

Lesson Plans and Resources for *Twelve Years A Slave*

OVERVIEW AND ESSENTIAL QUESTIONS

The materials in this unit plan are meant to be flexible and easy to adapt to your own classroom. Each chapter has discussion questions provided in a later section.

Through reading the book and completing any of the suggested activities, students can achieve any number of the following understandings:

- *Knowledge and education cannot be taken away from an individual.*
- *The most effective way to control another person is to dehumanize them.*
- *An unjust system traps both the victims and the perpetrators.*

Students should be introduced to the following key questions as they begin reading. They can be discussed both in universal terms and in relation to specific characters in the book:

Universal

- *What is essential to your identity and your sense of self? What do you know that can't be un-known?*
- *Why do humans repeatedly set up systems to control and dehumanize each other?*
- *What systems in this world can you break free of? And what systems of this world are impossible to remove yourself from?*

Book-Specific

- *How does Northrup's identity and experience as a free man influence his actions when kidnapped and enslaved? How does it influence his understanding of what is happening?*
- *Why was slavery such a successful, enduring part of American history?*
- *Who does Northrup fault in his story: the system of slavery, or the individuals that captured and enslaved him personally?*

Many of the reader response questions and suggested projects relate to these essential questions, and they can be looped back to frequently during class discussions and activities.

IN-CLASS INTRODUCTION

This lesson is designed to provide students with a one-class introduction to the book. The lesson can be used to start off a class reading of the text, or to encourage them to read it independently.

As a recipient of One Book resources, the Free Library requires that you devote one class period to introducing *Twelve Years A Slave* to students, either using this lesson or your own plan.

Introduction

1. Show students two images related to Northrup's story. The images are included at the end of this resource guide, or you can use the links below:
 - A film still showing Chiwetel Ejofor as Northrup:
<https://thenypost.files.wordpress.com/2013/10/12years.jpg>
 - The portrait of Northrup created for the original publication of his memoir:
<http://cdn.thedailybeast.com/content/dailybeast/articles/2013/10/20/the-woman-who-saved-solomon/jcr:content/image.img.2000.jpg/1382375246528.cached.jpg.dimg.jpg/2513bcc-1.cached.jpg>
2. Discuss the basics of Northrup's story. Have students seen the recent film version? | As a group, share what you know about him.
3. Present the following three documents to students, either on paper or electronically:
 - The 1840 census listing Northrup as a free man
 - The slave manifest for the Brig Orleans, where Northrup is listed as Plat Hamilton
 - The 1850 slave census for Avoyelles Parish, Louisiana<http://education.blogs.archives.gov/2013/11/05/twelve-years-a-slave/>
4. Distribute the books and read the first three paragraphs of Chapter I aloud.

Thanks in part to the recent film version of the book, there are a wealth of online resources available for lesson planning and activities. If you are looking for a comprehensive lesson plan, the [Penguin Companion](#) provides a complete set of resources.

ONLINE RESOURCES

LESSON PLANS & RESOURCES

Penguin Companion Lesson Plans

A comprehensive PDF version of lesson plans put out by the publisher, including a historical overview, discussion questions by chapter, a variety of final assessment options, and guidance for using the film adaptation in class.

<http://www.penguin.com/static/pdf/teachersguides/twelveyears032014b.pdf>

Weekly Lesson Plans

Designed to be used one day a week for five weeks as students read independently.

<http://twelveyearsaslave.org/education/>

Vocabulary Chapters 1-7: <http://www.vocabulary.com/lists/397317#view=notes>

Vocabulary Chapters 8-14: <http://www.vocabulary.com/lists/397434#view=notes>

Vocabulary Chapters 15-22: <http://www.vocabulary.com/lists/397482#view=notes>

Free Online Audio Book

An essential aide for students who are challenged by the language of the text.

<https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=g-ILc8W0P3Y>

“Incidents in the Life of a Slave Girl” by Harriet Jacobs

A free online text — one of the best narratives to compare and contrast with Northrup’s. Chapters 8 and 10 are especially relevant, although students could also pick and choose any of the sections.

<http://www.readbookonline.net/title/47019/>

Slave Narrative from the Federal Writers Project, 1936-1938

A national project where writers interviewed over 2,300 former slaves about their experiences. Follow the [Voices and Faces from the Collection](#) link for highlights from the database.

<http://memory.loc.gov/ammem/snhtml/snhome.html>

Text To Text Analysis from The New York Times

Excerpts from the book alongside an article discussing the genre of slave narratives, including questions for discussion or assessment at the end.

<http://learning.blogs.nytimes.com/2013/10/22/text-to-text-twelve-years-a-slave-and-an-escape-that-has-long-intrigued-historians/>

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Portraits of Solomon Northrup's Descendants

<http://www.hollywoodreporter.com/gallery/12-years-a-slave-portraits-683439/1-cheryl-nelson>

PRINT RESOURCES

Why Didn't an American Make '12 Years A Slave?' *By David Thompson for The New Republic*
<http://www.newrepublic.com/article/115668/12-years-slave-review-steve-mcqueens-film>

Some films are like battles. In the shock and horror that is left behind, it is gross to talk of victory, the deft strokes of tactics, or even the radiant courage of the parties. Emerging from *12 Years a Slave*, one fears the triteness of saying how convincing the acting is or how beautiful the photography. It's not that those claims would be unjust. But it is more to the point to say that some films, like some battles, were necessary. Nothing was as important at Stalingrad as the Soviet insistence that that battle be fought. Without it, the world, not just the Russian citizen, would have asked, "Why did we not fight?" And so as we come away from *12 Years a Slave*, one persistent question is: why has this film not been made before? Why have we been waiting? And what were we waiting for, when the necessity of this picture was as evident as the heat of the day?

Why had we not heard of Solomon Northup? Well, historians will reply that some of us have known. His slave journal was published in 1853 and received much attention. Northup traveled and spoke widely about how as a free man and a family man living in Saratoga, he was lured to Washington on a job and then kidnapped and sold into slavery in Louisiana. It was twelve years before his legal rights as a free man could be asserted. His book was re-issued in a scholarly edition in 1968, and it was what prompted this film. Northup was a hero in the abolitionist movement. But no one knows when he died, where, or how. Did he vanish? Was he ill? Did he opt for a quiet life? Or was Solomon Northup taken a second time by people outraged at his prominence, and ruined by his story? Was he murdered, or erased?

So while this film is necessary, and belated, and made by an Englishman, and while it is good and more than good, and while it exposes a situation of plain evil, I don't see any reason for self-congratulation, or retreat into remorse and self-pity as negotiable forms of guilt. Let us just say that it has taken a hundred years before a halfway American film could show the impact of a whip on a bare back. The director Steve McQueen has been compelled by the necessity of such a scene, done largely in one intricate camera setup in which a once-favored slave named Patsey (Lupita Nyong'o) is lashed first by a reluctant Northup and then by their slave-master, Epps (Michael Fassbender), who believes that Northup is going easy on the young woman and determines that his own tortured notion of her demands physical expression. You see, she had been compelled to be his mistress for years, and perhaps he loved her in his hideous way.

That is the climax of the film, the savagery we have known was coming. It is a hard scene to witness, and it has been managed with tact and decency. Not long after this sequence, Northup meets a phlegmatic abolitionist, played by Brad Pitt (a producer on the film), who begins the process that will free him. But it is a price of freedom that Solomon must say farewell to Patsey, leaving her in scarred captivity. No one knows what became of her.

Steve McQueen is a Londoner of Grenadian descent. Chiwetel Ejiofor (Northup) was born in east London, to Nigerian parents. Michael Fassbender had a German father and an Irish mother. Benedict Cumberbatch, who plays a more liberal slave-owner, is English. Lupita Nyong'o was born in Mexico, raised in Kenya, and educated at Yale. It is not that the picture has excluded Americans: the photographer Sean Bobbitt is American, and he shot

McQueen's first two features, *Hunger* and *Shame*. In the faultless cast for this film, anyone would see the virtues of Sarah Paulson and Alfre Woodard, and note the iniquity in their roles—the wife of the cruel slave-owner and a former slave who has entered genteel white society on the plantation. The film counts officially as a production of the United Kingdom and the United States, but it is a question as pressing as what happened to Solomon Northup that Americans did not make this picture.

Necessity goes on. In 2015, we face a challenging anniversary. It will be the centenary of D. W. Griffith's *The Birth of a Nation*. What will we do in our land of anniversaries to mark that occasion? How will the film business greet the awkward occasion, when no movie ever did more to create this business than *The Birth of a Nation*? It made the money that built theaters and production companies, and was the film that encouraged the audience to be patient and excited with long-form narratives. It is now—as it always was—a work of flagrant racism in which white actors in blackface play treacherous and irresponsible black characters and in which the white plantation class is idealized, not least in its formation of the Ku Klux Klan as a “chivalrous” band meant to suppress “supposed” black excesses. It is a shaming birthday that awaits us for a film that cannot be played as an entertainment or even a mark of history. It can be offered only in a spirit of apology and necessary recompense.

What do we mean by recompense? Well, the edifice of the movie business was built on this shaming film. Should monies be paid to black citizens to make good the horror of purchased souls? A redistribution of resources? Perhaps the awkward and often inept attempts to open American institutions to black participation should be persisted with until slavery is forgotten. It is indelible and it stains our independence. And if we are prepared to be honest about *The Birth of a Nation*, then we might examine the inner complacency of *Gone with the Wind*, a venture that has not yet really come under the lash for its racism.

Is it mere coincidence that the second most important film in the history of this business also deals with the South and has its black characters (all minor) as fond onlookers at the turbulent romantic history of its white boys and girls? *Gone with the Wind* is not directly offensive in what it does and says, but it is a work that Mistress Epps, the Sarah Paulson character in *12 Years a Slave*, might have been happy to read. *Gone with the Wind* is still a favorite, the film of films, the Hollywood monument, and a goldmine that kept a company like Metro-Goldwyn-Mayer going for at least another ten years.

But then consider this: the world premiere of *Gone with the Wind*, in December 1939, was set for Atlanta. There would be a great celebration in the city, with all the people from the picture—its producer David Selznick, the novelist Margaret Mitchell, Vivien Leigh, and Clark Gable. The Selznick company assumed that Hattie McDaniel (who played Mammy) would be in the party. Then word came out of Atlanta from Mayor John Hartsfield (after whom the city's airport is named) that Atlanta would have its mind set at rest if McDaniel did not make that trip. Selznick was horrified. He protested. But Hattie McDaniel did not go to Atlanta.

There would be other parties. At the night of the Academy Awards in February 1940, the occasion was done as a banquet. Contending films took tables for the night. The largest of these tables was for *Gone With the Wind*, which was expected to walk away with a cartload of statuettes. One of those prizes went to Hattie McDaniel. Her supporting actress win for Mammy was the first Oscar to go to a black person. But McDaniel had to make a long walk to get her Oscar. For she had not been invited to sit at the Selznick table. She and a companion were put off in a corner at a small table for two.

It is not that *12 Years a Slave* is a “must see” in terms of normal entertainment, or a rival to the candy of *The Help* or *The Butler*. No, it is a film that necessity and education demand seeing. But it was being opened gradually by Fox Searchlight (123 theaters in its third week), as if they feared that it could prove discomforting for the necessary audience. One of the most piercing things in *12 Years* is seeing the damage that slavery did to the white race. The Epps characters are odious in their cruelty and mendacity, and that devastation is still active. This is an era in which we nurse our own protection from confounding truths. Similarly, the publication of Linda Spalding’s exceptional novel *The Purchase*, about a Quaker who becomes a slave-owner at the end of the eighteenth century, has gone largely unreviewed in this country, no matter that it won the Canadian Governor General’s Award for Fiction. It is about time such side tables were dragged into the center of the American room.

