



*The Great Migration Script*

**Note: For this lesson, students just read the prologue and Scenes 1 and 2. The whole script is provided in case your class wants to use it as an extension activity.**

**Prologue**

In 1865, the 13th Amendment freed millions of Southern blacks from slavery. But for most of them, life remained a struggle. They had little power to break the cycle of poverty. They also suffered from racial segregation. In 1910, about 7 million African Americans lived in the South; fewer than 1 million lived in all the rest of the U.S. Then an industrial and economic boom up North opened a path to opportunity. From 1915 to 1930, an estimated 1.5 million Southern blacks poured into Northern cities. Historians call that movement the Great Migration. Back then, people called it the exodus.

**Character:**

**Hetty Robinson**, a former slave

**Bob**, Hetty's oldest son

**Hilda**, Hetty's daughter

**Sissy**, Hetty's daughter

**Reverend Edward Perry Jones**, a preacher

\* **Janelle Clay**, a black girl living in Vicksburg, Mississippi

**Bob's boss**, a white barbershop owner in Vicksburg

**Milt Hinton**, Hilda's son

\* **Conductor**, on a train

**Benny Goodman**, a white boy living in Chicago

**Narrators A–E**

*\*An asterisk indicates an imaginary character. All others were real people.*

**SCENE 1**

**Narrator A:** Hetty Robinson was born a slave on a plantation near Vicksburg, Mississippi. She was freed while quite young. Nearly two decades later, though, she is still struggling to survive. Her husband has died, leaving her to raise a large family on her own.

**Narrator B:** Like the rest of the Deep South, Vicksburg is deeply divided by race. Blacks live in the poor area near the Mississippi River, whites on higher ground. Hetty works for a wealthy white family.



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**Hetty Robinson:** I have to go to work. Come by around two o'clock, and I'll give you kids some dinner.

*[She leaves.]*

**Bob:** I hate seeing Mama work so hard. She cleans that family's house, washes and irons their clothes, and cooks all their meals.

**Hilda:** Well, she also does their food shopping, and makes sure that there is always enough left over for us.

**Bob:** I hate living off their leftovers—and the \$3.50 a week they pay her! I want to get a good job, and help us all.

**Hilda:** No matter how hard black folks work, we can't get ahead. Even if we could, white folks here would never let us move to a nice part of town.

**SCENE 2**

**Narrator C:** By 1910, Hetty's children are all grown. That June, Hilda's son, Milt Hinton, is born. One Sunday, during church services ...

**Reverend Edward Perry Jones:** There is a better life for you and your children! But you won't find it in Vicksburg. *[He holds up a newspaper.]* This is the *Chicago Defender*, published by Mr. Robert S. Abbott. He is a black man, the son of Georgia slaves! He went to Chicago and made something of himself. You can, too. The Lord helps those who help themselves.

**Narrator D:** After the service ...

**Hilda:** Reverend, do you really think black folks can live better up North?



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**Rev. Jones:** I get letters from young men and women who left the South for Chicago. They're making good money now, helping their families and improving themselves.

**Janelle Clay:** I'm going to Chicago!

**Hilda:** By yourself? You're only fifteen!

**Janelle:** We know a lady there who'll let me stay with her. I'll make plenty of money for myself and my folks.

**Hilda:** I want my son to grow up with that kind of opportunity—and dignity.

**NOTE: STOP HERE.**

Additional scenes below provided as a possible extension activity.



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**SCENE 3**

**Narrator E:** A few months later, Bob has news for his family.

**Bob:** I've finally saved enough for my fare to Chicago.

**Hetty:** But black folks here can't buy train tickets unless a white boss gives permission in writing or goes to the station to okay it in person.

**Bob:** I asked a friend who lives in Memphis to write a letter saying that my aunt is dying, and wants to see me while she still can.

**Hilda:** We don't have a dying aunt.

**Bob:** My boss doesn't know that!

**Narrator A:** Bob works for a barber. His boss and all the customers are white. Bob's tasks include sweeping up hair clippings and bringing hot towels for shaves. One afternoon ...

**Bob:** Have you read the letter, sir?

**Bob's boss:** Yes. Your aunt is dying? I suppose you want to go to Memphis.

**Bob:** Yes, sir, by the next train.

**Bob's boss:** I'll okay one round-trip ticket. But be back here in two days.

**Narrator B:** Bob catches the next train to Memphis. Once there, he trades his return ticket for the fare to Chicago. He gets a job right away, earning fifty dollars a day as a hotel bellhop. He sends home as much money as he can.

**SCENE 4**

**Narrator C:** During World War I (1914–1918), Chicago and other industrial cities are booming. Demands for labor draw more and more Southern blacks north. In Chicago, Detroit, New York, and other big cities, the African American population increases rapidly.



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**Narrator D:** In time, Bob manages to send home enough money for his brother Matt to move to Chicago. Sisters Pearl and Hilda follow. Hilda's son Milt stays in Vicksburg with his grandmother and Aunt Sissy. Then, in the fall of 1919, when Milt is nine ...

**Hetty:** Look at this, Milt. Your Uncle Bob sent us tickets to Chicago!

**Milt Hinton** (*thrilled*): We're going?

**Hetty:** We sure are. Now help us pack!

**Narrator E:** A few mornings later, Hetty, Sissy, and Milt try to catch a train. But a rainstorm makes them late.

**Sissy** (*in tears*): The train left without us—and we're soaked. This is awful!

**Hetty:** Hush now. There's another train this evening. We'll catch that one.

**Narrator A:** They do. Once aboard ...

**Conductor:** Take your seats.

**Milt:** But this car is noisy and crowded!

**Conductor:** Sorry, but the rest of the train is whites-only.

**Hetty:** Don't fret, Milt. We'll soon be in Chicago.

**Narrator B:** The next evening, the train pulls into the station in Chicago.

**Sissy:** Look, Milt! Uncle Bob, Uncle Matt, and Aunt Pearl came to meet us. Your mom, too—with a coat for you.

**Milt:** Great! It's cold here.



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**SCENE 5**

**Narrator C:** Milt finds Chicago exciting. He has never seen buildings so tall, or streets so crowded. He also has never seen so many black people looking well dressed and important.

**Narrator D:** But the first day at his new school, Milt returns home in tears.

**Hetty:** What's wrong?

**Milt:** I was in fifth grade back in Vicksburg. But this school is making me repeat three grades!

**Hilda:** That's because your old school was awful. That's partly why we came here—so you can get a real education.

**Narrator E:** Milt soon starts making friends. For the first time in his life, he gets to know some white kids.

**Milt:** Everyone here seems to be from someplace else! I'm from Mississippi. How about you?

**Benny Goodman:** I was born here in Chicago, but my parents came from Russia. They were so poor and Jews were treated so badly there, they came here. All we want is a fair chance to make it.

**Milt:** That's a lot like my family's story. Hey, is that a clarinet case?

**Benny:** Yup. I'm taking music lessons.

**Milt:** Me too. Violin. Here, even poor kids get a chance to learn such things.

**Narrator A:** The boys walk on, talking music. Neither knows that both will become famous jazz musicians.



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**SCENE 6**

**Narrator B:** One day on his way to high school, Milt runs into Janelle Clay.

**Janelle:** Aren't you Hilda Hinton's son?

**Milt:** Yes, ma'am.

**Janelle:** I knew your folks back in Vicksburg. How's the family?

**Milt:** Can't complain, ma'am.

**Janelle:** Oh, I can. That's why I'm moving back to Vicksburg. Chicago is too big, too fast, and way too cold for me. I just never got used to it. Plus, the North has its own share of racism.

**Milt:** That's true. But there's still a lot of opportunity here.

**Janelle:** Sure. Some black folks from down South became doctors, social workers, teachers, and lawyers. But some are like me. I was an illiterate servant in Vicksburg, and I'm the same here. So I'd rather be home. Well, I have a train to catch. Good luck, Milt.

**Milt:** Thanks. Same to you!

**Narrator C:** For every black Southerner who returns home, there are many more who stay. Milt Hinton is one of the success stories.

**Narrator D:** Hinton switches from violin, to tuba, and then to stand-up bass. It is as a bassist that he makes his mark, performing and recording with many of the world's greatest jazz musicians. The move from Vicksburg to Chicago became the first step toward a career that takes him all across America and around the world.



Great Migration Venn Diagram

Name: \_\_\_\_\_

Date: \_\_\_\_\_

**Hetty's Robinson's Family**

**Both Families**

**Jackie Robinson's Family**

