



Curriculum Units by Fellows of the Yale-New Haven Teachers Institute
1997 Volume III: American Maid: Growing Up Female in Life and Literature

Struggle of the Black Women

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I work in an inner school system and I see everyday the lost innocence of young black girls. They are believing what they hear from society about what type of future they will have. I want to give the young black girls in today's society a new avenue to explore. If they learn about other black women who have made it, hopefully they will believe they too can achieve their goals.

For a lifetime black women have felt as if they are not in total control of their lives. They are caged by the chains of society. Imagine not being in total control of your life, having someone else tell you what you can and can not do. To have the feeling of being a prisoner in a world that does not want to set you free and allow you to advance to your full potential. Black women have to live in world that does not see them or treat them as equals. They have to work ten times harder than anyone else, and then they only break the surface. How is it that black women still remain at the bottom of the totem pole, and how can they make strides toward equality?

In my paper I will explore how black women in the past have struggled to make small advances that the black women of today enjoy, and how the struggles of today's black women are breaking down the barriers of society for the betterment of tomorrow's black women. I will explore what obstacles they have faced and overcome and what obstacles they still have to overcome. In choosing this topic I hope to educate myself and others about a part of history we do not learn about in our school system. In growing up and attending a mostly white school system I never learned about the history of black Americans, let alone the history of black women. I feel I have been cheated out of a part of myself, and now I have the opportunity to fill a gap. In order for the black female of any age to realize her full potential, she must first understand and be thankful of the struggles her sisters have made for her in the past.

I will complete a two page summary of three different books that I feel will provide a view of the many different stages of the black women. I will provide one lesson to go along with each book. I have chosen to deal with four different grade level of books, because I feel that knowledge of black women should start at an early age and progress through adulthood. *Addy: An American Girl*, *Flyy Girl* by Omar Tyree, and *Waiting to Exhale* by Terry McMillan. These books chronicle different aspects of black women's struggle from a slave girl who has escaped to freedom and what she hopes will be a better life, to a teenager trying to grow up too soon and too fast. Tracy tries to fill the void left her by her father by playing the game of how many boys she can catch. Finally the third about book about four women who thought they were settled in their lives and happy, only to find out the still have a lot of maturing to do. They have to realize their lives do not revolve around a

man.

I will compare the three books' likenesses and differences. I will provide a survey for the students to fill out, regarding their opinions of the books and any items they felt should have been addressed in the lessons. The books may seem a bit adult for middle and high school, but I felt the books I have chosen are related to the situations students face in today's society. In the books the female characters realize the path they are taking is not a path that is going to benefit their life. If young women and men can see there is a better way to live their lives, maybe they too will decide to change their path.

Society thinks more of black men than they do of black women. A prime example of this is during the fifties and the sixties it was the black women who once again had to hold the family together. The black man was feeling down on himself, because of his situation, not being able to get a good job and support his family like he thinks he should. It is left up to the black women to get employment as maids and laundress, because in some instances it was easier for a black woman to obtain a service job.

Most young black girls did not have the companionship of their mothers. These black women held jobs as cooks or picking cotton for about four dollars a day. Sometimes they had to bring their children with them, but it was never expected for a black man to carry a child with him to work. If they had a babysitter, which was often a relative they did not get to spend a lot of time with their children.

The television show *I'll Fly Away* was a good example of the struggle the black women had to go through to make a living. The main character was a black woman named Lily. Lily was a maid for a white family. Every day she would report to her white children and get them ready for school. She fixes breakfast and packs lunches and makes sure they are prepared to go to school on time. While at Lily's house she has to rely on her father to get her daughter ready for school.

Lily cleans the house and prepares the evening meal while the children are at school. Lily spends more time with her "white" children than she does with her own daughter. At the end of the day Lily goes home to once again do the chores of the house, but this time it is her own house. When she arrives it is dark and she is tired, but she knows her work is not done. Lily gets her house in order and spends time with her daughter before it is time for her to go to bed. Finishing up with the housework she goes to bed knowing she will have to do the same thing in the morning.

Lily, like many black women in the fifties and sixties, is making a living by working in service-oriented jobs to take care of the family. Black women were not educated like some black men and had very limited skills.

Just as in today's society with families who have both parents working it is still seen as the woman's job to take care of the children and the house. The role of the black women is very similar to the role of the past. Just as the black women in the past have overcome obstacles, the black women of the present are overcoming the obstacles placed in her way.

In this time there are many examples of how black women are overshadowed by black men. It was not only black men that organized the civil rights movement, countless black women also suffered and sacrificed.

When Rosa Parks refused to give up her seat in the front of the bus, she was put in jail. Her refusing to give up her seat would have made news, but it was a black male figure who was respected to gather forces and make it even bigger news. It took Dr. King to create an organization to start the civil rights movement, to where it was a national attention. Black women even had to take a back seat in the movement, because society barely

listened to the black men involved. In fact although the men received the credit for starting the movement it was the unsung black women who played a major role in starting the movement. Looking back in the past at Harriet Tubman, she set things in motion by risking her life to free slaves, and for a long time it was thought she was man, because a woman was not smart enough to pull it off, especially a black woman. Barbara Jordan no one thought she would become a senator. Black women were not thought to be smart enough to know anything about politics and how to run a state. She proved all wrong, and went on to have a very successful career.

In today's society black women are portrayed as welfare mothers who have a lot of children out of wedlock. They are portrayed as lazy, man loving, young mothers, who do not care about themselves as much as they care about the men in their lives. In fact if society took a good look they would realize that most of what they see is propaganda that benefits the ruling class of America. In fact black women are very successful in their own right. They are true professionals with high self-esteem and the will to survive. Studies show an increasing number of black women are attending higher learning institutes, and obtaining degrees. Black women today are entering the work force at a higher number than black men in most states. They are becoming better educated than black men, and being employed in top positions.

They are overcoming the stereotypes which have been placed upon them, by starting their own businesses and getting positions in top level management with top level companies. They are no longer satisfied with the minimum wage jobs and having to rely on the black man to support her as they had done so many years in the past. They now are the bread winners in the family. Having to face the reality of being a single working mother, the black woman has taken on the challenge and is beating the odds. Black women are trying to break the cycle of settling for whatever they are offered. They do not want their daughters to go through the pain and struggle they had to face. The pain of having to work two or more jobs just to make ends meet, or of having to suffer through the many years of abuse handed out by men.

Black women are becoming a force to reckon with, they are standing up and demanding to be respected and treated with dignity. In the future it is thought that black women will surpass black men in all areas of society, including education, professional, and financially.

Addy

Addy is a young black girl who has recently escaped with her mother from a plantation in the south. Weeks before her escape her father and brother were sold to another plantation owner, and they left her baby sister behind with her aunt and uncle. Addy is a very smart and very mature girl who only wants one thing for her family to be together again in the free land of the north. Addy and her mother reach free ground safely and with the feeling of bittersweet happiness, ready to start their lives as free people. The only thing that is missing is the rest of her family, because they are still slaves on plantations. Addy and her mother settle in Philadelphia ready to start their new lives. Addy is very happy about beginning her new life, because she knows her life will be better in Philadelphia. Soon after her mother finds a job working in a dress shop for Ms. Ford. They live in a room above the dress shop that Ms. Ford has given them.

Addy is excited about the new things that are to come. Through the church Addy meets a girl named Sarah and they become very good friends. Sarah shows Addy around Philadelphia and introduces her to all her friends. Addy starts school and she is thrilled beyond belief, she will have a chance to learn to read and write.

Addy loves going to school and she loves her teacher, but the one thing that does not please Addy is the girl everyone hates, Harriet. Harriet is very smart, popular and her family is wealthy. Addy is jealous of Harriet because Harriet has the life Addy thought she should have when she arrived in Philadelphia. Although Addy does not like Harriet she wants to be her friend, because she is the popular one with all the friends, and Addy wants to be a Harriet clone. The only problem is Addy can not be friends with both Harriet and Sarah, because Sarah does not approve of the things Harriet does. Addy's dilemma makes her find the meaning of true friendship.

Although Addy and her mother have a better life then on the plantation, they feel it could be better. Addy's mother does not make much money working in the dress shop, but the one thing she has a lot to give her daughter is love. Addy quickly learns to read and write. Now she is able to help find the rest of her family. Her mother and her are reunited with her father. The three of them set out to find the whereabouts of the rest of their family. Addy is a big help, because she is able to read information sent out by the organization on run away slaves. She also writes letter to the same organizations to give information on what her brother, sister, and aunt and uncle look like and their last whereabouts.

Addy's brother is reunited with the family, when they spot him in a parade honoring the soldiers who fought in the war. In the war he lost his arm, but it doesn't matter to him because he is alive and with his family on free soil. The only piece that was missing now is their sister and aunt and uncle. Time had passed and they heard bits and pieces about description that sounded liked them, but nothing ever came out of it. One day Addy's mother was in the church and saw an old lady and a child. She thought it couldn't be, but it was her daughter and her sister. They had made it to free land. Everyone was together again, except her uncle who could not survive the trip. His body was to weak. In the end Addy has everything she needs to make her happiness come true, her family and her freedom.

Lesson for Addy Book Series

Objective:

- 1) Student will complete a family tree
- 2) Students will piece together a quilt that expresses something special about their family.

Materials: pieces of cloth, colored fabric glue, fabric glue, filling

Method: Students will be given a worksheet to complete their family tree. Students will draw a picture of something special about their family members.

Students will then redraw the pictures on the cloth with the fabric glue, and let dry. Then the students will glue pieces together to tell a story about their family. Students will then cut out a piece of cloth that measures the same size to glue for the back of the quilt.

Glue three sides of the quilt together, before gluing fourth side stuff with light amount of filling, and then glue side together.

Flyy Girl

Growing up too fast for her own good, Tracy goes from one boy to the next, looking for, but not finding happiness. She collects designer clothes and jewelry, and get money when she wants to, but she never finds the one true feeling she is looking for—happiness. Tracy fools herself into believing she is happy, because the street smart guys who want to be with her, will tell her anything she wants to hear.

On the other hand her neighbor Raheema does not have that problem, because she has promised herself not to get caught up in the cycle of letting boys get their way with any girl they want. She has seen what it can do to people, the prime example being her sister Mercedes. Mercedes has left home at the age of sixteen, because she has been caught up in the fast lane of boys and drugs.

Tracy grows up and begins to reexamine her life after one of her short term boyfriends takes her to a drug house to take care of some business. While she is waiting for her boyfriend to come back she spots a very familiar face coming down from the stairs after turning a trick to score some drugs, it is Mercedes. Tracy can not believe her eyes, she tries not to let Mercedes see her. Mercedes spots Tracy anyway and lets her have it. When Tracy gets home that night she realizes she needs to change her life, her wants, needs, and outlook on sex or she could be the girl coming down the stairs.

Just as Tracy is settling down, her father moves back into the house. This makes her mother and little brother very happy, but Tracy is not so sure. She does not want her father to come back and start telling her what to do and start running her life. When she finds out her father is not going to try and run her life, and that he is pretty cool about her ways. She has the urge to prove to her parents she is a mature young lady. Tracy starts to hang out with older who are in college. This makes her parents feel she is trying to become mature and responsible. She starts dating college student, and her parents are very pleased she has started dating a respectable young man with a bright future. Tracy soon finds out that the childish behavior her other boyfriends found cute will not fly with her new boyfriend Carl, and he lets her knew it. Tracy and Carl break up and Tracy and Tracy starts dating Victor again. Just as she has found Victor again, he is arrested for assault and sentenced to three years in jail. Tracy is crushed, because she feels she has been robbed of the only man she has really loved.

Tracy's void is filled because she and her father have come an understanding about each other. She has entered college, and she has decided to wait for Victor to get out of jail. She can see that he has changed his outlook on life, and they both realize they were meant to be together.

Lesson for *Flyy Girl*

Objective:

1. To have students explore different ways to handle a situation.
- 2 .To allow student to make the best decision based on information.

Materials: Five -six situations students will pick out of a hat or box.

Method: Student will work in groups of three- four, the group will have to work together to come up with the best solution for the problem. They are required to research different aspects that could lead them to a positive outcome. Each member in the group will devise an individual plan, and then the group will take the individual plans and work together to compile a group answer.

Waiting to Exhale

Waiting to Exhale by Terri McMillain is a story about four very different women trying to come to peace in their very complicated lives. Savannah, Bernadine, Robin, and Gloria are searching for the perfect life to live. They have to come face to face with many obstacles in their life before they can truly be happy. They struggle to find true love and success in their careers. Each has a personality that is waiting to exhale and achieve ultimate inner peace. Their friendship has blossomed into a sisterhood. They rely on each other to help them through their tough times and give advice on what to do. They learn from each others past mistakes.

Gloria is a middle aged divorced mother of a teenage boy, who works as a hairdresser. Gloria is a very simple women who unlike her friends doesn't have to have a men in her life. Her main concern in life is her son's happiness. The sun shines again for her. A nice looking man moves across the street from her, and Gloria being the friendly neighbor welcomes him into the neighborhood. To her delight he is single. They stat to spend more time together and she is happy. Just as in any relationship their relationship hit a bump in the road and Gloria has to come to a decision on want she really wants.

Bernadine thought she had it all, a loving family, two wonderful kids, and a house on the hill. One day she found her life in pieces, her husband left her and she had no job. Bernadine had sacrificed her dream and needs to fulfill the dreams of her husband. Bernadine couldn't believe what was happening to her, what was she going to do now. Feeling betrayed and hurt she decides to get even with her husband. Bernadine decides it is time to be paid for all her years of loyalty. She decides it is time for a new Bernadine to come out. She has become fancy free, looking out only for her children and herself. Bernadine now has the power to achieve her dreams and not be tied down to someone's else dream.

Robin and Savannah are both in the same boat: they have very successful careers, but their love lives leave a lot to be desired. Robin is man crazy willing to be with any man hoping he will be the man to fill the void in her life. She knows this is not the live style she wants to lead, but she feels it is the only way to find her true love. Savannah on the other hand has two problems she has just started a new job and she has no man. Both continue their search to find their Mr. Right, but to their dismay they are not having any luck. Robin and Savannah must come to realize a man is not the answer to their happiness.

Waiting to Exhale explores the coming of age of four women who have to overcome modern day oppression and slavery before they can free. They are oppressed by a society that tells them to they are to play the roles others have set for them. They are enslaved by men who are not willing to allow them to make their own choices and who always' put them in the background. They are expected to serve their men by raising the children, and being a companion when it is convenient for the men. When these women escape they mold to the stereotype of black women being strong willed.

The women in *Waiting to Exhale* face similar problems black women face today. Feeling as if they have to take back seat to black men, being enslaved by men who have a destructive agenda. Just as the women in *Waiting*

to *Exhale* black women of today are also breaking free and focusing on themselves.

Lesson for Waiting to Exhale

Objective:

1. To have students rewrite one of the plots in the books

Materials: *paper, pencils, copy of book*

Method: *Students will read story and then choose the one character they liked the best. They will summarize the character plot. The students will rewrite the plot of the character they have chosen. They will rewrite the plot to change the way the character has decided to live their life. They will have to explore other options the character could take and decide which path would be the best.*

Student Survey of Books Read

Survey of Books

Title:

What I liked about the book:

What I did not like about the book:

Were the books chosen appropriate for grade level?:

Were the lessons difficult for grade level?:

Which book did you like the most and why?:

Suggested Student Reading List:

Divided Sisters, Midge Wilson

Growing up Black in Mississippi

Bone Black: Memories of Girlhood

Addy: An American Girl

Flyy Girl, Omar Tryee

Waiting to Exhale, Terri McMillian

The Bluest Eye, Toni Morrison

Suggested Teacher Reading List:

African Women: three generations, Mark Mathabene

Madame C.J. Walker: Building a Business Empire, Penny Coleman

Pushed Back to Strength: A Black Women's Journey Home, Gloria Jean Wade-Gayles

Voice Against Violence , Ida B. Wells-Barnett

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