



Investigating the Multiple Identities of African American Women Fictional and Real

Curriculum Unit 05.02.10

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Introduction

Throughout the past four decades, as a teacher, I have seen New Haven's elementary grade students gradually become more aware of the African Americans who have played a major role in the history of the United States. By fifth or sixth grade, most students have at least a basic knowledge of the lives of leaders such as Martin Luther King, Jr., Harriet Tubman, Jackie Robinson, Rosa Parks, Ruby Bridges, and Langston Hughes. To a lesser extent, they may have some knowledge of Frederick Douglass, Malcolm X, Jacob Lawrence, Maya Angelou, Colin Powell, a variety of male and female sports figures, and others whom individual studies or media attention has brought to their attention.

At the same time, elementary students' understanding of the movement from the period of enslavement toward the quest for basic civil rights also has increased considerably. Though often the presence of such topics in the curriculum is relegated to the month of February, African American studies now present a considerably more comprehensive, continuous picture of African American history as an ongoing, integral part of United States history. In previous units that I have written, I have sometimes complained that African American history, as it is presented in the elementary grades, consisted of a sporadic introduction of personalities, without much attention given to the overall historical picture. To some extent, this is being remedied, but many of these individuals are still presented in an isolated, superficial manner. The individuals sometimes seem stiff and unreal. In this unit, I hope to help students develop a deeper, more realistic understanding and awareness of some individuals, specifically women, who played important roles in African American history.

Specifically, I will focus on two groups of African American women, one group living during and immediately after the period of enslavement, and the other group representing women who did influence or could have influenced the Civil Rights movement. Some lived in the years leading up to the movement and one was an actual participant. In each time period, some women we will meet are creations of fiction. Others are authentic figures in United States history; they actually lived. While at least one of these actual women, Harriet Tubman, is recognized by most students as a part of African American history, it is possible that most students are not familiar with the second, Faith Ringgold, though it is highly likely that most are familiar with at least one of her

fictional creations.

With each group of women, we will examine the various identities assumed by each individual, learn of the conflicting and/or supporting pressures that these identities had upon each other, and speculate regarding how we would have reacted to some of these influences.

Women whom I have chosen to represent the period of enslavement include Addy's mother, a fictional character, taken from the American Girl Series book, *Meet Addy an American Girl: Escape from Slavery*, and Harriet Tubman, a leader in The Underground Railroad, along with actual African Americans who speak to us through the words of slave narratives. As we read representative stories, we will meet a few other fictional characters who found themselves living in similar circumstances.

In examining the years related to The Civil Rights Movement, we will focus on women prominent in the fictional works of Mildred Taylor, in particular, Cassie's mother and grandmother, from the novel, *Roll of Thunder Hear My Cry*, along with the mother presented in the short story, *The Gold Cadillac*. As a living woman, we will take a look at Faith Ringgold: artist, author, and feminist.

There are many instances where the lives of these African American women, real or fictional, living during slavery or during the twentieth century, intertwine with the lives of one another and touch on the lives of other women, past and present. This fact should serve to amplify and enrich the goals of this unit.

The Students I Teach

I work in what is presently a kindergarten through fifth grade elementary school with sixteen classrooms containing a total population of about four hundred students. About 90 to 95 percent of these students are African American. In recent years, my classes have consistently reflected this percentage. Of the remaining members, most are Hispanic/Latino along with one or two white or Asian students. The ages of most third graders in our school vary from those who have just turned eight to a few who are close to eleven. This variation is primarily a result of retention. The students come from a variety of socioeconomic backgrounds and home situations. A number of them have a relative other than their mother or father as their primary care giver. Some are members of families with multiple problems. There are few who do not face difficulties in their lives. Most, though not all, parents or guardians are supportive of school. Most want to be and are helpful, but often are not sure of the best way to go about assisting. Often the struggles of everyday life interfere with their efforts.

Their academic ability and the level of their general knowledge vary considerably, but it is often below the norm for children of this age. Although many are performing below their potential, many display considerable creativity. Through its integrated approach, my unit presents activities that allow students to utilize the multiple intelligence they possess.

At this point in their lives, most students still enjoy school, but many are beginning to face considerable difficulties both academically and behaviorally. They are starting to understand that their school career will have some bearing on their lives beyond the present, though their actions often are influenced negatively by peer pressure, their lack of basic skills and general knowledge, difficulty in establishing long-term goals, and the lack of positive self-image, especially regarding their academic abilities. Nevertheless, at least on the

surface, most still have high aspirations regarding their future. Hopefully, as they participate in this unit's activities, the positive role models that students encounter will help them to see and develop their own positive qualities.

My Particular Teaching Situation

During reading, students in third grade classes at my school are grouped according to ability: high, medium, and low. Generally the high group is reading above grade level, the medium is on level, and the low group reads below level. At present I am teaching in one of these EOL (Essentials of Literacy) classroom. The twenty third-graders in this classroom rank lowest in reading among the three existing third grade reading classes.

During a different time of day and for a shorter time period, I am also teaching my Yale-New Haven Teachers Institute unit from 2004, in one of the heterogeneous third grade classrooms, to students who represent all three reading levels. Here, the general ability level is somewhat higher than it is in EOL, and academic and behavioral problems are usually of a lesser magnitude. I plan to use elements of my unit in both of these settings, but the material and approach will be designed primarily for use in a third grade classroom with students representing a variety of academic grade levels.

Though I plan to teach my unit in a third grade classroom, it is adaptable to a number of other grade levels. Having taught third and fourth grade for a number of years, I feel the material is especially suited for either of these grade levels. With appropriate adaptation it could be used on an even higher grade level, especially fifth or sixth grade. Some middle school group having difficulty in the area of Language Arts also could be a target of this unit's material.

This unit is designed to last for a minimum of two months, if taught two to three times a week with each session lasting forty-five minutes. However, depending upon the depth of the group's investigation and the resulting discussion, it could easily last for more. The individual teacher must make the final decision, regarding the unit's length, based upon her/his particular circumstances. Since my situation is somewhat different, I will adjust my lessons to the schedule of the teacher in whose classroom the unit will be taught. I anticipate that it will begin in January and last until early May.

Meeting New Haven's Academic Standards

Since it follows an integrated approach, lessons should utilize time devoted to reading, writing, social studies, art, and music. Also, the New Haven School District's emphasis on literacy is a focus in all aspects of this unit. Students will be reading, writing, listening, and speaking. Material has been integrated with social studies, language arts, social development, and art. A more specific list of the major New Haven academic standards covered in this unit may be found at the end of this paper.

Teaching Strategies and Background Information

In my unit, I have integrated by background information with my teaching strategies. Together, they present a sequential picture of the unit's scope and manner of approach. They should provide the teacher with an immediate understanding of my unit's content, as well as general information on how this content will be taught. The general activities discussed in my strategies will be followed by three examples of specific lesson plans related to the unit.

Looking at Our Own Identity

Since this unit explores the various identities which many African American women assumed and/or were forced to assume, pupils must have some idea of what I refer to when I discuss one's identity. For the purposes of this unit, when I refer to identity, I include both the roles in life that an individual sees her/himself as playing, along with the traits that best describe the individual in question. Naturally, when students discuss and explore the identity of each woman covered in this unit, the roles and traits assigned to each will be made from the perspective of the student based upon the information we have covered. For a more detailed discussion of identity, I refer the teacher to *"Why Are All the Black Kids Sitting Together in the Cafeteria?"* by Beverly Daniel Tatum (See bibliography), especially material found in chapter two, where she explains the "I am" list that I use throughout my unit. Although Tatum discusses the multidimensional concept of identity and details the complex factors which influence its formation, I will only expect students of this age to have a basic understanding of these points. As we discuss identity, I do hope that they will realize that family, peers, the media, society in general, and the times in which we live are a few of the forces which work to shape one's identity.

In order to begin to get students to develop a sense of what I am referring to when I speak of identity, I will have them complete a paper on which they finish the statement "I am. . . ." a number of times. To help students to understand what they are to do, it might be necessary to demonstrate how a list might be completed. I would suggest using an animal as the list's subject, since that would lead to fewer suggestions which might influence the students' own choices about themselves. I will use Proud Puppy, a simple little dog I draw and talk to them about. They are quite familiar with him, so they should have no trouble creating a list. We will do this as a group.

When they have finished their own list, they will examine their responses and share them with the group if they wish. I will include about ten or twelve opportunities for response on a sheet and will ask them to have at least five of them be adjectives. We will spend some time discussing some of the factors that helped create our identities, but we will not go into any deep analysis. They will be told that we will be meeting a number of African American women for whom they will be compiling similar lists in order to understand these women on a deeper level. I understand that their level of maturity and experience places some limitation on their perceptions, but I believe these activities will lead them to a deeper understanding of the women and times we study.

The Period of Enslavement

Meet Addy

We will begin our unit by reading *Meet Addy an American Girl: Escape from Slavery*. (In most cases I will read material to the class. This is necessary because there are usually not enough copies for each student and/or the reading level is too difficult.) Addy is an African American girl whom we meet during the Civil War when she and her family were slaves. Though her life after the events of this book will not be covered in this unit, Addy's story follows her until the time of freedom, after the Civil War has ended and her family has been reunited and is living in Philadelphia. The events of the stories relate accurately to the experiences history tells us occurred during this time period.

The Addy books are part of the larger American Girl Series, featuring young girls living during various historical time periods. Since I have used Addy books from the Series, I know that they are popular with students. Though aimed at girls, they are also popular with boys who seem to enjoy the fast paced excitement of events and can relate to the emotions of the characters in the same way girls do. For both girls and boys of any race or background, they help to make this historical period come alive.

Each of the girls featured in the larger series, lives in a particular historical time period and stars in a different set of books. Addy is the only African American girl in the series. The American Girls have been a huge commercial success. You can purchase a variety of dolls and many related items on more than one web page. Despite this commercialization, I find that the Addy books have had a positive influence on my students. Besides encouraging reading, they allow a teacher to painlessly and naturally interject factual material, and the books themselves make it easier for students to understand history on a personal level.

Meet Addy: Escape from Slavery , by Connie Porter

In this story, we follow Addy and her mother as the family is making plans for escape. The story then moves on through their experiences on the road to freedom. Poppa and Addy's brother have been sold to another plantation owner and Addy's baby sister, along with other relatives, has to be left behind. It is only Addy and her mother who will try to escape. Events of the story give us a personal view of traveling the Underground Railroad. Though there is no "conductor," there are a safe house, a helpful white woman, and various methods of deception familiar to those who know of the Underground Railroad. I have found that the fears and courage involved in escape are clearly evident to students.

Our discussions will focus on Addy's mother, speculating on the various pressures and choices facing the family, especially as they relate to her. Possible questions might include some of the following: Why was Addy's mother initially hesitant about whether the family should attempt to escape? Why do you think her opinion was different from Poppa's opinion? How do you think Momma felt when she had to leave Suzie? Would you have left her? How do you think Momma learned to control her emotions?

Life During Slavery

Though, naturally, background information on this time period, and others we will discuss, may be gathered from many resources, I strongly recommend that any teacher using this unit consult *A Shining Thread of Hope* by Darlene Clark Hine and Kathleen Thompson (See bibliography). This book presents a continuous, coherent,

interrelated picture of the role played by African American women in shaping the course of African American history, and thus United States history. Much of this information is relevant to this unit and besides providing the teacher with a strong background of facts, to supplement the basic outline presented here, the way in which the text focuses on the accomplishments of African American women offers a perspective not always found in other history texts.

In order to better understand the various roles Addy's mother assumed, and was forced to assume, and to understand the often conflicting pressures that were placed upon her, students will need to increase their knowledge of what life was like during this period and under these conditions. This will be done in a number of ways.

The Addy story, itself, gives us a good start. The physical conditions, the treatment of slaves, their "family" structure, their means of coping, and other particulars are covered in her book. At the end, there is also a short, but concise, section on "America in 1864." This section contains some important basic information and some authentic photographs and sketches related to this time period. (Additional information and photographs may be found in the Hine text recommended above.)

I will also present various excerpts from other works that discuss or depict different aspects of life during enslavement. In particular, we will focus on Julius Lester's *To Be a Slave*. This collection contains a variety of quotes taken directly from former slaves. Some have been edited, while others are written in the dialect in which they were told. Lester, who has compiled these excerpts, provides a commentary that connects these authentic comments in a meaningful sequence, supplementing most quotes with relevant information which adds to the reader's understanding. The word "nigger" appears often, so that the individual teacher, who may feel that the use of this word is inappropriate for young children, can choose to substitute "Negro." In order to retain authenticity, it seems best to tell students that this is being done, adding that when the term is used here by former slaves, its intent was usually not malicious. It should be clear that this does not minimize the negative impact of the term.

We will now turn back to Addy's mother and compile an "I am. . . ." list saying what we believe she would want it to say. The following are among possibilities the students might list: African American, woman, mother, wife, friend, relative, a seamstress, an escapee and of course some adjectives. The class list will be discussed and saved for later use.

Introducing Harriet Tubman

From there we will move to examine the life and accomplishments of Harriet Tubman, famous for her work on the Underground railroad. In order to get to this point, I will read Faith Ringgold's *Aunt Harriet's Underground Railroad in the Sky*. This will be the unit's first contact with Ringgold but will not examine her as an individual. We will use information from this book to expand students' basic knowledge of this Harriet.

In this story, we meet an eight-year-old girl named Cassie. Cassie has a younger brother named Be Be and she possesses a very vivid imagination. With her brother, Cassie is able to fly. While gliding amongst the stars, they encounter a dilapidated old train which Be Be boards, along with hundreds of other silent people. It is going North and the conductor is Harriet Tubman. While the train moves ahead, Aunt Harriet directs Cassie along an escape route taken by African Americans during slavery. Cassie's experiences bring her a vivid understanding of the horrors those individuals had to endure, as well showing her the kind and gentle ways in which others made their passage possible. Cassie and Be Be are reunited at the end, both having a new understanding of their great-great grandparents' survival.

Along with the events of the story, the brilliantly colored illustrations that accompany the text will be discussed, especially the quilts hung out as signals. Students will speculate regarding the possible fears and hopes of the people making the journey, including Harriet, as well as what the students might have felt: Why was it important for Harriet to be brave? Do you think that she was ever frightened? How would you have felt?

Students will then be motivated to gather factual information on Tubman using various resources available to them: books, encyclopedias, computer, other stories based upon her life, and magazine and newspaper articles. (Often, she is the subject of Black History Month features. If the teacher requires information, there are a number of articles available on the internet and in some of the references listed in my bibliography.) As a group, we will discuss and record pertinent information that they have discovered. The following is a brief summary of her life with facts compiled from a variety of references including Darlene Clark Hine's *A Shining Thread of Hope*.

The exact date of Harriet Tubman's birth in Dorchester County, Maryland is unclear, but the year was either 1819 or 1820. Born into slavery, Harriet was treated harshly. Injured by a blow to the head when she was twelve, Harriet suffered from sudden periods of sleep that may have been caused by the injury. When she was twenty-five, she married John Tubman, a free African American. Fearing that she would be sold South, she escaped to Philadelphia in 1849 and soon began her career as the most renowned "conductor" on the Underground Railroad. She made around thirteen trips and rescued about three hundred slaves, including her parents and brother. People called her Moses. Her highly spiritual nature and determination convinced her that God would protect her journeys. She claimed to have never lost a passenger. Though illiterate, she spoke against slavery and was a friend to Frederick Douglass and other abolitionists. She most likely worked with John Brown in planning his raid on Harpers Ferry. She served with the Union Army in many capacities. After the war, she married Nelson Davis and they settled in Auburn, New York. She was a supporter of women's rights, and she established a home for the aged and indigent where she worked and eventually died.

In addition to information available in the Hine reference, mentioned previously, teachers will find relevant facts and teaching suggestions on the National Underground Freedom Center web-site (www.freedomcenter.org) Included there, you will find a time line, discussion of related places and people, and age appropriate references.

Examining *Harriet and the Promised Land*

In this last book about Harriet, we will look at and discuss a series of paintings by the famous African American artist, Jacob Lawrence. In the book, *Harriet and the Promised Land*, his vivid paintings, with their bold colors and unique style, are accompanied by a simple, yet telling, verse. Together, they bring Harriet's journeys alive to the viewer. Discussion could explore a number of avenues, including: Harriet as she is depicted by Lawrence, the style of Jacob Lawrence, and the ways in which his paintings tell us how he would probably define Harriet.

Suggested Additional Readings

We will now read and discuss two short books set during the time period we have been investigating. The use of these two stories is optional. They are not essential to achieving the goals of this unit, but they do enhance student understanding and reinforce the validity of events found in *Meet Addy*.

In *Liberty Street* by Candice Ransom, we meet two strong African American women, one a mother and one a free woman who takes the risk of teaching slave children. Both sacrifice so that the story's narrator, a young

Black girl, can escape to Canada.

In the story *Almost to Freedom* by Vaunda Micheaux Nelson, events are narrated by a homemade doll, similar to one owned by Addy. This doll belongs to a slave girl, Lindy, whose mother was the doll's creator, just as Momma was the one who made Addy's doll. Through the eyes of Sally, the doll, we follow Lindy's life as a slave and eventually through the trials of her escape to freedom. After being hidden in a cellar by a sympathetic white woman, Lindy is forced to leave Sally behind as the slaves must make a swift exit. Sally's grief is lessened sometime later when another young girl escaping from slavery is hidden in the same cellar. She finds Sally, adopts her as her own, and gives her the name, Belinda. Belinda now sees her mission in life as comforting girls like Lindy and her new owner as they travel to freedom. (Please see an included lesson plan in which students make their own doll.)

Important elements in each of these stories, including Addy's story, will be discussed in the light of what we have learned from all of them. Possible approaches could include the following: How are the women in *Liberty Street* and the mother in *Almost Freedom* like Addy's mother? Are they at all different? Make the same comparisons among the young Black girl in *Liberty Street*, Lindy, and Addy. Could you have done what they did? How would you have felt? Do you know any woman similar to any of the women in these stories?

When this is done, the class should be ready to complete a Harriet Tubman "I am. . . ." list. Possible answers that students might select include the following: African American, woman, slave, former slave, wife, daughter, sister, Underground Railroad conductor, anti slavery speaker, abolitionist, "Moses," nurse, spy, laundress, scout, spy, and of course adjectives. Lists will be shared and a class list compiled. We will then compare our Tubman list with the one made for Addy's mother, noting and speculating on the causes of any similarities and differences. For example, Addy's mother was not a conductor on the Underground Railroad. Why? If the circumstances of her life had been different, do you think she would have been one? Both initially left family behind. Why? Would you have done the same? These and other issues should easily present themselves. Though we will not make a separate list for the other woman we have met, we will discuss which responses would apply to each of them. Compiling these "lists" is an attempt to help students recognize and focus upon the various positive roles these women played in their lives.

Moving toward the Civil Rights Movement

We will now move forward to the year 1933, in the midst of the Great Depression. Students will be given a brief picture of the intervening years: the period of Reconstruction, the withdrawal of Northern support from the South, the emergence of hatred and discrimination toward African Americans, especially in the South, World War I, and the decline of the American economy. This will not be a detailed examination but should give students an idea of the forces that influenced the first fictional characters that we will investigate as we read excerpts from *Roll of Thunder Hear My Cry*.

Examining *Roll of Thunder Hear My Cry*

In examining *Roll of Thunder Hear My Cry*, we will focus on excerpts related to the characters of Mama and Big Ma. Both are strong African American women who play a pivotal role in this novel. Although neither had been born a slave, both were intimately connected to the rise of white power in the South as reconstruction

crumbled. Along with the rest of the Black population, they had experienced the rise of the Klan and the accompanying beatings, burnings, and lynchings. They lived under Jim Crow laws and, though fortunate enough to own their own land, shared the pain of those forced to live under a system of sharecropping that held them in virtual slavery. Again, I refer the teacher to Darlene Hine's more detailed discussion of this time period.

Mama, Mary Logan is thirty-three years old. She is from the Delta but was sent **to** high school in Jackson and, later, to Crandon Teacher School by her tenant-farmer father. Her father died during her final year of teacher school, and she married Papa when she was nineteen. She has taught at the Great Faith school for fourteen years and has four children. Her strong pride in her race and a keen sense of injustice help her in dealing with the trials of her life, and the lives of those around her. Though she tries to keep the stories of violence and injustice from her children, she ultimately cannot shield them from the truth.

Big Ma, Caroline Logan is Papa's mother, a woman in her sixties. She holds the deed to the Logan land when the story begins. The land was bought by her late husband, Paul Edward, who had been born into slavery two years before the Civil War. She married him when she was eighteen, after meeting him in Vicksburg, where he worked as a carpenter. They raised their six children (Only two survived.) on the four hundred acres of land her husband bought between 1887 and 1918. Big Ma is the voice of history, telling stories about the past to Cassie. Her medical knowledge is often called upon to tend those injured by white violence, including the Berrys, who were attacked by night riders. She is very religious and is a source of comfort to Cassie, who shares a room with her.

Cassie Logan, a nine-year-old girl, serves as the narrator in this story about her family. The Logans are an exceptional black family, owning four hundred acres of farm land near Vicksburg, Mississippi, in 1933. Their land was purchased by Big Ma's husband, during Reconstruction. Papa must work a second job on the railroad to help pay the mortgage and taxes. The other blacks in the area are mostly poor sharecroppers. They all, including the Logans, live under the shadow of resentful whites, poor and wealthy, and the constant threat of physical assault from night riders.

Examining the First Excerpt: The School Books

In our first excerpt, we will focus on Mama, a dedicated teacher at the decidedly ill equipped Great Faith Elementary and Secondary School which Cassie and her three brothers attend. Little man, her precocious six-year-old brother, eagerly attending his first day at school, rejects his twelve-year-old text book, a cast-off from the white school. The book has the word "nigra" written in it to indicate its present owner. Their elderly teacher, Miss Crocker, worn down by years of white oppression, using lashes from her switch punishes both Little Man and Cassie, who has interceded on her brother's behalf.

After school, Cassie observes an indignant Miss Crocker telling Mama about the incident. Though Mama considers that they were wrong to disobey their teacher as they did, she never criticized their reactions to the book, as she calmly covers the offending page in Cassie and Little Man's book by gluing paper over them. She does the same for her seventh grade books. Miss Crocker is oblivious to Mama's remarks which mirror the stand taken by her children.

Examining the Second Excerpt: Night Riders

While Mr. Logan is away, word comes to the Logan house that the Night Riders are roaming. The children are certain that it is because they engineered a retaliation scheme that disabled the white school bus. In the

moments revolving around the arrival of the Night Riders, we see evidence of Mama and Big Ma's courage, as they are prepared to defend their home and children at any cost.

Examining the Third Excerpt: The Insults

While in the town of Strawberry with her older brother, a classmate of his, and Big Ma, Cassie naively challenges a white storekeeper who repeatedly ignores them to wait on white customers. Her brother who is aware of the danger ushers Cassie outside where he leaves her to go find Big Ma. Cassie, then, absentmindedly knocks into a white girl she knows. This incident results in Cassie being thrown to the ground by the girl's father. This horrible day is made even worse when Big Ma, in order to protect Cassie and the family, forces Cassie to apologize to the girl.

At home, Mama attempts to explain Big Ma's actions and tells Cassie about the roots of white prejudice and unfair treatment of black people. Her discussion is one that all children should hear.

Each of these selections will be examined and discussed. All of them illustrate the many interacting pressures from family, community, church, their own need for personal fulfillment and especially from the white power structure which influenced the roles these women played and give vivid examples of how they coped. (There are many more events in this novel which a teacher could use to help students understand these points.) We will now make an "I am. . ." list for each of them, noting and discussing similarities and differences. They, then, will be compared with the lists for Addy's mother and Harriet Tubman.

Examining Another Mildred Taylor Story: The Gold Cadillac

This short story, also by Mildred Taylor, jumps forward to 1950, beginning in Toledo, Ohio when Daddy has just arrived home with a brand-new 1950 Cadillac Coupe de Ville, which he purchased after trading in their old car. Though 'lois, our narrator, her sister Wilma, and a host of relatives and neighbors are thrilled, Mother is displeased because they have been saving to buy a home in a better neighborhood and cannot afford this extravagance. She refuses to ride in the car until Daddy decides to drive to Mississippi, despite the danger facing a black man who owns such an elegant car. Hearing this, Mother declares that she and the girls will join him. The Cadillac is a symbol of achievement to Daddy and he feels that driving it south is his right and serves to emphasize his accomplishments.

As they drive south, the girls see evidence of prejudice and segregation in the signs they see, the hostile eyes staring at them, and the behavior of the police who detain Daddy for no apparent reason. When daddy discovers 'lois clutching a large knife for protection as the family sleeps in the car, he switches the Cadillac for a more modest car, and the trip is completed. Upon their return, Mother tells Daddy to keep the car, but he sells it, anyway.

Though Mother doesn't seem to play the major role in this story, she is a dominant force. We will discuss her actions, her motivations, whether she was right, and what we would have done in a similar situation. Lack of information may make Mother's "I am. . ." list shorter than others, but many elements should be the same as we find in the two others we have made. Students should see her as another of the strong, caring African American women whom we have met.

The Civil Rights Movement Arrives

Students will now direct their attention to the overt actions of the Civil Rights Movement that ushered in the 1960's. We will discuss, read, and view material which should allow students to become more familiar with the accomplishments of this era. Generally, they will already have some knowledge of the protests involving Martin Luther King, Jr., but we will expand our investigation to include some examination of events related to student protest, voter registration, school desegregation, the emergence of Black Power, and the rising prominence of women in the movement. Since students of this age easily relate to the story of Ruby Bridges as she participated in the desegregation of the New Orleans public school, we will cover this event in more detail. There is a book and film listed in my bibliography which present Ruby's story well. How much time is spent in introducing students to this time period should depend upon the individual teaching situation, but, again, I recommend that the teacher read related material from Darlene Clark Hine's book, *The Shining Thread of Hope*.

Faith Ringgold

We will now turn to our primary focus of this time period. Though many recognize Faith Ringgold as a renowned artist whose audience is primarily adult, generally, children recognize her as the author of beautifully illustrated stories which they have heard or read. Her story quilts, which combine painting, quilted fabric, and story telling, have brought her international fame. She is also known for her fight to eliminate discrimination against women artist. She led others in putting pressure on museums to include women artists, especially African American women, in their collections, and through these efforts she was able to help all women artists.

Born in 1930 and raised in Harlem during the Great Depression, Ringgold experienced racism and sexism first hand, during her youth and as she developed as an artist. Since she suffered from asthma, she missed much of her time in primary school, often spending time with her mother who took her to museums and to see famous black entertainers perform. When she was sick in bed, her mother, who was a skilled dressmaker gave her cloth, along with the paper and crayons that recuperating children often receive.

Eventually Faith graduated from New York's City College in 1959 with a Masters in education, since women were not allowed to study liberal arts then. She taught in the New York public schools for twenty years and did her art work on her own time. Later, she returned to City College and earned her Masters of Fine Arts degree.

Her work and her life began to focus on racism, civil rights, and the struggles of black people. She worked to create more opportunities for blacks and women. Besides helping to get museums to show more art work by black women artists, she helped put more African Americans in positions of power in the art world. In her work she created visual stories of black peoples experiences. In 1972, she began to use material from African crafts in her work. She began to follow her family tradition of working with cloth. She decided to try painting on cloth. This led to the creation of story quilts, a combination of painting, writing, and quilting as a means of expressing her ideas. These quilts tell stories of slavery, city life, famous African Americans, family, jazz, and even Ringgold, herself, as she tells of losing one hundred pounds. Though the teacher should be able to find pictorial examples of these quilts in many text books, small images of all of them are available on the Internet. In her *French Collection*, "Dancing at the Louvre," and *American Collection*, her story quilts depict the life of Willia Marie Simone, a black female artist living in Paris, struggling for her place in the community. The quilt traces her, life up to the *American Collection* which focuses on her daughter. Simone is clearly based on

Ringgold.

She later began to make three-dimensional figures using a variety of materials. Some remind us of the dolls made by mothers during slavery. Her mother, Willi Posey, helped her on many of her projects involving cloth. Her work also evolved into performances in which singing, chanting, dancing, music and acting are performed with her story quilts, paintings, and sculptures so that she could more fully tell her stories.

Though she never saw herself as an author of stories for children, the urging of a book editor, motivated her to use her story quilt, *Tar Beach*, as the basis of her first children's book. It was an immediate success. The ones that followed became equally popular, and brought Faith numerous awards. In these books, she is able to colorfully explain some of the facts of slavery, examine the heritage of African Americans, and face the difficult issues of slavery, while also encouraging children to use their imagination and dream.

Faith Ringgold continues to spend part of each year living in Harlem, as she continues to express herself politically and artistically. Additional information on Faith Ringgold may be found by consulting her memoirs, listed in my bibliography.

Examining Her Own Words: *Talking to Faith Ringgold*

Most of these facts will be presented to students as I read from *Talking to Faith Ringgold*. It is a relatively short book with many colorful pictures and suggestions for use in the classroom. I will also read a few excerpts from *We Flew over the Bridge the Memoirs of Faith Ringgold*, a much more detailed adult account of her life and creations. The book contains some colorful pictures and the actual words from some of her story quilts. Ringgold, who at times was faced with personal and family problems, discusses some of these in her book. The teacher needs to decide which to include. Generally, I feel that most can be omitted without distorting the contributions Ringgold made as a strong, talented African American woman.

We will now read *Tar Beach* where we meet Cassie again. She takes an imaginary flight from the roof of the Harlem tenement where she and her family go to escape the heat of the summer, a youthful experience remembered by Ringgold. Her dream of freedom has been answered as she glides over the city of New York where she claims various sights, including the union building that her father helped to build. The fact that he is now out of work, because he lacks a union card illustrates the existence of prejudice and discrimination in Cassie's world, similar to the prejudice Ringgold encountered as a black, female artist.

Finally, we will read *Dinner at Aunt Connie's House* where we go on another fanciful historical adventure. Cousins, Melody and Lonnie, meet and talk with twelve famous African American women who have come to life from the portraits that Aunt Connie has painted and hung on her wall. Each woman relates a bit about her life which may inspire students to discover more about them. The women they meet are Rosa Parks, Fannie Lou Hamer, Mary McCleod Bethune, Augusta Savage, Dorothy Dandridge, Zora Neale Hurston, Maria W. Stewart, Bessie Smith, Harriet Tubman, Sojourner Truth, Marian Anderson, and Madame C.J. Walker.

All of these stories will be discussed, both for their content and the artistic characteristics and messages in their illustrations. An "I am. . . ." list for Faith, similar to those we have done, will be created, discussed, and compared to others we have compiled. The similarities and differences will be discussed. I hope we will come up with a consensus regarding the qualities present in these women and an understanding of the forces that affected their lives and the strengths they called upon to cope with them.

Bring Our Unit to a Conclusion

Students will now redo their "I am . . ." list. Perhaps they may see themselves differently or perhaps not. Again we will arrive at a consensus list of qualities to compare with the African American women we have studied. I am certain that there will be similarities to these women among both boys and girls, illustrating that both girls and boys can possess some of the qualities that made these African American women the caring, strong, and resilient individuals which they were. This should lead to a favorable forecast for the potentially positive things that students might accomplish with their lives.

Concluding Projects

Our concluding projects will include the creation of a doll, a quilt piece containing a written piece honoring a woman who has played an important role in each pupil's life, and another quilt piece, made of either paper or cloth, containing representations which symbolize these important woman. These are all detailed in my specific lesson plans. We will also consider a means of presenting these creations to the women they honor and, perhaps sharing them with other students.

Lesson Plans

Though I will complete my first lesson plan after the group has covered the material on enslavement, a teacher may wish to do all three on these activities together as a conclusion to the unit. Lessons two and three are intended to be linked and will serve as the units culmination, after all of the above activities have been completed. I intend to use all three in this capacity, bringing back the previously completed doll and her story. Hopefully this will involve some type of group presentation for parents and other students.

Lesson One: Remembering History through a Doll

Subject Matter Areas: Reading, creative writing, art

Materials: Cloth, needles and thread, five or more simple doll patterns in the shape of a gingerbread person, some material for stuffing, and things which could be used for making eyes and hair.

Objectives: Students will understand the significance of dolls that were made by African American women for children who faced life during the period of enslavement.

Students will create a simple cloth doll similar to those dolls students have read about.

Students will create a narrative story written by their doll in which the doll tells about its life with the student, including any advice the doll might give to its owner.

Procedure:

The roles played by the dolls in the *Meet Addy* and *Almost Freedom* will be reviewed. Students will speculate about how the dolls helped the girls who owned them. Questions similar to the following should motivate discussion: Could these dolls, as easily, have been owned by boys? How might the dolls have felt about what they saw around them? How did they feel about enslavement? Have you ever had a doll or stuffed animal that

helped you get through a difficult experience? Explain. Why do you think these African American women made these dolls for their children?

Students will be motivated to create their own doll. If any of the boys, or even girls, resists making a doll for themselves, they can make it for a younger child whom they think might like to have it. You might be lucky enough to have a parent to come to class to help. The dolls are quite simple in form, but many students may have some trouble making a backstitch around the body. If you have a variety of material, students may have some choice in determining the cloth used for their doll or even try to have the doll resemble themselves in some way.

The teacher should make a number of cardboard gingerbread shaped figures. The size should be determined by the teacher. Students will then trace the figure on their cloth and begin the backstitch around the figure. With some students, the teacher may want to make a line for them to follow as they sew. Students may help each another with this sewing. The stitching should not go completely around the figure. An opening of about two inches should be left, in order to turn the doll inside-out. If the teacher, or some other volunteer is available, the stitches that students made can be reinforced by a sewing machine. Be sure to stress the importance of the role played by the student's initial stitching so that they will retain ownership, despite the use of the sewing machine to reinforce their work.

The doll is now ready to be stuffed through the remaining opening. This hole is eventually closed by the student sewing over it or by the sewing machine. Students may now make simple additions such as eyes, hair, mouth, buttons, or whatever the student wants and is capable of making. It should, however, be stressed that these dolls were simple and that this is part of their beauty.

Students will now name their doll and begin writing an imaginative, narrative authored by the doll. In this narrative, the doll should tell us something about life with its owner, who, of course, is the student who made it. The doll can offer any helpful advice which it thinks will make the student's life more enjoyable. Even if the student plans to give the doll to someone else, this story should be written as though the student kept the doll. Stories may be shared with the class if the student has no objection. Dolls and/or stories might be displayed. Both could also become part of a culminating activity for parents or other students.

Lesson Two: A Woman Who Is Important to Me

Subject Matter Area: Creative writing

Objectives: Each student will develop a list of positive terms describing a woman who is important to their life.

Each student will write an interesting description, containing at least one representative event, about this woman.

Students, who wish to, will share these stories with the class.

Procedure:

Students will be asked to consider the African American women we have encountered during our study, attempting to identify the qualities that each possessed. The "I am. . ." lists should be a help in doing this. They will be then asked to select a woman from their life who is important to them. Naturally, this woman might not be African American. They will be urged to select someone who has played a continuous, significant role in their life, someone they know well. The student will then be asked to list some of the qualities that

make this woman significant, important, to them. You may need to probe in order to get some in depth answers, beyond "she buys me stuff." Keeping these qualities in mind, each student should now introduce this woman in writing, so that the reader can really understand what this woman is like. They should include at least one event that typifies a positive aspect of this woman. "I remember one time when. . . ."

After they have been corrected and rewritten, the stories will then be shared voluntarily with the class and perhaps displayed where others will be able to read them. They will also be a part of the next suggested lesson, where students create a quilt piece.

Lesson Three: Creating Your Own Quilt Piece

Subject Matter Area: Art, Effective Speaking

Objectives: Students will become more familiar with the art work of Faith Ringgold.

Students will transfer the main idea of a written piece to that of a visual piece.

Students will be able to effectively present their work orally to a group.

Materials:

The first approach requires a variety of 12" by 18" construction paper, glue, various drawing tools, magazine pictures, and possibly photographs, while the second approach requires enough plain material for the students to each have a 12" by 18" foundation and enough colorful material to border this piece. Naturally, the most important requirement for this approach is someone able and willing to sew.

Procedure:

The class will review some of the quilts pieces made by Faith Ringgold, along with the other illustrations we have seen in her books. As we did before, we will mention the bold, colorful representations in these works. We will note that she often incorporates bright African patterns in many of her works, especially along the borders. We will also look at story quilts where the written material is included within the quilt. A number of examples of both types may be found in *We Flew Over the Bridge: The Memoirs of Faith Ringgold* which is listed in my bibliography. Searching for "Faith Ringgold" on the internet will yield other examples.

Students will now be motivated to create two quilt pieces with pictures representing various aspects of the woman whom they have recently written about in their essay, "An Important Woman in My Life." Both pieces will be bordered, but one will contain a copy of the essay glued to the center piece and the other will be decorated with the pictures they make. These pictures that they make should be practiced on scrap paper before they are drawn on the quilt piece. They may include actual photographs, pictures from magazines, words, and drawings made with crayons, markers, ink, and/or paint. The borders may be strips decorated with repetitive designs or consecutive squares containing individual pictures or designs. Again, many examples may be found by looking at Ringgold's works. Another approach to the border is to cut strips of colorful wrapping paper that, like the other type of border, should be attached to the main, center, part of the quilt piece.

If the teacher sews or has a relative, friend, or a student's parent who is willing to take on the task, the quilt pieces may be made of cloth. With a plain piece of cloth serving as the center, colorful strips of cloth should be sewn around the quilt piece. The students may then use the plain center part for the representations they

have decided upon, transferring them in the same manner that they used with the paper quilt pieces.

Another approach that may be used with cloth quilt pieces involves students drawing on copy paper with fabric crayons, placing their drawing face down on the quilt piece, and ironing it with a warm iron. This will transfer the pictures to the cloth. Students need to know that any writing they use must be reversed before they iron. This may be done with relative ease by holding the word or phrase backwards to a window and tracing it. I would highly recommend that all ironing be done by an adult.

When the two quilt pieces have been completed, they may be attached or remain separated. If attached, they could easily cover an entire bulletin board, appearing somewhat like a giant quilt. This bulletin board display could also be done with just the picture pieces or just the story pieces. If used as part of a culminating activity, the essay could be read aloud by its author, while a classmate holds up the picture. When reading is completed, the student could give the quilt pieces to the woman for whom they were created, if she is able to be present. This could make an excellent culminating activity that could contain a segment during which students show their history dolls while reading their related story. (See first lesson plan.) Including a simple, or not so simple, reception following the program is an excellent way of involving parents and even other staff members.

Assessment

1. Teacher observation of student responses indicates an understanding of material being presented. (Much of this will come from daily observation and the "I am. . . ." lists created by students.)

Student responses indicate an understanding of factual material.

Student responses indicate an understanding of the roles played by the African American women presented in this unit, along with an understanding of the positive traits they possessed.

Students are able to draw connections among the women presented in this unit.

Students are able to identify some of the same positive traits in an important person in their life and in themselves.

2. Students complete a satisfactory project illustrating the goals listed above. (See lesson plans two and three for specific related activities.)

Bibliography

Books

All of the books listed below have some portion which could be read or shown to students, so I am listing all of my references. My annotation gives more specific information regarding each book's primary target.

Andrews, William Gates, editor. *Slave Narratives* . New York: Literary Classics of the United States, Inc., 2000.

Contains a number of slave narratives, including the narratives of Sojourner Truth and Harriet Jacobs. This text contains information that would make the teacher more knowledgeable about the period of enslavement. Small excerpts could be read to students in order to increase their understanding of the period.

Bial, Raymond. *The Underground Railroad* . Boston: Houghton Mifflin, 1995.

This text contains a number of authentic pictures of actual places and artifacts, including a doll, related to the Underground Railroad. These and excerpts from the text would enrich student understanding of the period.

Coles, Robert. *The Story of Ruby Bridges* . New York: Scholastic Press, 1995.

Presents the experiences surrounding the integration of Frantz Elementary School in New Orleans, Louisiana by Ruby Bridges an African American first grader. Excellent companion to the film of the same name. Gives students a vivid picture of school integration during the Civil Rights Movement.

Hine, Darlene Clark and Kathleen Thompson. *A Shining Thread of Hope* . New York: Broadway Books, 1998.

This text gives the teacher a detailed look at the historical and personal roles played by African American women from the seventeenth century until the 1990's. A must read for teachers of this unit. Contains some material which may be shared directly with student, including photographs of African American women who played a role in United States history.

Howard, Nancy Shroyer . *Jacob Lawrence American Scenes, American Struggles* . Worcester, Massachusetts: Davis Publications, Inc., 1996.

Besides including paintings related to slavery, Harriet Tubman, Frederick Douglass, and John Brown, this book discusses Lawrence's life and painting techniques. Includes activities for children but will be used primarily for discussion of his vivid representations.

Lawrence, Jacob . *Harriet and the Promised Land* . New York: Aladdin Paperbacks, 1968.

Through his paintings, Lawrence tells the story of Harriet Tubman and the Underground Railroad. A simple verse accompanies the pictures. An excellent supplement to information on Tubman.

Lester, Julius. *To Be A Slave* . New Your: Dell Books, 1968.

Contains both direct quote from former slave and edited material. Excerpts read to students will help to give them a realistic picture of life during enslavement.

Nelson, Vaunda Micheaux. *Almost to Freedom* . New York: Scholastic Press, Inc., 2003.

Narrated by a homemade doll, this story tells more about flight from enslavement and the role played by strong African American

women.

Porter, Connie. *Meet Addy An American Girl* . Middleton, Wisconsin: Pleasant Company Publications, 1993.

Though forced to leave her brother and little sister behind, Addy and her mother escape from slavery when her father is sold to another plantation. Story illustrates the quiet strength of Addy's mother.

Ransom, Candice. *Liberty Street* . New York: Walker and Company, 2003.

Narrated by a young Black girl who escapes to Canada, this book exposes students to two strong African American women.

Ringgold, Faith. *Aunt Harriet's Underground Railroad in the Sky* . New York: Crown, 1992.

Cassie's imaginary flight connects her with Harriet Tubman and a first hand tour of the Underground Railroad. Students gain information on Harriet and the Underground Railroad and a look at Faith Ringgold's illustrations.

Ringgold, Faith. *Dinner at Aunt Connie's House* . New York: Hyperion Books for Children, 1993.

Melany and her cousin Lonnie meet twelve famous African American women who come to life from paintings made by Aunt Connie. Presents African American women successful in the roles they played. Further exposure to Faith Ringgold's art work.

Ringgold, Faith, Linda Freeman, and Nancy Roucher. *Talking to Faith Ringgold* . New York, 1996.

Aimed at children, this book talks with Faith about her life and career. Contains many colorful pictures of her paintings and photographs related to her life.

Ringgold, Faith. *Tar Beach* . New York: Dragonfly Books, 1996.

Cassie takes another imaginary flight from the roof of her Harlem tenement. She glides over the city of New York where she claims various sights. Contains more colorful illustrations by Ringgold.

Tatum, Beverly Daniel. "*Why Are All the Black Kids Sitting Together in the Cafeteria?*"

New York: Basic Books 1997.

Aimed at adults, this text examines the development of racial identity in children. Provides an excellent foundation for understanding the implication that the material in this unit could have upon students.

Taylor, Mildred. *Roll of Thunder Hear My Cry* . New York: Puffin Books, 1976.

Through the eyes of a nine year old girl, we gain a vivid picture of Black-white relations in rural Mississippi during the early 1930's. Excerpts from this text are used as part of this unit to illustrate the role of strong African American women in family and community.

Taylor, Mildred. *The Gold Cadillac* . New York: Bantom Skylark Books, 1967.

An African American family driving from Chicago to Mississippi in a new Cadillac face the anger and hatred their car attracts. Shows students some of the conditions that prompted Civil Rights action. Unit focuses on strengths of the mother.

Films

Follow the Drinking Gourd . Rabbit Ears, 1989.

A short video follows a family's escape from slavery. Narrated by Morgan Freeman with blues score by Taj Mahal. Provides another way to make slavery and Underground Railroad real.

The Ruby Bridges Story . Disney Productions, 1998.

A made for TV movie, this film depicts the struggles and conflicts faced by the Bridges family as Ruby integrates Frantz Elementary School in New Orleans, Louisiana. Gives students a picture of Civil Rights protest.

Internet

A teacher or student may obtain information on just about all of the major topics that appear in this unit merely by typing the topic and searching the results. I have listed only those topics that I consulted in preparing this unit.

americangirl.com/catalogue/agcollection.htm

This site contains additional information on the other books in which Addy appears. There is also an abundance of information all of the American Girl Series, especially if you're in the mood for shopping.

Faithringgold.com/d30.htm

This site contains images of story quilts and other art work by Ringgold, biographical material, book and video references, and more.

Freedomcenter.org

This site contains information on the Underground Railroad that is teacher friendly.

Appendix

Implementing District Standards

Reading

Content Standard 1.0: Students will develop developmentally appropriate strategies and reading behaviors to construct meaning, retell, and read fluently.

Performance Standard 1.1: Students will read for information and enjoyment as they become skilled readers.

Performance Standard 1.4: Students will interpret materials read. (a.) Students will create a product related to the material heard, viewed, and/or read,

Writing

Content Standard 2.0: Students will progress along a continuum as they become skilled writers.

Performance Standards: 2.1, 2.2, 2.3, and 2.4.

Together these standards focus on the student developing a well-organized piece of writing appropriated to the assigned task.

Visual Arts

Content Standard 6.0: Interdisciplinary art connections, cultural and historical correlations.

Performance Standard 6.1: Students will make connections between visual arts and all other disciplines.

History

Content Standard 5.0: History

Performance Standard 5.0: Students will read, view, and listen to multiple sources concerning history.

Social Development

Content Standard 2.0: Promotion of Emotional and Mental Health

Performance Standard 2.0: Students will develop pro-social attitudes and values about themselves and their peers, families, school, and the community.

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