

Lesson Three

Objectives:

- Students will use resources at Mark Twain's Mississippi web site.
- Students will consider a variety of sources in an effort to build skills of textual analysis and to recognize that historical events can be conveyed from multiple perspectives.
- Students will gather a variety of data from these sources to recreate plantation life in antebellum America and to examine antebellum racial attitudes.
- Students will participate in a forum where they will explore differing perspectives of plantation life and present an interpretation from their assigned group.
- Students will write an analytical essay in which they compare and contrast the varying perspectives of slave-owners, their families, slaves, and hired white workers.

Notes on the Lesson:

This lesson is intended for history classes that have access to computers during class time so students can view the video clips and read through the text sources.

Materials Needed:

Students and teachers will access the clip from *Song of the South* at youtube: <http://www.youtube.com/watch?v=HvPcO7-FzW0>

Students and teachers will access the web site for the story "Brer Rabbit and the Tar Baby": <http://www.americanfolklore.net/brer-rabbit.html>

Students and teachers will access the video clip "Mark Twain and Race Relations" (by Gregg Camfield) from the Mark Twain's Mississippi Web site: <http://dig.lib.niu.edu/twain/video.html>

Students and teachers will access the following accounts that bear directly on the issue of slavery and plantation life on the Mark Twain's Mississippi site:

Bibb, Henry and Matlack, Lucius C.; et al. *Narrative of the Life and Adventures of Henry Bibb, an American Slave, Written by Himself, with an Introduction by Lucius C. Matlack*. New York: MacDonald and Lee, 1849. <http://lincoln.lib.niu.edu/file.php?file=1290.html>

Wolcott, Anson. *Eighteen Months in Louisiana, or Criticisms on Slavery*. New York: N. Leonard, Printer, 1843. <http://lincoln.lib.niu.edu/file.php?file=wolcott.html>

Aitken, W. *Journey Up the Mississippi River, From Its Mouth to Nauvoo, the City of the Latter-Day Saints*. Ashton-Under-Lyne: John Williamson, 1845. <http://lincoln.lib.niu.edu/file.php?file=aitken.html>

Time Required:

Three 50-minute class periods will be needed and perhaps some time as homework for the introduction, viewing of video clips, reading of the primary sources, and forum. An additional period may be necessary if teachers wish to follow the lesson with a written assessment.

Introduction:

The Mississippi River and the life of Mark Twain both cut right across American antebellum attitudes toward race. This lesson will expose students to the complexity of attitudes regarding race by analyzing the issue from multiple perspectives with a consideration of video and text sources. To apply their understanding, students will participate in a multi-sided forum and, if the teacher desires to extend the lesson, complete an essay.

Assignment:

1. Ask students to think of one of their favorite childhood stories or folk tales. Briefly survey what about the story attracted or resonated with them. Then have them write for 1-2 minutes in a notebook on why cultures and civilizations tell stories. Once again, survey responses. Though there are no “right” answers, draw students attention to several salient points as it relates to culture and history:

- Stories allow civilizations to pass on values, beliefs, and customs from one generation to the next.
- Stories create narratives that address cultural origins (such as a creation myth), meaning, and help simplify complex realities through the use of symbols, myths, and heroes.
- Stories can motivate people to act on behalf of preserving cultural values or even in resistance against oppression.

2. To illustrate the point further, have students view the youtube clip from Walt Disney’s *Song of the South*. As students watch the clip, have them briefly record responses to the following questions:

- How are the characters Brer Rabbit and Brer Fox portrayed in the clip?
- What characteristics does Uncle Remus display throughout the clip? To what extent does he represent white attitudes toward blacks at the time the film was made (1940s)?
- How might blacks have viewed the stories of Brer Rabbit and Brer Fox differently?

3. This point can be extended further by dividing the class in two. Have half watch the clip above, “Mark Twain and Racial Attitudes” and the other read the story on the web, “Brer Rabbit and the Tar Baby.” After 5-10 minutes of discussion in small groups, have each half report back to the larger group focusing on the following points:

- How do Mark Twain’s life and writings touch on the complexity of race and racial attitudes in antebellum America? What seemed to be the point of the short story recounted in the video clip [Hint: the assumption by even northern whites that slaves seemed happy in their lot.]?
- What seems to be the “moral” of the Brer Rabbit story? Who or what do you think the characters represent? Be able to defend your reasoning.

Teachers should point out that the Brer Rabbit story might be viewed very differently by slave-owners and slaves. The former might see it as reflecting the humor, good spirit, and simplicity of their slaves in the system of plantation bondage. Slaves, on the other hand, used such stories as symbolic acts of resistance, showing how Brer Rabbit (the slave) can often outwit the slave-owner (Brer Fox).

4. At this point, the teacher can provide background (depending on previous training) about the importance of using primary sources in historical reconstruction of the past. However, historians must consider issues such as bias, perspective, and reliability in using these sources. Instructors can solicit student responses or simply remind them that any of the following factors can influence how actors view historical events: race, gender, ethnicity, occupation, class, religious affiliation, sexual orientation, geographic location, age, involvement in events, etc. If concrete examples are needed, instructors might solicit from students how the following groups might view the proposal of a school dress code from their differing positions: students, teachers, parents, administrators, School Board members, community members.

5. Now tell students that they will be using three different accounts of slave life along the Mississippi to gain an appreciation of how various groups might have viewed plantation life and slavery differently. To facilitate use of the sources, teachers should divide students into four groups: **slave-owners, their families, hired white workers, and enslaved blacks**. Students can be further subdivided into three groups for purposes of culling the three accounts (see Mark Twain's Mississippi site above for exact titles) for information on how each of these groups might have viewed slavery/plantation life. For ease of gathering data, students can employ the data collection sheet below. This can be completed for homework and/or in class. **Note: Each of the sources clearly indicates its purpose in the Preface or Introduction. Teachers should draw students' attention to how this might influence the manner in which the accounts are presented.**

6. Students will now prepare for a forum on plantation life and slavery. Groups should address the following key points and prepare arguments in defense of them **from the perspective of their assigned group**.

- What are the benefits and/or drawbacks of the system of slavery?
- How do the plantation system and slavery affect the economy?
- What impact does slavery have on the enslaved blacks?
- On what grounds can slavery be defended or criticized?
- How did whites and blacks view each other and themselves as a result of the plantation and slave system?

7. The forum should last about 20-30 minutes, and teachers should assist students in focusing on how the differing groups might answer the prompts above differently based on their position in society. To conclude, instructors should reinforce that racial attitudes both influenced and were influenced by the system of slavery and plantation life.

8. If teachers wish to extend the lesson, they may have students write on the following prompt for homework or in class: "Compare and contrast how various groups in antebellum America viewed the institutions of slavery and plantations differently based on their position in society."

Lesson Three: Data Collection Sheet

Group:

Area	Data Collection	Conclusions
Working and living conditions		
Economic activities		
Leisure activities		
Methods of Control or Discipline		
Impact of slavery on slaves		