

Lesson Two: Emblems of Education—Nineteenth Century Education and Moral Instruction

Introduction

To the trustees of the African Free School, education involved more than simply teaching students reading, writing, and arithmetic. Equally important, if not more so, was the moral instruction of their students, as can be seen in the curriculum and in the messages sent to parents by school officials. This lesson will focus on the moral instruction received by students at the African Free School.

Grade Level

9–12

Time Allotment

Approximately six class sessions

Subject Matter

American History, English Literature, African American History, History of Education

Learning Objectives

Students will be able to:

- Read, ask questions of, and draw conclusions from, primary documents
- Compare and contrast historic and contemporary educational systems
- Better understand life for African American children in early-nineteenth-century New York City

Preparation

The teacher will need to do the following before beginning this lesson:

- Thoroughly review the Examination Days Web site, with special attention paid to the essay regarding the African Free School and its curriculum
- Review the online materials from the Web links provided below
- Print out and make copies of the online material for your students

Introduction

Teacher's Guide 2: Emblems of Education—Nineteenth Century Education and Moral Instruction

Examination Days: The New York African Free School Collection

Primary Documents

Documents from the African Free School Collection, New-York Historical Society, v. 4.

"Emblem of Education"

"Of Necessary Confidence Hope is the First Great Blessing"

"Unhappy Close of Life"

"Oh Liberty Thou Pow'r Supremely Bright"

"Of Applause"

An Address to the Parents and Guardians of the Children Belonging to the New-York African Free School, by the Trustees of the Institution (New York: Samuel Wood, 1818), 3–13.

Wynne, John Huddleston. *Choice Emblems, Natural, Historical, Fabulous, Moral and Divine for the Improvement and Pastime of Youth. Displaying the Beauties and Morals of the Ancient Fabulists . . .* (New York: James Oram, 1814), 63–64.

Primary Documents

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Learning Activities

Activity One: "See in What Evil Plight Yon Vine Appears"

(two days)

Henry Hill's "Emblem of Education" was copied from John Huddleston Wynne's *Choice Emblems, Natural, Historical, Fabulous, Moral and Divine for the Improvement and Pastime of Youth. Displaying the Beauties and Morals of the Ancient Fabulists . . .* (1772), which appeared in many subsequent British and American editions. English "emblems" combined allegorical illustrations and poems, proverbs or epigrams to convey moral lessons to young students. Wynne's "Emblem of Education" goes on to suggest that the guidance and support of parents and educators is critical to the moral development of children: "To education alone must children be indebted for their morals; and the care of the parents is always visible in the conduct of their offspring."

Several other examples taken from Wynne's *Choice Emblems* can be found in the African Free School Collection, including John Burns's "Of Necessary Confidence Hope is the First Great Blessing" and Richard Fitch's "Of Applause Fame that Strange Power."

Show your students the documents, which can be printed from the Web site, copied, and distributed to your students or displayed to the entire classroom using a digital projector.

1. Have your students view Henry Hill's "Emblem of Education." While they are examining the document, lead your students through the following questions.
 - Who created this document? How do you know this?
 - Discuss the overall layout of the document and its different components.
 - Have your students attempt to decipher the text above and below the image of the tree.
 - Study the image of the tree. What is happening in this picture? Is Henry Hill a good artist?
2. Lead your students through a reading of the entire text of the document using either the online transcription or the handwritten document.
 - What is the line "See in what evil plight yon vine appears" referring to? How does the text help to explain the meaning of the picture?
 - Why is the tree important to the vine? What do the tree and the vine stand for?
 - What is the moral of the poem? Why is this poem called "Emblem of Education."
3. Explain to your students that lessons of this type, in which a student would copy and memorize a poem that would be accompanied by an allegorical image and an explanation of the poem, were often used to provide *moral* instruction to school children. The poem "Emblems of Education" also includes an explanatory "application" that Henry Hill did not copy. Distribute copies of

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the excerpts from the explanatory text to "Emblems of Education" and guide your students in reading the text.

- According to the text, what is one of the most important purposes of education?
 - Who is responsible for providing good moral education to children?
 - Many children in 1820s New York City received little or no education, especially children in New York's poor and African American communities. According to this document, why might it be in the interest of the public to provide schooling for these children?
4. Henry Hill's "Emblems of Education" doesn't provide much information about Henry Hill, but the African Free School Collection has two more samples of his work, all of which appear to be from the same set of his work. Have your students search the online collection for other examples of Henry Hill's work.
- What more do we know about Henry Hill after examining the other surviving samples of his school work?

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Activity Two: "A Message to Parents"

(two days)

1. In 1818 the trustees at the New York African Free School prepared a pamphlet to be distributed to the parents of students or prospective students of the school, which explained the rules and regulations of the school and admonished parents to instruct their children in proper behavior and to provide, by example, good moral guidance. The passage "Respected Friends" lists their recommendations to parents. Have your students take turns reading the message while addressing some of the following questions:
 - What is the purpose of this message? Is it respectful? Condescending? Concerned? Why do you think the school trustees found it important to create this letter to African Free School parents?
 - List the values that the school trustees want parents to cultivate in their children.
 - What advice is given on "giving commands to children"? According to the document, how should parents treat their children?
 - Overall, does this message offer good advice? Bad or inappropriate advice?
 - Are schools today still concerned with imparting specific values to students? How does your school educate students about values? How do today's values compare with those taught to students at the African Free School?

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Culminating Activities

(two days)

1. Emblems, such as Henry Hill's copy of "Emblems of Education," were used to teach moral lessons through the use of allegorical images, poetry, mottos or epigrams, and explanatory text. The African Free School Collection has a number of other "emblems" as well as other inspirational poems and essays that were copied by students, including "Of Necessary Confidence Hope is the First Great Blessing," "Unhappy Close of Life," "Oh Liberty Thou Pow'r Supremely Bright," and "Of Applause."
 - Have your students read some of the other poems and essays in the collection and discuss the values and standards of behavior that the documents seem to hold in high esteem.
 - As an assignment, have your students create their own emblem that illustrates a value that they hold dear. You might elect to have students begin this project by selecting a topic (love, tolerance, honesty) and then selecting an appropriate motto using the quotations Web site at Bartleby.com (www.bartleby.com/quotations). Their emblems should consist of a quotation, motto, or slogan supported by a drawing, an original work of poetry, and a brief explanatory passage.

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