Anthony Burns Short Guide

Anthony Burns by Virginia Hamilton

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Overview

Virginia Hamilton's portrayal of a man on trial for escaping slavery is an engrossing, tension-filled story, made especially powerful by the fact that it is true. Anthony Burns was captured, tried, and sent back into a slavery worse than that from which he had originally escaped. He was eventually freed, but the trial and Burns's ordeal are the focus of this book. Because Hamilton presents the atrocities of Burns's childhood and later life with little editorial comment, readers can judge the everyday realities of slavery for themselves.

The book's significance lies partially in its portrayal of Burns the man as opposed to Burns the famous slave. Although the Anthony Burns case has great historical and legal significance, its chroniclers have tended to overlook Burns himself—the man who struggled and endured—and have focused instead on politics, slavery, abolitionists, legal issues, and on the famous names connected with the case. Hamilton details the trial but also gives readers important glimpses into the mind and soul of a "courageous and humane, gentle man," as she describes Burns in her Boston Globe-Horn Book Award acceptance speech for this book.

Hamilton's book reveals an underside of American history that is often glossed over in classrooms. The book demonstrates the injustice of congressional pro-slavery laws with its account of the Fugitive Slave Act, and clearly depicts President Franklin Pierce's aggressive pro-slavery policies. Moreover, Hamilton demonstrates ways in which lawyers and politicians use euphemistic legal terminology in an attempt to remove their actions from the sphere of morality. In this way they can calmly discuss the sale and bondage of another human being without acknowledging or facing slavery's inherent evil.

About the Author

Virginia Esther Hamilton was born on March 12, 1936, in Yellow Springs, Ohio. She was the last of five children, and she says that her parents and siblings pampered her. Hamilton's father, Kenneth, was a musician, and Virginia grew up with a love of music, singing solos in an African Methodist Episcopal church choir by the time she was six.

She always enjoyed school and graduated from high school with honors. She then studied, on a full scholarship, creative writing and literature at her hometown college, Antioch, from 1952 to 1955. She left Antioch for Ohio State University and later studied at the New School for Social Research in New York City.

Hamilton married Arnold Adoff, a poet, in 1960, and they have two children, a boy and a girl. The family has returned to Yellow Springs after ten years in New York, and they live with many pets on a piece of land that is the last of the farm belonging to Hamilton's family.

Hamilton enjoys living in the midst of her large extended family. Many of the recurring themes in her books come from her own life or from experiences of her kinfolk. Her characters tend, like Hamilton herself, to have a strong sense of family and of history, and they are all deeply connected to a place, whether it be an old farmhouse or a mountain.

Various aspects of the Afro-American experience are dealt with in Hamilton's writings—her own maternal grandfather was a slave who escaped to Ohio—and she draws on history and mythology to help explore and clarify this experience.

Her interest in the future has led Hamilton to write several science fiction novels.

Hamilton wrote her first novel, Zeely, seven years after her marriage. It received the Nancy Block Memorial Award of the Downtown Community School of New York and was an American Library Association Notable Children's Book, as have been six of her other books. Most of Hamilton's books have received awards, the most notable being the John Newbery Honor Book Award for The Planet of Junior Brown, the Edgar Allan Poe Best Juvenile Mystery Award for The House of Dies Drear, and the Newbery Medal, the National Book Award, and the Boston Globe-Horn Book Award for M. C. Higgins, the Great, the first book ever to win all three of these awards. Hamilton was the first black author to receive the prestigious Newbery Medal, and in its first year, M. C. Higgins, the Great garnered a record number of awards for a young adult book. Her later works have also been honored. Sweet Whispers, Brother Rush was named a Newbery Honor Book, won the Coretta Scott King Award, and received the Boston Globe-Horn Book Award, making Hamilton the only two-time winner of this prize. Hamilton's renditions of black American folktales in The People Could Fly won her another Coretta Scott King Award. Anthony Burns earned Hamilton yet another Boston Globe-Horn Book Award and was named an ALA Notable Book.

Hamilton's prolific and celebrated career is motivated by a personal need to write; she says that "writing is who I am." Hamilton writes not only to reflect on and explain aspects of life, but because she values art itself. "Art," she says, "must be the essence of how and why we live."

Setting

The biography is set primarily in Boston and Virginia; Hamilton makes use of a flashback technique to alternate between courthouse scenes of Burns's 1854 trial and scenes of his earlier life on the plantation. Burns's story is inseparable from its historical setting. The Fugitive Slave Act of 1850 was generally unpopular among Northerners; Harriet Beecher Stowe's Uncle Tom's Cabin, written largely in response to the act, had already caused an increase in abolitionist ranks. The question of states' rights also factored into Bostonians' opposition to the capture and imprisonment of alleged fugitive slaves in Massachusetts. When Burns's attempt to gain freedom failed, he quickly became a cause celebre.

The events of Burns's earlier life, illustrated in flashback memories, involve a Virginia plantation of moderate size and means. Mr. Suttle, the owner of the plantation, hires out his slaves to other people, and therefore Burns spends much of his later childhood with other families. But his first memories are of waking up his siblings in the slave cabins early in the morning and of visiting his mother in Suttle's kitchen. When Bums is later imprisoned in Boston, these memories offer some comfort and perhaps supply a sense of power: he can mentally escape his cell by controlling his memories and thoughts. Through Burns's memories the reader learns about slave culture and living conditions.

Social Sensitivity

Hamilton addresses many kinds of human cruelty in Anthony Burns.

Slavery involves the separation of parents and children, denial of education, profound physical abuse, and obvious emotional abuse. For female slaves, the threat of being "breeder women" is added to the other forms of cruelty. Breeder women are forced to have one child after another; often these children are bred for sale, and there is little or no chance that the family will be reunited. Moreover, a jealous slave owner's wife such as Missy (herself relatively powerless) can make her husband's unwilling mistress suffer terribly. Slave women are subject to one of the most profound degradations possible; as Mamaw so powerfully puts it, "My own me don't belong to me nohow...Say who come to my bed...Say who sleep-a-me where. That why that Missy hate me and mine so."

While Hamilton outlines the perils of being a female slave, her main concern is Anthony's story. Parents or teachers may want to explore the characters of Missy and Mamaw more deeply in order to give students a more complete view of slave life and the relations between master and slave; they may also be able to use this topic as a springboard into issues surrounding powerlessness and "blaming the victim."

Parents and teachers should note that Hamilton does manage to give readers a sense of the horrors endured by slaves without resorting to detailed descriptions of violence or degradation. In one scene she describes a beating, but the description is not lurid or voyeuristic; it simply relates the awful facts of the ordeal. Likewise, Hamilton's description of Burns's experiences in the slave jail are not romanticized. There is no need to exaggerate, for the reality is powerful enough to grip readers' attention and move them to pity and anger.

Literary Qualities

Although the framing narrative of Anthony Burns covers only a period of nine days during May and June of 1854, Hamilton uses flashbacks and flashforwards to describe events from 1839 to Burns's death in 1862. This shifting of time and place is the book's most effective literary device. Even as Burns's memories carry the reader back through his life, the reader remains aware that Burns is sitting in his cell, or in the courtroom. By structuring the book around the courtroom scenes, Hamilton intensifies their dramatic effect; by flashing back to Burns's lively recollections of his past, she relieves the tension and dryness of the courtroom drama.

Hamilton skillfully creates dialect that is authentic but not condescending; particularly effective is her alternation between the formal legal language used in the courtroom scenes and the more colorful language used by the slaves and slave owners. Expressions and words that might be unfamiliar to readers are explained by their context. Hamilton incorporates folk culture into her narrative, using songs and tales to create a realistic atmosphere.

Themes and Characters

Anthony Burns features a large number of characters, some historical and some fictionalized. Hamilton strives to portray all of the characters, both historical and fictional, realistically. Because most real human beings are changeable in their opinions and thoughts, Hamilton creates ambiguous, complex characters.

Judge Edward Greeley Loring, for example, ultimately sends Bums back into slavery. During the trial and pretrial he seems to want to ensure Burns a fair hearing. Yet he allows improper and illegal evidence to be presented, and appears to have made up his mind about Burns's guilt before the trial is over.

Because Loring is a historical character, his motives and thoughts are difficult to discern, but his ambivalence toward his legal duty is apparent. In the end he bows to pressure from representatives of the federal government, perhaps thinking of the future of his career, and hands Bums over to Suttle.

Charles Suttle, Burns's owner (and perhaps his half-brother) is portrayed as a man obsessed with having his status as owner reinforced by his slaves and by other slave owners. The slaves must bow when they see him, as Suttle's father taught them. At the hiring ground, when he is with other owners, Suttle is more sadistic than when he is alone with Burns. When his "top boy" runs away, Suttle is determined to avenge himself, for he has been publicly ridiculed; he cares more about proving his ownership than about the income or services Bums provides. The fact that Suttle refuses to sell Burns before the trial is over indicates that revenge is more important to him than profit, because if Suttle loses the case he will no longer have the opportunity to profit from the sale of his slave.

Anthony Burns is taken back to slavery. We toll for him, and thee. And for shame, and shame again.

In her afterword, Hamilton tells which aspects of her characters are fictionalized and which are based on biographical sources. The character of Mamaw, Burns's mother, is mostly fictional. Very little biographical information exists on Burns's family, so Hamilton had to draw on her knowledge of slave women's experiences when writing about Mamaw.

Although Mamaw's actual name is unrecorded, it is known that she was the driving force behind Burns's desire for learning and his interest in the ministry, and that she and Burns remained emotionally close even after Mrs. Suttle hired her out in another town. It is Mamaw who first tells her son about the North, where there is no slavery.

Hamilton portrays Mamaw as a strong, pragmatic, and deeply religious woman, whose faith sustains her and encourages her to continue dreaming of freedom for herself and her son.

Burns himself, as presented by Hamilton, is a mixture of fiction and fact.

Burns comes across as a saintlike figure: gentle, unembittered, and enduring his trials while waiting for the "wings over Jordan" that have been prophesied.

He neither hates his captors nor gives up his struggle.

Freedom is the most important thing in Burns's life. His religious experiences seem to revolve around images of Christ leading him out of slavery, and his burning desire to read stems from a need to obtain the freedom that comes from the written word. Burns even sacrifices romantic love for his chance at freedom.

Interestingly, in C. E. Stevens's biography, written with Burns's help, the quest for freedom is imbued with even stronger religious overtones than in the present work. Hamilton's character emphasizes freedom; Stevens's, religion.

Students interested in the character of Anthony Burns would be advised to read Stevens in conjunction with Hamilton.

Since this passion for freedom dominates the life of Hamilton's biographical subject, the overriding theme of her book is the individual's need for freedom and self-determination. Hamilton calls her book a work of "liberation literature." When writing about history and liberation, she says, "I bear witness by documenting the evidence of another's suffering and growing awareness of self in the pursuit of freedom." In Hamilton's biography, Burns struggles to come to know himself and his role in life as he teaches himself to read and write, studies the Bible, plans his escape, and makes the heartwrenching choice between love and flight.

By depicting Burns's struggle in a moving and dramatic manner, Hamilton extends her thematic focus to include the contemporary fight for racial freedom. Her principal themes of justice and equality among all people remain applicable today. It still takes courage and self-sacrifice to fight prejudice and injustice in everyday life and in the world at large. Similarly, there are today, as there were in Burns's day, groups of people dedicated to fighting injustice.

Hamilton challenges her readers to ally themselves with these groups.

Topics for Discussion

1. The courtroom scenes are taken from well-documented sources. In this way they are less "fictionalized" than are many of the flashbacks. Which scenes help you know Anthony Burns best?

Which scenes help you identify with him? Why?

2. Burns is indeed a "humane, gentle man." In what ways are his attitudes toward his oppressors exemplary? Is he too forgiving? Why or why not? How do you think you would have reacted to slavery and to the humiliation and trials that Burns experiences?

3. Today slavery has been abolished in almost every part of the world, but prejudice and oppression have not.

Think of some groups of people who are oppressed in your country today. How are these groups and their advocates fighting for justice?

4. Which character in the book, other than Burns, most inspires you? Why?

5. In what ways do Burns's religious beliefs affect his decision to escape slavery, and in what ways does his desire for freedom affect his spiritual development?

6. Why does young Burns say to Suttle, "They yo' slaves and they mine, too"?

What leads him to think this? Is this a foreshadowing of anything connected to Burns's later life? If so, what?

7. Do you think Anthony indeed triumphs, as the book's title states? Why or why not? Is he ever really defeated?

Cite examples from the book to support your answers.

Ideas for Reports and Papers

1. Research the abolitionist movement, concentrating on its growth in the South. Were any former slave owners involved in the movement? How did they come to believe slavery was wrong?

2. Read Charles Emery Stevens's Anthony Burns: A History and compare it with Hamilton's book. How do the two accounts differ? Burns helped Stevens with his history. Does this necessarily make Stevens's work the more authoritative? Why or why not?

3. If Burns had lived another fifty years, what might his life have been like?

What historical events would he have seen and been affected by?

4. Compare Anthony Burns's experiences with those of other freed or escaped slaves, such as Sojourner Truth, Frederick Douglass, Harriet Tubman, and Thomas Sims. What similarities and differences do you find?

5. Research accounts of slave women's experiences. Compare them with those of Mamaw, whom Hamilton created, for the most part, as a representative slave woman. Is Mamaw indeed representative of actual slave women? Are her relations with John and Missy Suttle typical of master-slave relationships?

6. Learn about slavery in Jamaica and the West Indies. Contrast the conditions under which those slaves lived with the conditions in the U.S. illustrated in Anthony Burns and other books you have read.

7. How is today's culture influenced by slave cultures of the American South and the West Indies?

For Further Reference

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Nasso, Christine, ed. Contemporary Authors, First Revision Series. Vol. 2528. Detroit: Gale Research, 1977.

Includes a biographical sketch highlighting Hamilton's personal background, career, and writings.

Stevens, Charles Emery. Anthony Burns: A History. 1856. Reprint. The Anti-Slavery Crusade in America Series. New York: Arno Press, 1969. A biography of Anthony Burns, focusing on his escape, capture, and trial, and written with Burns's help.

Williams, Pat. "Review." New York Times Book Review (October 16, 1988): 46. A brief but insightful review of Anthony Burns. Focuses on Hamilton's skillful use of language and structure to teach her readers about relationships between the law and the unempowered.

Related Titles

Hamilton has written two other biographical works, both about prominent black men, though neither of her two previous subjects—Paul Robeson and W. E. B. Dubois—was a slave. The heritage of the slave experience persists in many of her novels.

The House of Dies Drear and its sequel, The Mystery of Drear House, are set in a house that had been a station on the Underground Railroad. M. C. Higgins, the Great revolves around an adolescent boy whose house is threatened by a strip-mine slag heap. His family is reluctant to leave its land, although it is unsafe, because the mountain was originally settled by M.C.'s greatgrandmother, Sarah, an escaped slave.

Hamilton is also renowned for her collections of black folktales. In addition to her award-winning The People Could Fly, she has published two other books of tales, The Time-Ago Tales of Jahdu and Time-Ago Lost:More Tales of Jahdu.

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