



## ***Silent Sky***

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Grades 8-12

1-2 Class Periods

### **Introduction:**

History is complicated. No one group is responsible for the discoveries or progress of humanity. The world we live in was shaped by diverse people, not shaped by a single gender, race or culture. However, the historical figures included in typical curriculum often overlook the contributions of non-dominant cultures, races and genders. Historical thinking requires examination of multiple perspectives to better understand the past. Researching overlooked historical figures cultivates this skill and enriches overall history education for students.

However, there is an inherent challenge in researching overlooked historical figures. In many instances, the historical record is missing critical pieces of information. In being “overlooked,” individuals’ papers and diaries may not have been preserved; or a person’s perspective may have not been recorded. In these instances, historical narratives, historical fiction and historical dramas informed by research can be powerful tools to draw attention to an overlooked perspective. These creative methods help tell the stories of overlooked figures, so that they might become recognized. Drama asks us to imagine the perspectives of historical figures in detail that often is missing from primary resources – we must read between the lines.

In this lesson, students will develop research skills and learn how to be “responsible history detectives,” as they research existing informational resources for an overlooked historical figure.

The lesson will begin with learning about and seeing an example of an existing narrative of an overlooked figure. Students will read a scene from or see Lauren Gunderson’s play *Silent Sky* about astronomer Henrietta Swan Leavitt. Students will analyze a brief informational text about Leavitt and compare that to what the play shares about Leavitt. Students will determine what facts are part of the play and what the playwright imagined about Leavitt to create the narrative. Students will consider what effect the imagined elements have on our understanding of Leavitt and why the playwright chose to invent them. They will consider how this imagining of Leavitt helps or hinders our historical understanding of her and others like her.

Students will then select and research an overlooked historical figure to share with their class. Using a Historical Thinking Interview worksheet, students will prepare answers to questions that help them better understand their figure. Students will determine what they want classmates to understand, know and feel about their

historical figure. Students will prepare to be interviewed by classmates to communicate what they consider the most important understandings about their figure. Why should we care about this person? What should we remember about this figure? What should we learn from this figure's example?

## **Learning Objectives**

### **Students will understand**

- History is complicated. No one culture, race or gender solely contributed to the progress and society we live in today.
- It's important to research, find and share the stories of overlooked historical figures, and often that work isn't easy. Knowing of their contributions enhances our understanding of the past, shapes choices in the present and informs our choices for the future.

### **Students will:**

- Analyze informational texts for essential information and understandings.
- Use the historical thinking skill of considering multiple perspectives from a historical era.
- Use information and understanding to speak in the voice of their historical figure during a three- to five-minute interview with the class and teacher.

### **Guiding Questions:**

- Why is it important to learn about historical figures who have been overlooked?
- Whose voices and stories are missing from the history we learn in school?
- What overlooked historical figure do I want people to know about?

### **Common Core Standards:**

#### [CCSS.ELA-Literacy.RH.6-8.1](#)

Cite specific textual evidence to support analysis of primary and secondary sources.

#### [CCSS.ELA-Literacy.RH.9-10.2](#)

Determine the central ideas or information of a primary or secondary source; provide an accurate summary of how key events or ideas develop over the course of the text.

#### [CCSS.ELA-Literacy.SL.8.4](#)

Present claims and findings, emphasizing salient points in a focused, coherent manner with relevant evidence, sound valid reasoning and well-chosen details; use appropriate eye contact, adequate volume and clear pronunciation.

[CCSS.ELA-Literacy.W.9-10.4](#)

Produce clear and coherent writing in which the development, organization and style are appropriate to task, purpose and audience.

**Materials:**

- Selected scenes from *Silent Sky* by Lauren Gunderson
- Web and print resources for information about Henrietta Swan Leavitt
- List of overlooked historical figures
- Historical Thinking Interview Questions, adapted from Caitlin Goodwin, 7th/8th Grade History teacher, McGraw Jr./Sr. High School, McGraw, NY, and Ford's Master Oratory Fellow

**Procedures:**

- **Lesson Activity One: Henrietta Swan Leavitt—first look at an overlooked historical figure.**  
In this first activity, students begin to explore the idea of an overlooked historical figure. Students will read an informational text and a narrative text about a historical figure and compare/contrast the texts.
- **Lesson Activity Two: Multiple perspectives and history—exploring untold stories**  
In this second activity, students receive a selection of overlooked historical figures and choose one to research during class. Students may also suggest a figure they want to research. Student will use the Historical Thinking Interview Questions to research their figure and prepare to be interviewed by the class.
- **Lesson Activity Three: Sharing a story about an unsung hero**  
In this final activity, students will share what they've learned about their overlooked historical figure during an "interview" with the class and teacher. Students should prepare to speak in the voice of their historical figure during the interview. As a class, students will discuss what they learned from studying overlooked historical figures. How did preparing to be interviewed help them to understand their person better? What are other ways to share the stories of overlooked figures?

**Lesson Activity One:**

Begin the lesson briefly sharing about [Henrietta Swan Leavitt](#). A decade before women gained the right to vote, Henrietta Leavitt and her fellow women "computers" transformed the science of astronomy. Working in the Harvard Observatory in Cambridge, Massachusetts, Leavitt found 2,400 new variable stars and made important discoveries about their fluctuating brightness, enabling fellow scientists to

map the Milky Way and beyond. Leavitt is an example of an overlooked historical figure. Leavitt was one of several female “computers” at the Harvard College Observatory in the early 1900s. Since she was a woman, she was not allowed to touch the high-powered telescopes and was, instead, tasked with analyzing the glass photographs of the stars that were taken by the male astronomers who had access to the telescopes.

As a class, discuss the first two guiding questions: Whose voices and stories are missing from the history we learn in school? What might we gain from learning about historical figures who have been overlooked?

Individually, students will read a brief informational text about Henrietta Swan Leavitt. Ask students to mark up the text or make note of any factual details they think is important to share about Leavitt.

In small groups, students will read selected scenes from a play about Leavitt and compare that to an informational text about her. Students will discuss in their group what impact the scenes have on their understanding vs. the impact of the informational text. Groups will share out with the whole class what they discussed.

### **Lesson Activity Two:**

Students will review a selection of overlooked historical figures and select one to research for the remaining class time, at home, or for the first part of the next class meeting. Students can also suggest an overlooked historical figure they would like to research if that person is not on the list.

Give students the Historical Thinking Interview Questions. This should be their guide when determining what to research and what to prepare to share about their figure.

Explain that the next time the class meets, students will be “interviewed” by the class. Students should prepare to speak in the voice of historical figure during their interview. The interviews can be between three and five minutes, depending on the number of students in the class and length of the class period. Tell students to expect some, but not all, of the interview questions to be asked. Questions will vary for interviewees, but they should be ready to answer all of them. They will all be asked why their figure is important and should be taught in schools today.

Advise students that they don’t need to dress up as their historical figure and should not take on an accent, but that they should know biographical information and clearly understand why the person is significant to history. Tell students that they will turn in their Historical Thinking Interview Questions notes/responses after they have given their interview.

**Lesson Activity Three:**

Individually, students are “interviewed” by their teacher and classmates about their figure. Interviews should last three to five minutes, depending on the number of students in the class and length of the class period. Use equitable calling strategies for students to ask questions of the “interviewee.” Remind students that the goal is to learn as much about each overlooked historical figure as possible within the time allowed, and that the most important information to learn is why this person is significant. As the teacher, you reserve the right to ask any questions you feel should be asked of each interviewee that are not asked. Collect the Historical Thinking Interview Questions notes/responses after each student has given their “interview.”

Reflection: As a closing discussion, circle back to the initial conversation about overlooked historical figures. How did preparing to be interviewed help students understand their figure better? What are other ways to share the stories of overlooked figures? What new understandings about what we are taught in schools about our history do the students now have?

**Assessment:** Students will be interviewed by the teacher and class. Students will turn in their completed Historical Thinking Interview Questions worksheet. You should develop a rubric for assessing student learning depending upon which elements of this project are most important to you.

**Exit Slip:** Think about your life and network of friends, family, neighbors and community members (e.g. school, neighborhood, religious group, team or activity in which you participate , family). Is there a person you want to be sure people learn about or hear a story about? Who is this person and what about them is important to know? What’s one thing you can do to share their story with the world?

**Extension idea:**

Students create an original creative work about their selected overlooked historical figure using textual evidence from primary and secondary sources. Creative work genres could include: a scene or a short play, a narrative letter, a short story, a poem or a song.

**Web and print resources for information about Henrietta Swan Leavitt**

<https://www.famousscientists.org/henrietta-swan-leavitt/>

<https://www.britannica.com/biography/Henrietta-Swan-Leavitt>

<https://www.space.com/34708-henrietta-swan-leavitt-biography.html>

<https://scientificwomen.net/women/leavitt-henrietta-55>

Johnson, George. (2005). *Miss Leavitt's Stars*. New York, NY: W.W. Norton & Company, Inc.

## Overlooked Historical Figures

This list is only a beginning and is by no means meant to be comprehensive and final. For additional historical figures, please explore the *New York Times* Overlooked series: <https://www.nytimes.com/interactive/2018/obituaries/overlooked.html>

**Al-Razi**, Persian physician, chemist, philosopher and scholar who lived from 865 to 925 C. E. He is known as the “Father of Pediatrics” and was a pioneer in ophthalmology.

**Joseph Bologne, Chevalier de Saint-Georges**, born in the French colony of Guadeloupe, he was the son of a wealthy planter and an enslaved African woman. He was a champion fencer, violinist and classical composer. He is known as the first classical composer of African ancestry.

**Bessie Coleman**, an early American civil aviator. The first person of African American and Native American descent to hold a pilot’s license.

**Charles Drew**, an African-American physician and medical researcher. He made groundbreaking discoveries in blood transfusions and played a major role in the creation of the blood bank.

**Rosalind Franklin**, an English chemist whose work was essential to our understanding of DNA.

**Percy Julian**, an African-American doctor living under Jim Crow who was a pioneer in the pharmaceuticals industry.

**Susanne La Flesche**, the first Native-American woman to earn a medical degree in the United States.

**Henrietta Lacks**, an African-American woman whose cancer cells were used, without her permission, in medical research. Her cancer cells contributed to the development of the polio vaccine and other scientific landmarks.

**Hedy Lamarr**, an Austrian actor who immigrated to the United States. She created the modern precursor to Bluetooth technology.

**Ada Lovelace**, an English mathematician and writer often referred to as the first computer programmer.

**Sybil Ludington**, at the age of 16 she rode with Paul Revere during his famous ride to alert the Patriots that British troops were coming. She rode twice as far as he did that night.

**Emily Warren Roebling**, an American socialite, builder and businesswoman largely responsible for the construction of the Brooklyn Bridge.

**Bayard Rustin**, an African-American Civil Rights activist. He was a close friend and advisor to Dr. Martin Luther King, Jr. Rustin's work was often overlooked and relegated to the shadows because he was openly gay.

**Maria Tallchief**, an Osage ballerina who became the first American Indian prima ballerina for the New York City Ballet and the first American ballerina to dance with the Paris Opera Ballet.

**York**, an enslaved African-American man forced by his enslaver William Lewis to go on the Lewis and Clark expedition to the Pacific Ocean. His work and temperament were crucial to the explorers' success.

**Zitkala-Sa**, a Yankton Sioux writer, musician and activist. She founded the National Council of American Indians.





## Historical Thinking: Perspective and Context

### Interview Questions for Overlooked Historical Figures

Adapted from Caitlin Goodwin's "Excellent Adventures in Historical Thinking and Oratory: *Conducting Interviews for Sourcing and Contextualization*"

You have selected an overlooked historical figure to research and share with your classmates. Now, you will take on the persona of your historical figure. Who are you? Why should we learn about you in school? Why don't we? This activity will help you to answer that question and to share your knowledge and understandings with classmates.

**Directions:** You will be interviewed by a classroom that is not of your time period. These students will want to know as much about you and your time period as possible so that they can better understand your significance as a historical figure. Consider and prepare responses to the following questions for your interview.

#### Your childhood....

1. Where are you from?
2. Who was in your family? (siblings, parents, grandparents)
3. Are you from a big city or a small town?
4. What would you like to tell us about your childhood?
5. Any major notable events in your young life to share?

#### As an adult....

1. Where do you live?
2. What do you do for a living?
3. Are you a member of any groups- politically or socially?

4. What are you passionate about? Are there any issues that you feel very strongly about?
5. What can you tell us about your historical significance? Why should we learn about you in school? Why don't we learn about you?
6. What could be done so that your history and contributions are remembered?

The Historical Time Period: Tell us about the time you live in!

1. What do people do for fun?
2. What do people wear?
3. What type of government do you have?
4. Does everyone have equal rights?
5. Can everyone vote?
6. Are there any major social movements going on? Cultural movements?
7. Is America at war or peace?
8. How would you describe your time period compared to today?

Finally....

1. What else would you like us to know about you?