

## The Poetry of Resistance: George Moses Horton

### Overview

Students will learn about the life of North Carolina’s “first professional poet”, George Moses Horton, who was born into slavery in 1798 North Carolina. Despite the unjust society he was enslaved in, however, Mr. Horton resisted and tirelessly worked towards freedom, both intellectually and physically. By reading, discussing, and preparing dramatic presentations of Horton’s poetry, students will gain an understanding and appreciation of Mr. Horton’s literary contribution, even under the great adversity of enslavement.

### Grades

4-8

### Essential Questions

- Who was George Moses Horton and what contributions did he make to the state of North Carolina?
- What challenges and successes did Horton experience in his life?
- What is interesting or inspirational about George Moses Horton’s life and/or poetry?

### Materials

- Poems by George Moses Horton, such as The Slave’s Complaint, The Poet’s Feeble Petition, and A Slaves Reflection the Eve Before His Sale, attached
- Additional teacher resources on George Moses Horton:
  - <https://www.wunc.org/post/story-george-moses-horton-enslaved-nc-poet-turned-published-author>
  - Children’s Book, The Remarkable Story of George Moses Horton: <https://dontate.com/book/poet-the-remarkable-story-of-george-moses-horton/>

### Duration

45 minutes

### Preparation

Students should have an understanding of the Civil War and slavery.

### Procedure

#### A Poem for the Teacher’s “Sweetie”

1. As students enter class, tell them that you need their assistance with something. Explain that you are in need of a sweet, innocent love poem for [choose whichever may be applicable that you feel comfortable saying] your wife/girlfriend, your husband/boyfriend, someone you have a crush on, etc. Amidst the giggles you get from students, explain that you just can’t seem to come up with anything good, and stress the fact that the poem you are looking for must be sweet and *innocent*. Tell students that you are willing to give them the next 5 minutes to compose a great love poem for your “sweetie”, and that you will pay for the best poem. (Determine what you are offering and display it, such as a piece of candy). Give students any other stipulations you feel they need for the poem (i.e., keep it respectful) you are soliciting then give them 5 minutes to work. When finished, depending on time constraints, for fun you can allow students to share some of their poetry, vote on the best poem, etc.

#### George Moses Horton – NC’s First Professional Poet

2. Finally, explain that you are not in fact really in the market for a love poem, but in the early 1800s there was a man named George Moses Horton who actually did write love poems, and he sold them to the students at UNC-Chapel Hill! Ask students to share anything they may already know about George Moses Horton then share some background information on him, such as:

- George Moses Horton could rightly be called North Carolina's first professional poet. Mr. Horton was born into enslavement in 1798. Despite the unjust institution of slavery that he was forced into, George Moses Horton taught himself to read using an old speller and a copy of the Methodist hymnal, and once he was older he also learned to write. Especially fascinated with poetry, he composed psalm-meter verses in his head.

Young Horton was often sent to Chapel Hill by his then-master, James Horton, to sell produce. His unusually sophisticated vocabulary caught the attention of the university students, who encouraged his orations, and ultimately, the recitation of his own verse. His reputation spread, and he began to sell poems for students to send to their sweethearts, charging extra for acrostics based on the young ladies' names. Thus for several decades he was able to purchase his own time from James Horton for twenty-five cents a day, and later from James' son Hall for fifty cents. He earned the admiration and support of Governor John Owen, University presidents Joseph Caldwell and David L. Swain, and newspapermen William Lloyd Garrison and Horace Greeley. A professor's wife and novelist, Caroline Lee Hentz, encouraged him and arranged for the publication of a collection, *The Hope of Liberty*. The book, the first published in the South by a black man, unfortunately did not sell enough copies for Horton to purchase his freedom, nor did two subsequent collections.

He finally gained his freedom after the Civil War and moved north. Horton spent his final years in Philadelphia, writing Sunday School stories and working for old North Carolina friends who had moved to the city. UNC scholar Collier Cobb described Horton as a "man of letters before he had learned to read . . . and as an author who supported himself and his family in an intellectual center before authorship had attained the dignity of a profession in America." Noel Yancey has called him "UNC's first poet-in-residence."

Mr. Horton is author of the first book of literature published in North Carolina, and the first by an African American in the South. Except for Phillis Wheatley (who published in London after Boston publishers turned her down) he is the first published African-American author.

Horton Middle School in Pittsboro is named for him, and a State Highway Historical Marker was erected in Chatham County (off of 15-501) in his honor. He has been the subject of several books, dissertations and scholarly papers, and the University of North Carolina at Chapel Hill recently purchased one of his manuscripts at auction."

Source: <http://www.nclhof.org/inductees/1996-2/george-moses-horton/>

Discuss:

- In what ways, despite being born into enslavement, did George Moses Horton resist enslavement and persevere through great adversity? What particular skills did Mr. Horton possess?
  - What do you find most interesting/admirable about George Moses Horton?
  - How did Horton learn to read? What do you think it would take to teach yourself to read, as many of those enslaved did?
  - What is most impressive about Horton becoming a poet, given the time period?
3. Tell students that they will be exploring the poetry of George Moses Horton by working in groups to read, discuss, and prepare a dramatic presentation on an assigned poem. Divide students into small groups and assign each group one of the attached three George Moses Horton poems. (Additional poems are available at <https://www.poetryfoundation.org/poems-and-poets/poets/detail/george-moses-horton> if you would like each group to do a different poem.) Tell students that they should first read the poem once or twice then discuss it using the questions below the poem as a starting point.
  4. Once students feel that they have a firm grasp of the poem's content, they should prepare a short, 2-minute dramatic presentation of the poem to perform in front of the class. Tell students the purpose of

their presentation is to share the poem with us and show what their interpretation of it is. This can include any combination of a dramatic reading, pantomime, music or sound effects, acting, etc.

- **NOTE:** Tell students to ensure they are respectful in their portrayal of the poem (the object of the performances should not be humor) and remind them to focus on sharing the poem and their interpretation of it with class. Also, while the poems deal with slavery, it is important that students be specifically instructed to not act out enslavement, or assume the role of an enslaved person. This type of dramatization can cause harm and appear disrespectful.

➤ **Optional:** Teachers with limited time can also instruct students to create a piece of art representing one of the poems. These can then be hung around the room for a gallery walk during which students examine each others work.

5. Once all groups are finished, allow each to share their presentation. After each, discuss the poem and the various interpretations exhibited. Also discuss:
  - Overall, how would you characterize Horton’s poetry?
  - Did you notice any common themes, emotions, subjects, etc. in the poems? Explain.
  - What picture does Horton paint of enslavement?
  - What do you find interesting or inspirational about George Moses Horton’s life and/or poetry?
  - Considering the facts we discussed about his life, how would you characterize George Moses Horton?
  - Imagine you are teaching an elementary school history class about George Moses Horton. What do you think would be most important to teach them about him and why?
6. Optional: As a closing activity or homework assignment, instruct students to write their own original poem on the topic of slavery. On the due date, students can hold a poetry reading and share their work with classmates and/or visitors.

### Resources

- Poems by George Moses Horton: <https://www.poetryfoundation.org/poems-and-poets/poets/detail/george-moses-horton>
- George Moses Horton Project: <http://www.chathamarts.org/horton/>

## A Slave's Reflections the Eve before His Sale

by George Moses Horton

O, comrades! to-morrow we try,  
The fate of an exit unknowing--  
Tears trickled from every eye--  
'Tis going, 'tis going, 'tis going!

Who shall the dark problem then solve,  
An evening of gladness or sorrow,  
Thick clouds of emotion evolve,  
The sun which awaits us to-morrow,  
O! to-morrow! to-morrow!  
Thick clouds of emotion evolve,  
The sun which awaits us to-morrow.

Soon either with smiles or with tears,  
Will the end of our course be completed.  
The progress of long fleeting years,  
Triumphant or sadly regretted.

In whom shall the vassal confide,  
On a passage so treacherous and narrow,  
What tongue shall the question decide,  
The end which awaits us to-morrow?  
O! to-morrow, to-morrow!  
What tongue shall the question decide,  
The end which awaits us to-morrow?

The sun seems with doubt to look down,  
As he rides on his chariot of glory,  
A king with a torch and a crown,  
But fears to exhibit his story.

What pen the condition makes known,  
O! prophet thy light would I borrow,  
To steer through the desert alone,  
And gaze on the fate of to-morrow;  
O! to-morrow, to-morrow!  
To steer through the desert alone,  
And gaze on the fate of to-morrow.

### Discuss and answer the following questions on notebook paper:

1. How did you feel as you read this poem? What is the mood of the poem?
2. What emotions is the enslaved person experiencing regarding "tomorrow"? Why do you think he/she feels this way?
3. What example(s) of personification can you find in the poem?
4. What images do you visualize as you read this poem?

## **The Poet's Feeble Petition**

by George Moses Horton

Bewailing mid the ruthless wave,

I lift my feeble hand to thee.  
Let me no longer live a slave  
But drop these fetters and be free.  
Why will regardless fortune sleep  
Deaf to my penitential prayer,  
Or leave the struggling Bard to weep,  
Alas, and languish in despair?

He is an eagle void of wings

Aspiring to the mountain's height;  
Yet in the vale aloud he sings  
For Pity's aid to give him flight.

Then listen all who never felt  
For fettered genius heretofore--  
Let hearts of petrification melt  
And bid the gifted Negro soar.

**Discuss and answer the following questions below or on notebook paper:**

1. How did you feel as you read this poem? What is the mood of the poem?
2. What emotions is the enslaved person experiencing? Why do you think he/she feels this way?
3. What is the narrator's goal in this poem? What evidence in the poem makes you think this?
4. What images do you visualize as you read this poem?

**The Slave's Complaint**  
by George Moses Horton

Am I sadly cast aside,  
On misfortune's rugged tide?  
Will the world my pains deride  
Forever?

Must I dwell in Slavery's night,  
And all pleasure take its flight,  
Far beyond my feeble sight,  
Forever?

Worst of all, must Hope grow dim,  
And withhold her cheering beam?  
Rather let me sleep and dream  
Forever!

Something still my heart surveys,  
Groping through this dreary maze;  
Is it Hope?--then burn and blaze  
Forever!

Leave me not a wretch confined,  
Altogether lame and blind--  
Unto gross despair consigned,  
Forever!

Heaven! in whom can I confide?  
Canst thou not for all provide?  
Condescend to be my guide  
Forever:

And when this transient life shall end,  
Oh, may some kind eternal friend  
Bid me from servitude ascend,  
Forever!

**Discuss and answer the following questions on notebook paper:**

1. How did you feel as you read this poem? What is the mood of the poem?
2. What emotions is the enslaved person experiencing regarding "tomorrow"? Why do you think he/she feels this way?
3. What example(s) of personification can you find in the poem?
4. What images do you visualize as you read this poem?