Drama Activity 4

Worksheet E: Frederick Douglass Learns to Read

*Use this script as a model for the other suggested scenes.*

**Characters:**
Frederick Douglass as a grown man, the narrator
Young Frederick Douglass
Mrs. Sophia Auld
Mr. Hugh Auld

**Background Information:**
The great African-American abolitionist Frederick Douglass wrote three autobiographies, ending with *The Life and Times of Frederick Douglass*. In all three, he told the story of how learning to read was a turning point in his life – the moment when he knew for sure that he wanted to be a free man.

**Setting:** A sitting room in the home of the Aulds in Baltimore. Sophia Auld is seated with a Bible open on her knee. Standing beside her is a young Frederick, looking at the page. She is reading.

**The Script:**
*Frederick Douglass (narrator):* My mistress, whom I called “Miss Sopha,” often read the Bible aloud when her husband was absent. As I listened, I became curious about the great mystery of reading, and finally got up the courage to ask her if she would teach me. She readily consented, and in an incredibly short time, by her kind assistance, I had mastered the alphabet and could spell words of three or four letters. My mistress seemed almost as proud of my progress as if I had been her own child.

*Sophia:* “And Noah went in, and his sons, and his wife, and his sons’ wives with him, into the ark, because of the waters of the flood.” Now you read, Freddy!

*Young Frederick:* Really, Miss Sopha?
Sophia: Yes, you try this part, Freddy. [She points to the verse in the Bible.] Read about the animals that went into Noah’s ark!

Young Frederick: “Of clean beasts, and of beasts that are not clean, and of fowls, and of every thing that creepeth upon the earth –”

[Frederick hears the door and looks up. Hugh Auld comes into the room.]

Sophia [jumping up excitedly as her husband walks in]: Oh, Hugh, you must hear! I’ve been teaching Freddy to read, and he mastered his alphabet so quickly - and now, just listen! He can read the story of Noah’s ark from the Good Book! Go ahead, Freddy, show Master Hugh how well you read!

Frederick: “There went in two and two unto Noah into the ark, the male and the female. …”

Hugh interrupts sharply
Stop that! Stop this instant, boy.

[Frederick and Sophia freeze and appear puzzled and frightened.]

Hugh: Sophia, do you realize what you’ve done? It is against the law to teach a slave to read; didn’t you know that? Give a slave an inch and he will take a mile. Learning will spoil the best slave in the world. If he learns to read the Bible, it will forever unfit him to be a slave. He should know nothing but the will of his master, and learn to obey it. As to himself, learning will do him no good, but a great deal of harm, making him disconsolate and unhappy. If you teach him how to read, he’ll want to know how to write, and this accomplished, he’ll be running away with himself. So promise me - no more lessons for Frederick.

Sophia: But, but -
Hugh: No “buts” about it.
Sophia: Run along, Freddy.

Frederick: So I did run along, but I had understood a lot more than Mr. Auld thought I had. “Very well,” I thought, “knowledge unfit a child to be a slave.” And from that moment, I understood the direct pathway from slavery to freedom.

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