

# TEACHING LITERACY THROUGH HISTORY

## Frederick Douglass and the Columbia Orator

by Lois MacMillan

### UNIT OVERVIEW

This unit is part of Gilder Lehrman’s series of Common Core State Standards–aligned teaching resources. These units were written to enable students to understand, summarize, and analyze original texts of historical significance. Through a step-by-step process, students will acquire the skills to analyze any primary or secondary source material.

This lesson on Caleb Bingham’s textbook, *The Columbian Orator*, is for the Gilder Lehrman Institute teacher seminar, *Slave Narrative in American Literature* taught by David Blight. Students will demonstrate this knowledge by writing summaries of a selection from an original document. By the end of the unit students will enrich their understanding of Douglass’s most famous metaphor on freedom and enslavement and the “Dialogue of Master and Slave” from Caleb Bingham’s *The Columbian Orator*, culminating in the creation of a “remix.”

### Unit Objectives

Students will be able to:

- Analyze and summarize a conceptual metaphor from a nineteenth century slave narrative and fictional nineteenth century dialog between a master and slave
- Define vocabulary particular to nineteenth century literature
- Design a “remix” of the dialog into a modern version of inspiration for a new generation using the exact text from primary documents

### Number of Class Periods

Three class periods

### Grade Level

8<sup>th</sup>, 9<sup>th</sup> and 10<sup>th</sup> grades

### Standards

- ✓ RH.2 Determine the central ideas or information of a primary or secondary source; provide an accurate summary of how key events or ideas develop over the course of the text.
- ✓ RH 4 Determine the meaning of words and phrases as they are used in a text, including vocabulary describing political, social, or economic aspects of history/social science.
- ✓ RH 5 Analyze how a text uses structure to emphasize key points or advance an explanation or analysis.

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## Historical Context

*“Frederick Douglass validated his manhood by giving Edward Covey, his surrogate slave master, a good whipping. What inspired his fists was not only manly rage, but liberating knowledge---knowledge gained in part from his reading of *The Columbian Orator*. I read it now and the words still inspire and inflame.” ---Ossie Davis*

This unit is inspired by three sentences in chapter seven of Frederick Douglass’s *Narrative of the Life of Frederick Douglass*:

“I was now about twelve years old, and the thought of being *a slave for life* began to bear heavily upon my heart. Just about this time, I got hold of a book entitled “*The Columbian Orator*.” Every opportunity I got, I used to read this book. Among much of other interesting matter, I found in it a dialogue between a master and his slave...for the conversation resulted in the voluntary emancipation of the slave on the part of the master.”<sup>i</sup>

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## LESSON 1 “Loosed from your Moorings...Fast in my Chains”

### Objectives

Students will be able to:

- Analyze and summarize a conceptual metaphor on freedom and enslavement
- Identify and defend selected phrases that define the inalienable right to be free or the visceral pain of enslavement

### Historical Context

According to David Blight, twenty-six year old Frederick Douglass in chapter ten of his *Narrative of the Life of Frederick Douglass* writes “the most beautiful metaphor in anti-slavery literature.”<sup>ii</sup> His metaphor juxtaposes his envy of the white sailing ships on the Chesapeake to his torment of enslavement:

“...to me so many shrouded ghosts, to terrify and torment me with thoughts of my wretched condition. I have often, in the deep stillness of a summer Sabbath, stood all alone upon the lofty banks of that noble bay and traced, with saddened heart and tearful eye, the countless number of sails moving off to the mighty ocean.”

Slave narratives are about “telling a free story... acts of telling that in some ways made the former slave almost literally free by an act of language. Language itself to a former slave who could write was a form of liberation.”<sup>iii</sup>

### Materials

- Summary Organizer-Chapter X of *Narrative of the Life of Frederick Douglass*

### Procedure

1. Hand out the Summary Organizer-Chapter X of *Narrative of Frederick Douglass*.
2. “Share read” the excerpt with the students, which is having the students follow along silently while the teacher reads aloud the excerpt modeling prosody, inflection, and punctuation. Then, the teacher asks the class to join in to read the excerpt that they just listened the teacher read. The teacher leads the reading, with the students joining after a few sentences while the teacher continues to read along with the students, still serving as the model for the class. This technique will support struggling readers as well as English Language Learners (ELL).
3. After listening and reading the excerpt, the first objective is to select “key words” from the selection. Explain the endgame is to use these key words to summarize the excerpt.
  - a. Note: Key words are very important contributors to understanding the paragraph. With those words the selection would not make sense. These words are usually

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nouns or verbs. Warn students not to pick words that are connector words such as are, is, or the. These selections are between 140 to 197 words so the students with guidance should pick between seven to nine words.

4. The next step is a whole-class discussion and negotiation process in constructing a summary sentence using the key words selected by the class. The final negotiated sentence (or sentences) is/are copied in the summary section of the organizer. After doing the first excerpt as a whole group, have the students work in pairs to select key words and summary sentences for the last two excerpts.
5. To finish the lesson, have the students go back to the excerpt and search for four phrases that they think would prove why this conceptual metaphor is “the most beautiful metaphor in anti-slavery literature? The students should use textual evidence to justify their opinion.

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## LESSON 2-Dialogue Between Master and Slave

### Objectives

Students will be able to:

- Analyze a fictional nineteenth century dialog between a master and slave
- Define vocabulary particular to nineteenth century literature
- Design a “remix” of the dialog into a modern version of inspiration for a new generation using the exact text from the dialog

### Historical Context

What book could inspire and guide “the greatest African-American leader and orator of the nineteenth century?”<sup>iv</sup> Douglass answers this question in chapter seven of his autobiography. “Probably nothing had a more immediate or lasting effect on the young Douglass’s intellectual and spiritual growth than his fortuitous discovery of *The Columbian Orator*.”<sup>v</sup> What book in the twenty first century would have such an effect on our students? Furthermore, for teachers and the world of ‘common core standards,’ Douglass must have practiced the very analytical skills we want our children to practice in today’s classrooms using the *Columbian Orator*! Douglass’s autobiography teaches students today the power of the written word and that expression through writing was an act of liberation for the enslaved. David Blight in his introduction to the two hundredth anniversary year of the publication of *The Columbian Orator* said it best when he wrote:

“Destiny is an old-fashioned word; but words were the destiny, and would be the hope, the nourishment, and eventually the legacy of this young slave.”

### Materials

- Preview – Douglass’s Encounter with the Columbian Orator - PDF
- “Dialogue Between Master and Slave” - PDF
- Summary Organizer - PDF
- Assessment of Text –PDF

### Procedure

#### Preview of Douglass’s Encounter with the Columbian Orator – PDF

1. A preview assignment is a short, engaging task that foreshadows the upcoming content. This preview assignment introduces the student to Douglass’s fondness for the textbook, “The Columbian Orator.”

*“I was now about twelve years old, and the thought of being a slave for life began to bear heavily upon my heart. Just about this time, I got hold of a book entitled “The Columbian Orator.” Every opportunity I got, I used to read this book.”*

Emphasis on Douglass educating himself using “The Columbian Orator” should be part

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of the class discussion. “Share read” this excerpt with the students as done in the first lesson with the teacher reading the excerpt modeling prosody, inflection, and punctuation, the students follow along silently. Then the class reads the excerpt a second time joining in after a few sentences. Continue to read along with the students serving as the model for the class. This technique will support struggling readers as well as English Language Learners (ELL).

2. Explains that the first objective is to select “Key Words” from the excerpt and the endgame is to use these key words to summarize the excerpt.

Note: Key words are very important contributors to understanding the paragraph. With those words the selection would not make sense. These words are usually nouns or verbs. Warn not to pick words that are connector words such as are, is, or the. This selection is 41 words, so the students with guidance from the teacher should pick three or four key words.

3. The next step is a whole-class discussion and negotiation process in constructing a summary sentence using the key words selected by the class. The final negotiated sentence is copied in the summary section of the organizer.

### [Summary Organizer of “Dialogue Between a Master and Slave” – PDF](#)

#### **Vocabulary**

- Condescend – to behave as if one is conscious of descending from a superior position, rank, or dignity.
  - Providence – the foreseeing care and guidance of God or nature over the creatures of the earth.
  - Subservient – servile; excessively submissive.
  - Appellation – a name, title or designation.
  - Caprice – a tendency to change one’s mind without apparent or adequate motive.
  - Emolument – profit, salary or fees for services.
  - Acquiesce – submit or comply silently or without protest.
1. Review the seven vocabulary words. The students may underline the vocabulary words and put the meaning above the word in their own words on the summary organizer or the teacher can post the vocabulary with corresponding definitions. Emphasize that vocabulary words are not necessary words key words, as explained in the “Preview.”
  2. “Shared read” the “dialogue” with the students as done in the preview assignment modeling prosody, inflection, and punctuation while the students follow along silently. After reading “the dialogue,” ask for two student volunteers to read “the dialogue” with one student reading the master’s part and the other student reading the slave’s part. All other students should follow along.

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3. Put the students into pairs and have them analyze the last paragraph of the dialogue. Each pair will repeat the procedure from the preview of choosing key words and using those key words to construct a summary sentence. The pair will agree on a constructed summary sentence using the key words. The final negotiated sentence (or sentences) is/are copied in the summary section of the organizer.
4. After the pair completes the summary sentence, the pair rereads the whole reading, “Dialogue Between a Master and Slave”, and chooses their favorite phrases that Frederick Douglass may have embraced as a young boy reading *The Columbian Orator*. The pair needs to justify their opinion using textual evidence.

### Assessment

#### Assessment of Text: REMIX-PDF

1. Using the summary organizer from lesson, the students’ favorite phrases from chapter X in Narrative of the Life of Frederick Douglass, in groups of four, have the students compare and transfer phrases to the assessment worksheet.
2. Have the student group then review “Dialogue Between Master and Slave” and find phrases that match phrases from Douglass’s metaphor on freedom and enslavement.
3. Lead a whole class discussion on how the various student groups matched up phrases from both texts.
4. After the whole class discussion, each student creates a “**remix**” using both Caleb Bingham’s and Frederick Douglass’s text.
  - a. A musical remix is defined as editing or completely recreating a song that is different from the original version. A “primary document remix” takes a primary document from history, such as the “Dialogue Between a Master and Slave” or Douglass’s freedom/enslaved metaphor.
  - b. Students need to use exact words and phrases from the readings and puts the phrases together differently to either recreate or modernize the original message or create a new message.
  - c. Students’ “remixes” are meant to be performed.
  - d. A fun example to show students is Michael Jackson’s remix titled “HIStory Remix” which is on YouTube (4:18 version). Two more examples of primary document remixes of Abraham Lincoln’s words are on YouTube by Martha Bohneberger and Lois MacMillan. (These remix projects were created from a Gilder Lehrman’s “Understanding Lincoln” course. Search “Lincoln’s words remix” in YouTube.)

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<sup>i</sup> Douglass, Frederick. *Narrative of the Life of Frederick Douglass*. New York: Dover Thrift Editions, 1995. page 23.

<sup>ii</sup> Blight, David. Lecture 5: *Telling a Free Story: Fugitive Slaves and the Underground Railroad in Myth and Reality from Hist-119: The Civil War and Reconstruction Era, 1845-1877*. <http://oyc.yale.edu/transcript/546/hist-119>.

<sup>iii</sup> Ibid.

<sup>iv</sup> Blight, David, editor. *The Columbian Orator*. New York and London: New York University Press, 1998. page xiv.

<sup>v</sup> Ibid. page xv.