Up From Slavery by Booker T. Washington

Presenter: Danielle Reites
About the Author

• “Between the last decade of the nineteenth century and the beginning of World War I, no one exercised more influence over race relations in the United States” (Baym 673).
• “Wanted to help African Americans enter mainstream white society peacefully” (Baym 673).
• Mother was born a slave; father was a white man whose identity was unknown.
• “Worked as a salt packer, coal minter and house servant while attending school in the off hours” (Baym 673).
About the Author

- Attended American Missionary Association’s Hampton Normal and Agricultural Institute.
- Worked as a janitor while going to school.
- School drilled goals of cleanliness, thrift, and hard work.
- Graduate with honors.
- Became principal of Tuskegee Institute, which “trained African American men and women in agricultural and mechanical trades and engineering” (Baym 673).
About the work

- An autobiography
- Published serially in *Outlook* in 1900
- Published as a book in 1901
- Aware of other autobiographers: Ben Franklin, Frederick Douglass, Walt Whitman
- Argues that success should be “measured not so much by the position a person has reached as by the obstacles overcome while trying to succeed” (Baym 674).

- “The book was the first real blueprint for how black America was supposed to recover its potential for success from the deleterious effects of slavery in the wake of Emancipation” (“Gambling and Losing”).
- Work enhanced Washington’s mythic stature
Discussion Questions

1. What is a philosophy you live by? (For example, “treat others how you want to be treated,” “what goes around comes around,” “yolo,” etc.) Try to examine and explain briefly what people and experiences helped shape this philosophy in you (parents, jobs, movies, books, religion, friends, etc.)

2. What do you think Washington’s philosophy is? What events shaped him?

3. “[P]ay attention to the way Washington opens the story of his life. What is the effect of Washington's inability to say where and when he was born, or to give any details about his ancestry? How are we meant to understand the line ‘I suspect I must have been born somewhere and at sometime’? Is this humorous? Tragic? Both?” (“Social Realism”)
Discussion Questions (cont.)

4. What is Washington’s attitude toward whites? Where do you find evidence of this?

5. How does Washington portray African Americans? Where do you find evidence of this?


7. What significance is Washington’s name to him?

8. According to Washington, what role does African-American ancestry play in African American success?

9. Over the years Washington’s assimilationist position has drawn criticism. Can you understand why this might be? Explain.

10. If you were going to write your own biography and have it published, you could not include everything that has ever happened to you. What points would you want to make in it and why?
1. What childhood events shape Booker T. Washington’s philosophy?
2. How are African-Americans portrayed in the excerpts and why are they portrayed like this?
3. How are Whites portrayed in the excerpts and why are they portrayed like this?
4. Why do you think Washington’s message was so well received immediately after the book was published yet after a while African-Americans took issue with it?
Themes

• The importance of an education
• The dignity of hard work (manual labor)
• The importance of cleanliness
• Success was measured not by how successful a person was but by how many obstacles a person had overcome.
Works Cited

