

POPULAR CULTURE AS A TEACHING STRATEGY: THE AMERICAN SLAVE EXPERIENCE

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Popular culture has always been a mirror of American society.¹ Although produced mostly for mass entertainment, many forms of popular culture were concerned with social problems, moral reform, and attempts to understand society and human nature. As method, popular culture can be used to study a given historical event or time in which a particular genre was popular. In the classroom, by studying examples of popular culture, students can gain practice in the uses or applications of the historical method and opportunities to acquire a "feeling" and purpose for its use. Students can learn to rely on their own methodology, and to draw and test their own conclusions rather than accept those already formulated by teachers, historians, or textbooks. Students also learn to use original documents as sources of historical content to provide information and material for these activities. Introducing popular culture is an exciting way to stimulate students to demonstrate imagination and creativity in such skills as posing significant questions, locating appropriate data, subjecting that information to critical analysis, synthesizing these diverse materials, and expressing the results in articulate, convincing oral or written presentation.

In my classes I have used four popular culture genre--the antislavery almanac, the dime novel, the moving panorama, and the propaganda play--to provide students the opportunity to offer insights and to state viewpoints about select historical events, themes, and concepts within eighteenth and nineteenth-century American agricultural-plantation society. These activities can help students understand historical concepts and themes and gain a better perspective of the human drama that characterizes history, in general, and slavery, in particular. These activities provide students with a vicarious experience, and demonstrate the spiritual, cultural, social, political, and economic difficulties suffered by the slaves.²

HISTORY AND PROCEDURE OF EACH TECHNIQUE

Anti-Slavery Almanac

History--The almanac played an important role in the everyday lives of many early Americans from the seventeenth to the nineteenth century.³ Second only to the Bible in use, these forerunners of modern magazines contained general information related to agricultural data and weather forecasts during a given calendar year, discussed political, religious, and social issues, and provided a collection of useful or interesting facts such as folk-medicine cures. The New York Anti-Slavery Society from 1836 to 1840, and the American and Foreign Anti-Slavery Society from 1844 to 1852, realized the popularity and propaganda value of such literature by publishing a series of abolitionist almanacs to be placed in every home throughout the New England states. Entitled The American Anti-Slavery Almanac and The Liberty Almanac, these publications contained numerous abolitionist principles and arguments and antislavery facts and anecdotes. Each page, including the title cover, had black and white woodblock pictures that were very graphic, "a sermon in itself,"⁴ brutally depicting the harsh realities of slavery.

Procedure--The almanac is a simple transmission of information activity that can be used in a relatively short period of time, one to three days.

The following steps are used in designing and writing an antislavery almanac:

1. The teacher gives a brief history of almanacs and provides students with an overview of the assignment.
2. Students research the concept/theme that the teacher wants emphasized.
3. Students design a title page that should include the title of Anti-Slavery Almanac in bold lettering at the top of the page, a drawing representing the theme of the almanac, and the student's name at the bottom of the page.
4. Students construct the almanac pages (amount determined by the teacher) based on their research by drawing a black and white graphic picture about the slave experience at the top third of an 8 1/2 x 11 page. Below the picture, the students will describe in detail the nature of the picture.

Dime Novel

History--The dime novel was a form of American literature that gained popularity from 1845 to 1910.⁵ Dime novels (a misnomer, as most cost a nickel) were written to entertain the reading public with fast-paced action, high adventure, and ethically uplifting stories that emphasized the triumph of good over evil. Historically, topics of the dime novel covered events from the pioneering of the West in the nineteenth century to the urbanization of cities at the turn of the twentieth century.

Although making no pretensions to be historical novels, many of the early stories dealt with real people and actual events in order to sell their product to the public. On occasion, the dime novel constituted a significant social statement regarding various moral issues that affected American society. The dime novel, Maum Guinea and Her Plantation "Children," or, Holiday Week On A Louisiana Estate, was a slave romance that attacked the morality of slavery and the double standards of slave owners.⁶ Whatever the theme of the dime novel, the story line always followed a simple formula: rural or urban setting, moral hero, rugged individualism, crafty villain, heavily plotted cliffhanger, accomplished heroine, bold-spirited struggle, daring rescue, and a happy ending.

Procedure--This activity involves critical thinking and writing skills. The time limit for this activity ranges from one to three weeks in and out of class. The following steps are used in creating and writing a dime novel:

1. The teacher gives a brief history of the dime novel and an overview of the assignment.
2. Students research the concept or theme that the teacher wants emphasized.
3. Students write the dime novel (page amount determined by the teacher) based on their research, using the instructions for writing a dime novel.

How To Write A Dime Novel⁸

There are three basic parts to the writing of the dime novel: (1) the characterization, (2) the plot outline, and (3) the title cover.

Characterization

Regardless of the historical theme, development of the characters is the same. Stereotyped, they are of two basic personalities. The hero and the heroine are self-made, clean living, adventurous, brave, courageous, gentle, modest, unassuming, expert with any type of machine or weapon, and exceedingly attractive to the opposite sex. Love is purely romantic, a matter of blushing cheeks and palpitating hearts. They always thwart the evil intentions of the villain and siren.

The villain and the siren are lusty and uncouth characters filled with fiendish and crafty imaginations who for personal gain try to thwart and to defraud the hero/heroine at every turn through the use of dirty tricks. He or she is usually a victim of social injustice, mental disturbance, or some confused motive. The dastardly villain and the unscrupulous siren are felons of every type: spies, con artists, arsonists, swindlers, renegades, misers, bushwackers, plantation owners, overseers, business competitors, crooked government agents, old line aristocrats, bullies, kidnappers, bank robbers, bankers, land speculators, capitalists, politicians, lawyers, and sheriffs.

In addition to the hero/heroine and the villain/siren, other characters can be added to sustain interest and to carry out the story. These might be friends or "chums" of the hero/heroine, "cronies" of the villain/siren (they never have friends), or additional characters that aid in the development, progression, and flow of the story.

Plot

The plot consists of a simple story line, with emphasis on the local setting (in this case, a plantation and slave quarters), and plenty of action and descriptive dialogue. The story line involves the hero/heroine and the villain/siren in a conflict of interest. This conflict may involve the hero/heroine wanting to help free the slaves and the villain/siren wanting to keep slavery as it is. The purpose of the story ought to be introduced at the earliest possible moment, bringing together the principal characters to engage the interest of the reader. A situation is created that calls upon either the hero or heroine to accomplish some feat or choose some course of action. The situation should bring out the conflict involving all of the characters.

After presenting the purpose, the dime novel should present a series of situations that involve further conflict between the protagonists and the antagonists and, finally, the resolution of the conflict. The ending of the story should bring these situations to a climatic end. The reader should have a sense of satisfaction in regard to the happy outcome of the story.

Emphasis on local setting provides the necessary realism to establish the plausibility of the story. The dime novel is written in third person narrative with plenty of action and dialogue. For example, a horse never walks in a dime novel, it always gallops. The dialogue is very descriptive so as to provide vivid pictures in the mind of the reader. Add to all of

this the historical background and specific situation desired, and the dime novel is ready to be written.

Title Page

The title page is used to arouse the reader's interest. A title drawing provides a visual opportunity to display graphically what actions are described in the dime novel. The drawing encompasses most of the title page, portraying an exciting, action scene found in the dime novel. It should be drawn in color. The title is written in two parts: a primary title written in large, bold type followed by a subtitle, beginning with the word "or" written in small type somewhere below the primary title, e.g., SAMUEL SAVES THE DAY, or, The Overseer's Revenge.

Moving Panorama

History--The panorama was a highly acclaimed American entertainment form from the early 1800s to the 1870s. Originally, the panorama was an enormous painted canvas strip of ancient cities, historical battles, or nature scenes housed in a circular showroom. With increasing competition for more entertainment and the lack of moveability in transporting the cumbersome circular panorama to outlying frontier towns, the moving panorama was created to facilitate portability and display. The painted canvas was broken down into a series of twenty-four to forty related panels and was mounted between two rollers in a large frame that made it possible to view one panel at a time. In isolated towns, the itinerant showmen would carry these panoramas to be staged in town halls, theaters, and school houses. Illustrating various adventure and religious stories, travels, and American historical events, each panorama, accompanied by an explanatory, narrative lecture, had the dramatic effect of a moving picture as it was unwound from one panel to another.

Procedure--This simple group activity involves two to three weeks of time both in and out of class. The following steps are used in creating and designing a moving panorama:

1. The teacher gives a brief history of moving panoramas and presents an overview of the activity.
2. Students are divided into equal groups. No single factor is as important to the success of the moving panorama (and the propaganda play discussed below) as the ways students are grouped. The teacher may want to group students or allow students to group themselves. No matter which method is used, each group should be as balanced as possible according to sex, ability, leadership, and assertiveness.
3. Each group researches the concept and/or theme that the teacher wants emphasized.
4. Each group develops a storyline based on the research. The storyline is then translated into a series of drawn panels. These panels are drawn on long pieces of butcher paper. Each panel is uniform in size, no less than 36 inches by 36 inches nor more than 60 inches by 60 inches. The drawings are in color. Each drawing should depict some flowing action event about slavery which can capture the imagination and emotions of the audience.

5. Each group develops an explanatory lecture based on each of the panels to provide a narrative account of the individual panoramas.

6. While the panorama's panels are being drawn, a member of the group will build the frame--usually a cardboard box--to house the panorama. Two dowel sticks are needed to roll and unroll the panorama from panel to panel. When putting in the dowel sticks, the student needs to provide enough clearance from the stick to the top and bottom of the box to allow the paper to roll and unroll comfortably or the paper could rip during presentation. Also, the student needs to place two cardboard disks, the size of the unrolled paper, 1/4 of an inch on either side of the paper on each dowel stick. This causes the paper to roll in a straight line and keeps it from telescoping and bunching from one side to the other.

Propaganda Play

History--The propaganda plays of the pre-Civil War era (1852-1861) were nothing more than melodramas with a conscience that depicted the social needs and popular thought of the period.¹⁰ The melodrama had its beginnings in late eighteenth-century France, moving into England and the United States by the 1840s.¹¹ The melodrama, written originally for and performed to the unsophisticated audiences of the lower class and the new rising middle class, featured fast-paced action, high adventure, and ethically uplifting stories that emphasized the inevitable triumph of good over evil. Although primarily an entertainment form, the melodrama could constitute a significant social statement regarding various moral issues that focused on specific class-conscious causes. These muckraking dramas and propaganda plays were used to stir emotions and examine social issues such as abolition of slavery, temperance reform, women's suffrage, etc.

Either to arouse social action or to provide entertainment, the plot of the melodrama was always constant and simple: Act I, moral hero, distraught heroine, crafty villain; Act II, bold spirited action, evil intentions, rugged individualism; Act III, spectacular scenes, desperate struggle, climatic rescue; Act IV, happy ending.

Procedure--This is a higher-level thinking, group project. Classtime usually takes two to three weeks. The following steps are used in producing the propaganda play:

1. The teacher gives a brief background of propaganda plays and provides an overview of the assignment.
2. Students are divided into equal groups similar to the instructions given previously for the making of the moving panorama.
3. Each group researches the concept/theme that the teacher wants emphasized.
4. Each group writes, produces, and performs a propaganda play based on their research, using the instructions for writing and producing a propaganda play.

How To Create A Propaganda Play

There are three basic parts to the propaganda play: (1) the characterization, (2) the writing of the plot, and (3) the making of the scenery.

Characterization

The characterization of the propaganda play is the same as that of the dime novel (see Dime Novel for descriptions): the hero/heroine, the villain/siren, and additional characters carry out the desired story.

The acting of all the characters should be excessive, given to exaggerated movement and action. Emotion is visual and extreme. Although make-up and costuming may not be necessary, both would be desirable for the villain and the siren. They should appear gloomy, dark, and dismal. The villain, for example, speaks in a deep voice, and his luxuriant black hair (topped off with a black derby or top hat), heavy black moustache, and leech-like eyebrows are accompanied by evil looks and strange contortions of the face.

The Plot

The plot is divided into a four-act play:

- Act I. Introduction of the characters; introduction of the topic and theme; and introduction of the conflict over the issue of slavery.
- Act II. Development of situations that emphasize the continuing conflict over the issue of slavery.
- Act III. Development of a climatic situation wherein the hero/heroine thwarts the evil intentions of the villain/siren.
- Act IV. Development of the happy ending, or what can be a happy ending if certain social, economic, and political conditions are met to help liberate the slaves from oppression.

Dialogue should be action oriented, with no character speaking more than four sentences in turn. To help students memorize their lines, cues can be written on large cards. One member of the group sits in the front of the stage area and flashes the cards to the performing cast. The cue-card person should have a marked script that corresponds with the cue cards so that he or she knows when to switch cards during the performance.

Scenery

Any scenery should be kept simple, and used merely to give the audience a sense of location. The scenery can be made by cutting up cardboard boxes and painting them with either tempera paint or spray paint. Old sheets are excellent for backdrop scenery as they can be painted easily for a number of scenes; also they are easy to attach to the wall with thumbtacks or hang from the ceiling with hooks.

EVALUATION PROCESS

The Anti-Slavery Almanac and The Dime Novel--The evaluation includes students completing a questionnaire after the activity. The purpose of the questionnaire is to help students focus on the actual learning and processes of the activity. It also provides a focal point for in-class discussion.¹²

1. Cite eight significant facts learned from this activity.

2. What three conclusions can be developed concerning slavery based on the facts cited?
3. What in the activity would lead one to accept these conclusions?
4. Why might these conclusions be wrong?
5. What factors would cause these conclusions to change?
6. Are the conclusions consistent with the textbook, other readings, or other class activities?
7. How might these conclusions be applied to other times and places? Applied to the present?
8. How might these conclusions relate to the student?
9. What processes/steps in historical method were used in this activity?

One or two days are spent with the students in a large group discussion answering these questions. In order to support their positions and conclusions, the students' answers should be demonstrated with excerpts from their almanacs or dime novels.

The Moving Panorama and The Propaganda Play--The evaluation process begins during the presentations of the various moving panoramas and propaganda plays. Each student is given the following form, and is instructed to fill out one form for each presentation.

Panorama/Melodrama Debriefing Form

1. What is the major focus of the panorama or melodrama?
2. Based on what you have seen, what conclusions does this panorama or melodrama illustrate?
3. What specific facts, concepts, and/or generalizations in this presentation justify these conclusions?
4. What particular scene or scenes seem to bring out the major focus of the panorama or melodrama?
5. How can these conclusions be applied to the historical topic that now is being studied?
6. Are these conclusions consistent with those of the other panoramas or melodramas? Why? Why not?
7. How can these conclusions be applied to our current society?
8. Do you agree or disagree/accept or reject these conclusions? Why?
9. What questions do you believe this group should have asked in their presentation?
10. How can this presentation be improved?

11. What evidence was there of historical research?

Upon completion of the presentations, one to two days are spent having students in a large group discussion answer the questions. The students' answers and discussion should be demonstrated with excerpts from the activities.

CONCLUSIONS

The antislave almanac, the dime novel, the moving panorama, and the propaganda play are historical popular culture mediums that help capture the emotional drama of the various concepts and themes of the slave experience. The study of slavery ought to be a serious endeavor but high school students, at times, do not take such study seriously. These techniques can stimulate student curiosity about the past, in general, and the slave experience, in particular. They provide practice for students in using and understanding the historical method. They also help students to make sense out of historical facts by putting those facts into meaningful associations and relationships. It is the hope that these techniques can help students to understand and learn about the hardships of slavery so as to be able to apply this knowledge in their own lives and to appreciate all people, races, and creeds.

NOTES

¹See Ray B. Browne and Ronald J. Ambrosetti, eds., Popular Culture and Curricula (Bowling Green, OH: Bowling Green University Popular Press, 1972).

²One problem facing many high schools--and many colleges too--is the lack of original source material for content information to design any one of these popular culture activities. One way to resolve this dilemma is to provide students with readings and documents from sources such as: John W. Blassingame, ed., Slave Testimony, Two Centuries of Letters, Speeches, Interviews, and Autobiographies (Baton Rouge: Louisiana State University Press, 1977); William Loren Katz, ed., Five Slave Narratives (New York: Arno Press, 1968); Timothy Dwight Weld, American Slavery as It Is (New York: Arno Press, 1968); and George P. Rawick, The American Slave: A Composite Autobiography (Westport, CT: Greenwood Publishing Company, 1972), vols. 1-19.

³Dwight Lowell Dumond, Antislavery: The Crusade for Freedom in America (New York: W.W. Norton, 1966), 267-269. Robert K. Dodge, "Almanacs," in Handbook of American Popular Culture, vol. 3, edited by M. Thomas Inge (Westport, CT: Greenwood Press, 1981), 3-18.

⁴Dumond, 269.

⁵George W. Chilcoat, "History Comes Alive Through the Dime Novel," Southern Social Studies Quarterly, 7 (Fall, 1981), 31-39. Thomas D. Clark, "Virgins, Villains, and Varmints," American Heritage, 1 (Spring, 1950), 42-72. Merle Curti, "Dime Novels and the American Tradition," The Yale Review, 26 (1937), 761-778. Phillip Durham, "Dime Novels: An American Heritage," Western Humanities Review, 9 (Winter, 1954-1955), 33-43. Charles M. Harvey, "The Dime Novel in American Life," Atlantic Monthly, 100 (July, 1907), 39-43. Stewart H. Holbrook, "Frank Merriwell at Yale Again and Again and Again," American Heritage, 12 (June, 1961), 25-27, 78-81. Daryl E. Jones,

"Blood 'N Thunder: Virgins, Villains, and Violence in the Dime Novel Western," Journal of Popular Culture, 4 (1970), 506-517. Thomas L. Kent, "The Formal Conventions of the Dime Novel," Journal of Popular Culture, 16 (1982), 37-47. Mary Noel, "Dime Novels," American Heritage, 7 (February, 1956), 50-55, 112-113. William A. Settle, Jr., "Literature as History: The Dime Novel as an Historian's Tool," in Literature and History, University of Tulsa Monograph Series, No. 9, ed. by I. E. Cadenhead, Jr. (Tulsa, OK: University of Tulsa Press, 1970), 9-20. Michael K. Simmons, "The Dime Novel and the American Mind," Mankind, 2 (October, 1969), 58-63.

⁶Michael K. Simmons, "Maum Guinea: Or, A Dime Novelist Looks at Abolition," Journal of Popular Culture, 10 (1976), 81-87.

⁷To help students write a dime novel from a slave's perspective see: James Fulcher, "Black Abolitionist Fiction: The Formulaic Art of Douglass, Brown, Delany and Webb," Journal of American Culture, 2 (1980), 583-597.

⁸Chilcoat, 38-39.

⁹Ralph K. Andrist, "Massacre!," American Heritage, 13 (April, 1962), 8-17, 108-111. Bruce Catton, "The Army of the Cumberland: A Panorama Show by William D. T. Travis," American Heritage, 19 (December, 1967), 40-49. Curtis Dahl, "Artemus Ward: Comic Panoramist," New England Quarterly, 32 (December, 1959), 476-485. Llewellyn H. Hedgebeth, "Extant American Panoramas: Moving Entertainments of the Nineteenth Century" (unpublished doctoral dissertation, New York University, October, 1977). Bertha L. Heilbron, "Documentary Panorama," Minnesota History, 30 (March, 1949), 14-23. John L. Marsh, "The Moving Panorama," Players, The Magazine of American Theatre, 45 (1970), 272-275. John L. Marsh, "Captain E. C. Williams and the Panoramic School of Acting," Educational Theatre Journal, 23 (1971), 289-297. Lee Parry, "Landscape Theater in America," Art in America, 59 (1971), 52-61.

¹⁰William Reardon and John Foxen, "The Propaganda Play," Civil War History, 1 (1955), 281-293.

¹¹Earl F. Bargainnier, "Melodrama as Formula," Journal of Popular Culture, 9 (1975), 726-733. Michael R. Booth, "The Acting of Melodrama," University of Toronto Quarterly, 34 (1964), 31-38. Porter Emerson Browne, "The Mellowdrammer," Everybody's Magazine, 21 (1909), 347-354. Owen Davis, "Why I Quit Writing Melodrama," American Magazine, 78 (September, 1914), 28-31, 77-80. David Grimstead, American Theater and Culture, 1800-1850 (Chicago: The University of Chicago Press, 1968). E. M. Halliday, "Curses-Foiled Again!" American Heritage, 15 (October, 1963), 12-23. Clayton Hamilton, "Melodrama, Old and New," Bookman, 33 (May, 1911), 309-314. Frank Rahill, The World of Melodrama (University Park: The Pennsylvania State University Press, 1967). Harry James Smith, "The Melodrama," The Atlantic Monthly, 99 (1907), 320-328.

¹²Adapted from Francis McMann and Carolyn Jepson McMann, "How to Check on the Effectiveness of Your Activities," Social Education, 44 (1980), 624-627.