

**AFRICAN-AMERICAN POETRY BEFORE EMANCIPATION**  
**GRADE LEVEL: 8<sup>TH</sup>**  
**SUBJECT: SOCIAL STUDIES**  
**Dr. Rénard B. Harris, Assistant Professor, College of Charleston**

**LEARNING MODULE THEME VI. RESISTANCE TO THE TRANS-ATLANTIC TRADE**

**STANDARD 8-3:** The student will demonstrate an understanding of the American Civil War – its causes and effects and the major events that occurred during that time

**ESSENTIAL QUESTION(S):**

What was the voice and essence of some of the African-American poetry written before emancipation in regard to slavery?

**HISTORICAL BACKGROUND:**

Capturing the sincere voice of African-Americans before emancipation is an insight that deserves exploration. The poetry of African-Americans before emancipation gives us a view into their thoughts about slavery, life, love and most importantly a voice for a marginalized group. It is important for teachers to make an effort to expose students to this voice and insight of African-American poets who wrote before emancipation.

The impressive images of Handler’s website, *The Atlantic Slave Trade and Slave Life in the Americas: A Visual Record* (<http://hitchcock.itc.virginia.edu/Slavery/>) informs us of the complex societies that existed in Africa. Africans who were forced into slavery and brought to the U.S. were indigenous to these societies. Although forced into slavery they came to the U.S. with philosophies about the world and life.

“America was the first true experiment in democracy in human history; the treatment of African Americans has been both this country’s greatest triumph and its greatest failing” (Harper and Walton, 2000). Exploring poetry written by African-Americans before emancipation as well as exploring authentic images gives us the opportunity to see these philosophies and thoughts about democracy in artistic form. These images and words speak to the essence of African-Americans who were forced to be exposed to philosophies and an unjust democracy that supported slavery and inhumanity.

**MATERIALS:**

Construction paper

Scissors

Access to present day and historical period clip art, pictures that represent time period 1700s-1800s

Glue

Poetry by African-Americans before the Civil War (e.g. Jupiter Hammon, Phyllis Wheatley, George Moses Horton, George Boyer Vashon, James M. Whitfield, Frances Harper)

Website access to the following:

The Atlantic Slave Trade and Slave Life in the Americas: A Visual Record

<http://hitchcock.itc.virginia.edu/Slavery/>

### **PROCEDURES:**

1. **The teacher will access** the Atlantic Slave Trade and Slave Life in the Americas website
2. **The teacher will explain** that most of the images date from the period of slavery and any other additional information to express the compilers attempt to gather authentic images
3. **The teacher will display** 2-4 images from the following areas of the website: Plantation Scenes, Slave Settlements, Houses/ Family Life, Child Care, Schools/ Physical Punishment, Rebellion, Running Away
4. **The teacher will define and briefly discuss** the meaning of the word essence
5. **The teacher will respond** to each image displayed by writing his/her words/thoughts of what he/she believes is the essence of the image
6. **The teacher will ask** each student to respond to each image by writing his/her thoughts of what he/she believes is the essence of the image
7. **The teacher will ask** each student to share and explain some of their writing
8. **The teacher will read** 2-3 poems about slavery written by African-Americans before emancipation
9. **The teacher will encourage** a brief discussion with the class about the poetry in terms of how it made them feel, thoughts of images it created and the words they felt were empowering
10. **The teacher will pass** out books/copies of poetry written by African-Americans poets before emancipation
11. **The teacher will ask** each student to choose a stanza from a poem that speaks to him/her based on a voice similar to his/her written response to the images shown in procedure steps 5 (The teacher will allow the student to refer back to the images from the website if needed)
12. (The teacher will make the construction paper and clip art accessible to the students) **The student will** draw a horizontal line across the center of the construction paper and type or write the chosen stanza on the top half of the construction paper leaving an inch and a half free around the border
13. **The student will create** a collage of the time period the poetry was written on the border of the top half of the construction paper (bordering the stanza)
14. **The student will rewrite** his response from procedure step 5 in poetic form on the bottom half of the construction paper;
15. **The student will create** a collage of present day events that support his/her created stanza (written response to image(s)) on the border of the bottom half of the construction paper

**CLOSE:**

1. **The students will** share their creative collages, and explain why they chose the specific stanza
2. **The teacher will** display the collages on the class bulletin board (Bulletin Board Title example, “Team Poetry: The Poetic Essence of African-American Slavery” Past and Present

**ASSESSMENT TASK:** Each student presentation will be graded on a rubric. The rubric will be based on the following: the presentation, evidence of the relationship of the stanzas, and explanation of how the stanzas capture the essence of African-Americans before emancipation

**ANNOTATED BIBLIOGRAPHY:**

Sherman, J. (Ed.). (1997). *The Black Bard of North Carolina: Poems of George Moses Horton*. University of North Carolina Press

The Black Bard of North Carolina is a book of poetry by George Moses Horton who was a slave for most of his life until emancipation. Early in his writing Mr. Horton was known for his love lyrics, but his best writing concerns slavery conditions.

Harper, S. & Walton, A. (Eds.). (2000). *The Vintage Book of African-American Poetry*. Vintage books

An anthology of African-American poetry that covers poetry from African-American slaves, such as Phyllis Wheatley, poetry from the Harlem Renaissance, to post World War II poets.

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**APPENDIX**

**RUBRIC:**

**PRESENTATION:**

**3 POINTS**

- The student's voice is clear and able to be heard
- The presentation is well organized (the presentation is easily followed and it holds the audiences attention)
- The collage is neat and images are appropriate for the historical period

**2 POINTS**

- The student's voice is not always able to be heard clearly
- The presentation need to be more organized (i.e. the presentation plan is not as easily followed and it does not hold the audiences full attention)
- The collage needs more neatness (messy); some images are not appropriate for the historical period

**1 POINT**

- The student's voice is not able to be heard clearly
- The presentation is not organized
- The collage is not neat and many of the images are not appropriate for the historical period

**EVIDENCE OF STANZAS RELATIONSHIP:**

**3 POINTS**

- Relationship of stanzas is well explained

**2 POINTS**

- Relationship of stanzas needs more explanation of how and why they are related

**1 POINT**

- Explanation of relationship of stanzas is inadequate (unclear)

**STANZAS CAPTURING ESSENCE OF AFRICAN-AMERICANS BEFORE EMANCIPATION:**

**3 POINTS**

- Clear, well thought out explanation of essence (strong evidence)

**2 POINTS**

- Explanation of essence needs more clarity (needs more evidence)

**1 POINT**

- Explanation of essence is unclear (no evidence)