

Civil Rights Era and the African American Experience: Investigating American History through a Literary Lens

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Overview:

This unit is designed to teach students the American Civil Rights Movement using various approaches. First, the students will learn of the political, social and historical contexts that preceded the Civil Rights Movement. The teacher will help students to understand these contexts by researching various African American figures that all experienced racial segregation and discrimination in various ways. Then, the Civil Rights Movement will be introduced to the students through a study of the various issues that were being protested and the ways in which these issues were protested. The main event that will be focused on is the Children's March in Birmingham, Alabama in 1963. Students will learn of these events through a historical study in non-fiction accounts, a documentary, analyzing primary documents, and through a historical fiction novel.

This is a curriculum unit that can be integrated into a year-long elective course or as an isolated unit to accompany a social studies or reading/writing course. Although this unit is created to be taught at the middle school level (grades 6-8), a teacher could modify the course to the high school level. Upon completing this unit, students will gain a thorough understanding of the American Civil Rights Era, specifically during the American 1950's and 1960's. Furthermore, students will learn of the Civil Rights movement by researching and viewing these events through an African American lens by focusing on major African American figures who played important roles in the American 1950's and 1960's.

This curriculum is designed from a humanities viewpoint as the teacher will present content through a variety of mediums. The class will be a history class, English literature class, and humanities class all in one.

The history segment of this class includes an in-depth study of the political culture and social issues that existed before, during, and after the Civil Rights Era. Most of the materials read at

this time will be non-fiction, historical texts. The students will be encouraged to connect issues during those times with issues that exist today, making the content more relevant and accessible.

The English literature element of this class includes reading poetry and fiction by figures of this time as well as historical fiction documenting these times. Because this course will be first implemented as an extracurricular class stemming from the English department, the class will revolve around the historical fiction text, "The Watsons Go to Birmingham- 1963" by Christopher Paul Curtis. This novel is appropriate for this curriculum unit for a variety of reasons. First, most of the seventh grade students taking this course will be reading on the level in which this book is written. Also, this story depicts an African American family in the early 1960's who live in Michigan but travel down to Alabama. This novel describes the racial tension of America during this time, specifically that of the American south. Also, this novel serves as an excellent vehicle for discussing the civil rights movement in America. The novel depicts the Children's March of 1963 that occurred in Birmingham and was a major event in the Civil Rights Era. The class will participate in guided reading groups, writing activities, and work on their reading skills and strategies while reading this novel. Not only will they learn the content delivered in this curriculum unit, but they will also be able to reinforce their reading, writing and analytical thinking skills.

Finally, this class can be seen as a humanities class because the teacher will integrate art and music from the time period to reinforce the content taught. Because this era was coupled with the boom in technology and commercialism in America (i.e. - TV and other media), it is highly relevant and important to supplement this course with a variety of multimedia elements. Specifically, news footage from Civil Rights marches, video and/or sound clips of Martin Luther King Jr.'s speech, music from the time, etc. will all be integrated and woven into the curriculum.

Rationale:

The need for this curriculum was raised when it became apparent that most of my students confused the Civil War with the Civil Rights Era. Although most students can identify Martin Luther King Jr. and Rosa Parks, most do not understand the movement behind these figures. My students are taught history in a highly general format at my school. They receive lessons in World and American history in a broad and chronological form. Because middle school level social studies is taught in such a broad, survey format, the students do not get much exposure to current American History, including the Civil Rights Era up through modern day.

All of the students in my school are African American or African immigrants and it is critical to expose them to the history of African Americans in this country, although I believe that students from all races and cultures must learn about this critical time in our history. The civil rights movement not only exists as a crucial element of our history, but is an incredibly important part of my students' personal history and identity as Americans. If we are to build capable and effective members of society, we need to educate them on these types of dynamic elements of history such as the Civil Rights Era. Unfortunately, the School District of Philadelphia does not

offer enough teaching around the Civil Rights Era. This curriculum unit offers an answer to this problem.

Historical Context-Research

Jim Crow Laws¹

The Civil War ran from 1861 through 1865. One of the major outcomes of the American Civil War was the ending of slavery. Although racism and segregation existed informally after the Civil War, during the first 10 years after the Civil War, segregation was *not* as extensively institutionalized as it would later be. During this Reconstruction period (1865- 1877) there were federal laws that protected the civil rights of the liberated African slaves, or “freedmen.”

It was not until the end of Reconstruction after 1876 and the rise of the Jim Crow Laws from the 1890s on that racial segregation of African Americans became a strict and real way of life in America. The Jim Crow laws were state and local laws throughout the American South that mandated the “separate but equal status” for African Americans and other non-white racial groups. These laws came to be through various causes. First, during the 1870’s, white Democrats gradually gained back political power in American southern states. This allowed intimidation, attacks, and ultimately prevention of blacks from voting. Although some African Americans were still elected to local offices during the 1880s, the political arena established by the Democrats at this time increasingly included laws that made voter registration and participation in elections very difficult for African Americans, resulting in a massive decrease in voting among blacks. Beginning with Mississippi in 1890, the former Confederate states passed new laws and amendments that effectively disfranchised blacks through poll taxes, literacy tests, comprehension tests and residency requirements. Because blacks were denied the vote, they became unable to influence local and state legislatures and their interests were generally overlooked if not actively harmed. Although the Jim Crow laws stated “separate but equal,” the equality in the resources and treatment among blacks diminished. An example of this is seen in education. Although public schools had been established for black children, they remained under-funded and under-resourced. Areas in which the Jim Crow Laws created institutionalized segregation for African Americans included not only public schools but also transportation, sports and recreation services, restaurants, church services, and other public arenas. These laws greatly shaped a distinct segregated culture in the United States. These laws were overruled by *Brown v. Board of Education* in 1954 and also by the Civil Rights Act of 1964 and the Voting Rights Act of 1965. However, it is imperative in this specific study of the Civil Rights Era to understand the historical background and implications that existed before these laws were overturned. Four figures that help students to understand the historical context include the Delany Sisters, Dorie Miller, Jackie Robinson, and Emmett Till. By researching and understanding the experiences of these four distinct figures, a cohesive and thoughtful understanding of the racial tensions and situations that existed before and led up to the Civil Rights movement can be achieved.

¹ Finkelman, P. (Ed.). (2009). *Encyclopedia of African American History 1896 to the Present*

*Delany Sisters*²

A piece of history that documents this shift in America's legacy of racial segregation is the story of the Delany Sisters. Sarah Louise Delany (1889-1999) and Bessie Delany (1891-1995) were two African American women who detail the onset of Jim Crow laws in America through discussing their own experiences. They illustrate the effect these laws had on their own travels once public transportation became segregated. Their book *Having Our Say: The Delany Sisters' First 100 Years* discussed these experiences. They were raised by a former slave who became the first African American Episcopal bishop and despite institutionalized segregation and racism, the girls went on to higher education. Sadie became the first African American woman who taught science in the state of New York, and Bessie was the second African American woman who became a certified dentist. These women not only serve as great role models for our students to learn about, but they also offer a distinct picture into the American political culture during the onset of Jim Crow Laws. Their book *Having Our Say* was also adapted into a movie, teleplay, and play. This serves as an excellent resource in building the historical context of the civil rights movement.

*Dorie Miller*³

Doris "Dorie" Miller (1919-1943) is a historical figure hero whose story also shows the legacy of segregation and explains yet another reason for the Civil Rights Movement. Miller was an African American cook in the United States Navy. Originally from Waco, Texas, Miller joined the Navy as a mess attendant, Third Class in September 1939. He was assigned to the USS *West Virginia* on August 3, 1941. During the attack on Pearl Harbor, Miller's ship was damaged by a Japanese torpedo. He discovered that the Captain Mervyn Bennion was injured by a bomb splinter. Miller attempted to carry his captain to safety, but Bennion refused help and ended up dying at the spot. Miller's heroic actions did not end there, however. Although he had no formal training in operating the anti-aircraft weapons that were available on his ship, he nonetheless took control of one and began firing at the Japanese planes.

While his actions were commended and he received a Navy Cross in 1942, his rank was only raised to Mess Attendant First Class on June 1, 1942. Clearly, the fact that this hero was African American prevented him from receiving higher and deserved honors- Miller had simply become a higher-ranked cook. The *Pittsburgh Courier* heard about this and called for Miller to return home for a war bond tour like a white hero would be given. In a February 6, 1943 issue an article ran in this paper requesting for this action to come to pass. There was even a picture of Miller accompanying this article that read "He Fought...Keeps Mop," while another white hero of Pearl Harbor got a commission. The article reported that Miller was "too important waiting tables in the Pacific to return."

² *Having Our Say: The Delany Sisters' First 100 Years*, Olson, L. (2001). *Freedom's Daughters: The Unsung Heroines of the Civil Rights Movement from 1830 to 1970*.

³ Finkelman, P. (Ed.). (2009). *Encyclopedia of African American History 1896 to the Present*.

Despite the obvious inequities and the public outcry through the *Pittsburgh Courier*, Miller's rank never passed above Petty Officer (June 1, 1943). However, many sources merely list him as the ship's "cook," documenting the fact that he never gained the rank and recognition for his loyal and brave acts during World War II, a testament to the ingrained segregation of our nation.

Miller was pronounced missing in action and soon after dead in December 1943 when an aircraft bomb sunk his warship on December 7, 1943. Although his story can be viewed as tragic because of the implications and effects of racial segregation, his legacy lives on through various memorials including a recent Navy Distinguished Service Medal (2002), being listed on scholar Melefi Kete Asante's list of *100 Greatest African Americans*, portrayal in a number of books including historian Bill O'Neal's book *Doris Miller: Hero of Pearl Harbor* and Phillip A. Klinkner and Rogers Smith's *The Unsteady March*, as well as depictions in movies including *Tora! Tora! Tora!* (1970) and *Pearl Harbor* (2001). A study of this African American hero gives students an insight into the early segregation and its effects upon individuals and society.

*Jackie Robinson*⁴

Jack Roosevelt "Jackie" Robinson (1919-1972) was another major figure useful for learning the context behind the Civil Rights Movement. Best known for his all-star status as a Brooklyn Dodger which ended around 60 years of segregation in baseball, his role in the American Army also shows his relationship with American segregation and the Civil Rights Movement.

After his studies at UCLA and playing for the UCLA football and baseball team, Robinson was drafted into the United States Army. During his service at Fort Riley in Kansas, Robinson experienced firsthand racial discrimination. He discovered that white men of the same educational background as him were allowed to attend Officer Candidate School, while African Americans could not. This greatly disturbed Robinson and he asked heavyweight champion Joe Louis, whom he had met during basic training, for help. Louis spoke to someone in Washington DC about this issue and Robinson was eventually allowed into the program along with a few other black men.

The racial segregation did not end with Robinson's acceptance to the Officer Candidate School, however. Robinson was soon re-assigned to Fort Hood in Texas where he injured his ankle. To receive the results from some hospital tests regarding his ankle, Robinson took a bus ride with a fellow officer's wife. When Robinson boarded the bus, the driver ordered him to sit in the back of the bus because he was black. Robinson refused and although the driver allowed him to continue riding on the bus, Robinson was taken into custody by the military police upon arrival. Robinson was eventually charged with insubordination, disturbing the peace, drunkenness, conduct unbecoming of an officer, insulting a civilian woman, and refusing to obey the lawful orders of a superior officer. Through these proceedings, Robinson was eventually dishonorably discharged. It was not until his later fame as a baseball superstar that the army later acquitted him of all charges and his discharge status changed to "honorable." These events in Robinson's life show the effect that segregation had even as late as the 1940's. These events also directly link to the Civil Rights Movement of the 1950s and 1960s.

⁴ Cain, A.E. (Ed.). (1965). *The Negro Heritage Library*.

Robinson's influence in his baseball career also worked towards civil rights of African Americans. Professional baseball had always been racially segregated up until 1947. Until this time, Robinson was unhappily playing in a Negro League. He was discontented because this league did not offer the structure and competition he had experienced when playing at UCLA and did not pay as well as major league baseball. In 1945 the Brooklyn Dodgers' general manager Branch Rickey began scouting Robinson and assigned him to the Montreal Royals, a minor league baseball club associated with the Dodgers. Rickey explained to Robinson that he was interested in bringing him to the Dodgers, but wanted a man who could restrain himself from responding to the ugliness of the racial hatred that was certain to come. Rickey asked Robinson if he could face these racial tensions yet not react angrily. Robinson was perturbed and asked "Are you looking for a Negro who is afraid to fight back?" Rickey responded that he needed a Negro "with guts enough not to fight back."

Robinson was the man that Rickey was looking for when he played his first integrated Major League baseball game in spring training on March 17, 1946. In 1947 Robinson began playing for the Dodgers. There was much division around this historical event. Although most blacks and many whites supported this move, there were some people who did not agree with the desegregation of athletics. In fact, many major league players objected. However, Robinson's integration coupled with his high level of play and sportsmanship caused many racial barriers to fall, not only in athletics but also beyond. For example, many of the hotels and restaurants that the Dodgers patronized became integrated shortly after Robinson's appearance on the team.

The racism that Robinson encountered during his career was great and speaks to the abusive and detrimental legacy that segregation held over this country for so many years. Over the years he experienced racism from fans, players, and even his teammates. Some Dodgers initially refused to play alongside a black man. The St. Louis Cardinals threatened to strike if Robinson played until the National League President threatened to suspend the Cardinals if they did so. In 1947 the Philadelphia Phillies called Robinson a "nigger" from the dugout and yelled to "go back to the cotton fields." These verbal abuses were met head on by Robinson and his then supportive teammates and ultimately unified the Dodgers into a stronger unit. When the Dodgers finally won their only World Series in 1955, Robinson was one of their veteran leaders. Robinson's legacy can be seen in the biographical film *The Jackie Robinson Story* and in the book titled *Memoirs of Jackie Robinson*.

*Emett Till*⁵

Emmett Louis Till (1941-1955) was an African American boy whose murder is often noted to be one of the major events leading to the Civil Rights Movement. Living in the less segregated "North" of Chicago, Till visited family in Money, Mississippi, where segregation was much deeper and more serious. Racial tensions were elevated in this area of Mississippi during this time as the recent Brown V. Board of Education had recently been announced, ending legal segregation in public education in 1954 (though actual segregation has continued to this day).

⁵ Rochelle, Belinda (1993). *Witnesses to Freedom: People Who Fought for Civil Rights*.

Till arrived in Mississippi during the summer of 1955. He accompanied a few teenagers to the Bryant family grocery store on August 21, 1955. It was there Till was dared to flirt with 21 year-old Carolyn Bryant, daughter of the store owners. Till whistled at the girl and then left. After news spread about his unacceptable conduct towards the girl, specifically a black boy whistling at a white girl, people feared violence. Till was woken up in bed four days later when Bryant and his half brother drove down to the place in which Till was staying. They dragged him out of bed, took him to a deserted shed, beat him, gouged out his eye, and then shot him in the head. They went on to tie a 70 pound cotton gin fan to his neck with barbed wire and dumped his body in the Tallahatchie River near Glendora, Mississippi, just a few miles north of Money.

Till's mother insisted on an open casket during the public funeral service to show the world the brutality of the killing. These images were reprinted and circulated in JET magazine on July 23, 1964.

The trial took place in September 1955, just 22 days after the brutal murder had occurred. On September 23 the suspects were acquitted by an all-white jury whose deliberations took a mere 69 minutes. One juror even commented that "If we hadn't stopped to drink pop, it wouldn't have taken that long." This acquittal was seen as hasty and desperately unjust, angering people throughout the United States and Europe. These events explain the ever-growing tension that existed before the civil rights movement exploded throughout American culture and society in the impending Civil Rights Era.

Civil Rights Era- The Children's March of 1963 and the Civil Rights Act of 1964⁶

The modern Civil Rights Movement is said to span from 1955 through 1968. It includes all of the reform movements that occurred in the United States that aimed to abolish discrimination and segregation due to race. This movement also aimed to restore African American voting in the South as well as to restore racial dignity, economic and political self-sufficiency, and freedom from oppression by whites.

During this period, the movement was promoted through acts of civil disobedience including marches, speeches, and sit-ins. This string of civil disobedient acts started with the Montgomery Bus Boycott during 1955-1956. Well-known sit-ins included North Carolina's Greensboro Sit-Ins in 1960 and famous marches such as Selma to Montgomery marches for voting rights in Alabama in 1965.

In this unit of study, the Children's March of 1963 will be the act of civil disobedience that will be highlighted. The reason for this is because the book of study, *The Watsons Go to Birmingham-1963*, centers on this historic event.

The Children's March was a civil rights march that occurred due to the strife connected to the desegregation of busses and schools. Although busses and schools had been officially

⁶ King, C. (1997). *Oh, Freedom: Kids Talk about the Civil Rights Movement with the People Who Made it Happen* and *Mighty Times: The Children's March*. Dir. Hudson and Houston.

desegregated since 1957, there was still social unrest around these issues. Also, southern blacks still found it difficult to register to vote. From 1957 to 1963 there had been 18 bombings in Birmingham, Alabama due to racial tensions. In 1957 Reverend Fred Shuttlesworth attempted to enroll his children into an all-white school and was chain-whipped and his wife was soon stabbed. In 1961 a black man was dragged along the streets of Birmingham and then castrated. All of these events led to no arrests, attesting to the criminal racist acts that went unattended for so long. It was this oppression that led African American children of Birmingham to begin marching against this racial segregation. On May 2, 1963, around 1,000 students involved in this Birmingham march went to jail. By May 10, 1963 more than 3,000 were in jail. These children faced fire hoses and police dogs during their march. The shock around the world at the images of such brutal treatment of children eventually helped bring legal segregation to its knees.

This major march in the Civil Rights Movement is well documented in Teaching Tolerance's pamphlet and corresponding documentary *Mighty Times: The Children's March*. These resources should play an important role in disseminating the information for the unit. It provides specific background for the historical novel; *The Watsons Go To Birmingham- 1963*.

Objectives:

This unit is closely aligned to the Pennsylvania Standards for Reading, Writing, Speaking and Listening and the PA Standards for History.

The objectives of the unit include the following points. At completion of this unit, students will be able to:

- Explain the history of the Civil Rights Movement in the United States.
- Describe specific figures in history and how they contributed to the Civil Rights Movement. These figures include but are not limited to:
 - Jim Crow
 - The Delany Sisters
 - Dorie Miller
 - Jackie Robinson
 - Emmett Till
 - Martin Luther King, Jr.
- Connect the Civil Rights movement to their own lives through writing assignments, reflections, and projects.
- Connect the Children's March in Birmingham to their own lives through written and visual assignments.
- Illustrate the significance of the Children's March upon the Civil Rights Movement through the reading and investigation of literature, specifically, *The Watsons Go To Birmingham- 1963*.
- Analyze primary documents including *The Pittsburgh Courier* and *Jet Magazine* to illustrate the existence and significance of the American Civil Rights Movement upon American history and American political culture.

Strategies:

On the historical level, students will analyze and evaluate primary documents including newspaper articles, biographies, first-hand accounts, and magazine articles to better understand the civil rights movement. Students will also read texts describing the Civil Rights Movement as well as texts illustrating specific characters that played important roles in this movement. By analyzing these various types of non-fiction texts, students will gain a broader view of this period in history.

Students will work independently and cooperatively while studying and analyzing these documents and texts. The teacher will play a role mediating the study, although students will be encouraged to continue their studies in groups as well as independently, both in the classroom and at home.

Students will also participate in a guided reading model for part of the classroom experience. While reading *The Watsons Go to Birmingham, 1961*, (and if applicable, *The Gold Cadillac*, an extension reading) students will read in small groups heterogeneously created by independent reading levels. Students should be grouped in such a way that all students will receive enough support to be able to read and understand the texts. While reading, students will participate in discussions, question/ answers, essay prompts, writer's journal prompts, and book talks/ projects to show comprehension and analysis of the texts. Not only will the guided reading format reinforce literacy skills, the themes of these novels will be pressed. These themes include the Civil Rights Era, African American segregation during the 1960's, the African American experience in the American South during the 1960's, and the significance of the Children's March in Birmingham. Again, students will be given the opportunity to connect these themes to the issues taught in the historical aspect of this unit.

Moreover, the various strategies that will be used for student achievement of the unit's objectives include but are not limited to:

- Previewing/ Building Background Knowledge through brainstorms, KWL, and writing prompts.
- Reading and analyzing primary documents.
- Reading and analyzing historical texts.
- Learning new vocabulary through various techniques, including word walls, Frayer Model, etc.
- Reading and analyzing biographies of various figures from and leading up to the Civil Rights Era.
- Comparing and contrasting these various figures.
- Viewing documentaries and video accounts of and from this time period.
- Summarizing and synthesizing information through discussion and writing.
- Reflection and connection to their lives, the world, and other texts.
- Independent research

Classroom Activities/ Lesson Plans:

Lesson One: The American Civil Rights Era: Casting the Major Characters

Essential Questions: Who were some major figures in the Civil Rights Era and what did they contribute to this movement? Why are they important to understanding this period in time?

Objectives:

SWBAT:

- ✓ Describe and explain 5 major figures in the Civil Rights Era, including: Jim Crow, the Delany Sisters, Dorie Miller, Jackie Robinson, and Emmett Till.
- ✓ Compare and contrast these 5 figures.
- ✓ Show the connection between these figures and the significance on the Civil Rights Era.
- ✓ Research another figure from this movement and compare this figure to the five already learned.

Materials:

- Chart paper/ markers
- 5 different texts on the following Civil Rights figures: Jim Crow, the Delany Sisters, Dorie Miller, Jackie Robinson, and Emmett Till
- Venn diagram graphic organizers
- Exit tickets

Process:

- Depending on students' level of background knowledge, teacher should review what students know/ think they know about these characters. A suggested activity is a brainstorm: list these five names on the board and have students write as many things they know about each one. After 5 minutes of brainstorming, the class will share while teacher takes notes on chart paper. This is using the same idea as a KWL. Chart paper should remain posted throughout unit and when students learn new things about a particular character, the information should be added.
- Introduce each character through a brief PowerPoint that allows students to take notes on the overview of each character.
- Using textual resources (see bibliography), divide students up into groups and have each group take responsibility for reading about a character. If there are more than 5 groups, teacher can choose to either pick another figure from the Civil Rights Era or have two groups read about the same person.
- This reading activity should be conducted as a jigsaw. After students read about their assigned person, they will summarize and list the most important ideas from their reading.
- If time allows or teacher chooses to extend activity, students can research their person using library and Internet resources. Groups may work together to create presentations on their research.
- After reading is completed, students will share their findings with the rest of the class and other class members are required to take notes on the presentations.

- Using the content learned, students will then create a Venn-Diagram and pick two Civil Rights figures and compare and contrast them based on the facts that were taught in the presentations. Teacher should require that students include a “significance statement” on the bottom of each Venn Diagram. This sentence should read: “_____ was an significant figure in the Civil Rights Era because _____”.
- As an exit-ticket/ closing activity, students will write on the following prompt: “What is one thing that connects a person we learned about with a person or event from present day? Why is this significant?”

Lesson Two: The American Civil Rights Era: The Main Event- The Children’s March

Essential Questions: What was the Children’s March? What is the purpose of a political movement that involves children as well as adults?

Objectives:

SWBAT:

- ✓ Explain the events that led up to the Children’s March
- ✓ Explain the major events and figures within the Children’s March
- ✓ Analyze and describe political movements in the form of nonviolence and protest.

Materials:

- Reading material for background knowledge on Birmingham, AL before the Children’s March
- Do-Now Writing Prompt
- Film *The Children’s March* by Teaching Tolerance
- Guided Questions for film
- Internet access for extension research activities

Process:

- Again, depending on students’ background knowledge, pre-teach by setting the stage through reading short texts discussing the events that were occurring in Birmingham prior to the Children’s March. Much of this information can be found in the research listed earlier in this unit.
- Suggested Do-Now- Writing prompt: “Would you break the law to stand up for what was right, even if it meant you may be in danger?” OR “What is a nonviolent protest and should children take part in this type of political movement?” *Teacher can adjust prompt depending on background knowledge, student interest and learner’s levels.*
- Pass out guided questions to the film, *The Children’s March*. Questions and answers can be found at www.teachingtolerance.org/children.
- Preview questions.
- Play film- as film plays, stop repeatedly to allow students to answer guided questions, discuss issues, and to allow teacher to ask leading questions.
- After film, discuss thoughts.
- Students are to work with partners on guided questions through sharing and discussing.
- Have students find out more about some of the important people mentioned in the film by exploring their websites using the focus question “Where are they now?”

- Governor George Wallace, governor of Alabama-
www.mindspring.com/~raywjones/gwallac.html
- Eugene “Bull” Conner, commissioner of public safety-
www.alabamamoments.state.al.us/sec62.html
- Reverend Andrew Young, movement leader-
www.nccusa.org/nccat50/youngbio.html

Lesson Three: The American Civil Rights Era: Continuing with the Main Event- Literature Experience

Note: The reading of this book will clearly take more than one day and this lesson should be used as an overview for planning this novel.

Essential Questions: How does history intersect with literature? How does the Civil Rights Era surface in literature and what does this add to our knowledge about this historical period?

Objectives:

SWBAT:

- ✓ Read the novel *The Watsons Go to Birmingham- 1963* by Christopher Paul Curtis and complete guided questions, writing prompts, and mini-quizzes showing their comprehension of the novel.
- ✓ Make connections between this novel and the Civil Rights Era and Children’s March.

Materials:

- Class set of novels- *The Watsons Go to Birmingham- 1963* by Christopher Paul Curtis
- Guided questions for each chapter
- Mini-quizzes to assess/ check for comprehension

Process:

- Depending on levels and needs of students, teacher will group children in guided reading groups.
- Book should be read in four different formats- teacher read aloud, whole class, partner reading, and guided reading groups.
- As students read book in groups, they should be answering questions and filling out related worksheets. A great resource is “The Watsons Go To Birmingham- With Connections Study Guide” by Holt, Rinehart and Winston. This booklet not only contains guided questions and mini-quizzes, but also activities to help students connect the novel to history and to their own lives. It is a fabulous resource and is recommended when planning to teach this novel.
- After completing this novel, students should produce a final project. Depending on teacher’s wishes, recommended activities include: writing a new ending, rewriting a chapter from a different perspective, creating an advertisement and new book cover, making a collage of three major characters and related images, and writing a scene for the

book as a play and acting it out for the class. These final projects will ensure that students gained a comprehension of the novel.

- Finally, students should connect their prior learning of the Civil Rights Era and the Children's March with *The Watsons Go to Birmingham*. This connection can be displayed through a project or through an essay that compares and contrasts these different events along with explains their overall learning and understanding of this time period.

Annotated Bibliography/ Resources:

Cain, A. E. (Ed.). (1965). *The Negro Heritage Library*. Yonkers, NY: Educational Heritage.

This book accounts for virtually every African American aspect of life including major leaders and movements during the first half of the 1900's. It is organized as an encyclopedia and presented in chronological order.

Curtis, C. P. (1995). *The Watsons Go to Birmingham- 1963*. New York, NY: Delacorte Press.

This is a historical novel telling the story of the Watsons, a family from Michigan, who travel to visit family in Birmingham in 1963. This story discusses the racial tensions during this time and highlights the Civil Rights Movement and the Children's March through a fictional account of the family's experience.

Fandel, J. (2007). *Martin Luther King, Jr. Great Civil Rights Leader*. Mankato, MN: Capstone Press.

This graphic novel is high-interest yet low readability (5th grade reading level) and describes the life and work of Dr. Martin Luther King through comic-strip style and bright illustrations.

Farris, C. K. (2003). *My Brother Martin: A Sister Remembers Growing Up with the Rev. Dr. Martin Luther King Jr.* New York, NY: Simon & Schuster Books.

This book is written by Christine King Farris, Martin Luther King Jr.'s older sister and is a memoir depicting his life from birth to his role as a Civil Rights leader. She describes his life in a personal account.

Finkelman, P. (Ed.). (2009). *Encyclopedia of African American History 1896 to the Present*. Oxford: University Press.

This set of encyclopedias covers African American history and culture from 1896 to present and contains 1,200 cross-references entries. It is a five-volume set that offers many depictions of African American history.

Haley, A. (1964). *The Autobiography of Malcolm X*. New York, NY: Random House Publishing Group.

This memoir tells the story of Malcolm X from his experience as a child through adulthood as a Civil Rights leader.

King, C., & Osborne, L. B. (1997). *Oh, Freedom: Kids Talk about the Civil Rights Movement with the People Who Made it Happen*. New York, NY: Scholastic, Inc.

This book is written for the adolescent reader and contains interviews with African Americans who were children during the Civil Rights Movement. Each chapter contains an interview, personal accounts and beautiful photographs.

Mighty Times: The Children's March. Dir. Hudson and Houston. DVD. Teaching Tolerance, 2005.

This 40 minute DVD depicts the history behind the Children's March and includes actual footage from this event. Interviews, recordings, and accounts highlight and tell this story.

Myers, W. D. (1992). *Malcolm X- A Fire Burning Brightly*. New York, NY: HarperCollins Publishers.

This is a descriptive picture book loaded with many colorful pictures and artwork that accompanies the life and work of Malcolm X.

Myers, W. D. (1965). *Malcolm X- By Any Means Necessary*. New York, NY: Scholastic Inc.

This text is written for the adolescent reader and is organized by discussing facts about Malcolm X, highlighting his role in the Civil Rights Movement.

Olson, L. (2001). *Freedom's Daughters: The Unsung Heroines of the Civil Rights Movement from 1830 to 1970*. New York, NY: Touchstone.

This is a comprehensive history book focusing on the women who played a pivotal role in the Civil Rights Movement. The histories of both white and African American women are included.

Rochelle, Belinda (1993). *Witnesses to Freedom: People Who Fought for Civil Rights*. New York, NY: Puffin.

This book is written for the adolescent reader and depicts various African American children who took part in the Civil Rights Movement. Each chapter describes a different child and/or the part they played in the Movement.

Stolley, R. B. (Ed.). (2000). *LIFE: Our Century in Pictures*. New York, NY: Bulfinch Press.

This is a large encyclopedia chronologically organized and depicts United States history during the 1900's through short, informative essays and articles and various pictures. The Civil Rights Era is greatly highlighted.

Taylor, Mildred D. (1987). *The Gold Cadillac*. New York, NY: Puffin Books.

This historical fiction is a novella written for a middle-school reader and investigates the prejudice and segregation that existed in the American South during the 1960's through the voyage of a young African American girl who travels from Ohio to the deeply segregated Mississippi.

Teaching Tolerance. (2005). *Mighty Times- The Children's March* (Teacher's Guide ed.) [Brochure]. Montgomery, AL: Jeff Sapp.

This brochure is an extra teaching resource for the documentary on the Children's March. This resource compliments the video and provides teaching projects and discussion points for previewing, during and after-viewing activities.

Appendix/ Standards:

The Core Curriculum of the School District of Philadelphia is aligned to the Pennsylvania Academic Standards for Reading, Writing, and Speaking and History. This unit focuses specifically on:

PA Standards for Reading, Writing, and Speaking

- 1.1 Learning to Read Independently
 - a. Locate various texts, media, and traditional resources
 - b. Analyze the structure of informational texts
 - c. Identify, describe, evaluate and synthesize the essential ideas in a text
- 1.2 Reading Critically in All Content Areas
 - a. Read and understand essential content of informational text and ideas
 - b. Produce work in at least one literary genre that follows the conventions of that genre
- 1.3 Reading, Analyzing, and Interpreting Literature
 - a. Read and understand works of literature
- 1.4 Types of Writing
 - a. Write complex informational pieces

- 1.5 Quality of Writing
 - a. Write with a sharp distinctive focus
 - b. Write using well developed content appropriate for the topic

PA Standards for History

- 8.1 Historical Analysis and Skill Development
 - a. Chronological thinking
 - b. Historical comprehension
 - c. Historical interpretation
 - d. Historical research

- 8.3 United States History
 - a. Contributions of individuals and groups
 - b. Documents, artifacts and historical places
 - c. Influences of continuity and change
 - d. Conflict and cooperation among groups