



George Moses Horton

Overview

Students will learn about the life of North Carolina's "first professional poet", George Moses Horton, who was born into slavery in Chatham County. By reading, discussing, and preparing dramatic presentations of Horton's poetry, students will gain an understanding and appreciation of Horton's literary contribution, even under the great adversity of enslavement.

Grade

8

Course

North Carolina, Creation and Development of the State

North Carolina Standard Course of Study

- Objective 3.04: Describe the development of the institution of slavery in the State and nation, and assess its impact on the economic, social, and political conditions.
- Objective 9.02: Identify past and present state and local leaders from diverse cultural backgrounds and assess their influence in affecting change.

Essential Questions

- Who was George Moses Horton and what contributions did he make to the state of North Carolina?
- What challenges and successes did Horton experience in his life?
- What is interesting or inspirational about George Moses Horton's life and/or poetry?

Materials

- Poems by George Moses Horton, such as *The Slave's Complaint*, *The Poet's Feeble Petition*, and *A Slaves Reflection the Eve Before His Sale*; attached

Duration

60 minutes

Preparation

Students should have an understanding of the Civil War and basic knowledge of Abraham Lincoln.

Procedure

1. As students enter class, tell them that you need their assistance with something. Explain that you are in need of a sweet, innocent love poem for <choose whichever may be applicable that you feel comfortable saying> your wife/girlfriend, your husband/boyfriend, someone you have a crush on, etc.) Amidst the giggles you get from students, explain that you just can't seem to come up with anything good, and stress the fact that the poem you are looking for must be sweet and *innocent*. Tell students that you are willing to give them the next 10 minutes to compose a great love poem for your "sweetie", and that you will pay for the best poem (determine what you are offering and display it, such as a piece of candy). Give students any other stipulations you feel they need for the poem you are soliciting, then give them 10 minutes to work. When finished, depending on time constraints you can allow students to share some of their poetry, vote on the best poem, etc.
2. Finally, explain that you are not in fact really in the market for a love poem, but in the early 1800s there was a man named George Moses Horton who actually did write love poems, and he sold them to the students at UNC-Chapel Hill!

Ask students to share anything they may already know about George Moses Horton, then share some background information on him, such as:

"George Moses Horton could rightly be called North Carolina's first professional poet. Born the property of **Chatham County** yeoman farmer William Horton, young George Moses Horton taught himself to read using an old



speller and a copy of the Methodist hymnal, although he was grown before he learned to write. Especially fascinated with poetry, he composed psalm-meter verses in his head.

Young Horton was often sent to **Chapel Hill** by his then-master, James Horton, to sell produce. His unusually sophisticated vocabulary caught the attention of the university students, who encouraged his orations, and ultimately, the recitation of his own verse. His reputation spread, and he began to sell poems for students to send to their sweethearts, charging extra for acrostics based on the young ladies' names. Thus for several decades he was able to purchase his own time from James Horton for twenty-five cents a day, and later from James' son Hall for fifty cents. He earned the admiration and support of Governor John Owen, University presidents Joseph Caldwell and David L. Swain, and newspapermen William Lloyd Garrison and Horace Greeley. A professor's wife and novelist, Caroline Lee Hentz, encouraged him and arranged for the publication of a collection, *The Hope of Liberty*. The book, the first published in the South by a black man, did not sell enough copies for Horton to purchase his freedom, nor did two subsequent collections.

He finally gained his freedom after the Civil War, and moved north. Horton spent his final years in Philadelphia, writing Sunday School stories and working for old North Carolina friends who had moved to the city. He did not enjoy the popularity there that he had known in Chapel Hill, and the details of his death are unknown. UNC scholar Collier Cobb described Horton as a "man of letters before he had learned to read . . . and as an author who supported himself and his family in an intellectual center before authorship had attained the dignity of a profession in America." Noel Yancey has called him "UNC's first poet-in-residence."

Horton Middle School in Pittsboro is named for him, and there are plans to place a State Highway Historical Marker in his honor pending the determination of a documented location. He has been the subject of several books, dissertations and scholarly papers, and the University of North Carolina at Chapel Hill recently purchased one of his manuscripts at auction."

Source: <http://www.ncwriters.org/services/lhof/inductees/ghorton.htm>

3. Tell students that they will be exploring the poetry of George Moses Horton by working in groups to read, discuss, and prepare a dramatic presentation on an assigned poem.

Divide students into small groups and assign each group one of the attached three George Moses Horton poems. (Additional poems are available at <http://www.ibiblio.org/unccpress/horton/poems.html> if you would like each group to do a different poem.) Tell students that they should first read the poem a few times, then discuss it, using the questions below the poem as a starting place.

Once students feel that they have a firm grasp of the poems content, they should prepare a dramatic presentation of the poem to perform in front of the class. Tell students the purpose of their presentation is to share the poem with us and show what their interpretation of it is. This can include any combination of a dramatic reading, pantomime, music or sound effects, acting, etc. Tell students to ensure they are respectful in their portrayal of the poem, and again to focus on sharing the poem and their interpretation of it with class.

4. Once all groups are finished, allow each to share their presentation. After each, discuss the poem and the various interpretations exhibited. Also discuss:
 - What do you find interesting or inspirational about George Moses Horton's life and/or poetry?
 - Considering the facts we discussed about his life, how would you characterize George Moses Horton?
 - If you could only teach someone one main thing about George Moses Horton, what do you think would be most important to tell about him and why?
5. As a closing activity or homework assignment, instruct students to write their own original poem on the topic of slavery.

Culminating Activities

- Hold a poetry reading, where students share their work with classmates and/or visitors.
- Have students illustrate the poem they read, showing a visualization of Horton's words.
- Go to <http://www.chathamarts.org/horton/> for ideas on ways to extend your lesson on George Moses Horton.

Resources

Poems by George Moses Horton: <http://www.ibiblio.org/unccpress/horton/poems.html>

George Moses Horton Project: <http://www.chathamarts.org/horton/>

A Slave's Reflections the Eve before His Sale

by George Moses Horton

O, comrades! to-morrow we try,
The fate of an exit unknowing--
Tears trickled from every eye--
'Tis going, 'tis going, 'tis going!

Who shall the dark problem then solve,
An evening of gladness or sorrow,
Thick clouds of emotion evolve,
The sun which awaits us to-morrow,
O! to-morrow! to-morrow!
Thick clouds of emotion evolve,
The sun which awaits us to-morrow.

Soon either with smiles or with tears,
Will the end of our course be completed.
The progress of long fleeting years,
Triumphant or sadly regretted.

In whom shall the vassal confide,
On a passage so treacherous and narrow,
What tongue shall the question decide,
The end which awaits us to-morrow?
O! to-morrow, to-morrow!
What tongue shall the question decide,
The end which awaits us to-morrow?

The sun seems with doubt to look down,
As he rides on his chariot of glory,
A king with a torch and a crown,
But fears to exhibit his story.

What pen the condition makes known,
O! prophet thy light would I borrow,
To steer through the desert alone,
And gaze on the fate of to-morrow;
O! to-morrow, to-morrow!
To steer through the desert alone,
And gaze on the fate of to-morrow.

Discuss and answer the following questions on notebook paper:

1. How did you feel as you read this poem? What is the mood of the poem?
2. What emotions is the enslaved person experiencing regarding "tomorrow"? Why do you think he/she feels this way?
3. What example(s) of personification can you find in the poem?
4. What images do you visualize as you read this poem?



The Poet's Feeble Petition

by George Moses Horton

Bewailing mid the ruthless wave,

I lift my feeble hand to thee.
Let me no longer live a slave
But drop these fetters and be free.
Why will regardless fortune sleep
Deaf to my penitential prayer,
Or leave the struggling Bard to weep,
Alas, and languish in despair?

He is an eagle void of wings

Aspiring to the mountain's height;
Yet in the vale aloud he sings
For Pity's aid to give him flight.

Then listen all who never felt
For fettered genius heretofore--
Let hearts of petrification melt
And bid the gifted Negro soar.

Discuss and answer the following questions below or on notebook paper:

1. How did you feel as you read this poem? What is the mood of the poem?
2. What emotions is the enslaved person experiencing? Why do you think he/she feels this way?
3. What is the narrator's goal in this poem? What evidence in the poem makes you think this?
4. What images do you visualize as you read this poem?



The Slave's Complaint

by George Moses Horton

Am I sadly cast aside,
On misfortune's rugged tide?
Will the world my pains deride
Forever?

Must I dwell in Slavery's night,
And all pleasure take its flight,
Far beyond my feeble sight,
Forever?

Worst of all, must Hope grow dim,
And withhold her cheering beam?
Rather let me sleep and dream
Forever!

Something still my heart surveys,
Groping through this dreary maze;
Is it Hope?--then burn and blaze
Forever!

Leave me not a wretch confined,
Altogether lame and blind--
Unto gross despair consigned,
Forever!

Heaven! in whom can I confide?
Canst thou not for all provide?
Condescend to be my guide
Forever:

And when this transient life shall end,
Oh, may some kind eternal friend
Bid me from servitude ascend,
Forever!

Discuss and answer the following questions on notebook paper:

1. How did you feel as you read this poem? What is the mood of the poem?
2. What emotions is the enslaved person experiencing regarding "tomorrow"? Why do you think he/she feels this way?
3. What example(s) of personification can you find in the poem?
4. What images do you visualize as you read this poem?

