



Activity: Ulysses' Vow

Learning Style: Active Reading / Critical Thinking

Overview: With attention to context, students/community members will practice analyzing political texts through close reading and group discussion.

Duration: ½ day

Intended Audience: High School or College Seminar

Purpose: Students/community members will consider how the transfer of ideas throughout time, space, and in various contexts informs their enduring value.

Instructions: This activity engages a vow written by Ulysses McDaniel, a prisoner who was involved in struggles for racial justice inside and who became terminally ill while locked up at San Quentin. It involves closely reading two texts: 1) an article written by George Jackson about Ulysses, and 2) a statement commemorating the life of George Jackson following his death, issued by incarcerated members of the Seventh of August Movement--a group which George helped found after the death of his younger brother and revolutionary, Jonathan Jackson. The activity encourages reflection upon the legacy and unifying force of organized resistance inside, and its capacity to overcome barriers of enclosure and isolation imposed by the state.

For the first 5-10 minutes, have the class read Ulysses' Vow aloud together and share any initial thoughts or reactions to the text. Then break the class up into two groups. The first group will be tasked with reading, analyzing, and discussing the George Jackson article; the second group will read, analyze, and discuss the Message from the Seventh of August Movement. After 20 minutes of group work, participants will come back together for a large group discussion, and share reflections on the significance of Ulysses' Vow. As an optional closing activity, have participants craft their own vow (details below).

- **Ulysses' Vow**

If ever I should break my stride,
Or Falter at my comrade's side,
This oath will kill me!
If ever my word should prove untrue,
Should I betray the many or you few,
This oath will kill me!
Should I be slow to make a stand,
Or show fear before the hangman,
This oath will kill me!
Should I misuse the people's trust
Should I submit ever to greed or lust,
This oath will kill me!
Should I grow lax in discipline,
In times of strife, refuse my hand
This oath will surely kill me!

Group 1: Possible Discussion Questions - George Jackson: P.S. on Ulysses

- Why does George Jackson open the essay discussing prison camp numbers? What came up for you as you read through the first paragraph?
- What is the tone of George's writing as he recounts the events that transpired on the prison yard? Does it differ from the general tone of the essay, and if so, how?
- George ends the article with a call to action, requesting support for Ulysses. How does the value of the article go beyond this ask, and engage the larger picture?
- How does George write of Ulysses's commitment and resolution? Why does he emphasize these qualities in the essay?

Group 2: Possible Discussion Questions - Message from the Seventh of August Movement

- Why do the authors draw attention to the negative or pejorative associations with the term "convicts"? (i.e. "speaking for myself and countless others whom society terms 'convicts'...") How does this relate to the following lines in that second paragraph, which highlight the humanity of George Jackson (i.e. "First and above all, he was a man")?
- What do the authors mean when they say that "George... showed us our creed through his everyday actions and teachings." In your own words, how might you describe the set of beliefs that George taught through everyday actions?
- Why do you think the Seventh of August Movement adopted Ulysses' Vow as their creed?

- What does the Seventh of August Movement identify as George’s legacy? According to the authors, what were the strengths of his leadership?
- At the end of the statement, the Seventh of August Movement quotes Fidel: “We were never permitted to talk or remain in the same prisons; yet we were in full accord as to how to act. When men carry the same ideals in their hearts, nothing can keep them isolated, neither the walls of prisons nor the sod of cemeteries, for a single memory, a single spirit, a single idea, a single consciousness, a single dignity, will sustain them all.” How does Ulysses’ Vow echo this sentiment of sustaining unity in the face of adversity and isolation?

Large Group Possible Discussion Prompts - On the Significance of Ulysses’ Vow

What does Ulysses’ Vow represent? As it was passed from Ulysses to George, then from George to the Black Panther Party Newspaper, and then to the Seventh of August Movement, what might the “life” of Ulysses’ Vow reveal of resilience and unity beyond prison walls? How does knowing more about Ulysses’ life and background shape your interpretation of the text?

Optional Closing Activity

What are a set of values and commitments that you live by? What is uncompromising in your vision of a just world? Can you capture those values in just a few lines? Start by jotting down some ideas, then craft your own vow. Feel free to approach the activity creatively—write a letter to your community or loved ones, make a list, or recreate Ulysses Vow in your own words.

Materials:

1. Article, George Jackson, “George Jackson: P.S. on Ulysses,” in [Black Panther Party Newspaper, August 28, 1971](#) (Oakland, CA).
2. Message from the Seventh of August Movement, excerpted from “[San Quentin to Attica](#),” *The Sound Before the Fury* (New York, NY), n.d.