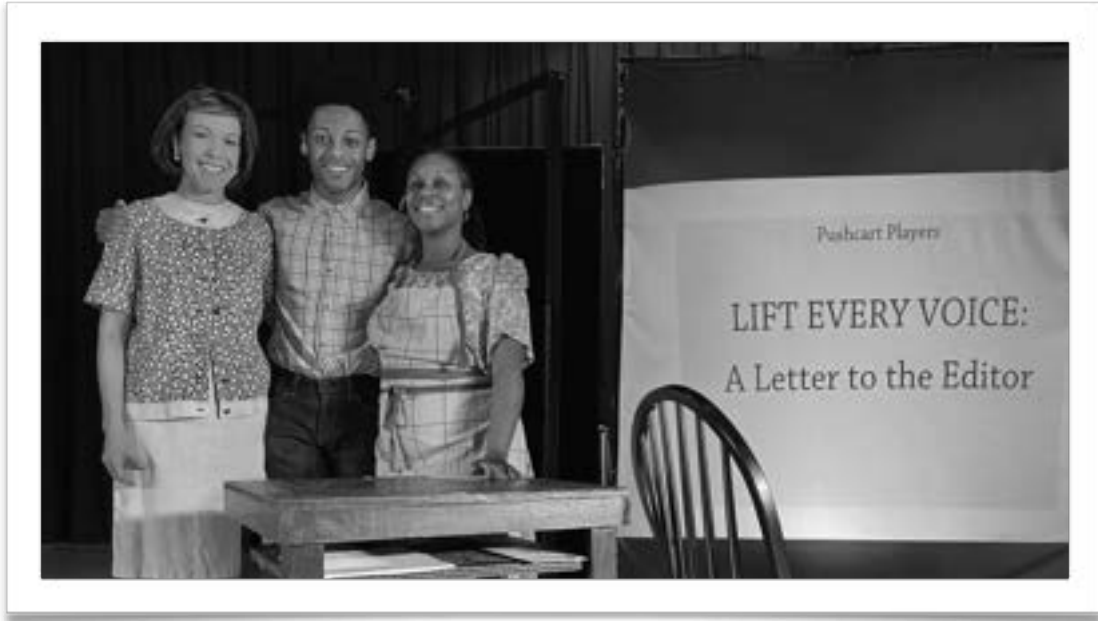


Rushcart Players

“Lift Every Voice: A Letter to the Editor”



Study Guide to Production & Activities

INTRODUCTION

The fight for Civil Rights in America is ongoing. Its history is complicated and filled with victories, contradictions and setbacks. It predates our revolution and is deeply rooted in racism, fear of “the other”, and often clouds our faith in our nation’s founding documents. It is a fight that must be fought again and again on many fronts. “Lift Every Voice: A Letter to the Editor” is a snapshot on one period of that history.

This Study Guide will help teachers navigate the themes, vocabulary and historic touchstones found in Junebug’s story and hopefully aid them in exploring, discussing and engaging their students in creative activities. This can lead to a positive understanding of the issues involved and help create citizens intent on navigating their way to a better society.

Vocabulary, historic points, thematic questions and activities are suggestions and should reflect the needs and abilities of your students and your classroom situation. Educators should feel free to adapt any of the ideas, information and activities expressed here in relation to their student’s grade and developmental level.

WHY STUDY CIVIL RIGHTS HISTORY?

Racism. Bias. Segregation.

These words sit at the heart of the struggle for Civil Rights in our nation. The notion of rights “for all” is embedded in our founding documents but also shrouded in conflict and compromise right at the start. Racism and fear of “the other” has entangled our nation in a complicated ebb and flow of attempting to define exactly who is included in the “all”.

At present, we are living through a period of negative resurgence. Not just along the lines of skin color and racism, but of gender, sexual orientation, religion, socio-political and national identity. Discourse and debate seem almost a naive means to find common ground and work towards “a more perfect union”, but the Arts can provide a conduit for communication, empathy and hopefully, catharsis.

“Lift Every Voice: A Letter to the Editor” can be a means for young people to view a moment in time when someone their age questioned the status quo around them, took a stand and made their voice heard. Hopefully, it will encourage others to explore how they too can make their voice be heard.

Along with the notes in this Study Guide, we can recommend these two sources from The New Jersey State Bar Foundation:

<https://njsbf.org/2020/05/20/explaining-the-roots-of-institutional-racism/>

<https://njsbf.org/school-based-programs/violence-preventionanti-bias-lessons-from-the-amistad/breaking-bias-lessons-trom-the-amistad-curriculum/>

“Lift Every Voice: A Letter to the Editor”

A Play with Music Written by Tylie Shider
Directed by Paul Whelihan

SYNOPSIS

Junebug, a 12-year-old Black boy living in segregated Oxford, Mississippi in 1962, has begun to question the society in which he and his family live. He sees his parents as hardworking to the point of exhaustion trying to make his life as comfortable as possible. His mom is a cleaner at the local university dormitory and his father, a sharecropper. He watches as both suffer indignities brought on by prejudices and he does not understand why. He is also happy that his father will soon be able to quit the hot, grueling outdoor work of a sharecropper and take a job working in the “cool” indoors as a janitor at the university. This is viewed as good news for his family.



However, tension is mounting in Oxford as a Black man, James Meredith, is applying for entrance to the All White, University of Mississippi. Both the Black and White communities struggle with reasons why this is not a good idea. After reading an editorial in the city’s local paper, The Oxford Eagle, Junebug is confused. He hears his parents react with fear that Meredith’s

actions will bring problems into their community and the Editor, Mrs. Nina Goolsby, expounds on how this action is an attempt to destroy “Southern Heritage.”

Junebug questions both arguments. He takes pride in knowing a Black man is trying to enter Ole Miss and doesn’t understand his parents’ fear. He also doesn’t understand what Nina Goolsby means by this being an “affront to southern heritage.” He also questions his own place in the society in which he lives. Does “Southern Heritage” include him and people like James Meredith? If not, why are so many people trying to change things?

Junebug discovers The Oxford Eagle invites correspondence from its readers. On a new typewriter, a gift from his parents, he writes a letter to the Editor, asking her to clarify her position:

“...please define southern heritage. Does it not include my rights and the rights of men and women who look like me...Does the Pledge of Allegiance include me? Is liberty and justice for us all?”

Junebug’s letter leads to conflict, first with his mother and subsequently with Mrs. Goolsby, each asking him, “Which side are you on?”

The resolution in this story lies in the fact that he openly questioned the status quo. He let his voice be heard.

KEY FIGURES AND HISTORICAL BACKGROUND

Junebug is based on a real person. **S.T. Jamison**.

The University of Mississippi is a public college in Oxford, Mississippi. Until the entrance of James Meredith, it was strictly segregated. Until 2003, its mascot was modeled after a Confederate soldier (Colonel Reb), replacing it with a black bear. In 2006, a statue of James Meredith was erected on the campus. In 2008, the site of the riots was designated as a National Historic Landmark. In 2015, the university removed the state flag which utilized the Confederate battle flag from its logos and seal.

Nina Goolsby continued to be Editor for the Oxford Eagle through 2006. She died two years later at the age of 88.

James Meredith served in the Air Force from 1951 to 1960. He attended Jackson State University, one of the Historically Black Colleges and Universities (HCBU) from 1960 to 1961 before he decided to apply for admission to The University of Mississippi in 1961. He was denied admission and subsequently filed suit with the assistance of the National Association for the Advancement of Colored People (NAACP). On September 10th 1962, the U.S. Supreme Court stated that he was to be admitted. At that time, Mississippi Governor, Ross Barnett, assumed the role of University registrar. U. of M, being a public university, denied Meredith admission. U.S. Attorney General, Robert F. Kennedy, stepped in and brokered a deal with Barnett to allow the admission. However, riots broke out on campus, necessitating the need for President Kennedy to call out Federal Troops and restore order. Meredith



began classes and graduated in August 1963, though federal law enforcement was needed for his protection during his time in Oxford. In 1968, he received his law degree from Columbia University.

Segregation, Jim Crow, Black Codes and Citizens Councils.

Following the Civil War, Reconstruction began and for a brief period, African-Americans began to move away from slavery and into a “free” society. This, however, was short-lived as racism, political machinations both in Washington and on local levels, moneyed interests in the North and South, and the rise of extremist organizations like the Ku Klux Klan and Citizen’s Councils began dismantling Civil Rights through a combination of legal machinations and fear. Progress made in the years following the war quickly eroded. In 1896, the U.S. Supreme court, ruled that segregation by race was constitutional as long as facilities for both races were equal in quality. The doctrine of “Separate but Equal” was established and remained the basis for further erosion of African-American Civil Rights through the first half of the 20th Century. Separate but Equal also was the framework by which South Africa designed its Apartheid regime which also did not fall until the latter part of the 20th Century.



So called “Black Codes” were instituted officially and unofficially (de jure and de facto segregation) throughout the nation. De jure segregation refers to legalized segregation, whereas de facto segregation exists in practice but not by law. The federal government could deem segregation unconstitutional, but it could not force people to accept it. Segregation, particularly in the South, took the form of Jim Crow Laws, separating the races in nearly all aspects of community and disenfranchising African-Americans severely. Things were separate but far from equal.

THE CIVIL RIGHTS MOVEMENT OF THE 1950S AND 1960S

Meredith’s enrollment at Ole Miss and the period of the play, straddles the fertile period of Civil Rights Activism in post World War II America. At the end of the war, much of the world, Europe and Asia was physically and psychologically devastated. America escaped much of the physical destruction and stood poised for a period of prosperity. The GI Bill was guaranteeing returning veterans access to higher education and more prosperous employment. Industries were retooling from a wartime footing to create a large consumer-based economy. This revitalization did not serve true for the African-American communities. Racial prejudice remained. De jure Segregation was still the law of the land and racism kept African-Americans from many of the opportunities to participate in the new prosperity.

In 1948, in reaction to the beginnings of the Cold War, President Truman ordered an end to discrimination in the military. This was an incentive for grass roots movements throughout the nation to mobilize, very often fostered in the traditional Black churches of the South, to organize and create enough civil unrest to force change. Names like Rosa Parks, Martin Luther King Jr., and The Little Rock Nine appeared in the news. That news was now promulgated not just in newspapers and radio, but on the ever-growing medium of television, thus giving a face to the stories being told.

Incidents like the Montgomery Bus Boycott, the Greensboro Sit-ins, the killings of Freedom Riders, the fire hosing of Black men and women by Sheriff Bull Conner in Alabama, and the blatantly racist campaigns for president by George Wallace and Barry Goldwater were viewed in many Americans' living rooms each night.



Martin Luther King Jr. united his desire for racial justice and equality with the anti-war movement. This sparked our involvement in Vietnam and helped increase the desire for a more inclusive society, culminating with the March on Washington in 1963.



It was a tumultuous period in which not just African-Americans fought for de facto Civil Rights; It provided a model for other groups to find their voice and seek their rightful place in society. Gender, Sexual orientation, National origin, Immigrant and Native populations, and more have found the value of speaking up for themselves as we continue to strive for “a more perfect union.”



REFERENCES

The Wikipedia pages on Racial Segregation in the United States, Plessy v. Ferguson, and The University of Mississippi are very helpful and contain links that can lead to more in depth information, including sites on The Black Codes and many of the names and incidents associated with the Civil Rights Movement.

The University of Mississippi also has a very good article about James Meredith on their website; <https://50years.olemiss.edu/james-meredith/>

LESSON PLAN: EXPLORING RACISM

Essential Questions: Whose lives are impacted by racism? What can we do as a community to make a difference in a racist society?

Objectives: Students will be able to explore and successfully manage techniques in handling situations that pertain to racism. They will be able to reflect on their own comfort level when they talk about race.

Activity #1

- Students will start by brainstorming “What is racism?” The teacher will define and the students will discuss and learn about their roles in a broader sense.
- To help expand the creative process, the teacher will put two pieces of chart paper on the board with the alphabet listed vertically (A-Z).
- Students will split into two teams. They will line up and on “go” they will (like a relay race) write one word per student next to the letter of the alphabet that relates to “Racism.” The teammates may help them if they get stuck on a letter (ex: Q or Z). Whichever team finishes first wins.
- After both lists are completed, students will then look at the opposing team’s list of words (There will be some crossover words). They will chat briefly about the words and meanings they wrote.
- The teacher will then instruct the students to create a tableau (a frozen picture in time depicting an emotion, an event, or moment of action) using two words from the opposing team’s list. They should not share their words with the opposing team.
- They present the tableaus and have the opposing team identify the words chosen and what they perceived was the story presented.
- At the end of the class, discuss what the words represent in terms of racism. How did the tableau make them feel? Write a reflection (exit ticket) of what racism means to them.

Activity #2

- Students will write a “letter to the editor.” Writing such a letter is a longstanding tradition in journalism. Editorials are different from news. News is supposed to be objective facts whereas editorials are based on opinions.
- Students will choose a topic of concern in their world involving racism in their neighborhood, school, friends, or family. Their “letter to the editor” should voice their concerns. Then they will respond to the letter as “The Editor” in another letter.

Activity #3

- The teacher will lead a “human barometer” game where the student will have an opportunity to discuss and evaluate their own perceptions on racism.
- There will be three zones: Strongly Agree, Strongly Disagree, Not Sure. The teacher will read a list of statements and the students will choose a zone based on whether they agree or disagree with the statements. If they are not sure, they will choose Not Sure. After choosing their zone, the students will discuss why they chose that zone.
- Wrap up with a brief discussion about whether any perceptions have changed during the “human barometer” game.

Examples

- 1) In today’s world, racism is expected.
- 2) Racism can be easily prevented.
- 3) Men are more likely to be racists.
- 4) We first learn racist behavior in our family.
- 5) We can someday live in an anti-racist world.

This study guide was jointly prepared by Paul Beattie, Ellen Beattie, Paul Whelihan, and Sam Tucker.

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Pushcart programs are generously funded by ADP Foundation, Geraldine R. Dodge Foundation, Frenkel & Company, E.J. Grassmann Trust, Healthcare Foundation of NJ, The Hyde & Watson Foundation, NJ State Council on the Arts/Department of state, PNC Bank, Lillian Schenck Foundation, The Turrell Fund, Wallerstein Foundation for Geriatric Life Improvement, Josh & Judy Weston Foundation, The Whitehill Foundation, The Puffin Foundation, A.I.G. and many individual contributors

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