirty dollars a year more than that.

When my master came of age, he took all his coloured people to himself. Seeing that I was industrious and persevering, and had obtained plenty of work, he made me pay him almost twice as much as I had paid Mr. Furley. At that time, the English blockaded the Chesapeake, which made it necessary to send merchandize from Norfolk to Elizabeth city by the Grand Canal, so that it might get to sea by Pamlico Sound and Ocracock Inlet, I took some canal boats on shares; Mr. Grice, who married my other young mistress, was the owner of them. I gave him one-half of all I received for freight: out of the other half, I had to victual and man the boats, and all over that expense was my own profit.

Some time before this, my brother Benjamin returned from the West Indies, where he had been two years with his master's vessel. I was very glad to hear of it, and got leave to go see him. While I was sitting with his wife and him, his wife's master came and asked him to fetch a can of water: he did so, and carried it into the store. While I was waiting for him and wondering at his being so long away, I heard the heavy blows of a hammer: after a little while I was alarmed, and went to see what was going on. I looked into the store, and saw my brother lying on his back on the floor, and Mr. Williams, who had bought him, driving staples over his wrists and ankles; an iron bar was afterwards put across his breast, which was also held down by staples.

Excerpts from James Curry slave narrative

James Curry was born into slavery around 1815 in Person County, North Carolina. In these excerpts from his memoir, he describes his mother's experiences as a slave and reflects on the differences between slave labor and paid labor.

From James Curry, b. 1815? *Narrative of James Curry, A Fugitive Slave*. The Liberator, 10 January 1840.

Courtesy of Documenting the American South / UNC Libraries.

My mother was cook in the house for about twenty-two years. She cooked for from twenty-five to thirty-five, taking the family and the slaves together. The slaves ate in the kitchen. After my mistress's death, my mother was the only woman kept in the house. She took care of my master's children, some of whom were then quite small, and brought them up. One of the most trying scenes I ever passed through, when I would have laid down my life to protect her if I had dared, was this: after she had raised my master's children, one of his daughters, a young girl, came into the kitchen one day, and for some time about the dinner, she struck my mother, who pushed her away, and she fell on the floor. Her father was not at home. When he came, which was while the slaves were eating in the kitchen, she told him about it. He came down, called my mother out, and, with a hickory rod, he beat her fifteen or twenty strokes, and then called his daughter and told her to take her satisfaction of her, and she did beat her until she was satisfied.

Oh! it was dreadful, to see the girl whom my poor mother had taken care of from her childhood thus beating her, and I must stand there, and did not dare to crook my finger in her defence. My mother's labor was very hard. She would go to the house in the morning, take her pail upon her head, and go away to the cow-pen, and milk fourteen cows. She then put on the bread for the family breakfast, and got the cream ready for churning, and set a little child to churn it, she having the care of from ten to fifteen children, whose mothers worked in the field. After clearing away the family breakfast, she got breakfast for the slaves; which consisted of warm corn bread and buttermilk, and was taken at twelve o'clock. In the meantime, she had beds to make, rooms to sweep, &c. Then she cooked the family dinner, which was simply plain meat, vegetables and bread. Then the slaves' dinner was to be ready at from eight to nine o'clock in the evening. It consisted of corn bread, or potatoes, and the meat which remained of the master's dinner, or one herring

piece. At night she had the cows to milk again. There was little ceremony

about the master's supper, unless there was company. This was her work day by day. Then in the course of the week, she had the washing and ironing to do for her master's family, (who, however, were clothed very simply,) and for her husband, seven children, and herself.

After I was sixteen, I was put into the field to work in the spring and summer, and in the autumn and winter, I worked in the hatter's shop with my uncle.

We raised on the plantation, principally, tobacco, some cotton, and some grain. We commenced work as soon as we could see in the morning, and worked from that time until 12 o'clock before breakfast, and then until dark, when we had our dinner, and hastened to our night-work for ourselves. We were not driven as field slaves generally are, and yet when I hear people here say they work as hard as the slaves, I can tell them from experience, they know nothing about it. And even if they did work as hard, there is one striking difference. When they go home at night, they carry to their families the wages of their daily labor; and then they have the night for rest and sleep. Whereas, the slave carries to his family at night, only a weary body and a sick mind, and all he can do for them is done during the hours allowed him for sleep.

A slave, who was hired during one summer by Thomas Maguhee, a rich slaveholder in our neighborhood, soon after his return, passed with me, one day, near a field on his plantation. Pointing to it, he said, "I never saw blood flow any where as I've seen it flow in that field. It flows there like water. When I went there to work, I was a *man* but now, I am a *boy*. I could then carry several bushels on my shoulder, but now I cannot lift one to it." So very hard had he been worked. When arranging the slaves for hoeing in the field, the overseer takes them, one at a time, and tries their speed, and places them accordingly in the row, the swiftest first and so on. Then they commence, and all must keep up with the foremost. This Thomas Maguhee used to walk into his field, with his hat close down on his head, and holding his cane over his shoulder. When he came up to the poor slaves, as they were tugging at their hoes, he would call out, "boys!" Then they must all raise their hats and reply simultaneously, "Sir." "Move your hoes." They would spring forward and strive to increase their speed to the utmost; but presently he would call out again, "boys!" Again the hats were raised as they answered, "Sir." "I told you to move your hoes, and you hav'nt moved them yet. I have twice to threat and once to fall." (That is, if you do not move faster, I shall knock you down.) Now the poor creatures must make their last effort, and when he saw that their every power was exerted, he would set his hat on the top of his head, taking down his cane, set his arms akimbo and strut through the field.

Analysis of Slave Narratives – Created by Sue Robertson

Use one of these worksheets for each of the slave narratives.

Name of the narrative _____

1. Specific hardships suffered by the slave or slaves in the narrative.
2. Emotions expressed in the narrative/ when and why
3. Type of work the slave or slaves did
4. Relationship between slave and slave owner
5. Specific visual or auditory images you remember from the narrative
6. What you learned about slavery that you didn't already know

A Dream Deferred

by Langston Hughes

What happens to a dream deferred?

Does it dry up
like a raisin in the sun?
Or fester like a sore--
And then run?
Does it stink like rotten meat?
Or crust and sugar over--
like a syrupy sweet?

Maybe it just sags
like a heavy load.

Or does it explode?

I, Too, Sing America

by Langston Hughes

I, too, sing America.

I am the darker brother.
They send me to eat in the kitchen
When company comes,
But I laugh,
And eat well,
And grow strong.

Tomorrow,
I'll be at the table
When company comes.
Nobody'll dare
Say to me,
"Eat in the kitchen,"
Then.

Besides,
They'll see how beautiful I am
And be ashamed--

I, too, am America.

Strange Fruit : A Poem by David Margolick

Southern trees bear strange fruit,
Blood on the leaves and blood at the root,
Black bodies swinging in the southern breeze,
Strange fruit hanging from the poplar trees.

Pastoral scene of the gallant south,
The bulging eyes and the twisted mouth,
Scent of magnolias, sweet and fresh,
Then the sudden smell of burning flesh.

Here is the fruit for the crows to pluck,
For the rain to gather, for the wind to suck,
For the sun to rot, for the trees to drop,
Here is a strange and bitter crop.

Poem Analysis Sheet – Created by Sue Robertson

“A Dream Deferred”

1. Many slaves like Harriet Jacobs had to postpone their dreams. According to Langston Hughes, what are some of the things that happen to people’s dreams when they are deferred? Which ones do you think apply to Harriet?

“Strange Fruit”

1. What is the strange fruit described in this poem?
2. How does the juxtaposition of contrasting images make the second stanza imagery effective?
3. How are the bodies like fruit? Why do you think the word bitter was used?

“I, Too, Sing America “

1. What does “eating in the kitchen” symbolize?
2. What is ironic about how the black narrator feels about himself or herself?
3. What do you think the title means?
4. What does “being at the table symbolize?

General Questions

1. Do you see anything in these poems that might relate to slave narratives? If so, how?

Three Paragraph Writing Assignment – Created by Sue Robertson
Create a graphic organizer for each of the paragraphs in your essay.

Paragraph I – A description of Harriet Jacobs' dream

What did she want for the future? How was she trying to achieve this dream?

What did she imagine her life to be like when she achieved this goal?

Paragraph II – An explanation of why Harriet's dream had to be deferred

What got in the way of Harriet achieving her dream?

Which people or events contributed to this delay?

Did Harriet's dream ever come true? Explain.

Paragraph III – A description of the emotions that Harriet was feeling when she couldn't fulfill her dream as well as how she felt when she finally got her dream.

How did Harriet react to the postponement of her dream?

Did she give up on her dream?

What led to the fulfillment of her dream?

Poetry Assignment – Created by Sue Robertson

Using the information you learned from the slave narratives, write a poem of at least 16 lines divided into four stanzas. The focus of the poem should be the emotions and experiences of a slave as seen in the narratives you have read. Your poem must include the following:

A metaphor or simile

An example of alliteration

Color imagery

At least one auditory image

At least four visual images

At least one image relating to taste and one to touch

A refrain

At least four emotions a slave would be feeling