

The Origins of Black Humor

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Overview

The complexity of black humor and its impact on America's black and white society has been somewhat ignored. The effects that events such as the minstrel shows has played in defining black America can still be seen today. The contributions of black entertainers forced into pre-determined roles have lacked documentation and acknowledgment. The following curriculum unit will try to document the development then the growth of black humor. The history of black humor will focus on its unlikely origins in slavery. During this time period blacks develop a dual expression of their humor. One was the public expression of what blacks wanted others to see as opposed to their own private view of what was actually humorous. The later was also confined solely to the black community. The stereotypes of the black culture that are established during slavery become the foundation for the American entertainment form of blackface minstrels. Here, white Americans distorts and exaggerates what they believe to be the lifestyle of blacks. These roles are so entrenched into the psyche of what America perceives about blacks that when blacks try to enter into the white only minstrel acts they must confirm to these distortion in order to compete in this new form of entertainment. The impact that these two events had on the development of black humor will be discussed.

Starting with the graduating class of 2003 the students at Pittsburgh Public High Schools must complete a graduating project. This research-based project will be presented to a panel of adults in the students' junior or senior year of high school. Juniors at Peabody are enrolled into a semester graduating project class. Due to scheduling conflict, not all juniors are enrolled in this course. For those students, who choose, this curriculum unit can serve as a guide for them to follow for their graduation project. The students will be working independently on their project with the sociology teacher as their mentor. The students who choose this path need not be enrolled in the sociology class. However, the curriculum unit will be incorporated into the lesson design for the students who are enrolled in the sociology class. The students enrolled in the sociology class will use the unit as a case study to explore the effects of racism on American society. This unit will help show students how events of the past have a powerful impact on current and future customs in American culture.

Rationale

To graduate from the Peabody High School each student needs three years of a social science. This usually includes: Civic/African American History in the 9th grade, World Cultures in the 10th grade, U.S. History in the 11th grade. Students entering their senior year have usually fulfilled the graduation requirements in history. As an academic elective or 4th year of history credits students can choose to take a course in psychology and sociology. Each subject is divided into a semester long class. Although this unit is intended for the use in a sociology class, it can be beneficial to other social studies classes. For example, when studying slavery, Black humor can be seen as a means of survival. "No master could be thoroughly comfortable around a sullen slave

and conversely, a master unless he was utterly humorless could not overwork or brutally treat a jolly fellow, one who could make him laugh” Watkins (1994). Each students will gain an understanding of the historical development of black humor and how it has transformed American culture both black and white.

Comedy

The curriculum unit will first look to answer the questions of what is comedy, how comedy is perceived and how black humor has had an impact on black and white America. An introduction into the myth that comedy is equated with what is funny will be examined. The idea that comedy is not necessarily funny is one of the first points that the students will be taught to recognize. This will be especially important when they study black humor and slavery. Like tragedy, comedy as a form of entertainment follows certain rules. One of the characteristics of comedy is that it is inclusive. Comedy seeks to bring together its characters, usually in the form of a celebration. As far back as Aristophanes, this formula has been used to measure what would be considered comedic.

According to Frye a form of comedy is one in which the comedic hero resolves the particular situation he finds himself in. The process by which he resolves this situation is what becomes comedy. The journey or conversion of the character from low to high or high to low makes for the action in the comedy. This journey often begins with the absurd and proceeds with how the character overcomes this absurdity. Black humor often revolves around the absurdities that come from discrimination and racism.

Some of the characters of comedy are the imposters, self- deprecators and the buffoons. In a historical perspective of the black society the buffoon character is better know as the “Sambo” or “Uncle Tom”. Another type of comedic character found in Roman and Renaissance comedy is that of the tricky slave. This character acts out of mischief, often with selfish intentions. Such characters can be found throughout the history of black humor. From the characters in the tales of Uncle Remus to the comedic stand up of Chris Rock the trickster is a popular character in black humor. The trickery of the slave could be seen as a form of rebellion that enabled him some relief from the every day routines of plantation life.

Black comedy in America starts unfortunately with the means to which blacks were brought to this country is mass numbers. If black humor can be seen as a form of rebellion to slavery or a survival mechanism, it is then reasonable to understand why parody, satire and irony are three styles of comedy that are popular within the black community. Blacks have used parody, irony and satire as a less threatening way to express their view about important social issues. Black contemporary comedians such as Dick Gregory, Richard Pryor, Eddie Murphy and Chris Rock have used these three forms of comedy in their comic routines to discuss important political and social issues facing the black community.

Slavery

It seems unlikely that black humor could have its roots in the bondage of slavery. However, that experience has become the major factor in developing African American humor. “Remarkable resilient and inventive manner of behaving and observing both themselves and the eternal world began to engage during the transformation from African to African American slave. Herded together with others with whom they shared only a common condition of servitude and some

degree of cultural overlap, enslave Africans were compelled to create a new language a new religion and a precarious new lifestyle.” Joyner (1984).

Captured Africans were left few options to make this transformation from a freed Africans to an enslaved people. Many chose the course of suicide while others chose to fight back. In both of these instances, the end result was usually death. Still yet, millions died from the conditions of their journey from Africa to America. Statistics vary but it is estimated that for every slave ship that left the coast of Africa, 12 to 25 percent of the captives perished during the journey.

Those that made it through and survived to arrive in the Americas must have been overwhelmed. They must have succumbed to the despair of their situation and resigned themselves to becoming the harmless darkies, the “Sambos.” However, many others survived by using a social mask. Slaves who behaved like Sambos might not have actually been Sambos. They might have been playing the role of the loyal and congenial slave in order to survive. Sambo like behavior may have been not so much a veil to hide inner emotions of rage and discontent as an effective means of expressing them. “In effect this behavior may have demonstrated resistance to efficiency, discipline, work and productivity. Where the master perceived laziness the slave saw refusal to be exploited.” Takaki (1979)

This social masking that helped slaves survive by appeasing the demands of their slaveholders was past from generation to generation. This skill also had to be so well tuned that the white slave owners remained unaware of its working. The very life of the slave would depend on how well he or she played their role. Unknowingly slave owners were duped by the public expression of humor by their slaves. Dr. Samuel Cartwright wrote of such an account. He wrote on the disease secular to Negroes, among the DYSAESTHESIA AETHIOPICA:

“From careless movement of the individuals affected with this complaint they are apt to do much mischief, which appears if intentional, but is mostly owing to the stupidity of mind and insensibility of the nerves induced by the disease. Thus they break, waste, and destroy everything they handle; abuse horses & cattle; tear, burn, or rend their own clothing. . . . When driven to labor by the compulsive power of the white man, he performs the task assigned to him in a headlong, careless manner, treading down with his feet or cutting with his hoe the plants he is put to cultivate; breaking the tools he works with, and spoiling everything he touches that can be injured by careless handling.” Lester (1968)

This account shows that the relationship between black slave and white owner was absurdly comedic. These themes can also be found in the jokes about the interracial encounters that come from the Black community today. The popular television show, *Comic View*, that comes on the Black Entertainment Television Network (BET) constantly features comics that use racial confrontations as part of their routine. This style of entertainment is a form of social masking that has helped to establish a dual social and psychological dynamic in the black community. There was the face for the master and then there was the private face that was reserved for the slave or the black community. The basic ingredients for black comedy were being established. Ironically, contradiction, and distortion became an essential tools for the survival of the slave and the basis for black humor.

The dual life of African American slaves put forth the public notion widely held by white America that they were “merry, frivolous, and happy – go- lucky slaves.” The public face became a source of entertainment for the slave owner. Many journals, narratives and diaries from this time period portray the Black slave as the ultimate entertainer. Every aspect of the public slave’s life was seen as a form of entertainment. Even when they were not required to entertain, their leisure activities, what little leisure they had was often observed with fascination. Europeans were enthralled by the rhythmic movement and dance, their seemingly nonsensical antics, gaunt pulsating music and overall uninhibited behavior. Even religious and burial ceremonies were watched with amusement by whites when possible. Watkins (1984).

While this public face put on by slaves was intended as a survival technique it also made blacks the object of ridicule, the court jester, the fool, the Sambo. Slaves became comic figures and the butt of the joke. The public face fit well within what the whites believed about blacks at this time. Blacks were childlike and needed to be cared for, therefore slavery was necessary. This misconception only helped advance black humor. Peter Randolph in 1855 gives an example of what would have is perceived as black naivete as opposed to cutting satire.

“Pompey, how do I look?” the master asked.

“O massa mighty. You looks mighty.”

“What do you mean mighty, Pompey?”

“Why massa you looks nobles.”

“What do you mean by noble?”

“Why, suh, you mean looks just like a lion.”

“Why Pompey, where have you ever seen a lion?”

“I saw one down yonder field the other day massa.”

“Pompey, you foolish fellow. That was a jackass.”

“Was it mass? Well suh you looks just like him.” Cohen (1978)

The adversarial relationship between black slaves and the white slave owners created an environment where blacks had to establish a dual personality. This also translated into the public and private humor of blacks. The wit that blacks used in dealing with whites must have been seen as a release when these same

slaves were back in their quarters. The deliberate sabotage, work slow downs or stoppages created by the slaves would have been met with great laughter when blacks were in the company of themselves.

This private humor could be looked at as a way to ease the heartache associated with the daily life of the slave. The role of the Sambo did not only entertain the “massa” but the slave as well. Imagine the feeling the slaves would have gotten when called up to entertain the massa and his company when only he and the other slaves got the true joke. The joy they must have felt retelling the story of how they outwitted the Massa. This private humor must have given the slaves opportunity to escape mentally from the cruelty of their condition. Moreover, this private humor gave them a sense of power and control over those who unquestionably thought them to be inferior. The tradition that grew out of the need for survival has become an integral part of the black experience here in America. This experience reflects the history of African Americans and the relationship that they have had with whites America. This is an experience and relationship that continues today.

Slaves used the tales of the trickster as another means to resist their condition. The humorous animal stories were examples of their rebellion. Joel Chandler Harris who recalls stories he heard as a child growing up on a Georgia plantation made *Uncle Remus, His Songs and His Sayings* popular. Much of the popularity of these stories during 1760s was due to the “faithful darky” role of Uncle Remus. Similar to the role of Uncle Tom of Harriet Beecher Stowe’s *Uncle Tom’s Cabin*. Uncle Remus would tell humorous stories of how weaker animals like Brer Rabbit would become the heroes. The Uncle Remus character helps establish a safe context in which these tales could be told. The use of animals makes the tales more palpable for the white audience. An example of this is how Brer Rabbit convinces Brer Fox to throw him into the brier-patch after he had been caught. “I don’t keer w’at you do wid me, sezee, ‘ so you don’t fling me in dat brier-patch!” After Brer Fox, convinced that the brier-patch was the worst fate he could inflict on the rabbit frees Brer Rabbit and tosses him into the brier-patch, Brer Rabbit escapes unharmed. “ ‘ Bred and bawn in a brier-patch, Brer Fox – bred and bawn in a brier-patch, ” “ Brer Rabbit hollers before scampering off to safety. Harris (1981)

These tales were also used to teach morality within the slave community. In the animal tales the weaker animals occasionally tricked the rabbit, which was the trickster, when his behavior was perceived as arrogant and malicious. From the testimonies of former slaves from the All Saints Parish in South Carolina comes such tales. During a drought Buh Rabbit conceals the whereabouts of a well from the other animals. They then band together to lure Buh Rabbit to the villain Tar Baby. The moral here is that boastfulness, hoarding and lying can be dangerous even for the trickster. One of the most popular of these tales is the Turtle and the Hare. Through these animal tales the slaves found the perfect way to express their opinions about the truth of their

condition. This indirect way allowed the slaves to share the truth in a less painful way, making their state of slavery a little easier to bear.

After emancipation, however, the former slaves began to express themselves with fewer restrictions. The thoughts that they would have kept private began to emerge into the public after the constraints of slavery were lifted. The following is such an example.

Slave Owner: Ah, dear faithful, loyal Uncle Tom. Lincoln has forced you to accept freedom – against my wishes, and, I am sure against yours. Dear old friend and servant, you need not leave this plantation. Stay here with us; kindly, gently, self-sacrificing Uncle Tom!

Uncle Tom: Thank you, deah kine, lovin gen'rous Massa. I reckon I'll leave. But befo' I go I wants you ter know I will allus 'membuh you ez de son uv a bitch you is an' allus waz! Spalding (1972)

White Minstrels

The white male dominated both the on stage and behind the stage efforts in American entertainment. What the white male considered to be entertaining was what America thought was entertaining. The white male's view of humor defines what would become America's number one form of entertainment. At this time the audiences that attended these shows were primarily white men. The view that white males had of blacks as comedic characters was formed from the notion that blacks enjoyed plantation life. Blacks were seen as the "Uncle Tom, Sambo and Mammy. There was the common belief that blacks were inferior and plantation life was in their best interest of these simple creatures.

The emergence of the white minstrel shows in America is the beginning of black exploitation in the entertainment business. Blacks characters on the American stage were seen as comic figures. In the early 1800s whites mimicking blacks began to appear in rural America. At the same time an English actor, mimic and comedian named Charles Mathews was touring the United States. A natural fit into his comic routine, Mathews began to imitate blacks on stage. Edwin Forrest a popular American actor in the early 1820s made himself up to be a black man. By using the stereotypes of the time about blacks, white minstrels began to enjoy success on the stage.

The more exaggerated the stereotype the more appealing it was to the audiences at this time. Thomas D. Rice, a minor actor in the dramatic play *The Rifle*, reportedly saw a crippled and deformed black hostler or stable groom singing and performing a striking but peculiar dance as he went about his work. The actor, recognizing the potential appeal of the song – "Weel about and turn about, a

do jis so./Eb'ry time I weel about I jump Jim Crow"-and the black man's twisted, antic movements, Rice memorized and copied the dance. Rice began presenting the impersonation between acts of *The Rifle*. He began to add other "Negro" characters into his act and became one of Americans most popular white minstrels.

American audiences loved this new form of entertainment. These black-faced acts were entertainment for the common man. "By focusing on and exaggerating the supposed earthly peculiarities of blacks, black-faced mimics provided the simple, folksy entertainment whites audiences demanded and assured them that, indeed they were superior to their enslaved brethren" Watkins (1994). This formula for comedy proved so successful that by the 1830 white minstrels were one of the most popular forms of entertainment both in America.

The minstrel shows did not happen in isolation from American history. During the late 1830 America was on the brink of a financial disaster. Unemployment was rampant and a group out of work white actors turned to blackface to solve their particular economic problem. This group formed the Virginia Minstrels. The misconceptions of black American life presented on stage helped to contribute to the misconceptions that white America had of blacks. These stereotypes were not limited to the United States. With the growth in popularity of the minstrel shows, troupes such as the Virginia Minstrels began to tour Europe with great success. Now, the view of black America was distorted in American and Europe. The following is a description from Robert C. Toll's *Blacking Up: The Minstrel Show in Nineteenth Century America*:

They burst on stage in make-up, which gave the impression of huge eyes and gaping mouths. They dressed in ill-fitting, patchwork clothes, and spoke in heavy "nigger" dialects. Once on stage, they could not stay still for an instance. Even while sitting, they contorted their bodies, cocked their heads, rolled their eyes, and twisted their outstretched legs...their wild hollering and their bobbing, seemingly compulsive movements charged the entire performance with excitement. (1974)

The second part of the minstrel show was the variety segment. The comedic component consisted of the stump speaker. This is when a lone comic stood and did a discourse that ranged from nonsense to social and philosophical issues. (The future stand up comic) The comic would speak in a very heavy black accent. The political topics of the day were emancipation and women's suffrage. Of course, the white male's view of these two topics were no and no. The stump speaker also ridiculed the ability of blacks to understand such complex issues.

The third part of the minstrel show revolved around the comedic form of slapstick. This would usually involve the plantation skits that showcased the "Sambo" and "Mammy". The slave was made to be happy in his life of servitude. As the issue of emancipation became a topic in American society the third part of the show changed. Idea of freed blacks became the topic of this part of the show. The freed black was portrayed as a fool or helpless child in desperate need of saving by the institute of slavery.

With the uproar from the publication of Uncle Tom's Cabin in 1852 white America had begun to take definite side on the issue of slavery. The minstrel shows, like others forms of entertainment gave their audiences what they wanted. In most cases this was to show the good life that the plantation offered or to show the negative impact of what would happen if these slaves were emancipated. Showcasing the stereotype that blacks were inferior and needed to be taken care of by the superior whites did this. The other stereotype that put fear into the hearts of whites was that a freed black man would also be free to lust after white women. "American's most popular entertainment form had become a forum in which white performers posing as blacks actively lobbied for the continuation of slavery by presenting degrading, consciously distorted comic stereotyped intended to prove that slavery and black subordination were justified or, even more insidiously, to demonstrate that blacks actually preferred serfdom" Cockrell (1997).

The Civil War saw a downturn in the numbers that attended the minstrel shows. The number of deaths and the belief that the war would be a short one did little to change the setup of the show. With the war lingering on, blacks soldiers being allowed to fight and the tide of the war turning towards the north, some changes began to appear in the shows. The minstrels began to show some favoritism towards emancipation. After the war and the start of Reconstruction the satirizing of the new black official did occur.

The minstrel show which was consider the averages mans entertainment began to lose its audience. The war had taken its toll on all of America. The fate of slavery had been settled with the ending of the war. For many, the war had been fought over this issue of slavery. The division that slavery and the war had created was in no way to be seen as a subject for entertainment. The average man was looking for something that the whole family could enjoy. Many wanted to escape from the agony cause by the war. Families that had be separated, now wanted a form of entertainment they all could enjoy. P.T. Barnum and variety shows began to take the place of minstrel. These shows had little to no black subject matter. Instead they began to focus on female entertainment. This plus the introduction of vaudeville and the silent film, the minstrel shows began its decline.

Black Minstrels

During slavery blacks were required to perform for their white masters. Prior to the 1830s when minstrels began, blacks would have been involved in all kinds of entertainment. "They are the fiddlers at the Virginia reels there, the entertainers in local restaurants and saloons and that kind of thing" Ruffins (2000). These performances, of course, would not have received paid wages. The arrival of the minstrels as a form of entertainment became the first type of entertainment that people could see outside of their local setting. As discussed in the section on white minstrels the opportunity for the exploitation of the perceived lifestyle of the black slave gave way to the discovery of a new form of paid entertainment.

The minstrel shows easily excluded the black slave performer. According to Langston Hughes, "Hundreds of white minstrels performing in burnt cork borrowed not only the Southern Negro's songs but his dance steps, his jokes, and his simple way of speech as well – which they distorted into what became known as "Negro dialect." White entertainers, North and South, literally made millions of dollars from Negro material. The Negroes themselves, barred from most theaters as spectators and segregated in others could seldom see a minstrel show, and at that time they were not allowed to perform in them" Boskin (1986).

Some black minstrel performers emerged during the Civil war, but they became more prevalent by the end of the war. One of the first black minstrels was William Henry Lane, known by his stage name "Master Juba". White critics remarked on Juba's ability to "tie his legs into knots, and fling them about so recklessly, or make his feet twinkle until you lose sight of them altogether in his energy." They labeled his performance the authentic "Nigger Dance". The fact is that Lane like all other black minstrel performers built their act on the distortion and caricature that had already existed Mahar (1999). The black figures were there to be looked at, shaped to the demands of desire; they were screens on which audiences fantasy could rest, and while this purpose might have had a host of different effects, its fundamental outcome was to secure the position of white spectators as superior, controlling figures Thompson (1996)

By the 1860s the black minstrel could not and would not break out of the stereotypes that had been established by their white predecessors. In order for blacks to keep and maintain their jobs as performers they had to advertise themselves as the "real" Negro which the white audiences wanted to see. Even to the point where they themselves had to perform in blackface to sooth the desire of their white audiences. "They blackened their faces and circles their lips with red and white to make their mouths twice the normal size." Mahar (1999).

A trend that would last well into the 1970s, would be, black entertainer being managed and their profits controlled by whites. Initially blacks owned their own minstrel troupes. However, whites began to realize the immense business potential of owning and operating a black minstrel. To this end, the white minstrel shows that were bigger began systematically buying out the smaller black owned minstrels. This was often done through intimidation. For those black owners who did not bow to the pressure they were often meet with violence. White owners conspired with whites booking agencies to lock out black owned minstrel shows in an attempt to put additional pressure on black owners to sell. All these factors worked together to put the black owners and black performers under the direction and management of the white minstrel shows.

It should also be noted that the minstrel show and the black minstrel himself were a "disreputable lot in the eyes of a large section of the upper class-crust Negroes. But it is also true that all the best talent of that generation came down the same drain. The composers, the singers, the musicians, the speakers, the stage performers, the minstrel show got them all" Mahar (1999).

Objectives

The basic thrust of this curriculum unit is to have a working guide for students to follow who are working on their graduation project. The two main outcomes that will drive the graduation project are the research paper and the panel presentation. The research paper is the actual written documentation of the student's work. The panel presentation is the visual and oral representation of the student's work.

Comedy

Students will be able to define what comedy is and is not. They will understand some of the myths associated with views on comedy. Each student will establish a working knowledge of the bases of comic expression. Through examples, students will identify the various styles and characters in comedy.

Slavery

Describe the origin of black humor through slavery. Analyze how the institution of slavery helped to establish a dual social and psychological dynamic in the black community. Explain how slaves used black humor as a means of survival from the black community. Discuss the importance of the establishment and the role of public and private humor with the black slave community.

White Minstrels

Each students will learn the process of applying black-face. This process can be used when students take excerpts from original shows and perform them for class or for their graduation project. Students will create their own show based on the 3 stages of the traditional minstrel show. Using notes, research and after the viewing of the video *Ethnic Notions* the students will write a three to five page essay on the lasting effects of the minstrel shows.

Black Minstrels

During this part of the unit the students will learn to dispel the myth that whites were the only minstrel performers. Students will relate the reasons that lead to the black minstrel performers. Students will interpret the dual role that black performers in blackface had to play. Students will also view the movie *Bamboozled* by Spike Lee. Using this movie, notes and research students will analyze the impact

of the minstrel on black performers and the entertainment industry. Points of focus will be the difficulty that black performers had getting and maintaining work, the roadblocks that limited black ownership and control. Students will do oral presentations of their findings to the class.

Strategies

This unit will employ a variety of methods to present the information and to help student achieve the various objectives. During the initial part of the unit an overview of comedy will be presented and the students will be asked to define basic comedic terms. Based on these terms students will be exposed to examples of these terms through photo, audio and film. Students will then begin to explore the impact of black humor on society. With groups or as individuals students will be given selected excerpts from reading to begin comparing and contrasting the variety of examples of black humor. Included in these reading will be primary source materials. The process of overview, discussion, analysis of materials based on the sociological implications will be repeated through out the unit. For the graduation project, students will follow the format set up by the Pittsburgh Board of Public Education. Student presentation will also follow that guidelines set up by Peabody High School. Students will initially be given time in class to begin their research. With the help of the school librarian each class will have a lesson specifically designed to instruct the students in the basic process of research both by print and electronic mediums. Students will do a scaled down version of their research paper and oral presentations in preparation for their graduation project.

Classroom Activities

All students will follow the graduation project handbook. During the first week of class students will receive the graduation handbook. One day will be spent giving the students an overview of this handout. This handout will be continually referred to as the semester progresses and the students work towards completing their graduation project and panel presentation.

Comedy

The students will read from Frye's essay that details some of the types of comedic characters. Students will develop a list of the various types of characters. The teacher will lead the class in a discussion of each comedic term. The class will develop a working definition for each term. The teachers will then divide the class into working groups to come up with a working list of examples that meet the requirements of their definitions. Each group will share their list with the class. The teacher will lead the class in a discussion around each group's examples. The class will establish a working list of terms and a working list of examples for each term. Each student will find an example of a term and bring it into the class. The students will present their example to the class and explain why their example fits the definition of the term. The example can be a photograph, an artifact, a song, an excerpt from a movie, film or video, a poster, or cartoon. The class will then do a worksheet analysis of the particular term

based on the worksheets from the Nation Archives & Records of Administration. (Appendix A) If the student chooses this topic can be used as a basis of his or her graduation project.

Slavery

The teacher will write the word “slavery” on the blackboard. The teachers will then ask the class to respond to word on the board. Their responses will be prefaced from the point of view “what does this word make you think of”. At this point the teacher realizes that it is very unlikely for the student to think of humor. After a few moment of this discussion the teacher will then write the word “humor” on the blackboard. Again, the students will response to “what does this word make you think of”. Next the teacher will pose the question to the class and ask the students to explain themselves, “Is there any humor in slavery”. Teachers will allow students to respond to the question. Remembering some of the responses that the students gave when they were asked about slavery the teacher will now pose the question “what ways could or did blacks deal with slavery”. After the responses the teacher will pass out a verse from a song that was sung during slavery.

We raise de wheat, Dey gib us de corn;

We bake de bread, dey gib us de crust;

We sif de meal, dey gib us de huss;

We peel de meat, dey gib us de skin;

And dats de way dey takes us in.

We skim de pot, dey gib us de liquor,

An say “Dats good enough fer a nigger”.

The teacher will lead a discussion around this verse and the possibility of any comedy found in this verse. This will be the introductory lesson to the lessons around slavery and black humor. The lessons that follow will allow the students to discover how slavery can be seen as the starting point for the history of black comedy in American. Through research each students will be able to document their finding to support the role that slavery has played in the development of a public and private humor in the black community. If the student chooses he or she can use this topic as the basis for their graduation project.

White Minstrels

The video *Ethnic Notions* with a run time of approximately 55 minutes will be viewed over a two-day period. During the duration of the video students will respond, both written and orally to a variety of question pertaining to the film. Questions will include the following:

How did minstrels begin?

Why cause it to be so popular in the 1830s?

What made up the minstrel show?

Who made up the audiences for the show?

In what ways were the minstrel show racist?

Although minstrels were racist, did it have any benefit for blacks?

What legacy did minstrels create for American culture?

These will be the questions that guide the research paper.

Black Minstrels

Students will follow the same format that occurred when they watched *Ethnic Notions*. The film *Bamboozled* will be used, with a run time of approximately 90 minutes. The duration of the film may extend the viewing a discussion to three days. The questions will also vary:

What where some of the factors that caused the black performers to work in blackface?

What were some of the personal issues the black performers had to deal by performing in blackface?

What were some of the social issues that both white and black audiences had to deal with? How did these issues change over time?

What was the entertainment industry's response to the creation of a show using blackface?

What would be your response today be if a show involving blackface were put on television? Explain your reasons.

Interpret the function of the black dual personality in dealing with blackface minstrel shows?

These will be the questions that guide the oral presentation.

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Annotated list of Materials for Classroom Use

Graduation handbooks

Journal

Notebook

Slave song

Television and VCR.

Ethnic Notions video

Bamboozled video

Handout of question for videos

Pictures of minstrels (both black and white performers)

Slave songs

Minstrel skits

Burnt Cork make-up

Stage make-up

Clown make-up

Foundation

Facial moisturizer

Facial cleanser

Skin toner

Analysis worksheets

Appendix A

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Photo Analysis Worksheet

Step 1. Observation

A.

Study the photograph for 2 minutes. Form an overall impression of the photograph and then examine individual items. Next, divide the photo into quadrants and study each section to see what new details become visible.

B.

Use the chart below to list people, objects, and activities in the photograph.

People

Objects

Activities

Step 2. Inference

Based on what you have observed above, list three things you might infer from this photograph.

Step 3. Questions

A.

What questions does this photograph raise in your mind?

B.

Where could you find answers to them?

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Cartoon Analysis Worksheet

Level 1

Visuals

Words (not all cartoons include words)

1. List the objects or people you see in the cartoon.
1. Identify the cartoon caption and/or title.
2. Locate three words or phrases used by the cartoonist to identify objects or people within the cartoon.
3. Record any important dates or numbers that appear in the cartoon.

Level 2

Visuals

Words

2. Which of the objects on your list are symbols?
3. What do you think each symbol means?
4. Which words or phrases in the cartoon appear to be the most significant? Why do you think so?
5. List adjectives that describe the emotions portrayed in the cartoon.

Level 3

- A. Describe the action taking place in the cartoon.
- B. Explain how the words in the cartoon clarify the symbols.
- C. Explain the message of the cartoon.
- D. What special interest groups would agree/disagree with the cartoon's message? Why?

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Poster Analysis Worksheet

1. What are the main colors used in the poster?

2. What symbols (if any) are used in the poster?

If a symbol is used, is it

- a. clear (easy to interpret)? _____
- b. memorable? _____
- c. dramatic? _____

4. Are the messages in the poster primarily visual, verbal, or both?

5. Who do you think is the intended audience for the poster?

6. What does the Government hope the audience will do?

7. What Government purpose(s) is served by the poster?

8. The most effective posters use symbols that are unusual, simple, and direct. Is this an effective poster?

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Artifact Analysis Worksheet

1. TYPE OF ARTIFACT

Describe the material from which it was made: bone, pottery, metal, wood, stone, leather, glass, paper, cardboard, cotton, wood, plastic, other material.

2. SPECIAL QUALITIES OF THE ARTIFACT

Describe how it looks and feels: shape, color, texture, size, weight, movable parts, anything printed, stamped or written on it.

3. USES OF THE ARTIFACT

A. What might it have been used for? _____

B. Who might have used it? _____

C. Where might it have been used? _____

D. When might it have been used? _____

4. WHAT DOES THE ARTIFACT TELL US

A. What does it tell us about technology of the time in which it was made and used?

B. What does it tell us about the life and times of the people who made it and used it?

C. Can you name a similar item today?

5. BRING A SKETCH, A PHOTOGRAPH, OR THE ARTIFACT LISTED IN 4C ABOVE TO CLASS.

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Step 1. Pre-listening

A. Whose voices will you hear on this recording?

B. What is the date of this recording?

C. Where was this recording made?

Step 2. Listening

A. Type of sound recording (check one):

- Policy speech
- Congressional testimony
- News report
- Interview
- Entertainment broadcast
- Press conference
- Convention proceedings
- Campaign speech
- Arguments before a court
- Panel discussion
- Other

B. Unique physical qualities of the recording

- Music
- Live broadcast
- Narrated

- _____ Special sound effects
- _____ Background sound

C. What is the tone or mood of this recording?

Step 3. Post-listening (or repeated listening)

A. List three things in this sound recording that you think are important:

1. _____
2. _____
3. _____

B. Why do you think the original broadcast was made and for what audience?

C. What evidence in the recording helps you to know why it was made?

D. List two things this sound recording tells you about life in the United States at the time it was made:

1. _____
2. _____

E. Write a question to the broadcaster that is left unanswered by this sound recording.

F. What information do you gain about this event that would not be conveyed by a written transcript? Be specific.

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Motion Picture Analysis Worksheet

Step 1. Pre-viewing

A. Title of film: _____

Record Group source: _____

B. What do you think you will see in this motion picture? List Three concepts or ideas that you might expect to see based on the title of the film. List some people you might expect to see based on the title of the film.

Concepts/Ideas

People

1. _____
2. _____
3. _____

1. _____
2. _____
3. _____

Step 2. Viewing

A.

Type of motion picture (check where applicable)

- ___ Animated cartoon
- ___ Documentary film
- ___ Newsreel
- ___ Propaganda film
- ___ Theatrical short subject
- ___ Training film
- ___ Combat film
- ___ Other

B. Physical qualities of the motion picture (check where applicable)

- Music
- Narration
- Special effects
- Color
- Live action
- Background noise
- Animation
- Dramatizations

C. Note how camera angles, lighting, music, narration, and/or editing contribute to creating an atmosphere in this film. What is the mood or tone of the film?

Step 3. Post-viewing (or repeated viewing)

A. Circle the things that you listed in the previewing activity that were validated by your viewing of the motion picture.

B. What is the central message(s) of this motion picture?

C. Consider the effectiveness of the film in communicating its message. As a tool of communication, what are its strengths and weaknesses?

D. How do you think the filmmakers wanted the audience to respond?

E. Does this film appeal to the viewer's reason or emotion? How does it make you feel?

F. List two things this motion picture tells you about life in the United States at the time it was made:

1. _____

2. _____

G. Write a question to the filmmaker that is left unanswered by the motion picture.

H. What information do you gain about this event that would not be conveyed by a written source? Be specific.

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Appendix B

Reading, Writing, Speaking and Listening

1. All students use effective research and information management skills, including Locating primary and secondary sources of information with traditional and emerging library technologies.
2. All students read and use a variety of methods to make sense of various kinds of complex text.
3. 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,
4. All students write for a variety of purposes, including to narrate, inform and persuade in all subject areas.
5. All students analyze and make critical judgements about all forms of communication, separating fact from opinion, recognizing propaganda, stereotypes and statements of bias, recognizing inconsistencies and judging the validity of evidence.
6. All students exchange information orally, including understanding and giving spoken instruction, asking and answering questions appropriately, and promoting effective group communications.
7. All students listen to and understand complex oral messages and identify their purpose, structure and use.
8. All students compose and make oral presentations for each academic area of study that are designed to persuade, inform or describe.

Citizenship

1. All students demonstrate an understanding of major events, cultures, groups and individuals in the historical development of Pennsylvania, United States and other nations, and describe the patterns of historical development.
3. All students describe the development and operations of economic, political, legal and governmental systems in the United States, assess their own relationship to those systems, and compare them to those systems in other nations.

4. All students examine and evaluate problems facing citizens in their communities, state, nation and world by incorporating concepts and methods of inquiry of the various social sciences.
5. All students develop and defend a position on current issues, confronting the United States and other nation, conducting research, analyzing alternatives, organizing evidence and arguments and making oral presentation.
6. All students explain basic economic concepts and the development and operation of economic systems in the United States and other nations, and make informed decision about economic issues.
7. All students demonstrate their skill of communication, negotiating and cooperating with others.
9. All students demonstrate that they can work effectively with others.
10. 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.