

THE WORTH OF A SLAVE



ESSENTIAL QUESTIONS

What was chattel slavery? How did hopes and dreams help Black Americans get through difficult times?



OBJECTIVES

Students will:

- Learn what chattel slavery is and how it was practiced in the United States.
- Explore a fictionalized account of a plantation and its enslaved people, and create a visual response to it.
- Discuss the inherent dignity of all people and the injustice of treating human beings like property.



LEARNING STANDARDS

See the [standards alignment chart](#) to learn how this lesson supports New Jersey State Standards.



TIME NEEDED

60 minutes



MATERIALS

- *Freedom Over Me: Eleven Slaves, Their Lives and Dreams Brought to Life* by Ashley Bryan (book)
- *Freedom Over Me Quilt Square* handout (one per student)
- Squares of paper and drawing implements (crayons, markers, colored pencils)



VOCABULARY

chattel slavery

enslaved

enslaver

resistance

Procedures

NOTE ABOUT LANGUAGE

When discussing slavery with students, it is suggested the term “enslaved person” be used instead of “slave” to emphasize their humanity; that “enslaver” be used instead of “master” or “owner” to show that slavery was forced upon human beings; and that “freedom seeker” be used instead of “runaway” or “fugitive” to emphasize justice and avoid the connotation of lawbreaking.

1 Hold up an ordinary object for the class to see (e.g., a book, a chair, a backpack, etc.). Ask students what they think the object is worth, and come to an agreement on the value. Comment that the object can be bought, sold, traded or given away by the owner at the agreed-upon price.

2 Tell students they will hear the story of a time in the U.S. when—just like the object—human beings were bought, sold, traded or given away without their permission by other people at an agreed-upon price. Write the following term on the board and review the definition with students:

Chattel Slavery: A system of enslavement in which people are considered the property of their owners for life. Under chattel slavery, people could be bought, sold, traded or inherited, and their treatment was similar to that of cattle—cows, goats, sheep etc.

NOTE

Chattel slavery is the most common form of slavery known to Americans, but it is just one of many ways people have sought to own and control the lives of others. Other examples of slavery include forced labor, bonded or debt labor, child slavery, and domestic servitude. See the National Underground Railroad Freedom Center’s page on “Modern Abolition” for more information:

<https://freedomcenter.org/enabling-freedom/five-forms-of-slavery>.

3 Conduct a read-aloud of *Freedom Over Me: Eleven Slaves, Their Lives and Dreams Brought to Life* by Ashley Bryan. Read the first page about the English widow, Mrs. Mary Fairchilds, and make sure students understand what it means that she is having her “estate appraised.” Show the photo on the next page of the book of the 11 enslaved people and the values assigned to their lives. Pause to allow students to react to this image, either through a think-pair-share or a minute of reflective writing. Discuss their feelings about seeing monetary values attached to human lives.

4 Continue reading the sections of the book describing each enslaved person’s life and their dreams. Explore some of the following themes and questions during and after reading:

- What skills and abilities do the people in the story have? How do they get comfort from their talents, even though their work profits only their enslavers?
- Peggy says her people were “stripped of everything, our language, our customs, they even took our names.” Betty says: “The owners say we have no history.” How do the enslaved people find ways to remember and share their histories and traditions?
- What things make them most afraid? Most angry?
- How do they help, support and teach one another, especially the youngest among them?
- Why was learning to read a crime for enslaved people?
- Qush asks himself how he could “breathe moments of joy into our driven lives.” How do Qush and others find ways to feel humanity and happiness even though they are treated like property?
- Betty says: “Within us lives this undefeated pride.” How do they stay proud even when their enslavers try to make them feel like they don’t matter?
- How do thoughts of escaping to freedom enter into their daily lives? What were the risks of trying to escape?
- Athelia says: “Our real lives are our precious secret,” Bacus says: “Our lives are within.” What do they mean?
- What are examples of the people’s resistance to being enslaved?


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NOTE

In *Freedom Over Me* (Atheneum/Caitlyn Dlouhy Books, 2016), the author gives expression to the inner lives of 11 enslaved people. Though the stories are imagined, the people are real, as evidenced by slave auction and plantation estate documents that are woven into the book’s illustrations. The verse interprets each person’s life on the plantation, followed by an articulation of their hopes and dreams. The contrast between the monetary value placed on the enslaved people’s lives and the pricelessness of their humanity frames the cruelty of chattel slavery. A read-aloud of this book is available at https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=B_wG8PUcAk.

NOTE

As conversations about the individual characters progress, prepare for a range of emotions, from anger to sadness to disbelief. Create a safe space as students struggle with the historical content. Emphasize that the students’ reactions are timeless—many enslaved people and those who fought against chattel slavery shared these emotions.

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- 5 Remind students that in the book, Jane is a talented seamstress who is sought after for her work with textiles and cloth. Tell students that many women sewed quilts during the time of this story. Share that, though it's not certain, some historians believe quilts contained secret codes that provided freedom seekers with directions. Enslaved people on the run could memorize the blocks in quilts hung on clothes lines and from windows, and use this information to find shelter and safety.
 - 6 Tell students that together the class will create a quilt in response to *Freedom Over Me*. Distribute a square of paper and the handout, *Freedom Over Me Quilt Square*, to each student. Have them choose one of the options on the handout and design a square by drawing, writing, creating a collage or using another method. When they are done, allow students to share their squares in small groups before assembling them and displaying the quilt in the classroom.

Discussion Questions

- 1 How did it feel for you to learn about the experiences of enslaved people and to consider what their private thoughts, feelings and dreams might have been?
- 2 Why do you think it was important for the people in *Freedom Over Me* to hope, dream and plan for their liberty, even though they were enslaved?
- 3 What do you think it felt like for enslaved people to have a price tag put on them?
- 4 How did enslaved people keep their pride, history and humanity, even when their enslavers tried to take these things from them?
- 5 Though chattel slavery in the United States no longer exists, inequality for Black Americans is still a problem. What examples of inequality today do you know about?

ADDITIONAL RESOURCES

- + Hannah-Jones, Nikole. "What Is Owed." *NY Times Magazine*, June 26, 2020. <https://www.nytimes.com/interactive/2020/06/24/magazine/reparations-slavery.html>.
- + Primary Source Pairings. "Freedom Over Me: Eleven Slaves, Their Lives and Dreams Brought to Life by Ashley Bryan." <https://primarysourcepairings.com/freedom-over-me>.
- + Teaching Books. "Freedom Over Me: Eleven Slaves, Their Lives and Dreams Brought to Life by Ashley Bryan." <https://www.teachingbooks.net/tb.cgi?tid=51319>.
- + Teaching Tolerance. "Teaching Hard History American Slavery Podcast," Episode 4, Season 2: In the Elementary Classroom. <https://www.tolerance.org/podcasts/teaching-hard-history/american-slavery/in-the-elementary-classroom>.



Freedom Over Me Quilt Square

NAME: _____

Choose one of the ideas below and design a quilt square showing your thoughts and feelings about the people in *Freedom Over Me*. You can create your square by drawing, writing, creating a collage or using another method.

Create a square that speaks to one of the people in the book and recognizes their skills and talents.

Create a square that expresses your feelings about slavery and treating people like chattel or property.

Create a square that illustrates the hopes and dreams of one or more of the people in the book.

Create a square that celebrates the culture or traditions of the enslaved people's African homeland.

Create a square that explains to Mrs. Fairchilds why it's wrong to put a price on human life.

Create a square that shows what freedom meant to the people in the book or what it means to you today.