

Harriet, a new film to teach about the Underground Railroad



As teachers, we utilize many resources to teach about history. Occasionally, a Hollywood box office movie comes along to help us in our job. I believe *Harriet* is one of these films. The movie will help students grasp the facts of American slavery, the biographical specifics of Tubman's life, and significance of the Underground Railroad.

[Harriet is a PG-13 biopic](#) of the Underground Railroad's most famous conductor, Harriet Tubman (1822-1913). The movie, directed by Kasi Lemmons and starring Cynthia Erivo, begins on a Maryland plantation in 1849. The slave owner has decided to sell off several slaves to pay debts, including Araminta Ross, nicknamed Minty. Faced with being "sold down the river," separated from her husband and family members, Minty decides to escape to the North.

Thus, begins Minty's hazardous and courageous journey to freedom. The cinematography is powerful; your students will feel the danger as she eludes the slave catchers, traveling at night guided by the North Star. She travels alone but is aided by clergymen, tradesmen, farmers, and sailors along the way.

As we join Harriet on her perilous journey north, students will witness how the Underground Railroad operated, a network of anti-slavery activists providing food, shelter, and transportation for escapees.

After her dramatic get-away, Minty finds freedom in Pennsylvania. She starts her life anew in Philadelphia with aid of abolitionists. It is here that Minty announces her emancipation by choosing a new name, Harriet Tubman.

As the film demonstrates, what is remarkable about Harriet Tubman is that she not only escaped her captors, but chose a very risky return to Maryland to free her family. She traveled South thirteen times, freeing over 70 slaves. "I never lost a passenger," the most famous conductor of the Underground

Railroad reported. Tubman became known as “Moses” symbolizing deliverance for the enslaved, sparking outrage among white slave owners.

The end of the film documents Tubman’s role as a scout, spy, and military leader for the North during the Civil War, where she commanded Union soldiers in the raid of Combahee Ferry, liberating over 700 slaves.



Harriet Tubman – Circa 1868 – The Smithsonian Institution

“I had reasoned this out in my mind, there was one of two things I had a right to, liberty or death; if I could not have one, I would have the other.”

As they watch *Harriet* your students will learn: The economic motives of southern slave masters, the devastating impact of slavery on African American families, the complexity of the white supremacist South which oppressed field slaves, house slaves and free blacks, and the important role of religion in slaves’ lives supported by a beautiful soundtrack of spirituals.

Along with Tubman, the movie’s heroes are the Americans who sought an end to slavery, abolitionists, black and white, from both the South and the North. The film features real historical figures such as African American abolitionist William Still, often called “The Father of the Underground Railroad.” In addition, the film highlights efforts of the Pennsylvania Anti-Slavery society in providing support for those who escaped southern slavery.

This movie will also help students grasp the terrible impact of the Fugitive Slave Act of 1850, which allowed slave catchers to cross into the North to bring back slave owners’ “property.” Former slaves in the northern states were no longer safe. The film shows the dramatic exodus of Harriet and her brethren to Canada, beyond the reach of the slave masters.

Good historical films like *Harriet* also transport the viewer to another time and place, establishing an emotional connection to a distant historical period. A sixteen-year-old watcher can imagine the brutality

Tubman faced as a slave, witness the dangers of her escape, and admire her commitment to the liberation of her people.

Some of the scenes, characters, and dialog in *Harriet* are fictionalized, as the film credits explain. While this feature film differs from a documentary in this regard, history teachers will find lots of accurate historical material about Tubman and the Underground Railroad, presented in an engaging and accessible way for our teen viewers.

This film provides an excellent springboard for student discussion. After viewing *Harriet*, ask students about the choices Americans made in response to slavery. Why did some slaves choose to escape, while others stayed? Why did some Americans risk participating in the Underground Railroad, while others did not? What would your students have done? Or perhaps have students discuss the meaning of the following Tubman quote to their own lives:

“Every great dream begins with a dreamer. Always remember, you have within you the strength, the patience, and the passion to reach for the stars to change the world.”

Historical films are powerful when used in conjunction with the textbook, lectures, and other educational resources. For example, I’ve used Scholastic’s [The Underground Railroad](#), a website with a simulation which asks students to, “follow one of these slaves along the Underground Railroad, a secret network of hiding places and brave people who helped runaway slaves reach freedom.” In addition, the site provides slideshows, primary sources, and other activities on the Underground Railroad.

PBS has a [short 6 minute video on Harriet Tubman](#), as well as a [website with lesson plans on the Underground Railroad](#).

For teachers wanting their students to compare the film with historical fact, the USA article, [“Harriet” Fact check – How accurate is the new movie on Harriet Tubman?](#), will be helpful. After they’ve read the article, ask students, do you agree with the choice of the filmmaker to fictionalize portions of Tubman’s life? Why or why not?

A good resource for teaching about the Abolitionist Movement is the University of Virginia’s [Gallery of Abolitionist and Anti-Abolitionist images](#), containing original source etchings and political cartoons created prior to the Civil War.

In addition, I’ve designed a Reader’s Theater activity utilizing [a portion of a speech by Frederick Douglass](#), also an escaped slave and abolitionist. The description and materials for this activity are contained in my [June Blog on Reading Strategies](#).

Finally, there are powerful photos of slaves and abolitionists useful to the classroom. I described how I used one such photograph, “Private Gordon”, providing lesson materials in my [January Blog on the Power of Photographs](#).

The film *Harriet* has received very positive audience reviews on sites such as [rottentomatoes](#), but it has its critics, too. A.O. Scott recommended the film in his [NYT review of Harriet](#) writing, “It is more like one of those biographies of historical figures intended for young readers: accessible, emotionally direct and artfully simplified.” Watch it for yourself to decide whether it will help you tell Harriet Tubman’s story.

Whatever materials you choose, students should leave your classroom appreciating the heroism of Tubman, those in the Underground Railroad and all Americans who helped end slavery.