

## THE FERGUSON RIOTS

*Michael Brown, an unarmed black teenager, was shot and killed on Aug. 9, by Darren Wilson, a white police officer, in Ferguson, Mo., a suburb of St. Louis. The shooting prompted protests that roiled the area for weeks. On Nov. 24, the St. Louis County prosecutor announced that a grand jury decided not to indict Mr. Wilson. The announcement set off another wave of protests.*  
- NY Times



## NEWS COVERAGE

In August 2014, there has been extensive news coverage on American and world-wide television.

Watch the following CNN broadcast on people's opinion on Michael Brown's death and its aftermath.

"Do white people not 'get' Ferguson?"

<https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=Pm0hvk3b2J4>

Reporter: Brian Stelter - Guest 1: Elon James White - Guest 2: Crystal Wright

Background information: CNN is an American to world-wide news outlet which is preferred by voters of the democratic party. Its Republican counterpart is Fox News (Mutz 2006, 229).



## INVESTIGATE IN GROUPS

Divide the class into groups to **answer the questions** below.

*Group 1:* What is Brian Stelter's thesis on the escalation of violence in Ferguson and the news media coverage?

*Group 2:* In how far does Elon James White agree with Brian Stelter's statements?

*Group 3:* Even though Crystal Wright is from the Afro-American community, how far does she have a different opinion? How does she argue against the initial thesis?



## REACTIONS TO FERGUSON

The Internet community also leads furious discussions on Michael Brown's death, the question of guilt, and whether the riots in Ferguson are righteous or not.



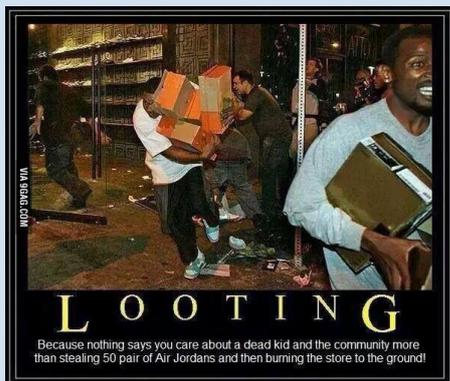
The online platform **9gag.com** is visited by a large number of young Americans and international users every day. **How can their reactions be described?**



<http://9gag.com/gag/anXkx5>



<http://9gag.com/gag/aj6ZmOg>



<http://9gag.com/gag/azLOXwK>



<http://9gag.com/gag/aKg8jYb>

## ARGUMENTATIVE ESSAY WRITING

With which view presented so far can you identify best personally? Write a **five-paragraph argumentative essay** to express your view on the question:



Are the riots in Ferguson against the authorities justified?

In order to make up your mind, you can also check the comments given by the internet community under each video and meme.

## WHAT FERGUSON TELLS US ABOUT SLAVERY

In his speech as a response to the court's decision, president Barack Obama said:



*“Finally, we need to recognize that the situation in Ferguson speaks to broader challenges that we still face as a nation. The fact is, in too many parts of this country, a deep distrust exists between law enforcement and communities of color. Some of this is the result of the legacy of racial discrimination in this country.”*  
(The White House, 24.11.2014)

This statement raises the question of the connection between the history of the United States – i.e. years of slavery and racial discrimination – and the present. So, in order to understand Ferguson, we need to look back into the past ...

You can read the full speech here: <http://www.whitehouse.gov/the-press-office/2014/11/24/remarks-president-after-announcement-decision-grand-jury-ferguson-missou>  
Or watch it on YouTube: <https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=O2BBAfWucaE&spfreload=10>

## ACTIVATE YOUR KNOWLEDGE

You have surely heard about slavery and the American Civil War before. You might have read articles, novels or even poems about this topic; also, there is a large number of feature films and documentaries.



Get together in groups of three students and prepare a mind-map which summarizes your knowledge at the beginning of this unit.



## JIGSAW PUZZLE

Choose which topic you want to research on:

- I. Slavery in the United States
- II. The Civil War
- III. From “Negro” to “Afro-American”: What the Words Refer To
- IV. Human Rights Past and Today



Then, find together with other students working on the same topic. You have one lesson to find important information and prepare a short talk on your topic.

Now, get together in your initial groups. Every student, who is now an expert in his or her topic, presents what he or she has learned. Take notes on what your fellow students report.

## SLAVERY IN THE UNITED STATES

What can you find out about slavery in the United States in the 18th and 19th century? You can use school books and also do an Internet research. Here are some sources which you should consider:



- Crash Course US History on YouTube, presented by John Green (an author you might know; he wrote “Looking for Alaska” or “The Fault in Our Stars”): <https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=Ajn9g5Gsv98&spfreload=10>
- In the 19th century, the United States were separated by two different ideologies which eventually led to the Civil War. Read up on the following two sources to compare the different standpoints on slavery; the first text, “On the Constitution of the Union” (1832) is by the abolitionist orator and editor William Lloyd Garrison, the second source, “Slavery a Positive Good” (1837), from the slaveholding Senator from South Carolina John C. Calhoun:  
[http://edsitement.neh.gov/sites/edsitement.neh.gov/files/worksheets/Abol\\_Slave.pdf](http://edsitement.neh.gov/sites/edsitement.neh.gov/files/worksheets/Abol_Slave.pdf)
- Some slaves were able to escape their fate, and one of them was Harriet Tubman. Her story, told through a painting by R. Furan, can be read here:  
<http://www.civilwarinart.org/items/show/140>

Of course, you can also include your own sources into your research! However, make sure they are valid. Please make a list of any additional sources you used.

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## THE CIVIL WAR

The American Civil War from 1861 to 1865 was crucial for building one united nation eventually. What can you find out about the motives of the Union (the “North”) versus the Confederate States (the “South”)?



Try not to focus too much on battles here, rather look at the causes and effects of the war. Here are some sources which you should consider:

- Crash Course US History on YouTube, presented by John Green (an author you might know; he wrote “Looking for Alaska” or “The Fault in Our Stars”):

Part I: <https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=rY9zHNOjGrs&spfreload=10> and

Part II: [https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=GzTrKccmj\\_I&spfreload=10](https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=GzTrKccmj_I&spfreload=10).

- Very often artworks help us to understand history. On this website you can explore several artworks linked to the causes of the Civil War: <http://www.civilwarinart.org/exhibits/show/causes/introduction>. More information on this topic can be found here: <http://www.civilwarinart.org/exhibits/show/causes/introduction/slavery-and-abolition>.

- The same website also lists some artworks related to the effects of the Civil War: <http://www.civilwarinart.org/exhibits/show/remembering/introduction>.

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## FROM NEGRO TO AFRO-AMERICAN

*“But if thought corrupts language, language can also corrupt thought.”*  
– George Orwell, “1984”

As the quote by Orwell shows, the meaning of words can be very powerful. Throughout American history, Afro-Americans have been referred to differently, and very often derogatory terms – like negro, or even the “n-word” – were used. What may once have been socially acceptable can now be an affront. What can you find out about the development of how Afro-Americans were referred to and how they are referred to nowadays? Here are some sources which you should consider:



- To understand the historical development of the meaning of a word, you can look at a thesaurus. For example: <http://www.thesaurus.com/browse/black>. Some dictionaries also give information: <http://www.oxforddictionaries.com/definition/english/nigger>. Make sure to check several synonyms of “Afro-American”.
- The following article by David Pilgrim and Phillip Middleton explores the etymology of the word “nigger”, explains its historical purpose, and how Afro-Americans were depicted in caricatures: <http://www.ferris.edu/jimcrow/caricature/>.
- In his introduction to “Nigger: The Strange Career of a Troublesome Word”, Randall Kennedy gives a rather personal account of his experiences as an Afro-American during the time of Segregation: <https://books.google.de/books?id=VgVzXgUxFB4C&lrpg=PR11&dq=nigger&hl=de&pg=PR11#v=onepage&q&f=false>.

Of course, you can also include your own sources into your research! However, make sure they are valid. Please make a list of any additional sources you used.

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## HUMAN RIGHTS PAST AND TODAY

*The “recognition of the inherent dignity and of the equal and inalienable rights of all members of the human family is the foundation of freedom, justice and peace in the world [...].”*

– United Nations, Universal Declaration of Human Rights



Anti-slavery movements are strongly connected to the belief that every human being has the inalienable right of freedom. Such beliefs are – among many other constitutions – outlined in the American Charters of Freedom, and the United Nations’ *Universal Declaration of Human Rights*. What can you find out about the establishment of human rights in American and world history and its violation especially during the period of slavery in the United States?

- This Power-Point presentation explains what the *Universal Declaration of Human Rights* is, what it says about slavery, and it mentions examples of contemporary slavery: [http://www.antislavery.org/includes/documents/cm\\_docs/2010/h/human\\_rights\\_and\\_slavery\\_powerpoint.pdf](http://www.antislavery.org/includes/documents/cm_docs/2010/h/human_rights_and_slavery_powerpoint.pdf)
- Here you can take a look at the *Universal Declaration of Human Rights*: <http://www.un.org/en/documents/udhr/>
- Here you can take a look at the transcript of the *American Declaration of Independence*: [http://www.archives.gov/exhibits/charters/declaration\\_transcript.html](http://www.archives.gov/exhibits/charters/declaration_transcript.html)
- Mary Reynolds, a former slave, talks about her life here: <http://xroads.virginia.edu/~hyper/wpa/reynold1.html>. In how far were her basic human rights violated?

Of course, you can also include your own sources into your research! However, make sure they are valid. Please make a list of any additional sources you used.

## THE FIRST SCENES

Watch the first scenes of the feature film (00:00:55-00:07:45).

The beginning is divided into several shots.

Watching it a second time, chose one scene to especially focus on.

**Which aspects in this scene especially attract your attention?**

Try to look at cinematic, dramatic as well as literary aspects.

How do you think does the scene affect the rest of the film;

**what expectations do you have after watching it?**



SCENE	SCENE DESCRIPTION AND OBSERVATIONS	EXPECTATIONS
1. Slaves in the field (00:00:55 - 00:02:16)		
2. Quarters, food and letter writing (00:02:17-00:03:43)		
3. A sexual encounter (00:03:44-00:05:37)		
4. A different woman (00:05:38-00:05:57)		
5. Title screen: "12 Years a Slave" (00:05:58-00:06:00)		
6. Music and children at home (00:06:01-00:07:45)		

After completing your own observations, talk to your classmates and discuss your views in order to fill in the rest of the chart.



## THE CHARACTERS

During the course of the story, Solomon Northup, the main character, meets (or rather: is subjected to) many other characters. While watching the film, try to note their main attributes. Watch the two following sequences, pause to complete and discuss, and continue to add more information in later scenes.



- ... until Solomon has to leave William Ford's farm (00:54:28),
- ... until Mistress Epps refuses to give biscuits to Patsey (01:18:25).

CHARACTER	WHAT DOES THE CHARACTER LOOK LIKE? <i>PHYSICAL APPEARANCE</i>	HOW DOES THE CHARACTER ACT? <i>FACIAL EXPRESSIONS, GESTURES, BODY LANGUAGE</i>	HOW DOES THE CAMERA PORTRAY HIM/HER? <i>AUDIO-VISUAL EFFECTS, CAMERA MOVEMENTS</i>
Solomon Northup (,Platt')			
Anne Northup			
Eliza Berry			
Theophilus Freeman			
William Ford			
John Tibbeats			
Edwin Epps			
Mary Epps			
Patsey			
Harriet Shaw			
Samuel Bass			

## EPPS' FARM: CHARACTER CONSTELLATION

You have watched **12 Years a Slave** until Mistress Epps has refused to give Patsey one of her self-made biscuits (01:18:25). In front of the other slaves and her husband she humiliates the slave woman.



You have witnessed that on Edwin Epps' farm, Solomon alias Platt, finds himself in brutal conditions of labour. His master is a harsh man who, by Master Ford, is described as a "nigger breaker". However, Solomon and Patsey do not only suffer because of Epps' harsh view of his workers. Edwin, his wife Mary, Patsey, and Solomon, too, find themselves in a multi-sided relationship of love, hatred and revenge.

## FREEZE IMAGES

Get together in groups of four students and think about how you can so far depict the relationship of the four characters: Edwin Epps, Mary Epps, Patsey and Solomon. Create a freeze image of the situation after the scene of Patsey's second humiliation.



Think about: The characters' *position in the image*, *gestures*, and their *facial expressions*.

The images will be shown in class. Comment on the other groups' work and discuss whether the situation was depicted accurately (and whether it is clear who depicts whom in the freeze images).

## ADDING A VOICE

One group remains in the freeze image; they will act as statues. A second group doubles behind each character and will act as the statues' voices. The rest of the class can now ask questions addressed to one specific character, for example:

- Solomon, why didn't you defend Patsey?
- Mrs. Epps, do you love your husband?
- ...

The statues have to remain silent but can show their answer through movements of their body and their facial expressions. Their voices, the students standing behind them, have to answer the question verbally. (Both should happen simultaneously, as if statue and voice were one person.) The answers can be discussed in class.



## SOLOMON'S LETTER HOME



Solomon gets to know the former overseer Armsby who seems to be sympathetic to the slaves on Mr. Epps' farm. Solomon offers him all he earned at a concert he played at and asks Armsby to deliver a letter from him to his family.

Watch the film until Solomon writes the letter to his family (01:34:05).

Write Solomon's letter. However, since you have only one small sheet of paper and improvised ink and quill to write with, you can only write 150 words.

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What do you think does Solomon feel like when he has finished writing the letter?

Leave your own letter on your desk. Walk around in class in order to read what other students have written. Discuss some of the letters in class.

How do you think will Solomon's letter be received? How will the story continue from this point? Discuss your views with your neighbor in class.

You can now finish watching the feature film – in how far does it differ from your expectation?

**THE ROLE OF WOMEN**

The role of slave women is central to Steve McQueen's narrative. At the beginning, Solomon meets Eliza, a woman who is separated from her children by Master Ford at the slave auction.

On Master Epps' farm, Solomon meets Patsey who does not only suffer from the terrible working conditions but is also confronted with difficult personal relations with Master and Mistress Epps. Other Afro-American women in the narrative are Mistress Shaw, a former slave who has married a white farmer, and the unknown slave woman whom Solomon pleases at the beginning of the film.

In small groups, discuss the potential function for the narrative as a whole of each of the women listed below. Try to condense it in one or two key points:

Unknown woman: \_\_\_\_\_

Eliza: \_\_\_\_\_

Mistress Shaw: \_\_\_\_\_

**Patsey's** importance as a character is also highlighted by one of the last scenes in the feature film: Solomon, on his way to his family finally, leaves her behind on Epps' farm.

**How is Patsey characterised in the feature film?**

**What is Patsey's function for the narrative?**

**How is this conveyed technically?**

## THE ROLE OF WOMEN

Watch the following scenes again in order to analyse them:

- Master Epps oversees the daily harvest (00:55:37-00:58:21)
- Mistress Epps throws a bottle on Patsey (00:59:40-01:01:41)
- Patsey asks Solomon to kill her (01:18:26-01:21:00)
- [If not included in “Sequence Analysis 3: Violence”]  
Solomon beats Patsey (01:46:45-00:53:53)
- Solomon leaves Patsey behind (02:00:32-02:03:57)



Use the sequence analysis protocol to complete the task.  
Present and discuss your results in class.

## THE STORY OF PATSEY

At the end of “12 Years a Slave”, Solomon drives away in a carriage. Patsey is left behind on Master Epps’ farm. The brutal beating still lingers in the audiences thoughts. We still have the picture of her, tied to a post, in our minds; we still see the wounds on her back while the other slaves tend to them. We know what happened to her during the course of the story.

We wonder, **what happens to Patsey after Solomon has left?**

**Write a short story to answer this question personally.**  
You can freely chose the perspective of narration, tense etc.  
(though your choice should of course be accounted for).



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The class will be divided in five groups. Each group gets assigned a different perspective to write the short story in. The planning can be done in small groups; however, the stories should still be written individually:

- Group 1: Write the story from Patsey’s perspective (1st person),
- Group 2: Write the story in the 2nd person.  
*“You feel the tears running down your face ...”*,
- Group 3: Write the story in 3rd person,
- Group 4: Write the story from Master Epps’ perspective (1st person),
- Group 5: Write the story from Mistress Epps’ perspective (1st person).

## THE ROLE OF WOMEN

Option 1: The class can be divided into groups which focus on one scene.

Option 2: All scenes are watched together; each group focuses on one aspect of analysis.



## HOW SOLOMON IS SOLD

Watch the scene in which Solomon gets sold to Master Ford again (00:27:49-00:32:03).



Divide the class into four groups to pay attention to one of the aspects in the sequence analysis protocol. After having taken a close look at the scene, compare and discuss your results.

- How are the slaves treated by the other characters?
- How do the slaves behave?
- How is this conveyed technically?

*“From “Negro” to “Afro-American””-experts from the group puzzle research can focus on how the slaves are spoken to. Experts on human rights can evaluate, in how far basic rights of Afro-Americans are neglected and violated in this scene.*

<b>Scene, Time &amp; Plot</b>	
<b>Camera angles &amp; movement</b>	
<b>Image composition, colour &amp; lighting</b>	
<b>Sounds &amp; soundtrack</b>	

## SHARE YOUR RESULTS

Present and discuss your results in class.



## VIOLENCE

Steve McQueen, the director of “12 Years a Slave”, said in an interview: *“We have to confront this topic in a real way. No one’s blind anymore. No excuses. That’s the power of cinema.”* (Gates 2014, 188).



Therefore, McQueen decided to show horrifying scenes of violence against slaves.

- How is violence depicted and used in the feature film?
- What are its causes and effects?
- What is its purpose?
- How is this conveyed technically?
- Do you think McQueen’s approach is viable?

## VIOLENCE

Watch the following scenes again in order to analyse them:

- Solomon is captured and beaten upon refusing his new identity (00:12:56-00:16:21),
- Solomon is hung (00:45:13-00:52:21),
- Solomon beats Patsey (00:46:45-00:53:53).



Use the sequence analysis protocol to complete the task. Present and discuss your results in class.

<p><b>Scene, Time &amp; Plot</b></p>	
<p><b>Camera angles &amp; movement</b></p>	
<p><b>Image composition, colour &amp; lighting</b></p>	
<p><b>Sounds &amp; soundtrack</b></p>	

## WRAP-UP

At the beginning we discussed whether the riots in Ferguson were justified or not. In order to understand the history of Afro-Americans in the United States more fully, we then looked at the background history of slavery and the Civil War.



We watched **12 Years a Slave** as a personal account of a dreadful part of American history.

## HAS YOUR OPINION CHANGED?

Has your opinion changed due to your research findings and the feature film?



- Write a short reflection on this question (300-500 words).
- **Optional:** Re-write (parts of) your essay and incorporate your latest findings.

## QUESTIONS FOR DISCUSSION

The following questions can be used for group and/or class discussions as well as written reflections:

- When Solomon sees his family at the end of the film, he apologizes (You can watch the scene again: 02:03:58-02:08:21). What does he apologize for? Also, his wife tells him there is nothing to forgive. Do you also think so?
- After watching the film, **do you think the film depicts hopelessness and despair or, on the contrary, hopefulness?**
- “12 Years a Slave” received three Oscars in 2014: Best Picture, Best Actress in a Supporting Role (Lupita Nyong’o), and Best Writing (Adapted Screenplay). **Do you think the film deserved to win these (and many other) prizes?** As a reference, other important feature films of the year include “The Wolf of Wallstreet”, “Gravity”, “Dallas Buyers Club”, “American Hustle”, or “The Great Gatsby” (which all have at least been nominated for Oscars).