

CREATING ORIGINAL HISTORICAL FICTION USING HENRY "BOX" BROWN'S NARRATIVE AND RUNAWAY SLAVE ADS

A SOCIAL STUDIES LESSON PLAN

GRADES 6-8

Overview

One of the most famous slave narratives is that of Henry "Box" Brown who escaped from slavery by having himself shipped in a crate from Richmond, VA to Philadelphia, PA. He popularized his daring escape by creating a one-man show about his experiences that he performed in theaters. Escaping slavery by running away was one of the most overt forms of slave resistance, although the experience was rarely as dramatic or successful as Brown's daring adventure. In this lesson, students learn the structural components of a slave narrative by examining Brown's motives for running away, his path of escape and experiences along the way, and the result of his dramatic effort to escape bondage. In addition, students are provided examples of actual runaway slave ads that owners, who were trying to retrieve their "property," published in newspapers. These are primary sources that provide a rare window into the circumstances surrounding the escape of slaves and into the thoughts and feelings of slave masters. Because owners wanted to have their slaves captured and returned, they were very candid and detailed in the ads they placed. Owners provided physical descriptions of their slaves' bodies, facial features, and clothing. Together, the information students receive about the general structure of slave narratives, the excerpt from the narrative of Henry "Box" Brown, and a selection of runaway slave ads serve as the foundation for students to develop their own fictional, yet historically accurate, diary entries, or "mini-narratives" written from the perspective of a runaway slave.

Learning Objectives

Upon completion of this lesson plan, students should be able to:

- Discuss the life and escape of Henry "Box" Brown.
- Describe runaway slave advertisements.
- Explain why the information provided in runaway slave advertisements was often honest and accurate.
- Explain the four structural components often found in slave narratives.
- Provide a fictitious, but historically accurate, account of a runaway slave experience.

Guiding Question

What can we learn about slavery from both the prevalence and general content of runaway slave ads?

Suggested Time

2 class periods

Preparing to Teach the Lesson

1. Review Teacher Tool 1, which is a brief biography of Henry "Box" Brown.
2. Review Student Handout 2, which presents an excerpt from the narrative of Henry "Box" Brown.
3. View the short video, *One Noble Journey: A Box Marked Freedom*, featuring an actor portraying "Box" Brown describing his journey to freedom.
4. Review Teacher Tool 2, which contains a list of websites featuring runaway slave ads. Select at least five runaway slave ads to print and photocopy for distribution to your students.
5. Review Student Handout 1, which contains an overview of the general structure of slave narratives.
6. Review Student Handout 3, which presents a group activity in which students identify and summarize the components from "Box" Brown's narrative that fit into the general structure of slave narratives then share what they learned about Brown's experience within their group.
7. Review Student Handout 4, which presents a writing assignment based on "Box" Brown's narrative, your selected runaway slave ads, and the general structure of slave narratives.

Teaching the Lesson (Suggested Steps)

1. Begin this lesson by informing students that they will learn about slavery through runaway slave ads, analyzing the general structure (or four structural components) of runaway slave narratives, and reading part of the narrative written by Henry "Box" Brown.
2. Distribute Student Handout 1, which outlines the general structure of many slave narratives. *Note: In a longer unit on slavery, it is advisable to expose students to several slave narratives.* Go over the information on Student Handout 1 with your students.
3. Show the short video, *One Noble Journey: A Box Marked Freedom* to introduce your students to Henry "Box" Brown.
4. For homework or in class, distribute Student Handout 2, which presents an excerpt from the slave narrative written by Henry "Box" Brown. Ask students to read the excerpt.
5. Divide the class into groups and distribute Student Handout 3. Ask students to work collaboratively on identifying the content from the "Box" Brown narrative that fits into each of the structural components of a slave narrative.
6. Once the groups have completed Student Handout 3, discuss how they broke Brown's narrative into structural components.
7. Provide students with a brief introduction to runaway slave ads. Explain that runaway slave ads were written from the perspective of the slave owner who supported slavery and viewed the runaway slave as his or her property. Because the master wanted to get his or her property back as soon as possible, the physical descriptions of runaways in ads are usually very specific and offer accurate pictures of the slave's clothing and physical features. However, the language used to describe non-physical characteristics of the enslaved person should not be taken as an accurate description of the enslaved person. Descriptions in ads of the personality, character, and behavior of the enslaved reveal the racist attitudes of the slave owners who wrote the ads. For example, advertisements frequently used demeaning, racist terms such as "boy" for a man and

"wench" for a woman. Terms like "lurking," "deceitful," "cunning," "slow-witted," and "clumsy" are also commonplace in ads. These are revealing of owners' attitudes more than they are descriptive of the enslaved person's character, personality, or manner. Explain to students that enslaved people ran away throughout the era of slavery. Evidence of this is provided by the plethora of runaway slave ads placed in newspapers in the colonial and antebellum period.

8. Distribute copies of the runaway slave ads that you preselected from the online sources provided above (or others that you found on your own). Review the runaway slave ads with your students. Read several of them aloud or have students take turns reading them aloud.
9. Using the runaway slave advertisements as a stimulus in concert with Henry "Box" Brown's narrative, Student Handout 1, and the completed Student Handout 3, ask students to write 2-3 pages of historical fiction diary entries. In this writing assignment, students should try to identify with one or more of the individuals featured in the runaway slave ads and imagine what they experienced while running away. The runaway slave ads provide the names of the runaways, their physical description, and often some details about the circumstances surrounding their flight. Students should use these realistic details to trigger their imagination and creative thinking processes. One way to think about this writing activity is to use the ads as a "jumping off point" for a story that is told through first-person diary entries. The runaway stories must be plausible and historically accurate, but also descriptive. They must reflect realities and facts about the antebellum period and the relationships between masters and slaves. They should also include the components of the slave narrative structure.

Extending the Lesson

You may also wish to read the excerpts from two or three other runaway slave narratives (like those of George Moses Horton, Harriet Jacobs, Elizabeth Keckly, and William Henry Singleton) included on this website. If you are teaching a unit or longer session on slavery these would be excellent to incorporate.