

Sample Lesson: Urban Slavery in the Capital: Using Art and Literature as a Lens into the 19th Century

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Grade Level: GT Middle School/High School

Duration of Lessons: 1-2 weeks, with prior reading of Douglass's *Narrative*

Overview:

How can a painting be used to study life in another time? In this lesson, students will study the differences between urban and rural slavery, methods of resistance to slavery by enslaved people, the special complexity of slavery in Washington, symbol of liberty to the world, and the use of visual art to convey a political message. Drawing upon knowledge from prior reading of Frederick Douglass's *Narrative of the Life of Frederick Douglass, An American Slave*, students will study Eastman Johnson's painting, *Negro Life at the South*, and its use as a political tool to gain insight into the history of the antebellum United States.

Background:

In the *Narrative of the Life of Frederick Douglass*, Frederick Douglass details the circumstances of his childhood on a Maryland plantation and his experiences as an enslaved person both in the city of Baltimore and on rural plantations. Typically assigned in high school, all students at Sage in grades six through eight read the *Narrative* in connection with study of the 19th Century. Study of the *Narrative* prepares students with sufficient background to understand the differences between urban and rural slavery.

Originally from New England, the American painter Eastman Johnson spent a good portion of his adult life living in Washington, DC and had occasion to observe urban slavery first hand. Johnson's painting, *Negro Life at the South*, depicts twelve people of color engaged in various activities, such as playing the banjo and talking to each other, and also a lone white woman who appears to intrude upon the scene. According to the Davis article referenced below, the painting became an object of controversy in the antebellum United States as its name was changed by principals other than the painter to *Old Kentucky Home* and presented as an idyllic view of slavery. Among many points in his article, Davis suggests that the painter's background, living arrangements, and acquaintances may indicate that Johnson intended to present an entirely different view of slavery, that of resistance through music and familial relationships.

At this point in their study, all Sage students will have received instruction in the importance of symbolism and the founding principles of the United States, allowing them to eventually understand the particular ugliness of slavery in a capital city dedicated to representative democracy and freedom.

Lesson Objectives:

Students will learn how to interpret primary and secondary sources and how to draw conclusions about 19th Century life in a country torn by the issue of slavery.

Students will develop understanding of the role of an artist in society and the use of visual art as a tool for political commentary and historical study.

Studying a painting, students will develop hypotheses regarding history, applying knowledge gained from literature study.

Materials Used:

Douglass, Frederick. "Narrative of the Life of Frederick Douglass, an American Slave."

Johnson, Eastman. Negro Life At the South. Allposters.Com.

Davis, John. "Eastman Johnson's Negro Life at the South and Urban Slavery in Washington, D.C." The Art Bulletin 80 (1998): 67-92.

Implementation:

Divide students into groups of three or four. Distribute large sheets of newsprint or poster board and colored markers to each group. Provide each group with a high quality copy of Johnson's painting.

Direct students that today, they are the historians charged with discerning all information possible about the painting. Each group should write the name of the painting and their names at the top of the paper as historians.

Direct each group to study and discuss the painting using "wh" questions. What is happening? Where is this happening? When? Who are these people? Why are they here? Students are to record their observations on the paper or poster board for presentation to the class. As students are engaged in the study, the teacher should walk around the room pressing the students to look at every detail. Why are certain people illuminated? What are the relationships between people? What are the clues that indicate the setting of the painting? What is the significance of the white woman in the corner?

Each group should record its conclusions on the poster paper. After each group has completed the poster, the individual groups will present their findings to the class.

For younger students, the teacher will then summarize the actual history of the painting from notes prepared from a reading of the John Davis article. Students will learn that the painting is of antebellum urban slavery in Washington, D.C.

Older students or younger students with strong reading comprehension and curiosity are then assigned the Davis reading from *The Art Bulletin*. According to the JSTOR website:

[t]he Art Bulletin publishes leading scholarship in the English language in all aspects of art history as practiced in the academy, museums, and other institutions. From its founding in 1913

the journal has published, through rigorous peer review, scholarly articles and critical reviews of the highest quality in all areas and periods of the history of art. Articles take a variety of methodological approaches, from the historical to the theoretical. In its mission as a journal of record, The Art Bulletin fosters an intensive engagement with intellectual developments and debates in contemporary art-historical practice. (“Journal Information for the Art Bulletin” <http://www.jstor.org/journals/00043079.html>)

With specific instruction that this is challenging material written by and for university professors, students are given several days to complete the reading and a reading comprehension study guide (below) to complement their study. Students are instructed to give the questions a try and not to become downhearted if they find the material difficult, but also to record at least guesses for each prompt. This study guide is then discussed in a round table format with questions lead by either the teacher or individual students. The teacher will provide additional discussion prompts during the group review of the study guide. Some of the study guide questions require straight reading comprehension and recall, others present more challenge for the most advanced students to deconstruct text and to critically analyze the context for answers. All students are encouraged and given positive reinforcement for their work, especially in light of the difficulty of the material.

This lesson might immediately precede a unit on the Civil War.

The Sage School
Middle School Humanities
Study Guide

Davis, John, "Eastman Johnson's Negro Life at the South and Urban Slavery in Washington, D.C." *The Art Bulletin*, Vol. 80, No. 1. (March 1998) pp. 67-92.

<http://www.jstor.org>

Name:

You will find most of the answers in the reading, others you will have to look up in a dictionary or an encyclopedia.

Who was Eastman Johnson?

Define and cite source:

"minstrelly"

"coffle"

"Co-opting"

"Muckraking journalism"

"paradox"

“peculiar”

Why was *Negro Life at the South* recharacterized from the original title to *Old Kentucky Home*?

What was peculiar about Washington, DC that made slavery in the capitol politically “uncomfortable” for many citizens?

Thinking about symbolism, how did abolitionists co-opt national symbols in pursuit of their cause?

Why was the capture and sale of freeman from DC particularly noxious?

What did John Dickson say about it?

When was this?

What was the Southern response?

Based on your knowledge of the Constitution, what do you think about the 1836 “gag” rule in the Congress?

While the author says he does not have a thesis he is trying to prove, do you think he does? Why or why not?

Events/The Pearl/Adams connection/timing of the gag rule/lived in Boston

How did the plan of the city of Washington and the architecture of the city relate to the issue of slavery?

Why does the author compare *Negro Life at the South* to muckraking journalism?

The author asks, [w]hy might the Washington locale of *Negro Life at the South* have been problematic, and why might the success of the painting have been dependent on a public process of forgetting its original urban setting—or, just as likely, of refusing to see, or being unable to see that setting from the outset?" (p70) What do you think is the answer?

Who was Solomon Northrup? What happened to him? (p76) How does this story support an anti-slavery message for the painting?

Why was Charles Sumner caned?

What evidence does the author give for conflict over the issue of slavery in Johnson's life?

What is the “revisionist history” to which the author refers on page 78?

Did enslaved people resist the oppression of slavery? If so, how? How does the painting support this view?

How did the proponents of slavery use the painting to support their views?

How is there stereotyping in the painting?

What was the role of music in resistance?

What is the significance of the banjo?

What do you think the author means when he writes?

“As in many situations where ideologically inflected artistic products gain widespread popular resonance, stereotype here becomes the bedfellow of paradox, with the former serving as the tool of the uneasy dominant culture, intent on reshaping, reversing, and making more palatable the existing truths within a minority community. Thus, the realities of familial interactions and musical entertainment among blacks can come to mean very different things to slave participants and to the slave-owning onlookers who must find a nonthreatening way to account for them.”
(p.80)

Describe the housing arrangements for urban slaves.

Why would District slave owners, in particular, want to hide slavery?

Why would urban slaveholders in D.C. want to prohibit organized community life of slaves?

What is the meaning of the white woman in the corner of the painting?