

ELIZABETH KECKLY: FASHIONING A PUBLIC IMAGE

A SOCIAL STUDIES LESSON PLAN

GRADES 3-5

Overview

Over her lifetime, Elizabeth Keckly* developed her skill as a designer of beautiful custom-made dresses and became a major figure in women's fashion in the Civil War era. Keckly's creations enhanced the public image of first lady, Mary Todd Lincoln. Born into slavery in 1818 in Virginia, Keckly learned the needle arts from her mother, an enslaved seamstress. With her great skill and talent, Keckly eventually earned enough money to buy her own freedom and that of her son. In the early nineteenth-century, clothing was made by hand and reflected a person's social standing. Because fabric was very expensive, the enslaved and very poor wore clothes made from simple fabrics spun on a home spinning wheel, literally called "homespun." Slave clothing was made from a limited amount of fabric per year, so an enslaved person might have two outfits—one for summer and one for winter. Garments for middle and upper class women were made of finer, more expensive fabrics like silk and velvet and were complex and difficult to construct. In general, men's clothing was uniform and easier to make. Rich women could afford to follow the fashions (usually dictated by the latest styles in Paris) and have new dresses made each season. In this lesson, students learn about: Keckly's remarkable journey from enslaved seamstress to White House-insider and influential figure in the fashion world; the clothing of the rich and poor in the antebellum era; and the various ways clothing reflects and influences society and culture. Students will also gain an appreciation for the creative people who are "behind the scenes" working to make famous people look their best. In sum, teachers will use their students' understanding of clothing and fashion as a hook for examining slavery and freedom, social class, and other aspects of nineteenth-century life through the clothing and fashion of that era.

Learning Objectives

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

- Explain why a skilled dressmaker like Elizabeth Keckly could earn a respectable reputation and a good income.
- Define the terms *fashion* (as a noun and verb), *fashion designer*, *modiste*, *public image*, *style*, *couture*, and *haute couture* in their own words.
- Compare and contrast the clothing of poor and enslaved with that of the elite.
- Compare the process of acquiring clothing in the early nineteenth-century with that of today.

Guiding Questions

How did Elizabeth Keckly craft freedom for herself and others? What does and doesn't a person's clothing say about him/her? What is fashion and why does it change? How did Keckly help famous women fashion a public image? How do famous women today fashion a public image?

Suggested Time

2-3 class periods

Preparing to Teach the Lesson

1. If you are unfamiliar with Elizabeth Keckly's autobiographical work, *Behind the Scenes or Thirty Years a Slave, and Four Years in the White House*, you may read it at docsouth.unc.edu/neh/keckley/keckley.html or familiarize yourself with the brief summary of it at docsouth.unc.edu/highlights/keckley.html. You should also read Teacher Tool 1, which is a brief overview of Elizabeth Keckly's life.
2. Print and review Teacher Tool 2, which provides an overview of fashion in antebellum America.
3. Print and review Teacher Tool 3, which features some details about the differences between slave clothing and clothing of the elite and provides an overview of the variety within slave attire.
4. Review the PDF slide show that accompanies this lesson plan. This slide show is instrumental to teaching this lesson as it presents images of slave and elite clothing in nineteenth-century America as well as images of dresses created by Elizabeth Keckly.
5. Print and review Teacher Tool 4, which presents a table that identifies the subject and discussion questions/activities associated with each slide. It is important to review Teacher Tool 4 along with the PDF slide show as the Teacher Tool will serve as a guide when you are going through each slide in class. *Note: As each slide may generate an interesting class discussion, you may decide to break this lesson plan into two class periods. A natural breaking point is between slides 7 and 8. The first 7 slides focus on slave attire versus that of the elite and slides 8-11 focus on Elizabeth Keckly and her work.*
6. Review examples of fashionable dress for women in the nineteenth century from the following websites:
 - www.angelfire.com/nm/cw/stripe.html
 - www.sensibility.com/vintageimages/victorian/
7. Review examples of and information about nineteenth-century slave clothing at the following websites:
 - www.pbs.org/wnet/slavery/experience/gender/feature.html
 - www.loc.gov/rr/print/list/081_cwaf6.html
8. View the short video, *Dear Mother*, which features an actress portraying Elizabeth Keckly reading a letter she wrote to her mother while enslaved. Decide if you wish to show the video to your students.
9. Student Handouts 1, 2, and 3 provide three different directions you may choose to take this lesson. Review these Student Handouts and determine which you plan to distribute to students as either homework or in-class work. Student Handout 1 provides examples of how students dress differently in private and in public. Students are asked to discuss why this happens. Student Handout 2 leads students through conducting an oral interview with the oldest woman they know, focusing on how her experience with sewing has changed since she was young. Student Handout 3 leads students through the process of finding a picture of a dress designed by Elizabeth Keckly and creating their own version of the garment for a paper doll.

Teaching the Lesson (Suggested Steps)

1. Begin the lesson by telling students that they will learn about the nineteenth-century clothing of both elites and slaves and about the life and work of Elizabeth Keckly, a remarkable nineteenth-century fashion designer. Do not mention that Keckly was a former slave.
2. Show the PDF slide show and use Teacher Tool 4 as a guide for discussion questions and activities. This could take 1-2 class periods.
3. After you complete the PDF slide show, ask students to write a short essay about one of the many history-related themes that emerge in your discussion. Examples of questions or topics include: A) Who was Elizabeth Keckly and how did she craft freedom for herself and others with her sewing skills? B) Compare and contrast the clothing of enslaved people with that of wealthy people in the nineteenth-century.
4. If you wish to show the short video, *Dear Mother*, do so at this time.
5. Distribute the Student Handout (either 1, 2, or 3) that you preselected as an activity for the students. Have students work independently or in groups (depending on the Student Handout selected) to complete the activity.

Extending the Lesson

Option 1

Have students look at runaway slave advertisements at the following websites:

- www.afrigenas.com/library/runaway_ads/balt-intro.html
- www.vcdh.virginia.edu/gos/browse/browse_main.php
- <http://www.pbs.org/wgbh/aia/part1/1h309t.html>
- <http://scriptorium.lib.duke.edu/slavery/oldsouth.html>

Ask them to make notes about the clothing worn by the fugitive slaves and to use the web to research the types of clothes worn by the runaways. In many cases the runaways are not wearing typical slave clothing but clothing that is more expensive and fine, why?

Option 2

Select an antebellum picture for a male (boy or man, slave or slave owner). Make one set of clothing for a slave-era paper doll and a 2nd set for a modern era paper doll. Tell how the antebellum example you picked is similar to modern clothing.

Option 3

Students explore Elizabeth Keckly in the context of the transition of sewing technology. Elizabeth Keckly worked in a period of great technological change. Her own career spanned the change from hand sewing to use of the first sewing machines. Using the information provided on the Smithsonian Institute's History Wired website at <http://historywired.si.edu/detail.cfm?ID=502> (and any other sources you wish to use), students learn about the invention of the sewing machine, how it was used in the early construction of women's clothing, and how it reduced the effort of making clothing.

Option 4

Explore the history of blue jeans and the question: Why do people around the world wear blue jeans? Write a report on blue jeans, their origins, and how they have evolved into the uniform of our planet.

*Elizabeth Keckly's name is being spelled as she spelled it without the second "e." This is not the most common spelling of her name, however scholars advise the use of her own spelling of her name.

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