

Using Vernacular and Slang to Understand the Plight of African American Freemen during Reconstruction

Grade 10: E.S.L. American Studies/U. S. History

Four Days

DESIRED RESULTS:

What are the “Big Ideas” that drive this lesson?

Mark Twain effectively utilized slang and vernacular language in depicting the African American experience in the late 19th century.

What are the “essential questions” that students must answer in order to understand the “big ideas.”

1. What explains the apparent ignorance of Mark Twain and some of his readers concerning the struggles in life experienced by Aunt Rachel?
2. Why would Mark Twain publish a story in which he is given a comeuppance by a former slave?
3. What does this story suggest about the relationship of whites and blacks after the Civil War, even in the Northern states?

CORE UNDERSTANDINGS:

Identify what students will know and/or be able to do.

1. Mark Twain realistically and accurately used slang and vernacular in “A True Story: Repeated Word for Word as I Heart It” to allow readers to understand and empathize with the world view of the “other” in post-Civil War America.

SUGGESTED ASSESSMENTS:

- Write an explanation (100 words maximum) of why the student thinks that Mark Twain published this story.

LEARNING EXPERIENCES:

Day 1:

1. Introduce the words “slang” and “vernacular”. Give examples, i.e. teacher can hold up a computer mouse and ask what it is. Ask students what people in the 1950s would have defined as a “mouse;” ask students to give examples of slang in their native language and have them explain what each means.
2. Use the example of texting language such as “LOL” and “TTYL” to demonstrate modern day vernacular.
3. Demonstrate the use of accents and the ability to communicate with people from different parts of the country even though words may be phonetically different. Example, the word “rights” might be pronounced “rats” by some people in southeastern United States. Ask for other examples.
4. Using magazines and newspapers, students will make a collage of different words or phrases that are indicative of present day.

Day 2:

5. Students will be given a copy of a slang dictionary made up of Reconstruction era phrases and words that might have been used by African Americans.
6. In small groups, students will be asked to write a paragraph using at least ten of the terms found in the slang dictionary. They are to use their own native-language dictionary when completing this task.
7. Students will translate the paragraph and present both to the

class. Days 3 and 4:

8. Students will be given a brief background of the reading as written by Stephen Railton. ***

“This was Twain’s first attempt to represent slavery through an African-American voice, and his first publication in the prestigious *Atlantic* magazine. This story is true; “Aunt Rachel” was actually named Mary Ann Cord, a former slave who worked as a servant at Quarry Farm, the Elmira house where Twain’s sister-in-law had built him a study, and where, beginning two summers after he heard this story, Twain wrote much of *Huck Finn*. When the story appeared in the *Atlantic*, several readers wrote its editor wanting to know, since “Mark Twain” wrote the piece, where the joke was.” (Railton)

9. Students will be given a copy of Mark Twain’s “A True Story, Repeated

Word for Word as I Heard It".*** Discussion questions-

- Why does Twain assume Aunt Rachel has never had any trouble in her life?
- What expression did Aunt Rachel's mother use to throw a tantrum?
- What happened to Aunt Rachel twenty-two years earlier, back when there was still slavery, when her former owner—a woman—went broke?
- How many kids did Aunt Rachel have?
- Who was the last sold and the youngest?
- What does Henry whisper to his mother before they take him away; what does he promise?
- What does Aunt Rachel do when they take Henry away?
- What happened to the plantation after the Confederate colonel and his family left?
- How did the Union officers seem to treat "Aunt Rachel"?
- What were the officers always throwing?
- How did "Aunt Rachel" feel about them throwing parties in her kitchen?
- When one young black man and a girl are dancing and making fun of her, what does Aunt Rachel say?
- What does this young officer then do the next morning?
- How does Aunt Rachel recognize Henry?
- What had happened to Henry? What did he do?
- What kind of long-term impact do you think hearing this story had on Mark Twain?

*** This is very difficult reading for English-language learners and will probably be met with some frustration. By using both an English-language dictionary and their own native-language dictionary they should be able to decipher the text with help from the teacher. Four pages of this reading will be tedious and should be broken up into two days.

COMMON CORE CONNECTIONS:

- CCSS.ELA-Literacy.CCRA.R.4: Interpret words and phrases as they are used in a text, including determining technical, connotative, and figurative meanings, and analyze how specific word choices shape meaning and tone.
- CCSS.ELA-Literacy.CCRA.R.5: Analyze the structure of texts including how specific sentences, paragraphs, and larger portions of the text (e.g., a section, chapter, scene, or stanza) relate to each other and the whole.

MATERIALS AND ATTACHMENTS:

- Each student should have their own language-into-English dictionary for reference
- *Vocabulary and Phrases in "A True Story"* list

LESSON EXTENSION TO ENHANCE STUDENT LEARNING:

List all of the examples of slang and vernacular utilized by Americans today (texting, conversation, etc.). Write a short story about contemporary America using the slang and vernacular utilized by many Americans.

Vocabulary and Phrase List for “A True Story”

Colored : an African-American person

Mighty frame and stature: very strong

Undimmed: bright, smart

Unabated: ongoing, without stopping

“Under fire”: being attacked

“chaffed without mercy”: making fun of

Quaked: shook, scared

Misto: mister

Arnest: honest or earnest

Sobered my manner: calmed me down, made be stop and think

Sigh: deep breath

Gwyne: going

Bawn: born

Dat: that

Chil’en: children

Dey: they

Dis: this

Sah: say

Ole: old

Fo’ginny: Virginia

“my souls”: “Oh Wow”

“make de fur fly”: make someone angry

“dat I wasn’t bawn in de mash to be fool’ by trash!”: “I wasn’t born stupid”

“tore his wris’ awful, an’ most busted his head”: cut his wrist and hurt his head

Clar: declared, said

Bymyby: as time went by

Ole mistis: the old mistress

Broke: not enough money

Towered: stood over, taller

Oction: auction

Po’ch: porch

“Dis one too ole”: “This one is too old”

“Dis one lame”: “This one is too lame,” i.e. hurt

“Dis one don’t mount to much”: This one don’t amount too much”, no value

“Shet up yo’ dam blubberin”: “Stop crying”

“mouf wid his han”: “mouth with his hand”

Shan’t: won’t

Wid: with

B’long: belong

Marster: master

Confedrit: Confederate

Waw: war

Mons’us: monstrous, really big

Small-fry officers: low-level officers

Mosey roun: mostly around

Gen’l: General

Boss dat kitchen: boss of the kitchen

Meddlin’ wid you: meddling with you, bothering you

Afeard: afraid

“you’s mong frens, now”: your among friends

Norf: north

Kurtchy: curtsy

Gemmen: gentlemen

Fine: find

Sk-yar: scar

Mournful: sad

Befo: before

Feller: fellow

Hisse’f: himself

Barber: someone who cuts hair

Mammy: Mother

Less’n: unless

Ransacked: looked through in a rough way

Nuffin: nothing

Sojer ball: soldier’s ball

Carryin’ on: having fun

Heaps o’ times: many times

Rasp’: made me angry

Dander up: get angry

Nigger: a very bad name for a black person often used in during the 1700-1800s

“platoon f’m a nigger ridgement”: part of the army made up of black people

a-bilin: really anry

a-waltzin: a kind of dance

Pooty: very soon

Wench: a bad name for a girl

Abreas’: next to

Yeller wench: a mulatto girl, biracial

Rubbage: trash

Kin’o: family

B’long’ to de ban: belonged to the band

Widout puttin’ on airs: without being showy

Wuss: worse

Look-a-heah: Look here, listen

Stan’ astarin’: stood staring

Fo’got somefin: forgot something

At de do’: at the door

“cap’n I be on han’ ‘bout eight o’clock”: “Captain I’ll be on hand at about eight”

mawnin: morning

dey’s somefin on my mine’: There’s something on my mind; I’m thinking about something

a-stoopin’: bending over

“I got my own ag’in!”: I got my family again

