Under the Quilt of Night:  
The Underground Railroad

Grade 6 (also appropriate for younger and older students)

Objectives:

- Students will participate in a Readers’ Theater based on the book, *Under the Quilt of Night*.
- The student will be able to explain how the Underground Railroad worked and its importance to slaves in the years leading up to the Civil War.
- The student will articulate the events and emotions experienced by the main character in the book, *Under the Quilt of Night*.
- Students will identify descriptive language used by the author.

Materials:

- *Under the Quilt of Night* by Deborah Hopkinson, illustrated by James E. Ransome.
- *Follow the Drinking Gourd*, story and pictures by Jeanette Winter and/or lyrics to *Follow the Drinking Gourd*.
- A drinking gourd or dipper; quilt and/or access to website such as Owen Sound’s Black History Quilt Codes: ([http://www.osblackhistory.com/quiltcodes.php](http://www.osblackhistory.com/quiltcodes.php))
- Readers’ Theater adaptation of *Under the Quilt of Night*. This book is ideal for this because of the poetic nature of the words. (I divide mine into enough parts so that every student in my largest class has a part.) Each part is numbered. For example:

  Part 1:  
  I’m young  
  But my legs are strong  
  I can run.

  Part 2:  
  I run so fast, I lead the way  
  the ones I love race right behind.  
  Pounding dirt and grass  
  Jumping rocks and roots  
  My feet make drumbeats on the path.

Anticipatory Set:

This lesson takes place while we are learning about the time leading up to the Civil War. Students use various texts, class discussions, vocabulary study, videos, poetry and music to learn about this period of history. Prior to performing the Readers’ Theater, the teacher reviews the meaning of words used in the text that might be unfamiliar: hoeing, thorns, overseer, dusk, liberty. Students need a basic
understanding of what the Underground Railroad was and the relative locations of the South, North and Canada. I teach students the song *Follow the Drinking Gourd* and let them touch the drinking gourd and quilt. Images of these can be found on-line for teachers who don’t have them readily available. Likewise, many versions of the song can be found on-line for teachers who don’t sing or play guitar.

**Lesson:**

After introducing the book and explaining the activity, the teacher gives a slip of paper with a numbered passage to each student. This can be done by being mindful of the relative strengths of each student: strong readers can receive the more difficult passages, or ones that require a more forceful presence, while struggling readers can be given shorter, less complex passages. Give students a few minutes to practice their piece and the opportunity to ask for help with pronunciations. Then direct students to sit in a circle according to their number so that the words flow easily from one student to the next and so that everyone can see and hear each other. Remind students to be expressive and to speak loudly. When the reading is complete, discuss the story with students. Ask questions such as: “Who is telling the story?”, “Who are the people helping them to escape?”, “What signals are used in the story?”, “Who is chasing them?”, “What emotions are the characters experiencing?”, “What is their ultimate destination and goal?”. During the discussion, students should read from their parts when relevant to the questions. Then ask for examples of figurative and descriptive language, eliciting phrases such as, “I’ll make my steps quick whispers in the dark”, and “Mosquitoes whine and tease just like the overseer’s children did”. Discuss the meaning of: “A rough carved place in the wood under my mat. I make my fingers into eyes to explore it. Just before I fall asleep, I see it is a star.” Why are the horses named “Hope and Liberty” and why doesn’t the driver say their names until the slave catchers are gone?

**Conclusion:**

By reading and sharing the text of this book, students will have a better understanding of how an individual child might have experienced the Underground Railroad, which in turn will improve understanding of the events leading to the Civil War. If a written assessment is desired, students can write from the point of view of one of the characters in the story.