

SPIRITUALS...THE SONG OF FATHER

Goals:

This lesson plan introduces students to the role that spirituals have played in African American history and religion. The lesson begins with a review of factors that contributed to the development of the spiritual, which reflects the influence of African religious traditions, Christian traditions, and the conditions of slavery. Students explore the community-building power of this combination by listening to a performance of "Swing Low, Sweet Chariot," perhaps the best-known spiritual. They then turn to the 19th-century biography of Harriet Tubman to examine how she used spirituals as a secret signal to fugitive slaves on the Underground Railroad. Against this background, students reconsider the impact of the line from "an old Negro spiritual" with which Martin Luther King, Jr., ended his famous "I Have A Dream" speech and the influence of spirituals on his speaking style. Finally, to conclude the lesson, students collect spirituals by interviewing family members, friends, and acquaintances, in order to investigate how deeply this African American religious tradition has woven itself into American culture, and share similar songs that reflect their heritage.

Objectives: Sol: US 1. 8d, M, 9:1a

- (1) To learn about the role spirituals have played in African American history and religion;
- (2) To examine Harriet Tubman's use of spirituals in her work for the Underground Railroad;
- (3) To explore the continuing power of the spiritual in the Civil Rights Movement and as a shared American heritage;
- (4) To gain experience in working with oral tradition, biography, and song as types of historical evidence.

Prerequisites:

Begin by providing students with background on the development of spirituals, referring to the posting on "[African-American Spirituals](#)" and the essay on "[African-American Religion in the Nineteenth Century](#)" at the [National Humanities Center](#) website. (For the posting, click "TeacherServe@" on the website's homepage, and then click on the icon for "Divining America." From there, click "Getting Back to You" and select "[African-American Spirituals](#)" from the menu below. For the essay, click "19th Century" on the "Divining America" webpage, then click "[African-American Religion](#).")

- Inform students that spirituals arose in the early 19th century among African American slaves who had been denied the opportunity to practice traditional African religions for more than a generation and had adopted Christianity. For the most part, slaves were prohibited from forming their own congregations for fear that they would plot rebellion if allowed to meet on their own. Nonetheless, slaves throughout the South organized what has been called an "invisible institution" by meeting secretly, often at night, to worship together. It was at these meetings that preachers developed the rhythmic, engaging style distinctive of African American Christianity, and that worshippers developed the spiritual, mixing African performance traditions with hymns from the white churches.
- Explain to students that scholars have long debated the extent of African influence on the spiritual, but that most now trace the "call and response" pattern in which they are typically performed to worship traditions in West Africa. This is a pattern of alternation between the voice of an individual and the voice of the congregation through which individual sorrows, hopes, and joys are shared by the community. In the performance of spirituals, in other words, slaves were able to create a religious refuge from their dehumanizing condition, affirming their humanity as individuals and their support for one another through an act of communal worship.
- Point out to students that spirituals also reflect the influence of slavery in their emphasis on traditional Christian themes of salvation, which in this context take on a double meaning. The worshippers sing of their journey toward spiritual freedom through faith, but the song also expresses their hope for physical freedom through God's grace. These two levels of meaning are especially clear in the many spirituals that recount God's deliverance of his chosen people in the Old Testament, in whom African American slaves saw a reflection of their own suffering.

Materials: Chalk, black board, piano, internet, tapes, CD's, music, scores

Lesson Description\Lesson Procedure:

Have students experiment with this community-building power by listening to (or singing) a spiritual in class. A text of what is probably the most widely known spiritual, "Swing Low, Sweet Chariot," is provided below (in standard spelling rather than dialect). Have students notice the song's call-and-response pattern and reflect on the experience of emerging from the group in the solo lines (in italic) and then feeling the group affirm this individual "testimony" with its response.

Swing low, sweet chariot,
Coming for to carry me home.
Swing low, sweet chariot,
Coming for to carry me home.

Swing low, sweet chariot,
Coming for to carry me home.
Swing low, sweet chariot,
Coming for to carry me home.

I looked over Jordan, and what did I see,
Coming for to carry me home?
A band of angels coming after me,
Coming for to carry me home.

If you get there before I do,
Coming for to carry me home.
Tell all my friends I'm coming too,
Coming for to carry me home.

To what extent is this spiritual a song about escaping the physical conditions of slavery? To what extent is it an expression of religious hope and faith? Have students speculate on the role sharing spirituals in this way might have played for African Americans living in slavery.

Turn next to examine the role spirituals played for fugitive slaves, who sometimes used them as a secret code. This chapter in the history of the spiritual is best illustrated by several episodes in the life of Harriet Tubman as recounted in [Harriet, the Moses of Her People](#), a 19th-century biography based on interviews with this most famous conductor on the Underground Railroad, which is available through EDSITEment at the [Documenting the American South](#) website. (At the website's homepage, click on "North American Slave Narratives," then click "Collection of Electronic Texts." Scroll down and click on "Bradford, Sarah H., Harriet, the Moses of Her People," then click "[HTML file](#)" for the text.)

- Have students read the account of Harriet's own escape from slavery where she uses a spiritual to let her fellow slaves know about her secret plans:

*When dat ar ole chariot comes,
I'm gwine to lebe you,
I'm boun' for de promised land,
Frien's, I'm gwine to lebe you.*

*I'm sorry, frien's, to lebe you,
Farewell ! oh, farewell!
But I'll meet you in de mornin',
Farewell! oh, farewell!*

*I'll meet you in de mornin',
When you reach de promised land;
On de oder side of Jordan,
For I'm boun' for de promised land.*

What kind of leave-taking is this song about when it is performed as part of religious worship? What is the figurative or coded meaning Harriet communicates to her friends through the song? What is the relationship between these two levels of meaning? How is Harriet's escape like a passing away from the viewpoint of those she will leave behind? How does the song serve to create a bond that will connect her to her friends even after she is gone? Through questions like these, help students recognize that Harriet draws on the community-building power of the spiritual to add religious and social significance to her departure. Her song reaffirms her place in the slave community, even as she declares her intention to leave it, and at the same time expresses the double faith in salvation that will sustain her on her way.

- In a later episode when Harriet is guiding other slaves to freedom, she uses a spiritual to reassure them that they have eluded a pack of slave hunters:

Up and down the road she passes to see if the coast is clear, and then to make them certain that it is their leader who is coming, she breaks out into the plaintive strains of the song, forbidden to her people at the South, but which she and her followers delight to sing together:

*Oh go down, Moses,
Way down into Egypt's land,
Tell old Pharaoh,
Let my people go.*

*Oh Pharaoh said he would go cross,
Let my people go,
And don't get lost in de wilderness,
Let my people go.*

*Oh go down, Moses,
Way down into Egypt's land,
Tell old Pharaoh,
Let my people go.*

*You may hinder me here, but you can't up dere,
Let my people go,
He sits in de Hebben and answers prayer,
Let my people go!*

*Oh go down, Moses,
Way down into Egypt's land,
Tell old Pharaoh,
Let my people go.*

Have students explain the literal and figurative levels of meaning in this song. How does this spiritual fit the circumstances of a narrow escape from slave hunters? To what extent is it a signal and celebration of their escape? To what extent is it a prayer of thanks for their escape? Again, help students recognize that the spiritual infuses a religious significance into the situation and serves to reaffirm the group's strength as a community.

The use of spirituals not only in worship but also in the struggle for freedom is a tradition that continued in the Civil Rights Movement of the 1950s and 1960s. As a last step in this survey of the spiritual in African American history, have students look at the conclusion of Martin Luther King, Jr.'s, "[I Have A Dream](#)" speech, which is available through EDSITEment at the [Martin Luther King Jr. Papers Project](#) website. (At the Most Popular request's Page, click on "March on Washington for Jobs and Freedom")

So let freedom ring from the prodigious hilltops of New Hampshire. Let freedom ring from the mighty mountains of New York. Let freedom ring from the heightening Alleghenies of Pennsylvania. Let freedom ring from the snow-capped Rockies of Colorado. Let freedom ring from the curvaceous slopes of California. But not only that -- let freedom ring from Stone Mountain of Georgia. Let freedom ring from Lookout Mountain of Tennessee. Let freedom ring from every hill and molehill of Mississippi -- from every mountainside!

When we let freedom ring, when we let it ring from every village and every hamlet, from every state and every city, we will be able to speed up that day when all of God's children, black men and white men, Jews and Gentiles, Protestants and Catholics, will be able to join hands and sing in the words of the old Negro spiritual, "Free at last, free at last! Thank God Almighty, we are free at last!"

Have students explain how Martin Luther King, Jr. uses the call-and-response cadences of the spiritual to build his speech. Have them comment also on the figurative meaning behind his literal listing of mountaintops in the United States. Have them note finally how he uses the community-building power of the spiritual to rally support for the Civil Rights Movement. Who are members of the community that will respond to his call? What binds them into a community? Shared experiences? Shared beliefs? Explore, too, the part religion plays in this closing gesture of the speech. Is there a religious significance to the communal song Martin Luther King, Jr. envisions? Does he impart a religious dimension to the 1963 March on Washington that was the occasion for his speech? What is the faith he proclaims here to members of diverse religious denominations as a faith they all share?

Assessment/Evaluation:

Conclude this lesson by having students collect spirituals and other shared songs of their heritage by interviewing family members, friends, and acquaintances in their own community. Some people they talk to may know many songs; some may know only a few scattered verses. If possible, have students record the songs they collect on audiocassette and transcribe the words to create a class booklet, noting for each text where, when, and from whom they collected it, as well as any reminiscences or facts about the song that their source provides. What ethnic groups and religious denominations are represented in your collection? How diverse are the circumstances in which people learned these songs? How pervasive has the spiritual become in American society, and what do spirituals mean to Americans today?