Incidents in the Life of a Slave Girl
School Show Study Guide

Wells Fargo Center for the Arts
Friday, February 8, 2013
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LITERATURE TO LIFE® is a performance-based literacy program that presents professionally stage verbatim adaptations of significant American literary works. The program gives students a new form of access to literature by bringing to life the world of the book with performances that create an atmosphere of discovery and spark the imagination. Literature to Life encourages reading, writing and critical thinking and provides a catalyst for learning and self-expression.

*Incidents in the Life of a Slave Girl*, written in the 1850's by former slave Harriet Jacobs, is brought to vibrant life in this Literature to Life® adaptation commissioned by the New-York Historical Society. The author is the protagonist in this solo piece which illuminates in shocking fashion the traumas of slavery, particularly for women and children. The stage adaptation culminates in Harriet Jacobs's powerful and moving experiences during the seven years she spent hiding in The Loophole, a crawl space in her grandmother's attic. Audiences, having absorbed the images without sets or props, only the truth of the author's evocative words, will emerge with a visceral experience that may become and enduring part of their understanding of the "peculiar institution", slavery.

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**Theatre Etiquette**

To make the theatre-going experience more enjoyable for everyone, a code of behavior has been established. When attending theatrical performances, remember these simple rules of conduct.

- Be on time for the performance.
- Do not eat, drink, or chew gum in the theatre.
- Turn off all cellular phones and electronic devises.
- Be sure to use the restroom BEFORE the pre-show discussion begins.
- Talk before or after the performance only. Remember that the people near you and on stage can hear you.
- Be an active participant in the pre- and post-show discussions in order to deepen your experience with Literature to Life.
- Appropriate responses to the performance, such as laughing and applauding, are appreciated.
- Act with maturity during romantic, violent, and other challenging scenes.
- Do not leave after the performance, a post-show discussion will follow including a Q&A with the actor.
- Open your eyes, ears, and mind to the entire theatrical experience!
The following exercises are designed to be used BEFORE seeing the play.

Relating to the Text
Objectives: Students will express their expectations or impressions of *Incidents in the Life of a Slave Girl* using physical communication.

The group forms a circle, and a copy of the Penguin Classics publication of *Incidents in the Life of a Slave Girl*, by Harriet Jacobs is placed at the center. Each student has the opportunity to place their body in relation to the book, thus expressing something about how they feel about it. (E.g. A person who knows nothing about the book may stand at a distance from the book and stare at it. A person who thinks he’s going to love it may cradle it in his arms. A person who thinks it’s going to be boring may turn his back to the book.)

Analyzing Images
Objectives: Students will critically think about images of Harriet Jacobs based on three contrasting sources.

Break the students up into three groups. Provide each group with one of three sources: the picture from the cover of the Penguin Classic edition (*Slave Market*, Richmond, Va., ca. 1855 c.Francis G. Mayar/Corbis) on the previous page of this guide; the text from the historical document on the next page; or the photograph of Harriet Jacobs on this page. Then, instruct each group to elect one member to take notes and make a list of the group’s impressions of the person shown or described. (physical attributes, emotional state, etc.)

Once each group has completed the task, have the class reconvene as a larger group in order to present their lists and corresponding source image or text. After each presentation, have the class brainstorm factors that may have contributed to the attributes described in each image (examples may include physical environment, time period, economic circumstances, etc.)

Possible Discussion Questions:
1. Are the three descriptions one person in various circumstances, or are they describing different people?
2. Which is the most reliable description of Harriet Jacobs? Why?
3. Will a memoir or autobiography provide a more or less accurate description of Harriet Jacobs.
4. How do you think the actor’s portrayal of Harriet Jacobs will compare to the three descriptions you have just considered.
Compare & Contrast Tableaux

Break the class into groups of three. Each group will create three frozen pictures depicting the three images considered in the previous exercise (photo, book cover, and historical document.) Students may decide among themselves which group member will be “Harriet” in each of the scenarios, while the remaining two group members will portray part of that Harriet’s environment. Encourage students to explore both animate and inanimate roles (i.e. chair, photographer, auctioneer). Allow each group a few minutes to rehearse, and then invite groups to volunteer to present.

As each group presents, ask the audience what they see going on in the image. As an extended exercise, inform the students that you will activate the image by tapping them while frozen in their tableaux and upon activation have them share a word or a phrase in character that gives the audience a clue as to how their character is feeling/thinking in the tableau.

Post Tableaux Discussion:

1. Was there a chronological progression to the three images of Harriet?
2. Did portraying or observing a live portrayal-change your impression of Harriet? Did it make you more or less empathetic?
3. How do you think experiencing a play about her life will affect your impressions?
**Slavery**
1) The state of one bound in servitude as the property of a slaveholder or household.
2) The practice of owning slaves.
3) The keeping of slaves as a practice or institution.

**Mulatto**
1) The offspring of one black parent and one white parent.
2) A person on a light brown color.
3) A person whose ancestry is a mixture of Negro and Caucasian.

**Fugitive Slave**
A person who is running away from intolerable circumstances.

**Abolitionist**
Someone who advocated or supported the end of slavery in the U.S.

**Emancipation**
Freeing someone from the control of another.

**Frederick Douglass**
American abolitionist and journalist who escaped from slavery (1838) and became an influential lecturer in the North and abroad. He wrote Narrative of the Life of Frederick Douglass (1845) and co-founded and edited the North Star (1847-1860), an abolitionist newspaper.

**RELEVANT VOCABULARY**

*William Lloyd Garrison*
An American abolitionist leader who founded and published *The Liberator* (1831-1865), an antislavery journal.

*Cunning*
A skill employed in a shrewd or sly manner, as in deceiving; craftiness.

*Loophole*
1) A means of escape or evasion; a means or opportunity of evading a rule, law, etc.
2) A small or narrow opening, as in a wall, for looking through, for admitting light and air.

*Retreat*
A place affording peace, quiet, privacy, or security.

*Gimlet*
A small hand tool having a spiraled shank, a screw tip, and a cross handle and used for boring holes.

*American Civil War*
Civil war in the United States between the North and the South; 1861-1865.
Harriet Jacobs: A Timeline

1808 Five years before Harriet Jacobs' birth in 1813, U.S. abolishes the slave trade.

1813 Harriet Jacobs is born.

1819 Harriet Jacobs' mother dies and Harriet realizes that she is a slave.

1820 Liberia, a country in Africa is founded for the repatriation of Negroes.

1825 Harriet becomes the property of Dr. Flint's little daughter when her mistress dies.

1826 Harriet Jacobs' grandmother is freed. Harriet's father dies.
Both John Adams and Thomas Jefferson die on July 4th on the 50th anniversary of the Declaration of Independence.

1827 Harriet's uncle Benjamin attempts to escape by boat to New York only to be captured and returned to his master. Benjamin escapes to Baltimore and then to New York.

1828 Dr. Flint begins to harass Harriet and he tries to sexually exploit her.

1829 Harriet Jacobs' and her newborn son by "Mr. Sands" move in with her grandmother.

1831 Harriet's daughter is born.
William Lloyd Garrison begins publishing the abolitionist periodical The Liberator in Boston.
A Virginia slave, named Nat Turner, leads a revolt in which 55 Whites die.

1835 Harriet Jacobs begins hiding out in the garret of her grandmother's house.

1842 She leaves the garret and escapes to the North after hiding out for 7 years.

1850 Harriet moves to New York City.

1853 Harriet's grandmother dies. Harriet starts to write about her experiences in anonymous letters to a New York newspaper. Later she begins to write her book Incidents in the Life of a Slave Girl.

1861 Harriet Jacobs' book Incidents in the Life of a Slave Girl is published (January) under the pseudonym Linda Brent.

1897 Harriet Jacobs dies on March 7, in Washington, D.C.
The Following Exercises are designed to be used AFTER seeing the performance.

Marketing Research Project
1. Have students explore the persons in publishing who decide what book covers should look like and on what they base their decisions.
2. Have the students discuss what went into the book cover choice for the Penguin Classics edition. As an extended excercise, invite students to bring in their favorite books and discuss the cover image selection.

Visual Art Project
Provide the students with markers, colored pencils, paper, magazines that can be used to cut out images/words. Then, instruct them to create their own design for a book cover of Harriet Jacobs’ *Incidents in the Life of a Slave Girl* based on what they know about Harriet.

Creative Writing
1. **Letter Writing: (POST SHOW)**
   Instruct the students to write a letter from Harriet Jacobs’s point-of-view voicing her hopes for what modern day readers of her book *Incidents in the Life of a Slave Girl* will learn from her story.

2. **Poem: (POST SHOW)**
   Instruct the students to write a poem using the following template and by filling in the blanks:
   
   Freedom is ____________________
   
   Freedom tastes like____________________.
   
   Freedom smells like__________________.
   
   Freedom feels like___________________.
   
   Freedom looks like____________________.
   
   Freedom is_________________________. (repeat the first line)

3. **Creative Writing (POST SHOW)**
   Read the chapter called The Loophole of Retreat. As a group define the term “Loophole of Retreat.” Next, ask the students to write creatively about their own personal “Loophole of Retreat.” Inform them that it could be a poem, rap, short story, song, monologue, scene or letter. Lastly, have the students share their writing.
We want to hear from YOU and your STUDENTS!
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