

**GEORGE MOSES HORTON: CRAFTING VIRTUAL FREEDOM THROUGH POETRY**

A LANGUAGE ARTS LESSON PLAN

GRADES 3-5

**Overview**

In this lesson students explore the life and work of the nineteenth-century African American poet, George Moses Horton. Horton was the first slave to publish anti-slavery poetry; the first American of African descent to publish a book in the South; the only enslaved person to earn a living as a poet; and the only known poet in American history to produce a book of poems before he was able to write. Born into slavery, Horton worked to craft his own freedom. Horton's owner allowed him to live in "virtual freedom" and to sell his poetry to earn a living. He developed a flourishing business writing acrostic love poems customized for the sweethearts that his young male clientele courted. This entrepreneurial venture pre-dated the greeting card and valentine card business that is so popular today. Horton also wrote several books of poems on a broad variety of subjects, including slavery. Despite many obstacles, Horton recognized his poetic talent and took it seriously. Most importantly, he took steps to find and create opportunities that would enable him to further develop his natural gifts. Horton taught himself to read and write and soon was able to creatively express his thoughts and feelings on a broad range of subjects in his poems. He found individuals who could champion his work and support his desire for freedom. This lesson will introduce students to George Moses Horton, give them an opportunity to analyze some of his poetry, and encourage them to explore their own natural talents through writing an acrostic poem based on their personal gifts and interests.

**Learning Objectives**

Upon completion of this lesson, students will be able to:

- Recall the major accomplishments of George Moses Horton.
- Summarize some of the major obstacles George Moses Horton faced.
- Discuss the concepts of "virtual freedom" and "enslaved entrepreneurship."
- Explain how Horton recognized his gift of writing and capitalized on it.
- Identify one or more of George Moses Horton's poetical works.
- Explain the message or theme of a given poem written by Horton.
- Identify the purpose(s) of a given poem written by Horton.
- Explain why Horton's acrostic poetry is different from his other works in both form and purpose.
- Write an acrostic poem.
- Identify their own gifts and consider how they might further develop them.

**Guiding Questions**

Why are some people able to capitalize on their unique gifts and talents while others do not?  
Why was education so important to George Moses Horton?

## **Suggested Time**

1-2 class periods

## **Preparing to Teach the Lesson**

1. To learn about the life of George Moses Horton, you can read a brief biography in Teacher Tool 1. You can also read an overview of his life at <http://docsouth.unc.edu/fpn/hortonlife/bio.html>.
2. Watch "George Moses Horton, Poet Entrepreneur," a short video depicting Horton writing acrostic love poems for a profit. The video features a reading of "For the Fair Miss M. M. McL[ean]."
3. Review Teacher Tool 2, which provides an overview of "virtual freedom."
4. Review Teacher Tool 3, which provides an overview of "enslaved entrepreneurship."
5. Review the PDF slide show about the life of George Moses Horton along with Teacher Tool 4, which contains lecture notes to accompany each PDF slide.
6. Review Teacher Tool 5, which contains "The Slave's Complaint" along with notes to help you lead a discussion about the poem. Horton's poetry is sophisticated for this grade level, but you can encourage students to grasp the essence of the poems without understanding each word or each line. It is best to feature certain parts of the poem and help students through those parts as a class. You might decide which parts of the poem to highlight before teaching the lesson. The same is true for the second poem, "For the Fair Miss M. M. McL[ean]."
7. Review Teacher Tool 6, which contains the unpublished acrostic poem, "For the Fair Miss M. M. McL[ean]" along with notes to help you lead discussion about the poem.

## **Teaching the Lesson (Suggested Steps)**

1. Show slides 1-9 of the PDF slide show and use the lecture notes in Teacher Tool 4 to introduce George Moses Horton's life and work to your class. Leave the slide show up because you will be using slides 10-13 later in the lesson.
2. Lead a discussion about how George Moses Horton attained his "virtual freedom" by recognizing his literary gifts, by teaching himself to read and write, and by finding and creating opportunities to use his poetic talent to earn a living. Also discuss how Horton represents enslaved entrepreneurship.
3. Show slides 10 and 11 and distribute Student Handout 1. Read "The Slave's Complaint" aloud to your students and lead a discussion about the poem using the questions and notes in Teacher Tool 5.
4. Show slides 12 and 13 and distribute Student Handout 2. Read "For the Fair Miss M. M. McL[ean]" aloud to your students and lead a discussion about the poem using the questions and notes in Teacher Tool 6.
5. Show the short video, "George Moses Horton, Poet Entrepreneur," which depicts a reading of "For the Fair Miss M. M. McL[ean]" and Horton selling the original poem to earn money.
6. Ask students to write an acrostic poem using the letters of their own first and last names. This may be in free-style verse with or without rhyming. The first line of the

poem may use their name, i.e. "M-ary Smith loves to work with pre-school children."  
Students should highlight their own talents and interests in their acrostic poems. After the acrostics are written, have students volunteer to share their poems with the class.

### **Assessment (Optional)**

Review the Assessment. If you decide to use it, print the document for distribution to your students. Students are asked to write an essay describing the accomplishments of George Moses Horton, focusing on how he overcame obstacles and capitalized on his talents to create his own "virtual" freedom. In the essay students are also asked to consider their own gifts and how they may develop them further. A rubric is provided.

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