

ANTISLAVERY LITERATURE TEACHING GUIDE

**MEMOIRS OF THE LIFE
OF BOSTON KING,
A BLACK PREACHER (1798)**



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Teaching Approaches

Possible teaching approaches to *Memoirs of the Life of Boston King* include discussions of historical-literary, spiritual, and transatlantic dimensions of the text. Each of these approaches emphasizes the eighteenth-century origins of African American literature, particularly its emphasis on the experience of slavery as a formative personal and social force. The *Memoirs* provide a leading example of how slave and spiritual narrative traditions interacted and coincided, creating a sensibility visible equally in the nineteenth-century narratives of Frederick Douglass and others. An effective discussion might suggest how the *Memoirs* share with other slave autobiographies concepts of divine immediacy and the promise of individual redemption, as well as how the oppressions of slavery created spiritual needs.

Discussion Questions

1. The introductory lines to the *Memoirs* suggest King's humility and unwillingness to undertake the task of writing this narrative. He writes "It is by no means an agreeable task to write and account of my Life, yet my gratitude to Almighty GOD, who delivered my affliction, and looked upon me in my low estate, who delivered me from the hand of the oppressor, and established my goings, impels me to acknowledge his goodness." (p. 105) How does King establish a narrative trajectory from the first line forward, and what conclusion does this first line suggest? Are there other likely reasons beyond gratitude to God for his preservation that cause King to write this narrative?
2. Unlike some slave narratives, King has clear memories of his parents. How does he describe his father and mother? What qualities are important with respect to his father in particular, and why?
3. At age twelve, King reports that he had a vision while tending cattle: "I dreamt that the world was on fire, and that I saw the supreme Judge descend on his great white Throne! I saw millions of millions of souls; some of whom ascended up to heaven; while others were rejected, and fell into the greatest confusion and despair." (p. 106) As a result, King says, he ceased swearing and left bad company. He dates an awareness of God to this occasion. What Biblical text does this vision resemble? Given that King was illiterate at this age, how might oral culture have contributed to this vision? Or could it be that this vision is retrospective adult re-imagination of a juvenile memory, with benefit of literacy and Bible-reading?
4. King does not name his masters and gives mixed reports of their behavior. Why doesn't King name his masters? What seems to be his attitude towards them these many years later? Is there anger in King's report of mistreatment? Why does he choose to escape? Does fear motivate King's choice? How did fear motivate slaves in their choices?
5. How do the British receive King, initially and later? What is King's understanding of what the British represent? Does he seem to care about the larger

political questions of the Revolutionary War? By the end of the war, despite opposition from American slaveholders and George Washington to their service, blacks constituted about a quarter of the American army. Escaped slaves formed entire units of the British army in the American South, having been guaranteed freedom by the British. How might this history complicate or contradict orthodox histories of the American Revolution as liberation? Why were blacks – some of whom were promised emancipation, and a few of whom received it – willing to fight for a country where they were slaves?

6. How does King narrate his treatment while he and other soldiers were ill with smallpox? How does he believe ‘Providence’ intervened? Later he receives an opportunity to nurse the man who aided him. Is it arguable that King treats providence here as a reciprocal human relationship? Frederick Douglass famously attributes his good fortune to the hand of divine providence. What is the attraction of attributing fortuitous events to providence, and what might be its power as explanation for an ex-slave narrator?

7. After his service to the British, King drifts through a period of quasi-servitude, sometimes working for negligible or no pay, and during one period in New Jersey in actual slavery (p. 110). He does not report how he was reduced to slavery; there are lacunae in this story. Why might he choose to leave out certain events?

8. King constructs ‘balancing tests’ to understand his situation better: how does he balance the “terrifying sight” of a recaptured fugitive slave in stocks with an appreciation the relative advantages (e.g. food) of his own situation? What other balancing tests does he employ, and to what effect?

9. After his escape from slavery into New York, King writes “But notwithstanding this great deliverance, and the promises I made to serve GOD, yet my good resolutions soon vanished away like the morning dew: The love of this world extinguished my good desires, and stole away my heart from GOD...” (p. 158) There is a repeated dynamic in this narrative, one where King denounces himself as a ‘backslider’ after receiving what he believes to be the protection of divine providence. Discuss this dynamic and its occurrences in the narrative.

10. The Treaty of Paris, which brought peace at the end of the American Revolution, provided for the return of escaped slaves behind British lines. Describe the effects of the Treaty’s provisions on fugitive blacks in New York City. How does terror reappear in this narrative? King’s narrative here is relatively brief: what do you think it might not tell of these scenes?

11. In describing settlement in Nova Scotia, note that King fails to mention that Canada’s first anti-black race riots occurred approximately a year after the black refugees arrived at Birchtown. Why might not he mention this fact?

12. The 'Black Loyalist' communities experienced a religious revival in the years following their emigration to Nova Scotia. Based on the narrative, what social factors might have contributed to that revival?

13. In the winter of 1783, King found himself in great spiritual struggle, one in which he believes himself unworthy to be among the "the people of GOD." (p. 159) He sits by a fire in the forest snows and struggles with "doubts and fears, and evil-reasonings." This is a classic situation of individual struggle with self-doubt, one where the doubter seeks to overcome perceived inadequacy in the face of the world. The resolution of this struggle, typically conducted through confrontation with evil temptation, produces a new believer, one resistant to fears and troubles. At the same time, a slave narrative is frequently about the creation of a new person, one who has or will overcome slavery. How do these two purposes coincide in King's *Memoirs*? Remember that the second clause of the title is "...A Black Preacher." How do the above scene and these narrative purposes lead towards his new calling?

14. King's culminating conversion scene comes in the first Sunday of March, when he hears a voice saying "Peace be unto thee!" (p. 160) As a result of his epiphany, King finds that "my Soul was dissolved into love," everything appeared in a "different light," and "slavish fear" disappears. In the language of contemporary evangelical Christianity, King has been "born again." Discuss the elements of this experience as King describes them. Why does he use the phrase "tormenting and slavish fear"?

15. How does this conversion affect King's later perceptions of social conditions in Nova Scotia? For example, when near starvation King manages to sell two chests he has built, and praises the occasion as divine deliverance. (p. 210) He obtains subsequent contracts and finds more evidence of providence. Why does he equate personal economic survival with divine providence when many other blacks have to sell themselves as bonded laborers in order to survive? Or when salmon fishing is successful, why does he again equate it with divine favor? (p. 211)

16. What are King's relations with the Africans when he arrives in Sierra Leone? Discuss what King is advocating when he preaches "It is a good thing that God has made the White People..." (p. 263) How might it be argued that King served British colonialism in his roles as a missionary and teacher?

17. King has complex relations with white people. Part of his difficulty emerges where he writes that while preaching in England, he "found a more cordial love to the White People than I had ever experienced before. In the former part of my life I had suffered greatly from the cruelty and injustice of the Whites..." (p. 264) How did he come to change his mind, and why is he telling readers – most likely, white readers – about it?

18. Boston King's *Memoirs* have been relatively neglected for various reasons, including lack of accessibility. One reason that may have contributed to this neglect is the aura of Christian pietism that hangs over the narrative, which readers might dislike

for different reasons. If true, does this mean that such readers are searching for what suits their prejudices rather than what early 'Black Atlantic' writers such as King and Equiano – both devout Methodists – were actually producing during the eighteenth century? What were your own reactions to the religious passages of this narrative?

Video Questions

19. After viewing Prof. Neal Lester's performance reading of selections from Boston King's *Memoirs*, what African American discourse tradition does he call upon for this reading?
20. How would you read King's conversion passage? How can his rush of emotions be interpreted differently? Demonstrate your reading.

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