



FOUNDATION
AGAINST
INTOLERANCE
& RACISM

Lesson Title: Challenging Racism, Stereotypes and Intolerance through Film

Recommended Grade: 9-12

Recommended Pacing: 2 Class periods (Approximately 120 minutes)

FAIR Learning Standards: DV.9-12.10

Theme: Stories of Heroism and Hope

Era: Early 20th Century

Areas of Focus: Film, Oscar Micheaux, Civil Rights, Booker T. Washington, African American Experience

Objectives:

1. Students will be able to evaluate primary documents to better understand context and complexities in history.
2. Students will be able to analyze and explain the difficulties that existed for early independent filmmakers.
3. Students will be able to understand the importance of Oscar Micheaux's work in advancing racial equality in America.
4. Students will be able to critique historic movie clips.

5. Students will be able to explain the impact that Booker T Washington had on Oscar Micheaux.
6. Students will be able to explain the impact that Oscar Micheaux has had on contemporary African-American filmmakers.
7. Students will be able to evaluate criticisms of Booker T Washington and Oscar Micheaux.
8. Students will be able to articulate their own opinion on the extent to which filmmakers Tyler Perry and Key and Peele have had a positive influence on race relations in America.

Lesson Background

Film is perhaps the most powerful way to tell a story. Those who produce movies are artists whose portraits of the human condition have the ability to inspire change and bring people of all backgrounds together. Early film-making in America was especially difficult as producers had to be cognizant of mass appeal and avoid themes that could be considered controversial or unpopular. In addition, early films were not protected by the First Amendment guarantee of freedom of speech as movie goers were considered more impressionable than readers of printed material and film was viewed as conduct and not expression (*Mutual* decision). Those outside of the mainstream created independent films that would entertain specific audiences and shine an authentic light on the lives of Americans often forgotten or ill-represented in larger studio productions. This was the mission of America's first Black film producer Oscar Micheaux, who was compelled to create authentic depictions of African-Americans to show complexity that was lacking in the motion picture industry. According to an article dedicated to Micheaux's biography from the NAACP:

Given the times, his accomplishments in publishing and film are extraordinary, including being the first African-American to produce a film to be shown in "white" movie theaters. In his motion pictures, he moved away from the "Negro" stereotypes being portrayed in film at the time. Additionally, in his film *Within Our Gates*, Micheaux attacked the racism depicted in D.W. Griffith's film, *The Birth of a Nation*. The Producers Guild of America called him "The most prolific black – if not most prolific independent – filmmaker in American cinema." Over his illustrious career, Cledisson Micheaux wrote, produced and directed forty-four feature-length films between 1919 and 1948 and wrote seven novels, one of which was a national bestseller.

Activity #1 - The Czar of Black Hollywood

The Czar of Black Hollywood is a 2014 documentary film by Bayer Mack that chronicles the early life and career of African-American filmmaker Oscar Micheaux (1884–1951). Watch the film and respond to the questions that follow to gain an appreciation for the early life of Oscar Micheaux. <https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=ao5V-XhXS-c&t=276s>

The Czar of Black Hollywood - Comprehension Questions

1. How did Oscar Micheaux's upbringing help prepare him for success in life?
2. Why do you think Oscar's mother so often quoted Booker T Washington to him?
3. Chicago attracted many African-Americans from rural areas. Why did Oscar Micheaux find that city so appealing?
4. While staying at a boarding house for \$6 a month, Oscar finally earned enough money from several jobs to open a bank account. Why was this so important to him?
5. The Pullman Porter job was eagerly sought after, especially in the African-American community. For Oscar, getting this job represented the big break he was looking for. Explain how the job was ideal for the young and ambitious Micheaux?

Activity #2 - The Influence of Booker T Washington

Booker Taliaferro Washington rose from slavery to a position of power and influence. A realist and a man of action, he became one of the most important African-American leaders of his time. He was committed to improving the lives of African-Americans after the Civil War. Washington advocated economic independence through self-help, hard work, and a practical education.(Booker T Washington Museum Management Program)

Washington was the most powerful African-American at the turn of the 20th century, and his life and work inspired many to challenge their circumstances by maximizing personal agency to change those circumstances. Oscar Micheaux was one of many who were inspired by Washington's message of self-reliance, practical ambition and mutually beneficial relations between the races.

Open up the link below to read or listen (this is the only known sound recording made by Booker T Washington) to Washington's famous speech delivered at the Atlanta Exposition in 1895.

When finished, respond to the prompt in a short answer.

<https://www.loc.gov/exhibits/civil-rights-act/multimedia/booker-t-washington.html>

For many, Washington's "Atlanta Compromise" speech was a call to lift up Black America. For others, its message was a surrender to inferior political and civil rights. How do you feel about Washington's words? Might you make the writing topic a bit more clear? In a paragraph, write a personal response to his speech that communicates your opinion on his perspective (keep in mind, the year it was written).

Activity #3 - Oscar Micheaux in his Own Words

Micheaux was greatly influenced by the socioeconomic philosophies of Washington, who encouraged blacks to be politically patient, work with diligence and defer integrations until whites accepted and respected their economic progress.

Micheaux would direct more 'race movies' than any other black film director. Black filmmaker Carlton Moss offered, "Perhaps Micheaux's greatest achievement was that he proved he could make films. He grew up in a time where it was believed you could not spell if you are black and he challenged that myth."¹⁷ Micheaux's first major film, *The Homesteader*, produced in 1918 was the first feature-length race movie. Not only was Micheaux the first black person to make feature-length films, he was also the first to explore racial taboo subjects. With *The Homesteader*, he addressed interracial romance and sexual assault, extremely controversial content for the period. This theme was revisited many times throughout Micheaux's book and film career. Micheaux insisted in directly dealing with these complex and nuanced ideals. Focusing on questions of color, the need for education, and issues blacks faced in urban environments, his work reflected high concern for the message he wanted to share in his films, including his philosophical perspectives on black life. Micheaux served as an exemplary businessman, employing his trade in a capitalistic enterprise with minimal financial resources but an enormity of skill. His entrepreneurial astuteness helped him see successes over his first year totaling \$40,000 in total film attendance (Carlton Moss - *Midnight Ramble*. PBS Video, 1994. DVD). His impressive personality, salesmanship and marketing strategies allowed him to be an early model of entrepreneurial success for the independent black film industry that grew out of his shadow. Micheaux once wrote, "One of the greatest task of my life has been to show that the

colored man can be anything.” The Symbol of the Unconquered a recently discovered 1921 production, once again expressed his belief that the greatest opportunity for a black man existed through hard work and clean living. (A Light in Darkness, Oscar Micheaux: Entrepreneur Intellectual Agitator)

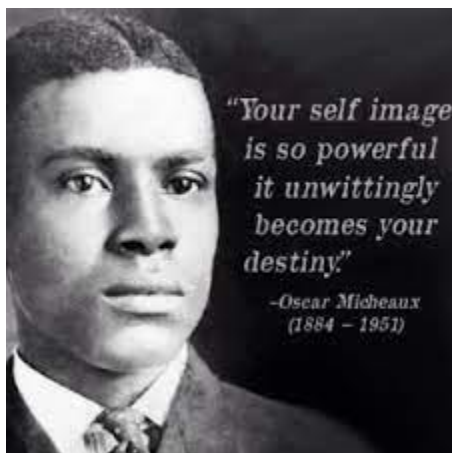
Read and analyze the following quotes **A - E** from Oscar Micheaux in order to respond to a follow-up question.

A (*Excerpt from a novel Micheaux wrote at age 16*)

Another thing that added to my unpopularity, perhaps, was my persistent declarations that there were not enough competent colored people to grasp the many opportunities that presented themselves, and that if white people could possess such nice homes, wealth and luxuries, so in time, could the colored people. “You’re a fool”, I would be told, and then would follow the timeworn long and cruel slavery, and after the emancipation, the prejudice and hatred of the white race, whose chief object was to prevent the progress and betterment of the Negro. This excuse for the negro’s lack of ambition was constantly dinned into my ears from the Kagle corner loafer to the minister in the pulpit, and I became so tired of it all that I declared that I could ever leave Mpls [Metropolis] I would never return. More, I would disprove such a theory and in the following chapters I hope to show that what I believed fourteen years ago was true.

B “It is only by presenting those portions of the race in my pictures, in the light and background of their true state, that we can raise our people to greater heights.”

C



D “It is only by constructive criticism arising from an intelligent understanding of the real problem, however, that the colored producer can succeed” (Pittsburgh Courier, 1924).

E



Role models are important for understanding how to lead a good and productive life. Oscar Micheaux had his parents and Booker T Washington to help guide him through journeys where he faced challenges and adversity. After reading the quotes, think of and write 2 - 3 quotes of your own that you believe will help to guide and inspire you through difficult times in your life.

Activity #4 - Oscar Micheaux's Legacy

Within Our Gates is the oldest surviving African-American film. Open the link provided to watch this American Classic and respond to a few questions.

<https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=h1E0NrcnwAE>

1. Explain how the film impacts your preconceived notions about African-Americans in 1920?
2. At 8:00 minutes, there is a scene of gambling which ruffled many audiences. Those who denounced Micheaux for his unflattering representations would have preferred to see a mask of rosy perfection. One audience member, William Lewis, wrote to The [Baltimore] Afro-American, "I have had the pleasure of observing several of Mr. Oscar Micheaux's productions and am forced to ask (with no offense to Mr. Micheaux whatever) why they are so suggestive of immoral and degraded habits of the human race? In several instances I have taken particular..." Why do you think that such scenes were so bothersome? Why do you think that Micheaux continued to make his films with such real human experiences?

3. *Within Our Gates* was unprecedented in its depictions of race in America. Describe a scene in the film that you felt provided an unexpected or surprising portrayal of race in 1920.

Activity #5 - Micheaux Lives On

Oscar Micheaux continues to inspire contemporary filmmakers of all races. One such filmmaker is Tyler Perry who has long admired Micheaux and was even selected to play him in an HBO biopic movie. Like Micheaux, Perry is a self-made success who financed his own studio and produced many successful films. He is also a very prominent cultural figure in America today. At the Oscars in the Spring of 2021, Perry gave a very powerful speech about refusing hate and meeting in the middle. Watch his speech below and respond to the question that follows.

<https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=NvGLBhmfIo>

Film has always had a powerful influence on the way we view society and each other. From Oscar Micheaux to Tyler Perry, filmmakers have the ability to lift up society and bring people together. The film poster below shows the progress in race relations that Oscar Micheaux helped to make possible. In a paragraph, write your opinion on the extent to which you think that Hollywood has done enough to bring us together and improve the bonds of affection that we have for each other as Americans.



Beautiful EVELYN PREER
Appearing as "Orlean," whose Characterization is Complete.

NEW CENTER THEATRE

Fifteenth St. and Troost Avenue
ONE WEEK
COMMENCING SUNDAY, MAR. 2

COLORED PEOPLE SEATED ANYWHERE IN THE HOUSE
TWICE DAILY, 2:30 AND 8:15 P. M.

Oscar Micheaux's Mammoth Photo-Play

"The Homesteader"

A powerful Drama of the Great American Northwest; adapted for the screen by the author from his popular new novel of the same name.

FEATURING

An All-Star Negro Cast!

At Popular Prices

ALSO

The Return of the "Fighting 8th"
The crack Chicago Regiment who pushed the Huns back across the Rhine and sent the Kaiser into oblivion.

AND

GEORGE GARNER, Jr.
Greatest Negro Tenor,
will sing at each performance



CHAS. D. LUCAS
Whose vivid portrayal of "Jean Baptiste," the man who went, is without doubt the most perfect work ever done by a Negro.



OSCAR MICHEAUX
Author of
"THE HOMESTEADER"



MISS IRIS HALL
As "Adele," the Tenderest Little Heroine Ever Created.



GEORGE R. GARNER, JR.
The Race's Greatest Tenor, who will sing at each performance.

NOTE---This wonderful and spectacular production, the first great creation from the pen of a Negro ever screened was held up by the Board of Censors for the city of Chicago, owing to a vicious attack by three well known Negro ministers of that city, until reviewed by a committee of the better class of both races, who unanimously proclaimed it to be the most masterful portrayal for many a day. The part objected to by these three ministers was, that it attacked the moral conduct of a certain well known minister—one of the three happening to be the one attacked. Needless to say the production was duly released and is now playing to great crowds at more than a dozen houses in that city, black and white.



MISS INEZ SMITH
Portraying the "Evil" "Elsie," whose "Close-up" Will Long Be Remembered.