

# Adapting *Beloved*: A Reader's Theatre Approach

By Rick Vanderwall

## Overview

This lesson, which inter-relates with the lesson, **Connecting the History of Slavery and Scriptwriting**, helps students extend their understanding of the novel, *Beloved*, beyond the one they glean from merely reading. While previous lesson gave students experience at adapting from a source, in this lesson students, divided into five groups, will create an act of a play based on a section of the novel. The resulting scripts will be an adaptation of the whole play. Students can accomplish the production process described below during class time or outside of class, depending your philosophy. This activity also may give students some insight into the process of turning history into artistic expression as Toni Morrison did with *Beloved*.

## Student Objectives

Students will:

- Apply a wide range of strategies to help them comprehend, interpret, evaluate, and appreciate texts. They will draw on their previous experience, interactions with other readers and writers, knowledge of word meaning and other texts, word identification strategies, and understanding of textual features (*NCTE standard 3*); and
- Apply their knowledge of language structure, language conventions (e.g., spelling and punctuation), media techniques, figurative language, and genre to create, critique, and discuss print and non-print texts (*NCTE standard 6*).

## Skills Attained

Students will be able to:

- Adapt prose to dramatic literature;
- Understand the literary form, Reader's Theatre; and
- Create a work of art as a small group.

## Materials Needed

- Group Instructions handout, below
- Script Format handouts, below

## The Lesson

### Group Assignments

Group One -- First half of Part One of the novel  
Group Two -- Second half of Part One of the novel  
Group Three -- First half of Part Two of the novel  
Group Four -- Second half of Part Two of the novel  
Group Five -- All of Part Three of the novel

## **Procedures**

### **Pre-production**

As your group analyzes the assigned section of *BeLoved*, make a list of any described events that take place in your part of the novel. Make another list of any characters mentioned or described, and write a short paragraph describing the person. You should add a narrator to the character list to provide informational bridges between the various scenes in the play. Once you complete this, have a group meeting to study the lists and create a cast and script outline for a dramatic interpretation. As Reader's Theatre style is the appropriate production style for this project, you can find a basic tutorial describing everything you want to know at:  
**<http://www.aspa.asn.au/Projects/english/rtheatre.htm>**

Note that the value of this project is not in the quality of the product; rather, it is in the process of the creation of the play. So, don't let your group get so hung up on "artistic decision making" that you lose sight of the project's overall goal. Once the group decides on both a cast and a scenario, you can then begin the production process.

### **Production Process**

The stage manager works with teacher to create a writing/rehearsal schedule. The playwrights work with director to create a script. The designers create drawings of simple sets and costumes. As these jobs are completed, rehearsals begin, and the sets and costumes are assembled.

### **Performance**

The directors should work with the teacher to coordinate the performance -- they must arrange a date, time, and place. Keep it as simple as possible: remember that the production process is far more important than the final product. An in-class performance can be just as valuable as a full-blown public performance. Performing for other classes works well, too.

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## **Production Group Instructions handout**

### ***Beloved* Unit**

Your class has been divided into five groups. Your assignment is to take a portion of the novel and adapt it into a play. Your group is Group #\_\_\_\_\_.

Your part of the novel to adapt is: (circle your assigned part)

- Group One -- First half of Part One of the novel.
- Group Two -- Second half of Part One of the novel.
- Group Three -- First half of Part Two of the novel.
- Group Four -- Second half of Part Two of the novel.
- Group Five -- All of Part Three of the novel.

### **Production Group Organization**

Each group, who size can be flexible, contains the following roles: director (1), stage manager (1), playwrights (1 or 2), production designers (1 or 2), actors (will be doubled with other roles). Role descriptions are as follows:

**Playwright(s):** The playwright(s) create the script with guidance from the group as a whole and within the guidelines your teacher establishes. They especially work with the director and stage manager. Use the attached script format handouts as a guide to the correct format for your play.

**Director:** The director is responsible for conceptualizing the play and works with the playwright(s) to create the script. Once the script is complete, the director oversees the staging of the play and the coordination of all the artistic aspects of the production.

**Stage Manager:** The stage manager works with the director to help organize the production. He or she records artistic decisions about acting and movement in the master copy of the script known as a prompt book. The stage manager also creates the rehearsal schedule with the teacher.

**Production Designers:** The production designers create simple settings, costumes, and props for the production. They work with the director to coordinate these technical aspects of the production with the production concept that the whole group has developed.

**Actors:** Actors in the production should include all members of the group. This means everyone has at least two roles in the group. People with larger responsibilities should take smaller parts. Casting should be a group activity with the director having the final say if group members disagree.

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## Script Format Handout

*[Title Page Format]*

OUR PLAY:

By:

(Group Names)

Name of Your Class: \_\_\_\_\_

Name of Your School: \_\_\_\_\_

Address of your School: \_\_\_\_\_  
\_\_\_\_\_

Date of Submission: \_\_\_\_\_

[Setting, Time, and Character page format, include all characters that are in your script]

### SETTING

Briefly describe the setting of the play, including the country and region where it takes place. Be sure to include a sentence about where we are at the beginning of the play.

### TIME

Give the date and year the play (as close as you can) takes place. If it is relevant, you can give a sentence about the season.

### CHARACTERS

Write a short Character description for the following, giving the character's age, basic role or job in the play, and a short description of his or her personality or motivation:

- Beloved
- SETHE
- DENVER
- BABY SUGS
- PAUL D

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*[Dialogue page format]*

[ACT-scene] I-1

ACT I

SCENE 1

(A house, 124. Insert here a short description of what is seen at the rise of the curtain or lights up. A short statement of who is on stage and what they are doing is appropriate)

SETHE

She talks here about...

DENVER

She responds to her Mother.

(A short description of character action is written this way)

BELOVED

The third character speaks.

DENVER

More dialogue here.

SETHE

She talks here about whatever.

(The house groans. More action described. Blackout.)

The Drama Workshop -- This website contains great reference material for aspiring playwrights and includes dramatic structures, script formats, screenwriting information, a reading list, and skill-building exercises: <http://www.chdramaworkshop.homestead.com/Home.html>.

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