



Lesson Plans

A Slave is a Dead Soul: Examining the Psychological Impact of Slavery Through the Writings of Juan Francisco Manzano

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Intended Grade: High School

Subject Area: Literature

Correlation to the State of Alabama Standards:

Apply appropriate strategies to interpret various types of reading materials.

Read for a variety of purposes.

Exhibit familiarity with American literature to 1900 and related world literature representing a variety of cultures.

Write in response to literature.

Objective:

Students will examine the psychological effects of slavery on a typical slave and compare one new slave narrative to more familiar slave narratives they have already studied.

Materials Required:

The required handouts are included in this lesson plan. (Optional) *Autobiography of a Slave* by Juan Francisco Manzano (available in paperback English/Spanish edition from Wayne State University Press, 1996). (Optional) Manzano, Juan Francisco. *Poems by a Slave in the Island of Cuba, Recently Liberated; Translated from the Spanish, by R. R. Madden, M.D. With the History of the Early Life of the Negro Poet, Written by Himself; to Which Are Prefixed Two Pieces Descriptive of Cuban Slavery and the Slave-Traffic, by R. R. M. London: Thomas Ward and Company, 1840.*

Approximate Time Required: One block class (90 minutes).

Instructions:

This lesson should take place when students are studying slave narratives in the literature class. A natural discussion about slave trade and the historical context should take place here.

Read to students the attached handout "A Brief Introduction to Juan Francisco Manzano" for background information.

Have students read from the early life of Juan Francisco Manzano in his *Autobiography of a Slave*. Select excerpts are included here.

Have students read from the later life of Juan Francisco Manzano in his *Autobiography of a Slave*. Select excerpts are included here.

Discuss what could have caused such a dramatic shift when Manzano was twelve years old, including the psychological effects of slavery on the young boy's life.

Evaluation:

In addition to the extension activities included later, students can write a composition on the following topic: "What are the psychological ramifications of slavery, and how does Manzano's account fit in with the historical context we have studied?"

A Brief Introduction to Juan Francisco Manzano

Juan Francisco Manzano, c. 1797-c. 1854, was the first slave in the Americas to publish while still in servitude. He was born a slave in Cuba and is considered one of the founders of Cuban literature. Enslaved in the colonial slave society, he wrote the only known autobiographical account of Latin American slavery as well as a volume of poetry; he was the only slave in Spanish American history to achieve success as a writer.

His autobiography has been called “a heart-rending history of the systematic, unrelenting destruction of human dignity and individual will.” According to the narrative, he experienced a relatively easy, carefree childhood. He benefited because, among other things, his mother was well educated and well trained.

His environment fostered intellectual growth. He was “knowledgeable in all that a woman could teach about religion ... knew many short plays and interludes, dramatic theory, and stage set.” He saw French operas and enjoyed imitating what he saw on stage. He was given the opportunity to learn poetry, Catholic prayers, art and theatre.

In 1837, he was liberated with money that was raised by a subscription among some young admirers of his talents.

Early Excerpts From Juan Francisco Manzano

“At the age of ten I could recite from memory Fray Luis of Granada’s longest sermons, and the stream of visitors to the house where I was born used to listen to me on Sundays when I would come home from learning to listen to sacred mass with my godmother r... I also knew many lengthy passages, short plays and interludes, dramatic theory, and stage sets. They took me to see French operas, and I was good at imitating some of them, for which my parents used to receive the allotment of gifts from me that I would collect in the parlor, although it was always more from the sermons.”

“For special occasions I wore an outfit with wide, scarlet pants trimmed in gold braid; a short jacket without a collar, made of navy-blue satin adorned the same way; a black velvet cap with a black tip embellished with a braid and red feathers; two gold French-style rings; and a diamond pin. With all this and more I soon forgot my old austere lifestyle. The theatre, outings, social gatherings, dances till dawn, and other excursions made my life happy.... [Dona Joaquina would] take care that I did not mix with the other black children.”

Later Excerpts From Juan Francisco Manzano (Manzano was 12 years old in 1809)

“The true story of my life does not begin until 1809, when destiny began to unleash itself against me with all its fury.”

After being accused of pulling a flower from his master’s plant: I was “taken to a building, now used for depositing the bodies of the dead till the hour of internment. What a frightful night I passed there! My fancy saw the dead rising and walking about the room. They took me out and placed me on a board fixed on a kind of fork. My hands were tied like Christ and my feet secured in an aperture of the board. Oh, my God! Let me not speak of this frightful scene!”

Extension Activities

1. Slavery is, by definition, a state of silence. Manzano wrote that “a slave is a dead soul.” A dead soul, though, isn’t a threat. What if he would have said that “a slave is a tortured soul”?
2. Why was this narrative published in the first place? Since Manzano was still enslaved, it could only be published with the help and support of free white men. One of these, Domingo del Monte, was an owner of 100 slaves in 1840.
3. Compare this narrative to the narrative of Frederick Douglass. Can you make any assumptions about differences in North American slavery and Latin American slavery?
4. Manzano grew up in a caste system that existed among the slaves in Cuba. A pure black slave was the worst kind of slave to be. The mulatto slaves were against the black slaves. The slaves of the community instead of being united in their oppression chose to oppress one another. The caste system was one of the reasons Manzano decided to run away. Manzano wrote, “I saw myself at El Molino, without parents or even relatives, and, in a word, a mulatto amongst blacks. My father was a bit proud and never allowed small groups in his house or that any of his children play with black children from the plantation.” How do you feel about this?
5. In the narrative, we learn of Manzano’s own prejudices against other races. The notion of racism among slaves in the Cuban slave communities added to the new dimension of slavery and made it all too hard to fight against. There was no unity among the slaves that could rise up against the common oppressor.
6. Is it possible that Manzano describes his special status in an exaggerated way in order to convince himself that he is an individual and not just someone’s property (in his early writings)?

Have students write a poem in the decima form, just as Manzano said he could do when he was young. (See attached handout, “The Decima Poem.”)

The Decima Poem

Since the traditional decima focuses on several themes (romance, love, and honor) and recognizes impressive events and experiences, you should spend a few minutes brainstorming these topics for today’s journal writing:

- Define love, honor or romance.
- Describe your favorite place.
- Describe an event that changed your life.
- Describe an event that changed the history of the United States in the last year? The last five years?
- Think of a famous personality from the mass media or from literature. Why do you admire them? Identify the qualities you think they possess.

Although evidence shows that the ten-line stanza decima existed in medieval Spain and northern Africa, Vicente Martinez de Espinel, a Spanish poet, novelist, and musician, has received credit for the decima that is performed today. The form is nicknamed “the little sonnet” and “the espinel” to recognize the interpretative pause that the poet added.

The decima is the most complex form of popular poetry and is most effective when written in Spanish, where specific rules apply to vowels and accented words, but it can also be written in English

The decima must follow this rhyme pattern: A/B/B/A (pause) A/C/C/D/D/C and consists of ten lines of 8 syllables. It is here that the form becomes complex:

- When a line or verse ends in with a word with an emphasized syllable, this counts as an extra syllable.
- When a verse or line ends with a word with its emphasized syllable being the antepenultimate one, one syllable is subtracted from the count for the line.
- When a word ends with a vowel and is followed by a word beginning with a vowel, in the Spanish language these flow together, so it counts as only one syllable.
- When a strong vowel (a, o, e) is combined in a word with a weak vowel (i or u) and the emphasis is on the weak vowel, an accent is placed over the weak vowel and it is counted as a separate syllable.

(adapted from "Decima Poem Lesson" by Nancy Gray.)