

Simon & Schuster's Classroom Activities for
***Narrative of the Life of
Frederick Douglass***
An American Slave, Written by Himself

By Frederick Douglass
ISBN: 074348777X

Each of the three activities includes:

- NCTE standards covered
- An estimate of the time needed
- A complete list of materials needed
- Step-by-step instructions
- Questions to help you evaluate the results

This curriculum guide and many other curriculum guides for Enriched Classics and Folger Shakespeare Library editions are available on our website, www.simonsaysteach.com.

This Enriched Classic Edition includes:

- A concise introduction that gives the reader important background information
- A chronology of the author's life and work
- A timeline of significant events that provides the book's historical context
- An outline of key themes and plot points to help readers form their own interpretations
- Detailed explanatory notes
- Critical analysis, including contemporary and modern perspectives on the work
- Discussion questions to promote lively classroom discussion
- A list of recommended related books and films to broaden the reader's experience

“Judging the Book by its Cover”

(A Lesson in Pre-reading)

By Robert Marantz

When we receive a new book, the first thing we notice is the cover, and the first thing on the cover we see is the title. Most of the time, we read the title once and immediately open the book to get to the story. Yet, if we take the time to examine the title, we can glean much from it, if the author intends it. Such is the case with Frederick Douglass and his Narrative. His complete title, Narrative of the Life of Frederick Douglass, An American Slave, Written by Himself, packs a lot of information into its 13 words. The astute reader will read the title and be able to predict what they will learn when they open the book. This forecasting will add to the reader’s enjoyment and comprehension of the work.

In this lesson, we will study the title of Douglass’ autobiography. By analyzing the title itself, students gain experience in predicting, a valuable component of reading. They also learn to appreciate the multiple levels of meaning that can be conveyed through language.

This lesson will take one class period.

NCTE Standards Covered:

1. Students read a wide range of print and nonprint texts to build an understanding of texts, of themselves, and of the cultures of the United States and the world; to acquire new information; to respond to the needs and demands of society and the workplace; and for personal fulfillment. Among these texts are fiction and nonfiction, classic and contemporary works.
2. Students read a wide range of literature from many periods in many genres to build an understanding of the many dimensions (e.g., philosophical, ethical, aesthetic) of human experience.
3. Students apply a wide range of strategies to comprehend, interpret, evaluate, and appreciate texts. They draw on their prior experience, their interactions with other readers and writers, their knowledge of word meaning and of other texts, their words identification strategies, and their understanding of textual features (e.g., sound-letter correspondence, sentence structure, context, graphics).
6. Students apply knowledge of language structure, language conventions (e.g., spelling and punctuation), media techniques, figurative language, and genre to create, critique, and discuss print and nonprint texts.
11. Students participate as knowledgeable, reflective, creative, and critical members of a variety of literary communities.

What to Do:

1. Ask your students, “What is the first thing you notice about a book?” They will (hopefully) answer, “The title.”
2. Then ask them, “What purpose does the title serve?” Write your students’ responses on the board.
3. Note to the class that a title is important. It can provide clues about the plot, themes, and character.
4. Next, turn their attention to the full title of Frederick Douglass’ story: Narrative of the Life of Frederick Douglass, An American Slave, Written by Himself. That’s a very long title for a short book. Ask your students, “Why do you think Douglass chose that title?”
5. After a few minutes of discussion, propose the following: One way to understand Douglass’ purpose in naming his story in this way is to *deconstruct*, or take apart, the various words of the title. Write the following questions on the board:
 - What’s a “Narrative”?
 - What does “The Life of Frederick Douglass” tell you?
 - Who is Frederick Douglass?
 - How do you interpret “An American Slave”? (Consider “American” and “Slave” separately and together.)
 - What does it mean when it says, “Written by Himself”?
6. Give your students a few minutes to think about each of the questions, and then ask them to “deconstruct” the title in their journals. (i.e. find the meaning beyond the words)
7. Finally, after deconstructing the title, ask the students to predict what Douglass will describe in his “Narrative.” You may choose to have the students express this out loud or record it in their journals.

What You Need:

A copy of the Enriched Classic edition of Narrative of the Life of Frederick Douglass (ISBN: 074348777X) for each student.

How Did It Go?

After this lesson, your students may want to look again at the titles of their favorite movies, albums, and books and deconstruct them. This could also be a fun extra-credit assignment.

“Influences”
(A Lesson in Character)
By Robert Marantz

Frederick Douglass encountered many people in his life. Those he describes in his Narrative have influenced him in some way, either positively or negatively; People such his Aunt Hester, Sophia Auld, and Edward Covey.

In this lesson, students are encouraged to think critically about who Douglass describes in his story and why they are important to him. This lesson also demonstrates the bond between narrator and reader. We, just like Douglass, are shaped by the people in our lives. This conceit allows students to better identify with Douglass (even though their lives are much different than his), and leads to a deeper understanding of his life story.

This lesson will take one class period.

NCTE Standards Covered:

1. Students read a wide range of print and nonprint texts to build an understanding of texts, of themselves, and of the cultures of the United States and the world; to acquire new information; to respond to the needs and demands of society and the workplace; and for personal fulfillment. Among these texts are fiction and nonfiction, classic and contemporary works.
2. Students read a wide range of literature from many periods in many genres to build an understanding of the many dimensions (e.g., philosophical, ethical, aesthetic) of human experience.
3. Students apply a wide range of strategies to comprehend, interpret, evaluate, and appreciate texts. They draw on their prior experience, their interactions with other readers and writers, their knowledge of word meaning and of other texts, their words identification strategies, and their understanding of textual features (e.g., sound-letter correspondence, sentence structure, context, graphics).
5. Students employ a wide range of strategies as they write and use different writing process elements appropriately to communicate with different audiences for a variety of purposes.
11. Students participate as knowledgeable, reflective, creative, and critical members of a variety of literary communities.

What to Do:

1. Have each student choose a character from the following list and answer the questions on Handout #1 to compile a profile of that character.

<u>Characters:</u>		
Harriet Bailey	Betsy Bailey	Aunt Hester
Captain Anthony	Hugh Auld	Sophia Auld
Edward Covey	Mr. Freeland	Henry Harris
	David Ruggles	

2. After completing the character profile, have each student exchange their profiles with another student who chose a different character.

3. Allow 5-10 minutes for the students to read their classmate's questionnaires, and then instruct them to add to or comment on any of the responses. (Think of it as a write-around, but only among pairs.)

4. Finally, ask each student to think of someone who has influenced their own lives, for good or bad. Have each student complete a character profile of their influence in their journals.

What You Need:

Handout #1, and a copy of the Enriched Classic edition of Narrative of the Life of Frederick Douglass (ISBN: 074348777X) for each student.

How Did It Go?

This lesson is valuable not only for building critical thinking skills around the knowledge that we have of the characters, but also for teaching students how to effectively summarize their understanding of the text.

“Voice for the Voiceless”

(A Lesson in Voice)

By Robert Marantz

In his Narrative, Douglass describes the singing that slaves did while they worked in the fields. Their songs were called spirituals. These spirituals may have conveyed to the white masters a sense of contentment amongst the slaves, but this was not the case. In fact, these songs were sung to express the slaves’ innermost thoughts, fears, and hopes through hidden meanings, as they were not permitted to speak out. In this way, these spirituals can be thought of as authentic literature—that is, the truest words of the slaves.

In this lesson we select two spirituals for reflection and study: *The Gospel Train* and *Swing low, sweet chariot* are two spirituals which follow in the wake of the Douglass narrative because of the spirituals’ ability to capture a particular voice of resistance to the oppressiveness of slavery. Just as the Douglass piece ends with the hope that emancipation will be a reality for all who are oppressed in the United States, these two spirituals are centered around hope; these two spirituals are literally the *voice* of the African slaves who were oppressed in our country at the time, using this medium as a coded means of escape.

This lesson will take one class period.

NCTE Standards Covered:

1. Students read a wide range of print and nonprint texts to build an understanding of texts, of themselves, and of the cultures of the United States and the world; to acquire new information; to respond to the needs and demands of society and the workplace; and for personal fulfillment. Among these texts are fiction and nonfiction, classic and contemporary works.
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6. Students apply knowledge of language structure, language conventions (e.g., spelling and punctuation), media techniques, figurative language, and genre to create, critique, and discuss print and nonprint texts.

9. Students develop an understanding of and respect for diversity in language use, patterns, and dialects across cultures, ethnic groups, geographic regions, and social roles.

11. Students participate as knowledgeable, reflective, creative, and critical members of a variety of literary communities.

12. Students use spoken, written, and visual language to accomplish their own purposes (e.g., for learning, enjoyment, persuasion, and the exchange of information).

What to Do:

1. Start the lesson by reading this excerpt from Narrative: “The songs of the slave represent the sorrows of his heart; and he is relieved by them, only as an aching heart is relieved by its tears.” (Page 35)

2. Play an audio recording of *Swing low, sweet chariot* and *The Gospel Train*.

3. Prompt the students: As you listen to the following Negro spirituals, ask yourself: do these songs serve any purpose other than what Douglass says? Is it possible that these songs both literally and figuratively give the slaves a voice in their oppressive world? Are there metaphors in the lyrics?

4. Distribute Handout #2; Students will learn other purposes of the songs—work, hidden meanings—a voice to the voiceless!

5. Finish the lesson with a prompt for an essay (or discussion): What songs (new or old) speak to you and for you? Why? How else might someone express themselves other than speaking and writing?

What You Need:

Audio recordings of *Swing low, sweet chariot* and *The Gospel Train*, Handout #2, and a copy of the Enriched Classic edition of Narrative of the Life of Frederick Douglass (ISBN: 074348777X) for each student.

How Did It Go?

This lesson can be used as a jumping-off point for an exploration of how *voice* is an integral part of one’s culture, especially a culture that is overtly oppressed.

Character Profile

A. Character's relationship to Douglass: _____

B. Where and when does Douglass encounter the character?

C. How long does Douglass spend with this character? _____

D. What does Douglass learn about this character and/or about himself through their interaction? _____

E. What happens to this character? (If it is not explicit in the text, speculate as to what this character's future is.) _____

NEGRO SPIRITUALS¹

NEGRO SPIRITUALS AND WORK SONGS

During slavery and afterwards, workers were allowed to sing songs during their working time. This was the case when they had to coordinate their efforts for hauling a fallen tree or any heavy load. For example, prisoners used to sing "chain gang" songs, when they worked on the road or some construction. But some "drivers" also allowed slaves to sing "quiet" songs, if they were not apparently against slaveholders. Such songs could be sung either by only one or by several slaves. They were used for expressing personal feeling, and for cheering one another.

NEGRO SPIRITUALS AND THE UNDERGROUND RAILROAD

The Underground Railroad (UGRR) helped slaves to run to free a country. A fugitive could use several ways. First, they had to walk at night, using hand lights and moonlight. When needed, they walked ("waded") in water, so that dogs could not smell their tracks. Second, they jumped into chariot, where they could hide and ride away. These chariots stopped at some "stations", but this word could mean any place where slaves had to go for being taken in charge.

The codes of the first Negro spirituals are often related with an escape to a free country. For example, a "home" is a safe place where everyone can live free. So, a "home" can mean Heaven, but it covertly means a sweet and free country, a haven for slaves.

The ways used by fugitives running to a free country were riding a "chariot" or a "train".

The negro spirituals "The Gospel Train" and "Swing low, sweet chariot" which directly refer to the Underground Railroad, an informal organization who helped many slaves to flee.

The words of "The Gospel Train" are "She is coming... Get onboard... There's room for many more". This is a direct call to go way, by riding a "train" which stops at "stations."

Then, "Swing low, sweet chariot" refers to Ripley, a "station" of the Underground Railroad, where fugitive slaves were welcome. This town is atop a hill, by Ohio River, which is not easy to cross. So, to reach this place, fugitives had to wait for help coming from the hill. The words of this spirituals say, "I looked over Jordan and what did I see/ Coming for to carry me home/ A band of angels coming after me."

¹ Excerpted from website: <http://www.negrospirituals.com/song.htm>

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