On My Own Ground: Madam C.J. Walker and Identity

• Compelling Question
  o How can a person transform his/her identity from one of poverty and target of abuse to one of power and generosity?

• Virtue: Identity

• Definition – Identity answers the question, “Who am I?”

• Lesson Overview
  o In this lesson, students will examine events in the life of Madam C. J. Walker, analyzing both her identity and her contributions to American identity.

• Objectives
  o Students will understand how Madam C. J. Walker challenged the gender roles, prejudice, and discrimination, of her times in America.
  o Students will analyze their own actions, goals, and ambitions to determine how identity contributes to achievement of worthy goals.

• Background
  o Sarah Breedlove was born in 1867 on the Delta, Louisiana plantation where her parents had been enslaved prior to 1865. Sarah and her family, including five siblings, continued to work the same cotton fields as sharecroppers following the Civil War. By the time she was seven, both of Sarah’s parents had died and she lived with her sister and brother-in-law, working in the fields and doing other manual labor. At the age of fourteen, in order to escape the harsh treatment she received from her brother-in-law, Sarah married Moses McWilliams. The couple welcomed their daughter, A’Lelia a couple of years later, but when Sarah was only twenty, her husband died. Sarah and her toddler moved to St. Louis where her brothers were successful barbers, and Sarah worked alongside them, also taking in laundry to help make ends meet. A’Lelia attended public school in St. Louis, and Sarah joined the local African Methodist Episcopal Church, where she eagerly practiced her faith, made good friends, and established her identity as a diligent worker.

  These were the days of Jim Crow, when life for black Americans involved strict segregation and limited economic opportunity. However, for black businesspeople who developed products that met the needs of that segregated market, success was more achievable. When she lived in St. Louis, Sarah began to suffer from a scalp malady that caused her to lose her hair. She tried various commercial preparations, including those made by Annie Malone, a black entrepreneur. Sarah even moved to Denver, where she became a sales agent for Malone’s products, providing in-home demonstrations and selling the shampoos, lotions, and creams door-to-door.

• Vocabulary
  o Sharecroppers
  o African Methodist Episcopal Church
  o Jim Crow
  o Segregation
  o Malady
  o Entrepreneur
  o Indefatigable
  o Lye
  o Deplore
  o Commission system
  o Walker System
  o Refinement
  o Charitable
  o Fervent
  o Proponent
  o Benefactor
  o Hypertension
• **Introduce Text**
  o Have students read the background and narrative, keeping the “Walk-In-The-Shoes” question in mind as they read. Then have them answer the remaining questions below.

• **Walk-In-The-Shoes Questions**
  o As you read, imagine you are the protagonist.
    ▪ What challenges are you facing?
    ▪ What fears or concerns might you have?
    ▪ What may prevent you from acting in the way you ought?

• **Observation Questions**
  o Sarah Breedlove started from a position of extreme poverty and a target of abuse. How do you think she found the strength of character to change her life to one of power and generosity?
  o What contributions did Madam C.J. Walker make to the advancement of freedom through her approach to understanding both her own identity and the American identity?
  o In what ways did Walker's experiences as destitute sharecropper contribute to her ability to fight for the freedom of others?

• **Discussion Questions**
  o Discuss the following questions with your students.
    ▪ What is the historical context of the narrative?
    ▪ What historical circumstances presented a challenge to the protagonist?
    ▪ How and why did the individual exhibit a moral and/or civic virtue in facing and overcoming the challenge?
    ▪ How did the exercise of the virtue benefit civil society?
    ▪ How might exercise of the virtue benefit the protagonist?
    ▪ What might the exercise of the virtue cost the protagonist?
    ▪ Would you react the same under similar circumstances? Why or why not?
    ▪ How can you act similarly in your own life? What obstacles must you overcome in order to do so?

• **Additional Resources**
Handout A: On My Own Ground: Madam C.J. Walker and Identity

Background

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Narrative

Meanwhile, Sarah continued to experiment with her own homemade hair conditioners. Sarah later explained that in a dream one night she saw a big black man who showed her a recipe including petrolatum, medicinal sulfur, and certain ingredients from Africa—a preparation similar to Malone’s. Sarah married Charles Joseph Walker, a newspaperman, and began to market her own new hair and beauty products as Madam C.J. Walker’s System. The flagship product was Madam C.J. Walker’s Wonderful Hair Grower, and Sarah used her own before-and-after pictures in advertising and on the decorative tins in which she packed her pomades and other beauty supplies. The innovative marketing, coupled with Sarah’s indefatigable work ethic, made her business very successful.

Most homes at the time lacked indoor plumbing and electricity, and most soaps and cleaning products were based on lye. Sarah advised her clients to aim for “cleanliness and loveliness,” giving more attention to their grooming, and as she visited with them in their homes she gave tips for doing so. She was careful to distinguish her products from the hair straighteners advocated by white cosmetic firms. She said, “Right here let me correct the erroneous impression held by some that I claim to straighten the hair. I deplore such impression because I have always held myself out as a hair culturist. I grow hair…I want the great masses of my people to take a greater pride in their personal appearance and to give their hair proper attention.” Madam Walker’s clients became her salespeople because of a generous commission system, and demand for the products grew rapidly. She was part of a larger movement in America as between ten thousand and forty thousand black-owned businesses were inaugurated between 1883 and 1913.

She established her business headquarters in Denver, also operating a branch in Pittsburgh managed by her daughter, A’Lelia. She provided lectures and demonstrations in homes, churches, and club meetings, traveling across the country and winning thousands of customers. In Pittsburgh and then in Indianapolis, Sarah maintained beauty schools alongside her factories, teaching her agents the Walker System. Encouraging self-respect and inspiring a strong sense of identity by personal example, Walker cultivated black female business talent and trained African American women as “hair culturists” to sell and demonstrate her products in house calls. Culturists were trained in strict rules of cleanliness, grooming, and professionalism, wearing crisp white shirtwaists tucked into elegant long black skirts, and carrying the black satchels that contained all the equipment needed to help their clients achieve the smooth and shiny hair that they desired. Her 1915 manual, Hints to Agents, exhorted, “Open your windows — air it well ... Keep your teeth clean in order that [your] breath might be sweet ... See that your fingernails are kept clean, as that is a mark of refinement.”
Walker's company trained some 40,000 “Walker Agents” in the expanding number of beauty colleges that she built or paired with already-established black institutions. "I am not merely satisfied in making money for myself. I am endeavoring to provide employment for hundreds of women of my race," she explained. Not everyone loved her; she received more than her share of criticism and hostility from men, both black and white, as she sought to empower black women throughout the country. Madam Walker was not just an entrepreneur, though. As generous as she was diligent, she sought to advance the status of African-Americans. She established a network of Walker clubs, offering bonuses and prizes to the local organizations that contributed the most to their communities through charitable works. A fervent proponent of black self-help, she funded scholarships for women at Tuskegee Institute, donated large sums of money to organizations like the YMCA, NAACP, and black colleges and charities.

A successful entrepreneur and generous benefactor, Walker turned the attention of her vast network to counteract social injustice and racial violence. She built a lavish and elegant home in New York in 1916 and became involved in Harlem’s social and political life, also becoming a major donor to a Harlem anti-lynching fund. In July 1917, white mobs agitated due to labor-related tensions set fire to black neighborhoods and murdered dozens of blacks in East St. Louis, Illinois. As many as 6000 blacks were left homeless. In Philadelphia that year, Walker hosted one of the first national conventions for American businesswomen. She told her network gathered there, “This is the greatest country under the sun, but we must not let our love of country, our patriotic loyalty cause us to abate one whit in our protest against wrong and injustice. We should protest until the American sense of justice is so aroused that such affairs as the East St. Louis riot be forever impossible.”

Walker’s doctor warned her that she needed to slow down, but she was unable to do so; there was so much that she wanted to accomplish and her identity was wrapped up in constant efforts to make life better for blacks—especially black women—in America. In 1919 at the age of 51, Sarah Breedlove—Madam C.J. Walker—died of hypertension and kidney failure in her extravagant estate home in New York. She was the first black American woman to become a self-made millionaire. At the time of her death, she was the sole owner of her business, which was valued at more than $1 million, and she had a personal fortune estimated to be between $600,000 and $700,000. In 1912 Walker had described her life: “I am a woman who came from the cotton fields of the South. From there I was promoted to the washtub. From there I was promoted to the cook kitchen. And from there I promoted myself into the business of manufacturing hair goods and preparations....I have built my own factory on my own ground.”
Handout B: Journal Prompts

Answer the following questions in your journal, as you prepare to voluntarily share some of your responses in a class discussion.

1. To what extent did Walker’s performance align with her purpose? In what ways does your performance align with your purpose?
2. To what extent and in what ways do your unique characteristics enable your pursuit of a life that is on track to achieve your purpose?
3. To what extent and in what ways does your performance align with your identity and purpose? What are you doing now to cultivate skills and interests that will connect today’s purposes with your long-term opportunity to enhance and protect the life and liberty of others?