

## **The Beauty of African-American Culture Through Children's Literature**

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### *Overview*

The focus of this unit is for third and fourth grade students to appreciate themselves, their families, and their community through the African American experience. This appreciation will develop as African-American children's literature is shared with them. After listening and reading several poems and stories, the students will be able to look at the importance of their own self-worth as well as friendship, family, and community assets that have contributed to African-American culture since Africans have been a part of America.

### Rationale

The reason I developed this unit is because I believe third and fourth grade students ranging in ages 8-10 should be introduced to African-American literature. This literature depicts their personal lives, family, friendships, and community. The literature that will be shared with the students consists of various genres. Poetry will be one genre used in this unit. Honey, I Love, by Eloise Greenfield will definitely be

a plus to use with this unit. Another poetry book being used in this unit is Danitra Brown Leaves Town, by Nikki Grimes. This book of poetry will help students look at a special friendship they have with someone. Friendly letter writing will be an appropriate activity after hearing various poems from this book relating to friendships. Another book being used in this unit is Dinner at Aunt Connie's House, by Faith Ringgold. This book will be used to help students create personal narratives around their own family traditions they may have. The last piece of literature I will use with the students for this unit is Henry's Freedom: Box A True Story from the Underground Railroad, by Ellen Levine. The students will hear first hand about the adventures Henry faces while trying to reach freedom in the north by way of a wooden crate. The students will be able to complete a comparison and contrast activity using this nonfiction genre and Flat Stanley, by Marc Brown as a fiction genre, which also places the main character, Stanley, in several adventures like Henry faced in Henry's Freedom Box. However, this character faces his adventures because he has been flattened by a bulletin board. Due to Stanley's being flat he can of course do many things he was unable to do when at a normal size.

The biography includes the use of the Internet; this will assist with Henry "Box" Brown's trip to freedom and Flat Stanley's trip to California in which they will share their adventures with each other via letters. There are several websites available such as, <http://www.nationalgeographic.com/railroad/j1.html> and <http://www.classicsforkids.com/shows/freedom.asp>. There are other books that can be used to extend activities such as, The Patchwork Path: a quilt map to Freedom, by Bettye Stroud and, Escape North; the Story of Harriet Tubman. These books could help to extend the learning of the students.

## African- American Cultural Experiences Shared Through Literature

As every educated person does or should know, Africans have had such a hard devastating experience early on in America. This ethnic group was subjected to unfair and cruel punishment physically as well as mentally. This group of people has been deprived of making fair wages; they have been segregated in all ways. This treatment in America of this ethnic group, has developed a culture that is theirs alone.

The ending of slavery was a huge step in the right direction for this country; however, it still was not enough. African-Americans have been mistreated, alienated, mentally and physically abused just to name a few of the challenges Africans have faced for a very long time in our history.

Africans were facing challenges daily that will be shared through the literature used in this unit. Students will be exposed to poetry, which allows African-Americans to express themselves about the inner and outer beauty they are so proud of. Family traditions have always been strong and important to African-Americans from the very beginning. The students will see how there is so much importance on the family tradition(s) continuing and being passed down to future generations so that they always remain in the family. Determination and strength will definitely be evident in the literature shared with the students. The characters in these stories will show how having strong will makes a difference in one's life or others.

### Objectives

The objectives of these lessons are for students to become familiar with the African experience in America displayed through African-American children's literature. Students will demonstrate their newfound knowledge after being exposed to poetry, realistic fiction, nonfiction genres, and particular websites by the teacher. Various activities will follow after students are read to and discuss the various forms of literature that will be used in this unit.

I want the students to appreciate themselves from the inside and out. A good way to get this total self- appreciation is through the sharing of poetry. The students will be directed to self-reflect after hearing poetry being read to them. Students will be engaged in activities that allow them to demonstrate their individual creativity. A lot of this creativity will take place through the writing.

This unit can be implemented in language arts and social studies as well. Students completing this unit will come to appreciate the struggles and challenges Africans had upon their arrival in America and how struggles and challenges have continued into the lives of African-Americans.

### Lesson 1 Plan

Objective: The student will become familiar with twelve heroines from our history, who have made a major contribution to our country. The research students perform will assist them in presenting short oral reports shared with the class. The twelve heroines in the story that will be researched are: Rosa Parks, Fannie Lou Hamer, Augusta Savage, Mary McLeod Bethune, Dorothy Dandridge, Zora Neale Hurston, Maria W. Stewart, Bessie Smith, Harriet Tubman, Sojourner Truth, Marian Anderson, and Madame C.J. Walker.

Materials: Book-Dinner at Aunt Connie's House by Faith Ringgold, large-lined index cards, computers, pencil, white-lined paper, poster board, or oak tag paper.

Anticipatory Set: Introduce title and author of, Dinner at Aunt Connie's House, to the students. Next, read the inside book jacket aloud to students. This will give the students an overall idea of what this picture book will be about. Reading and discussing the jacket with students will give them some background about the book.

Procedure: The teacher will begin to read, Dinner at Aunt Connie's House, by Faith Ringgold aloud. The teacher should stop and elaborate or question the students when necessary. This is done based on knowing your students.

#### Lesson 1 cont.

The level of questioning should vary and the teacher should be looking for talk that is accountable (dialogue where the students are also responsible for the learning taking place) from the students when discussions begin to take place. The teacher will most likely need to spend this extra time questioning students when reading about each historical figure. After completing the reading of the story, the teacher will inform students that they have been placed in groups of 2 or 3 to do some brief researching on each woman portrait created by Aunt Connie. The students will share additional information they learn about the heroines with their partner in the class. This will give everyone the opportunity to learn more about each woman. There are a total of twelve women so teachers can create groups of 2 or 3 students, even 4 if necessary. The teacher should group by different ability levels so that the students can complement each other during this activity. The teacher will go over the questions students will be responsible for answering and sharing in their oral report (see

Appendix A for questions). The students are told that they will work together to complete their individual question sheet. (See Appendix A for report format) The partners/groups will be given a historical figure to research and told to use the web sites listed on the student checklist page to assist them on this project. The websites that can help the students with their research is: (YahooligansYahooKids.com and Askjeeves.com). The students will proceed to the computer lab with the teacher to begin activity using the web sites shared by the teacher first. The teacher will circulate the lab checking on partners/groups working together as they individually gather notes, which could be beneficial for their oral report later. The teacher should go over each activity page with the students explaining expectations for each one. The students will get an artistic view of the project by the beginning of this activity. For day two of this activity students will receive a checklist from the teacher (See Appendix A) to make sure they are accountable for every part of this activity. The teacher will go over the student checklist with them so that the expectations for the final report to be given are clear.

#### Lesson 1 cont.

The teacher should allow students to work with their partner or in groups at computer stations in the classroom if they are available. The students will be given at least 2 weeks with at least 3 days of a 1 period class, which is designated to research, note-taking, and preparing for their oral presentations. The teacher will circulate and monitor students as they work with a partner independently on their assigned heroine until the complete project is complete.

Closure: The students show an understanding of the great qualities it takes to be a true hero or heroine in society. The learner will articulate through their oral report how important it is for African Americans to know about and share the important accomplishments and bravery black women have contributed to our overall society.

This will be measured for understanding with the use of an oral report rubric (See Appendix A).

### Lesson 2 Plan

Objective: The students will gain a positive self-awareness about themselves through poetry while gaining an understanding of compare and contrast. The poems shared with students will help them appreciate themselves and their family.

Materials: Poem template as rough draft, pencil, construction paper, crayons, markers, and colored pencils.

Anticipatory Set: The teacher will ask students when they feel best about themselves. Some students may answer that participating in sports gives them a positive feeling about themselves. With other students it may be physical features, and there may be some in which value of self comes mainly from family influences.

The question asked of students should initiate a healthy discussion amongst the class as well as give the teacher an idea of how the average child in the class actually feels about him/herself.

### Lesson 2 cont.

Procedure: The teacher will read the poem, “I Look Pretty” from, Honey I Love book of poems, by Eloise Greenfield. The teacher will discuss with students when they feel “*their best*” about themselves. The teacher will share another poem with students after discussing “I Look Pretty” with students. The second poem the teacher will read

to students is “Danitra’s Family Reunion” from Danitra Brown Leaves Town, by Nikki Grimes. The teacher will discuss with children the importance of family to our self-esteem. The teacher will help students realize how strong family relationships play a major factor with self-awareness. The teacher *should* stress how any person caring for them in any way should be considered as “important” to them. The teacher wants to also mention that no family is perfect and difficulties within them can make a family stronger. The students will use a teacher created template as well as be exposed to a model of acrostic biography poem. (See Appendix B) The teacher should create the model so that students are clear of what is expected of them for the assignment. This poem style allows the student to express him or herself by using their own goals, accomplishments, and anything else they are proud of.

Closure: The student shows an understanding of how self-esteem and pride usually comes from our family relationships. This will be measured through the biography poem created by the student. The student poem should demonstrate things about her/himself where self-worth is evident.

### Lesson Plan 3

Objective: The student will become familiar with specific character traits when introduced to them through various genres. The student will compare and contrast two poems that share characteristics of friends. They will use a Venn Diagram provided by the teacher to accomplish that goal.

Materials: Books, Honey I Love and other love poems, by Eloise Greenfield. Danitra Brown Leaves Town, by Nikki Grimes is the other book you will need. Transparency or activity page with a Venn Diagram to use with either an overhead projector or an Elmo, pencils, construction paper, markers, and crayons.

Anticipatory Set: Ask students what they feel is the one “best” quality or characteristic about their best friend that they like the most. Once students share their “one” best quality about their friend the teacher should discuss with students that most people select and appreciate their friends based on more than one characteristic about that person. The teacher will inform students to listen to the two poems that will be shared carefully.

Procedure: The teacher will begin with sharing the poem “Noticing Nina” in Danitra Brown Leaves Town. The teacher will discuss the poem with the students making sure they have the main idea of the poem. Next, the teacher will read “Lessie” from the Honey, I Love book of poems. The teacher should reread each poem to the class after reminding students that they will be looking for comparisons in the poems, how these two poems about friends are the same.

### Lesson Plan 3

The students should also be instructed to be thinking about some contrasts they notice between the two poems, how the two poems show differences, after hearing the

poems for the second time. As the students share ways the two poems are the same the teacher will list the comparisons under that section on the Venn Diagram graphic organizer. The students will complete their blank copy of the Venn Diagram organizer with the teacher. The teacher and student will proceed to the contrast section of the Venn Diagram organizer where students will contribute differences evident between the two poems.

Lesson Extension: The teacher can have students write a compare and contrast paragraph using the information gathered by use of the Venn Diagram graphic organizer.

Closure: The students will show an understanding of genres being the same having two different authors, but there are similarities and differences between their writing. This will be evident to the student as they complete the Venn Diagram graphic organizer with the teacher.

#### Lesson Plan 4

Objective: The student will become familiar with friendly letter writing. This lesson also allows the student to get reinforcement in making comparisons and contrasts between main characters.

Materials: Books; Henry's Freedom Box: A True Story from the Underground Railroad, by Ellen Levine. Flat Stanley, by Marc Brown is also needed to complete this lesson, pencil, white-lined paper, and Venn Diagram graphic organizer.

#### Lesson Plan 4 cont.

Anticipatory Set: Ask students where they would send him/herself in a box if they could be shipped anywhere? The teacher should also extend the question of why the student would select that destination. This question will help begin a discussion around the reason for wanting to be shipped to a particular place. It may also draw some discussion around how the student might get there.

Procedure: The teacher will begin to read, Henry's Freedom Box: A True Story from the Underground Railroad, by Ellen Levine. The teacher should stop and elaborate on the main character, Henry's experience as a slave and the steps he takes to change that situation. The teacher should also discuss with students the family hardships Henry had based on being a slave. The discussion with the students should also cover the determination Henry had to find true happiness in the end.

This lesson also requires the use of another form of genre also. The teacher could read the fiction story, Flat Stanley, by Marc Brown before or after reading the nonfiction genre Henry's Freedom Box. The teacher should keep in mind that Flat

Stanley is a short chapter book so additional planning may have to occur. The letter writing experience will come after both stories have been read and discussed with the teacher. The student will then complete a Venn Diagram graphic organizer with the teacher. This organizer will compare and contrast the lives of the main characters' Henry and Stanley. After the student has completed the Venn Diagram the information in the graphic organizer will be used to create a friendly letter from Henry, the slave, to Stanley. The letter should include many of the hardships Henry faced as a slave. The student may choose to create a friendly letter, which is written from Stanley, after he has become flattened, to Henry. The student will share the character's adventurous experiences with the other character through the body of the letter.

#### Lesson 4 cont.

The students should use two websites to assist them with the characters' adventures. These sites give additional information for Henry "Box" Brown's trip to freedom and Flat Stanley's trip to California. (See Annotated Bibliography/Resources) Before the students begin their letter writing the teacher will teach the needed parts of a friendly letter. The teacher should introduce the parts of a friendly letter to the students. There are 5 parts of a friendly letter that need to be taught the heading (sender's address), greeting, body, closing, and signature. The teacher can teach the concept by using an overhead projector or an Elmo. The letter created by the student should consist of a

body that includes information from the completed Venn Diagram. The differences between Henry and Stanley's adventures should be discussed as well as the similarities they may have had during their adventurous travels.

Closure: The student will show an understanding of how detrimental slavery was to people of the African descent. This will be demonstrated through the letter the student writes as Boxcar Henry to Flat Stanley or vice versa. The student will share the challenges faced while traveling in a box over several states as a slave. With the use of the Venn Diagram it should be evident that there may have been some likenesses in the two character's travels. However, there should definitely be some major differences in the two character's travels just based on Henry being a slave attempting to escape.

#### Annotated Bibliography/Resources

Ringgold, Faith. Dinner at Aunt Connie's House. Hyperion Books *for* Children: New York, 1993. This book is excellent due to the rich history that is also shared with the author's audience. Ringgold does a fabulous job with giving students a host of heroines, which will probably be unfamiliar women to the average third and fourth grade student.

Levine, Ellen. Henry's Freedom Box: A True Story from the Underground Railroad. Scholastic Press. New York, 2007. This book is an excellent way to have children have a first hand experience with the determination and desperation a slave may have had to reach freedom. This book received a Caldecott Honor and is well deserved. Children can get a true feel for the harshness of slavery from Henry "Box" Brown's life through this well written and illustrated picture book.

Grimes, Nikki. Danitra Brown Leaves Town. Harper Collins Publishers Inc. 2002. This book of poetry is done in a creative way that should relate to all children. All the poems are centered on Zuri Jackson who has to deal with the absence of her best friend Danitra Brown during the summer. The friendship in this book of poems carries over to the Coretta Scott King Honor Book, Meet Danitra Brown.

Greenfield, Eloise. Honey, I Love and other love poems. Harper Collins Publishers. 1978. This poetry book is great for having children listen to various love poems depicting the emotion from a child's perspective. These poems cover a lot of "things and people" that children *love*. There is also an extra bonus with these poems; there are beautiful drawings in either portrait or panorama.

Web Sites

<http://www.Yahooligans.com>

<http://www.AskJeevesKids.com>

<http://www.nationalgeographic.com/railroad/j1.html>

<http://www.classicsforkids.com/shows/freedom.asp>

Appendix A

Name \_\_\_\_\_ Date

\_\_\_\_\_

Research Biography Report

1. Biography Report on

\_\_\_\_\_

2. Birth date \_\_\_\_\_ Died

\_\_\_\_\_

3. Birth place

\_\_\_\_\_

4. What makes this person a heroine? List at least four qualities about this person that were not discussed in Dinner at Aunt Connie's House.

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5. \_\_\_\_\_ is considered a  
heroine

because \_\_\_\_\_  
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\_\_\_\_\_  
\_\_\_\_\_

Name \_\_\_\_\_ Date \_\_\_\_\_  
\_\_\_\_\_

Research Checklist

We have answered research questions individually. \_\_\_\_\_

We have used websites to assist us with finding important information on our heroine.  
\_\_\_\_\_

We have shared at least 8 different facts we have learned as a team from our research.

\_\_\_\_\_

We have made a decision together on what facts we want to share with our audience.

\_\_\_\_\_

We have practiced for our oral report and we are prepared to share our facts with our audience. \_\_\_\_\_

Helpful Websites to Use for Research:

1. [www.Yahooligans.com](http://www.Yahooligans.com)
2. [www.AskJeevesKids.com](http://www.AskJeevesKids.com)

Oral Report Form

Names:

\_\_\_\_\_

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After researching \_\_\_\_\_  
we would like to share more interesting information with you that we have learned  
about this person.

## Group Presentation

Group Name

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(or Members) \_\_\_\_\_

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Category

Acceptable

Not Acceptable

1. Presentation  
was complete

Covered all

Not complete

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2. Audience  
unclear

Presentation clear

Presentation

Awareness

Used quality visuals  
visuals

No quality

Used correct volume                      Too loud, too quiet

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3. Creativity                      Skit or performance                      Lacked creativity

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4. Participation                      All members involved significantly                      Not all members involved

## Appendix B

### Biography Poem

\*Share who you are through your biography poem. Use your name to teach your audience about “you”

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**Model for Acrostic Biography Poem**

*“It’s All About ME!”  
by, Merrie Luna*

***My*** sister Terri is the oldest  
***Enjoys*** meeting New People  
***Runs*** only during aerobic class  
***Really*** enjoys Family Gatherings

## ***Interested in Playing the Drums***

### ***Every Student is Important!***

#### Standards

##### *Content Standards*

Reading, Writing, Speaking, Listening, and Citizenship

##### Communications

- All students use effective research and information management skills, including locating primary sources of information with traditional and emerging library technologies.
- All students respond orally and in writing to information and ideas gained by reading narrative and informational texts and use the information and ideas to make decisions and solve problems.
- All students analyze and make critical judgments about all forms of communication and separating fact from opinion.
- All students exchange information orally, including understanding and giving spoken instructions, asking and answering questions appropriately and promoting effective group communications.

##### Citizenship

- All students demonstrate that they can work effectively with others.
- All students demonstrate their skills of communicating, negotiating, and cooperating with others.
- All students demonstrate an understanding of the history and nature of prejudice and relate their knowledge to current issues facing communities, the United States, and other nations.