

# Connecting the History of Slavery and Scriptwriting: *A Beloved* Checklist

By Paul Horton

## Overview

Students who are writing and performing a play about slavery need to be able to connect the lives of slaves they imagine with the experiences and expectations that are forcefully imposed on those lives. The degree of autonomy allowed a slave or a group of slaves often varied with circumstances, time, and place. In *Beloved*, for example, a clear contrast exists between the two extremes. Mr. and Mrs. Garner represent owners who allow their slaves a degree of autonomy and patronizing respect. The Schoolteacher, on the other hand, is not only a harsh master who attempts to prove the "scientific" inferiority of slaves, he also is a profit-crazed sadomasochist in the tradition of Harriet Beecher Stowe's Simon Legree. This lesson provides students with a checklist of slave experiences that they can draw from to create their dramatic adaptations.

## Student Objectives

Students will:

- Demonstrate their understanding of African life under slavery by analyzing:
  - a. The forced relocation of Africans to the English colonies in North America and the Caribbean;
  - b. The ways African Americans draw upon their African past to develop a new culture; and
  - c. Overt and passive resistance to slavery (All NS 3C).
- Demonstrate their understanding of how slavery rapidly grew after 1800, and how African Americans coped with that "peculiar institution" by:
  - a. Describing the plantation system and the roles of the owner and his family, of hired white workers, and of enslaved African Americans;
  - b. Identifying the various ways in which African Americans resisted the conditions of their enslavement and analyzing the consequences of violent uprisings; and
  - c. Evaluating how enslaved African Americans used religion and family to create a viable culture for ameliorating slavery's effects. (All NS 2C)

## Skills Attained

Students will be able to:

- Analyze and evaluate primary source documents;
- Evaluate historical interpretations and apply them when constructing fictional narratives; and
- Create an act in an historical play by synthesizing document analysis, interpretations of slavery, and their own set of imagined experiences.

Materials needed:

- Access to computers
- Handouts

## The Lesson

### Anticipatory Set

Lead students in a discussion about how Morrison created *Beloved*. (5-10 minutes) For background resources, go to the **Jim Crow Gateway**.

### Procedures

1. Pass out research guide.
2. Have students use the guides to generate a set of ideas about what to develop into an act in an historical play. (Remainder of day one and half of day two).
3. Have students share with classmates what they could write about.
4. Have students write, share, and perform their scripts.

The research for this lesson forms the background for the performance adaptation lesson, **Adapting *Beloved*: A Reader's Theatre Approach**

### Assessment

To determine whether students successfully participated in the lesson, you can use the list of ideas, focusing on key elements when writing a drama, that students created. While judging the quality of this list is subjective in nature, below are some expectations you can use to measure each student group's success:

- Were all members of the group on task during the activity?
- Did they produce a list they could use to create a script?
- Was the group's report well organized and clear?
- Did the group actually use the list to create their script?

### Connections

Students and teacher can consult the abundant printed primary source material on slavery. Three good places to start are:

Berlin, Ira et al., eds. *Remembering Slavery: African Americans Talk About Their Personal Experiences of Slavery and Freedom*. New York: Norton, 1997. (book and tape)

Blassingame, John. *Slave Testimony: Two Centuries of Letters, Speeches, Interviews, and Autobiographies*. Baton Rouge, LA: Louisiana State University Press, 1977.

Rawick, George P., ed. *The American Slave: A Composite Biography*. Westport, CT: Greenwood Press, 1972-79.

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## Slavery: Documents and Interpretations Handout

- I. Browse the 46 documents you find at <http://vi.uh.edu/pages/mintz/primary.htm>.
  - a. List five documents that you might develop into an act for a play.
    - i.
    - ii.
    - iii.
    - iv.
    - v.
  - b. Print these documents and read them carefully for homework

II. Browse the 13 ex-slave narratives at <http://xroads.virginia.edu/~hyper/wpa/index.html>.

a. List five experiences that you might consider developing into an act for a play.

i.

ii.

iii.

iv.

v.

b. Print the narratives you find will be most useful as you develop an act for a play and read them carefully for homework.

- III. Read the three contrasting historical interpretations of slavery, below, and summarize each in three or four sentences.
- a. Stanley Elkins (interpretation follows this section), summary:
  
  - b. Eugene D. Genovese (interpretation follows this section), summary:
  
  - c. Nell Irvin Painter at <http://www.pbs.org/wgbh/aia/part4/4i3084.html>, summary:
- IV. Combine the narrative and history to form a group outline for act's plot.

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**Stanley Elkins**

**Plantation >>> Concentration Camp >>> Infantilization**

...The other body of material, involving an experience undergone by several million men and women in the concentration camps of our own time, contains certain items of relevance to the problem here being considered. The experience was analogous to that of slavery and was one in which wide-scale instances of infantilization were observed. The material is sufficiently detailed, and sufficiently documented by men who not only took part in the experience itself but who were versed in the use of psychological theory for analyzing it, that the advantages of drawing upon such data for purposes of analogy seem to outweigh the possible risks....

...It has been recognized both implicitly and explicitly that the psychic impact and effects of the concentration-camp experience were not anticipated in existing theory and that consequently such theory would require some major supplementation....

...The experience showed, in any event, that infantile personality features could be induced in a relatively short time among large numbers of adult human beings coming from very diverse backgrounds. ...

...These cues, accordingly, will guide the argument on Negro slavery. Several million people were detached with a peculiar effectiveness from a great variety of cultural backgrounds in Africa--a detachment operating with infinitely more effectiveness upon those brought to North America than upon those who came to Latin America. It was achieved partly by the shock experience inherent in the very mode of procurement but more specifically by the type of authority system to which they were introduced and to which they had to adjust for physical and psychic survival. The new adjustment to absolute power in a closed system involved infantilization, and the detachment was so complete that little trace of prior (and thus alternative) cultural sanctions for behavior and personality remained for the descendants of the first generation. For them, adjustment to clear and omnipresent authority could be more or less automatic--as much so or as little as it is for anyone whose adjustment to a social system begins at birth and to whom that system represents normality....

...Yet a Freudian diagnosis of the concentration-camp inmate--whose social self, or superego, did appear to change and who seemed basically changed thereby--is, given these limitations, still possible. Elie Cohen, whose analysis is the most thorough of these, specifically states that "the superego acquired new values in a concentration camp." The old values, according to Dr. Cohen, were first silenced by the shocks, which produced "acute depersonalization" (the subject-object split: "It is not the real 'me' who is undergoing this"), and by the powerful drives of hunger and survival. Old values, thus set aside, could be replaced by new ones. It was a process made possible by "infantile regression"--regression to a previous condition of childlike dependency in which parental prohibitions once more became all-powerful and in which parental judgments might once more be internalized....

...Both were closed systems from which all standards based on prior connections had been effectively detached. A working adjustment to either system required a childlike conformity, a limited choice of "significant others." Cruelty per se cannot

be considered the primary key to this; of far greater importance was the simple "closedness" of the system, in which all lines of authority descended from the master, in which alternative social bases that might have supported alternative standards were systematically suppressed. The individual, consequently, for his very psychic security, had to picture his master in some way as the "good father," even when, as in the concentration camp, it made no sense at all...

...For the Negro child, in particular, the plantation offered no really satisfactory father-image other than the master. The "real" father was virtually without authority over his child, since discipline, parental responsibility, and control of rewards and punishments all rested in other hands; the slave father could not even protect the mother of his children except by appealing directly to the master. ...

Stanley Elkins, *Slavery: A Problem in American Institutional and Intellectual Life* (Chicago, 1959). pp. 86-89, 115-39.

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Eugene D. Genovese

**Oppression >>> Resistance >>> Identity**

...For the slaveholders, paternalism represented an attempt to overcome the fundamental contradiction in slavery: the impossibility of the slaves' ever becoming the things they were suppose to be. Paternalism defined the involuntary labor of the slaves as a legitimate return to their masters for protection and direction. But, the masters' need to see their slaves as acquiescent human beings constituted a moral victory for the slaves themselves. Paternalism's insistence upon mutual obligations--duties, responsibilities, and ultimately even rights--implicitly recognized the slaves' humanity....

...In the Old South, the tendencies inherent in all paternalistic class systems intersected with and acquired enormous reinforcement from the tendencies inherent in an analytically distinct system of racial subordination. The two appeared to be a single system. Paternalism created a tendency for the slaves to identify with a particular community through identification with their master; it reduced the possibilities for their identification with each other as a class. Racism undermined the slaves' sense of worth as black people and reinforced their dependence on white masters. But, these were tendencies not absolute laws, and the slaves forged weapons of defense, the most important of which was a religion that taught them to love and value each other, to take a critical view of their masters, and to reject the ideological rationales for their own enslavement....

Brutality lies inherent in this acceptance of patronage and dependence, no matter how organic the paternalistic order. But southern paternalism necessarily recognized the slaves' humanity--not only their free will but the very talent and ability without which their acceptance of a doctrine of reciprocal obligations would have made no sense. Thus, the slaves found an opportunity to translate paternalism itself into a doctrine different from that understood by their masters and to forge it into a weapon of resistance to assertions that slavery was a natural condition for blacks, that blacks were racially inferior, and that black slaves had no rights or legitimate claims of their own.

Thus, the slaves, by accepting a paternalistic ethos and legitimizing class rule, developed their most powerful defense against the dehumanization implicit in slavery. Southern paternalism may have reinforced racism as well as class exploitation, but it also unwittingly invited its victims to fashion their own interpretation of the social order it was intended to justify. And the slaves, drawing on a religion that was supposed to assure their compliance and docility, rejected the essence of slavery by projecting their own rights and value as human beings....

...The South had discovered, as had every previous slave society, that it could not deny the slave's humanity, however many preposterous legal fictions it invented. That discovery ought to have told the slaveholders much more....

...Those slaves whose disaffection turned into violence and hatred--those who resisted the regime physically--included slaves who made stealing almost a way of life, killed their overseers and masters, fought back against patrollers, burned down plantation buildings, and ran away, either to freedom or to the woods for a short while, in order to effect some specific end, as well as those who took the ultimate measures and rose in revolt. Class oppression, whether or not

reinforced and modified by racism, induces servility and feelings of inferiority in the oppressed. Force alone usually has not sufficed to keep the lower classes in subjugation. Slavishness constitutes the extreme form of the psychology of the oppressed, although we may doubt that it ever appears in pure form. It longs for acceptance by the other, perceived as the epitome of such superior qualities as beauty, goodness, virtue, and, above all, power. But, the inevitable inability of the lower classes, especially but not uniquely slave classes, to attain that acceptance generates disaffection, hatred, and violence.

The slaves' response to paternalism and their imaginative creation of a partially autonomous religion provided a record of simultaneous accommodation and resistance to slavery. Accommodation itself breathed a critical spirit and disguised subversive actions and often embraced its apparent opposite—resistance. In fact, accommodation might best be understood as a way of accepting what could not be helped without falling prey to the pressures for dehumanization, emasculation, and self-hatred. In particular, the slaves' accommodation to paternalism enabled them to assert rights, which by their very nature not only set limits to their surrender of self, but actually constituted an implicit rejection of slavery....

Eugene D. Genovese, *Roll, Jordan, Roll: The World the Slaves Made* (New York, 1972)

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