

Literacy Skills Teacher's Guide for

The Slave Dancer

by
Paula Fox

Book Information

Paula Fox, The Slave Dancer

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127 Pages

Book Level: 6.0

Interest Level: MG

In this spellbinding novel of suspense and survival, young Jessie, a musician, is hired to play for the slaves aboard a ship bound for America.

Award: Newbery Medal

Topics: History, Slavery; Transportation/Vehicles, Ships/Boats

Main Characters

Aunt Agatha Jessie's spinster aunt

Ben Stout a cruel sailor who pretends to be kind

Betty Jessie's younger sister

Captain Cawthorne the ruthless and deranged captain of "The Moonlight"

Daniel the escaped slave who helps Jessie and Ras

Jessie Bollier a thirteen-year-old boy captured to play his fife on a slave ship

Jessie's mother a widow who works as a seamstress to support her children

Purvis a sailor on the slave ship who is Jessie's true friend

Ras the African slave boy with whom Jessie becomes friends

Vocabulary

carronade a kind of cannon used on ships in the 1880's

duff a pudding made with raisins and spices

fife a flute-like instrument

hold an area below the deck of the ship where cargo is often kept

latrine a bucket that serves as a toilet

shackles cuffs locked around prisoners' ankles to keep them from running away

Synopsis

Jessie Bollier lives with his younger sister and his widowed mother in New Orleans. On his way home from his aunt's house one night, Jessie is kidnapped by two men who turn out to be sailors on a slave ship called "The Moonlight." Jessie soon finds out the ship is on its way to Africa, and his job will be to play his fife for the slaves, who will be traded in Cuba. A sailor named Ben Stout appears to take him under his wing and although he treats Jessie kindly, Jessie does not like him. Instead, Jessie becomes friends with Purvis, a large, coarse, and sincere man who helps Jessie survive the trip.

Over the course of the journey, Jessie faces many perils. He must deal with the men on the ship, particularly the fierce and rather deranged Captain Cawthorne, who bites Jessie's ear at their first encounter, and Ben Stout, who Jessie soon realizes is the most evil of the crew in spite of his attempt to appear pious. Jessie must also survive the dangers of the sea, with its many shifting moods, and the hazards of avoiding the authorities who want to stop a ship participating in the illegal slave trade.

When the ship reaches Africa, the men smuggle the slaves aboard the ship. Jessie is appalled and sickened by the awful conditions in which the slaves will be transported and by the callous way the crew, particularly Cawthorne, Spark, and Stout, treat them. Though he does not want to participate, Jessie plays his fife out of fear of the Captain and Stout.

The journey back home is a difficult one, as there are many deaths among both the crew and the slaves because of illness, thirst, malnourishment, beatings, and bad weather. Tension continues to rise, and Stout becomes increasingly cruel as he torments the slaves, the crew, and Jessie in dozens of devious ways, such as stealing Jessie's fife.

Upon arriving in American waters, the Captain makes a deal to sell the slaves to a Spanish slave trader. In the midst of a celebration, however, an American ship approaches "The Moonlight" and the storm breaks. In the commotion, Jessie and a boy

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named Ras, whom he has befriended, hide down in the hold. When the storm finally begins to subside, the two climb out onto the deck and swim towards the shore Jessie had sighted earlier as the ship sinks behind them.

The boys are discovered on the beach by Daniel, an escaped slave, who has been living in a forest of Mississippi. He nurses them back to health and then sends Ras to the North and Jessie home to New Orleans. Although Jessie recovers and grows up, he is unable to forget his experience and is never able to listen to music again.

Open-Ended Questions

Use these open-ended questions as the basis for class discussions, student presentations, or extended writing assignments.

Initial Understanding

Why might Jessie want Daniel to touch his head in the same way he had touched Ras's head?

Jessie probably wants to know if Daniel trusts him and cares about him in the same way he cares about Ras. Jessie probably feels somewhat responsible that Ras had been brought to the United States and wants to know whether Daniel forgives him for being a part of the crew on the slave ship and accepts him in spite of the difference in their skin color.

Literary Analysis

How do Jessie's reactions to the experiences he has with the slaves show what he thinks of them as people?

Jessie questions the name of Star given to a black woman he sees in the street, as it does not seem like the name of a person; he is appalled at the thought of being on a slave ship and participating in a trade which he opposes; the sight of the little girl climbing aboard the ship disturbs him, and he cries out when her body is dropped off the ship after she dies; he is sickened at the sight of the abuses to which the slaves are subjected; he attempts to make friends with Ras by whispering his name and making eye contact; he tells Daniel that he is not Ras's master; and he agrees not to tell anyone where Daniel is and, in fact, wants Daniel's friendship and approval. All of these experiences show that Jessie regards the slaves as people and feels a deep sense of sympathy.

Inferential Comprehension

Based on the information in the book, the reader can assume that Daniel is an escaped slave. Considering that Jessie is white, why does he decide to help both boys? What makes him trust Jessie?

Daniel probably first approaches the boys because they are young and are apparently in trouble. He assumes that Jessie is Ras's master because Jessie is white and Ras is black. Daniel probably decides to trust Jessie after Jessie tells Daniel he is not Ras's master and attempts to find out Ras's name. Jessie's attempt to communicate with Ras shows Daniel that Jessie believes they are equals and as a result, Jessie will probably not report him to the authorities.

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Constructing Meaning

What kind of image does the author paint of the sea and sailing? What techniques does she use to accomplish this?

The image of the sea portrayed by the book is that of a mysterious and powerful creature that can be either dangerous and terrifying, or calm and soothing. The author uses personification to tell about the "moods" of the sea and to describe how the sea "speaks." She uses similes that compare the sea to colors, animals, people, and places. She also describes Jessie's feelings towards the sea based on his experiences on the slave ship and his memory of his father's death by drowning.

Teachable Skills

Understanding the Author's Craft Have the students write a passage of the story from Ras's point of view. Encourage them to consider writing about events that might have occurred before or after the story Jessie told as well, such as how Ras was captured, what his life was like before he became a slave, or what adventures he had in the Civil War.

Extending Meaning Set up a trial in the classroom to judge some of the characters in *The Slave Dancer*, such as Purvis, Ned Grime, and Ben Stout. Assign students to be prosecuting and defense attorneys, witnesses, and jury members. Students can make up histories for each man that lead up to the day Jessie joins the crew. Some of the things they might consider are what the common beliefs were at the time, how each man treated the people around him, why each was a slaver, and how each man came to be on the ship.

Recognizing Feelings After reading *The Slave Dancer*, the students probably have a better idea of the conditions in which the slaves traveled. Have the students find out the exact conditions in which the slaves were transported in the ships, such as how much space they were given, how many slaves were transported at one time, how long the average journey was, and what

percentage actually survived the journey. Then, based on the information they discover, demonstrate the situations with the class, such as placing the students in the same amount of space the slaves were given so they can understand what kinds of conditions they faced. From the entire class, take people out as time goes by to show how many slaves did not survive the trip. Then begin a class discussion in which the students talk about how they felt and what some of their reactions were.

Responding to Literature Slaves were not only subject to cruel treatment but also the shock of adapting to a new language, culture, and way of life. Have the students research the immigration of their own ancestors, looking at the difficulties they faced during the journey to the United States and what life was like for them when they arrived. Let them present their findings to the class and discuss the common problems the different cultures faced in the United States, as well as the problems that were unique to each. Then look at the challenges that the new arrivals created for the people who were the country's original inhabitants. Talk about some of the problems that are still present and discuss ways in which the problems might be resolved.