

LESSON OVERVIEW

Name: Dana Huff **Grade:** 12 **Subject:** AP English Literature **Location:** Worcester, MA

Context & Purpose: This lesson was part of a unit on the theme of Home and Family. The major text in this unit is Yaa Gyasi’s *Homegoing*, a multigenerational saga about a family that lives the story of the African diaspora when one branch of the family is captured, enslaved, and transported to the United States while the other branch remains in the Gold Coast (present-day Ghana). One chapter in the book focuses on the character “H Black,” who is arrested for a minor charge and is sentenced to hard labor working as a leased convict in a coal mine in Alabama. The purpose of the lesson is to help students gain a greater understanding of the convict leasing system.

Lesson Procedure:

1. I will display the QFT rules and share Google Slides with a collection of primary source images. The whole collection will serve as the QFocus. Students will examine the images at their own pace on their computers.
2. Students will complete a QFT in small groups and write their three most important questions on the whiteboard.
3. Students will lead a discussion on the priority questions and look up additional information as needed.
4. Students will reflect on the process.

Next Steps (i.e. how student questions will be used after the QFT):

- As mentioned, students will lead a class discussion on their priority questions immediately following the QFT.
- After reflecting, students will read, discuss, and address an additional primary source document written by John T. Milner called “White Men of Alabama Stand Together” that served as an argument in favor of White supremacy.

LESSON OUTCOME

Question Focus*:

*Students examined a photo series that included the image below.



[A Southern chain gang, \[between 1900 and 1906\]](https://www.loc.gov/item/2016803065/)

Student Questions: Bolded=priority questions

- Why is the little boy wrapped around the pole?
- Are they prisoners? If so, what are they prisoners of?
- Is the boy alive?
- What does their age signify?
- Why are the white people always in the back of the photos?
- Why does the white man in the back have the same pants as the prisoners in the back?
- Were they born into this?
- Is there any importance to workers in different clothing? (white shirt, tie... etc)
- **Who is in charge?**
- **What kind of place is this and why does it exist?**
- **Does what they’re in for justify their imprisonment?**
- What did he do to put him in that situation? (pickaxe pictures)
- **Why are there so many incarcerated children?**
- **Why do some of the photos seem posed while the rest of them seem to be candid?**
- Where are the women? Why are they separated?

Student Reflections:

- “I learned that despite slavery being abolished there were still many instances where African Americans were being heavily discriminated against and were still being used for labor against their will. Even younger kids such as the ones in the photographs were being forced to worked [*sic*] and were put in jail for situations that are not illegal and did not warrant arrest. There were still punished as heavily as adults were in the instance of the children tied to the pole. I learned this by looking at each of the photographs thoroughly and learning about the convict leasing, which relates to the photographs. Many of the photographs are indicative of the torture that these children experienced for small crimes.”

- “By the wording of the thirteenth amendment I always assumed that there were going to be loopholes in action for Black people being forced back into slavery but I had never seen any proof of that until today. I had never seen the little Black boys that were forced into shackles for close to no good reason. The malnourishment in these photos was awful to see and by learning that people were living in such conditions it was a disheartening sight. I learnt it by seeing these pictures in a way detailing the harsh conditions these boys were in. Boys that were forced into stripped [*sic; striped*] apparel like jailmen.”

TEACHER REFLECTIONS

What did students do with their questions at the conclusion of the QFT? How were they used in subsequent lessons?

We used the questions initially to prompt inquiry. When many students were unsure what the images depicted, I prompted them to search “convict leasing” online. Students read information they found online to answer some of their questions. We also looked up the exact wording of the Thirteenth Amendment to see the loophole regarding imprisonment that set the stage for convict leasing. We engaged in a discussion to try to answer some of the questions we came up with and realized some of them would need to remain unanswered because we had no way of knowing. We looked up some reasons why people were incarcerated and discussed what happened to the character H in *Homegoing*. One student had also read Jesmyn Ward’s *Sing Unburied Sing* which tells the story of a boy who died at Parchman Farm as part of the convict leasing system, and she shared some thoughts about her experience with that book.

After the discussion, we read a primary source document written by John T. Milner called “White Men of Alabama Stand Together” that served as an argument in favor of White supremacy. Milner was an advocate for convict leasing and once said, “Negro labor can be made exceedingly profitable in manufacturing iron and in rolling mills, provided there is an overseer: a Southern man who knows how to manage Negroes” (source: https://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/John_T._Milner). We discussed how we would address Milner’s arguments. We continued to return to discussion of the pictures as we read subsequent chapters of the book. The questions prompted students to engage more actively. They had to do something with what they were examining—last year’s class was still interested but more passive. I had a better idea of what, exactly, each student was learning through doing QFT than I would have if I had just shown the pictures and opened up a discussion as not all students would have elected to participate. This activity ensured full participation from all students.

Which student questions stood out to you? Why?

Where are the women? Why are they separated? -- This stood out to me because I didn’t even think about it, but none of the images showed women. The students were extremely observant. They looked carefully at the images and noticed details. They shared these details out as well, and invariably, one student would notice something no one else had.

Why do some of the photos seem posed while the rest of them seem to be candid? -- This was yet another astute observation and led to some interesting discussion about why anyone would pose pictures like this—wouldn’t this be something participants would NOT want to document in that way? Did the white people in the photos and the photographers feel justified in using convict labor, and if so, why?

Why is the little boy wrapped around the pole? -- Ultimately, this question can’t be answered because it’s impossible to know. We did deduce he was being punished and being made an example of, and we connected his predicament to a character in *Homegoing* who dies while in the convict leasing system.

Were they born into this? -- This question could easily be dismissed as a “no,” since people are not born convicts, but it could be answered “yes” because clearly this was an example of systemic racism at work, and yes, the people in the photographs were born into systemic racism. Clearly more African Americans were forced into convict labor, even though we did notice some white prisoners. I actually felt most of the questions students generated were incredibly insightful and offered wonderful opportunities for our discussion.

How did you tailor the standard QFT process, if at all? Describe.

Because my students are familiar with QFT, we did not discuss which rules might be difficult; however, I did remind them of the rules. Also, we did not discuss the advantages and disadvantages of open- and closed-ended questions.

Overall, what did you learn from this experience?

QFT allows for more participation and prompts students to engage in inquiry through giving them an opportunity to wonder and create their own questions. I have sometimes shortchanged the reflection part due to time constraints. I know how important it is, but I often run out of time to do it properly. This time, we ran through the full reflection and shared them with each other. It was so much more powerful because students themselves had to articulate what they learned and how they learned it, which meant they needed to sift through the learning experience themselves in order to articulate what learning they were taking away with them.