

## **HARRIET JACOBS AND ELIZABETH KECKLY: THE MATERIAL AND EMOTIONAL REALITIES OF CHILDHOOD IN SLAVERY**

A LANGUAGE ARTS LESSON PLAN

GRADES 6-8

### **Overview**

Harriet Jacobs and Elizabeth Keckly were both born into slavery and thus forced to confront the harsh circumstances of the institution as young children. Despite enslavement, moments of happiness and of fleeting material comfort punctuated the early lives of both Jacobs and Keckly. Nonetheless, these women were scarred by the brutal realities of an institution that frequently ripped apart families, separating parents from each other, and most poignantly, children from their parents. In this lesson, students will examine and identify the components of love, sadness, deprivation, and small comforts that defined the lives of enslaved children. They will read excerpts from the narratives of Jacobs and Keckly and will learn about their childhoods. Students will explore the process of making inferences and will consider what they can learn about childhood in slavery in general through examining the narratives of two women who had been enslaved as children. Note: Elizabeth Keckly's last name is often spelled "Keckley." We are honoring Keckly's own spelling of her last name, which lacked the extra "e." Although we encourage the use of "Keckly," some of the materials that you will reference for this lesson plan will present the name with the extra "e."

### **Learning Objectives**

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

- Discuss the lives of Harriet Jacobs and Elizabeth Keckly from childhood to adulthood.
- Describe the lives of enslaved children in general.
- Distinguish life experiences of children who were house slaves from those who were not.
- Recall how race and gender determined roles in nineteenth-century plantation society.
- Demonstrate improved ability in reading closely for details.
- Explain why incorrect inferences can be made when based on a limited number of sources.
- Demonstrate improved ability in making inferences.

### **Guiding Questions**

What was it like to be a female slave child in the nineteenth-century Upper South? What experiences defined Jacobs's and Keckly's memories of their enslaved childhoods? Why do we have to be cautious in making inferences based solely on one or two primary sources?

### **Suggested Time**

2 class periods

## Preparing to Teach the Lesson

1. Review Teacher Tools 1 and 2, which offer brief overviews of the lives of Harriet Jacobs and Elizabeth Keckly.
2. View the short videos *9 Feet Long and 7 Wide* (on Harriet Jacobs) and *My Dear Mother* (on Elizabeth Keckly). Be prepared to show these two videos to your class.
3. Review Teacher Tool 3 for a generalized overview of childhood slavery in the American South. For more information on this topic, you can visit the Encyclopedia of Children and Childhood in History and view an entry on Slavery in the United States at <http://www.faqs.org/childhood/Re-So/Slavery-United-States.html> or review the article "Family Life in the Slave Quarters: Survival Strategies" by Marie Jenkins Schwartz in the Organization of American Historians Magazine at <http://www.oah.org/pubs/magazine/family/schwartz.html>.
4. Review "*I was Born a Slave: Two African American Women Relate their Childhood Years and the Growing Awareness of Being Enslaved*" from the National Humanities Center Resource Toolbox. The document is available at <http://nationalhumanitiescenter.org/pds/maai/identity/text1/jacobskeckley.pdf>. This lesson plan requires your students to read this document, so decide if you should print it for reproduction or if they will read it in online.
5. Review Student Handout 1, which contains identification questions about Harriet Jacobs and Elizabeth Keckly based on the reading of "*I Was Born a Slave.*"
6. Review Teacher Tool 4, which is the same as Student Handout 1, but with the correct responses in bold for your use.
7. Review Student Handout 2, which contains a list of questions that require students to explore the types of inferences they can make from reading about the lives of two women who were enslaved as children.
8. Review Teacher Tool 5, which is the same as Student Handout 2 with notes added to help you lead a discussion on inferences.

## Teaching the Lesson (Suggested Steps)

1. To begin this lesson plan, show the brief videos on Harriet Jacobs and Elizabeth Keckly.
2. Either distribute "*I was Born a Slave: Two African American Women Relate their Childhood Years and the Growing Awareness of Being Enslaved*" or have students read it online.
3. Distribute Student Handout 1 and ask them to circle the appropriate response to the facts listed. Teacher Tool 4 contains the correct responses to the activity in Student Handout 1.
4. As a class, discuss correct responses to the fact list in Student Handout 1.
5. Distribute Student Handout 2 and ask students to respond to each of the statements about childhood slavery. Once students have completed Student Handout 2, tell them you will come back to it and discuss their responses later.
6. Using the information in Teacher Tool 3, provide students with an overview of childhood slavery in general.
7. Using Teacher Tool 5, have a class discussion about what helped them form their inferences and whether or not they were correct. Lead a discussion about generalizations and inferences. You might ask them such questions about inferences as "if you see a student with red hair walking out of a classroom, can you infer that all of the students in that class have red hair?" You might also ask them, "What if you were

in a hotel lobby filled with bald men? Would it be reasonable to infer that there was a meeting geared to bald men being held at the hotel?" Explain to students that with such a large number of bald men all together at the same place and time, it would be reasonable to infer that such an event was being held. Lead a discussion about how students can put together facts from multiple sources to increase their chances of making accurate inferences. Explain that they should be careful in making generalization based on only one or two sources. They should not make the assumption that the experiences of Keckly and Jacobs were shared by all enslaved children. Although the experiences of these two women are in many ways representative of the experiences of privileged female house slaves, more sources of information would be required in order to make an educated inference.

8. Based on the information in Teacher Tools 1 and 2, provide students with an overview of the lives of Harriet Jacobs and Elizabeth Keckly. Describe their progression from slavery to freedom and their contribution to American society and history (both in their time and in the present). Be sure to note Harriet Jacobs's escape from slavery (including hiding for seven years in a confined space), the narratives written by both former slaves, and Keckly's career as a dressmaker to affluent women, including Mary Todd Lincoln. Engage students in a discussion about how these two women, who were enslaved as children, went on to be free as adults and to accomplish so much.

### **Extending the Lesson**

- Encourage students to answer the following question in a one or two paragraph essay: Imagine that you were Harriet Jacobs or Elizabeth Keckly. What would be the worst thing about your childhood? How would you cope with your situation?
- Encourage students to write a one or two paragraph essay that discusses how Jacobs's and Keckly's childhood experiences in slavery helped to prepare them for their lives as adults. Encourage students to cite specific examples like how learning to sew as a child provided Keckly with the skills that she later used to earn a living.

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