

# Applying Theatre to the Study of African-American Literature

Sabrina Alano

Academy for Careers in Television and Film, Long Island City, NY

2014 NEH Institute

**Grade Level:** 11

**Overview:** Employing Matthew Spangler’s adaptation strategies and adapting Ping Chong and Company’s Secret Histories activities, this mini-unit encourages students to use performance to explore literature in depth. This set of lessons focuses on examining the use of rhetorical appeals in *Narrative in the Life of Frederick Douglass*, discussing the overall purpose of that text, and exploring themes in the whole history of African-American literature.

## **Objectives:**

Students will be able to:

- Analyze the impact of rhetorical appeals (ethos, logos, and pathos) on an audience through a close reading of a text.
- Determine the rhetorical purpose of a text.
- Identify common themes in African-American literature, as well as embrace the diversity within this literary tradition.
- Make connections between texts and with their own personal beliefs and experiences.

## **Common Core Learning Standards:**

CCSS.ELA-LITERACY.RL.11-12.4

Determine the meaning of words and phrases as they are used in the text, including figurative and connotative meanings; analyze the impact of specific word choices on meaning and tone, including words with multiple meanings or language that is particularly fresh, engaging, or beautiful. (Include Shakespeare as well as other authors.)

CCSS.ELA-LITERACY.RL.11-12.9

Demonstrate knowledge of eighteenth-, nineteenth- and early-twentieth-century foundational works of American literature, including how two or more texts from the same period treat similar themes or topics.

## **Texts:**

- *Narrative of the Life of Frederick Douglass* by Frederick Douglass
- “The Negro Speaks of Rivers” by Langston Hughes
- Independent reading selections drawn from list of suggested African-American authors

## **Materials:**

- SMART Board with laptop projection
- Butcher or chart paper
- Chart markers
- Post-It Notes
- Introductory “get to know you” surveys from the beginning of the year

## **Lessons:**

### **Day 1: Dramatizing Pathos in *Narrative of the Life of Frederick Douglass***

1. Students will be introduced to the idea of pathos, or appeals to emotion, through examples from advertising. We will identify strategies for creating pathos:

- Language with strong positive or negative connotations
- Shocking, vivid images
- Emotional anecdotes (stories)
- Figurative language
- Repetition

Students will choose a section of the first chapter of the *Narrative* that appeals to emotion. Then students will identify Douglass' strategies in that section.

2. Students will receive their assignment to choose another section to dramatize. The class will engage in a warm-up activity.

3. In groups of 3, students will select a passage in which Douglass creates pathos, and develop a performance of that section. At least one group member will serve as the first-person narrator. Groups may decide to perform the narrated action or project images to accompany the narration.

4. Groups will share their scenes for the class.

5. The class will engage in a discussion reflecting on the performance experience. Questions will include:

- What did you notice during the performances? Give your peers feedback.
- What emotions came up for you as you were putting together your scene? As you were watching other groups' scenes?
- What was it like for you to engage in this activity? What did you notice about the text?

### **Day 2: Dramatizing Ethos in *Narrative of the Life of Frederick Douglass***

1. As an anticipatory question, students will answer: how would you present yourself on a college application? These responses will segue into a discussion of ethos, or appeal to character. We will discuss the particular importance of ethos within a slave narrative.

2. The class will engage in a warm-up activity.

3. In groups of 3 (which should be different from Day 1's groups), select a passage in which Douglass focuses on ethos, and plan a choral scripting of that section.

4. Groups will share their scenes for the class.

5. The class will engage in a discussion reflecting on the performance experience. Questions will include:

- What did you notice during the performances? Give your peers feedback.
- What words were frequently repeated, and why?
- What was it like for you to engage in this activity? What did you notice about the text?

### **Day 3: Frederick Douglass: A Summary**

1. In pairs, students will create a "river story" for Frederick Douglass. On a piece of paper, students will draw two wavy diagonal lines from the upper left hand corner to the lower right hand corner to represent the river. At the top left corner, students write Douglass' birth date and draw a small stone to represent the beginning of the timeline. They will then add 4-5 other major milestones from Douglass's *Narrative* onto the river timeline.

2. On the bottom of the paper, pairs will answer the question: what was Douglass' purpose for writing his story?
3. The class will engage in a gallery walk of the different river stories for Douglass. The papers will be posted on the walls of the classroom, with pads of Post-Its on the ledges of the boards. Students will circulate the room and write at least 3 comments on Post-It notes. Students will place the Post-It notes on the charts. Students will also be advised to read their peers' comments on the Post-It notes as they circulate.
4. The class will have a closing discussion. Questions will include:
  - What did you notice about the events that people selected for their timelines?
  - What did you notice about the statements of Douglass's purpose?
  - What were Douglass's fundamental beliefs? Why did he write?

### **Days 4-5: A Brief History of African-American Literature**

1. The class will read Langston Hughes' poem "The Negro Speaks of Rivers" aloud together.
2. Students will engage in a Think-Pair-Share around the following question: What phrase or line best represents the poem as a whole? The teacher will post the lines on the board for us in Activity #4 in this lesson.
3. Each student will receive a piece of paper and construct a "river story" for his or her independent reading author. The "stones" for this river story will include:
  - Birth year of author
  - Two significant events in the author's life
  - Quote that resonates most with you. Include the publication year of the text
  - Quote that best represents the author's writing and philosophy.
4. Students will select one stone from their river stories, ensuring that they have a year for that stone. Students will line up chronologically, then go down the line presenting their events or quotes. The teacher will begin and end the performance with a recitation of two selected lines from "The Negro Speaks of Rivers".
5. The class will sit in a circle. Each person will finish one of the following sentences as we go around the circle:
  - They believe...
  - They create...
6. On the SMART Board, student responses from the beginning of year surveys will be projected anonymously. The responses will be taken from the questions: "What do you believe?" and "Why do you create films, writing, or other forms of art?" Students will synthesize the "I" and "they" statements:
  - We believe...
  - We create...
7. The class will engage in a post-performance discussion. Reflection questions will include:
  - What was it like for you to engage in this activity?
  - What did you notice during the performance?
  - What were common themes that you noticed?
  - What differences did you notice among the authors?