



Plessy v. Ferguson featuring Bert Williams

OVERVIEW

ESSENTIAL QUESTION

Who was Bert Williams and how does his life represent an American experience during the rise of Jim Crow laws and the U.S. Supreme Court's ruling in *Plessy v. Ferguson*?

OVERVIEW

*In this lesson, students examine the life of the Black American entertainer Bert Williams to identify how the rise of Jim Crow laws and the ruling in the *Plessy v. Ferguson* case shaped the American experience.*

With the end of Reconstruction in the late 1870s, the federal government relinquished its role in managing the affairs of the former Confederacy. Without federal oversight, Southern states began passing laws to reassert white supremacy and deny the social and political gains made by African Americans after the Civil War. In Louisiana in 1890, the state legislature passed the Separate Car Act, which racially segregated railroad passengers traveling in the state. Considering the legislation to be a violation of the 13th and 14th amendments, in 1891 a group of New Orleans men, identifying as “Creoles of color,” formed the Citizens’ Committee to Test the Constitutionality of the Separate Car Act. They devised a plan to challenge the law and a member of the group was Homer Plessy, a local shoemaker and social activist.

On June 7, 1892, Plessy boarded a Louisiana railroad car with a first-class ticket, which provided him a seat in the “white” car. After taking his seat and due to his light complexion, Plessy was asked by the train conductor to identify his race. When Plessy identified as “black,” the conductor ordered him out of the car. When Plessy refused, the train was stopped, and he was arrested and physically removed from the train. Plessy was convicted of violating the Separate Car Act and the Louisiana Supreme Court upheld his conviction when he appealed. His case, *Plessy v. Ferguson* was then heard before the U.S. Supreme Court.

On May 18, 1896, the U.S. Supreme Court upheld Plessy’s conviction. The Court ruled that the Separate Car Act did not violate the 13th and 14th amendments to the Constitution. Regarding the 14th Amendment, the Court’s opinion explained that there was no violation because the railroad provided equal accommodations regardless of racially segregating passengers—separate but equal train cars. The ruling sanctioned the practice of “separate but equal” and it transformed American society. Legislation like Louisiana’s Separate Car Act became known as, “Jim Crow laws” and they spread throughout the former Confederacy. Although racial segregation was



Bain News Service, Publisher. Bert Williams. , ca. 1915. [Between and Ca. 1920] Photograph. <https://www.loc.gov/item/2014709201/>.

codified into laws primarily in the South, throughout the United States policies and practices of separate but equal disenfranchised and segregated African Americans from much of white society.

The term “Jim Crow” comes from “Jump Jim Crow,” a comical routine performed during minstrel shows beginning in the 19th century. Created by the minstrel performer Thomas “Daddy” Dartmouth Rice in the mid-1800s, the performance was a racist caricature that grotesquely mimicked the appearance, movement, and speech of an enslaved African American man. As part of the costume for his prejudicial “Jim Crow” character, Rice darkened his face with makeup. This practice became a defining characteristic of Minstrelsy known as Blackface.

Minstrelsy was very popular throughout the United States during the mid-1800s but especially in the urban cities of northern free states where slavery had ended. The stock Jim Crow character was presented, and often perceived by northern audiences, as an authentic representation of enslaved plantation life. In time, a second racist stock minstrel character was created to mimic a free African American man from the city, Zip Coon.

Around the time of the Plessy decision in 1896, Bert Williams was ascending to American entertainment stardom. A Black American born in the Caribbean, Williams forged a successful career within the American theatre—an industry, like many in the U.S., where few opportunities were available to people of color. Williams’ celebrity and success was built portraying Jim Crow-type characters, and in blackface. However, Williams approached the portrayals as an opportunity to reclaim and reshape how audiences experienced the Jim Crow character. His performances created a sense of humanity within and exposed the artifice of the Jim Crow character, all while making subtle social commentary on race relations in America. In 1903, Williams would have a lead role in the first show written, produced, and performed by African Americans on Broadway, *In Dahomey: A Negro Musical Comedy*. And at the dawn of the music recording industry, he was the first African American to sign and record for a major record company, producing nearly 80 recordings between 1901-1922.

OBJECTIVES

Upon completion of this lesson, students will:

1. KNOW (KNOWLEDGE):

- The U.S. Supreme Court ruling in *Plessy v. Ferguson* and the impact the ruling had on U.S. society
- Jim Crow laws and their effects on African Americans and American society
- Minstrelsy and the musical origins of the phrase “Jim Crow”
- Bert Williams and his historic career as a Black American entertainer

2. MASTERY OBJECTIVE:

- Students will be able to describe the U.S. Supreme Court’s decision in *Plessy v. Ferguson*, identify Jim Crow laws and the term’s musical origins, and explain how the life of Black American entertainer Bert Williams represents an American experience by analyzing texts and examining media.

ACTIVITIES

DISCLAIMER

This lesson contains primary source documents and other materials that may include terms and images reflecting the attitudes, perspectives, and beliefs of different times that today are considered offensive and demeaning. Teachrock.org does not endorse the views expressed in these documents, but recognizes the value such materials provide for historical inquiry. For guidance on introducing controversial historical materials into the classroom, we suggest reviewing this document from The Library of Congress: <https://blogs.loc.gov/teachers/2011/11/dealing-with-difficult-subjects-in-primary-sources>.

PREPARATION

- Place large sheets of paper around the classroom and label them with the topic names (“14th Amendment,” “Jim Crow Laws,” “Homer Plessy,” “Plessy v. Ferguson”) for students to write on during the Graffiti activity.
- Print images or prepare devices to display images from **Gallery Walk - Minstrelsy**.

MOTIVATIONAL ACTIVITY

1. At a place in the classroom viewable to all, write or display the phrase, “Separate but Equal.”
2. As a Quick Write activity, instruct students to respond in writing to the following question:
 - What does the phrase “Separate but Equal” mean to you?
3. Once completed, ask students to share their answers with the class and instruct them that they will be returning to their Quick Write writing at the end of the lesson. Then, ask students:
 - Can things that are separate ever be equal?
 - Can something be equal if it is separate?

PROCEDURE

1. Inform students that they will now participate in a Jigsaw activity to explore the origins and legacy of “separate but equal” in U.S. history. (View instructions for a jigsaw activity [here](#).)
2. Distribute **Handout - Plessy v. Ferguson featuring Bert Williams Graphic Organizer** (Teacher’s Guide). Organize students into

groups of four for the Jigsaw activity. Explain to student groups that they will work together to “jigsaw” four document “pieces.”

3. Distribute **Handout - Plessy v. Ferguson Jigsaw Activity**. Explain to student groups that each group member will choose one document “piece” to become the “expert” on by reading the document and answer the aligning questions independently. (It may be necessary

to provide a way for students to look up the meaning of words they are unfamiliar with in their document.)

4. After students have completed their document piece and answered the aligning questions they will then form “expert” groups with students who completed the same document piece from other groups. Display **Image 1, Expert Group Discussion** and instruct expert groups to discuss using the bullet points as guidance.
5. After students are finished in their expert groups, have them rejoin their original groups. Instruct each member to take turns presenting their document set to the group, allowing all students to write a summary of all the “pieces” on their graphic organizer.
6. Inform students that they will now participate in a Graffiti activity (view instructions for a Graffiti activity here). Instruct students to visit each sheet and “graffiti” a word or phrase that demonstrates their comprehension of that topic (examples: 14th Amendment = citizen, equal protection, constitution; Jim Crow laws = legal system, white supremacy, separation; Plessy v. Ferguson = segregation, separate but equal, second-class citizen).
7. Bring students back together as a class. Have students share about their word or phrase on each sheet, including providing support for what they wrote based on what they discovered in the Jigsaw activity. Then ask students:
 - What similarities do you notice between the words or phrases on the sheets?
 - How might those similarities support the historical connections between each jigsaw piece?
 - How do all the pieces connect to the phrase “separate but equal”?
- What might be the origins of the term Jim Crow considering that it’s the name of “a legal system aimed at re-establishing a society based on white supremacy”?
8. Inform students that they will now participate in a **Minstrelsy Gallery Walk** activity. Organize students in pairs and distribute the Library of Congress - Teacher’s Guide: Analyzing Photographs & Prints to each student. Instruct students to use the three stages of the guide as prompts as they walk through the gallery and make notes. Once student pairs have completed the gallery walk, they will write a definition of Minstrelsy on their graphic organizer.
9. Display **Image 1, Bert Williams**. Explain to students that Bert Williams (1874-1922) was one of the first Black American entertainment stars, performing in stage productions often as a Jim Crow-type character from the late-19th century into the early-20th century. Then ask students:
 - What do you notice in the two images?
 - How do these images relate to the images and text you analyzed in the Gallery Walk activity?
 - Why might Bert Williams have performed in blackface?
10. Distribute **Handout - Bert Williams Document Set**. Organize students into groups of four. Explain to student groups that for this activity they will pair Bert Williams quotes with texts describing his life and career. Instruct students to follow the instructions for the activity on the first document of the set.
11. Once completed, ask student groups to share about the text they were assigned, the Bert Williams quote that was paired with it, and to explain the pairing. Guide further discussion

into why students may have paired the same quote with different texts. Guiding questions for the discussion could be:

- How might your paired text and quote reflect Bert Williams' experience with Jim Crow laws and the effects of the *Plessy v. Ferguson* ruling during this time in U.S. history?

- How does the life and career of Bert Williams connect to the phrase "Separate but Equal"?

12. Display **Image 2, Question for Structured Academic Controversy**. Using this handout for guidance, conduct a Structured Academic Controversy either in student groups, or as a class. (View instructions for a structured academic controversy activity here.)

SUMMARY ACTIVITY

1. After the Structured Academic Controversy activity, instruct students to write a summary of Bert Williams on their graphic organizer. Ask students to share their summaries with the class, and guide further discussion into the similarities and differences between each summary.
2. Direct students to retrieve and review their Quick Write activity writing, then ask students:
 - Considering everything covered in this lesson, what may have changed in what "Separate but Equal" means to you?
 - What might the legacy of "Separate but Equal" mean for African Americans until the Civil Rights Movement in the mid-20th century?
3. As an Exit Ticket activity, instruct students to write a second version of what "Separate but Equal" means to them, including how its legacy affected African Americans. Once completed, ask students to share their answers with the class, then turn in the completed Quick Write writing.

EXTENSION ACTIVITIES

1. Learn more about Plessy v. Ferguson by viewing the New American History lesson plan, "A Brief Moment in the Sun: The End of Reconstruction and the Rise of Jim Crow". (<https://resources.newamericanhistory.org/moment-in-the-sun>)
2. Explore the history and significance of the Cakewalk (<https://www.npr.org/sections/codeswitch/2013/12/23/256566647/the-extraordinary-story-of-why-a-cakewalk-wasnt-always-easy>) and watch it being performed here: <https://www.loc.gov/item/96520361/>
3. Examine the 14th Amendment to the U.S. Constitution at the U.S. National Archives website: <https://www.archives.gov/milestone-documents/14th-amendment>
4. Explore the website for the Jim Crow Museum at Ferris State University: <https://jimcrowmuseum.ferris.edu/>
5. Read the Plessy v. Ferguson decision at the Library of Congress website: <https://guides.loc.gov/plessy-ferguson>



6. View Minstrelsy artifacts at the National Museum of African American History and Culture website: <https://nmaahc.si.edu/explore/stories/blackface-birth-american-stereotype>
7. Watch a profile of Bert Williams, with film clips of him performing, on YouTube: <https://youtu.be/pqID-eZm1ck?si=os-i5KHn-GdqSb1h&t=293>



STANDARDS

COLLEGE, CAREER, AND CIVIC LIFE (C3) SOCIAL STUDIES STANDARDS

History

D2.His.1.9-12. Evaluate how historical events and developments were shaped by unique circumstances of time and place as well as broader historical contexts.

D2.His.3.9-12. Use questions generated about individuals and groups to assess how the significance of their actions changes over time and is shaped by the historical context.

D2.His.5.9-12. Analyze how historical contexts shaped and continue to shape people's perspectives.

D2.His.16.9-12. Integrate evidence from multiple relevant historical sources and interpretations into a reasoned argument about the past.

CALIFORNIA HISTORY—SOCIAL SCIENCE CONTENT STANDARDS

11.10 Students analyze the development of federal civil rights and voting rights.

2. Examine and analyze the key events, policies, and court cases in the evolution of civil rights, including *Dred Scott v. Sandford*, *Plessy v. Ferguson*, *Brown v. Board of Education*, *Regents of the University of California v. Bakke*, and California Proposition 209.

MASSACHUSETTS HISTORY AND SOCIAL SCIENCE FRAMEWORK STANDARDS

Topic 5. The Civil War and Reconstruction: causes and consequences [USI.T5]

6. Analyze the consequences of the Civil War and Reconstruction (e.g., the physical and economic destruction of the South and the loss of life of both Southern and Northern troops; the increased role of the federal government; the impeachment of President Johnson; the 13th, 14th, and 15th Amendments; the expansion of the industrial capacity of the Northern U.S.; the role of the Freedmen's Bureau and organizations such as the American League of Colored Laborers, the National Negro Labor Council, the Colored Farmers' National Alliance and Cooperative Union; the accomplishments and failures of Radical Reconstruction; the presidential election of 1876; and the end of Reconstruction)

CONNECTICUT SECONDARY SOCIAL STUDIES FRAMEWORK

US-1. Reconstruction

US.Civ.5.a. Evaluate the effectiveness of state and federal government in upholding the Reconstruction Amendments (e.g., Black Codes, Enforcement Acts, Jim Crow laws).

US.Civ.14.a. Analyze the historical context of racism, racial violence, and challenges to reconciliation between the United States and the former Confederacy.

NEW JERSEY STUDENT LEARNING STANDARDS - SOCIAL STUDIES

Era 4. Civil War and Reconstruction (1850–1877)

6.1.12.HistoryCA.4.a: Analyze the debate about how to reunite the country and determine the extent to which enacted Reconstruction policies achieved their goals.

6.1.12.CivicsDP.5.a: Analyze the effectiveness of governmental policies and of actions by groups and individuals to address discrimination against new immigrants, Native Americans, and African Americans.

SOCIAL STUDIES – NATIONAL COUNCIL FOR THE SOCIAL STUDIES (NCSS)

Theme 1: Culture

Theme 3: People, Place, and Environments

Theme 4: Individual Development and Identity

Theme 5: Individuals, Groups, and Institutions

Theme 7: Production, Distribution, and Consumption

COMMON CORE STATE STANDARDS

College and Career Readiness Reading Information Text Standards for Grades 11-12

CCSS.ELA-Literacy.RI.9-10.1 Cite strong and thorough textual evidence to support analysis of what the text says explicitly as well as inferences drawn from the text.

CCSS.ELA-Literacy.RI.9-10.7 Analyze various accounts of a subject told in different mediums (e.g., a person’s life story in both print and multimedia), determining which details are emphasized in each account.

CCSS.ELA-Literacy.RI.9-10.9 Analyze seminal U.S. documents of historical and literary significance (e.g., Washington’s Farewell Address, the Gettysburg Address, Roosevelt’s Four Freedoms speech, King’s “Letter from Birmingham Jail”), including how they address related themes and concepts.

CCSS.ELA-Literacy.RI.11-12.1 Cite strong and thorough textual evidence to support analysis of what the text says explicitly as well as inferences drawn from the text, including determining where the text leaves matters uncertain.

CCSS.ELA-Literacy.RI.11-12.7 Integrate and evaluate multiple sources of information presented in different media or formats (e.g., visually, quantitatively) as well as in words in order to address a question or solve a problem.

College and Career Readiness Anchor Standards for Writing for Grades 9-12

CCSS.ELA-Literacy.W.9-10.1 Write arguments to support claims in an analysis of substantive topics or texts, using valid reasoning and relevant and sufficient evidence.

CCSS.ELA-Literacy.W.9-10.2 Write informative/explanatory texts to examine and convey complex ideas, concepts, and information clearly and accurately through the effective selection, organization, and analysis of content.

CCSS.ELA-Literacy.W.9-10.4 Produce clear and coherent writing in which the development, organization, and style are appropriate to task, purpose, and audience. (Grade-specific expectations for writing types are defined in standards 1-3 above.)

CCSS.ELA-Literacy.W.9-10.9 Draw evidence from literary or informational texts to support analysis, reflection, and research.

CCSS.ELA-Literacy.W.11-12.1 Write arguments to support claims in an analysis of substantive topics or texts, using valid reasoning and relevant and sufficient evidence.

CCSS.ELA-Literacy.W.11-12.2 Write informative/explanatory texts to examine and convey complex ideas, concepts, and information clearly and accurately through the effective selection, organization, and analysis of content.

CCSS.ELA-Literacy.W.11-12.4 Produce clear and coherent writing in which the development, organization, and style are appropriate to task, purpose, and audience. (Grade-specific expectations for writing types are defined in standards 1-3 above.)

CCSS.ELA-Literacy.W.11-12.9 Draw evidence from literary or informational texts to support analysis, reflection, and research.

CCSS.ELA-Literacy.SL.11-12.3 Evaluate a speaker's point of view, reasoning, and use of evidence and rhetoric, assessing the stance, premises, links among ideas, word choice, points of emphasis, and tone used.

College and Career Readiness Anchor Standards for Speaking and Listening for Grades 9-12

CCSS.ELA-Literacy.SL.9-10.1 Initiate and participate effectively in a range of collaborative discussions (one-on-one, in groups, and teacher-led) with diverse partners on grades 9-10 topics, texts, and issues, building on others' ideas and expressing their own clearly and persuasively.

CCSS.ELA-Literacy.SL.9-10.2 Integrate multiple sources of information presented in diverse media or formats (e.g., visually, quantitatively, orally) evaluating the credibility and



accuracy of each source.

CCSS.ELA-Literacy.SL.9-10.4 Present information, findings, and supporting evidence clearly, concisely, and logically such that listeners can follow the line of reasoning and the organization, development, substance, and style are appropriate to purpose, audience, and task.

CCSS.ELA-Literacy.SL.11-12.1 Initiate and participate effectively in a range of collaborative discussions (one-on-one, in groups, and teacher-led) with diverse partners on grades 11-12 topics, texts, and issues, building on others' ideas and expressing their own clearly and persuasively.

CCSS.ELA-Literacy.SL.11-12.2 Integrate multiple sources of information presented in diverse formats and media (e.g., visually, quantitatively, orally) in order to make informed decisions and solve problems, evaluating the credibility and accuracy of each source and noting any discrepancies among the data.

CCSS.ELA-Literacy.SL.11-12.4 Present information, findings, and supporting evidence, conveying a clear and distinct perspective, such that listeners can follow the line of reasoning, alternative or opposing perspectives are addressed, and the organization, development, substance, and style are appropriate to purpose, audience, and a range of formal and informal tasks.

LEARNING FOR JUSTICE SOCIAL JUSTICE STANDARDS

JU.9-12.13 I can explain the short and long-term impact of biased words and behaviors and unjust practices, laws and institutions that limit the rights and freedoms of people based on their identity groups.



RESOURCES

HANDOUTS

- Gallery Walk - Minstrelsy
- Handout - Plessy v. Ferguson featuring Bert Williams Graphic Organizer
- Handout - Plessy v. Ferguson featuring Bert Williams Graphic Organizer (Teacher's Guide)
- Handout - Plessy v. Ferguson Jigsaw Activity
- Handout - Bert Williams Document Set
- Classroom Activity - Jigsaw
- Classroom Activity - Graffiti Wall
- Classroom Activity - Structured Academic Controversy