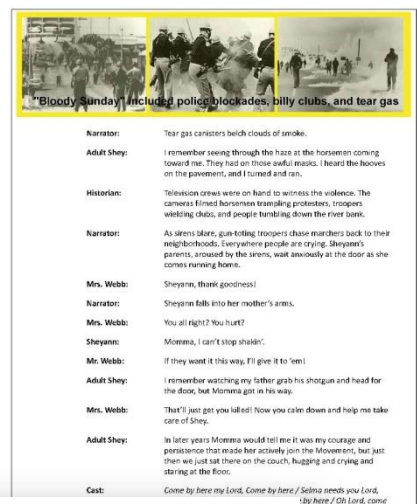
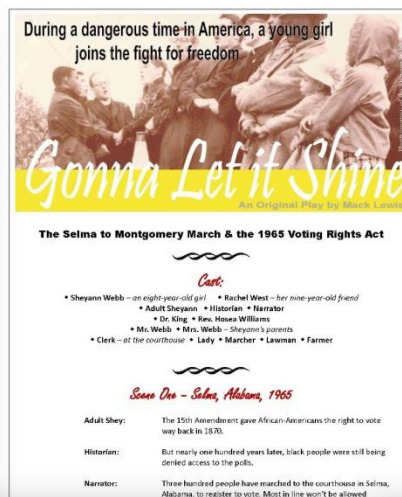
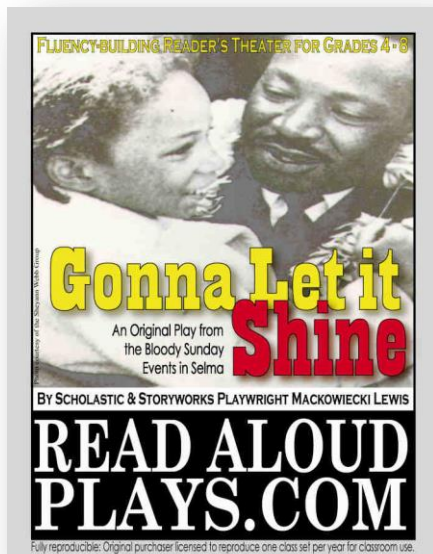


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Students will quickly connect with eight-year old **Sheyann Webb**. In **Gonna Let it Shine** she shares her emotional, often frightening childhood experience as Martin Luther King's "Smallest Freedom Fighter." We're used to hearing about the Civil Rights struggle from the viewpoint of adults, yet here is the **true story** of a little girl who not only saw it, but was there on the front lines in Selma risking the same dangers as her adult counterparts. Carefully researched, it improves upon an earlier version that appeared in *Storyworks* in 2012. This fifteen page play is suitable for **grades 4 through 8** for reader's theater, podcast, or a discussion-based classroom reading. It includes lyrics for freedom songs from the Movement, and parts for from **10 to 14 students** depending on your casting needs.

If the script meets your needs, please be sure to follow me and leave a positive review. Remember, anything less than 5 out of 5 stars is considered negative. Thanks!



Adult Sheyann: Sure enough, people everywhere were outraged. They were calling it "Bloody Sunday."
Historian: Because of the publicity, President Johnson sent troops to protect the marchers.
Adult Sheyann: And two weeks later, I joined a spirited crowd of over 3,000 people marching toward the state capitol building in Montgomery.
Sheyann: It seems like we marched to Heaven today.
Rachel: Ain't we?

Scene Seven - The Capital Steps

Historian: By the time Dr. King began his speech, the crowd had swelled to 25,000 people.
Adult Sheyann: Even my mother and father were there for the big rally.
King: Today I want to say to the people of America... that we are not about to turn around... We are on the move now...
Cast: Yes, sir.
King: Let us march on poverty until no American parent has to skip a meal so that their children may eat...
Cast: Yes, sir!
King: Let us march on ballot boxes until all over Alabama God's children will be able to watch the earth in decency and honor...

Cast (followed by clapping): Yes, sir!



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Now the beginning of Scene Eight, Sheyann says the word **triumph**. What does it mean in this sentence or scene give clues as to the meaning of this word? (p. 14)

Sheyann quotes Dr. King saying, "If you can't vote, you ain't free." How does that apply to you? Can you vote?

How do the scenes in this play fit together to tell the story? Put the "summary sentences" in order by marking them 1 through 8. Be prepared to explain, using evidence from the play, to say how each fit the given scene and how one leads to the next. (p. 15)

When the protesters try to march in the state capital, their word fears are realized. After marching to the capital, they hear Dr. King encourage the massive crowd. All appears lost, but the people are re-inspired by a freedom song. Sheyann finds out what she'd been fighting for. The people in power use dirty tricks to keep African-American citizens from voting. Sheyann and her friend Rachel take an interest in the Voting Rights Campaign. The President won't let the people be bullied, so he sends troops to protect the marchers. Fear kept the newly-freed slaves from exercising their rights, says Mrs. Webb.



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During a dangerous time in America, a young girl
joins the fight for freedom

Photo courtesy of the Sheyann Webb Group

Gonna Let it Shine

An Original Play by Mack Lewis

The Selma to Montgomery March & the 1965 Voting Rights Act

Cast:

- ♦ Sheyann Webb – *an eight-year-old girl* ♦ Rachel West – *her nine-year-old friend*
- ♦ Adult Sheyann ♦ Historian ♦ Narrator
- ♦ Dr. King ♦ Rev. Hosea Williams
- ♦ Mr. Webb ♦ Mrs. Webb – *Sheyann's parents*
- ♦ Clerk – *at the courthouse* ♦ Lady ♦ Marcher ♦ Lawman ♦ Farmer

Scene One – Selma, Alabama, 1965

Adult Shey:

The 15th Amendment gave African-Americans the right to vote way back in 1870.

Historian:

But nearly one hundred years later, black people were still being denied access to the polls.

Narrator:

Three hundred people have marched to the courthouse in Selma, Alabama, to register to vote. Most in line won't be allowed inside.

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- Adult Shey:** I was there when Amelia Boynton and other Civil Rights leaders led these marches. These events often ended with all the marchers being arrested.
- Narrator:** An old farmer is trying to register, but he's required to take a "literacy test."
- Historian:** Literacy tests were rigged for failure. White people didn't have to take them.
- Farmer (reading):** 'Who was Zachary Taylor's vice-president?' Why, that's not a fair question, but I know the answer. His vice president was...
- Clerk (interrupting):** You're writin' outside the line, old man. You've failed already. You can't register. You can't vote. You may as well quit right now.
- Farmer:** You can't tell me that I can't register. I'll try anyway.
- Clerk:** So be it, but you won't be votin' in this county.
- Narrator:** The farmer already knows the clerk will use any excuse to deny his application. He also knows his name will be published in the newspaper just for trying.
- Historian:** Black people who tried to register were often fired from their jobs or run off their land. In some places, they were required to pay "poll taxes" in order to vote.
- Narrator:** Despite the risks, black citizens continue to wait their turn. Outside, the people in line shape their determination into song.
- Cast:** *We shall overcome / we shall overcome / we shall overcome
someday / oh deep in my heart / I do believe / we shall overcome
/ someday...*



Scene Two – Brown Chapel

- Adult Shey:** I was just eight years old when I risked my life to be Dr. Martin Luther King's youngest freedom fighter. Whenever Civil Rights meetings were held at the church, I'd sneak out of the house to attend.

Narrator: Sheyann and her friend Rachel follow a crowd into Brown Chapel. Dr. King spots them right away.

King: And what is it you girls want?

Girls: We want freedom.

King: I can't hear you.

Girls: We want freedom.

King: This time I want you to say it like you mean it. What is it you want?

Girls (shouting): Freedom!

King: That's the way I want to hear it!



Scene Three - Still a Slave

Adult Shey: One night during the second week of the Movement, I began to run a fever.

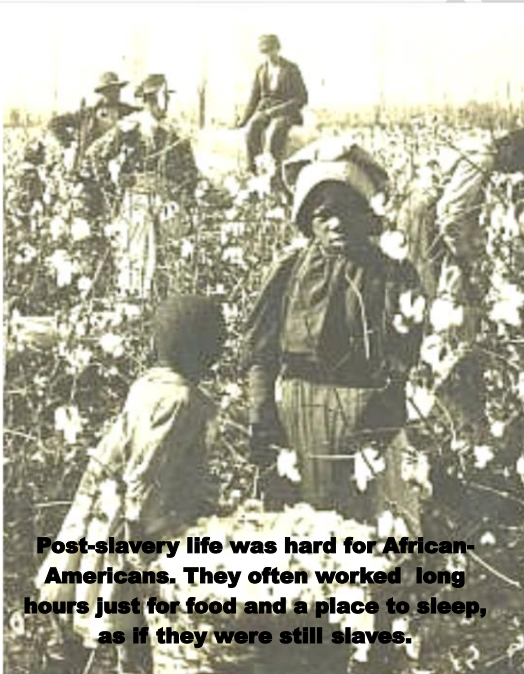
Mrs. Webb: You've been out in the cold and rain too much, young lady. Other folks can sing tonight. You need to stay in bed.

Adult Shey: Momma brought me some soup and we talked about my Great Great Granmamma, who'd been a slave.

Mrs. Webb: When they were freed, they didn't have any money to go up North, so they just stayed right here and worked for next to nothing.

Shey: Did she ever try to vote?

Mrs. Webb: In those days, no women could vote, not even white ones. She did say some of the men got to vote for a while, but the white folks cut 'em off, and before long they'd lost their rights.



Post-slavery life was hard for African-Americans. They often worked long hours just for food and a place to sleep, as if they were still slaves.

- Shey:** I don't understand how that could happen.
- Mrs. Webb:** It's because they were scared. Granmomma said she'd seen folks whipped, and even though they'd been freed, they never forgot.
- Adult Shey:** I remember thinking that a hundred years later, not much had changed. As I drifted off to sleep, I heard the sound of singing coming from the church.
- Cast:** *Oh, freedom / Oh, freedom / Oh, freedom over me! / And before I'll be a slave / I'll be buried in my grave / And go home to my Lord and be free...*
- Adult Shey:** All of sudden it struck me that if I kept marching, I might die. I thought of the four little girls down in Birmingham who'd been killed by a bomb. I imagined being struck by a deputy's club.
- Narrator:** Sheyann gets out a pencil and paper.
- Adult Shey:** I decided I should write my obituary, the words that would appear in the newspaper if I should perish.
- Sheyann (writing):** Sheyann Webb, 8 years old, was killed today in Selma. She was one of Dr. King's freedom fighters. She was a student at Clark School, Selma. Sheyann wanted all people to be free and happy.



Scene Four - Bloody Sunday

- Historian:** The marches continued throughout the winter months, but when a young civil rights activist was killed by police in a nearby town, Dr. King, James Bevel, and others organized a protest march from Selma to the State Capitol in Montgomery.
- Narrator:** When the march begins, the crowd is nervous and worried. No one talks or sings.
- Adult Shey:** I was near the front of the line. When we got to the top of the Edmund Pettus Bridge, I saw what awaited us on the other side.
- Historian:** Hundreds of troopers with clubs and gas masks stood blocking the highway. Behind them were the sheriff's horsemen.

Narrator: Led by the Reverend Hosea Williams, the marchers descend the bridge.

Williams: Crossing this bridge means having a chance of real freedom. Not crossing it means nothing will change!

Narrator: A lawman yells through his bullhorn.

Lawman: Y'all stop right there now! Don't go no further!

Williams: Sir, may we have a word?

Lawman: There'll be no talkin' today! Get 'em back to the church! Ya got two minutes!

Adult Shey: I reached up and grabbed the hand of the lady walking next to me.

Lady: Don't be afraid. I know you're young, but don't be afraid.

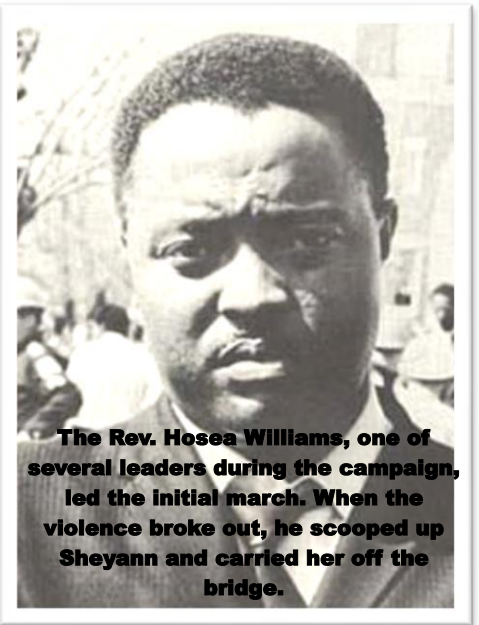
Sheyann: What's gonna happen?

Lady: I don't know, but remember what you've been taught.

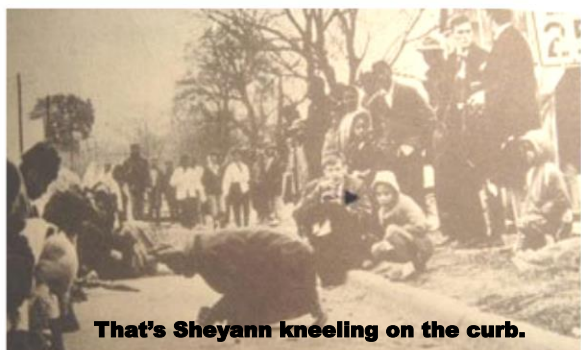
Adult Shey: What we'd been taught were the principles of non-violence, to not return violence with more violence.

Narrator: Rev. Williams turns toward the marchers.

Williams: Brothers and Sisters, kneel down and pray!



The Rev. Hosea Williams, one of several leaders during the campaign, led the initial march. When the violence broke out, he scooped up Sheyann and carried her off the bridge.



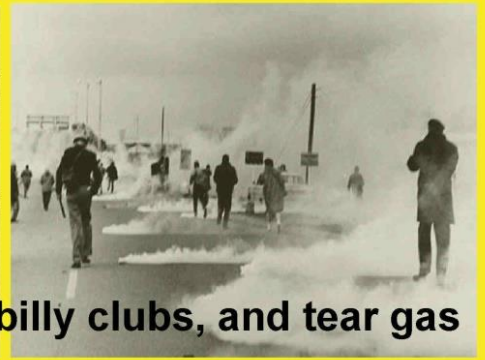
That's Sheyann kneeling on the curb.

Lawman: Charge on them, men!

Narrator: Before anyone can stand up, state troopers rush into the crowd, swinging their clubs.

Marcher: Run! Run for your life!

Adult Shey: I remember the screaming. There were people everywhere, jamming against me, pushing me.



"Bloody Sunday" included police blockades, billy clubs, and tear gas

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- Narrator:** Tear gas canisters belch clouds of smoke.
- Adult Shey:** I remember seeing through the haze at the horsemen coming toward me. They had on those awful masks. I heard the hooves on the pavement. I turned and ran.
- Historian:** Television crews were on hand to witness the violence. The cameras filmed horsemen trampling protesters, troopers wielding clubs, and people tumbling down the river bank.
- Narrator:** As sirens blare, gun-toting troopers chase marchers back to their neighborhoods. Everywhere people are crying. Sheyann's parents, aroused by the sirens, wait anxiously at the door as she comes running home.
- Mrs. Webb:** Sheyann, thank goodness!
- Narrator:** Sheyann falls into her mother's arms.
- Mrs. Webb:** Are you all right? Are you hurt?
- Sheyann:** Momma, I can't stop shakin'.
- Mr. Webb:** If they want it this way, I'll give it to 'em!
- Adult Shey:** I remember watching my father grab his shotgun and head for the door, but Momma got in his way.
- Mrs. Webb:** That'll just get you killed! Now you calm down and help me take care of Shey.
- Adult Shey:** In later years Momma would tell me it was my courage and persistence that made her actively join the Movement, but just then we just sat there on the couch, hugging and crying and staring at the floor.
- Cast:** *Come by here my Lord, Come by here / Selma needs you Lord, come by / Come by here my Lord, come by here / Oh Lord, come by here...*

Scene Five - Our Own Funeral

- Adult Shey:** Death was all around us during the Movement, but I was still determined to go back to Brown Chapel. That night, my eyes still burning from the tear gas, I walked to the church and found Rachel.
- Narrator:** Inside, things seem hopeless. The only sound is that of sobbing.
- Rachel:** It's like we's at our own funeral, Shey.
- Shey:** Yeah, but it ain't just the marchers that took a beatin'. It's the whole Movement.
- Adult Shey:** We let that thought sink in a bit. Then, out of nowhere, someone started humming.
- Rachel:** You hear that, Shey?
- Shey:** Sounds like a funeral hymn.
- Cast (humming):** *Ain't gonna let nobody, turn me 'round...*
- Rachel:** Listen closely. You recognize it?
- Adult Shey:** It was real soft and low, but soon I did recognize it, and then we started humming along. And then people started picking it up, and it started to swell, and suddenly we were all singing and clapping!
- Cast:** *Ain't gonna let nobody, turn me 'round / Turn me 'round / Turn me round / Ain't gonna let nobody, turn me 'round / Gonna keep on a-walkin' / Keep on a-talkin' / Marching up to Freedom land...*
- Rachel:** Maybe we won something today after all, Shey.
- Shey:** They can break our bones, but they haven't broken our spirit!

Scene Six - Marchin' to Montgomery

- Historian:** Around the world, television networks broadcast footage of the attack on the marchers.

Adult Shey: Sure enough, people everywhere were outraged. They were calling it *'Bloody Sunday.'*

Historian: Because of the publicity, President Johnson sent troops to protect the marchers.

Adult Shey: And two weeks later, I joined a spirited crowd of over 3,000 people marching toward the state capitol building in Montgomery.

Shey: It seems like we marchin' to Heaven today.

Rachel: Ain't we?

Scene Seven - The Capitol Steps

Historian: By the time Dr. King began his speech, the crowd had swelled to 25,000 people.

Adult Shey: Even my mother and father were there for the big rally.

King: Today I want to say to the people of America ... that we are not about to turn around....We are on the move now....

Cast: Yes, sir.

King: Let us march on poverty until no American parent has to skip a meal so that their children may eat....

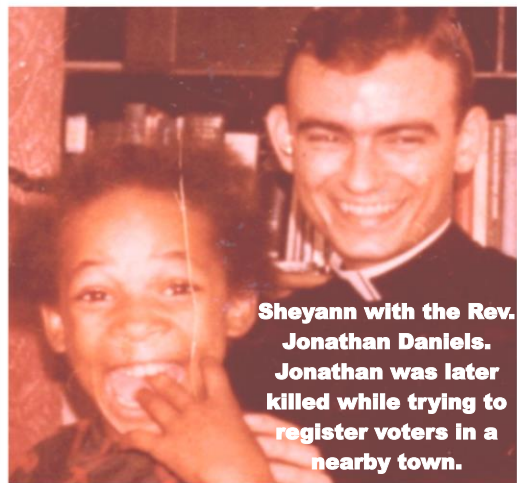
Cast: Yes, sir!

King: Let us march on ballot boxes until all over Alabama God's children will be able to walk the earth in decency and honor....

Cast (followed by clapping): Yes, sir!



Many other children joined the second march to Montgomery, including those of the Reverend Ralph Abernathy, shown here with Dr. King (center).



Sheyann with the Rev. Jonathan Daniels. Jonathan was later killed while trying to register voters in a nearby town.

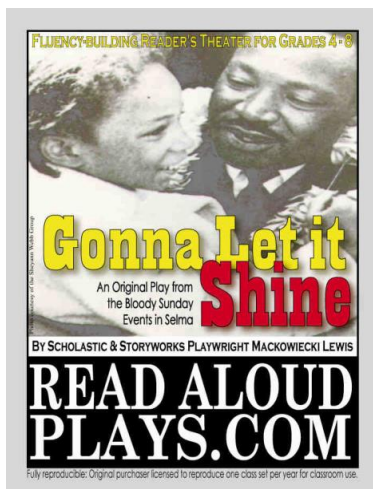
Scene Eight - The Voting Booth

- Adult Shey:** Soon thereafter, President Johnson signed the Voting Rights Act into law.
- Historian:** It gave African-Americans the rights they had been promised nearly 100 years earlier.
- Adult Shey:** But as I look back on it, I think the real victory wasn't that we marched to Montgomery. The real triumph had been on Bloody Sunday when we turned a brutal beating into a non-violent victory.
- Narrator:** Sheyann's parents have a surprise for her. For her birthday, they've become registered voters.
- Mrs. Webb:** We're proud of you, Sheyann.
- Mr. Webb:** Now we want to show you what you were fighting for.
- Mrs. Webb:** That's right. We're voting today—and you're going with us.
- Narrator:** When they arrive at the voting precinct, Sheyann watches her mother make a checkmark on her ballot.
- Sheyann:** That's it? Just that?
- Mrs. Webb:** That's it. It's just like Dr. King said: If you can't vote, you ain't free.
- Mr. Webb:** That, Sheyann, is freedom.



Pres. Johnson meets with Dr. King and others at the signing of the Voting Rights Act of 1965. PD (US Gov.)

Cast: *This little light of mine / I'm gonna let it shine / Oh, this little light of mine / I'm gonna let it shine / This little light of mine / I'm gonna let it shine / Let it shine, let it shine, let it shine....*



Students will quickly connect with eight-year old **Sheyann Webb**. In *Gonna Let it Shine* she shares her emotional, often frightening childhood experience as Martin Luther King's "Smallest Freedom Fighter." We're used to hearing about the Civil Rights struggle from the viewpoint of adults, yet here is the **true story** of a little girl who not only saw it, but was there on the front lines in Selma risking the same dangers as her adult counterparts. Carefully researched, it improves upon an earlier version that appeared in *Storyworks* in 2012. This 15 page play is suitable for **grades 4 through 8** for reader's theater, podcast, or a discussion-based classroom reading. It includes lyrics for freedom songs from the movement (which can be sung or merely chanted). There are speaking parts for from **10 to 14 students** depending on your casting needs as well as room for numerous non-speaking extras.



Tech Note: Having trouble printing? Pictures not showing up? Try opening your PDF viewer (such as Adobe) *before* opening the file containing this play. If that fails to fix the problem, visit the FAQ page on *your download site*. To maintain photo quality, print directly from an open PDF (rather than printing one and photocopying it.)

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Extension Activities:

- **Watch the Disney film, *Selma*, Lord, *Selma*,** and create a compare and contrast t-chart
- **Enact alongside other plays.** *ReadAloudPlays.com* has numerous African-American history plays including several from the perspective of children.

Sources: Interviews with Sheyann Webb and Rachel Nelson West, conducted by Blackside, Inc. on Dec. 6, 1985, for *Eyes on the Prize: America's Civil Rights Years (1954-1965)*. Washington University Libraries, Film and Media Archive, Henry Hampton Collection; *A Dream of Freedom: The Civil Rights Movement from 1954 to 1968*, by Diane McWhorter, 2004, Scholastic; *Marching for Freedom: walk together, children, and don't grow weary*, by Elizabeth Partridge, 2009, Viking; *Selma, Lord, Selma: Childhood Memories of the Civil-Rights Days*, by Sheyann Webb and Rachel West Nelson as told to Frank Sikora, 1980, Univ. of Alab. Press; MLK Online; National Park Service; CNN.com/transcripts

All songs in the Public Domain: "Oh, Freedom," composer unknown; "Ain't Gonna Let Nobody Turn Me 'Round," composer unknown; "Come by Here, My Lord," ("Kumbayah"), composer unknown; "We Shall Overcome," 1947, Charles Albert Tindley; "This Little Light Of Mine," 1920, Harry Dixon Loes

Photos: *Cover:* Sheyann Webb with Dr. Martin Luther King. Copyright held by The Sheyann Webb Group. Photo courtesy of The Sheyann Webb Group; *Title piece:* Sheyann Webb (second from right) during the Selma Campaign. Copyright held by The Sheyann Webb Group. Photo courtesy of The Sheyann Webb Group; *Sharecropper:* Author unknown. Public domain (old); *Hosea Williams:* Alabama Dept. of Public Safety (PD Govt); "Bloody Sunday-Alabama police attack", "Bloody Sunday-officers await demonstrators" and "Bloody Sunday-officers throw tear gas": by Federal Bureau of Investigation (Public Domain); *Sheyann Webb crouching on curb in the moments leading up to the march* (unattributed; copyright unknown); *"Abernathy Children on front line leading the SELMA TO MONTGOMERY MARCH for the RIGHT TO VOTE"* by Abernathy Family - Abernathy Family Photos. Licensed under Public domain via Wikimedia Commons; *Sheyann with Rev. Jonathan Daniels:* Copyright held by The Sheyann Webb Group. Photo courtesy of The Sheyann Webb Group; *Lyndon B. Johnson signing of the Voting Rights Act:* Public Domain (US Govt).

Focus on Common Core – *Literature: Craft and Structure*

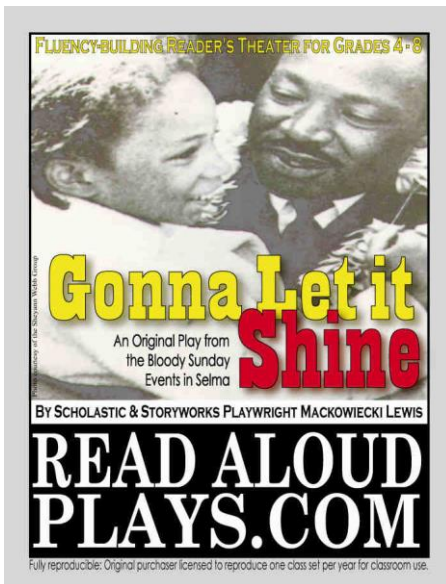
Gonna Let it Shine: The Selma to Montgomery March (Play) by Mack Lewis



Your Name: _____ Date: _____



Vocabulary Warm-up: Work with a partner to match the word on the left with its meaning on the right. Review the play to see if your selections make sense.



register
publicity
determination
descend
canisters
outraged
ballot

angered
firmness of purpose
to sign-up
containers
a paper on which to vote
to move downward
news

Other words to know: access, gun-toting, non-violence, decency, footage, persistence,

Work with a partner and use evidence from your reading, performing, or viewing of the play to answer the questions. Use complete sentences.



In this play, Sheyann is both a **character** (as a child) and a **narrator** (as an adult). Why do you think the **author** set it up that way? Is the story more or less believable as a result? Why? (RL.#.6)



In addition to “Adult Shey,” the author also used a **traditional narrator**. Can you recognize any **differences** in their tone or in what they say? (RL.#.6)

4

Near the beginning of Scene Eight, Shey uses the word **triumph**. What clues in this sentence or scene give clues as to the meaning of this word? (RL #.4)

5

Sheyann **quotes** Dr. King saying, "If you can't vote, you ain't free." How does that **apply** to you? Can you vote?

6

How do the **scenes** in this play fit together to tell the story? Put the "summary sentences" in order by marking them 1 through 8. Be prepared to explain, using evidence from the play, to say how each fit the given scene and how one **leads to the next**. (RL #.5)

- ___ When the protesters try to march to the state capitol, their worst fears are realized.
- ___ After marching to the capitol, they here Dr. King encourage the massive crowd.
- ___ All appears lost, but the people are re-inspired by a freedom song.
- ___ Sheyann finds out what she'd been fighting for.
- ___ The people in power use dirty tricks to keep African-American citizens from voting.
- ___ Sheyann and her friend Rachel take an interest in the Voting Rights Campaign.
- ___ The President won't let the people be bullied, so he sends troops to protect the marchers.
- ___ Fear kept the newly-freed slaves from exercising their rights, says Mrs. Webb.

