



Bessie Coleman: Critical Thinking & Discussion Questions

What kinds of obstacles did Bessie Coleman face in her life?

How did she manage to achieve outstanding success in spite of them?

What kinds of racial and gender discrimination did Coleman face in pursuing her dreams of being a pilot?

How and why did this discrimination continue after she began performing for audiences, and her fame grew? What was Coleman's response to the discrimination and prejudice she faced?

Do you think that people pursuing goals in fields like aviation face more challenges, or fewer, today than in Coleman's era?

How can people achieve their dreams and goals in spite of being born into challenging circumstances?

Do challenges and obstacles motivate you or do they discourage you?

Have you ever met someone who became more determined when they encountered a setback?

What do you think is the best way to respond to a disappointment, setback, or obstacle?

Who are the bravest people you know in your life? What risks do they take?

Who are people who've gone out of their way to make you feel like "part of the family," as Rev. Hezekiah and Mrs. Viola Hill did for Bessie Coleman when they befriended her in Orlando, Florida?

How did the invention of aircraft and the reality of human flight change the world?

What kinds of technological advances have changed the world in the 21st century? Are there still barriers that prevent some people from using or benefiting from this technology?

The account of Coleman's memorial service in Chicago, by Evangeline Roberts, contains the text of a letter a young girl who admired Coleman wrote to her. Who do you admire? How do you emulate them?

Would you ever try to contact the people you consider heroes? Why or why not?

What did Bessie Coleman want her legacy to be? Whose legacies have you benefited from?



Activities

Dig deeper to find out **the specific requirements of learning to fly and become a licensed pilot in the early 20th century**. What did Bessie Coleman have to learn in order to become a "barnstorming" aviatrix?

In most of America in the 1910s and 20s, venues for performances were segregated, including fields for airshows. This only applied, however, to the audiences — not the performers. **Many Black musicians, actors, and other artists performed for all-white audiences at whites-only venues.** Bessie Coleman refused to fly for such audiences, insisting that her airshows be open to all. Why did other performers in other contexts choose differently? What pressures did they face? Did other performers make the same principled demands as Coleman? Who were they? Investigate further to find out more.

Analyze the two brief 1922 news articles from Bessie Coleman's early days of flying in the United States; the first, from the *New York Times*, about her debut flight in a tribute to Black WWI veterans; the second, from the Black-owned *Chicago Defender* about her first major airshow, a little over a month later. What do you find interesting about them? Which aspects of the stories would you like to know more about?

Compares and contrast the two 1922 news articles. How do they cover the subject matter differently? What is similar or different about their writing style, focus, and overall approach to reporting?

Bessie Coleman traveled extensively in Europe, where she received the great majority of her training and made connections with other early aviators and aviation engineers. Investigate to learn more about **Black American expatriates in Europe between WWI and WWII**. Why did Black American artists, intellectuals, and other professionals choose to learn a new language and live abroad? Who are some famous examples?

Research one of the **African-American men who flew planes in combat during WWI or WWII**. Write about one of their accomplishments and experiences in the service and beyond.

Research the history of **Black-led aviation programs**, such as the flight school founded by aviator and educator **Cornelius Coffey**, or the aircraft mechanics program at **Dunbar Vocational High School** (both of which were located in Coleman's adopted hometown of Chicago, IL).