

ELA Grade 8 Unit 1 - Print

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From Rags to Riches

by Dennis Denenberg

True or false: Every famous person from our Colonial period came from a wealthy family. I hope you said “false,” because Alexander Hamilton grew up in poverty on a Caribbean island—yet he became one of our country’s most respected founders.

Hamilton’s parents were never legally married, and in that time, such children were labeled “illegitimate” and denied rights that other children had. For example, he could not attend a school like other boys. His father’s business failed completely, and when our hero was only 11 years old, his dad deserted him and his mother. Two years later, his mother died—so Hamilton was raised by various relatives. His life was hard.

But the young man was determined to escape poverty and overcome his hardships. He was hired as a clerk for an international trading company, where he quickly demonstrated incredible skill managing money. Amazingly, within three years and at the young age of 16, he was put in charge when the manager became ill.

Hamilton certainly demonstrated that applying oneself to a job can pay off, don’t you think? In fact, he was so good at what he did that his employers and their friends raised money to send him to college in the American colonies.

Wait a minute. You may be wondering, *How can that be? He didn’t go to school, right?* Well, Hamilton had taught himself, using the books his mother owned.

He read constantly, mostly about the great heroes of ancient Greece and Rome, and he learned all about currencies and languages through his job. He also liked to write, and his articles and poems were published in the island’s newspaper.

At 17, Hamilton entered King’s College (now Columbia University) in New York City—and obtained a degree in one year. Yes, one year! Armed with an education, he faced new adventures in his new country—including fighting for its independence and playing a leading role in establishing our constitutional government.

Today Hamilton is one of only two non-presidents to appear on today’s U.S. currency.

Part A:

Which sentence from “From Rags to Riches” **best** states the main idea?

- A) Every famous person from our Colonial period came from a wealthy family.
- B) Alexander Hamilton grew up in poverty on a Caribbean island—yet he became one of our country’s most respected founders.
- C) He read constantly, mostly about the great heroes of ancient Greece and Rome, and he learned all about currencies and languages through his job.
- D) Hamilton entered King’s College (now Columbia University) in New York City—and obtained a degree in one year.

Part B:

Which evidence from the passage **best** supports the main idea from part A?

- A) Amazingly, within three years and at the young age of 16, he was put in charge when the manager became ill.
- B) Hamilton’s parents were never legally married, and in that time, such children were labeled “illegitimate” and denied rights that other children had.
- C) Well, Hamilton had taught himself, using the books his mother owned.
- D) Today Hamilton is one of only two non-presidents to appear on U.S. currency.

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Which of these events was the most instrumental in Hamilton’s success?

- A) He was labeled as “illegitimate.”

- B)His father’s business failed.
- C)His employers and friends sent him to college.
- D)He established a constitutional government.

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Based on “From Rags to Riches,” what enabled Hamilton to succeed against all odds?

- A)good luck at critical points of his childhood
- B)hard work and persistence throughout his life
- C)a prestigious childhood education
- D)a deep understanding of business and economics

4

Read the excerpt from “From Rags to Riches.”

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Wait a minute. You may be wondering, *How can that be? He didn’t go to school, right?* Well, Hamilton had taught himself, using the books his mother owned.

Which **best** describes the significance of the author’s word choices in this excerpt?

- A)The author uses informal language to directly engage readers.
- B)The author uses descriptive language to help readers envision the setting.
- C)The author uses technical language to convey specific details about Hamilton’s career.
- D)The author uses exaggerated language to emphasize the significance of Hamilton’s accomplishments.

5

Read the excerpt from “From Rags to Riches.”

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Wait a minute. You may be wondering, *How can that be? He didn’t go to school, right?* Well, Hamilton had taught himself, using the books his mother owned.

He read constantly, mostly about the great heroes of ancient Greece and Rome, and he learned all about currencies and languages through his job. He also liked to write, and his articles and poems were published in the island’s newspaper.

Which **best** explains how the author addresses readers' potential doubts in this excerpt?

- A)The author asks open-ended questions to allow readers to come to their own conclusions about Hamilton.
- B)The author questions the main argument to show that there are different ways to interpret Hamilton's life.
- C)The author raises questions about Hamilton that could undermine the argument and then provides the reader with answers.
- D)The author poses questions about Hamilton that suggest to the reader that the argument is defective.

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The Warnings

Adapted from a story by Jeanne B. Hargett

Travis, fourteen, slumped to the ground by the riverbank. Earlier that day, Foley Thorne, overseer of the plantation next to their farm, had growled to Travis’s mother, “A

neighbor’s warning for you and your family, Missus Rogers. Tennessee farmers like you and your husband got to learn not to aid runaway slaves.”

Travis had listened to the overseer, trying not to let his face reveal the truth: Pa had built a false bottom in their wagon, and even as the overseer spoke, that same

wagon concealed a man on his way to freedom. "I'll not be a party to slavery, war or no war," Pa had declared.

Travis wasn't entirely beholden to Pa anymore because he had taught his seven-year-old brother Squirrel to help him gather honey. Selling it at a good price up and down the river, he'd set some money aside. Travis loved Pa, but Pa was endangering the whole family, and Travis had to decide whether to follow Pa on that perilous course.

"Squirrel," he called. "We have chores to do." Their hardest and riskiest job came after dark when they would gather honey in buckets and drop it in a barrel in a nearby hiding place, a large cave Travis had discovered last summer. Even now a full keg of honey, ready for sale, waited in the cave, along with a larger barrel that the boys hoped to fill by the time summer arrived.

At dusk, Travis and Squirrel smoked the bees from their hive and filled their buckets. Travis lit the lantern by the cave entrance. As the boys crept toward the empty barrel, Travis heard a movement. "Who . . . Who's there?"

"Mistuh Travis?" a crouching figure replied. "My name Shad. Was with Clem, only 'de wagon not hold bof' of us. Your Pa say he be back for me."

Travis had been afraid before, but now he felt terror—if Shad were found here on their farm, the whole family was doomed. He shut his eyes and wished his greatest danger

might be a risk of bee stings. But opening his eyes again, for the first time he saw Shad's stooped shoulders and frightened expression. Shad's eyes held no confidence or joy and perhaps they never had.

After a few moments of silence, shuddering at the risk, Travis spoke. "Squirrel," he said quietly. "I need you to slip through the forest alone, all the way to the river where we hide our boat, and when you get there, climb a tree and keep watch for Foley Thorne. Can you do that?"

"You know I can. How long must I wait?" Squirrel asked.

"I won't be far behind you," Travis said, hoping it was true.

Travis and Shad worked swiftly while Travis explained his plan to move Shad in the barrel to the boat on the river. "Shad," he whispered, "you sure you can do this?" He would never forget Shad's answer.

"Mistuh Travis, getting' in, I be a slave. Getting' out, a free man. Be like I'se borned new."

An hour later, Travis and Squirrel wrestled the heavy barrel into the boat with a thump. The rising moon shone on the water, and Travis felt newborn, too.

Read the excerpt from the story "The Warnings."

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Part A:

Which **best** describes the significance of the river in this excerpt?

- A) It enables Travis to be financially independent.
- B) It represents a division between Travis and his father.
- C) It has the potential to transform both Shad and Travis.
- D) It provides safety and comfort to both Shad and Travis.

Part B:

Which **two** sentences best supports the answer to Part A?

- Travis and Shad worked swiftly while Travis explained his plan to move Shad in the barrel to the boat on the river.
- "Shad," he whispered, "you sure you can do this?" He would never forget Shad's answer.
- "Mistuh Travis, getting' in, I be a slave. Getting' out, a free man. Be like I'se borned new."
- An hour later, Travis and Squirrel wrestled the heavy barrel into the boat with a thump.
- The rising moon shone on the water, and Travis felt newborn, too.

Read the excerpt from the story “The Warnings.”

Travis wasn’t entirely beholden to Pa anymore because he had taught his seven-year-old brother Squirrel to help him gather honey. Selling it at a good price up and down the river, he’d set some money aside.

What does the word “beholden” mean in this excerpt?

- A)significant
- B)loyal
- C)obligated
- D)responsible

Part A:

Which **best** explains how Travis’s father’s beliefs about slavery influence Travis in “The Warnings”?

- A)They embarrass him in front of other people.
- B)They force him to make a tough choice of his own.
- C)They create a disagreement between him and his father.
- D)They force him to conceal his true feelings from his father.

Part B:

Which detail from the passage **best** supports the answer to Part A?

- A)Travis had listened to the overseer, trying not to let his face reveal the truth: Pa had built a false bottom in their wagon, and even as the overseer spoke, that same wagon concealed a man on his way to freedom.
- B)“I’ll not be a party to slavery, war or no war,” Pa had declared.
- C)Travis wasn’t entirely beholden to Pa anymore because he had taught his seven-year-old brother Squirrel to help him gather honey.
- D)Travis loved Pa, but Pa was endangering the whole family, and Travis had to decide whether to follow Pa on that perilous course.

Which detail from “The Warnings” **best** supports the idea that Travis feels compassion for Shad?

- A)If Shad were found here on their farm, the whole family was doomed.
- B)But opening his eyes again, for the first time he saw Shad’s stooped shoulders and frightened expression.
- C)After a few moments of silence, shuddering at the risk, Travis spoke.
- D)Travis and Shad worked swiftly while Travis explained his plan to move Shad in the barrel to the boat on the river.

An Unsinkable Hero
by Dennis Denenberg

Can a hero also be a celebrity, and vice versa? Well, The Unsinkable Molly Brown easily fits in both categories. The *Titanic* made her an instant hero who became a celebrity

of her times—and today, her heroic deed has made her story the subject of books, a Broadway show, and movies. Modern-day celebrities still play the part of her frequently.

Born in Missouri, Margaret Tobin went to grammar school but also worked to help the family. As a teenager, she stripped tobacco leaves from their stalks—a very dirty job. When she was 18, she moved to Leadville, Colorado. Her difficult childhood years had made her determined to

marry a wealthy man. In the end, love won out, however, and she married a poor man. But guess what? Her husband, James Joseph Brown, struck it rich by inventing a way to prevent mine cave-ins, for which he was awarded a share in a successful mine. Wealth enabled Brown to pursue charitable causes important to her.

In 1912, Brown booked passage on the *Titanic*. On that dreadful April night, circumstances turned her into a hero as she helped women and children get into lifeboats until she was told she had to leave the ship. Her knowledge of other languages enabled her to guide non-English-speaking passengers to safety.

She organized the women in lifeboat 6 to row together and supposedly tried to return to look for survivors once the *Titanic* sank.

Brown's actions that night were considered so heroic that, 20 years later in 1932, the French bestowed on her the Legion of Honor—the country's highest award.

She was dubbed "unsinkable," and that is how we know her today. Ironically, the now-famous nickname "Molly" was not used during her lifetime. Brown preferred to be called "Margaret" or "Maggie."

Which **two** factors enabled Brown to become a hero during the sinking of the *Titanic* in the passage "An Unsinkable Hero"?

- her skills as a leader
- her navigation skills
- her celebrity among passengers
- her knowledge of other languages
- her commitment to charitable causes

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Read the excerpt from the passage "An Unsinkable Hero."

Brown's actions that night were considered so heroic that, 20 years later in 1932, the French bestowed on her the Legion of Honor—the country's highest award.

What does "bestowed on" mean in this excerpt?

- A) displayed to
- B) required of
- C) donated to
- D) presented to

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Part A:

Write each definition next to the word it defines based on "An Unsinkable Hero."

celebrity

deed

hero

- A. an action
- B. a good reputation
- C. someone who is born into fame
- D. someone who is well known in society
- E. someone who is respected for being brave
- F. someone who is admired for being wealthy

Part B:

Which **best** explains why the author considers the nickname "The Unsinkable Molly Brown" to be ironic?

- A) The name fails to accurately reflect Brown's personality.

- B)The name is unrelated to the event that made Brown famous.
- C)People today fail to remember Brown how she would have wanted.
- D)The name is not something Brown would have called herself.

School Trip

Adapted from a story by Gareth Owens

The lifeboat hatch clanged shut with metallic finality, and Amber Fairlight looked down at eight frightened little faces. A 21-year-old student teacher, she was all that stood between these children and a fiery fate—the wrecked space station behind them would hit Earth’s atmosphere in just a few minutes.

Amber got her students strapped into their seats, and then she stared at the empty pilot’s seat, breathing hard and thinking fast.

The field trip to the orbiting botanical gardens had been routine until an unmapped piece of space-junk had slammed into the station. Amber had rushed her class into a lifeboat, but there had been no time to wait for a pilot.

Her father had once said that survival was about quick choices: “Darlin’, if you freeze, you’re lost.”

“Okay,” she said, strapping into the pilot seat, “fly or die.”

A single button flashed the word, “Launch,” so she pressed the button and was thrown back into her seat as the lifeboat accelerated away from the falling space station.

A light blinked on the comm panel—space traffic control was calling.

“This is Amber Fairlight, teacher from Orbital School 2721,” she said, “and I need you to take navigational control now.”

The holo-projected head of the STC supervisor appeared. “Sorry, Ms. Fairlight, Ionization interference won’t let us take nav control, but we’ve worked out a survivable vector that may prevent you from burning up.”

A shadow swung across the cockpit, and as Amber looked up, the black silhouette of a commercial freightliner blotted out the Sun.

“This is Captain Bill Williams of the TLC *Fireflash*,” said the comm. “Not even the best fighter pilot could save that lifeboat, so we’ll commence pickup.”

“Captain Williams!” the STC supervisor shouted, “an unplanned pickup is too dangerous.”

Amber checked the flight path on her screen—she had to agree with the captain that trying to save the lifeboat herself would be suicide. Quietly, calmly, she asked the captain what he wanted her to do.

“When I’m in position, fly the lifeboat into the cargo hold.”

Above her, the *Fireflash*’s massive cargo bay doors swung open, and in front of her, a violent orange ionization flame burst across the lifeboat’s nose as she began to enter Earth’s atmosphere.

“Pull back on the control yoke,” said Captain Williams. Thrusters roared into life, pushing the lifeboat toward the freightliner.

As Amber looked out at the great curve of Earth through a haze of ionization flames, she felt a sudden wave of terror.

“If you freeze, you’re lost,” her father whispered.

With one last thrust, she moved inside the brightly lit cargo hold, and agonizingly slow grappling hooks locked onto the lifeboat as the massive cargo bay doors swung shut.

The great freighter groaned as Captain Williams skipped it off the Earth’s atmosphere like a stone across a lake.

As Amber began to breathe again, she noticed that one of the children had his hand up.

“Olly, what is it?”

“Ms. Fairlight, I really, really, really need to go . . . like . . . now!”

Part A:

What enables Amber to save the lifeboat in the story "School Trip"?

- A)She trusts her students as her father told her to do.
- B)She uses the navigational skills that her father taught her.
- C)She remembers the importance of making rapid decisions in a crisis.
- D)She reminds herself to take control instead of asking others for help.

Part B:

Which sentence from the story **best** supports the answer to part A?

- A) A 21-year-old student teacher, she was all that stood between these children and a fiery fate—the wrecked space station behind them would hit Earth's atmosphere in just a few minutes.
- B) Her father had once said that survival was about quick choices: “Darlin’, if you freeze, you’re lost.”
- C) “This is Amber Fairlight, teacher from Orbital School 2721,” she said, “and I need you to take navigational control now.”
- D) Quietly, calmly, she asked the captain what he wanted her to do.

14

Read the excerpt from the story “School Trip.”

The great freighter groaned as Captain Williams skipped it off the Earth's atmosphere like a stone across a lake.

Which **best** explains how this line relates to the events in the story?

- A) It conveys a poetic message to appeal to readers’ emotions.
- B) It establishes a stark contrast between nature and space technology.
- C) It provides a familiar image to emphasize the fact that the passengers are in capable hands.
- D) It offers technical information to help readers understand what happened.

15

Read the excerpt from the story “School Trip.”

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Which **three** statements **best** describe the effect of the author’s word choices in this excerpt?

- They establish a futuristic tone.
- They reveal details about Amber’s personality.
- They create a vivid image of the vastness of space.
- They build suspense in anticipation of a dramatic event.
- They show that the situation is complicated and out of Amber's control.

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Part A:

Which **best** explains how the text structures of "An Unsinkable Hero" and "School Trip" differ?

- A) "An Unsinkable Hero" describes a problem and then presents a solution, while "School Trip" provides readers with context before telling a story.
- B) "An Unsinkable Hero" presents events in the order in which they occurred, while "School Trip" describes specific steps in a process to show readers how to do it effectively.
- C) "An Unsinkable Hero" starts by presenting information before going into sequential order, while "School Trip" begins during an action sequence and continues in chronological order.
- D) "An Unsinkable Hero" compares and contrasts different time periods in history, while "School Trip" provides information in chronological order.

Part B:

How does the text structure of "School Trip" affect its meaning?

- A) It provides readers with the outcome of the story before the conclusion, making events less suspenseful.

- B)It creates a sense of tension, so the reader knows that every decision the main character makes is critical.
- C)It allows readers to see how another person may have solved the problems facing the main character.
- D)It shows readers that events in the story did not happen in the way the main character remembers them.

17

Which **two** statements **best** explain why Brown in "An Unsinkable Hero" is considered both a celebrity and a hero, while Amber in "School Trip" is considered just a hero?

- Brown's actions saved lives.
- Amber is a fictional character.
- Amber was given an inferior nickname.
- Brown became famous for her bravery.
- Amber's courageous act went unnoticed.
- Brown was popular throughout her childhood.

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Which central idea do "An Unsinkable Hero" and "School Trip" share?

- A)Hard work and sacrifice always pay off in the end.
- B)Education enables people to help others in need.
- C)Average people can become heroes in moments of crisis.
- D)Memories of childhood define who people become as adults.