

Reading African American Spirituals in Historical Context

ELA/US History

Enduring Understanding

Enslaved African Americans employed word choice, allusion, and irony in spirituals to respond to the constraints of enslavement, exert agency, and exercise resilience.

Essential Question

How did enslaved African Americans use word choice, allusion, and irony to say two things at once? How did this work “meet the historical moment” (i.e., how did it confront and resist constraints of enslavement)?

Objectives

SWBAT determine the connotative and figurative meanings of key words in African American spirituals.

SWBAT analyze how word choice, allusion, and irony shape the tone and mood of each spiritual and create meaning in its historical context.

Standard

Target: CCSS.ELA-Literacy.RL.9-10.4. Determine the meaning of words and phrases as they are used in the text, including figurative and connotative meanings; analyze the cumulative impact of specific word choices on meaning and tone (including the impact of allusion and irony).

Building Toward: CCSS.ELA-Literacy. RL.9-10.9: Analyze how an author draws on and transforms source material in a specific work.

Exit Ticket

Identify ONE word with strong connotation and ONE allusion or example or irony in the spiritual “Go Down, Moses.” Explain how that word choice and that allusion or irony shape the tone or mood AND how they carry a hidden meaning in the spiritual’s historical context. Use 4-6 complete sentences to answer.

Proficient answers may use informed conjecture and inference in order to

- ☐ quote one word and explain its connotation
- ☐ name a specific allusion or example of irony
- ☐ explain the effect on tone or mood
- ☐ explain the hidden/coded meaning in history

Exemplar of Mastery

In the African American spiritual “Go Down, Moses,” both strong word choice and allusion to Biblical imagery are used to respond to the historical circumstances of enslaved African Americans and to create a tone or mood of hope and victory. The spiritual uses the word “soar” to describe the song that the “Hebrew children,” that is, the Israelite people, sang when they were finally free from their enslavement after leaving Egypt. The word “soar” carries the connotation of a bird taking flight or a feeling in one’s heart of joy or happy anticipation. These connotations create a positive mood that is hopeful and a tone that is victorious, even in the face of oppressive circumstances. This word choice is an example of one way that enslaved African Americans could exert agency and express resilience under harsh restrictions and violence. Additionally, the spiritual references the story of the Israelites crossing through the final barrier to freedom—the water that God divided to let them through to the other shore. This allusion to the biblical story might have served as kind of coded language carrying an encouraging message about running away: that God would provide aid even through difficult or seemingly impossible terrain.

Core Literary Texts

“Steal Away to Jesus,” “There Is a Balm in Gilead,” “Go Down, Moses”

Paired Historical Documents and Texts:

“Family Worship in a Plantation in South Carolina,” 1863 (image)

Virginia Act of March 15, 1832 (excerpt)

Jeremiah 8:22; Exodus 7:14-18 (Bible passages, synthesized translations)

Possible scaffolds & extensions

Scaffold 1: Sentence stems for graphic organizer and/or exit ticket

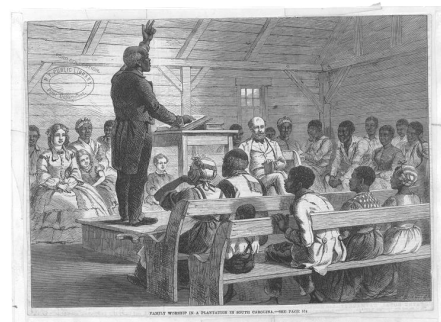
Scaffold 2: Pre-glossed vocabulary

Extension: Ask students to defend two possible readings of a single spiritual, or to compare the two spirituals

5 min	Do Now / Hook	See-Think-Wonder on a primary-source image
2.5 min	Guided Notes	Historical context Literary genre Close Reading Methodology
11 min	Close Read #1	"Steal Away to Jesus": connotation and historical context - I do/We do/You do Visible Thinking Routine (Word-Connotation-Impact graphic organizer) - Stop & Check (assess skills needed for exit ticket)
4 min	Close Read #2	"There Is a Balm in Gilead": biblical allusion and irony (bridge to RL.9.9).
7.5 min	Exit Ticket	Read Texts 5 & 6 (whole class if appropriate) Independent paragraph analyzing an excerpt of "Go Down, Moses" against the standard.

Do Now

See-Think-Wonder on "Family Worship in a Plantation in South Carolina," Illustrated London News, Dec. 5, 1863, now in the New York Public Library.



TW cold call; look for

- OBSERVATION: the enslaver's family is present and supervising

TW ask:

- How does white supervision affect the worship of the enslaved persons?
- (Q4). Why might enslaved people also have wanted to worship in secret, away from this setting?
 - what kind of worship was forbidden?
- How would you call people to a meeting you were not allowed to hold?

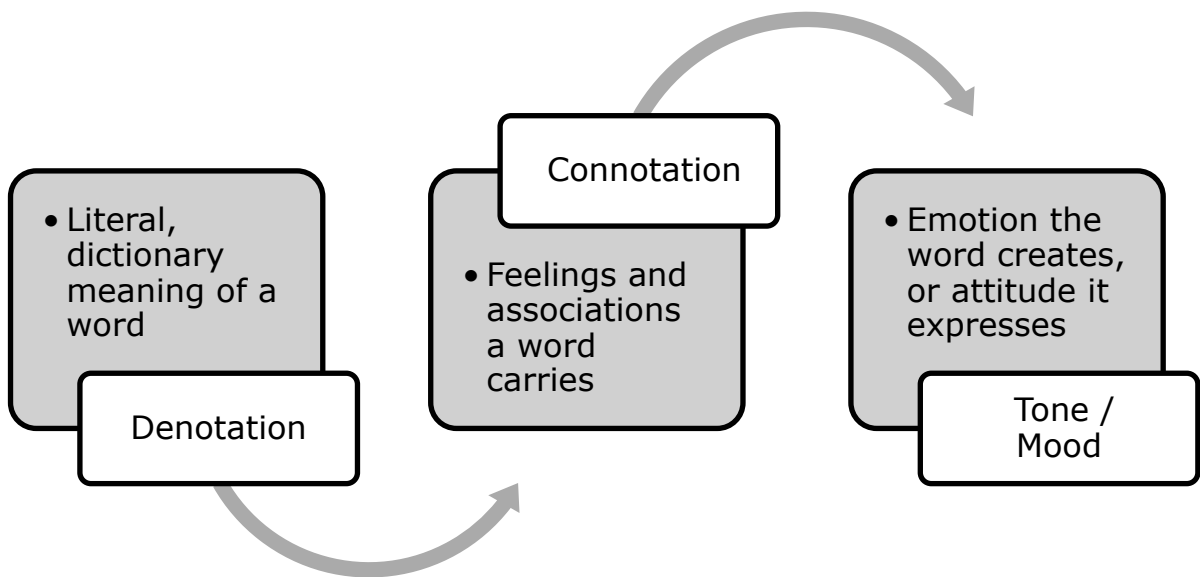
NB: Teacher key of student materials follows. Blank student materials begin pg. 10.

Guided Notes (fill in the blanks)

Historical context:

Southern slave codes restricted enslaved people from reading, assembling, or holding religious meetings without white supervision. These restrictions tightened sharply after 1831, the year of Nat Turner's rebellion in Virginia. To subvert those restrictions, enslaved African Americans often used coded language—in other words, language with double meaning. One example is in religious folk songs created by enslaved African Americans, called spirituals. Spirituals often used coded language: a safe surface meaning for white listeners and a hidden meaning about human dignity, freedom, escape, or secret meetings.

➡ How can we uncover those secret meanings? We pay attention to the



➡ How can we figure out the connotation, tone, or mood? We look for

references to another text, person, or event (in spirituals, often the Bible)
allusion

gaps between what is expected & what is said OR what is said & what is meant
irony

Text 1: "Steal Away to Jesus" (excerpt)¹

Steal away, steal away,
Steal away to Jesus!
Steal away, steal away home,
I hain't got long to stay here.

My Lord, he calls me,
He calls me by the thunder;
The trumpet sounds it in my soul;
I hain't got long to stay here.

Green trees are bending,
Poor sinners stand a-trembling;
The trumpet sounds it in my soul;
I hain't got long to stay here.

Text 2: Virginia Act of March 15, 1832 (excerpt)²

"...no slave, free negro, or mulatto ... shall hereafter undertake to preach, exhort or conduct, or hold any assembly, or meeting, for religious or other purposes, either in the day time, or at night ... [punishable] with stripes ... not exceeding thirty-nine lashes."

1. What exactly did the 1832 law make illegal?

gathering in groups for religious or other reasons

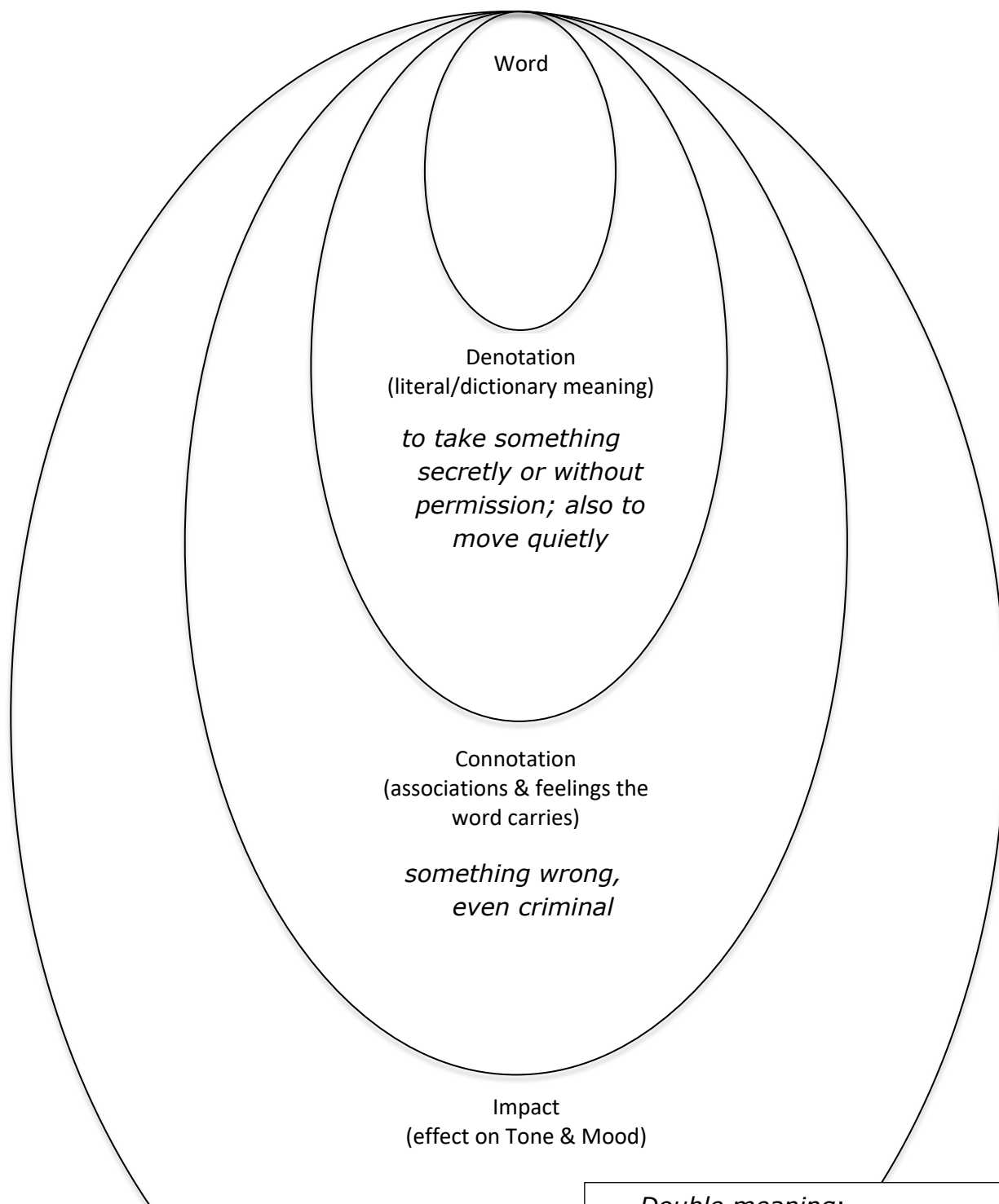
2. Why did enslaved people need words that could mean two things at once?

to remain undetected while subverting laws and constraints of enslavement

¹ "Steal Away to Jesus" as published in Jubilee Songs (1872), Accessed July 6, 2026 < <https://www.gilderlehrman.org/ap-african-american-studies/unit-2/resistance-revolt/steal-away-to-jesus-1872>>.

² Accessed July 6, 2026 < <https://encyclopediavirginia.org/primary-documents/an-act-to-amend-an-act-entitled-an-act-reducing-into-one-the-several-acts-concerning-slaves-free-negroes-and-mulattoes-and-for-other-purposes-march-15-1832/>>.

Target word #1 (we do it together): STEAL



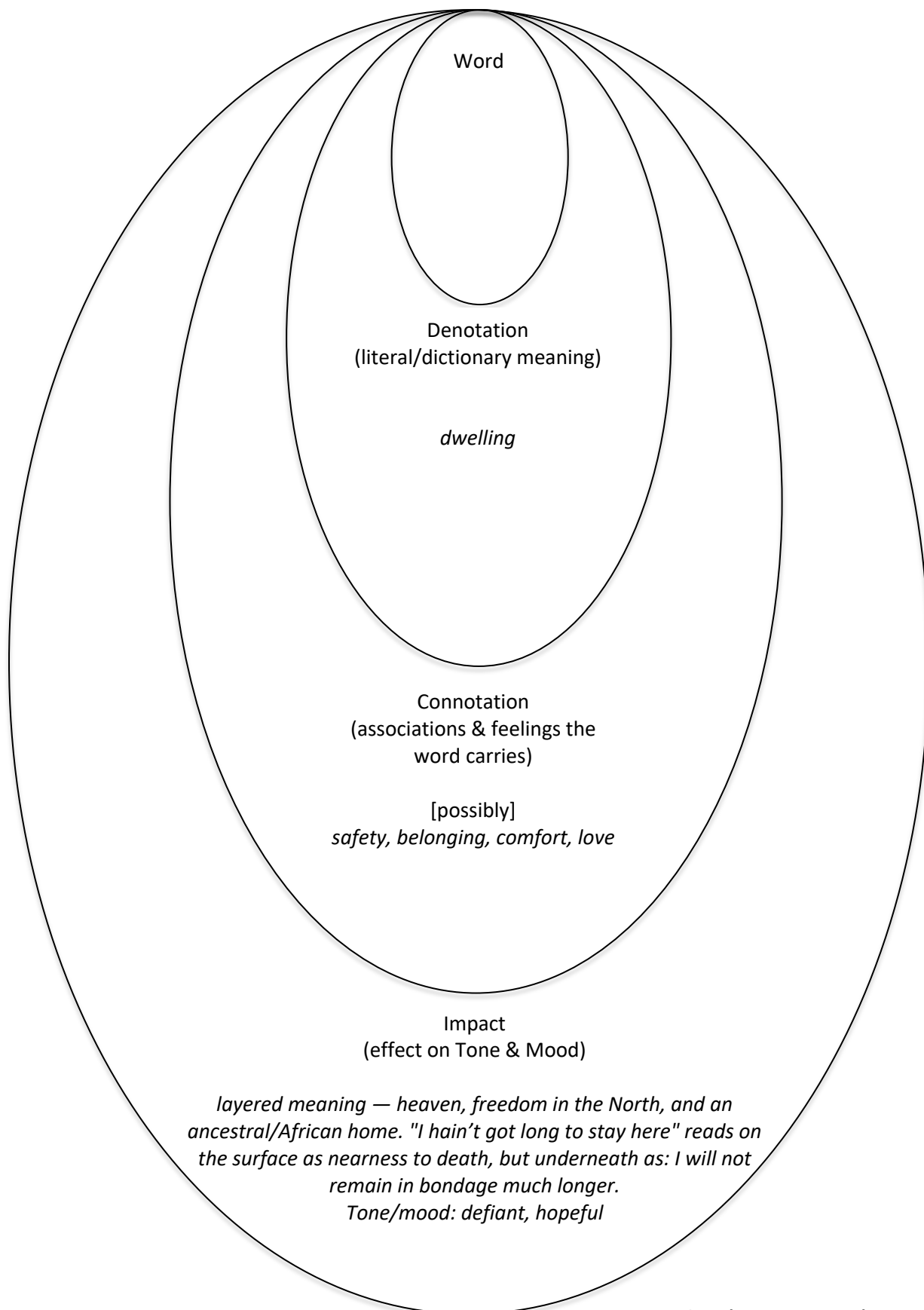
inverted and ironic meaning:

Enslaved people were legally treated as property; to "steal away" is to take back their own bodies, time, and worship from those who claimed them.
"Crime" → act of self-reclamation
Tone: subversive

Double meaning:

On the surface, "steal away to Jesus" sounds devotional or religious, BUT underneath, it signals slipping off to a forbidden secret meeting.
Tone: on surface, pious; underneath, urgent

Target word #2 (your turn): HOME



Stop and Check: Explain how word choice in the spiritual “Steal Away to Jesus” shapes the tone or mood AND carried a hidden meaning in its historical context.

Brainstorm:

- STEAL → creates sense of agency
- HOME → creates sense of resiliency

In the spiritual “Steal Away to Jesus,” The word “home” carries the connotation of safety, comfort, belonging, and positive feelings generally. This creates the mood (tone/mood) of hope and resiliency because underneath a surface of seemingly pious devotion, it suggests that the one singing about “stealing away home” will not remain in bondage much longer. In the spiritual’s original context, this double meaning allowed slaves to express their defiance, hope, and personal dignity, even in the face of the violence and constraints of enslavement, because it was disguised from enslavers.



Fisk Jubilee Singers, circa 1870s, ensemble from Fisk University, who performed many spirituals.

Text 3: "There Is a Balm in Gilead" (excerpt)³

There is a balm in Gilead
To make the wounded whole;
There is a balm in Gilead
To heal the sin-sick soul.

Sometimes I feel discouraged,
And think my work's in vain,
But then the Holy Spirit
Revives my soul again.



Text 4. Jeremiah 8:22 (Bible passage)

"Is there no balm in Gilead? Is there no physician there? Why is there no healing for the wounds of my people?"

1. Using context clues from the spiritual "There Is a Balm in Gilead," what is a "balm" in a literal and figurative sense?

medicine, healing ointments → a cure generally; miraculous or holistic cure

2. What is the tone or mood of the questions asked in Jeremiah 8:22?

despair: this is a rhetorical question used to express distress, anguish

3. How does the spiritual CHANGE Jeremiah's question?

the enslaved changed the ? to an ! [Howard Thurman]: the rhetorical question of despair becomes an assertion of hope

Stop and Check: Explain how the spiritual "Balm in Gilead" creates tone or mood through irony.

The spiritual reverses the meaning of the text it alludes to, emphasizes it through repetition.

³ Published in Frederick J. Work, *Folk Songs of the American Negro, No. 1* (Nashville: Fisk University, 1907). Image accessed July 6, 2026 <<https://www.hymnologyarchive.com/there-is-a-balm-in-gilead>>

Exit Ticket **[read texts whole class as appropriate]**

Text 5: "Go Down, Moses"

When Israel was in Egypt's land,
Let my people go!
Oppressed so hard they could not stand,
Let my people go!

As Israel stood by the waterside,
Let my people go,
at God's command it did divide,
Let my people go.

The Lord told Moses what to do,
Let my people go,
to lead the Hebrew children through,
Let my people go.

When they had reached the other shore,
Let my people go,
they let the song of triumph soar,
Let my people go.

Go down, Moses,
Way down in Egypt's land;
Tell old Pharaoh
To let my people go!

Go down, Moses,
Way down in Egypt's land;
Tell old Pharaoh
To let my people go!

Text 6: Exodus 7:14-18 (Bible passage)⁴

God said to Moses: "Go and meet Pharaoh... and say to him, 'the God of the Hebrews, sent me to you with this message: Let my people go.'"

Directions: Identify ONE word with strong connotation and ONE allusion or example or irony in the spiritual "Go Down, Moses." Explain how that word choice and that allusion or irony shape the tone or mood AND how they carry a hidden meaning in the spiritual's historical context. Use 4-6 complete sentences to answer.

When finished, Check your paragraph:

- ☐ I quoted one word and explained its connotation (beyond the literal meaning).
- ☐ I named a specific allusion or example of irony.
- ☐ I explained the effect on tone or mood.
- ☐ I explained the hidden/coded meaning in history.

⁴ In this Bible story, Moses was a Hebrew man who confronted the ruler of Egypt (the Pharaoh) to demand his people (Hebrews or "Israel") be set free from enslavement.

Exit Ticket

This image shows a blank sheet of white paper with horizontal ruling lines. The lines are evenly spaced and extend across the width of the page. There is no handwriting or other markings on the paper.

Grade (leave blank for the teacher to complete):

- ☐ quoted one word and explained its connotation (25pts)
- ☐ named a specific allusion or example of irony (25 pts)
- ☐ explained the effect on tone or mood (25 pts)
- ☐ explained the hidden/coded meaning in history (25 pts)

Total: _____ / 100 pts

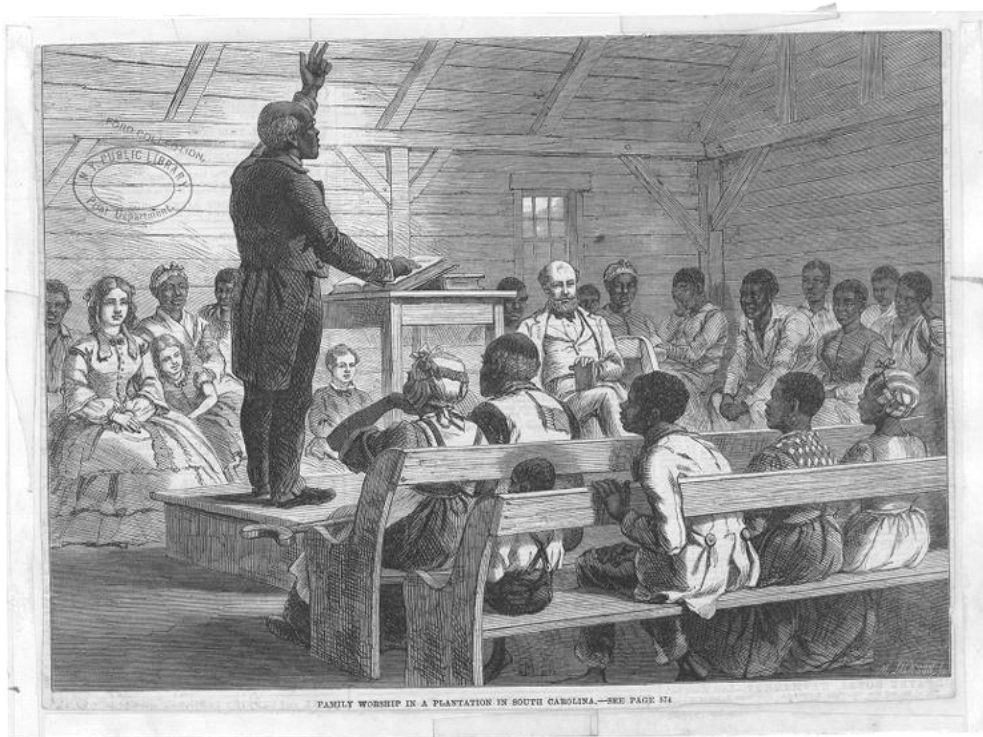
Name: _____

Date: _____

Do Now: Complete the DO NOW silently and immediately.

Closely examine and annotate the image below.

1. Label one OBSERVATION (what do you see?)
2. Label one INFERENCE (what do you think it means?)



"Family Worship in a Plantation in South Carolina," Illustrated
London News, Dec. 5, 1863, now in the New York Public Library

3. Who is present at this worship gathering, and who appears to be in control? Cite one detail from the image.

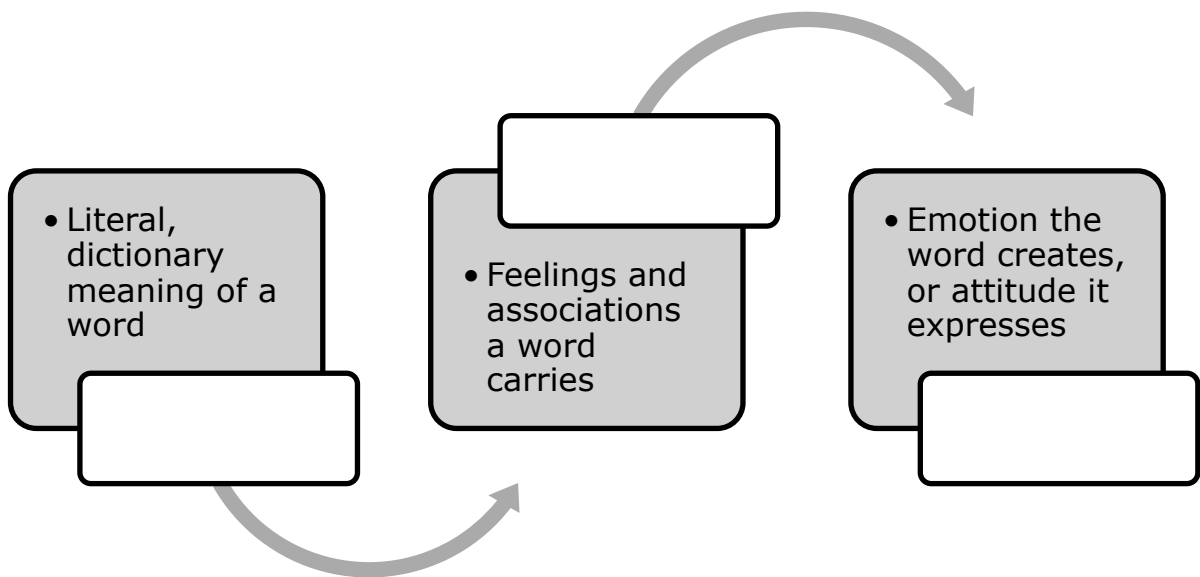
4. This is worship that was allowed and watched. Why might enslaved people also have wanted to worship in secret, away from this setting?

Guided Notes (fill in the blanks)

Historical context:

Southern slave codes restricted enslaved people from _____
 _____ without white supervision. These restrictions
 tightened sharply after 1831, the year of Nat Turner's rebellion in Virginia. To
 subvert those restrictions, enslaved African Americans used _____—
 in other words, language with _____. One example is in _____
 _____ created by enslaved African Americans, called _____.
 Spirituals used coded language: a safe surface meaning for white listeners and a
 hidden meaning about human dignity, freedom, escape, or secret meetings.

➡ How can we uncover those secret meanings? We pay attention to the



➡ How can we figure out the connotation, tone, or mood? We look for

references to another text, person, or event (in spirituals, often the Bible)

gaps between what is expected & what is said OR what is said & what is meant

Text 1: "Steal Away to Jesus" (excerpt)¹

Steal away, steal away,
Steal away to Jesus!
Steal away, steal away home,
I hain't got long to stay here.

My Lord, he calls me,
He calls me by the thunder;
The trumpet sounds it in my soul;
I hain't got long to stay here.

Green trees are bending,
Poor sinners stand a-trembling;
The trumpet sounds it in my soul;
I hain't got long to stay here.



Text 2: Virginia Act of March 15, 1832 (excerpt)

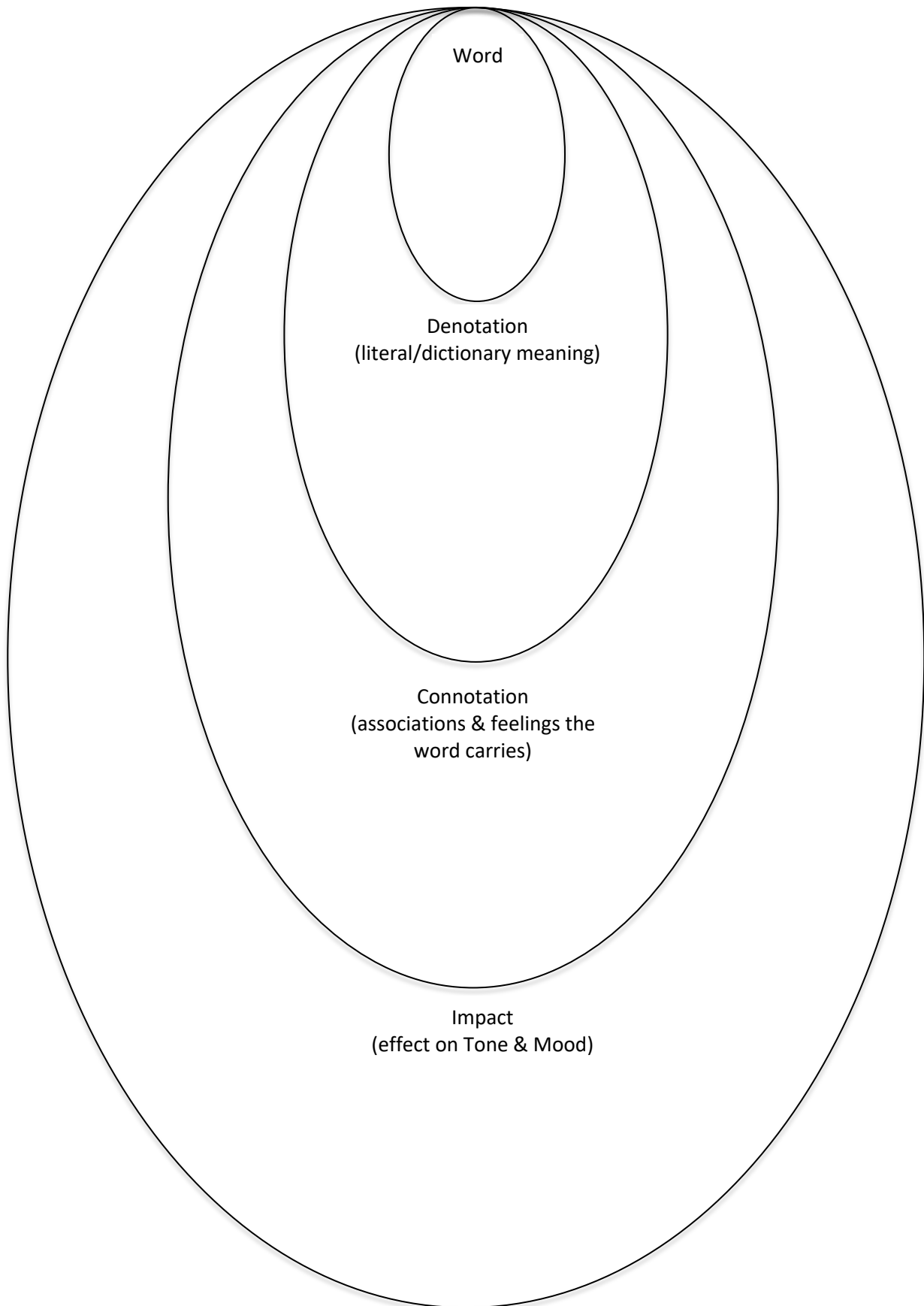
"...no slave, free negro, or mulatto ... shall hereafter undertake to preach, exhort or conduct, or hold any assembly, or meeting, for religious or other purposes, either in the day time, or at night ... [punishable] with stripes ... not exceeding thirty-nine lashes."

1. What exactly did the 1832 law make illegal?

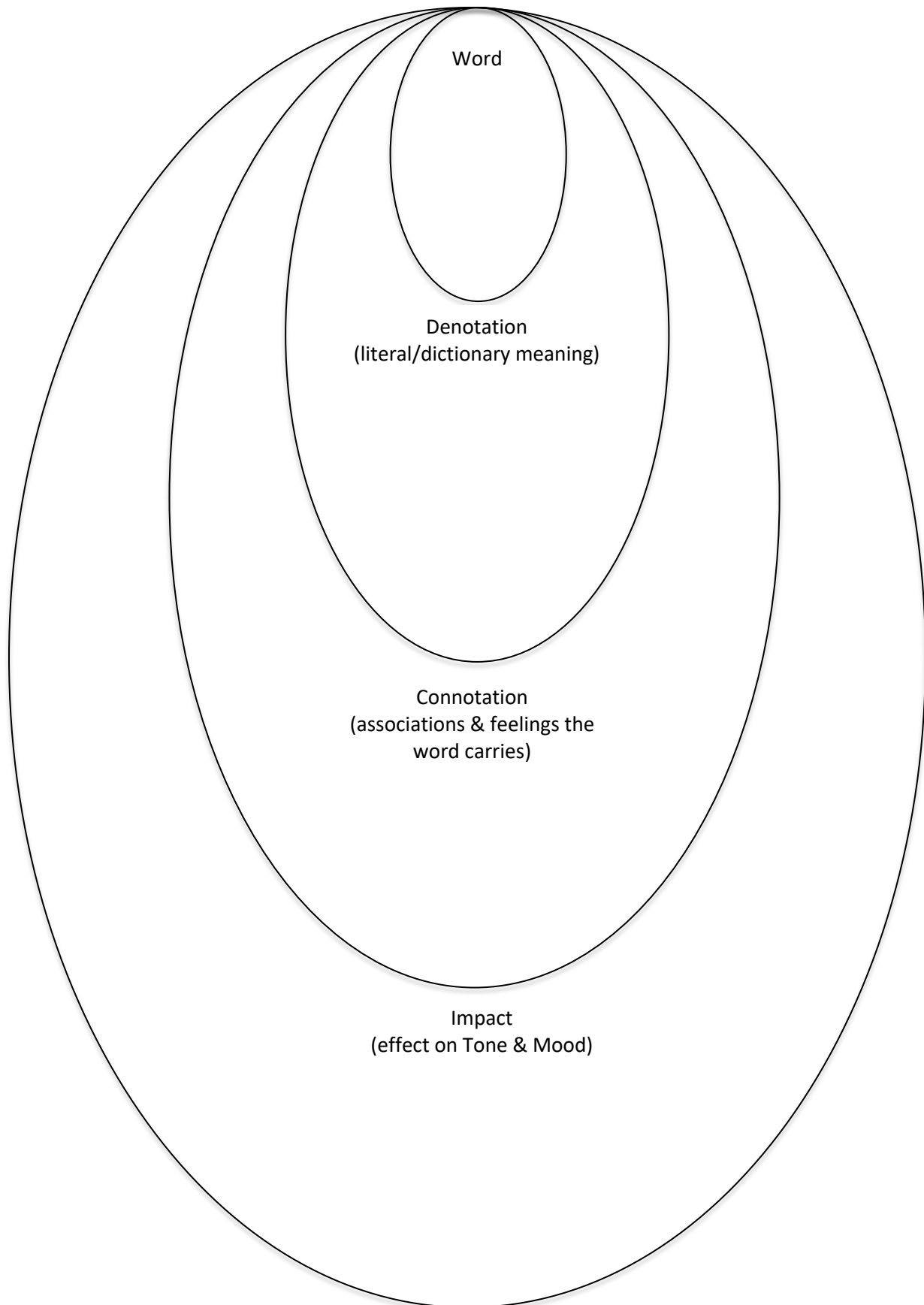
2. Why did enslaved people need words that could mean two things at once?

¹ "Steal Away to Jesus" as published in Jubilee Songs (1872), Accessed July 6, 2026 <
<https://www.gilderlehrman.org/ap-african-american-studies/unit-2/resistance-revolt/steal-away-to-jesus-1872>>.

Target word #1 (we do it together): STEAL



Target word #2 (your turn): HOME



Stop and Check: Explain how word choice in the spiritual “Steal Away to Jesus” shapes the tone or mood AND carried a hidden meaning in its historical context.

Brainstorm:

In the spiritual “Steal Away to Jesus,” The word _____ carries the connotation of _____. This creates the _____ (tone/mood) of _____ because _____.

In the spiritual’s original context, _____.



Fisk Jubilee Singers, circa 1870s, ensemble from Fisk University, who performed many spirituals.

Text 3: "There Is a Balm in Gilead" (excerpt)²

There is a balm in Gilead
To make the wounded whole;
There is a balm in Gilead
To heal the sin-sick soul.

Sometimes I feel discouraged,
And think my work's in vain,
But then the Holy Spirit
Revives my soul again.

79 NEW JUBILEE SONGS.

Balm in Gilead.

There is a Balm in Gil - e - ad, To make the wounded whole, There is a Balm in Gil - e - ad, To heal the sin - sick soul. There is a soul.

1. Some-times I feel dis-cour-aged, And think my work's in vain, But
2. Don't ev - er feel discour-aged, For Je - sus is your friend, And
3. If you can-not preach like Pe - ter, If you can-not pray like Paul, You can then the Ho - ly Spir - it Re - vives my soul a - gain. There is a if you lack for knowl-edge, He'll ne'er re - fuse to lead. There is a tell the love of Je - sus, And say, "He died for all." There is a

Text 4. Jeremiah 8:22 (Bible passage)

"Is there no balm in Gilead? Is there no physician there? Why is there no healing for the wounds of my people?"

1. Using context clues from the spiritual "There Is a Balm in Gilead," what is a "balm" in a literal and figurative sense?

2. What is the tone or mood of the questions asked in Jeremiah 8:22?

3. How does the spiritual CHANGE Jeremiah's question?

Stop and Check: Explain how the spiritual "Balm in Gilead" creates tone or mood through irony.

² This song has a long history in the 19th century but was published in Frederick J. Work, *Folk Songs of the American Negro, No. 1* (Nashville: Fisk University, 1907). Image accessed July 6, 2026 <<https://www.hymnologyarchive.com/there-is-a-balm-in-gilead>>

Exit Ticket

Text 5: "Go Down, Moses"

When Israel was in Egypt's land,
Let my people go!
Oppressed so hard they could not stand,
Let my people go!

As Israel stood by the waterside,
Let my people go,
at God's command it did divide,
Let my people go.

The Lord told Moses what to do,
Let my people go,
to lead the Hebrew children through,
Let my people go.

When they had reached the other shore,
Let my people go,
they let the song of triumph soar,
Let my people go.

Go down, Moses,
Way down in Egypt's land;
Tell old Pharaoh
To let my people go!

Go down, Moses,
Way down in Egypt's land;
Tell old Pharaoh
To let my people go!

Text 6: Exodus 7:14-18 (Bible passage)³

God said to Moses: "Go and meet Pharaoh... and say to him, 'the God of the Hebrews, sent me to you with this message: Let my people go.'"

Directions: Identify ONE word with strong connotation and ONE allusion or example or irony in the spiritual "Go Down, Moses." Explain how that word choice and that allusion or irony shape the tone or mood AND how they carry a hidden meaning in the spiritual's historical context. Use 4-6 complete sentences to answer.

When finished, Check your paragraph:

- ☐ I quoted one word and explained its connotation (beyond the literal meaning).
- ☐ I named a specific allusion or example of irony.
- ☐ I explained the effect on tone or mood.
- ☐ I explained the hidden/coded meaning in history.

³ In this Bible story, Moses was a Hebrew man who confronted the ruler of Egypt (the Pharaoh) to demand his people (Hebrews or "Israel") be set free from enslavement.

