

A Study of an Afro-Ethnic Climate In the Face of Houston's History, Economic Base and Political Growth

Celia Harness

INTRODUCTION

The city of Houston has become one of the great urban centers of the twentieth century. The explosive economic growth of the area over the last 160 years has resulted in the creation of a great melting pot, as the community has become one of the most diverse in this country, or the world. That diversity has many sources, of which one of the most important, and certainly the most tragic, was the early settlement and growth of Houston that occurred during the last years of the southern American cotton empire. That empire, which produced enormous wealth for a small planter class, was based on the slave labor of Afro-Americans. The Civil War ended in Texas 141 years ago, but the newly freed slaves faced enormous barriers in securing basic civil rights and an opportunity to enjoy the cultural, economic, and political rights of the majority white population.

A window into that struggle is provided by a resident Houstonian, Anita Bunkley's novel, **Emily the Yellow Rose, a Texas Legend**. Ms. Bunkley's work chronicles both the serene, hopeful dreams and the disappointment and discord surrounding her Afro-American heroine before, during, and after the Civil War along the upper Gulf Coast.

The relevance of her story clearly can be seen in the modern, diverse Houston of this day. Like Ms. Bunkley, I am a Houstonian, a native Houstonian, and I teach at Jack Yates High School, one of the oldest predominately black schools in the Houston Independent School District. Yates is sited in the Third Ward, a strongly, historic, Afro-American neighborhood that has produced some of the most prominent minority civic, religious, and business leaders of the state and city. The ward today is a study in contrast. Some areas are stylish, with real estate valued in the millions, while only a few blocks away is an urban ghetto, reeking of poverty and destitution. So one finds middle and upper middle class residents in the area, but also present, are the penniless, the hungry, and the unfortunate.

The contrasting quality of the area is also reflected in the fact that Houston's two largest public universities, Texas Southern University and the University of Houston, are in the area, and bracket Yates High School. But near these centers of higher learning are blocks of deteriorating "row houses" that have impoverished generations, for decades. So amidst booming, growing, diverse Houston we still find, in this inner city area and others, pockets of an oozing, infectious ulcer of decay. Trying to sort out how we still find this sad urban landscape in such a city of opulence requires an understanding of the origins of areas such as Third Ward, and Ms. Buckley's novel can provide insights in that regard.

Emily The Yellow Rose offers an example of a young black woman struggling to find a new identity and make a new start in the Galveston-Houston area before, during, and after the Civil War. Coming to the area from New York, she found herself caught in the slave empire being built in Texas, being declared a free person, after the war. She endured the torture of a cruel civilization when she first came to Galveston seeking a new life with dignity, as the following passage suggests:

“Tears of frustrated disappointment burned her eyes, as she fought to keep them from spilling over. Trembling, drenched with perspiration, she wondered if she had made a mistake in coming to this wild foreign place.”

Emily’s experience can offer insight and encouragement to Afro- American and other students as they research their own histories and experiences in the Houston area. It will provide a frame of reference when they visit sites like Freedman’s Town in the Fourth Ward, with its narrow, hand- laid brick streets, attesting to the pride and determination of the newly freed slaves. And in this way, they can gain an enhanced understanding of how events in this area 150 years ago, contributed to the modern, diverse Houston, with its contrasting pockets of poverty and affluence in the inner city.

This unit is designed for a six week period. Aside from a careful analysis of a work of fiction set in this area, students will be given opportunities to view and explore factors that have contributed to the growth and development of the Houston area in general and the Third Ward, in particular.

BACKGROUND

Since the Allen brothers purchased their tract of 5,000 acres along Buffalo Bayou in 1836 and laid out a new town named for the victor of the recent battle of San Jacinto, many factors have contributed to Houston’s growth, while others acted as a brake on local development. Ms. Bunkley’s novel of the early days of a new frontier, makes some of these factors clear, such as, the climate of the Texas Gulf Coast with it’s “muggy mosquito filled air” and the “Swampy lowland” of the Houston area. These qualities led the surviving Allen brother to leave the insect infested swamps of Buffalo Bayou within a few years of founding Houston and return to the northern states.

The early economy of the area was based on exporting local timber and cotton to national and world markets. This, necessitated a large agricultural labor force in the adjacent river valleys of the Trinity, Brazos, and Colorado, almost all held in slavery like the Yellow Rose. With the end of the war, large numbers of freed slaves moved into Galveston and Houston to seek better lives. Most settled in the older areas of these cities like the Third, Fourth, and Fifth Wards in Houston, where affordable housing could be found.

Over time, most whites left these same areas, and the neighborhoods became overwhelmingly Afro-American. Third Ward gradually became the center of black

intellectual, cultural, and political life in the growing city. The rigid Jim Crow segregation of the South assured that all classes of the local Afro-American population—elites, middle class, and the very poor—all lived in these highly concentrated neighborhoods through the 1950s.

In the 1960s, white flight began from inner city areas, as local public schools were desegregated and the black population of the older wards began to move into adjacent formerly white areas like North and South Macgregor. This outmigration accelerated in the 1970s with the passage of federal fair housing laws ending discrimination in housing and the availability of large numbers of affordable houses in suburban areas after the energy bust of the 1980s. Third Ward went into decline as many of its best educated and most prosperous residents moved to Fort Bend County and other suburban neighborhoods.

Population losses slowed in the 1990s, and efforts are underway to reverse the decline and to encourage families to move back into the Third Ward area. For the first time in years, new houses are being built, and some new businesses are opening in the ward. Now is a good time for area students to learn information concerning the early history of Afro-Americans in this part of Texas, and to observe what is happening in one of the city's historic Afro-American communities contributing to Houston's dynamic economic growth.

General Objectives

To examine the Afro-American experience in Houston by relating it to the personal experience of the heroine in **Emily the Yellow Rose**, and a series of exercises to familiarize them with the current status of the Third Ward area.

Specific Objectives

1. To explore the history of the city and the third ward neighborhood and the factors that influenced the growth and development of both.
2. To explore literary sources that deal with people in the Houston area, especially Afro-Americans in the region.
3. To enhance familiarity with important landmarks in Houston such as Antioch Baptist Church, Freedman's Town, the Jack Yates homestead in Sam Houston Park, and the old wards of the City where most blacks lived from the end of the Civil War to the 1970s.
4. To familiarize students with the Third Ward area specifically, including Texas Southern University, the row houses, Cuney Homes, and local businesses in the area.

5. To relate the generated information from this unit to the larger city. Where does Third Ward fit? What is its future?

Directed Research

Students will be directed to undertake a number of projects to gather data about local landmarks, and other aspects of the Afro-American experience in the area. Portions of this will entail site visits and field trips, as well as the use of library materials, including **Emily the Yellow Rose, A Texas Legend.**

Free Expression

Another part of the unit will be devoted to having students use their own words to express what they see to have been the important changes that have occurred in Houston since its founding over 160 years ago. They are encouraged to write poetry in this part of the exercise.

Vocabulary

Students will explore the meaning of specific terms that are relevant to the city's history. These will include such important terms such as Juneteenth, Freedman's Town, the Camp, Logan riot, Jack Yates, Antioch, etc.

Bibliography

Bunkley, Anita, Emily, The Yellow Rose, A Texas Legend, Rinyard Publishing Company, Houston Texas, 1989.

. **(Presents a realistic view of a young black woman's plight as she seeks independence and freedom from the grips of slavery)**

Johnston Maugerite, Houston, The Unknown City, 1836-1946, Texas A&M University Press, College Station, 1992.

(True stories of the lives of the creators of a new city of Houstonians and their descendants from the Second World War.)

Jones, Dr. Howard, The Red Diary, Nortex Press, Austin, Texas, 1991.

(Chronicles a step-by-step progression of the struggle experienced by Houston-area blacks as they arrived under Spain around the 19th century.)

Rice, Lawrence, The Negro In Texas, 1874-1900, Louisiana State University Press, Baton Rouge, 1971.

(Presents an extensive look into the political, economic, and social lives of black Texans.)

The Houston Metropolitan Study, An Entrepreneurial Community Looks Ahead, University of Houston Center for Public Policy, Rice University/Baker Institute for Public Policy.

(Focuses on a study on the metropolitan Houston area and the entrepreneurial aspects of the city.)

Von der Mehden, Fred R., The Ethnic Groups of Houston, Rice University Studies, Houston, Texas, 1984.

(Charts the progression of the large groups of people that have settled in the Houston community.)

Williams, Annie Lee, The History of Wharton County, 1946-1961, Von Boeckmann-Jones Company, Austin, Texas, 1964.

(Touches on aspects of the history of Texas settlement in Wharton and other surrounding counties from 1824 .)

Winningham, Geoff, A Place of Dreams, Houston, An American City, Rice University Press, Houston, Texas, 1986.

(Presents a pictorial view of the Houston area as it has progressed into a city of dreams.)

Focuses

The Allen Brothers

Migration to Houston From East Texas and other areas.

Southern Ports and Influences To Houston -Galveston/Port of Houston

Freedman's Town - Early Afro-American Settlements/First,Second,Third, Fourth, Fifth Wards

Houston In Today's Society

Approach to a novel - Emily The Yellow Rose, A Texas Legend

PRESENTATION

Week I

Unit 1

Research - History of the Houston Project/The Allen Purchase

Using the Newspaper As a Resource for Information / Public Library /Historical Society

Map Study -Drawing of coordinates and the use of map reading skills based on the Allen Purchase/ Buffalo Bayou.

Week II

Unit 2

Important Historical Contributors to the Houston Landscape- slides/photos

Important Houston landmarks; NASA, Port of Houston, Harrisburg, Row Houses, Wards of Houston

(Bus Tour)

Reading of ethnic literature and myths

Vocabulary Study - Crossword Puzzle

Week III

Unit 3

Personal and Expressive Writing - Autobiographical Essay

Life Map -Students will make a road map of life showing beginning memories of Houston.

Family History - Research of family history and roots in the Houston area.

Week IV

Unit4

Poetic Expressions -Personal expressions of 1) "The Person Within and a Concept of People, Events, and Settings" 2) "Houston Past and Present" 3) "Houston and the

Sights and Sounds of What Has Been” 4) “What Houston is Presently, and What the Future Holds”

Week V

Unit 5

Introduction to the Novel-Vocabulary Study

Setting

Plot

Theme

Characterization

Climax

Resolution

Week VI

Unit 5

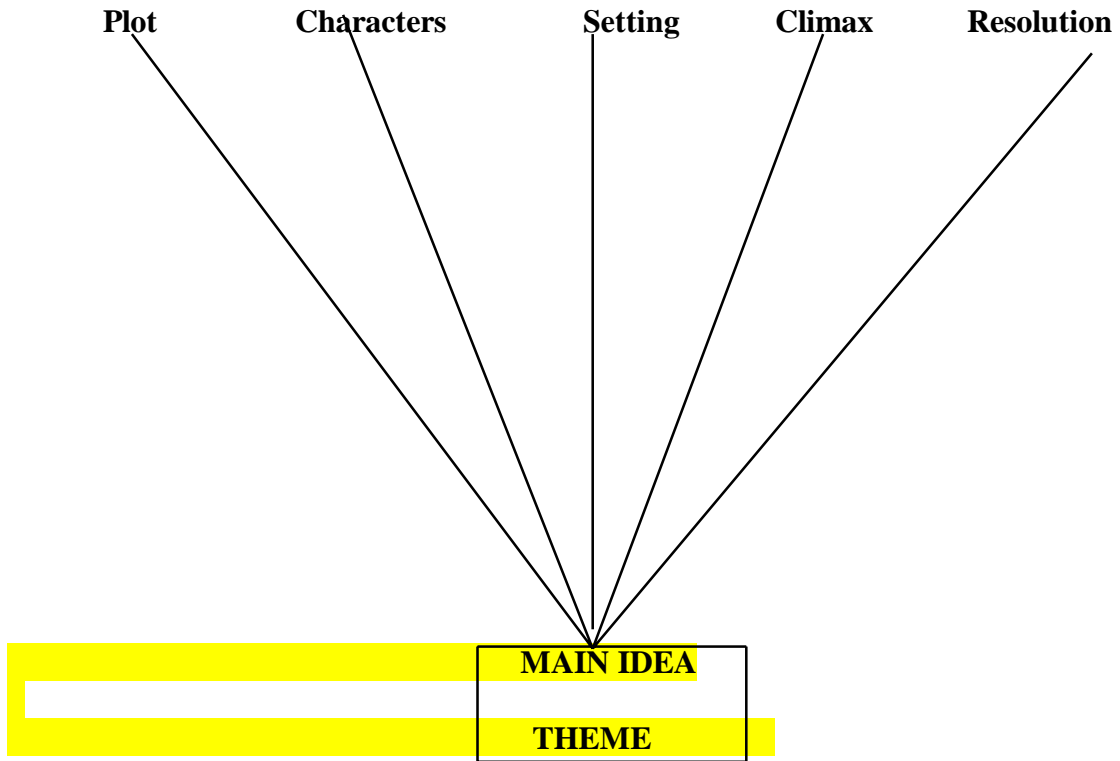
Reading of the novel **Emily the Yellow Rose, A Texas Legend**

Study Questions

Think and Respond -Example Why do you think that.....?

Book Review

- **FORMAT FOR A BOOK REVIEW**



REVIEW FORMAT

- **PLOT** - Motion = The Action
- **CHARACTERIZATION** = Centering around individuals or animals in story line.
- **CLIMAX** = The high point of the story where the action must ebb or decline.
- **RESOLUTION** = The final outcome that levels the action.
- **SETTING** = When and where the story takes place.
- **MAIN IDEA** = The central or most important element in the story line.
- **THEME** = The implications the story teaches about life.

VOCABULARY EXERCISE

Directions: The following terms have been taken from the context of the on-going unit. From the discussion and readings, use the clues to determine the correct answers to solve the puzzle.

ACROSS

1. PLACE OF HIGHER LEARNING BOARD MEMBER
3. OPPOSITE OF DOWN
5. TO GIVE INSTRUCTION TO
7. SOUND TO CHEER THE HOME TEAM
9. _____ TOWER; ONE OF CITY'S TALLEST BUILDINGS
11. SHORT FORM OF TERM FOR FUEL
12. SIR NAME OF HOUSTON FOUNDER
13. PAST FORM OF WORD MEANING TO DEVOUR WHICH CAPITAL IS AUSTIN
14. USED IN NEGATIVE PHRASE; ESP AFTER NEITHER
17. A RATE OF MOTION WAS A LEADER IN RIGHTS
18. STADIUM BUILT BY HOFHEINZ FAMILY ROCKET'S BASKETBALL
20. EMERGENCY CODE LINE FORM
21. HOME OF SPACE OPERATIONS TO LEFT OF SUNSET
22. SHORT FOR UNITED STATES OF AMERICA THE GULF OF MEXICO
24. HOUSTON WARD WHERE FREEDMAN'S TOWN BEGAN SEAMAN
26. TO CUT DOWN
28. ONE OF HOUSTON'S LARGEST PUBLIC INSTITUTIONS BELONGING TO LIGHT COLOR
30. COMERCIAL ESTABLISHMENT OFFERING LODGING DWELLING
31. OBJECTIVE CASE OF SHE
32. HEATING ELEMENT
33. ONE OF HOUSTON'S LARGEST PUBLIC INSTITUTIONS BREEZE
35. DOCUMENT EXECUTED UNDER SEAL VENOMOUS TROPICAL SNAKE

DOWN

1. MARRIED FIRST BLACK
2. RATING ON A SCHOOL EXAM
3. TYPE OF VASE
4. INFORMAL; FATHER
5. PREP; IN THE DIRECTION OF
6. LARGE OR IMPORTANT TOWN
8. IN THE PAST
9. STATE IN WHICH CAPITAL IS AUSTIN
10. ALONE
15. MINISTER WHO
16. HOME OF
19. ARRANGEMENT IN
20. DIRECTION
23. SEATED AT
25. SAIL OR
26. WINGED INSECT
27. OF OR
- 29.
30. MALE
34. MY GAL
40. LIGHT
43. NON

- | | |
|--|--------------------|
| 36. LARGE BODY OF WATER | 44. DIRT |
| 37. PATRIOT FOR WHOM CITY IS NAMED
CULTURAL HOUSTON AREA | 46. A DIVERSE |
| 38. TO UTILIZE | 47. UNBOUND |
| 39. PERSON WHO IS THE PROPERTY OF ANOTHER, BOUND
COMPROMISING A WHOLE
TO SERVE WITHOUT PAY | 48. |
| 41. CRAFT OR SKILL
OR WODDEN STICK | 50. HEALTH RESORT |
| 42. MUSICAL INSTRUMENT
OR BETS | 52. STRAIGHT METAL |
| 45. HOUSTON IMPORT AND EXPORT CENTER
DAYS | 53. WAGERS |
| 46. POSSESSES
CONVERSATION | 54. 365 |
| 48. TO PERCEIVE BY EAR | 57. I NFORMAL |
| 53. FICTIONAL HEROINE OF SLAVE INDEPENDENCE
CHARGE FOR SERVICE | 58. SOIL |
| 54. SLUGGISH CREEK | 61. |
| 55. ONE OF HOUSTON'S RENOWN PRIVATE UNIVERSITIES | |
| 56. TYPE OF SNAKE | |
| 59. INCREASE OF KNOWLEDGE | |
| 60. BAYOU FROM WHICH HOUSTON WAS BUILT AROUND | |
| 62. TO CLASSIFY BY COMMON CHARACTER | |
| 63. ONE OF TEXAS' FORMER LEADING INDUSTRIES | |

Strategic Landmarks to the Houston Landscape

Directions: A. The map below shows the surrounding areas that were meaningful to Emily in her plight toward her independence. Carefully observe the landmarks and identify them in relation to the Houston story and its rise to prosperity.

1. _____
2. _____
3. _____
4. _____
5. _____
6. _____
7. _____
8. _____
9. _____
10. _____

B. Use the library to construct your own map of the city. From the study of the city, locate and identify at least three historical points in the city with at least one in the proximity of your neighborhood.

FOR YOUR REVIEW

Plot

1. In numerical order..... first, second, third, rising events.
2. Itemize the series of suspenseful, amusing, or anticipated outcomes.
3. Outcome and slowing of action.
4. Conclusion

Study Questions

1. Where do we first meet Emily?
2. How does she help to relate bits of the Houston scenario?
3. Why do you think Emily needs to make this change in her life?
4. What incidents in her pursuit bring about realities of the world in which she lives?
5. Where are her strengths/weaknesses?
6. How do you think you would handle her situation if the shoe were on the other foot?
8. What do you feel is her real fate?
9. Is it permanent?
10. Is it transient?
11. What is her relationship to Joshua?
12. Describe his character as it relates to the black man's plight.
13. When and how does Emily find out about his dilemma?
14. How does this cause Emily to search for answers within?
15. How does this relate to the history of Mexican slave trade in Texas?
16. What in the novel gives facts about the flourishing cotton market?
17. What in the novel relate evidence of strength in individuals?
18. How is this novel a work that pictures the question of slavery and its effect on the lives of human beings?
19. Who is Lucinda and what is her fate?
20. Explain what twist of fate brings Joshua and Emily together again.

ETHNIC LITERATURE

Ethnic literature sometimes provides tremendous fictional and non-fictional information about many subjects. Often, that literature is an expression of the writer's efforts to convey feelings or point of view on a specific issue or subject.

The following is a poem from **Roll of Thunder, Hear My Cry** Examine the writer's poetic expression :

*Roll of thunder
hear my cry*

*Over the water
bye and bye*

*Ole man comin
down the line*

*Whip in hand to
beat me down*

*But I ain't
gonna let him*

Turn me 'round

What do you think the poem means ? _____

What message do you think that Mildred Taylor seeks to convey to the reader _____

Life Map

Directions: Every individual has a specific life line that belongs to no one else. There have been many life experiences; some of them being less desirable than others. There were probably hills to climb and also valleys that were sometimes deeper than others in overcoming. The following is an example of such a map. Use this as an example to create your own life map.

Autobiographical Essay

Directions:

Choose one memorable incident, happy or sad, from your life map. Make this the place you begin your life map and proceed from there to write about yourself and your family.

ex.

Janice is sixteen years of age and looks back over her life. She has had many experiences, but one that she will never forget. Janice always liked to ride her bicycle through her tiny neighborhood, through the white framed houses and well manicured lawns. This day was different from all the rest. In her essay that she read before the class, she began with the moment the doctor placed a cast on her leg and she spent the entire summer on crutches. Of course, how could she forget how each family member; her mother, her father, and her two brothers always tried to keep her in a good mood. As she reflects, on this day, a huge moving van came into view as she rode to tell her best friend goodbye. This was one of the worst days of her life. Not only did she lose a best friend who was leaving the neighborhood, but she also was having to deal with a frightening, unforgettable moment. She recalls also how someone called her parents, there was a ride to the hospital in an ambulance, and the many warm faces she met during slow recovery. As she wrote, she looked back at her childhood and her life with her family. This was an autobiography that brought her to the exact moment that she sat in her tenth grade class and related her experience from birth to her present.

Family Tree

Directions:

1. Contact an elderly family member to find out information about your family background. Elderly members can sometimes offer more information than anyone else.
2. Ask your parents to give you information about your birth and family members.
3. Contact a genealogical library as a source of information.
4. Be creative.

Poetic Expression

Directions: Choose an element from your present or past environment, or even from a place you observed in this study. You might even select some individual or character that you have become acquainted with. Write a poem in free verse as an expression of your thoughts based on the aspects of this unit. Be sure to focus on the positive as well as the negative forces of your own world.

Personal Essay

Directions: Write a personal essay expressing the following:

Question: Should the events of the past, my life history, and the present be an experience of personal integrity for today and future growth.

