

PBS Lesson Series

# ELA, Grade 7, Lesson 20

## Teacher Packet

## Possible emerging themes in “His Motto.”

- You shouldn't be prejudiced.
- You can teach yourself new things.
- Be nice to people who are trying to help you.
- Work hard – don't be lazy.

<u>Point of View</u>	
<u>Character</u>	<u>Notes</u>
Durmont	
African American boy	

## Part II

They had entered the one-room shack which contained a long table holding a wireless outfit, a couple of chairs and a shelf of books. On the walls were tacked pictures of aviators and drawings of aeroplanes. A three-foot model of a biplane hung in a corner.

<u>Setting</u> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>early 1900s Maine: rural fishing spot</li> <li>telegraph office</li> </ul>	
<u>Character</u>	<u>Description</u>
John Durmont	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>stressed businessman who needs a break, but doesn't want to take one</li> <li>prejudiced against the African American boy</li> <li>starts to be nicer when he sees the telegraph tower</li> </ul>
Durmont's doctor	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>concerned about Durmont's health and wants him to take vacation</li> </ul>
Youth in office	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>works telegraph wire</li> <li>lazy, unhelpful, not ambitious, surly</li> </ul>
African American boy	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>quiet and helpful</li> <li>proud built wireless telegraph by himself</li> <li>uses it to talk to friend in NYC</li> <li>curious and creative</li> </ul>

"Now if he is only in," said the boy, going over to the table and giving the call.

"He's there," he said eagerly, holding out his hand for the message. Durmont handed it to him. His face still held the look of doubt and unbelief as he looked at the crude, home-made instruments.

"Suppose I might as well have hired a horse and taken it into town." But the sputtering wire drowned his voice.

<u>Point of View</u>	
<u>Character</u>	<u>Notes</u>
Durmont	<ul style="list-style-type: none"><li>doubtful that wireless telegraph will work</li></ul>
black boy	<ul style="list-style-type: none"><li>confident he will succeed</li></ul>

"And get on your wheel and go like blazes. Tell 'em to rush answer. This guy here thinks a colored boy is only an animated shoe-blackening outfit; it's up to us to remedy that defect in his education, see!" Thus sang the wires as Durmont paced the floor.



<u>Point of View</u>	
<u>Character</u>	<u>Notes</u>
Durmont	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• doubtful that wireless telegraph will work</li> <li>• prejudiced against the black boy</li> </ul>
black boy	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• confident he will succeed</li> <li>• determined to prove that black people can be smart, too</li> </ul>

"I said," began the nervous man as the wires became quiet. "I—" again the wire sputtered, and he couldn't hear himself talk. When it was quiet, he tried again, but as soon as he began to grumble, the wire began to sputter. He glanced suspiciously at the boy, but the latter was earnestly watching his instruments.

"Say," shouted Durmont, "does that thing have to keep up that **confounded racket** all the time?"

"I had to give him some instructions, you know, and also keep in **adjustment**."

"Well, I'll get out of **adjustment** myself if that keeps up."

Durmont resigned himself to silence, and strangely enough, so did the wire. Walking around the room he noticed over the shelf of books a large white sheet on which was printed in gilt letters:

"I WILL STUDY AND MAKE READY, AND MAYBE MY CHANCE WILL COME."  
—ABRAHAM LINCOLN.

Durmont read this, and then looked at the boy as if seeing him for the first time. Again he looked at the words, and far beyond them he saw his own struggling boyhood, climbing daily Life's slippery path, trying to find some hold by which to pull himself up. And as he watched the brown-skinned boy bending over the instruments, instinct told him here was one who would find it still harder to fight his way up, because of **caste**.

## Plot

Durmont decides to take a vacation to Maine on his doctor's advice.



Durmont can't send an important message to NY because the telegraph wire is broken and the youth won't help fix it.



A black boy offers to help Durmont deliver his message, and Durmont reluctantly agrees to go with him.



As the boy works to send the message on the wireless, Durmont notices a sign with a motto on it that makes him think about the boy as a person.

"Ah!"

The exclamation startled him.

The boy with phones adjusted was busily writing.

"Well, has that partner of yours got that message down at his end yet?"

"Yes, sir, and here is your answer from New York."

"Why it's only been half an hour since I wrote it," said Durmont.

"Yes, that horse wouldn't have got into town yet," grinned the boy.

Durmont snatched the paper, read it, threw his cap in the air, exclaiming,

"The day is saved. Boy, you're a winner. How much?" putting his hand in his pocket suggestively.

<u>Point of View</u>	
<u>Character</u>	<u>Notes</u>
Durmont	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• doubtful that wireless telegraph will work</li> <li>• prejudiced against the black boy</li> <li>• grateful message was successful</li> </ul>
black boy	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• confident he will succeed</li> <li>• determined to prove that black people can be smart, too</li> <li>• proud and satisfied that he was successful with the message</li> </ul>

"How much you owe to my help, I don't know," answered the lad sagely [or wisely]. "I offered to help you because you needed it, and I was glad of the chance to prove what I believed I could do. I'm satisfied because I succeeded."

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Durmont sat down heavily on the other chair; his nerves couldn't stand much more in one afternoon. To find himself threatened with a large financial loss; to have this averted by the help of the scientific knowledge of a colored boy, and that boy rating the fact of his success higher than any **pecuniary compensation**— he had to pull himself together a bit.

# Plot

Durmont decides to take a vacation to Maine on his doctor's advice.

Durmont can't send an important message to NY because the telegraph wire is broken and the youth won't help fix it.

A black boy offers to help Durmont deliver his message, and Durmont reluctantly agrees to go with him.

As the boy works to send the message on the wireless, Durmont notices a sign with a motto on it that makes him think about the boy as a person.

The boy is able to send the message, and Durmont offers to pay him, but the boy doesn't want money. He's satisfied to have been successful.

His eyes fell on the motto on the wall. He read it thoughtfully, considered how hard the boy had worked because of that, his hopes of the future based on that; saw the human element in him as it had not appealed to him before, and then turning something over in his mind, muttered to himself,

"It's nobody's business if I do." He got up, and walking over to the boy said: "What's your name?"

"Robert Hilton."

## Point of View

### Character

### Notes

Durmont

- doubtful that wireless telegraph will work
- grateful message was successful
- realizes he was wrong to judge Robert based on his race.

~~black boy~~

Robert Hilton

- confident he will succeed
- determined to prove that black people can be smart, too
- proud and satisfied that he was successful with the message
- not interested in getting paid for helping

"Well, Robert, that motto you've got up there is a pretty good one to tie to. You certainly have studied; you have made yourself ready as far as your resources will permit, and I'll be hanged if I don't stand for the 'chance.' In the manufacturing of electrical instruments you could have great opportunity for inventive talent, and in my concern you shall have your chance, and go as far as your efficiency will carry you. What do you say, would you care for it?"

"I'd care for it more than any other thing on earth, and am very grateful for the chance."

"The chance wouldn't be standing here now if you had not had the inclination and the determination to live up to those words on the wall."

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Durmont	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• doubtful that wireless telegraph will work</li> <li>• prejudiced against the black boy</li> <li>• grateful message was successful</li> <li>• realizes he was wrong to judge Robert based on his race.</li> <li>• respects Robert for his hard work and determination</li> </ul>
<del>black boy</del> Robert Hilton	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• confident he will succeed</li> <li>• determined to prove that black people can be smart, too</li> <li>• proud and satisfied that he was successful with the message</li> <li>• not interested in getting paid for helping</li> <li>• appreciates the chance Durmont gives him and understand prejudice is hard to overcome</li> </ul>

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Durmont decides to offer Robert a chance to work at his company because he respects his hard work and determination. Robert accepts.



Question 1: What were Durmont and Hilton's points of view about Hilton's ability to help Durmont earlier in the story?

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Durmont was doubtful Robert would be able to help. He expressed and demonstrated prejudice toward him, but Robert was confident that his wireless would work.

Question 2: How did Durmont's point of view change by the end of the story?

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Durmont's point of view changes as he sees Robert working hard and remembers what it was like for himself when he was younger. He starts to see to see Robert as a human being, not just another young, black boy.

Question 3: What events and description show Durmont reconsidering his point of view?

Durmont resigned himself to silence, and strangely enough, so did the wire. Walking around the room he noticed over the shelf of books a large white sheet on which was printed in gilt letters:

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Durmont sees the motto from Lincoln and is reminded of himself when he was young and working hard to achieve his dreams. He realizes Robert has had it more difficult than he did because he is black and has limited resources.

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Question 3: What events and description show Durmont reconsidering his point of view?

Durmont sees the motto from Lincoln and is reminded of himself when he was young and working hard to achieve his dreams. He realizes Robert has had it more difficult than he did because he is black and has limited resources. When Robert expresses more pride in success than getting money, Durmont recognizes how prejudicial he has been and decides to offer Robert a chance at his company.

What is a theme of the story of “His Motto?” How do the characters’ actions and points of view develop this theme?