

**HARRIET JACOBS AND ELIZABETH KECKLY: THE MATERIAL AND EMOTIONAL REALITIES OF CHILDHOOD IN SLAVERY**

A LANGUAGE ARTS LESSON PLAN

GRADES 3-5

**Overview**

Harriet Jacobs and Elizabeth Keckly were both born into slavery and thus forced to confront the harsh circumstances of the institution as young children. Despite enslavement, moments of happiness and of fleeting material comfort punctuated the early lives of both Jacobs and Keckly. Nonetheless, these women were scarred by the brutal realities of an institution that frequently ripped apart families, separating parents from each other, and most poignantly, children from their parents. In this lesson, students will examine and identify the components of love, sadness, deprivation, and small comforts that defined the lives of enslaved children in general. They will also examine particular examples of the lives of child slaves by reading (or being read) excerpts from the narratives of Jacobs and Keckly. They will focus on the details revealed in the excerpts and will do an assignment comparing the childhood experiences of Jacobs and Keckly. Note: Elizabeth Keckly's last name is often spelled "Keckley." We are honoring Keckly's own spelling of her last name, which lacked the extra "e." Although we encourage the use of "Keckly," some of the materials that you will reference for this lesson plan will present the name with the extra "e."

**Learning Objectives**

Upon completion of this lesson, students will be able to:

- Discuss the lives of Harriet Jacobs and Elizabeth Keckly from childhood to adulthood.
- Describe the lives of enslaved children in general.
- Distinguish life experiences of children who were house slaves from those who were not.
- Recall how race and gender determined roles in nineteenth-century plantation society.
- Demonstrate improved ability in reading closely for details.

**Guiding Questions**

What was it like to be a female slave child in the nineteenth-century Upper South? What experiences defined Jacobs's and Keckly's memories of their enslaved childhoods? Were the early lives of Jacobs and Keckly reflective of the larger population of enslaved children?

**Suggested Time**

2 class periods

## Preparing to Teach the Lesson

1. Review Teacher Tools 1 and 2, which offer brief overviews of the lives of Harriet Jacobs and Elizabeth Keckly.
2. View the short videos *9 Feet Long and 7 Wide* (on Harriet Jacobs) and *My Dear Mother* (on Elizabeth Keckly). Be prepared to show these two videos to your class.
3. Review Teacher Tool 3 for a generalized overview of childhood slavery in the American South. For more information on this topic, you can visit the Encyclopedia of Children and Childhood in History and view an entry on Slavery in the United States at <http://www.faqs.org/childhood/Re-So/Slavery-United-States.html> or the article "Family Life in the Slave Quarters: Survival Strategies" by Marie Jenkins Schwartz in the Organization of American Historians Magazine at <http://www.oah.org/pubs/magazine/family/schwartz.html>.
4. Review "*I was Born a Slave: Two African American Women Relate their Childhood Years and the Growing Awareness of Being Enslaved*" from the National Humanities Center Resource Toolbox. The document is available at <http://nationalhumanitiescenter.org/pds/maai/identity/text1/jacobskeckley.pdf>. As part of the lesson, you will read this document aloud to your students (or have them take turns reading it aloud), so you should print it for reproduction and distribution.
5. Review Student Handout 1, which contains identification questions about Harriet Jacobs and Elizabeth Keckly based on the reading of "*I Was Born a Slave.*"
6. Review Teacher Tool 4, which is the same as Student Handout 1, but with the correct responses in bold for your use.
7. Optional: You may decide to explore making inferences or generalizations in a lesson extension. If you choose to do so, review Student Handout 2 and Teacher Tool 5 and read the instructions under Extending the Lesson.

## Teaching the Lesson (Suggested Steps)

1. To begin this lesson plan, show the short videos on Harriet Jacobs and Elizabeth Keckly.
2. Using the information in Teacher Tool 3, provide students with an overview of childhood slavery in general.
3. Distribute "*I was Born a Slave: Two African American Women Relate their Childhood Years and the Growing Awareness of Being Enslaved*" and either read it aloud to your students and ask them to follow along or ask students to take turns reading sections aloud to the class.
4. Distribute Student Handout 1 and ask them to circle the appropriate response to the facts listed. Teacher Tool 4 contains the correct responses to the activity in Student Handout 1.
5. As a class, discuss correct responses to the fact list in Student Handout 1.
6. Lead a brief discussion about how the lives of Jacobs and Keckly, living in the households of their owners, compare to the lives of other enslaved children who did not live in their masters' homes.
7. Based on the information in Teacher Tools 1 and 2, provide students with an overview of the lives of Harriet Jacobs and Elizabeth Keckly. Describe their progression from slavery to freedom and their contribution to American society and history (both in their time and in the present). Be sure to note Harriet Jacobs's escape from slavery (including hiding for seven years in a confined space), the narratives written by both former slaves, and Keckly's career as a dressmaker to affluent women, including Mary

Todd Lincoln. Engage students in a discussion about how these two women, who were enslaved as children, went on to be free as adults and to accomplish so much.

### **Extending the Lesson**

- Encourage students to write a one or two paragraph essay that discusses how Jacobs's and Keckly's childhood experiences in slavery helped to prepare them for their lives as adults. Encourage students to cite specific examples like how learning to sew as a child provided Keckly with the skills that she later used to earn a living.
- Distribute Student Handout 2, which asks a series of questions requiring students to make inferences or generalizations from the reading of the excerpts from the narratives of Jacobs and Keckly. Using Teacher Tool 5, have a class discussion about what helped them form their inferences and whether or not they were correct. Lead a discussion about generalizations and inferences. You might ask them such questions about inferences as "if you see a student with red hair walking out of a classroom, can you infer that all of the students in that class have red hair?" You might also ask them, "What if you were in a hotel lobby filled with bald men? Would it be reasonable to infer that there was a meeting geared to bald men being held at the hotel?" Explain to students that with such a large number of bald men all together at the same place and time, it would be reasonable to infer that such an event was being held. Lead a discussion about how students can put together facts from multiple sources to increase their chances of making accurate inferences. Explain that they should be careful in making generalization based on only one or two sources. They should not make the assumption that all enslaved children shared the experiences of Keckly and Jacobs. Although the experiences of these two women are in many ways representative of the experiences of privileged female house slaves, more sources of information would be required in order to make an educated inference.

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