

Publishers' Bindings Online, 1815-1930: The Art of Books
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Sample Lesson Plan: The Old South in Children's Books
Grades K-5

Objectives:

- Students will learn that how the South was portrayed in children's books of the nineteenth century is not how the South really was in history.
- Using the PBO database, students will see what the book covers of nineteenth-century children's books looked like.
- The lesson includes two optional creative activities to enhance student learning.

Materials:

- 1) A computer with an Internet connection and a large screen or other capability to display the teacher's actions to the entire class.
- 2) A print-out of at least one short story, excerpt, or sketch by each of the authors. The following are available on-line:
 - a. Thomas Nelson Page, *Two Little Confederates* and *Among the Camps* (four short stories), <http://kdl.kyvl.org/cgi/t/text/pageviewer-idx?c=kyetexts;cc=kyetexts;sid=21da42ac5962986846c11138f4047481;q1=among%20the%20camps;rgn=full%20text;idno=b92-230-31280747v11;view=image;seq=7>
 - b. Joel Chandler Harris, *Uncle Remus, His Songs and Sayings*, <http://www.gutenberg.org/etext/2306>
 - c. Louise-Clarke Pyrnelle, *Diddie, Dumps, and Tot*, <http://www.gutenberg.org/etext/17146>
- 3) Enough blank paper for each student.
- 4) Crayons, markers, or colored pencils (either for each student or to share).
- 5) Corkboard and tacks or other capability to display student artwork (such as spreading it out on a large table or taping it to the wall).

Lesson

Introduction

Many writers from the South have written fondly about their region throughout history. A large group of these writers have focused on the South as a farming region, and they have made the farming culture and society sound more wonderful than it actually was. For example, the people who owned farms and plantations often had African American slaves, who did hard work without pay and often were treated badly. A lot of southern writers made it sound like slaves were happy, and like they wanted to stay slaves even when they didn't have to be.

This type of story was especially popular after the Civil War, when many southern writers missed the way things used to be. They called the region as they remembered it the “Old South.” There were hundreds of novels, short stories, and poems written about the “Old South.” Some of the people that wrote books for grown-ups wrote stories about the “Old South” for children, too.

Thomas Nelson Page

Some people say that a man named Thomas Nelson Page invented the type of writing that made the “Old South” sound so great. He wrote a lot of stories, novels, and essays for adults, and he also wrote stories for children.

Mr. Page was born in 1853 in Virginia. He lived on a plantation, which is a really big farm with a lot of slaves. His family was wealthy, and he felt like rich white people were better than everyone else. But after the war, the wealthy people started to lose their place in society. Mr. Page was sad about this, and he started writing stories to help his fellow wealthy white people remember how things used to be. However, his stories made the “Old South” sound better than it was.

One thing Mr. Page did was make the slaves sound like they were happy and devoted to their masters. He also was worried about people from the North liking people from the South, and he made northerners and southerners friends in his stories.

[Teacher’s Note: Go to <http://bindings.lib.ua.edu/sitesearch.html>, select the “Search by Keyword” link, and type “pba00523” in the top search box. Click on “search.” Click on the thumbnail, and enlarge the image by clicking on the largest of three boxes under it.]

One of the first books Mr. Page published was a novel for children called *Two Little Confederates*, which came out in 1888 – twenty-three years after the Civil War ended. The story is set during the war, on a Virginia plantation like the one Mr. Page grew up on. The story is about two little southern boys who become friends with the son of northern boy whose father died in a battle near their home. The brothers’ family has slaves who refuse to leave, even after they are freed.

[Click on “Search” at the top of the page, and type “pba00503” in the top search box. Click on “search.” Click on the thumbnail, and enlarge the image by clicking on the largest of three boxes under it.]

The second book for children that Mr. Page published was a collection of short stories called *Among the Camps*. It was published in 1891. Two of the stories in the book focus on the uniting of North and South. In “Kittykin and the Part She Played in the War,” fighting stops while soldiers from both sides rescue a cat from a tree. In “Nancy Pansy,” an innocent young girl brings the two sides together. Another story from this book called “Jack and Jake” is about a friendship between a white boy and an African American slave boy, which makes slave life look happy.

[READ THE SELECTED STORY OR STORIES BY THOMAS NELSON PAGE.]

Joel Chandler Harris

Even though he wrote a lot of books for adults, Joel Chandler Harris was best known for his children's stories. Mr. Harris was born in Georgia in 1845. Although he and his single mother were not wealthy, Mr. Harris spent his teen years on a slave-holding plantation, where he worked as a printer. He spent some time with the slaves, who told him folk tales that he later used in his books.

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Mr. Harris's most famous stories come from his Uncle Remus series. The first of these were published in 1881, in a book called *Uncle Remus, His Songs and Sayings*. More were published in 1883 in this book, *Nights with Uncle Remus: Myths and Legends of the Old Plantation*, as well as eight later volumes. The narrator of these stories is a happy African American slave named Uncle Remus, who sees a little white boy as family and tells him stories. Like Mr. Page, Mr. Harris also tries to show friendship between North and South when Uncle Remus's owner, Miss Sally, marries a northern soldier.

Many of the stories in the ten Uncle Remus books feature the famous character Brer Rabbit and his friends. Some of the stories were adapted in the Disney movie *Song of the South* in 1946, but the movie and books later were banned because they were considered racist.

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Mr. Harris also wrote a series of six books about two white children named Sweetest Susan and Buster John, and their slave playmate Drusilla. These stories are similar to the Uncle Remus books because they combine life on a Georgia plantation with fantasy stories.

In the first two books of this series, *Little Mr. Thimblefinger and His Queer Country* and *Mr. Rabbit at Home*, the children go to a magical world. These stories have three narrators—Mr. Rabbit, Mr. Thimblefinger, and Mrs. Meadows—that are all animals.

[Click on "Search" at the top of the page, and type "pba00385" in the top search box. Click on "search." Click on the thumbnail, and enlarge the image by clicking on the largest of three boxes under it.]

The next two books in this series, *The Story of Aaron* and *Aaron in the Wildwoods*, have four animal narrators: a horse, a pony, a dog, and a pig. The three children encounter an Arab man named Aaron, who knew the white children's uncle. These stories make the African American slaves appear inferior to both the white people and Aaron.

Mr. Harris uses human narrators for the last two books of this series. Aunt Minervy Ann, a free African American, tells the children stories in *Plantation Pageants*. A cranky old man is the main story-teller in *Wally Wanderoon*, although Drusilla also tells stories. All of Mr. Harris's African American narrators, including Uncle Remus, use dialect, which is a type of language that makes African Americans sound uneducated.

[\[READ THE SELECTED STORY OR STORIES BY JOEL CHANDLER HARRIS.\]](#)

Louise-Clarke Pynelle

Louise-Clarke Pynelle, who was born in 1850, had a childhood similar to Mr. Page's. She was from a wealthy family and grew up on a slave-holding plantation in Alabama. Her family lost everything after the war, and she missed the way things were. Her stories, like Mr. Page's, make the Old South sound better than it was. Her stories also are similar to Mr. Harris's, because they make African Americans look lazy and stupid. Mrs. Pynelle makes slave life look happy, but she does not show the slaves as loyal to their masters. Instead, she makes them look ungrateful.

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Mrs. Pynelle made her living as a teacher, rather than a full-time writer. She only published two books, both of which were for children. The first was published in 1882, called *Diddie, Dumps, and Tot, or Plantation Child-life*. This book told the story of three children on a Mississippi cotton plantation. Like Mr. Harris, Mrs. Pynelle incorporates folk tales told to the children by African American slaves. However, most of the book talks about plantation life. She uses her own hurt feelings over the loss of the Civil War in her story. The children have a wonderful life on the plantation, but after the war and their plantation are lost, they suffer as adults.

The African American Mammy character is a major part of the story. An interesting thing that Mrs. Pynelle does is to make the Mammy warm and loving toward the white children but abusive of African American slave children.

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Mrs. Pynelle's other book was called *Miss Li'l' Tweetty*, and it was published in 1917. This story is about a little girl who almost drowns while trying to find the items she needs to cure a voodoo curse placed upon her father's favorite African American slave.

[\[READ THE SELECTED STORY OR STORIES BY LOUISE-CLARKE PYRNELLE.\]](#)

Activity 1

For this activity, each student will select his or her favorite story from among the selections the instructor read during the lesson. Students then will draw a picture to go with the story. Alternately, the instructor may pause the lesson after each story and have all students draw a picture to go with each one.

When the students have finished their drawings, the instructor should display them.

Activity 2 (for advanced students)

For this activity, students will draw inspiration from Uncle Remus's folk tales to create fantastical stories of their own. Students should be encouraged to create drawings illustrating their stories.

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