

A House Divided: Civil War

Stepping Into History

Overview: After completing this activity, students will better understand the remaining tensions in the South during Reconstruction.

Age Group/Grade Level: 10-11 years, grades 5-6

Subject Area: Social Studies, Visual Arts

Duration: approximately 60 min.

Background

Winslow Homer's *A Visit from the Old Mistress* takes place in the home of a group of African American women. Their former mistress has just entered. She stands in profile, turned toward her former slaves. The freed slaves are no longer obliged to greet their former mistress with welcoming gestures, and one remains seated as she would not have been allowed to do before emancipation. The standing women are of similar heights, placing them on equal footing with each other.

Discussion

Share Homer's *A Visit from the Old Mistress* with students. Begin your conversation by asking students:

- What do you see or notice in this picture?

Have five students [actors] take on the poses of each figure, creating a *tableau vivant*. Follow up with the questions below:

- [To actors] What is your body language communicating to the other people in this scene?
- [To audience] What story does this scene tell?
- [To all] Why might an artist choose to tell this story?

Explain that this painting was created in 1876, after the end of the Civil War, and that Homer composed the work from sketches he had made while traveling through Virginia. As a large group, brainstorm the historical facts necessary for understanding this scene:

- How has the relationship changed between these women?
- Imagine going back in time to interview these women. What questions would you have for them?

	Option 1	Option 2
Scene 1	<i>A Visit ...</i>	Beginning
Scene 2	Middle	<i>A Visit ...</i>
Scene 3	End	End



Winslow Homer, [A Visit from the Old Mistress](#), 1876, oil on canvas, 18 x 24 in., Gift of William T. Evans, 1909.7.28.

Activity

Explain that some former slaveowners wrote letters and diary entries with genuine shock and a sense of betrayal when their newly freed slaves left for the promise of emancipation or asserted their freedom where they already lived.

Assign students to small groups. Supply each group with the attached primary sources.

- Based on these narratives, what has changed for each woman during the Reconstruction period?
- If the painting depicted a scene from a play, what might each character say? What might each figure be thinking?

Using *A Visit from the Old Mistress*, the narratives, and prior knowledge as a springboard, have each group write action and dialogue for three 30-second scenes, whose order they may select from the table, bottom left.

Invite each small group to perform for the class. After each group has performed their series of scenes, reflect as a class using the following questions:

- [To actors] How did you decide where Homer's painting fits into the scenes?
- [To audience] How well did these scenes connect to the painting?
- [To all] What did the end of the Civil War mean for former slaves? For former slaveowners? What challenges remained?

For a full-size image of Winslow Homer's *A Visit from the Old Mistress*, visit: https://ids.si.edu/ids/deliveryService?id=SAAM-1909.7.28_1

Mistress' Memoirs

Everybody adjusted themselves to their changed circumstances and went to work to repair their shattered fortunes. The after effects were as trying as the war itself, the disgusting Reconstruction period was a disgrace to all concerned. We submitted to the inevitable, the freeing of our slaves, the ruthless destruction of our dearly loved plantations, the pillage of our homes then all we asked was to be let alone and rebuild as our judgment told us was for the best. Reconstruction times as you may well know, was trying to men's souls, "getting back into the Union" was a favorite expression, and in some ways these times were worse even than the war.

Bryan, Mary Norcott. *A Grandmother's Recollections of Dixie*. New Bern, NC: Owen G. Dunn, [1912?]. *Documenting the American South*. University Library, The University of North Carolina at Chapel Hill. 1998. Web. 23 March 2016. <<http://docsouth.unc.edu/fpn/bryan/bryan.html>>.

On every side the poor, unknowing creatures sought every opportunity to impress the fact of their independence upon all against whom they bore resentment. The women were wont to gather on the sidewalks of the main thoroughfares, forming a line across as they sauntered along, compelling their former masters and mistresses who happened to be approaching to take the street; or, if not sufficiently numerous or courageous to do this, would push their way by them, bumping into them with a distinct challenge to the outraged one to resent it. As if to encourage this spirit of "independence," the agents of the conquering Government were there to protect their protégés from the indignant resentment such conduct might well awaken, though they seemed not to be equipped to instruct them in better things.

Clay-Clopton, Virginia. *A Belle of the Fifties; Memoirs of Mrs. Clay, of Alabama, Covering Social and Political Life in Washington and the South, 1853-66*. New York: Doubleday, Page, 1905, c1904. *Documenting the American South*. University Library, The University of North Carolina at Chapel Hill. 1998. Web. 23 March 2016. <<http://docsouth.unc.edu/fpn/clay/clay.html>>.

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Freed Slaves' Memoirs

One morning in April, 1865, my master got the news that the Yankees had left Mobile Bay and crossed the Confederate lines, and that the Emancipation Proclamation had been signed by President Lincoln. Mistress suggested that the slaves should not be told of their freedom; but master said he would tell them, because they would soon find it out, even if he did not tell them. Mistress, however, said she could keep my mother's three children, for my mother had now been gone so long. . . .

My mother came for us at the end of the year 1865, and demanded that her children be given up to her. This, mistress refused to do, and threatened to set the dogs on my mother if she did not at once leave the place. My mother went away, and remained with some of the neighbors until supper time. Then she got a boy to tell [my sister] Caroline to come down to the fence. When she came, my mother told her to go back and get Henry and myself and bring us down to the gap in the fence as quick as she could. Then my mother took Henry in her arms, and my sister carried me on her back. We climbed fences and crossed fields, and after several hours came to a little hut which my mother had secured on a plantation. We had no more than reached the place, and made a little fire, when master's two sons rode up and demanded that the children be returned. My mother refused to give us up. Upon her offering to go with them to the Yankee headquarters to find out if it were really true that all negroes had been made free, the young men left, and troubled us no more.

Burton, Annie L. *Memories of Childhood's Slavery Days*. Boston: Ross, 1909. *Documenting the American South*. University Library, The University of North Carolina at Chapel Hill. 1996. Web. 23 March 2016. <<http://docsouth.unc.edu/fpn/burton/burton.html>>.

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Abraham Lincoln done put a piece in de paper saying dat all de slaves was free and if dey whipped any of de slaves after dey was set free dey would prosecute them. . . . Once de mistress struck me after we was freed and I grabbed her leg and would have broke her neck. She wanted to apologize with me de way she had treated me but I would not let her. They thought it was awful dat dey could not whip de slaves any longer. . . .

Talk about bein' happy! We was sure 'nough some happy people when dey done took dat yoke offen our necks. Before I was free we had to shuck three wagon loads of corn a day. De wagon would hold 40 bushels. I'd come home and my fingers would be twisted from so much work. De oxen would slobber all over de corn before we picked it. It was cold out dere in de field an' I would wrap my feet up in my dress and wait till de wagon would drive up. I had no shoes on.

Holsell, Rhody. "Slaves Happy to Be Free." *Slave Narratives: A Folk History of Slavery In the United States From Interviews with Former Slaves*. Missouri Narratives, Vol. X. Washington, DC: Library of Congress Project, 1941. *Born in Slavery: Slave Narratives from the Federal Writers' Project, 1936-1938*. Library of Congress. 2001. Web. 23 March 2016. <http://memory.loc.gov/mss/mesn/100/100.pdf?bcsi_scan_2687365ababd2c82=0&bcsi_scan_filename=100.pdf>.