



Post-Visit Activity: Abolition and Social Change Program

Chain Poetry Exercise

Time: 30 minutes

Background:

This lesson explores the way poetry has been used to combat injustice and oppression from the 19th-century fight for abolition, to the 21st century. During their visit to Old Sturbridge Village, students have learned about the roots of slavery in the North, as well as its abolition. They have also seen how people in New England remained complicit in the institution of slavery despite emancipation measures in the North. They saw examples of different methods used by the abolitionist movement to make their voices heard and enact change. In this lesson, students will read “An Appeal to Women,” a poem by Black abolitionist and writer Sarah Louisa Forten.¹ After reading the poem, students will examine the message Forten attempts to convey before creating a chain poem in small groups.

Sarah Louisa Forten was born in Philadelphia in 1814 to a family of abolitionists. Though she was well-educated, Forten and other Black women were largely barred from participating in common abolitionist practices such as voting or public speaking (Gernes, 231). To engage in the cause, Forten began to attend the Female Literary Association, a Black women’s literary society established in 1831. She wrote formal essays as well as poems and stories. She had several works published in *The Liberator*, including the essay “The Abuse of Liberty,” and the poem “Prayer,” which were published on March 26th, 1831.

The work we will be looking at in this lesson, “An Appeal to Women,” published in the *Liberator* in 1834. It was potentially written in response to a note left by abolitionist John Greenleaf Whittier in the friendship book of Forten’s sister. The poem makes an appeal to women, particularly Christian women, to put aside prejudices and strive towards a common goal. She states that while “Our ‘skins may differ,’ but from thee / we claim a sister’s privilege, in a sister’s name.”

¹ The text of the poem can be found here: <https://www.poetryfoundation.org/poems/52144/an-appeal-to-women>

This powerful poem and others drew the attention of Angelina E. Grimké, a prominent abolitionist of the time. Forten and Grimké exchanged letters before Grimké eventually used a shortened version of “An Appeal to Women” as an epigraph to a pamphlet “An Appeal to the Women of Nominally Free States,” which was distributed at the Convention of American Women in 1837.

Lesson Objectives:

- Students will analyze abolitionist poetry from the early 19th century.
- Students will identify methods abolitionists used to oppose slavery and give examples of ways they can affect change today.
- Students will collaborate to write poems inspired by their visit to Old Sturbridge Village.

Essential Questions:

- How did abolitionists use poetry as a tool for the cause?
- What can poetry teach us about abolition?
- How can culture (poetry, music, art, literature, film, etc.) be a force of change or of protest?

Procedure:

1. Print out the poem for students to analyze.
2. Print out worksheets for students to organize notes on the poem.
3. Pull up the poem at the front of class for students to follow along.

Opening to Lesson (10 minutes)

Review some of the concepts from the visit to the Village.

- How were people who seemed powerless able to effect change and speak out for their cause?
- What were some of the ways abolitionists spread their ideas?
- What values do you feel you share with the abolitionists?

Following review, pass out copies of “An Appeal to Women” by Sarah Louisa Forten or project for the entire class. Read the poem aloud as a group. Encourage students to annotate their copies of the poem as you read.

Split the class into small groups to discuss how this poem relates to the concepts discussed at the beginning of the lesson.

After a couple minutes for discussion, ask students to share what they discussed. Wrap up by asking students if they have a cause they care about that they would like to write a poem about. Call on several students to share the causes they are thinking about before moving on to the poetry writing exercise.

Poetry Activity (20-30 minutes)

The following exercise is inspired by Ingrid Wendt's article "The Chain Poem, a Way of Breaking the Ice." Through this fun and reflective activity, students will have an opportunity to build upon their experience in the Village.

Begin with a demonstration that the group does together.

- Start with a base word. For example, freedom, change, action, etc.
 - Ask students to say words that they associate with the base word.
 - Write each word directly below the first to create a vertical list. Aim for 8–10 words.
- As a group, create sentences around each word on the board. Each word is incorporated to create one line of the poem.
 - Allow for mistakes and re-writes to show that this is a process and the first attempt will not be perfect.
- Next, read your poem with the class, and explain how its imperfections are perfectly normal.

Next, break the students into small groups and allow them to write their own poems using a different base word (see example below for new word inspiration).

Poem example:

Liberty. What is it?
Is it merely equality for all?
If so, then we must start to change.

Movement after movement has shown,
That when people come together, the most productive work is done.
We still have reason to hope.
Though it may be a challenge to move forward,
Only as one, will freedom become a reality.

In this example, "liberty" was the base word, and each underlined word was the original list that the poem was built around. All the underlined words in this example could each be used as a base word for student poems.

Conclusion (10–15 minutes)

When students have completed their poems, collect and share them with the group. This can be done anonymously or with the students' names attached. If a group does not wish their poem to be shared, do not require it.

Next, allow the students to reflect on the experience of writing their poem in their small group. After they have discussed for a minute or so, have them share out to conclude the lesson.