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Sample Lesson Plan: Slave Narratives
Grades 5-12

Objectives:

Using examples from the PBO bindings database, students will learn what slave narratives are, who wrote them, and their purposes.

Materials:

A computer with an Internet connection and a large screen or other capability to display the teacher's actions to the entire class.

Lesson

Use of imported Africans and African Americans for slave labor began in the Jamestown colony of Virginia in the seventeenth century, and lasted until after the Civil War ended in 1865. The best way to learn about the experience of those who were held as slaves is to study their first-hand accounts. Many slaves who either had escaped or been freed published their stories during the nineteenth century. These stories became a distinct literary genre known as slave narratives.

Prominent American colonists published popular autobiographies – or books about themselves – during the eighteenth century. About the same time, Puritans began writing the stories of Native Americans held in captivity. The first slave narratives, published in the late 1700s, had their roots in these two genres, but they had their own unique characteristics as well.

The slave narrative developed as a genre during the nineteenth century for two reasons. The first was the support slaves received from the abolitionist – or anti-slavery – movement, which gained momentum beginning in the 1830s. The other is the romantic movement of American literature, which encouraged individualism, stressed emotional subjects, and often featured quests for American ideals, such as freedom.

[Go to <http://bindings.lib.ua.edu/sitesearch.html>, select the “Search by Keyword” link, and search for pba02474. Click on thumbnail. Enlarge image by clicking on the largest box under it.]

Slave narratives of the antebellum era – or the period before the Civil War, during the early to mid-nineteenth century – were extremely popular with white readers in the North. Many became best-sellers, selling tens of thousands of copies. Among the most widely read of the antebellum slave narratives was Solomon Northup's *Twelve Years a Slave*.

Northup's story was unique because he was neither born a slave nor imported from Africa. Born free in New York, Northup was kidnapped in Washington, D.C., and sold into slavery at the age of thirty-three. Northup worked on three different Louisiana plantations before a New York attorney managed to free him based on a law that required the recovery of free black citizens taken unlawfully into captivity as a slave. The following year, Northup published his story, which reviewers called a "truth stranger than fiction."

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Most antebellum slave narratives were different from Northup's because they detailed the lives of people born in bondage, who somehow managed to escape to the free states. Among these stories was that of Jermain Wesley Loguen, who was born into slavery in Tennessee. He escaped to Canada in 1834 and then moved to New York, where he went to school and became a minister. He also was a stationmaster on the Underground Railroad, the network of secret routes by which abolitionists helped slaves escape to freedom. Loguen's autobiography, *The Rev. J. W. Loguen, as a Slave and as a Freeman*, was published in 1859.

Although Northup and Loguen's books tell different stories, they – and dozens of other slave narratives written prior to the Civil War – had the same purpose: to describe the evils of slavery in the hope that readers would be moved to support abolition. Like many slave narratives, these two books were not written by the subjects themselves but were narrated to abolitionist editors. That abolitionists expected these stories to win supporters is obvious from the editors' prefaces in the books and in the reviews written about them in the newspapers. A reviewer for the *New York Tribune* wrote of Northup's book, "No one can contemplate the scenes which are here so naturally set forth, without a new conviction of the hideousness of the institution from which the subject of the narrative has happily escaped." In addition to emphasizing the horrors of slavery, the editor of Loguen's book used the subject's heroism and the good that came of the minister's escape as extra incentive for readers to consider the need to free all slaves.

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A majority of the abolitionists who published and promoted slave narratives were white. Black abolitionists such as William Still offered a different view. Born to two former slaves in New Jersey, Still moved to Philadelphia and took a job at the office of an abolition society. He soon began harboring fugitive slaves at his home, and in that capacity met his brother, who had been born while his mother still was a slave in Maryland. After hearing his brother's story, Still decided to make a careful record of all the slaves he aided, which he later compiled into this book, the long title of which is, *The Underground Rail Road: A Record of Facts, Authentic Narratives, Letters, [et cetera], Narrating the Hardships, Hair-breadth Escapes and Death Struggles of the Slaves in Their Efforts for Freedom, as Related by Themselves and Others, or Witnessed by the Author: Together with Sketches of Some of the Largest Stockholders, and Most Liberal Aiders and Advisers, of the Road*. The book published in three editions, making it the

most widely-circulated work about the Underground Railroad. It also provided readers with an account of the escaped slaves' courage and intellectual capacity.

That Still emphasized the intelligence of slaves is significant, because many people of the nineteenth century assumed that all slaves were incapable of thinking. Although most slaves were, in fact, illiterate, that usually was because most masters forbid their slaves from learning how to read and write, for fear that education would encourage their slaves to revolt. The slaves were not as mindless as white Americans assumed. Their mistaken belief, however, caused many to doubt that slaves could tell their story to abolitionist editors, let alone write their own narratives. This doubt, coupled with the fact that abolitionists so blatantly used the slave narratives as propaganda for their cause, made many people skeptical about whether the slave narratives were reliable and objective. The horrific stories the narratives contained also made them hard to believe, even though they were true.

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Writers and editors of slave narratives therefore had to do a number of things to make readers believe that the stories were true and accurate. Escaped slaves who wrote their own narratives had an additional hurdle of making readers believe that they were intelligent enough to record their own stories. It was common for former slaves to include phrases such as "written by himself" in the titles of their books. If you look in the bottom right corner of this autobiography of Willis M. Brown titled, *Life and Conversion of a Kentucky Infidel*, you can see that it says "told in his own words," signifying that it was not made up by an abolitionist for propaganda.

Other means of verifying the authenticity of slave narratives included publishing letters of endorsement from important whites in the preface and appending documentation such as diaries and letters, plantation and government records (including census data), newspaper articles, and the testimony of acquaintances of the narrators.

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Non-slaves writing about slavery included similar documentation to convince readers that their stories were accurate. For example, Still included letters and newspaper clippings in his book about the Underground Railroad.

Although *Uncle Tom's Cabin* was fiction, it was based on true accounts of escaped slaves the author, Harriet Beecher Stowe, had encountered. Because she wanted her book to enlighten people about slavery, Stowe responded to claims that her novel was inaccurate by publishing this book, *A Key to Uncle Tom's Cabin*, the following year. It is a collection of slave narratives, newspaper clippings, and other facts that verified the details in her novel.

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Although slavery ended after the Civil War, former slaves did not stop writing their stories. However, the purpose of slave narratives changed from trying to persuade people

to end slavery to making sure people remembered what the slaves had endured and proving that former slaves were worthy contributors to post-Civil War society.

One such narrative was this one, published in 1893 by the Rev. Peter Randolph. Randolph grew up in slavery on a Virginia plantation but was freed in 1847, when his owner died. He spent twenty years as an anti-slavery agent and minister in the northern United States and Canada, returning to Virginia after the war. His book consisted not only of his autobiography but also of a collection of pamphlets he wrote in 1855 about the institution of slavery. The preface to his book declares that he wanted to keep the pamphlets in publication, and relay his own story, because, “Slavery, we say, is dead; but the rising generations will ask: What was it?”

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Whereas Randolph’s book served to keep slavery in the public memory, the books of Booker T. Washington aimed to promote the usefulness of former slaves to the post-war social and economic world. Washington wrote several books about his life, as well as volumes for the advancement of the African American race. The first of Washington’s autobiographical works was *Up from Slavery*. Although the first chapter discusses his childhood as a slave on a Virginia tobacco plantation, most of the book focuses on what occurred after he and his family were freed by Emancipation. Through the story of his struggles, Washington aimed to show white Americans what a former slave could do.

Conclusion

The slave narrative tradition finally died out in the early twentieth century, but it influenced a number of other African American expressions, including modern autobiographies, novels, music, drama, and visual arts. As we have just seen, this genre also includes a wealth of information, not only regarding the hard facts of living in bondage, escaping to freedom, and experiencing racism in the North, but also about how the former slaves felt about all that happened to them.

Optional Activities

Creative Writing Assignment

Although slave narratives had the various motives of ending slavery, keeping slavery in the public memory, and advancing the position of freed blacks, the basis of each story was autobiography.

For this activity, students will write their own autobiographical essays. Ideas for items to include are their background (their family members, where and when they were born), their interests and hobbies, exciting or amusing anecdotes, and what they hope to do in the future.

All students, or those who volunteer, should have an opportunity to read their stories in front of the class.

Book Report

Students will select one of the slave narratives listed on the PBO Slave Narratives Gallery at http://bindings.lib.ua.edu/gallery/slave_narratives.html#bib.

After reading their books, students will write a book report about their selections. Distribute “Guidelines for Book Reports” for students to follow.

Students should be given at least a week to read their books and write their reports. The instructor may choose to set aside a class period for students to discuss what they reported.

For additional teaching resources on slave narratives, see:

African-American Women and the Slave Narrative, The City University of New York
http://newman.baruch.cuny.edu/digital/2000/c_n_c_old/c_08_19th_cent_prose/african_american.htm

Contextualizing Frederick Douglass, Assumption College
<http://www.assumption.edu/users/lknoles/douglasscontexts.html>

Eyewitness to History Lesson Plan: Fugitive Slave Narratives, Schomburg Center for Research in Black Culture
http://www.inmotionaame.org/education/lesson.cfm?migration=&id=2_008LP

Olaudah Equiano (1745-1797), Classroom Issues and Strategies, Houghton Mifflin
<http://college.hmco.com/english/heath/syllabuild/iguide/vassa.html>

Slave Narratives: Constructing U.S. History Through Analyzing Primary Sources, EDSITEment, National Endowment for the Humanities
http://edsitement.neh.gov/view_lesson_plan.asp?id=364

William Wells Brown (1815-1884), Classroom Issues and Strategies, Georgetown University
<http://www.georgetown.edu/faculty/bassr/heath/syllabuild/iguide/brownw.html>

Slave Narratives: Black Autobiography in Nineteenth-Century America, Yale-New Haven Teachers Institute
<http://www.yale.edu/ynhti/curriculum/units/1985/5/85.05.02.x.html>

Writing a Slave's Diary to Show Understanding of Slave Culture, Slavery in America
http://www.slaveryinamerica.org/history/hs_lp_slavediary.htm