

The Tragedy of Slavery and Its Aftermath, in *Beloved*: Establishing Contexts for Understanding

By Paul Horton

Overview

Beloved is a meditation on the festering wound that slavery inflicted on tens of millions of African slaves who were forced from their homes for profit. When we read *Beloved*, we learn of the trauma inflicted on several generations of one family. The book is a metaphor for the psychological legacy of an institution that attempted to deny human beings their humanity. To grasp the metaphor, we must be sure that students have a general knowledge of the historical evolution of the transatlantic slave trade, and how slavery was rooted and evolved in North America. To give students the big picture and to provide them with a framework for understanding the historical references in *Beloved*, the lesson allows students to review the history of slavery.

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:

- Organize information they obtain from the website and video series to produce a multimedia presentation;
- Create an outline;
- Create a timeline; and
- Present dramatic readings.

Materials Needed

Books:

- PBS Video, *Africans in America*, Parts I-IV (1998, produced by WGBH Boston for PBS)

- Access to computers and video monitors

Web Sites:

- PBS's Africans in America at <http://www.pbs.org/wgbh/aia/home.html>
- Historical overview essays at Jimcrowhistory.org

The Lesson

Anticipatory Set

Present the idea to students that only when they understand the historical evolution of slavery, can they fully appreciate *Beloved*.

Procedures

1. **Day 1:** Divide the class into four groups and go over the presentation requirements and rubric. (Designed for a class of 15-20)
2. **Days 2:** Have each group, over the course of three days, develop a 15-minute presentation on the history of slavery in North America. Each group will choose a period of time on which to focus.
3. **Day 3:** Have a representative from each group give the rest of the class a one to two minute update on the progress his/her group made the previous day (days 2 and 3).
4. **Days 4 and 5:** Have students begin presenting their reports begin on day four, and instruct non-reporting students to respond to each report. You should also respond to each report, filling in gaps when necessary. Reports will take most of two days to present and allow for extended responses.

Assessment

Here is a suggested breakdown of points for grading:

Evaluation Category	Points out of a Total 60
Oral presentation of outline	10
Quality of outline	15
Dramatic readings	10
Video clip (if available)	5
Final presentation organization/delivery	10
Historical accuracy and quality	15

Self Assessment

You can also have students describe the contributions they each made to group in a narrative paragraph and, then, lists how many points he/she has earned for each category. Instruct the student to: "Describe your own contribution to the group presentation in a narrative paragraph and attach your own assessment by completing your own copy of the above rubric. You will have three class days, including today, to complete this task."

Connections

For general sources, see:

1. Aptheker, Ed. *A Documentary History of the Negro People in the United States, Vol. 1*. S (handout).
2. Franklin, John Hope and Alfred A. Moss, Jr. *From Slavery to Freedom: A History of African Americans*.
3. Harding, Vincent. *There is a River: The Black Struggle for Freedom*.

Slavery Presentation Handout

Your group will have three days to organize and develop a 15-minute presentation on the history of slavery. You will be assigned one of the following time periods:

- The Terrible Transformation, 1450-1750
- Revolution, 1750-1805
- Brotherly Love, 1791-1831
- Judgment Day, 1831-1863

You will find general histories for each of the periods above at:

<http://www.pbs.org/wgbh/aia/home.html>

You will also find primary sources documents and commentary by historians for each period at the above website and corresponding PBS video, if available, to help you organize a presentation that includes the following:

Checklist

- A one-page outline of the material that you will present. You must provide a copy to each person in the class
- A timeline of the important events that you intend to cover that is neat and bold and will be posted in the classroom
- Several dramatic readings taken from the documents that you access or from the historians' analyses of the period.
- A sample video clip from your section of the PBS series "Africans in America (If available).

Paul Horton teaches History at Holy Innocents Episcopal School in Atlanta, Georgia.