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Northshore Educational Collaborative II
Final Project

Topic: Rhetoric and the American Civil War:
The importance public speech in 19th Century America

Level: Advanced Placement or Honor Levels

Class Size: 20 students, forming 10 groups of 2 (lesson can work for larger/smaller class sizes by adding/deducting key figures)

Length: 6-8 Classes

Materials: Copies of handouts/readings, computer/internet access, energetic and willing students.

Introduction/Purpose:

Speeches played an important role in the development of our Nation. Individuals that excelled in the art of rhetoric polarized audiences and swayed public opinion. The goal of this lesson plan is to expose students to the once revered art of public speaking. In addition students will experience the crucial role skilled speakers played in the years preceding the Civil War. Research and interpretation will help students prepare to perform a rhetorical speech in front of their peers.

This lesson can be used as an alternative for teaching the causes of the civil war. Through actual speeches given during the time period, students will study the various perspectives on why the conflict began, as well as, gain understanding of the regional differences and the role they played in the outbreak of the Civil War.

Learning Objectives:

- Gain an understanding of the importance of speech and the crucial role orators played before, during, and after the Civil War.
- Analyze the lives and experiences of key Civil War rhetoricians. Use their words to help identify the many causes of the conflict.
- Gain an understanding of the regional differences and the role they played in the outbreak of the Civil War.
- Practice the art of public speaking.

Preparation Instructions:

To teach this lesson about rhetoric's role in the Civil War, students will work in teams of two completing four activities (descriptions below). The first activity introduces students to a brief lesson about 19th century rhetoric and its importance in shaping public opinion. The second activity requires students to research key figures who were strong voices before, during, and after the conflict. The third and fourth activity involves students with preparation and participation in the art of public speaking. In the fifth activity, students will discuss the various causes for the Civil War that they heard in each others speeches.

Lesson Activities:

Activity 1: **The importance of Public Speaking in the 19th Century**

Approx Length: **1 class period (45 minutes)**

Pre-Requisite: **Students should have already been taught the Harkness Discussion method. (See attached handout for details)**

As a class, students will discuss the article “Public Speaking in an Outspoken Age: Oratory in 19th Century America” following the Harkness method for discussion. This article does an excellent job explaining the importance of rhetoric during the 19th century. The goal of this first activity is to not only give students historical facts about speech and the time period, but also, to “warm-up” their own public speaking skills.

Link to article: <http://www1.assumption.edu/ahc/rhetoric/oratory.html>

Teacher Notes:

Open the class discussion with Emerson's quote from the article:

The highest bribes of society are all at the feet of the successful orator...All other fame must hush before his. He is the true potentate

- Be prepared to define potentate = **Potentate** (from the Latin *potens*, 'powerful') is an informal term for a person with [potent](#), usually [supreme](#), [power](#)

Use the following **Guiding Questions**:

- Define, in your own words, rhetoric.
- How does a great rhetorician communicate his/her ideas to the public audience?
- What is the ultimate goal of the rhetorician?
- What are some characteristics of a truly effective rhetorician?
- Do you believe that words could cause war?

Conclusion:

End class by having students create teams of two and select the Civil War figure they would like to research and eventually portray for this assignment. (See handout for a list of Union/Confederate voices)

Activity 2: **Research of Civil War Figure**

Approx Length: **1 class period in the computer lab (45 minutes)**

An essential component of an effective rhetorical speech is life experience. In the following activity, students will complete biographical research on their Civil War figure. This research will help them understand the motivating factors behind the speeches he/she gave during the Civil War and will help one of them “get into character” for their final activity.

- One member of the team should type a formal one page biography on the figure to act as an introduction during the final activity.

Teacher Notes:

Help students conduct their research by asking the following *questions*:

- When and where was he/she born? Was he/she born into poverty? Wealth? Do these details matter?
- How educated was he/she? Where and how did he/she obtain his/her education?
- What hardships did he/she endure, if any? How will these events shape his/her future beliefs?
- When did he die?

Activity 3: **Speech Selection & Practice**

Approx Length: **2 class periods in the computer lab (90 minutes)**

After completing research and writing an introduction about the life experiences of their Civil War figure, students should now dig through the many speeches their figure gave during this crucial time in American History. After reading two or three speeches students should **select an excerpt that they believe best describes their figures perspective on why the war is about to happen, is happening, or has happened.**

- Remind students that one of them will have to attempt to memorize and act out this excerpt in front of the class as part of their final activity.
- Have each group print the excerpt they will be using in their final presentation. Copy all excerpts so that every student has a copy.

Teacher Notes:

Suggested Speeches to help guide students in the right direction:

Abraham Lincoln, *A House Divided*, June 16, 1858

<http://www.historyplace.com/lincoln/divided.htm>

Charles Sumner, *The Crime Against Kansas: The Apologies for the Crime; The True Remedy*, May 20, 1856

http://www.sewanee.edu/faculty/Willis/Civil_War/documents/Crime.html

Alexander H. Stephens, *Cornerstone Speech*, March 21, 1861

<http://teachingamericanhistory.org/library/index.asp?documentprint=76>

Frederick Douglass, *What to the Slave is the Fourth of July?*, July 5, 1852

<http://teachingamericanhistory.org/library/index.asp?document=162>

James Henry Hammond, *On the Admission of Kansas, Under the Lecompton Constitution ("Cotton is King")*, March 4, 1858

http://www.sewanee.edu/faculty/Willis/Civil_War/documents/HammondCotton.html

John C. Calhoun, *Slavery a Positive Good*, February 6, 1837

<http://teachingamericanhistory.org/library/index.asp?document=71>

Jefferson Davis, *Inaugural Address*, February, 1861

<http://www.civilwarhome.com/davisinauguraladdress.htm>

Sojourner Truth, *The Injustice of Slavery*, October 4, 1856

<http://www.sojournertruth.org/Library/Speeches/Default.htm#SLAVERY>

Stephen Douglas, *Response to Lincoln*, 1858

<http://www.sonofthesouth.net/slavery/abraham-lincoln/stephen-a-douglas-speech-debate.htm>

William Lloyd Garrison, *On the Constitution and the Union*, December 29, 1832

<http://fair-use.org/the-liberator/1832/12/29/on-the-constitution-and-the-union>

While students are rehearsing their speeches circulate around the room and make sure students are using what they have learned about their figure to help them formulate an accurate portrayal of how they believe this figure would have spoken and carried themselves in front of an audience. Remind students that there is no right or wrong answer for this, only educated interpretations.

Activity 4: Presentations

Approx Length: **2 class periods depending on the number of groups
(90 minutes)**

Students will take turns reciting the excerpts they have mastered in the previous activities. One member of the group will begin the presentation by reading the biographical introduction they created.

Teacher Notes:

Take time after every presentation to discuss/evaluate the techniques of the speakers. Allow groups to explain why they used a particular tone or why/how they selected their excerpt. Write brief notes on the board to help students organize the material and key points of the speech.

Activity 5: Reflection and Summary

Students should now be able to discuss the multiple reasons for the Civil War. They should be able to identify how different backgrounds affected each historical figure and their perspectives of the war. Lead students through a discussion of what they have learned using the Harkness model for discussion.

Use the following *Guiding Questions*:

- What are topics that continue to be addressed in every speech?
- How do Union and Confederacy perspectives on the conflict differ?
- Do you think these speeches can be considered rhetoric? Which figure said it best?
- Re-evaluate: Do you believe that words could cause war?
- Discuss each student's experience with public speaking. What was difficult? What was easy? Do they think they were effective public speakers?
- Discuss whether students think rhetoric plays a part in today's society.

Extending the Lesson:

Ask students to identify key figures in American rhetoric today. How are the voices of these people shaping current events? Is the art of public speaking dead? If so, what has replaced it?

Have students read: "Social Media Sparked, Accelerated Egypt's Revolutionary Fire"
By Sam Gustin

<http://www.wired.com/epicenter/2011/02/egypts-revolutionary-fire/>

Public Speaking in an Outspoken Age: Oratory in 19th Century America

Public speaking was an important part of life in 19th century America. Whether you wanted to win an election, win support for a reform movement, or become a successful minister, you needed to learn how to deliver crowd-pleasing speeches. Candidates for office debated one another. Evangelical ministers hoping to win people to their denominations could often use rousing sermons to attract large crowds to their revival meetings. In the same period, the local lyceums and other organizations provided an important source of education and entertainment for people of all classes by bringing national celebrities into cities and small towns across America. As Gilman Ostrander writes in his book, *Republic of Letters: The American Intellectual Community, 1775-1865*:

Oratory was a lawyerly skill that boasted a tradition as venerable as the law itself, extending from Demosthenes to Daniel Webster. From medieval universities to nineteenth-century liberal arts colleges, orations remained an essential part of higher education, and forensic eloquence remained the mark of a cultivated man. Patrick Henry rose to the head of the Virginia bar chiefly on the basis of his forensic ability, being admittedly unqualified for practice so far as his technical knowledge of the law was concerned. The Olympian prestige and appeal of oratory in the ages of Patrick Henry and Daniel Webster is hard to appreciate in our present age of mass media, but in mid-nineteenth century America, Emerson observed that "The highest bribes of society are all at the feet of the successful orator. . . . All other fame must hush before his. He is the true potentate." (p. 104).

The ability to play an effective role in discussions of local importance (such as whether to build a town library) or to speak persuasively in debates over national issues (such as the dispute over slavery) could even contribute to the standing of a private citizen in his or her community. Along with print, oratory was an essential part of public life. It was how the business of public life got done.



*George Caleb Bingham, "Stump Speaking, or, the County Canvass," 1853-54
As you will notice, the crowd is made up of a mixture of men, women, and
children representing a variety of classes.*

Although it might seem surprising, many of the theories that shaped nineteenth century American oratory were taken from two eighteenth century rhetoric texts written by Scotsmen: [The Philosophy of Rhetoric](#) (1776), by [George Campbell](#), and [Lectures on Rhetoric and Belles Lettres](#). Up until the late eighteenth century, most thinking about rhetoric was based on the ideas of Aristotle, who offered the formal rules of logic as a means by which one could deduce truth. As products of the Scottish Enlightenment, Campbell and Blair rejected those rules, believing instead that human beings discover truth through experience and can only communicate it by recreating that experience in the minds of their listeners. According to this "common sense" approach, the rhetorician was expected to develop his or her own understanding by reflecting on experience, and then explain those ideas to the audience by appealing to the faculties of mind, which included both understanding and imagination. This helps to explain why nineteenth century American orators so often told stories of their experiences or created "word pictures" in order to communicate their ideas to the members of the audience. (In fact, if you listen to the speeches made by twentieth century American political candidates, you will realize that these techniques are still in use today.) According to this system of thinking, the true purpose of rhetoric was not merely to entertain but to persuade listeners to take action towards a noble end. A good speaker was therefore also expected to motivate the listeners to act

by appealing to the passions, and encourage them to adopt a particular course of action by appealing to their wills.

If someone asked you to deliver a speech with a "businesslike air" in a highly emotional fashion, you would probably be perplexed. Yet, that is precisely what you would have to do if you were delivering a lecture or participating in a debate before an audience in 19th century America. If you wanted to win over your listeners, you would probably also offer several kinds of evidence, in order to appeal to your audience's intelligence and to their imaginations. Picture the kinds of larger-than-life lawyers who populate the courtrooms in movies or televised trials. They try to seem reasonable and down to earth while also doing everything they can to stir up the emotions of the jury. They use their closing arguments to describe the details of the scientific and factual evidence, while also imaginatively recreating the "night of the crime." They want to be sure that the members of the jury identify emotionally with the victim--or the accused-- and that they have "reasonable evidence" to justify a decision in favor of the person with whom they have identified. If you can picture that kind of lawyer, you can begin to understand what a nineteenth century orator might have been like.

Today's audiences typically expect celebrities to speak in a way that seems "natural." The desire of people to feel that they are seeing a "real person" giving a glimpse of his or her "true self" leads political candidates to speak informally in casual settings wearing shirts with the top button unbuttoned. While all this is going on, of course, what the audience is usually seeing is a carefully planned performance.

Audiences in the 19th century, on the other hand, would have expected orators to seem larger than life. Orators were the celebrities of that day, and oration provided an important source of entertainment in a world without radio, television, or moview. Speeches, debates and sermons often attracted large crowds, and every occasion required one or more speeches. The fried chicken you ate at a Fourth of July celebration would hardly have tasted right unless it was accompanied by one or two patriotic addresses by local celebrities. The 1863 poster at the right, lists several orations as part of the program for the day's festivities. (By clicking on the image, you can choose to view a larger version and take a [Virtual Visit to 4th of July Orations Exhibit](#) at the New York State Library.)



Detailed accounts of speeches often appeared in newspapers, speeches were frequently published in pamphlet form, and books offering a "behind-the-scenes look" at famous orators were very popular. Note the reporter taking notes as he sits behind the speaker in this detail from "The Stump Orator."



George Caleb Bingham, "Stump Speaking, or, the County Canvass," 1853-54.

How did people learn to master the art of rhetoric? Young men often joined libraries or lyceums which sponsored debating societies in order to hone their skills. People used books such as Luther Cushing's 1854 [Manual of Parliamentary Practice](#) to learn how to run and participate in deliberative assemblies. However, many people would have received their first training in speaking in the schoolroom, where anthologies of speeches were used to teach children reading, speaking, and patriotic values all at the same time.

Despite their importance in their own time, nineteenth century speakers and their speeches are largely neglected today for a number of reasons. Some of the best orations of the day were not published--or even written down. In addition, since much of the power of a speech derives from its delivery, orations lose much of their power as the human voice fades away. One vanished voice of the mid-nineteenth century is Father Taylor, the once-celebrated minister of the Seamen's Bethel in Boston. Everyone from Charles Dickens to Jenny Lind crowded into the pews intended for sailors, eager to hear Taylor's praching. Walt Whitman, one of Taylors many fans, wrote in ["Father Taylor \(and Oratory\)":](#) " I never had anything in the way of vocal utterance to shake me through and

through, and become fix'd, with its accompaniments, in my memory, like those prayers and sermons—like Father Taylor's personal electricity . . ." Yet, just a few years after his death, Whitman lamented that Taylor's "name is now comparatively unknown, outside of Boston—and even there, (though Dickens, Mr. Jameson, Dr. Bartol and Bishop Haven have commemorated him,) is mostly but a reminiscence As St. George Tucker observed in 1813: ."Orators "sink into immediate oblivion. . . . The truth is that Socrates himself would passed unnoticed and forgotten in Virginia, if he were not a public character, and some of his speeches preserved in a newspaper; the latter might keep his memory alive for a year or two, but not much longer."

Nineteenth century speakers went to the platform--and the pulpit--to entertain, to educate, to experiment with ideas, to test drafts of literary works in progress, to gain votes, to persuade, to lead. And across the country, lecture halls, lyceums, and churches were filled by people who wished to be educated and entertained, and also to become active participants in the major decisions and events of their day. If we wish to understand those people and that time, it is important for us to try to recover the "the true potentate(s)" of the period.

E Pluribus Unum Project. National Endowment for the Humanities. Assumption College

<http://www1.assumption.edu/ahc/rhetoric/oratory.html>