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Early American Literature in the Elementary School Classroom

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The goal of the American educational system should be to teach an individual to become an independent thinker who can form his or her own view. This goal is very hard to obtain, because textbooks often provide a skewed view, but if educators make creative use of literature, students can learn to become independent thinkers. Students need to acquire this deeper understanding in order to learn critical literacy or the ability to “question, examine or […] dispute” texts (McLaughlin 14). One important tool educators can use to help develop this critical capacity is literature, in particular literature about slavery. Grade five students can be introduced to excerpts from a variety of eighteenth and nineteenth century texts, and secondary literature about those texts. This essay explores ways to use selections from The Interesting Narrative of the Life of Olaudah Equiano, The Life and Times of Cotton Mather, and the poems “On Being Brought from Africa to America,” and “To Sir Toby.” Thoughtful use of this literature introduces young students to complex and rich ideas concerning slavery.

A teacher’s first challenge is introducing students to Africa. In the Massachusetts curriculum frameworks, fifth grade students do not study Africa’s history; therefore they cannot accurately imagine where the majority of slaves were born. The history of Africa may not be in their curriculum, but literature always is. Excerpts from The Interesting Narrative of the Life of Olaudah Equiano, by Olaudah Equiano, could easily be enjoyed and read by the class while the teacher discusses Africa. Equiano’s autobiography succeeds at making Africa into a place of commerce and excitement. This view is different than most textbooks, which describe Africa as an underdeveloped continent. Instead Equiano describes Africa as “a nation of dancers, musicians, and poets” (676). In other words, Africa has culture and was successful long before Europeans started to invade. Janelle Collins, in “Passage to Slavery, Passage to Freedom: Olaudah Equiano and the Sea,” writes, “Part of Equiano’s task in the opening chapters […] is to geographically and rhetorically contest the accepted images of both Africans and Europeans” (213). For example, Equiano describes a dance ritual, which shows how Africa is this nation of culture:

The assembly is separated into four divisions, which dance either apart or in succession, and each with a character peculiar to itself. The first division contains the married men, who in their dances frequently exhibit feats of arms, and the representation of a battle
Equiano takes the time to describe the dance's divisions and symbolic meaning to show how it reflects this spirit and variety that exists in Africa.

An educator trying to give his or her students a well-rounded view on slavery should make students aware of the conflicting ideas surrounding the economic and cultural “success” of Africa. More importantly, giving students views of Africa written by an African is more meaningful than descriptions from secondary literature, and provokes a deeper reaction in students. Two conflicting depictions of Africa can be found in Equiano’s and Eighteenth Century American poet Phyllis Wheatley’s writings. Though Equiano portrays a successful country, most “Europeans [...] characterized Africans as stupid, backward, and uncivilized” (Loewen 143). Even Phyllis Wheatley, born in Africa and raised by white slave owners, echoes this negative perspective in her poem, “On Being Brought from Africa to America.” Wheatley refers to Africa as a “pagan land” (l.1) that contained her “benighted” (l.2) soul. In other words, Africa was kept in the dark or was ignorant about Christianity. In Wheatley’s poem Africa is portrayed as an unsuccessful, unreligious land whose occupants needed to experience a successful and religious culture (i.e. Anglo-American culture) to become better people. Wheatley felt that Africa was not Equiano’s organized and successful continent; rather, Africa was a place kept in religious darkness. It is important to emphasize to students that Wheatley does not defend or support enslavement of Africans, but rather is thankful for her new religion, which she did not have access to as a child in Africa.

Awareness of these conflicting views of Africa will prepare students for the slave owners’ harsh treatment of their slaves. There are many texts expressing the pain and evil of enslavement. Equiano’s graphic details can be too much for young students, but there are examples of mistreatment that would be appropriate for fifth graders. Equiano describes his time in The Middle Passage by sharing this story: “One day they had taken a number of fishes; and when they [the white sailors] had killed and satisfied themselves with as many as they thought fit, to our astonishment who were on deck, rather than give any of them to us to eat, as we expected, they tossed the remaining fish into the sea again” (685). This story is appropriate for the age group, while still showing how the slaves were mistreated during transportation. Equiano is well known for his graphic details, which gives students, teachers, and scholars ample material to study. Because of that, Equiano will provide age appropriate examples that range from starvation to use of the “iron muzzle” (687).

Equiano is not the only American writer to point out the horrendous nature of slavery. “Sir Toby,” by the white Eighteenth Century poet and newspaper writer Philip Freneau, is a difficult poem, but if introduced in stages its message becomes accessible to students. Introducing students to Freneau also teaches students that while the vast majority of Americans in the early Republic either supported or were indifferent to slavery, some, like Freneau, spoke out against it. If one feels the whole poem is not manageable, excerpts can also be used. Freneau writes, for example:

Ye powers! who formed these wretched tribes, relate
What had they done, to merit such a fate!
Why were they brought from Eboe's sultry waste,
To see that plenty which they must not taste-
Food, which they cannot buy, and dare not steal;
Yams and potatoes-many a scanty meal! (ll.19-24)

Like Equiano’s writing, this passage demonstrates that slaves were taken from their home to be mistreated and starved. Freneau makes it clear that slaves rarely got to enjoy the “plenty” that white Americans enjoyed. He also mentions the fact slaves had no money and to steal the “plenty” could mean death. Depending on the maturity level of the fifth graders, an educator could include Freneau’s message about a slave’s life being hell. Freneau uses visions of “whips on whips” (l.7) and “howlings” (l.8) to recreate a realistic hell. He also switches to a sarcastic tone when he refers to slaves as a “black herd” (l.14). The overall tone of disgust underscores Freneau’s recognition that enslavement turned human beings into a herd of animals.

Reading a poem that speaks out against slavery, can only increase a child’s shock when he or she finds out almost all wealthy, Southern white men, including our third president, Thomas Jefferson, owned slaves. James Loewen, a researcher of history textbooks, found that “half of our textbooks never note that Jefferson [and other Founding Fathers] owned slaves” because it is too controversial (Loewen 147). Confronting this alarming controversy, however, creates curious students, which gives them energy and desire to learn even more about slavery.

While students are shocked and saddened to learn about the errors of our Founding Fathers, it is important for them to know that slavery did not crush African-Americans; rather, they adapted and survived in this oppressive environment. For this purpose, students should be referred again to Phyllis Wheatley’s history and the poem, “On Being Brought from Africa to America.” Students had previously read this poem to learn about Africa; now, however, students can learn that Wheatley found the joy of religion while enslaved. Her owner John Wheatley “taught [her] to read and write” (Gura 751).
as well as raise her as a Christian. Because of her conversion to Christianity – not her enslavement – she was grateful that she was brought to America. To show her appreciation to God she writes, “Twas mercy brought me” to America (l.1). This appreciative statement is only for God’s work. It is important that students understand that she not thanking the system of slavery or white people. Learning the background of this poet, however, helps students understand that some slaves were educated and that many found joy and hope in religion. Her poem expresses this gratitude for God and the benefit of religion she received by being an American slave.

Wheatley was not the only one who experienced the occasional civil white slave owner, and explorations of these relationships can humanize and complicate the frightening and foreign study of enslavement. For example, Richard Baker, a white slave owner, and Equiano had “a friendship [that] was cemented” (689). When Baker passed away, Equiano writes, “I lost at once a kind interpreter, an agreeable companion, and a faithful friend, who at the age of fifteen, discovered a mind superior to prejudice; and who was not ashamed to notice, to associate with, and to be the friend and instructor of one who was […] a slave!” (689). Equiano’s insight into Baker’s character demonstrates that kind, considerate and unbiased men existed among the world of slavery, and his inclusion of Baker’s character proves that he wants to paint a full picture of his world and the relationships he forged in it. He did not include only the bad or the good; he wrote a well-rounded piece of literature that provides many examples for students who need to understand that slavery was an integral part of society. When presenting excerpts, like this one, to students, teachers must emphasize the point that despite moments of civility, the overwhelming feeling towards African Americans was negative and the majority of the white race treated African American cruelly. In other words, Richard Baker was a rare exception.

To demonstrate how rare Richard Baker really was, and to remind students that slavery was not exclusively a Southern institution, educators can introduce students to The Life and Times of Cotton Mather by Kenneth Silverman as well as some of Mather’s sermons. While these texts are a little advanced for fifth graders, the ideas in them are central to an understanding of the history of slavery and can be shared successfully with students. Cotton Mather’s treatment of his slave, Onesimus, is well documented and clearly explained in Silverman’s book. Here Silverman clarifies that Puritans thought “servants were to be treated as family members” (264). Because of that, Mather allowed Onesimus “to read and write,” “to marry” and “to work outside the house” (264). In Mather’s sermons, however, he made it clear there was a division and order between slave, master, and God. In “God of Order” Mather addresses “masters and servants separately (though not equally)” (Ceppi 220). Mather’s goal was to make masters realize that while they are masters to slaves, they are also servants to God. He believed masters must make the slaves, or servants as he called them, realize that their future happiness can only be achieved in heaven if they follow both God and their masters. By studying Mather’s relationship with slaves, a student will realize that American religious leaders participated freely in slavery because slavery was not seen as evil; rather, slavery was seen as “a proper form of education for them” (Loewen 144). As a teacher one should make sure students understand that this is not an acceptable excuse; rather a teacher should emphasis that slavery was so entwined in society that religion had to be adapted to make it seem appropriate.

Nearly all aspects of European-American culture (religion, economics, etc.) benefited from African slavery. The economic rewards for participating in the system of slavery even induced Africans to become involved in the trade. In addition, a form of slavery materialized in some parts of Africa. Students, however, are not told that Africans participated in this cruel and horrendous system. Edward Lucie-Smith, in “Slavery For Beginners,” writes, “One myth […] is that the slave trade was purely a matter of whites exploiting black” (44). An excerpt from Equiano clarifies that slavery existed in Africa. However, it was a milder form of enslavement, and not a permanent state dictated by skin color, as students will find out when they read about a “mistress” that followed his “custom” and whose “language […] resembled [his] so nearly” (681). This paragraph is rather long, because Equiano goes into great descriptive detail of how this “mistress” treated him “as [he] had been used to” (681) and allowed other slaves “to attend” to him because “she had a number of [other] slaves” (681). The reader also learns that “all the nations and people [he] had hither passed through, resembled [his] own in their manners, customs, and language” leading readers to realize that the “mistress” is African (681). Equiano, therefore, presents an African woman as a kindly slave owner, which few if any textbooks ever mention. Students, however, must understand that slavery in Africa allowed for social mobility, was not a permanent state, and did not include the violent practices of European-American slavery. One was not permanently a slave; rather they were more similar to indentured servants. Acknowledging that some Africans were familiar with slavery in their native lands while underscoring the differences between European and African slavery provides students with a richer and more complex understanding of the history of slavery.

Frenacle’s poem, “To Sir Toby,” further explains how blacks participated in the system of slavery. This time, however,
Africans become involved in slave trading in response to the European-dominated economic system. In Freneau’s poem, and in reality, the economy forced Africans to betray one another. In “To Sir Toby” Freneau describes the fate of black West Indian slaves who sought refuge with other escaped slaves in the hills of Jamaica. Freneau writes that these refugee slaves were “. . . hardly safe from brother traitors there.” Because he includes the “brother traitors” readers realize that other black men profited by turning in the escaped slaves. It is important for students to realize what Freneau means in these lines: the European-dominated economic system is so fueled by slavery that even freed slaves resort to profiting from slavery. As Edward Lucie-Smith writes, “The white traders needed reliable sources of supply, and the suppliers were blacks”; therefore, slavery was not always white against black and students should be aware of this tragic reality. White males were not the only threat to a slave; the evil of slavery was such that even a “brother” will bring a slave back to his or her master for an economic reward.

After students realize how atrocious and complex the system of slavery was students may start to develop pity for the “helpless” African. This pity is the reason why many teachers and black students dislike discussing slavery in school. It is one of the worst consequences of studying slavery without the literature. Literature, like Equiano’s narrative, shows that many slaves were not helpless, but rather took a stance against their owners. Equiano tells of an incident where he refused to be sold. He writes of an exchange between himself and his master,

“Then,” said he, “you are now my slave.” I told him my master could not sell me to him, nor to anyone else. “Why,” said he, “did not your master buy you?” I confessed he did. “But I have served him,” said I, “many years, and he has taken all my wages and prize money, for I had only got one six pence during the war; besides this I have been baptized, and by the laws of the land no man has a right to sell me.” (692)

Equiano, like other slaves, has the courage to face his master and demand to be released. Here Equiano is using the religion he adopted from the culture that has enslaved him. This great contradiction in belief and action is significant. It should be pointed out to students that though Equiano believes that his Christian faith teaches “no man” can be sold or bought, this interpretation of Christian doctrine was unpopular, and in some states, preaching Christianity to the slaves could cause imprisonment or death. Because of that, Equiano’s strong reasoning did not stop the master from selling him. The effort and strong argument from Equiano does, however, show his great courage and prove that Equiano was educated and able to stand up for himself, and he is ultimately successful in purchasing his own freedom. He includes this moment of his life to show just that and educators should share this moment in the text in order to avoid the pity many students feel for the “helpless” African.

Wheatley’s poem also resists the idea of the “helpless” African. “On Being Brought from Africa to America” ends with an important message that puts “Christians” and “Negroes” on the same plane. Wheatley writes, “Remember, Christians, Negroes, black as Cain / May be refined, and join the angelic trains” (ll.7-8). The use of the comma puts “Christians, Negroes, black as Cain” as members of a list (l.7), all of whom “may be refined and join the [same] angelic train” (l.8). Wheatley is very subtly taking charge and making a bold statement that makes all races equal before God. These two lines demonstrate how slaves—in this case, an enslaved woman poet—took chances to point out the wrong in slavery. It is so important for students to realize that slaves did indeed try to help themselves, had pride in their own accomplishments and an understanding of their own rights as human beings, regardless of their treatment in the white-dominated society.

Phillip Freneau also realized the importance of changing this stereotype. In “To Sir Toby,” he writes of the escaping slaves, “Here, they, of stuff determined to be free / Must climb the rude cliffs of the Liguane” (ll.53-4). Freneau points out that the slaves are made “of stuff” or courage and “determined to be free” (l.53). These men do whatever it takes to reach freedom, even climb “rude cliffs” (l.54). Freneau’s use of adjectives underscores the slaves’ passionate determination to be free. By pointing these word choices out to students, they can realize the bravery needed to live life as a slave.

It is of uttermost importance to make the lesson of slavery something current African-American citizens can be proud of rather than something they need to hide. The message should be that their ancestors were strong enough to endure these tough times and fought hard against their oppressors. One should never feel a slave ancestry is shameful or that slaves were weak. Philip Freneau does just that in “To Sir Toby” because he makes sure readers realize that slaves had great strength, courage, and determination.

Slavery has been a touchy, uncomfortable topic for many teachers because our society has taught a slanted and skewed version of the truth. In order to prevent this issue from causing concern in the future, educators need to teach students the information that is found in Early American Literature. This literature will not only help students become better readers, but help them become critical, independent thinkers. It is every educator’s job to encourage students to seek the truth and think...
about matters on their own. Grade five students tackle the issue of slavery and if a teacher can introduce each student to at least parts of *The Interesting Narrative of the Life of Olaudah Equiano*, “On Being Brought from Africa to America,” *The Life and Times of Cotton Mather* and “To Sir Toby,” the student will begin the process of becoming an independent thinker, which is, after all, the goal of every educator.

**References**


