

## Stowe's models of American attitudes toward race

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DOCUMENTS: *Uncle Tom's Cabin* and *Our Nig or, Sketches from the Life of a Free Black*

### FOCUS OF SUBJECT AREA

- Stowe's use of stereotypical, static characters to represent prevailing 19<sup>th</sup> Century American thought on race.
- Stowe's use of literary devices to suggest implicit meanings.
- Keeping track of plot events in an unwieldy, by modern standards, novel.
- An author's underlying racial assumptions are revealed by her characters' behaviors.
- Stereotypical characters also appear in *Our Nig*, a contemporaneous book; which suggests that the types are common to the period's literature.

### INSTRUCTIONAL OBJECTIVES

- Understand Romantic literature's pattern of character exposition as an essential part of plot development; unlike contemporary fiction- including video, which relies more on event, less on authorial presentation.
- Recognize authors' characterization techniques by focusing on characters' own behavior, including speech.
- Recognize characters as historical types, whose interactions echo political realities.

### STRATEGIES

Students will accomplish the instructional objectives:

- After completing the novel independently, close reexamination of sections of *Uncle Tom's Cabin*.
- Following teacher managed consideration of *Our Nig*, students discover parallels to *Uncle Tom's Cabin*.
- Small group peer discussions, followed by report to the entire class, focused on one aspect of the novel.
- Creative re-telling, in the voice of a single character, of a scene in the novel.

### OVERVIEW OF LESSON ACTIVITIES

- Students will first complete reading *Uncle Tom's Cabin*, as an independent assignment, one of ten such independent assignments in the year.
- While students independently read *Uncle Tom's Cabin*, class periods are spent considering *Our Nig*, with special attention to characters, characterization, and implied authorial judgments. Likely, this consideration will include prepared, dramatic readings of sections of *Our Nig*.
- This lesson will follow the reading, and occur in the second day of follow up activities – the first day being spent in general discussion centered on plot and on important themes.
- The lesson will require a full class (70 minutes), if quotes are provided. It will require two classes if groups come up with their own quotes. In either case, part of a later class will be devoted to sharing and discussing the students' assessment narratives.

#### ASSESSMENT

Following discussion of each group's findings, each student will compose a re-telling of an event reported (in third person) in the novel, as seen through the eyes of one of the characters examined in the class. The re-telling should reflect biases and racial understandings of the character as they were discussed in the class. These retellings will be shared with the entire class, to prompt further discussion, and to set up an authentic audience situation for each writer.

#### QUESTIONS ADDRESSED

- How does Stowe use character exposition, in addition to plot, to establish her characters in *Uncle Tom's Cabin*?
- What perceptions of race, particularly the American Black's situation, does Stowe present in *Uncle Tom's Cabin*?
- How does Stowe employ language to convey her characters' underlying assumptions about race?
- What underlying moral assumptions does Stowe develop through her characters' actions and speech, especially speech?
- What similarities in character types in the two texts suggest that these are familiar types to mid 19<sup>th</sup> Century readers?

#### MATERIALS

- Individual student copies of *Uncle Tom's Cabin*.

Stowe, Harriet Beecher. *Uncle Tom's Cabin*. New York: Pocket Books: Simon and Schuster, 2004.

- Individual student copies of *Our Nig*.  
Wilson, Harriet E. *Our Nig or, Sketches from the Life of a Free Black*. New York: Penguin Books, 2005.
- Assignment sheet for each student
- If students are not searching for their own quotes, a set of character quotes for each group.  
(Tom, p 503 - George: p529 – Cassie, p448 – Legree, p407 – Eva, p352 – Marie St. Claire, p321)

### LESSON OPENING

Begin the lesson with a brief review of the novel's plot, with emphasis on the importance of Haley, Legree, Tom, George, Cassie, Marie St Clair, and Eva. Relate these characters to static characters in previous readings, whose fixed emphases moves plot by virtue of other characters' reactions to them. Twain's Jim, Melville's Ahab and Hawthorne's Chillingworth would be useful allusions. Also, provide a brief review of language issues, tone, and implied meanings.

### PROCEDURE

- Divide class into six groups. Each group's task is to closely consider a long quote from *Uncle Tom's Cabin*. First, together, consider the provided model Mr. Haley quote and answer. Either provide the quotes, or set as part of the task that groups will locate their own representative quote or quotes. Each quote is centered on a single character. Each group will respond to these questions, and assemble equate notes for a three minute presentation to the class.
  1. Where does this passage fit in the plot? What important events lead up to this scene? What important events are consequences of this scene?
  2. What is the literal meaning of this passage?
  3. What is inferred in this passage about the character's underlying assumptions? What **specific** evidence from this passage supports your answer?
  4. What does this character perceive as essential to who he or she is? What **specific** evidence from this passage supports your answer?
  5. What does this character perceive as essential about black people? What **specific** evidence from this passage supports your answer?
  6. What seems to be Stowe's opinion of this character? What **specific** evidence from this passage supports your answer?

7. What character from *Our Nig* seems to represent the same attitudes? What **specific** evidence from the two books supports your answer?

- Upon completion (20 minutes?) Each group presents findings. Non-presenters should listen actively; even take notes, since they may choose a character from another group's presentation for their assessment task.
- After all presentations, and any discussion, read aloud, pp 406, 7 (the slave market). Limiting themselves to this scene, students will narrate it through the eyes of one of our six characters. The retellings should be consistent with the characterizations presented by the groups.

**MODEL RESPONSE:** p6, Mr. Haley

**Quote:** "Some folks don't believe there is pious niggers, Shelby," said Haley, with a candid flourish of his hand, "but I do. I had a fellow now, in this yer last lot I took to Orleans" –'t pray: and he was quiet and gentle like. He fetched me a good sum, too, for I bought him cheap of a man that was 'bliged to sell out; so I realized six hundred on him. Yes, I consider religion a valeyable thing in a nigger, when it's the genuine article and no mistake."

1. This is Mr. Haley, the slave trader, talking to Mr. Shelby. Haley is explaining why Tom is a desirable purchase. After this conversation, Tom and Emmreline are sold and their trip down river begins.
2. Haley says that religious blacks are more docile, and make better slaves. He made a good profit on a religious black man last year.
3. Haley is not concerned about slaves' spirituality. His emphasis is on how religion increases a slave's monetary value. His example of a good religious slave is one who sells for a good price.
4. He is a trader, able to recognize commercial value in a commodity. "Some folks don't believe there is pious niggers, but I do."
5. Haley believes that black people are objects; important only in their ability to make a profit for him. "Religion is a valeyable thing. '
6. Stowe represents Haley as a despicable person. He a direct agent for Tom's (the novel's most sympathetic character) suffering.
7. Henry Reed, Jane's disappointed suitor, but her mean spirited family's favorite, is interested only in "amassing wealth."

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