

COMPARING LANGUAGE OF SELF-EMPOWERMENTTEACHER TOOL 3: CONTEXTUALIZING DAVID WALKER'S *APPEAL*

This Teacher Tool provides historical context for David Walker's *Appeal to the Coloured Citizens of the World*, with an emphasis on the abolition movement and its impact on nineteenth-century politics and society, particularly from 1820 through the 1850s.

During David Walker's lifetime, attitudes towards slavery and relations between whites and blacks underwent significant change in the United States. In the 1790s, around the time of Walker's birth, the enlightenment and constitutional ideals of human equality caused many in the North and South to question the legitimacy of human bondage. Some expected that slavery would remain limited to the narrow agricultural sector in the southeast where large concentrations of enslaved people worked in tobacco and rice cultivation. Imbued with a spirit of liberty during the Revolutionary era, a number of slave owners freed their slaves and in so doing, increased the free black population. At the turn of the nineteenth century, free blacks shared many rights whites did, like the right to own property. In towns and cities many blacks were able to own and operate businesses, principally as artisans, and in the rural areas they established tight-knit communities that thrived off the land. In many areas of the South, free blacks were "given a pass" and treated with respect and even acceptance so long as they did not overtly challenge the status quo or white dominance and its principle institution, slavery. However, whenever there was a rebellion or disturbance within the slave population, those blacks who were already free were targeted, in many instances, simply because they were black and free.

By 1820, when David Walker was coming into manhood, he was already well acquainted with the institution of slavery having witnessed it firsthand in the vibrant port city of Wilmington, North Carolina, which had a large African American population. His mother was a free black, and by law his status followed hers. His father was likely a slave. Walker witnessed the expansion of the institution of slavery due to the rise of cotton cultivation in the Deep South. As plantation agriculture grew, the need for slave labor increased, causing many white southerners to abandon their thoughts about ending the institution. They became more resentful of free blacks as a group whose very existence contradicted the idea that to be black was to be enslaved. Many whites also responded with growing hostility to northerners who challenged slavery on moral grounds. Sectional tensions ignited during the Missouri Compromise in 1821, an effort to maintain a balance of power between slave and free states in Congress. As part of the Compromise, Missouri was admitted into the Union as a slave state, then Maine was admitted as a free state and slavery was not allowed to extend north of the 36° 30' latitude line. The Missouri Compromise symbolizes how the conflict over slavery had made its entry on the national central stage.

During this period, there were a great many social reforms occurring, fueled by the emotionalism and evangelism of the second Great Awakening, a religious movement sweeping the country. Slavery became a major moral issue that was hotly debated.

Out of these circumstances, an anti-slavery movement was born, primarily instigated by blacks themselves. The anti-slavery movement gained momentum throughout the 1820s. Initially, anti-slavery advocates supported the American Colonization Society (ACS), formed predominantly by whites in 1817, with the objective to end slavery gradually, and to send

African Americans to a newly established colony called Liberia, on the west coast of Africa. But the ACS appeared to many blacks to be most concerned with slaveholders' interest in ridding the nation of "troublesome" slaves and free blacks. The feeling that the ACS was a scheme to rid the nation of blacks and to make the United States a country for whites only, served to galvanize blacks as a political force in the North and to fuel an emerging radical abolition movement. Boston, where Walker was living in the late 1820s, was at the center of black abolitionist fervor. By the time Walker published his *Appeal* in 1829, free black activists were repudiating the colonization movement and calling for an immediate end to slavery. In 1831, William Lloyd Garrison published *The Liberator*, which is often heralded as the beginning of the anti-slavery political movement in America, but in fact, the movement had been born years earlier in black communities in the North.

In 1831, another pivotal event occurred that fueled the anti-slavery movement: Nat Turner led a violent slave rebellion in Virginia that left nearly 60 white people dead. Untold scores of blacks were killed in the aftermath of retaliation by vengeful whites. The publication of the *Appeal*, followed just two years later by Nat Turner's Rebellion and the publication of *The Liberator*, hardened the positions of abolitionists and their southern opponents.

From 1830 to 1860, the conflict between slaveholders in the South and anti-slavery advocates was affecting all segments of national life. Battle lines were drawn up in the social, economic, and religious spheres. Although Congress had managed to subdue their differences on the topic until the late 1840s, the end of the Mexican War and the subsequent struggle to define the status of the western territories regarding slavery, triggered new hostilities and ultimately ruptured the political party system. As the political crisis escalated in the 1850s, southern states adopted a siege mentality toward African Americans, both enslaved and free, in their midst. Liberties and privileges that free blacks had enjoyed were gradually stripped away from them and the assault of free black rights reached its peak in the 1850s. The Supreme Court, in the case of Dred Scott in 1857, proclaimed that blacks have "no rights which the white man was bound to respect." By 1860, it was becoming clear that the abolition of slavery would not be possible in the United States without violence, and soon afterward, in 1861, the Civil War began.

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