

Ajeemah and His Son Short Guide

Ajeemah and His Son by James Berry

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Contents

Ajeemah and His Son Short Guide.....	1
Contents.....	2
Overview.....	3
About the Author.....	4
Setting.....	5
Social Sensitivity.....	6
Literary Qualities.....	7
Themes and Characters.....	8
Topics for Discussion.....	10
Ideas for Reports and Papers.....	11
For Further Reference.....	13
Related Titles.....	14
Copyright Information.....	15



Overview

Ajeemah and His Son is an account of the kidnapping and enslavement of two Africans from Ghana, Ajeemah and his son Atu. The novella begins with an ironic tone: "That wiping out of Atu and Sisi's wedding was always going to be one of the painful happenings." This ironic reference to the wedding that was not to be echoes with increasing power throughout the narrative. Atu, a teenager at the beginning of his hopeful life, is kidnaped as he and his father walk to deliver the husband's dowry to the family of his wife to be. It is a playful time; Ajeemah, a practical joker, has hidden two gold pieces in his sandals, and he hopes to at first appear empty handed before the bride's family and then to surprise them by suddenly producing the gold pieces. This happy opening to the novella is cruelly subverted by four men who are kidnaping people for slavery, binding and gagging them, and placing them in the bottom of a boat. Sisi will never know what happened to her betrothed; no family or tribal member will ever know what happened to Ajeemah and Atu that day in 1807.

About the Author

Tames Berry was born in 1925 in Jamaica, grew up there, and has used it as the setting for most of his fiction.

When twenty-three years old, he moved to England where he became an educator and literary scholar, publishing *Bluefoot Traveller: An Anthology of West Indian Poets in Britain* in 1976 (revised 1981).

In addition to his scholarship and writing fiction, Berry has published two collections of poetry, *Fractured Circles* (1979) and *When I Dance: Poems* (1988). Featuring a deft prose style and fine depictions of life in Jamaica, *A Thief in the Village* was declared a Coretta Scott King Award honor book.

Although he did not begin writing fiction for young readers until late in his life, Berry has in less than a decade established himself as a distinguished voice in the field of young adult literature.



Setting

Africa is but a brief setting in *Ajeemah and His Son*. Most of the action takes place in Jamaica, where the two are forced to labor on plantations. The cruelty of a slave's life is depicted in plain English, allowing the terrible reality of lives without hope to manifest itself in an honest, unsensational way. There is no romantic adventure here; even the strong-willed Ajeemah is unable to find a way to fight against his oppressors. The slave society of Jamaica seems to have thought of everything: No matter what hope a slave may have, the slaveowners have a way of anticipating and crushing that hope. For instance, Atu raises a horse by his shack, hoping to run away on it when it is full grown, but nothing a slave owns actually belongs to him, it all belongs to his owner. In addition, no slave is allowed to own a horse because he might try to escape on it, just as Atu intends. Thus the horse is taken from Atu just before he can attempt to escape. Ajeemah faces similar problems, discovering that even fellow slaves will conspire to thwart his efforts to run away.

Plantation life is not drawn in great detail; the novella focuses more on how two men respond to the loss of their freedom and their individual experiences during this ordeal. Even so, the complexity of plantation life is indicated. Alongside leather-making shops such as the one Ajeemah works in, there are stables, warehouses, slave quarters, great houses, and large fields of crops intended for export to England. Everywhere present in the grueling world of the plantation are the slaves: always angry at their oppressors, always yearning to kill their masters in an orgy of bloodletting, yet always degraded, abused, and without hope of ever being anything other than slaves. Most of the novella is about how Ajeemah comes to terms with his misery and how Atu fails to come to terms with his.

Social Sensitivity

Ajeemah and His son offers a different view of the African slave trade because it focuses on Jamaican plantation slavery rather than on slavery in the southern United States. It covers the period from the year before the importation of African slaves was outlawed to a period after slavery was altogether outlawed in Jamaica.

The history that forms the setting for the novel is accurate and not sensationalized. Ajeemah and Atu are kidnaped by other Africans and sold by them to ship owners who transport them to Jamaica, where they are sold to plantation owners. The entire degrading process is vividly dramatized by the responses of Ajeemah and Atu to their experiences; Berry shows how the humanity of formerly free men is systematically torn from them. They are robbed of their property, stripped and oiled for display like farm animals, forced to live among excrement and vomit on board ship, and then separated from each other when sold in Jamaica. Berry explains that families were broken up, and even fellow tribesmen separated, in order to cut down on the possibility of slaves conspiring with one another to escape their bondage. Throughout the account of slavery, Berry's understated, dignified prose lends it a strong tone of authenticity.



Literary Qualities

Anyone who loves literature is likely to notice Berry's elegant yet understated prose style. Indeed, the narrative is related in such dignified, wellphrased English that *Ajeemah and His Son* provides a good model for someone learning English as a second language; imitating Berry's prose style would form a good foundation for learning to write English well.

Another important aspect of Berry's writing is his handling of dialect. His characters in Africa speak a somewhat grand diction with Atu addressing his father, "My father Ajeemah," and saying, "I thank you, my father Ajeemah."

This elevated diction contrasts with how people speak in Jamaica where the slave dialect drops articles, prepositions, and sometimes verbs. With an ear for language, one can hear the lilting Jamaican dialect reproduced in Berry's Jamaican characters. In his hands, the language is poetic, and it provides a strong sense of locale.

Ajeemah and His Son is very much in the tradition of Shakespeare. Like Shakespeare, Berry bases his story of despair and redemption on universals of human experience. Love, hatred, despair, and hope are his themes, and out of them he builds a narrative that can be understood by anyone. A father's love for his family is likely to touch an understanding chord in adult readers; Atu's longing for his beloved Sisi is likely to strike a chord of understanding in teenage readers; and the desire to be rewarded for one's labors is likely to be understood by everyone.



Themes and Characters

There is no great complexity of theme in *Ajeemah and His Son*; the novella is a study of character rather than an exploration of ideas. Ajeemah is about thirty-six years old when he is kidnaped. He has two wives and several children, and he loves them all. To keep his sanity through years of torment, he envisions himself talking to them and remembers how they made him happy or proud. As a father and as a man, he has developed the inner resources he needs in order to endure great adversity, but his son Atu has not had time to do the same. He is kidnaped just as his adult life is about to begin, and in his misery he can only think of what he has lost: the love of his life, Sisi, his prospects for an honorable adulthood, and his right to make decisions for himself. Thus how he and his father cope with their enslavement varies significantly.

Both are bitter and angry. They would like to kill their owners and their overseers, and they yearn to flee back to Africa—Ajeemah to his family, Atu to Sisi. Both wonder what their loved ones think happened to them.

Ajeemah finds solace in his leather working and memories of his family, but he is desperate for something to love; Atu finds what solace he can in raising a sickly colt. In each case, slavery cruelly warps their personalities.

Atu descends into evil; he eventually realizes that instead of becoming the good man he could have been, slavery has brought out all of his worst qualities—he has become a conniving liar and cheat. His father withdraws into himself, refusing to trust those around him. When another slave thwarts Ajeemah's plans to avenge himself and to escape, he descends into quiet bitterness; only the love of a household servant saves him from self-destruction.

Ajeemah and His Son packs an enormous emotional wallop. Atu, the tall, honorable teenager with a bright future is brutalized day in and day out by beatings and forced labor; an exceptionally strong man, he can outwork everyone if he chooses, but he has no motivation to achieve his potential. Perhaps the powerful emotions his tragedy evokes stem from his being basically an ordinary personality, and his suicide seems the only logical recourse for a young man who cannot conceive of another way out of his horrible life. His death not only serves to represent the destruction of a person's life by an inhumane society, it also shows how thoroughly degrading of humanity slavery was. Atu is found on the steps of the plantation owner's house, a knife deep in his chest, and the wife of Atu's owner says, "How dare he do a thing like this here! Who told him he could do this here? The disrespect of it. The audacity!" Mrs. Nelson's words show that she too has lost much of her humanity; so far as she is concerned, a slave must ask permission even to kill himself.

On the other hand, Ajeemah manages to hang on to life. He has a skilled job that gives some satisfaction, although he is very bitter that he is not allowed to profit from it. Considered a savage even by his fellow slaves, he has no friends, only a rich fantasy life in which he imagines his African home, the burning of his owner's estate, and the



slaughter of the owner and overseers. Even with his sustaining inner strength, Ajeemah like Atu fades; his will to live becomes fainter until he seems sick almost to death.

The household slave Bella saves Ajeemah by giving him herself to care about. She shows him how to earn a little money for himself. Her favor in the slave master's household enables her to win Ajeemah some relief from the suspicion that has surrounded him because of his sullen attitude. This may be the novella's one concession to romantic adventure: The love of a good woman saves a man by enriching his spirit.

His relationship with Bella results in bittersweet irony. They have a daughter they name Sisi, after Atu's long lost love, an effort to preserve Ajeemah's connection with a homeland he cannot ever see again. At the novella's end, he surprises people at his daughter Sisi's wedding by producing the two gold pieces Atu had hidden in his sandals thirty-three years before; slavery having been outlawed, his former master can no longer claim the gold as his own. All this is symbolic for Ajeemah who is asserting his African antecedents, but the irony is that Sisi is thoroughly Jamaican and is without her father's zeal for memories of Ghana; she even refuses to be called Sisi outside of her father's presence. The name is too African to suit her, so she calls herself Emma. The richness of his African culture will die with Ajeemah. Even though Emma recognizes that her values "were so, so shallow!" she nonetheless prefers them over her father's. Slavery has produced a new kind of person, someone without history, without values that have evolved out of a strong sense of place and home. Even so, she understands her father's strength of character and seems overwhelmed by it at the novella's end.



Topics for Discussion

1. Was the slavery in Jamaica degrading to the masters and overseers as well as the slaves?

2. Why does Atu kill himself? 3. Atu loved his horse, so why did he break its legs?

4. Why does Ajeemah spend part of each night imagining his family?

Would this not make him sadder?

5. Why do the slaves in Ajeemah and His Son not rebel and kill their oppressors? Do they want to? What would stop them?

6. Ajeemah and Atu live fairly ordinary lives as representative slaves.

Why would Berry not give them exciting deeds to do? How does he maintain interest in a story about mundane lives?

7. What do you learn about history, especially Jamaican history, in Ajeemah and His Son?

8. Why would a slave warn his or her master that another slave was plotting to rebel or escape?

9. How do the slaveowners make sure that slaves do not rebel? Are the stories about what happens to runaway slaves true?

10. Ajeemah is told that he is better as a slave in Jamaica than he was as a free man in Africa. Why would someone say this? Is it true?

11. Ajeemah is thought to be a savage, even by other slaves. Why would people think this? Was he a savage?



Ideas for Reports and Papers

1. Research the slave trade of the early 1800s. How were slaves captured in Africa? Berry says that people even started wars for no other purpose than to take enemies prisoner and then sell them as slaves. Did this happen?
2. What were conditions like on slave transports? Did prisoners actually die on board ship the way a couple do during Ajeemah and Atu's voyage?
3. What is the history of the antislave-trade laws of the early 1800s?

Why did they become law when many powerful people wanted the slave trade to continue?

4. When was slavery outlawed in Jamaica? What were the effects on Jamaica? What were the effects on those countries that imported Jamaican goods that had been produced by slave labor?
5. What was the economy of Jamaica like during the era of slavery? How important were plantations? Who owned the slaves?
6. Write an account of how plantations worked in Jamaica in the era of slavery. What was the division of labor? Who worked in the fields, in the shops, and in the master's house?

What crops were grown? What products came from the shops?

7. Who bought the products that came from slave labor in Jamaica?
8. How did people try to justify Jamaican slavery? In researching an answer to this question, look for information from England as well as Jamaica; the slavery, after all, occurred under British law.
9. Research whether Ajeemah and His Son provides an accurate account of what everyday life was like for plantation slaves in Jamaica?
10. Who actually did the kidnaping of Africans for selling into bondage?

Ajeemah and His Son hints that whether by straightforward kidnaping or by war, the kidnappers were fellow Africans? Is this true?

11. What were marriage customs in Ghana in Ajeemah's day? How many wives could a man have? What was a good age to marry? Who gave whom a dowry? Who decided who would marry whom?
12. What would life have been like for Ajeemah's daughter Sisi (Emma)?



Write a story of her life in Jamaica in the middle 1800s.

13. Describe how a Jamaican slave auction would have been conducted.

14. Write a story about how their family reacts when Ajeemah and Atu disappear; include how Sisi and her family react. What happens to them all? (Search through Ajeemah's memories to learn about the personalities and names of his children.)

15. Did any slaves ever escape from Jamaica and return to Africa?

For Further Reference

"Berry, James." In *Contemporary Authors*. Edited by Susan M. Trosky.

Detroit: Gale Research, 1992, pp. 36-38. This provides little biographical information and consists mostly of highlights from Berry's books.

Related Titles

A Thief in the Village: And Other Stories (1987; see separate entry, vol. 9) focuses on modern-day Jamaica, but it features people who would likely be descendants of Ajeemah and other Africans brought to Jamaica against their will. Like *Ajeemah and His Son*, the stories in *A Thief in the Village* are written in a dignified prose style that honors the ordinary lives of characters depicted. From reading the stories, a reader can gain an impression of what life is like for most people in Jamaica—their family lives, their friendships, their prejudices, their clothing, and their ways of earning livings.

Where *Ajeemah and His Son* has themes that might be best understood by teenagers, the stories of *Thief in the Village* are accessible to younger readers as well as young adults.



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