

Title

To Render a Life: The Wealth in Poverty
Lesson Plan created by Kyle Alexander, Nashville

Overview

In 1936, John Agee with the assistance of Walker Evans traveled to rural Alabama to document the lives of three poor cotton sharecropping families. The research resulted in the publication of their book Let Us Now Praise Famous Men in 1941. The film *To Render a Life* was inspired by this book. Filmed by Ross Spears over the course of more than three years, the film is a contemporary portrait of a poor, rural family living under similar conditions to those experienced by the cotton sharecroppers of Alabama during the height of the Great Depression. In this lesson, students will be asked to think of poverty not only in terms of a lack of money and/or material possessions but also in terms of wealth through family, pride, and honor, and to compare poverty during the Great Depression with modern-day examples from the film.

Objectives

- To evaluate quotations dealing with materialism, wealth, and poverty
- To discuss the ways people are “rich” and “poor”
- To compare and contrast the lives of rural poor during the Great Depression with contemporary equivalents

State Standards

U.S. History

- Understands the effects of the Great Depression upon American society

Reading

- Comprehends and constructs meaning from written, heard, and viewed text:
 - Analysis and Evaluation
 - Compares and Contrasts

Materials

To Render to Life
Television and VCR
To Render a Life Venn Diagram
Computer (w/REAL player) & Internet access

The Great Depression and the American
Families Decision-Making Scenario Graphic
Organizer (optional)

Description of Lesson

1. Share the following quotations with the class and discuss their meaning as well as possible connections to economic class.

- “One must be poor to know the luxury of giving.” (George Eliot)
 - “If you want to know what God thinks of money, just look at the people he gave it to.” (Dorothy Parker)
 - “Only when the last tree has died and the last river been poisoned and the last fish been caught will we realize that we cannot eat money.” (Cree Indian Proverb)
 - “Happiness is not in the mere possession of money; it lies in the joy of achievement, in the thrill of creative effort.” (Franklin Delano Roosevelt)
 - “Do not be fooled into believing that because a man is rich he is necessarily smart. There is ample proof to the contrary.” (Julius Rosenwald)
2. Create a T-chart on the overhead/white board with “POOR” in one column and “RICH” at the top of the other. Ask the students for their thoughts about the two terms. The discussion will more than likely begin with a focus on issues of money and other material items, but the teacher should make sure to broaden the discussion to include such aspects as richness in terms of family and friends, culture, having a positive outlook, happiness, etc. “POOR” should also include lack of experiences or opportunities, such as enrichment activities, possibly higher education, etc.
 3. Before watching the film, the teacher should provide students with background information with regard to the Great Depression (if not already). Any materials the teacher could use to supplement the student textbook would help enrich the students’ understanding of the period (and the film). Such a supplemental piece would be Chapter 17: *Down and Out* (pp. 83-87) in Joy Hakim’s *A History of US: War, Peace, and All That Jazz, 1918-1945* (especially pp. 84-85 which specifically address the impact of the Great Depression on farmers) and/or Chapter 30: *As Important as the Cotton Gin* (pp.144-146) in Joy Hakim’s *A History of US: All the People, 1945-2001* (dealing with sharecropping mainly among poor African-Americans but a decent resource even looking at a few of Agee and Walker’s photographs).
 4. Explain to the students they are about to watch a video called *To Render a Life* which is about a modern-day, poor, rural family who’s living conditions greatly mirror those of rural Southern poor during the Great Depression. Encourage students to move beyond any stereotypes with regard to poverty they might have/find in the film and to watch for aspects of “wealth” in the family’s life. Below are some suggested questions the teacher could provide to students to “answer” as they watch the film:
 - Describe the “famous” men in Agee’s *Let Us Now Praise Famous Men*. How are they “famous”?
 - What was the purpose of Agee’s book? What do the “experts” have to say about the book?
 - Describe daily life for the Glass family. What responsibilities does each member of the family (especially Obea and Alice) have?
 - How different are the hardships of the Glass family from those of families during the Great Depression (specifically those recorded in Agee’s *Let Us Now Praise Famous Men*)?

- How is the Glass family “rich”? List sources of pride for the family. (not owing anything on their house, the closeness of the family, raising their granddaughter, etc.)
5. After watching (and possibly debriefing) the film, the teacher should assign/read aloud the short chapter entitled “Money” (pp. 101-106) in Agee’s book Let Us Now Praise Famous Men. Using information from the film, the Agee reading, and their knowledge of the Great Depression (and its effects on the American family), the students should fill in the Venn diagram activity comparing the life of the family in the film with that of sharecropping families during the Great Depression.
 6. As a possible conclusion to this lesson, have students listen to some of the Studs Terkel interviews found at <http://www.studsterkel.org/htimes.php>. As the students listen to the various interviews, they should listen for similarities among the experiences discussed. Then using information from the interviews and all the other material from the lesson, students could write a poem dealing with “wealth” in poverty, create a collage addressing the false “wealth” of modern materialism, create a piece of art dealing with similarities issues, or write a song or rap dealing with the hardships of poverty but the wealth of the human spirit.

Supplemental Activities

1. During the Great Depression, children and adults did not get proper nutrition or adequate medical care. Students investigate the results of this lack on the long-term health of those who grew up or lived during the Great Depression and write a report on their findings.
2. Ask the students, in small groups, to brainstorm a list of ways in which their lives would change if the Great Depression happened today. Be sure students realize that there was no unemployment insurance or Social Security and bank accounts were not protected or insured in the early 1930s. Encourage students to consider the depression’s effects on their housing, food, family life, education, and future prospects.
3. Read *How the Other Half Lives* by Jacob A. Riis and compare the urban tenant life found in Riis’s work with the rural sharecropper life of Agee’s Let Us Now Praise Famous Men.
4. Complete the *Great Depression and the American Family Decision-Making Scenario Graphic Organizer*

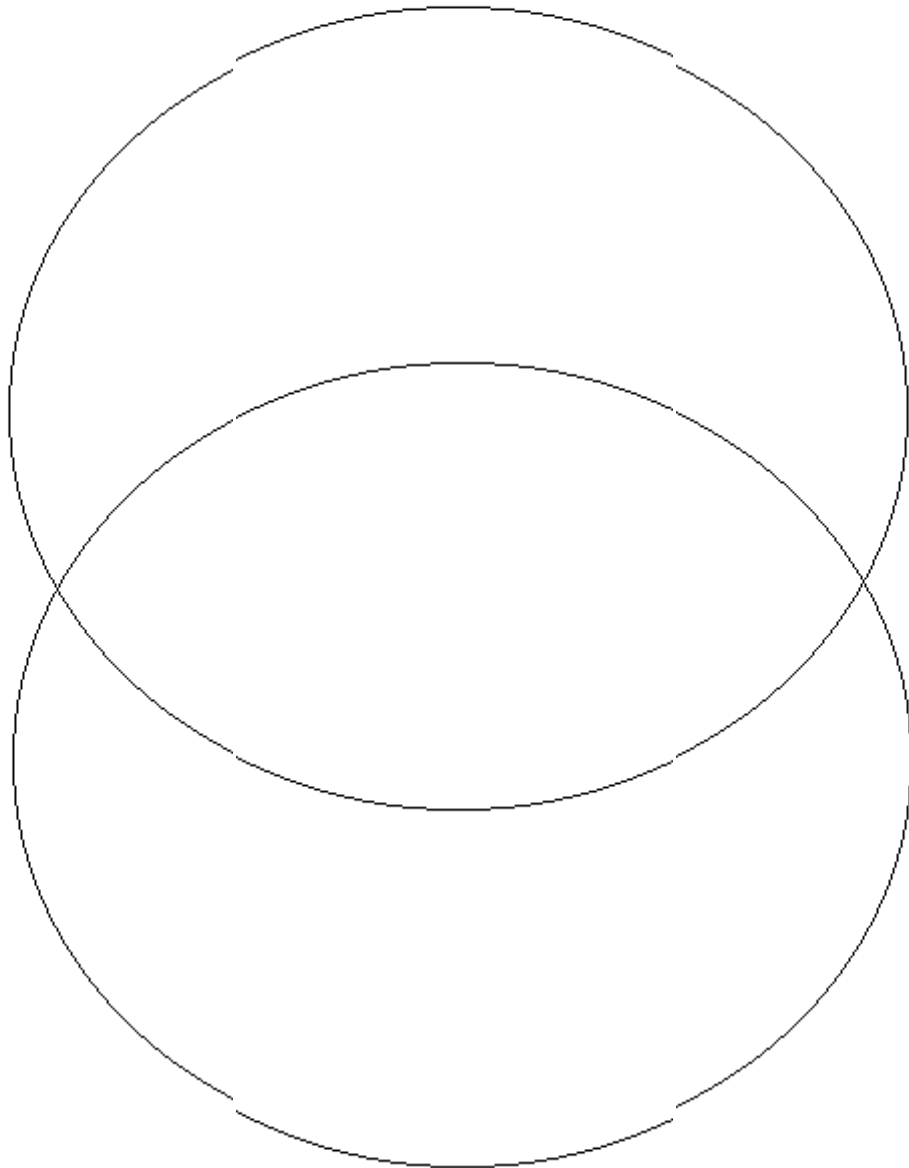
Bibliography

- Agee, John and Walker Evans. Let Us Now Praise Famous Men. Boston: Houghton Mifflin Company, 1939.
- Hakim, Joy. A History of US: All the People, 1945-2001. New York: Oxford University Press, 2003.
- Hakim, Joy. A History of US: War, Peace, and All That Jazz, 1918-1945. New York: Oxford University Press, 2003.

Name: _____ Date: _____ Pd: _____

To Render a Life and the Great Depression
Venn Diagram

"Money" (and the Great Depression)



"To Render a Life"

Name: _____ Date: _____ Pd. _____

The Great Depression and American Families Decision-Making Scenario Graphic Organizer

Historical Question/Dilemma

During the Great Depression, if you had a family to provide for and like millions of Americans found yourself out of work, what would you do? If that failed, what would you try next?



Option #1

Option #2



Positive Consequence	Negative Consequence



Positive Consequence	Negative Consequence



Decision