

Slave Code Songs

The Basics

Time Required

5 hours of instructional time

Subject Areas

7th Grade American History

Expansion and Reform, 1800-1860

Common Core Standards Addressed:

Writing Standards for Literacy in History/Social Studies 6-12

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The Lesson

Introduction

This lesson is part of a unit on slavery. It can be included after covering slave resistance and introducing the Underground Railroad. The secret and dangerous nature of these topics particularly appeals to middle school imaginations, and identification with slave and fugitive conditions can happen readily.

Before beginning this lesson, I would have shown *The Sellin' of Jamie Thomas*, a film about a fugitive slave family's escape on the Underground Railroad (appropriate for upper elementary and middle school students). I would also connect this lesson with an art activity on the possibility of hidden messages in slave quilts.

Guiding Questions

- What three water bodies were escape routes to Canada, free states, and slave states?
- How can song lyrics contain hidden meaning? Why would singers not want everyone to know the meanings of the lyrics?

Learning Objectives

- The student understands historical chronology and the historical perspective.
- The student understands U. S. history to 1880.
- The student understands the interactions of people and the physical environment.

Preparation Instructions

Print copies of “THINKING ABOUT A SONG” worksheet

A copy of the film *The Sellin’ of Jamie Thomas*

Star chart, which includes the Big Dipper

Atlas or political and physical maps of the United States

Songs used in this lesson:

“Follow the Drinking Gourd”

“O Canaan”

“Wade in the Water”

“Steal Away”

Lesson Activities

Procedure:

- Read aloud Velma Maia Thomas’ powerful definition of spiritual from her book, *No Man Can Hinder Me*, page 12.
- Assign a write-pair-share activity:
 - Write about a childhood experience that involved secrecy or communicating in code.
 - Describe methods used, objectives (conceal or reveal?), materials necessary (signals, symbols, code words, etc.).
 - Share this assignment with a classmate.
- Present the following ideas through a class discussion or lecture:
 - Codes and signals are useful in real life (military and government, computer abbreviations that teens know and parents don’t, etc.).
 - Throughout time, poetry and songs have been a means of conveying hidden ideas (nursery rhymes with political references, “Puff, the Magic Dragon,” etc.).
 - Songs have power through their words, meaning and/or melody and music. (At this point, ask students to think or free write about a song that has a message or particular meaning in their own life.)
 - Spirituals (religious songs that convey a strong belief in God and heaven) were the songs that communicated powerful feelings and meaning for slaves.
 - While the need for secrecy and the oral tradition of slave songs severely limit the amount of information available in slave code songs, we can glean some details about hidden messages in a few spirituals.
 - The most well-known slave code song is “Follow the Drinking Gourd.” Explain that lesser known spirituals also conveyed hidden messages to slaves. We will examine three of these, as well as revisit “Following the Drinking Gourd,” in the following activities.

Activity I (5 minutes)

- Have pairs or triads brainstorm a written list of today’s popular songs that have hidden messages and then share the list with the class.
- Elicit the idea that songs of all eras have meaning that is sometimes obvious, sometimes hidden.

Activity II (10 – 15 minutes)

Using a classroom map or an atlas source, have students locate these places that were geographic goals of fugitives or hidden references in spirituals:

- the Mason Dixon Line
- Ohio River
- Canada
- Tennessee River
- Tombigbee River

Label these places on an outline map of the United States. Students should also use color or shading to signify which are slave states and which are free states.

Activity III (30 minutes)

Many students have been exposed to this song and the story of Harriet Tubman in elementary grades. This is meant to be a review activity. There are many website lesson plans for this particular song.

- Distribute the words to “Follow the Drinking Gourd.”
- Have a star chart available. Ask students to locate the Big Dipper. Review the significance of the hidden messages, as needed. Refer to the locations on the map that are thought to be part of the hidden messages in this spiritual.
- Divide students into pairs or triads and distribute the THINKING ABOUT A SONG worksheet (in Resources). Have students discuss the questions and write their ideas.
- Share with the class in a group discussion.
- Play the song before or after the worksheet activity and have students sing along. (Harris, *Music of the Underground Railroad*.)

Activity IV (60 minutes)

- Review biographical details about Frederick Douglass (from textbook, website, etc.).
- Distribute the passage from Frederick Douglass’s Autobiography, which is his comment on singing among slaves. Ask students to read silently and then briefly react in writing or orally.
- Read aloud Frederick Douglass’s words about his escape. (Preview this first to decide on the appropriate length.)
- Distribute the words to “O Canaan.” If it’s possible to find a recording, play it for students as they read the words.
- Use the questions from the THINKING ABOUT A SONG worksheet (in Resources) to generate a class discussion.

Activity V (40 – 50 minutes)

- Assign a brief essay (100 words): “Describe a time when you were scared. What in particular were you most afraid of before the experience? After the experience, did it seem that your earlier thoughts and fears were worse than the experience itself? Why or why not?”

- Discuss which physical features (landforms and water bodies) have advantages and disadvantages to someone fleeing from danger. Why would a river or water body be important to someone who is fleeing? What fears might be real or imagined when a fugitive has to face challenging physical features?
- Distribute the words to both versions of “Wade in the Water.” Play the music and have students sing along. (“African American Spirituals”)
- Discuss what the words and ideas in both versions might convey to a fugitive slave.
- Have students illustrate an aspect of the hidden message in this song. A caption should be included on their drawing to explain its meaning.

Activity VI (15-20 minutes)

- Distribute the words to “Steal Away.” Play the song and have students sing along. (“African American Spirituals”)
- What is the meaning of steal in this spiritual? What metaphors are used? What could the thunder, trumpet and green trees stand for? Why is the sinner trembling?

Assessment

Activity VII (20 minutes)

To be used with the film The Sellin’ of Jamie Thomas.

- Write a brief essay (approximately 100 words): What songs do you think might have inspired Jamie Thomas and his parents? Consider the period before they began their Underground Railroad experience as well as the flight itself. Support your ideas with clear reasoning.

Activity VIII (40 minutes)

- Elicit ideas about situations in today’s world where a coded song might be useful or necessary. Photocopy and share a news article about a current event with which students are familiar (e.g., the war on terror in Afghanistan, Guantanamo detainees, hostages in Iraq).
- Discuss what type of song and what words/phrases might be used to convey hidden meaning about the situation described in the news article.
- Assign one of the slave code songs in this lesson for the following writing assignment:

Using the assigned slave song, write new lyrics that relate to the current situation of the news article. Include a paragraph explanation of what your lyrics’ codes and meanings are. Be prepared to share in class.

Activity IX (40 minutes)

Imagine that you are a conductor of the Underground Railroad and want to give a coded message to slaves you are planning to help flee to Canada. Create 2 or 3 verses to a well-known tune that will inform the fugitives. The tune can be as simple as “Row, Row, Row your Boat,” “Lullaby and Good Night,” etc. Choose your words carefully. Consider including familiar local places as you compose. Be prepared to explain the coded words and ideas before presenting to the class.

Note to teacher: It might be helpful to have the class create a list together of well-known, slow songs that could be used for this activity.

Resources

THINKING ABOUT A SONG WORKSHEET

GROUP MEMBERS: _____

1. What does this song seem to be saying?
2. What words do you think had possible hidden references or meanings?
3. Where do you imagine this song being sung? Under what circumstances? Describe two possible scenarios.
 - a.
 - b.
4. What would an outsider listening to this song think about it?
5. Why did this song work as a successful coded song?

Lyrics

"Follow the Drinking Gourd"

Follow the drinking gourd,
Follow the drinking gourd,
For the old man is waiting for to carry you to freedom
If you follow the drinking gourd.

When the sun comes back and the first quail calls,
Follow the drinking gourd.
For the old man is waiting for to carry you to freedom
If you follow the drinking gourd.

The riverbank will make a very good road.
The dead trees show you the way,
Left foot, peg foot traveling on,
Following the drinking gourd.

The river ends between two hills,
Follow the drinking gourd.
There's another river on the other side,
Follow the drinking gourd.

Where the great big river meets the little river,
Follow the drinking gourd.
The old man is waiting for to carry you to freedom,
If you follow the drinking gourd.

"O Canaan"

Together let us sweetly live;

I am bound for the land of Canaan,
Together let us sweetly die,
I am bound for the land of Canaan!

Chorus:
O, Canaan, sweet Canaan,
I am bound for the land of Canaan,
O, Canaan, it is my happy home,
I am bound for the land of Canaan!

The way the holy prophets went,
I am bound for the land of Canaan,
The way that leads from banishment,
I am bound for the land of Canaan!

"Wade in the Water"

The lyrics of this particular song seem to be very elusive, most likely due to the oral tradition of spirituals. Below are versions from a) "African American Spirituals" and b) <http://www.localdial.com>.

a)

Chorus:
Wade in the water, wade in the water, children,
Wade in the water, God's gon' trouble the water.

Verses:
I looked over Jordan, and what did I see?
A band of angels coming after me.
They're gonna take me to the heavenly place,
Where the streets are paved with gold, and they got pearly gates.
Some say I've never been redeemed,
Just follow me down to Jordan stream.
I tell you how the Lord has set myself free,
When I get to heaven, how happy I'll be.

b)

Wade in the water (children)
Wade in the water
Wade in the water

God's gonna trouble the water
If you don't believe I've been redeemed
God's gonna trouble the water
I want you to follow him on down to Jordan stream
(I said) My God's gonna trouble the water
You know chilly water is dark and cold
(I know my) God's gonna trouble the water
You know it chills my body but not my soul

(I said my) God's gonna trouble the water.
(Come on let's) wade in the water
Wade in the water (children)
Wade in the water
God's gonna trouble the water

Now if you should get there before I do
(I know) God's gonna trouble the water
Tell all my friends that I'm comin' too
(I know) God's gonna trouble the water
Sometimes I'm up lord and sometimes I'm down
(You know my) God's gonna trouble the water
Sometimes I'm level to the ground
God's gonna trouble the water
(I know) God's gonna trouble the water

Wade in the water (children)
Wade out in the water (children)
God's gonna trouble the water

"Steal Away"

Steal away, steal away, steal away to Jesus,
Steal away, steal away home,
I ain't got long to stay here.

My Lord he calls me, he calls me by the thunder,
The trumpet sounds within my soul.
I ain't got long to stay here.

Green trees are bending, poor sinner stands a trembling,
The trumpet sounds within my soul,
I ain't got long to stay here.

Suggested Meanings of words found in slave songs:
Canaan – Canada

Additional Spirituals Thought to Be Slave Songs:
"Swing Low, Sweet Chariot"

"Nobody Knows the Trouble I've Seen"

"Good News Member"

“We Shall be Free”

“Run to Jesus”

Spirituals Found in *Voices Across Time*:

“Let us Break Bread Together,” page 1.42

“Go Down, Moses,” page 3.82

“Deep River,” page 4.78

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