

# **Integrating Informational Text into a Language Arts Curriculum**

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**Breakout workshop**

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## Sharecropping and Tenant Farming in Alabama

Sharecropping and tenant farming were the dominant economic model of Alabama agriculture from the late-nineteenth century through the onset of World War II. Both terms refer to forms of agriculture conducted by people who did not own the land they worked. These landless farmers worked the plots of other landowners. Although the system reached its zenith during the era of Reconstruction, tenancy existed in Alabama prior to the Civil War. Sharecropping, in particular, can be traced back to some of the earliest written records. The tenancy system, which by the early twentieth century encompassed more than 60 percent of the farming population in the state, left a legacy of poverty and illiteracy that began to be overcome only in the late twentieth and early twenty-first centuries.

Sharecropping and tenant farming, usually grouped together under "tenancy," are not easy to define because the system was enormously complex. The terms encompass a wide variety of systems: At least seven varieties of tenancy were practiced in the United States; in Alabama, sharecropping and cash renting were the most common. Sharecropping involves landowners renting land to someone else in exchange for a portion of the crop, usually one-third to one-half, depending on what the sharecropper brought to the arrangement. Cash renting, as the name implies, refers to a rental agreement between farmers and landowners. Cash renters were generally of higher economic and social status than sharecroppers.

### Life as a Tenant Farmer

Landlords normally supplied sharecroppers with seed, fertilizer, plows, and draft animals. The tenant farmer also had to be supplied the necessities of life: housing, fuel, food, snuff, overalls, items collectively referred to as "furnishing." Most tenants, especially sharecroppers, needed food and personal items advanced to them in order to manage until harvest time. Landlords usually had a small store or commissary to advance basic commodities, which they purchased on credit from merchants in towns. Landlords would take a mortgage on the unplanted crop (usually referred to as a "crop-lien") as collateral. Very quickly a new character entered the picture: the *furnishing merchant*. Landowners discovered that they could reduce their own indebtedness and diminish personal risk by allowing merchants in the towns and rural communities to directly furnish their tenants. Furnishing merchants protected their investments by taking a second crop-lien on a farmer's crop. It has been estimated that as late as the early 1940s, the average sharecropper family's income was less than 65 cents a day. Out of this meager income, farmers had to pay off advance indebtedness. If the crop did not bring enough to pay the entire debt, the remainder was added to the next year's lien, a situation that one historian referred to as "debt peonage." Generally the interest rate for advanced goods was 10 percent. Added to that, the merchant often raised the price of goods sold on credit over and above that of those purchased with cash. Considering the higher mark-up and interest together, tenant farmers paid an interest rate that sometimes exceeded 50 percent annually.

The way of life of most tenant farmers was inferior to that of many people in medieval Europe. Housing was primitive log cabins or clapboard shotgun houses. Few homes had glass windows or screens; most featured wooden shutters that could be closed at night

and in inclement weather. Indoor plumbing was nonexistent; water was provided by open wells or nearby springs and creeks, and bathrooms were outdoor privies located a few yards behind the house, creating serious sanitation problems.

Another problem facing tenant farmers was poor transportation. Until the 1950s virtually all tenant farms were located on unimproved dirt roads. In 1930, of Alabama's 257,395 farms, only 4,516 had access to hard-surface roads. Rain left unimproved roads impassable, and during dry weather, they were dusty, with deep ruts. As a result, tenants were generally isolated socially, and they faced economic ruin if the roads were unusable at harvest time.

The tenant family's diet consisted mainly of cornbread, corn mush, fatback pork, and molasses. Some tenants were able to supplement their diet with vegetables if the landowner permitted use of a portion of their plot for a garden. Many landlords, however, wanted as much land in cotton as possible, so only a few farmers had gardens. Poor diet, lack of sanitation, and substandard housing led to widespread health concerns, such as hookworms, pellagra, and rickets.

### **Tenant Farming in the Twentieth Century**

By the 1890s, tenant farming dominated Alabama agriculture. Whether white or black, sharecroppers produced more cotton per acre than any other category of farmer. But more cotton did not translate into more money. The crop-lien system had a tight hold on Alabama tenant farmers, and families were lucky to break even at harvest each year. Many of those who did make money chose to buy their own draft animals and equipment and become cash renters. Some even became landowners, but the majority remained trapped in debt peonage.

Likely as a result of the boll weevil and many other economic and social factors, including a desire to escape Jim Crow laws, blacks began to leave the South in large numbers in the early twentieth century. By 1915, hundreds of thousands of blacks were leaving the South for the North, in a movement known as the Great Migration. As a result, poor whites came to dominate the tenant system. Despite a drop in available labor, conditions did not improve for tenant farmers, and their plight came to national attention only through the efforts of novelists such as William Faulkner and works such as *Let Us Now Praise Famous Men*, a collaboration by author James Agee and photographer Walker Evans.

By the time of the Great Depression, tenant farming reached its peak in Alabama, encompassing well over 65 percent of all farmers, with sharecroppers making up 39 percent of this number. With the election of President Franklin D. Roosevelt and the implementation of his New Deal programs, tenant farmers began to lose what little economic security that they had. Agencies such as the Agricultural Adjustment Administration actually drove tenants from the land by reducing the acreage planted and paying subsidies to landowners, all in an attempt to keep food prices higher; fewer acres meant less need for tenants to work the land. Many farmers found refuge in the projects of the Works Progress Administration, others sought work as day laborers, and some became dependent on public relief.

### **Additional Resources**

Fleming, Walter L. *Civil War and Reconstruction in Alabama*. 1905. Reprint, New York: Peter Smith, 1949.  
Flynt, J. Wayne. *Poor But Proud: Alabama's Poor Whites*. Tuscaloosa, Ala.: The University of Alabama Press, 1989.  
Kolchin, Peter. *First Freedom: The Response of Alabama's Blacks to Emancipation and Reconstruction*. Westport, Conn.: Greenwood Press, 1972.

**From *Let Us Now Praise Famous Men* by James Agee and Walker Evans, 1941**

A man and a woman are drawn together upon a bed and there is a child and there are children:

First they are mouths, then they become auxiliary instruments of labor: later they are drawn away, and become the fathers and mothers of children, who shall become the fathers and mothers of children:

Their father and their mother before them were, in their time, the children each of different parents, who in their time were each children of parents:

This has been happening for a long while: its beginning was before stars:

It will continue for a long while: no one knows where it will end:

While they are still drawn together within one shelter around the center of their parents these children and their parents together compose a family:

This family must take care of itself; it has no other or father: there is no other shelter, nor resource, nor any love, interest, sustaining strength or comfort, so near, nor can anything happy or sorrowful that comes to anyone in this family possibly mean to those outside it what it means to those within it: but it is, as I have told, inconceivably lonely, drawn upon itself as tramps are drawn round a fire in the cruelest weather; and thus and in such loneliness it exists among other families, each of which is no less lonely, nor any less without help or comfort, and is likewise drawn in upon itself:

Such a family lasts, for a while: the children are held to a magnetic center:

Then in time the magnetism weakens, both of itself in its tiredness of aging and sorrow, and against the strength of the growth of each child, and against the strength of pulls from outside, and one by one the children are drawn away:

Of those that are drawn away, each is drawn elsewhere toward another: once more a man and a woman, in a loneliness they are not liable at that time to notice, are tightened together upon a bed: and another family has begun:

Moreover, these flexions are taking place every where, like a simultaneous motion of all the waves of the water of the world: and these are the classic patterns, and this is the weaving, of human living: of whose fabric each individual is a part: and of all parts of this fabric let this be borne in mind:

Each is intimately connected with the bottom and the extremest reach of time:

Each is composed of substances identical with the substance of all that surrounds him, both the common objects of his disregard, and the hot centers of stars:

All that each person is, and experiences, and shall never experience, in body and in mind, all these things are differing expressions of himself and of one root, and are identical: and not one of these things nor one of these persons is ever quite to be duplicated, nor replace, nor has it ever quite had precedent: but each is a new and incommunicably tender life, wounded in every breath, and almost as hardly killed as easily wounded: sustaining, for a while, without defense, the enormous assaults of the universe:

(p. 56)

## **DULCE ET DECORUM EST by Wilfred Owen (1918)**

Bent double, like old beggars under sacks,  
Knock-kneed, coughing like hags, we cursed through sludge,  
Till on the haunting flares we turned our backs  
And towards our distant rest began to trudge.  
Men marched asleep. Many had lost their boots  
But limped on, blood-shod. All went lame; all blind;  
Drunk with fatigue; deaf even to the hoots  
Of tired, outstripped Five-Nines that dropped behind.

Gas! Gas! Quick, boys!---An ecstasy of fumbling,  
Fitting the clumsy helmets just in time;  
But someone still was yelling out and stumbling,  
And flound'ring like a man in fire or lime...  
Dim, through the misty panes and thick green light,  
As under a green sea, I saw him drowning.

In all my dreams, before my helpless sight,  
He plunges at me, guttering, choking, drowning.

If in some smothering dreams you too could pace  
Behind the wagon that we flung him in,  
And watch the white eyes writhing in his face,  
His hanging face, like a devil's sick of sin;  
If you could hear, at every jolt, the blood  
Come gargling from the froth-corrupted lungs,  
Obscene as cancer, bitter as the cud  
Of vile, incurable sores on innocent tongues,---  
My friend, you would not tell with such high zest  
To children ardent for some desperate glory,  
The old Lie: Dulce et decorum est  
Pro patria mori.

## **“Gassed” by John Singer Sargent (1919)**

In 1918, the British Ministry of Information commissioned the American painter John Singer Sargent (1856-1925) to contribute a large-scale work to a planned Hall of Remembrance commemorating Anglo-American cooperation. Travelling to the front in July 1918, Sargent witnessed the harrowing aftermath of mustard gas attacks, which became the subject of his new work, “Gassed” – a six-metre-long tableau depicting a procession of wounded men stumbling, blindfolded, towards a dressing station.

While this painting, completed in 1919, is not representative of the portraitist’s oeuvre, it has become widely recognized as an embodiment of the pain of war in a strangely serene and dignified manner. Virginia Woolf, in her essay “The Fleeting Portrait,” wrote of “Gassed” that it “at last pricked some nerve of protest, or perhaps of humanity.” It now hangs in the Imperial War Museum in London.

With mustard gas, the effects did not become apparent for up to twelve hours. But then it began to rot the body, within and without. The skin blistered, the eyes became extremely painful and nausea and vomiting began. Worse, the gas attacked the bronchial tubes, stripping off the mucous membrane. The pain was almost beyond endurance and most cases had to be strapped to their beds. Death took up to four weeks.

A nurse wrote, “I wish those people who write so glibly about this being a holy war and the orators who talk so much about going on no matter how long the war lasts and what it may mean, could see a case – to say nothing of ten cases – of mustard gas in its early stages – could see the poor things burnt and blistered all over with great mustard-coloured suppurating blisters, with blind eyes ... all sticky and stuck together, and always fighting for breath, with voices a mere whisper, saying that their throats are closing and they know they will choke. (from John Ellis, *eye-Deep in Hell: Trench Warfare in World War I*, (1976), pp. 66-7.

## **Last Post**

*In all my dreams, before my helpless sight,  
He plunges at me guttering, choking, drowning.*

If poetry could tell it backwards, true, begin  
that moment shrapnel scythed you to the stinking mud ...  
but you get up, amazed, watch bled bad blood  
run upwards from the slime into its wounds;  
see lines and lines of British boys rewind  
back to their trenches, kiss the photographs from home —  
mothers, sweethearts, sisters, younger brothers  
not entering the story now  
to die and die and die.  
Dulce — No — Decorum — No — Pro Patria mori.

You walk away; drop you gun (fixed bayonet)  
like all your mates do too —  
Harry, Tommy, Wilfred, Edward, Bert —  
and light a cigarette.  
There's coffee in the square,  
warm French bread,  
and all those thousands dead  
are shaking dried mud from their hair  
and queueing up for home. Freshly alive,  
a lad plays Tipperary to the crowd, released  
from History; the glistening, healthy horses fit for heroes, kings.

You lean against a wall,  
your several million lives still possible  
and crammed with love, work, children, talent, English beer, good food.  
You see the poet tuck away his pocket-book and smile.

If poetry could truly tell it backwards,  
then it would.

- Carol Ann Duffy

Britain's poet laureate marking the deaths of Henry Allington and Harry Patch  
*The Guardian* July 31, 2009