

# POETRY

**Grade 5 Lesson 1: "The Slave Auction"**  
by Frances Ellen Watkins Harper



# Introduction



In our study of personal narratives, we've read accounts by people such as Rosa Parks and Bertie Bowman. Their experiences took place in the twentieth century, but Americans have been writing about and fighting injustice for centuries.

Today we will read a poem written by a free African American woman who lived during the time of slave auctions. We will also read part of a story that describes slavery but that was written in the 21st Century.

These texts are two different kinds of sources.

A **primary source** is a text, like the poem, that provides first-hand testimony or direct evidence witnessed or recorded by someone who experienced the event or condition being documented.

Examples of other primary sources are diaries, speeches, interviews, letters, and official records.

A text created by someone who did not experience firsthand or participate in the event(s) is called a **secondary source**.

Examples of secondary sources are encyclopedia entries, history books, and other things written by someone who did not experience the events.

Primary sources are written by people who have experienced the events they're written about. When might you want to consult a primary source?

Primary sources are written by people who have experienced the events being described. When might you want to consult a primary source?

*Consult a primary source when you need to know exactly what happened during an event or how people understood the event when it happened.*



Primary sources help us understand the way people experienced things when they happened. However, because primary sources are written by people in the moment, they do not always have the perspective we get over time.

We can learn from history, and secondary sources help us see how things change over time. They can offer an important historical perspective and help us understand events in a bigger context.

For example, soldiers writing about battles in the American Revolution didn't always know about other battles that were taking place in other colonies.

Secondary sources help us understand the connections between different events happening at the same time.

Reading



Let’s compare these sources.

First we will read a primary source, a poem written by a free African American woman who lived during the time of slave auctions.

As we read, think about the people described and their feelings about the slave auction.

Read “The Slave Auction” by Frances Ellen Watkins  
Harper aloud.

The poem can be found on the program’s digital components site.

According to the story, what did plantation owners want most?

*Plantation owners wanted to “make as much money as possible,” so they used enslaved people to do much of the work.*

Who does the speaker describe?

What lines from the poem describe how the people feel about the slave auction?



Who does the speaker describe?

*young girls, mothers, women, men, husbands, wives,  
children, etc.*

What lines from the poem describe how the people feel about the slave auction?

*A few answers are possible. For example, “sobs of deep despair,” “bitter cries,” “anguish,” “frail and shrinking,” “mournful,” “anguished,” etc.*

Now we’re going to read an excerpt from a story about Harriet Tubman, whose nickname was Minty.

This story was written many years after Tubman’s life, and the author was not alive during the events described. Therefore, the story is a secondary source.

Read an excerpt from “Harriet Tubman, Part 1”  
aloud.

The excerpt can be found on the program’s digital components site.

What similarities does this story have with the poem we read earlier?

Who is separated in the primary source? Who is separated in the secondary source?

What similarities does this story have with the poem we read earlier?

*Both texts are about people being sold as enslaved people.*

Who is separated in the primary source? Who is separated in the secondary source?

*In the primary source, young girls/children and their mothers and husbands and wives are separated. Similarly, in the secondary source, Minty's family is separated.*

“The Slave Auction” is a primary source. What does the poem describe that our secondary source, the passage on Harriet Tubman, does not?

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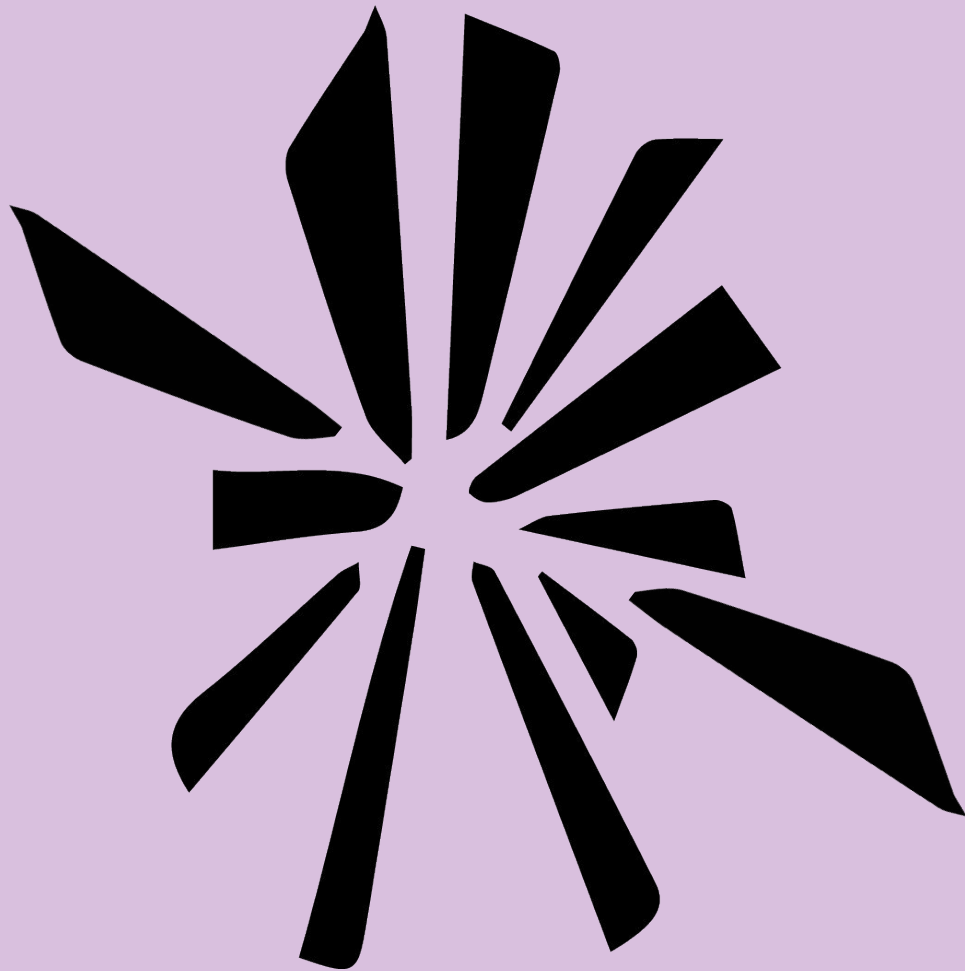
*The poem describes the enslaved people’s emotional responses to being sold and separated.*

Our secondary source—the story about Minty and her family—also discusses slave auctions. It gives a different kind of information about slavery.

According to the story, what did plantation owners want most?



# Wrap-Up



We’ve been discussing primary and secondary sources. What is the difference between the two?

When might primary sources sometimes be more helpful than secondary sources?

We’ve been discussing primary and secondary sources. What is the difference between the two?

*Primary sources are written by people who have a direct connection to events. Secondary sources are written after the events.*

When might you consult a primary source?

*When you want to understand what people experienced or how they thought about an event when it happened.*

From this list of sources, identify which are primary and which are secondary.

diary written during the Great Depression

photograph taken during the March on Washington

encyclopedia entry

book about Ancient Greece written in 2005

newspaper article written about the attack on Pearl Harbor on its 50 year anniversary

letters written from a soldier to his family during the American Civil War

Answer



## Primary Sources

diary written during the Great Depression

photograph taken during the March on Washington

letters written from a soldier to his family during the American Civil War

## Secondary Sources

book about Ancient Greece written in 2005

encyclopedia entry

newspaper article written about the attack on Pearl Harbor on its 50 year anniversary