



# Gender, Sexuality, and Family in US Enslavement

Author(s): Alexander Vasquez

**Subject:** History

**Topic:** Integrated

**Grade Levels:** Middle School; 8

## Overview

This lesson seeks to introduce how gender roles and sexuality influenced familial structure during U.S. enslavement. There is an emphasis on this topic through literature and primary sources.

**Time:** 55 minutes

## Lesson Objectives:

- Examine how the institution of slavery shaped the institution of family during 1800-1850
- Analyze how slavery produces gender violence and inequity
- Interpret the familial dynamics in a poem about a slave auction

## Essential Questions:

How did conceptions of gender and sexuality change under the institution of slavery?  
How did conditions of enslavement affect families?

## Standards:

CCSS RH 6-8 2- Determine the central ideas or information of a primary or secondary source; provide an accurate summary of the source distinct from prior knowledge or opinions.

HSS 8.7.2. Trace the origins and development of slavery; its effects on black Americans and on the region's political, social, religious, economic, and cultural development; and identify the strategies that were tried to both overturn and preserve it.

## Vocabulary:

*Being enslaved vs. being a slave:* Using the term "enslaved person" rather than "slave" helps to acknowledge the humanity of the people who experienced enslavement by recognizing that they are not narrowly defined only by being enslaved

*Gender*: a person's internal sense of self as male, female, both or neither as well as one's outward presentation and behaviors

*Race*: a grouping of humans based on shared physical or social qualities into categories generally viewed as distinct by society

*Racialization*: attributing racial identities to a group

*Marginalization*: treatment of a person, group, or concept as insignificant so as to put them at a social disadvantage

**Teacher Background:** Teacher should have an understanding of the history of Ashley's Sack in order to lead and facilitate a discussion about it (see Relevant Resources). Teacher must have knowledge on Maya Angelou and her involvement in liberation movements through art. Teacher should have experience with poetry.

### Materials:

- Lined paper
- Pencils
- [Poem](#)

### Instruction:

1. Warm-up (15 minutes)
  - a. Begin a warm up where the facilitator displays the above vocabulary. The facilitator will then lead a dialogue allowing students to define these words on their own. After students have completed the first part of this activity, the facilitator will give the accurate definitions of all the terms.
  - b. Have students study this image (<https://southernspaces.org/2016/slaverys-traces-search-ashleys-sack>)
  - c. Allow students to deduce what the image itself is referencing, given their knowledge of slavery and how some enslaved families were broken apart through auctions.
  - d. Use the image to begin a discussion on how families were shaped by slavery. Have students not only recall the historical violence of auctions but other institutions that may have caused black families to become fragmented.
  - e. Some guiding questions to consider:
    - i. How would students describe the familial structure of black families during slavery?
    - ii. How would students describe the quality of family formation during slavery?
2. Poetry analysis (20 minutes)
  - a. Provide a copy of "The Slave Auction" (1993) by Frances Ellen Watkins Harper (see Materials). Have the class listen to the poem being read by Maya

Angelou on Youtube, found at  
<https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=jK4XzxBxOek>.

- b. After listening to the poem being read, read through the poem once more together as a class by choosing one student to read the first stanza of the poem. After they finish reading one stanza, take some time to analyze the meaning of it before choosing a new student to read the next stanza, and so on until the whole poem has been read and analyzed.
3. Conclusion (20 minutes)
  - a. Once the class has read and analyzed the poem together, have students write a short response using these guiding questions:
    - i. Who is the main speaker in this poem?
    - ii. How did gender influence the description of this auction? Is the speaker sympathetic toward a particular gender? Why?
    - iii. What is the tone of the poem? How would you describe the tone in the context of the auction?

**Assessment Ideas:** Have students do a quick write-up using the following questions. All the response should utilize at least 1 of vocabulary terms accurately.

- What have you learned about the separation of enslaved families?
- How have contemporary institutions in politics, health, religion, or in other areas impact marginalized communities through the separation of families?

### **Relevant Resources:**

Auslander, Mark. "Slavery's Traces: In Search of Ashley's Sack." *Southern Spaces*, Southern Spaces, 1 Jan. 1970, [southernspaces.org/2016/slaverys-traces-search-ashleys-sack](http://southernspaces.org/2016/slaverys-traces-search-ashleys-sack).

nurfcenter. "Dr. Maya Angelou Shares The Poem, The Slave Market." *YouTube*, YouTube, 8 Nov. 2013, [www.youtube.com/watch?v=jK4XzxBxOek](http://www.youtube.com/watch?v=jK4XzxBxOek).

Harper, Frances Ellen Watkins. "The Slave Auction by Frances Ellen Watkins Harper." *Poetry Foundation*, Poetry Foundation, 1993, [www.poetryfoundation.org/poems/47686/the-slave-auction](http://www.poetryfoundation.org/poems/47686/the-slave-auction).

"Slavery as a Form of Racialized Social Control." *Teaching Tolerance*, Teaching Tolerance, 15 Aug. 2017, [www.tolerance.org/lesson/slavery-form-racialized-social-control](http://www.tolerance.org/lesson/slavery-form-racialized-social-control).

**Author(s) Information:** Alex Vazquez works in HIV Care and Prevention at a clinic in Oakland. He is dedicated to intersectional movements within Public Health. He is based in Oakland, Ca.