

The Cay Study Guide

The Cay by Theodore Taylor

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Overview

The Cay is the suspenseful story of a young boy, handicapped by blindness and thrust into an unfamiliar environment, who is forced to grow up quickly.

Young readers can identify with Phillip's struggle for independence and his frustration in coping with situations over which he has virtually no control.

Phillip's survival depends upon his learning to follow Timothy's instructions and to respect the power of nature. He jeopardizes his life each time he forgets past lessons, but those lapses—whether from carelessness, fear, or despair—make Phillip a very believable character.

The Cay illustrates Phillip's progress toward an ideal of tolerance, chronicling the course of events that gradually leads him to shed his prejudice toward Timothy. At first Phillip considers himself superior to Timothy, an old black sailor who eats raw fish and cannot spell the word "help." He depends upon Timothy but keeps both a physical and an emotional distance. Slowly, though, Phillip begins to appreciate Timothy's kindness and wisdom, and at the end of the novel he plans a significant gesture of respect—a pilgrimage to Timothy's grave.

Set in the Caribbean, close to the South American mainland, the novel provides an unusual perspective on historical events and topics frequently overlooked, such as the role of the merchant marine during World War II, and the war's impact on domestic life in the Americas.

About the Author

Theodore Langhans Taylor was born June 23, 1921, in Statesville, North Carolina, the fifth child of Edward Riley Taylor, an Irish-American ironworker, and Elnora Langhans Taylor, a German-American with a strong creative drive and interest in drama. In 1934 the family moved to Virginia, where his father worked in the shipyards. Taylor, thirteen, began covering high school sports for a local newspaper, the Portsmouth Evening Star and developing his interest in naval history. At age seventeen he became a copyboy for the Washington Daily News, and two years later began writing sports copy for NBC Radio.

Taylor attended the U.S. Merchant Marine Academy and served in the merchant marine from 1945 to 1946 before returning to journalism. Between and 1950 he wrote for the Bluefield News and the Orlando Sentinel and held public relations positions with New York University and the YMCA. During this time period he also studied at Columbia University and with the American Theatre Wing.

Although Navy service during the Korean War (1950-55) limited the time he could spend writing, Taylor published his first book, *The Magnificent Mitscher* (1954), a biography for adults.

His other nonfiction books for adults include *Fire on the Beaches* (1957), *The Body Trade* (1968), *Special Unit Senator: An Investigation of the Assassination of Senator Robert F. Kennedy* (1970), *The Amazing World of Kreskin* (1973), and *Jule: The Story of Composer Jule Styne* (1979). Taylor's short fiction has been published in *Redbook*, *McCalls*, *Argosy*, and the *Saturday Evening Post*. He has also written teleplays, screenplays, and three adult novels, *Sweet Friday Island* (1984), *Rocket Island* (1985), and *The Stalker* (1987).

During much of his career, Taylor also worked in the motion picture industry, as a publicist, story editor, associate producer, free-lance press agent, and producer/director of documentary films. His travels provided background for his books, and his stated goal each year was "one book for young readers, one for adults and a movie project of some type." In 1977 Taylor received the Western Writers of America Spur Award.

His best known work, *The Cay*, initially received favorable reviews. It appeared on numerous lists of best young adult books of 1969, was named an American Library Association Notable Book, and received the Silver Seal of the Commonwealth Club of California, the Lewis Carroll Shelf Award, The Woodward School Award, and the Jane Addams Children's Book Award. When later criticism of the book as "racist" led the head of the Jane Addams Children's Book Award Committee to label the prize selection "a mistake," Taylor immediately returned his award to the Jane Addams Peace and Freedom Association. He has since explained that he intended to fight racism with his book.



Taylor has lived in California since 1955 and currently makes his home in Laguna Beach. His manuscripts belong to the University of Minnesota's Kerlan Collection in Minneapolis.



Plot Summary

The Cay is a heartwarming story of survival, friendship and sacrifice. The author dedicates this children's book to Dr. Martin Luther King's dream of racial equality. Set during World War II, the main character is eleven-year-old Phillip Enright. His father is a brave American, who has chosen to move his family to the island of Curacao in order to lend his expertise to the war effort by working to increase the output of aircraft fuel at the island's refinery. Curacao is a Dutch-controlled island, and so young Phillip learns Dutch and comes in contact with the local Dutch populace. There is also a population of West Indian black sailors with whom Phillip is not allowed much contact, as his mother harbors racial prejudice against black people.

German submarines surround the island, hoping to choke off the shipping lanes used by local tankers to provide fuel for the Allied forces. Phillip's mother, a nervous woman by nature, becomes frightened by the encroaching Germans. Against Phillip's father's advice, she decides to take Phillip back to the United States, to Virginia where she was raised. She and Phillip board the S.S. *Hato*, a small Dutch freighter carrying eight other passengers. A German submarine torpedoes the *Hato*, and Phillip and his mother become separated, as the ship goes down.

Phillip wakes up four hours later on a raft. With him is Timothy, a black sailor from the *Hato* crew, and Stew, the ship's cat. Although Timothy saved his life by pulling the unconscious boy from the water, Phillip is frightened and becomes angry with Timothy. Phillip blames Timothy and his mother for his desperate circumstances. Timothy reassures the boy; they have a keg of fresh water, some biscuits, and some chocolate, enough to sustain them for a few days. Timothy builds a lean-to on the raft to protect them from the sun's rays and catches fish for their supper. Phillip refuses to eat and retreats into the lean-to. When he wakes up, his vision is gone; the blow to the head he sustained during the crash has belatedly blinded him. Now even Timothy is frightened; he is over seventy years old and stranded on a raft with a blind boy and a cat.

Timothy doesn't show Phillip his fear, however. He sites a small, uninhabited island and steers the raft toward it. Timothy knows the waters well and has guessed that this island, or cay, is in a region called the Devil's Mouth, which most ships avoid, because it is lined on both sides by dangerous coral reefs. Phillip does not want to land on the cay, but Timothy ignores him. Timothy builds them a hut on the high ground in the middle of the cay and catches them langosta for dinner, which is the native form of lobster. Timothy explains that the island has no water, so they will have to subsist on the remainder of their keg until the first rain. Phillip is struggling with his blindness, and he is terrified whenever Timothy has to move out of earshot. He is angry with Timothy for stranding them on this frightening cay, and Phillip begins to share his mother's racial prejudice.

Timothy builds a signal fire on the beach to alert passing airplanes, but has to ask Phillip's help to spell the word HELP in large letters with the big pile of rocks Timothy has gathered. Phillip thinks Timothy is stupid because of his race and when he learns



Timothy cannot read or write, he feels superior. Timothy builds a vine rope and stretches it from their campsite to the beach so Phillip can get to the signal fire, if he ever hears an aircraft while Timothy is not around.

After doing all this, Timothy insists that Phillip overcome his fear and help with some of the work. He places palm fronds in Phillip's hands and guides him through the process of making a sleeping mat. Phillip feels that he can't do this, because he is blind and yells at Timothy, calling him a stupid, old black man. When Phillip calms down, he remembers the vine rope Timothy made especially for him; he realizes everything Timothy has done has been to assure Phillip's survival. Phillip apologizes and asks if they can be friends. Timothy responds that Phillip has always been his friend.

Life settles into a routine on the cay as the two friends and Stew Cat wait for rescue. Timothy builds a wooden trough to catch rainwater and fishes daily for their food. They keep track of time by putting a pebble in an old tin can every day. As the days and weeks pass with no sign of rescue, Phillip can sense Timothy's worry. Timothy is old, and he is afraid of what will happen to Phillip if Timothy dies on the cay. Timothy doesn't tell Phillip this, but he starts encouraging Phillip's independence. Timothy describes the entire cay in detail to Phillip and makes him a cane to get around. As Phillip gains confidence in his surroundings, he begins to pitch in with the work. Timothy makes him several fishing poles and teaches him how to safely find the fishing hole on the dangerous reef. Phillip is proud of his new skills, and from then on, he does all the fishing.

In July, three months after being stranded on the cay, a freak storm arrives from the sea. Timothy feels it coming and knows how dangerous the storm will be. He prepares Phillip for the coming tempest mentally and emotionally, and then prepares them physically. Timothy ties the tin containing their matches and his hunting knife to a palm tree, and then ties himself and Phillip upright to another tree. Timothy shields Phillip's body in between his body and the tree. The hurricane is terrible in its force. The rain lashes Timothy's skin like knives. When the storm is over, Timothy lives just long enough to make sure Phillip is okay. Alone on the cay now, Phillip digs a grave with his hands and buries Timothy.

Since Timothy has taught him so much, Phillip is able to rebuild the hut and the water trough. He makes a new sleeping mat and continues to fish to provide for himself and Stew Cat. The blind boy knows his way around the island thanks to Timothy, and is even able to make another signal fire. In late August, Phillip hears the sound of a naval destroyer ship battling a German submarine. He lights his signal fire and a passing military aircraft spots it. The American officers who arrive on the island are stunned to find a little blind boy and a cat fending quite well for themselves under the circumstances. Phillip is reunited with both his parents. His mother, who survived the sinking of the *Hato*, has changed in many ways and no longer speaks of leaving Curacao. Phillip returns to school, but his old friends seem younger to him now. He prefers to spend his time at the harbor with the island's black population. Their voices remind him of Timothy.



Chapters 1 - 2

Chapters 1 - 2 Summary

Chapter 1: When the German submarines arrive to patrol the island of Curacao, off the coast of Venezuela, eleven-year-old Phillip is excited. School is cancelled for the day and the prospect of war fascinates young Phillip. He and his best friend in the town of Willemstad, Henrik van Boven, ignore their mother's admonitions to stay away from the harbor. Phillip and Henrik often spend time at the harbor, imagining that the cargo-laden ships manned by black Caribbean sailors are enemy pirates. The sailors enjoy playing along with the boys' imagination, shooting pretend guns as the boys pretend to defend Willemstad from pirates. Thus the arrival of the Germans at first seems no different to the boys. Yet when they arrive at the harbor, they find no cargo ships on the sea and the townsmen wield real guns as they man Willemstad's ancient fort.

Chased away from the harbor by the men, Phillip and Henrik head for the Queen Emma pontoon bridge on the other side of the city. The bridge affords them a view of the harbor as they discuss the German attack. Henrik's father is in the government, giving Henrik the upper hand in the conversation, to Phillip's irritation. Henrik sounds knowledgeable as he says that Aruba has been destroyed by the Germans. Phillip assures him the American Navy will soon arrive. Henrik insists the Netherlands Navy will also come. Phillip does not point out that the Netherlands Navy was scattered when the Germans took Holland; he sympathizes with his Dutch friend. Curacao is a Dutch island and the architecture greatly resembles Holland. Phillip's family has been on Curacao for four years, having moved here in 1939 so his father could lend his expertise to the war effort.

An army officer finds the boys on the bridge and tells them to leave, explaining that they are in torpedo range of the German submarines. Phillip realizes the seriousness of the situation at last and the boys run home. Phillip's mother is angry when she learns where he's been. Phillip notices that his normally nervous mother is even more nervous than usual as she listens to the war news on the radio. Phillip's father returns home late that afternoon. His mother warns Phillip not to pester his father with too many questions, for Phillip Enright Sr. has been working at the refinery since two a.m.

Phillip's father has been working very long hours for the past year. His job is to increase production of aviation gas. Despite his fatigue, Phillip Sr. answers his son's questions, telling him that there must be at least three German subs in the area as the Dutch Islands were simultaneously attacked in three separate places. Phillip's mother, Grace, admonishes Phillip for asking so many questions. His father tells Grace that Phillip has a right to know the situation in Curacao. Grace once again makes known her unhappiness about living in Curacao. She misses home and the safety of Virginia. Phillip Sr. replies that no place is safe at the moment. Grace leaves the room in silent anger, and Phillip resumes his questioning. He learns that the men of Curacao cannot fight the Germans, because they have no submarines or aircraft weaponry.



Chapter 2: After dinner, Phillip Sr. goes outside to check the effectiveness of the blackout curtains, which Grace has installed. Phillip's father returns to the refinery. Phillip and Grace make their beds downstairs for safety. Unable to sleep, Phillip worries about torpedoes and German soldiers. He slips out to the tool shed and retrieves a hatchet; he sleeps with it under his makeshift bed on the couch. Around eleven p.m., he hears his parents talking in low voices. Phillip Sr. has returned to collect flashlights from the house. Grace urges her husband to leave Curacao and return to Virginia. Phillip Sr. tells her that returning aboard ship is far more dangerous than staying. Grace is afraid of planes and will not fly. After his father leaves again, Phillip lies awake thinking about leaving Curacao. He has lived here since he was seven and barely remembers Virginia. Phillip loves the island and the people on it; he thinks about leaving his friend Henrik behind.

The next morning, Phillip Sr. tells his family that the Chinese crews aboard the crude oil tankers have refused to sail without a naval escort. This means the refinery will have to close down and the Allies will not get the fuel they need to fight the Germans. For the next week, no ships sail past the Queen Emma Bridge and the morale of the islanders suffers. The people of Aruba and Curacao take great pride in the important role they play in the war effort. Unable to continue their efforts, the frustrated people call the Chinese crewmen cowards; mutiny charges are filed against them. Phillip Sr. tells his son that many of the people accusing the Chinese of cowardice would not themselves have the courage to sail the crude oil tankers either. Phillip's dad explains that because of the crude oil carried on board, the ships would explode into flame if hit by a German torpedo.

The isolated islanders begin to worry that they will run out of fresh water and vegetables now that the supply ships have stopped sailing into their harbor. However, Phillip's father is confident that the ships will sail again soon, and his confidence proves right. On February 21, the Chinese crewmen agree to sail out of Willemstad. However, on that same day, an outbound Norwegian tanker is torpedoed off the coast. In response, the British Navy sends the S.S. *Empire Tern*, an armed tanker, to take fuel from Curacao to the Royal Air Force. Phillip's father takes him on a tour of the huge tanker as it is being fueled. A large crowd, including the governor of Curacao, turns out to see the ship sail. As the cheering crowd looks on, the *Tern* explodes in the water. A mile away, a German submarine surfaces to watch the *Tern* sink.

Phillip realizes the sailors he met earlier in the day are all dead. He no longer finds war exciting; he realizes it only means death and destruction. That night, Grace informs Phillip Sr. that she is taking Phillip back to Virginia. Phillip Sr. tells her this is a mistake, but Grace is adamant. As March progresses, life on the island returns to a semblance of normality. The ships begin to sail again; some, but not all, are lost. When the American and Dutch navies send destroyers and a cruiser to protect the ships, Phillip hopes his mother will change her mind. The presence of the armed ships only increases her nervousness, however. In April she announces that Phillip Sr. has secured passage for her and Phillip on a Dutch freighter. Phillip spends his last day of school in Curacao trying to come up with a way to stay behind. That night he announces that he prefers to



stay with his father, but Phillip Sr. tells him he must go with his mother. When Phillip appeals to his mother to allow him to stay, she cries and says they don't love her.

On a Friday morning in April, Grace and Phillip board the S.S. *Hato*. Phillip has often seen the small Dutch freighter in the bay. Although Phillip Sr. assures Phillip that the Germans would not waste a torpedo on the small freighter, Phillip can tell he is worried. Eight other passengers board the ship; Phillip holds his father tightly for a long moment as they say goodbye. As the ship sails past the Queen Emma Bridge, Phillip sees the lonely figure of his father standing atop Fort Amsterdam, waving goodbye. The ship turns toward Panama, where it is scheduled to deliver pumps to the Panama Canal before turning back and heading for Miami.

Chapters 1 - 2 Analysis

Phillip's naive approach to war shows both innocence and immaturity, typical for his age. His future character is hinted at by his parent's actions and Phillip's responses to them. His father treats Phillip with respect and provides an excellent role model for his young son. Phillip's mother, however, is a fearful woman. Grace expresses her fear over the war by becoming angry at her husband and son. This behavior foreshadows how Phillip will handle the life-threatening challenges he is shortly to face. Her racial prejudice is also a result of her fear of the unknown. While this is not made clear in these early chapters, the groundwork has been established for Phillip's racial prejudice, which will be rooted clearly in his fear of the unknown.

The danger to Phillip and his mother has been foreshadowed by the sinking of the ships around Curacao. This section ends with the vivid image of Phillip's father, standing alone and lonely atop the fort as he waves goodbye to his family. This image portends the grave consequences of Grace's fearful flight from Curacao.



Chapters 3 - 6

Chapters 3 - 6 Summary

Chapter 3: On April 6, 1942, at around three a.m., the S.S. *Hato* is torpedoed. Phillip's mother is uncharacteristically calm as she helps him into his life jacket. They follow the emergency procedures which the captain has drilled into them throughout the voyage. The back of the ship is on fire and the captain hurries everyone efficiently into lifeboats. As the first lifeboats are launched, Phillip sees pools of burning oil on the surface of the water. The lifeboat carrying Phillip and his mother is lowered toward the oil-slicked sea. Before the boat hits the water, the *Hato* lurches suddenly, tipping everyone on the lifeboat into the sea. Something falls from the *Hato* and hits Phillip on the head.

Phillip awakes four hours later with a terrible headache. An accented voice greets him, calling him young boss, or "Young bahss" (pg. 31). Phillip turns to see an ugly Negro sitting next to him on a raft. The elderly Negro, Phillip, and a cat are the only occupants of the raft. Phillip recalls seeing the Negro working on board the *Hato*. Phillip asks where they are and what has become of his mother. The man explains he hauled Phillip out of the water, along with Stew, the cook's cat. He assures Phillip his mother must have been picked up by another raft or lifeboat. The man cannot be sure of their location, but believes they are near the cays, approximate latitude of fifteen and longitude eighty. The man tells Phillip that the *Hato* sank in minutes after being hit by a torpedo.

Phillip looks around and sees nothing but blue ocean and a few birds. He begins to cry. The man tells him he feels the same way, but that there is nothing to be gained by it. His calm demeanor soothes Phillip somewhat. Phillip examines his companion and notices his muscles, hardened by a lifetime of work aboard ships. Phillip vomits over the side. The man explains he is suffering from shock. He rips some boards off the edge of the raft and creates the framework for lean-to. He removes his clothes and tells Phillip to do the same, and then covers the framework with the clothing to shelter them from the sun. He assures Phillip that they are drifting along an ocean passage used by various ships; they will be found. With this assurance, Phillip allows himself to fall back asleep.

When he wakes again, Phillip asks the man his name. He introduces himself as Timothy; he has no last name. Phillip is thirsty, and Timothy pours him a tiny cup of water from a large keg of fresh water aboard the raft. Phillip complains at this stinginess and demands more, but Timothy tells him they must conserve their supply. Phillip insists and when Timothy again refuses, he begins to dislike the Negro. Phillip tries arguing with him then he cries, but Timothy will not budge. Phillip moves as far away from him as the raft allows and cries while he strokes Stew Cat. He thinks about his mother's dislike of black people and for the first time in his life, he agrees with her. Henrik never understood why Phillip's mother felt that way, but now Phillip does.



When night falls, Timothy tells Phillip they may have fish to eat if a flying fish falls on the raft. He advises Phillip that the fish contain water. Phillip ignores him. Moments later, fish begin leaping along the surface. Two of them land on the raft, and Timothy kills and skins them. He gives Phillip the two largest pieces, but Phillip refuses to eat them. Timothy tells him they will have no other dinner tonight, so Phillip should eat. Timothy eats his fish, but Phillip just turns away. Phillip broods about his mother's decision to leave Curacao which has left him stuck on this raft with a stubborn black man. Aloud, Phillip says it's his mother's fault that he is here. Timothy asks if his mother is really to blame for starting the war.

Chapter 4: As the heat of the sun gives way to the chill of night, Timothy removes their clothing from the lean-to, and they re-dress themselves. Phillip stares at the stars and wonders how a boy from Virginia could be in the middle of the ocean lying next to a black man. When their bodies accidentally touch, they both draw back. Phillip remembers the colored section of town in Virginia and the blacks at the harbor in Willemstad; unlike his friend Henrik, he has never really gotten to know a black person.

Phillip asks Timothy where he comes from. Timothy tells him his home is on St. Thomas, one of the Virgin Islands, in the town of Charlotte Amalie. Phillip has trouble believing that Timothy is not from Africa, but Timothy has never been there. Timothy never knew his parents either; he was raised by a woman named Hannah Grumbs. Timothy does not even know his exact age; he estimates himself to be upwards of sixty. Phillip advises Timothy that he is twelve years old, hoping that Timothy will stop treating him like a small child. Timothy tells him twelve is an important age, and then tells him to get some sleep, because tomorrow will be a busy day. Phillip asks what could possibly keep them busy; Timothy replies that they will be busy staying alive.

Phillip shivers in the night; his head aches painfully. Timothy moves Phillip to the leeward side of the raft and gathers Phillip close to keep him warm; Stew Cat snuggles up against them both for warmth. The next morning Timothy assures Phillip that a blow to the head takes a few days to heal. He gives Phillip two biscuits and a half cup of water from their meager stores; Timothy eats half a biscuit and feeds Stew Cat with leftover fish. Timothy tells Phillip he believes they are close to some islands and has hope they will be rescued today. Phillip begins to have trouble with his vision; Timothy tells him he has just spent too much time looking into the sun. Timothy sets up their shade shelter again, and Phillip crawls under it, moaning in pain. Worried, Timothy dips a cloth in cool water and presses it to his forehead.

Phillip wakes up in the dark. The pain is gone. He asks Timothy what time it is and is horrified to learn it is ten in the morning. Phillip realizes he is blind. Timothy advises him to lie down again, assuring him the condition must be temporary. Timothy recalls a time in Barbados when a sailor got hit in the head by the boom and went blind for three days before his sight returned. Phillip asks if Timothy thinks that will happen for him; Timothy says he thinks it will. Lying on the raft, Phillip's plight sinks in; he begins to scream and call for his mother. Timothy holds him tightly and speaks soothingly. When Phillip begins to hit Timothy and blame him Timothy tells him to go ahead and do so if it makes him feel better. Eventually, Phillip tires and falls asleep.



Chapter 5: Around noon on the third day, Timothy hears an airplane. By the time Phillip hears it, too, Timothy has made a torch from one of the lean-to legs to send a smoke signal. Timothy sees the plane and reports on its movements for Phillip's benefit. The plane passes by without spotting them. Timothy douses the torch and assures Phillip they will be ready the next time. He tells Phillip, "'Tis a good ting not to harass d'soul ovah dis. We are edgin' into d'aircraft track, same as d'ship dey run.'" (pg. 50) Phillip is disheartened, but Timothy insists they will be found today. However, the long day passes without another airplane passing overhead.

Bored, Phillip dangles his hand in the water. Timothy warns him away from the edge of the raft, explaining that there are sharks in the water. Phillip retreats under the lean-to, grateful he got to see what Timothy and Stew Cat looked like before he went blind. He can imagine being even more afraid if he hadn't seen his surroundings before losing his vision. Timothy tells him the cat is bad luck, but Phillip disagrees whole-heartedly. At Phillip's request, Timothy describes their ocean surroundings in detail.

Chapter 6: Early the next morning, Timothy sights land. Phillip is so excited he stumbles off the raft. He hears Timothy dive in after him, screaming about sharks. Timothy drags Phillip back to the raft and throws him aboard. Phillip hears Timothy splashing and cursing at the sharks, and feels the raft tilt as Timothy makes it back on board. Timothy yells at Phillip, telling him there are sharks circling the raft all the time and ordering Phillip to crawl, not walk, around the raft. When he calms down, he asks Phillip if he's okay, and then tells him that a man can die quickly in these waters.

Phillip reminds him about the island and joy returns to Timothy's voice. He describes the island for Phillip. Timothy sees a white beach, sea-grape bushes, and twenty or thirty palm trees. It is a small island with no inhabitants and no source of water. Nevertheless, Timothy says they will be better off on land. Phillip prefers to stay in the raft until they are rescued rather than take his chances on an uninhabited island, but Timothy turns stubborn again. He tells Phillip they are going to the island.

Chapters 3 - 6 Analysis

This section of the story seems like a dream to Phillip, the narrator and protagonist. One moment he is with his mother safely aboard the *Hato*, and when he wakes up four hours later he is adrift at sea on a raft with a large black man and a cat. Adding to the sense of dislocation is the sudden onset of Phillip's blindness. Phillip has not yet come to terms with the reality of his situation. He reacts as if he were at home and fails to understand that the rules of survival are different than the rules of everyday life. Phillip turns his nose up at the life-giving fish Timothy offers and gets upset, because Timothy insists on conserving their precious fresh water supply. As Timothy is black and speaks in an uneducated fashion, Phillip fails to realize that Timothy's wisdom is keeping them alive.

Like his mother, Phillip reacts with anger and prejudice when he is afraid. Timothy works hard to protect Phillip and keep his spirits up, but Phillip sees Timothy as the enemy and directs his fear and anger at the kindly old man. Even when Timothy dives into shark-

infested waters to save Phillip's life, the boy does not comprehend that Timothy is protecting him. Timothy is wise enough not to take Phillip's anger personally. He protects Phillip from himself and from the elements, understanding that the boy's angry bravado is merely a mask for his fear.



Chapters 7 - 11

Chapters 7 - 11 Summary

Chapter 7: Timothy gets into the water to kick them to shore. Timothy tells Phillip when his feet touch the bottom, and moments later Phillip feels the raft being grounded on the sand. One at a time, Timothy carries Phillip then Stew Cat to land, and then hauls the raft further onto shore so they do not lose it. Timothy calls out that there are fish and *langosta* here; *langosta* are a native lobster, lacking claws but with a tail. Timothy plops Stew Cat in Phillip's lap and asks the boy to wait while he tours the island and finds a place to make camp. Timothy promises to build a signal fire before nightfall so they can summon any passing airplanes. Phillip asks their location; when Timothy says he is not sure, Phillip thinks he must be a stupid black man.

However, the more Phillip presses, the more he feels Timothy is holding something back. Timothy's tone of voice reminds Phillip of the tone his father used when hiding bad news when Phillip was younger. As Phillip got older, his father started telling him the truth even when it was bad news. Phillip wishes Timothy would do the same, but Timothy walks away to scope out the cay. Stew Cat goes off exploring, too, and Phillip begins to panic alone on the beach. Unable to see, Phillip suddenly realizes how helpless he is without Timothy. He crawls around on the beach. When something brushes his arm he screams, but it is only Stew Cat. He holds the cat close.

When Timothy returns, Phillip yells at him never to leave him alone again. Timothy laughs and assures him there is nothing to fear on the island. Sea grape, palm trees, and small lizards are the only other living things. Nonetheless, Timothy promises not to leave Phillip alone; Phillip again hears anxiety in Timothy's voice. Timothy tells him there is no water, but assures him they still have the keg and can collect more water at the first rain. Timothy describes the island as a mile long, half a mile wide, and shaped like a melon. He has found them a campsite near the palm trees, which are on a rise about forty feet above sea-level.

They are both hungry, so Timothy gets the water and biscuit tin from the raft. As they eat, Phillip confronts Timothy and asks him to tell the truth about their situation. Timothy admits he believes they are in the Devil's Mouth. The Devil's Mouth is a series of cays trapped behind a forty-mile stretch of coral reefs; ships avoid this area because of the dangerous reefs. Phillip accuses him of trapping them on this cay when Phillip wanted to stay on the raft. Timothy assures him that planes still fly overhead and their signal fire will bring rescue. Phillip continues to lament their situation, but Timothy insists there is no point in worrying; they must make camp and hope for the best.

Chapter 8: Timothy spends the afternoon making a hut out of dried palm fronds. Phillip thinks about his mother; somehow he believes she is safe. He is also certain that ships are searching for them now, not realizing that the ships and aircraft are needed in the war effort. Phillip imagines the tale he will have to tell Henrik when he returns. He tries



not to think about his vision. He chooses to trust Timothy's assurance that his sight will return and that a passing aircraft will spot them. When Timothy finishes the hut, he proudly runs Phillip's hands over his handiwork. The hut is six feet wide by eight long, supported by driftwood from the beach and laced together with vines from the northern end of the island. It stands six feet high and Phillip can stand up inside it, but Timothy cannot.

Timothy announces he must go to the reef to get langosta for their dinner. Phillip wants to go with him, but Timothy insists the reef is too dangerous. He leaves without another word. Left behind, Phillip again thinks that his mother is right about black people; if Timothy cared about him he would have taken him along. Phillip listens to the strange noises around him, becoming frightened by the thought of snakes and scorpions. He begins screaming for Timothy, but Timothy cannot hear him over the sound of the water. Phillip cries miserably until Stew Cat comes over and starts purring. Soon after, Timothy returns with three langosta. Phillip refuses to speak to him. Timothy says, "'Young bahss, be an outrageous mahn if you like, but 'ere I'm all you got.'" (pg. 70) That night, Timothy groans as if in pain. Phillip asks how old he really is; Timothy admits he is over seventy. Phillip realizes Timothy is old enough to die on the island.

The next morning, Timothy makes a fire pile down on the beach. His plan is to constantly keep a small fire going at the campsite, and if a plane is spotted, they can take a piece of burning wood down to the large signal fire pile on the beach. This method will save their few matches. Timothy tells Phillip they must write a message in large letters on the sand. Timothy keeps asking for Phillip's help, and finally Phillip realizes that Timothy cannot read and does not wish to say so. Phillip takes a stick and writes the word HELP in the sand. Gratefully, Timothy copies the letters in large scale with rocks. Phillip feels superior to Timothy and quietly relishes the feeling.

Chapter 9: Timothy enlists Phillip's help tearing down vines from the north end of the island to make a rope. Timothy weaves a long rope and stretches it from their campsite to the fire pile on the beach. The rope is for Phillip in case Timothy is out on the reef when a plane flies overhead. Phillip can use the rope to make his way to the beach and light the signal fire. As Timothy weaves, he tells Phillip he must begin to help with the other work. Phillip is tired from pulling the vines and tells Timothy he cannot work, because he is blind. Timothy insists Phillip help him make sleeping mats. Phillip refuses. Timothy tells him the best mat-maker in Charlotte Amalie was blind. Phillip still refuses, but Timothy places several strands of palm fiber in his hands and moves Phillip's hands in an over-under pattern to teach him how it's done.

Phillip tries but does not get it right away and feels incapable; Timothy tries to guide his hands again, but Phillip throws the palm fibers at him. He calls Timothy a stupid, ugly, black man and makes fun of him for not being able to spell. Timothy slaps his face. After a moment, Timothy tells Phillip he is weaving his own mat. He begins to sing as he works. Phillip remembers the rope Timothy made; the rope is for Phillip's benefit, not Timothy's. Suddenly Phillip feels sorry and calls Timothy's name. Timothy walks over and puts more palm fibers in his hands. Phillip says he wants them to be friends.



Timothy tells Phillip he has always been his friend. Phillip asks him to call him by name instead of calling him young boss. Gladly, Timothy agrees.

Chapter 10: After a week on the island, it rains for the first time. Gleefully, Timothy and Phillip run around in the cooling rain. Timothy tells Phillip the catchment is working; Timothy has built a trough to catch rainwater with a bamboo pipe to funnel the water into their keg. The keg overflows, and Timothy wishes he'd made a second catchment. Only Stew Cat doesn't like the rain. Phillip loves it, because he can enjoy the feel of it even without his vision. He and Timothy talk long into the night, sharing stories of their childhoods. Timothy started working on fishing boats at age ten and the only fun he had was during the annual carnivals in Charlotte Amalie. Phillip knows about the carnivals for they have them in Willemstad, too.

Phillip tells Timothy that his mother doesn't like black people and asks Timothy to explain why. Timothy says he doesn't like some white people, but that it would be outrageous if he disliked them all. Phillip asks why people have different skin colors; Timothy thinks it's for the same reason fish and flowers come in different colors. He tells Phillip that underneath the skin, people are all the same. Phillip recalls a teacher at school saying something similar, but it means more coming from Timothy. After Timothy falls asleep, Phillip snuggles up against him. He realizes that in the dark, Timothy doesn't feel either white or black.

Timothy broils them a pompano fish for breakfast. Their diet consists of fish, langosta, mussels, and sea urchin eggs. Timothy has tried to make soup from seaweed and sea-grape with no success, but sea-grape leaves turn out to be edible when cooked. Timothy longs for the coconuts high up in the palm trees, but tells Phillip his legs are too old to climb so high. Every day Timothy hints that Phillip should climb up and get the coconuts. Today they are both in good moods because of the rain, and Timothy pushes the subject. Phillip is afraid. He asks Timothy if his blind eyes look scary. Timothy assures him they do not and tells him how grateful he is for Phillip's company. Phillip asks how long it took for his sailor friend to regain his sight. Timothy says it took many months. Phillip reminds him that on the raft Timothy told him it took three days; Timothy says it was so long ago he can't be sure, but that he is sure the man got his sight back. He changes the subject. Phillip has noticed he changes the subject whenever Phillip talks about his eyesight.

Chapter 11: Phillip uses a cane which Timothy made him to feel his way around. He falls down a lot, but never hurts himself. Phillip comes to know the island by feel. Timothy is proud when Phillip walks all the way around the island by himself; he does this by feeling the damp sand which tells Phillip he is near the water line. Phillip comes to know what the cay looks like in detail, from Timothy's accounts and from his own exploration. Timothy describes the water around the cay as clear and full of fish. Only the north end is dangerous because of sharks, reefs, and sudden drop-offs into the deep. Phillip gradually becomes more independent and does not need the rope to find his way down to the signal fire. He realizes Timothy is trying to make him independent; he believes Timothy worries about dying and leaving Phillip alone on the cay.



The night after the rain, Timothy is morose. His rain-inspired optimism led him to hope that a plane would arrive; when night falls without an airplane, Timothy decides the island has a jumbi, or evil spirit. Phillip tells him this is nonsense, but Timothy believes it. Phillip knows that "obediah" or "voodoo" is a common religion in the West Indies. Timothy says Stew Cat might be the jumbi. Worried now, Phillip tells Timothy to leave the cat alone. When Phillip wakes up the next morning, both Timothy and Stew Cat are gone. Phillip calls them both and searches the island using his cane to feel his way. At the north end, Timothy responds to his call. Timothy insists he's been on the north beach all morning, but refuses to answer when Phillip asks about Stew Cat. Phillip senses the dishonesty in Timothy's tone and hears him scraping a knife against wood. Timothy says he is cutting firewood, but Phillip knows they have plenty.

Timothy returns to the hut with Phillip and makes them breakfast, and then slips away without a word. Phillip discovers Timothy's knife is gone. Phillip worries that their isolation is turning Timothy crazy. He knows if Timothy is capable of harming the cat, he might also harm Phillip. Desperate, Phillip thinks he could put the water keg and a little food on the raft and have enough to survive in the ocean for a few days. He walks down to the beach to locate the raft. He finds the driftwood where Timothy keeps the raft tied up, but the raft is not there. Panicked, Phillip walks out into the water, feeling around for the raft. The sea bottom he stands on slides away, and he realizes he stood on a skate, a diamond-shaped flat fish with a stinger tail. Fortunately, it does not sting him, but Phillip cannot find the raft anywhere in the water.

Phillip returns to the hut. He keeps telling himself that Timothy is his friend, not his enemy, but Phillip is afraid of the voodoo religion. Timothy returns to the hut around midafternoon and pounds something onto the top of the hut. He leaves again without a word. Phillip feels around on the hut and discovers a carved wooden cat with nails driven into it; he knows the nails are supposed to kill the evil jumbi. Timothy returns and puts Stew Cat in Phillip's lap. Timothy tells him Stew Cat was on the raft; Timothy had kept the cat off the island until he could chase away the jumbi. Timothy tells him their luck will change now. Actually, though, their luck is about to get worse.

Chapters 7 - 11 Analysis

This section begins and ends with Phillip's fear of Timothy. When they first arrive on the island, Phillip finally realizes the extent of his predicament. He is terrified of being completely dependent on a stranger, and a black stranger at that. Timothy's brand of tough love puts Phillip off at first, until he comes to realize that Timothy is acting in Phillip's best interests. Timothy is different than anyone Phillip has met in his limited social circle, and thus even after growing to trust Timothy as a friend, Phillip becomes fearful again by Timothy's religious practices. Voodoo is very frightening to Phillip, because he is unfamiliar with it and assumes it is a crazy, violent practice. When Timothy returns Stew Cat safe and sound, Phillip realizes that although Timothy's ways are different, he is still a kind and gentle person, and Phillip has nothing to fear.



Chapters 12 - 15

Chapters 12 - 15 Summary

Chapter 12: One May morning, Timothy comes down with a fever. He tells Phillip it is malaria. Phillip gets him some water and puts a cool cloth on his head; he sits beside his friend, holding the cloth to his forehead. Timothy becomes delirious and raves nonsensically. Phillip talks to him throughout the morning, but Timothy does not know he is there. Around noon, Timothy stands and stumbles towards the beach. Phillip tries to hold him back, but Timothy is too big. Phillip follows Timothy to the beach. Phillip wades into the water and finds Timothy's body floating there. Phillip drags his big friend back to the beach; it takes Phillip a long time to get him out of the water completely. He waits on the beach for an hour; when Timothy starts to shiver, he covers him with grape leaves. Phillip brings him water from the hut and pours it down his throat. By early evening, Timothy's fever breaks. Timothy doesn't remember coming down to the beach. As they walk back up to camp, Timothy leans on Phillip for support for the first time. Phillip notes that Timothy never fully recovers his strength after this bout with malaria.

Chapter 13: The two friends mark time by dropping pebbles into a can, one for each day on the island. Thus Phillip knows it is late May when there are forty-eight pebbles in the can. He believes Timothy has given up all hope of rescue, although Timothy does not admit it. Timothy only asks Phillip if he has considered the possibility that Timothy might come down with malaria again. Phillip admits this has occurred to him; Timothy tells him he must learn to fish. Timothy has spent the last week making fish hooks, and now Phillip realizes they are for him. Timothy tells him about a good fishing hole in a safe area of the reef and takes Phillip to it.

Timothy has planted poles along the reef surface so Phillip will have a path to follow. The major problem with Phillip walking on the reef is the sea urchins which inhabit the surface. They have poisonous spines and stepping on one is very painful. Timothy has smashed all the sea urchins with a rock, but over time, they will return. Timothy promises to think about a solution to this. About fifty feet out on the reef, they arrive at the hole, which Timothy describes in detail. It is twenty feet in diameter and eight feet deep. Timothy tells him there is an underwater passageway through the hole allowing small fish to swim in and out, ensuring a steady food supply for Phillip.

Timothy has him feel around the smooth edges of the hole and then reach in and tug a mussel off the side wall. Phillip almost falls in the hole when he pulls on a stubborn mussel; Timothy catches him. Timothy tells him how to get out if he ever falls in; Phillip should feel the direction of the water's movement and follow that to the side of the hole. Phillip baits his hook with the mussel and drops his line into the hole; Timothy has found rusty bolts in driftwood for sinkers, and made the fishing line from strands of a life line on the raft. Moments after dropping in his line, Phillip feels a tug and jerks the fish out of the water. Timothy has him feel along the fishing line to locate the fish, and then take the hook out of its mouth. Phillip and Timothy feel pride in the moment.



From that day on, Phillip does all the fishing. Timothy continues to get the langosta since this involves diving into the hole. After three days, Timothy lets Phillip go out on the reef alone, although Phillip senses that Timothy continues to watch him from the beach. Timothy and Phillip talk a lot about the cay and the things on it. Phillip explains geography to Timothy, telling him how a volcano might have created the Devil's Mouth. Such subjects fascinate Timothy, who has no formal education.

As Phillip's confidence grows, he decides to climb a palm tree for coconuts. Timothy is thrilled. Phillip starts up the tree but becomes scared. He begins to shinny back down; Timothy tells him there is no shame in the brave attempt. Phillip stops a few feet from the sand heads back toward the top. He throws down two coconuts, and they celebrate with a feast of coconut milk and coconut meat. Phillip feels like he's graduated Timothy's survival course. That night, he recalls what Timothy looks like. He no longer identifies him by his skin color, and the face he recalls is kind and strong, not ugly.

Chapter 14: One July morning breaks hotter than any other day on the island so far. They are on the north beach when they hear a rifle shot. Phillip thinks the navy has come to save them, but Timothy explains the sound is bad news. The cracking noise is the sound the waves make before a tempest. Timothy tells Phillip the sky is yellow and the birds are gone. Timothy hurries him back to the hut so they can prepare for the storm. Phillip realizes Timothy has chosen the high ground for their campsite in case a storm caused the waters to rise. At the hut, Timothy secures the water keg high up on a palm tree trunk with some of their rope and ties the rest around the tree for them to hold onto if the storm reaches this high.

Phillip realizes Timothy has been making vine ropes for day to day use so he could save the real rope for just such an emergency. Timothy tells him about storms and explains why this one is unusual for this time of year. Timothy assures him Stew Cat will instinctively climb a palm tree to ride out the storm. Timothy spends the afternoon bringing up everything useable from the raft, which might disappear in the storm. Phillip worries; the thought of losing either of his friends is unbearable. Phillip recognizes that Timothy is not trying to frighten him; he is just being honest about the danger of the storm. They eat a large meal that day as Timothy knows the fish may not return for up to a week after the tempest. After they eat, he lashes the tin box with his knife inside to a tree and pronounces them ready.

Chapter 15: Timothy describes the red sky to Phillip as they wait. As night falls, the rain begins. Phillip holds Stew Cat close as the seas begin to roil. Phillip feels slithering around his feet; Timothy tells him the lizards are rushing to high ground. The wind tears the hut away, and Timothy has the three of them lie flat on the ground for about two hours before he says it is time to go to the palm tree. They lash themselves to the tree; Timothy is lashed on the outside so that his body protects Phillip from the slashing rain. The waves reach their knees, and Timothy holds them tight to the palm. The rain feels like nails driving into Phillip's skin, and he knows Timothy's back is taking the worst of it. The eye of the storm arrives; Timothy assures Phillip he's all right, but Phillip hears him making quiet, pained noises. They sit on the ground during this quiet time, and Phillip hugs Timothy, who is now in obvious pain.



A half hour later, the storm picks up again, and they stand against the palm. The storm is worse this time and when the waves crash over their heads, both Timothy and Phillip lose consciousness. The storm is receding when Phillip wakes up; he feels Timothy sagging limply against the restraining ropes. Phillip feels him breathing and works to untie them both from the tree. Stew Cat is gone. Phillip lays Timothy down and holds his hand until Timothy finally speaks. He asks Phillip if he is all right. Timothy passes out again. Phillip feels his back and realizes it has been flayed to ribbons by the storm. Phillip realizes they are both naked; the storm has taken their clothes. He cannot stop Timothy's bleeding, so he just takes his hand and falls asleep next to him. When Phillip wakes in the dawn, Timothy is dead. Phillip is beyond tears. He sits with his friend for a long time before exhaustion claims him. When he wakes again, Stew Cat is with him. Phillip holds the cat and now he cries.

Chapters 12 - 15 Analysis

Chapter 12 begins with an incident which foreshadows Timothy's death. Timothy's bout with malaria causes him and Phillip to realize that Phillip needs to be able to take care of himself on the cay in case something happens to Timothy. The thought, detail, and foresight Timothy puts into planning for Phillip's needs are touching in their scope. Timothy puts himself in Phillip's place and thinks of everything a blind boy might need to survive. Phillip begins to realize how much forethought Timothy has given to their survival needs when he figures out that Timothy has been saving the good rope all this time in case of a tempest. As their friendship continues to bloom, Phillip begins to understand how much Timothy has done for him. Phillip's retrieval of the coconuts is a turning point, and after this, Timothy knows Phillip is ready to learn to fend for himself. Timothy cannot rest until Phillip is independent enough to take care of himself in the event that Timothy dies. By the time the deadly storm arrives, Phillip is ready. Timothy makes the ultimate sacrifice by protecting Phillip against the storm with his seventy-year-old body.



Chapters 16 - 19

Chapters 16 - 19 Summary

Chapter 16: That afternoon, Phillip buries Timothy, digging the grave with his hands. He is angry with Timothy for leaving him alone, but as he digs, he realizes that Timothy gave his life to protect him. He recalls his father telling him, when his grandfather died, that sometimes people simply die, because they are very tired. Phillip thinks that was the case with Timothy. Phillip believes his blindness protects him somehow from the fear of his new reality. He places stones on Timothy's grave and asks God to take care of him.

Afterwards, Phillip unties the water keg and tin from the tree. The water is still potable and the matches are dry. He feels the debris under his feet and begins clearing the campsite. He stumbles over Stew Cat a few times, keeping busy until nightfall. He finds a coconut amidst the debris and eats it; Stew Cat refuses the coconut meat. He sleeps on a bed of palm fronds that night, thinking of what he must do. He determines to feed himself and Stew Cat, to rebuild the hut, and to build another signal fire on the beach. He knows his vine rope and signal markers are gone, and fully appreciates now why Timothy spent so much time training him to move around the cay. He suddenly remembers that Timothy made him fishing poles and put them away in a safe place, but Timothy hadn't said where. Phillip gets up and runs his hands along every palm trunk until he feels rope; on the lee side of the tree are at least a dozen fishing poles, each with a barbed hook and bolt sinker.

Phillip can feel the sunshine the next morning, and by noon, he hears the cry of a returning bird. He has learned to tell time, roughly, by the feel and position of the sun. He has a lot to do to ensure his survival and knows that staying busy is important right now; he must not stop to think too much about the impossibility of it all. Within five days he has accomplished a great deal, even honing Timothy's knife on the coral. Phillip keeps the knife jabbed into a palm tree trunk, so he can always find it. He makes himself a new cane and on the fifth day scouts the beach for useable supplies. He finds a tin can and starts to track the days again with pebbles, beginning from the day of the storm.

On the sixth day, as Phillip explores the south beach, he is attacked by birds. Stew Cat comes to his rescue; he can hear the cat fighting valiantly. When the battle is over, he touches the dead bird; it is smaller than he thought, but its beak is very sharp. Phillip feels around in the sand and realizes he provoked the attack by wandering into the birds' new nesting area; their old nesting ground washed away in the storm.

Chapter 17: Ten days later, Phillip is tired of fish and sea-grape leaves. He decides to do something Timothy warned him against; he is going to dive into his fishing hole on the reef to catch langosta. Timothy had told him the underwater entrance to the hole is too narrow for a shark to enter, but barracuda can get inside. Phillip believes he can



handle a barracuda or a small octopus, and decides to chance it. He sharpens a stick as Timothy used to do then he and Stew Cat walk to the fishing hole. Phillip gets into the warm water and swims down a few feet; nothing attacks him. He gains courage and dives for the bottom with his sharp stick, feeling his way along the sea floor, checking out the hole. Seaweed brushes his face several times and sends him rushing for the surface, but each time he dives back down. After half an hour, Phillip is convinced he can safely hunt langosta in the hole.

Phillip feels along the side where Timothy told him the langosta would be. Amazingly, he catches one on his first try; driving the stick in, he heads for the surface. Hoping for more, Phillip continues to feel his way around the sides. He finds the entrance to a deep hole. He sticks his hand in the hole and something bites him, holding onto his hand. Panicked, he braces his feet and pulls hard against his strong opponent. He pulls his arm out "and whatever it was came out with my arm, its tail smashing against my chest. I kicked and rose to the surface, the thing still on my wrist, its teeth sunk in deep." (pg. 130) It lets him go when he breaks the surface. Phillip heaves himself out of the water, his arm in great pain but still in one piece. Later, he realizes the creature must have been a moray eel. He never goes into the fishing hole again.

Chapter 18: Phillip is constantly on the alert for the sound of an airplane. His hearing and touch have become more acute in the absence of his vision. He can tell the birds apart by their cries and knows the sound of the breeze in the sea-grape bushes and palm fronds. He can hear the lizards and even the soft sound of Stew Cat's paws as he approaches. In August, Phillip hears the far-off sound of an airplane. He feels around his campfire. It is laid out as Timothy taught him, with the sticks arranged like wheel spokes so that Phillip can easily grab one without burning himself. He spits on the stick and listens for the sizzle to make sure it is hot enough to light the signal fire, and then sprints for the beach. At the signal fire, he blows on the palm fronds until he can hear them crackling. He runs to the sand where he has spelled out the word HELP with rocks. He and Stew Cat wait anxiously, but the plane passes by without returning.

Phillip sobs on the beach. He knows he cannot live on the cay indefinitely; if he gets sick or if there is another storm, he will not be able to survive alone. This is the worst moment he has experienced on the island. Stew Cat rubs against him, and he holds the cat for a long while. It occurs to Phillip that the pilot may not have seen the white smoke against the light sky. He realizes that oil makes black smoke and wishes for some oily boards, but there are none. He considers everything on the island and thinks that the sea-grape may have oily, resinous leaves. He pinches off a piece of the leaf and drops it in the fire; it rewards him with the sizzling sound of hot grease. Now Phillip knows how to attract the next plane's attention. His hopes renewed, he begins to gather palm fronds for a new signal fire.

On the morning of August 20, 1942, Phillip hears explosions that sound like thunder. Yet the air does not feel like rain. He is hearing the sound of a battle between destroyers and submarines. He grabs the last four matches this time and bolts for the beach. The first two matches go out immediately. He considers running back up for a burning stick from the fire, but then hears an airplane overhead. Phillip lights the fire pile with the next



to last match, holding it under the kindling until his fingers burn. He hears the fire roar to life and runs to pull sea-grape from the bushes. He tosses ten or fifteen armloads onto the fire until he is sure that black smoke must be pouring from the cay. The plane's roar gets closer, flying low over the island. Phillip waves his arms madly. After the second pass, the plane flies away. Phillip feels weak and sick, afraid he has lost his only chance of rescue; maybe the pilot saw his darkly tanned skin and thought he was a native fisherman just waving hello to the aircraft. He turns towards Timothy's grave and demands to know why Timothy didn't take him and Stew Cat with him when he died.

Chapter 19: At noon, Phillip hears a bell. He thinks he is dreaming until he hears the chug of a ship's engine and the sound of human voices. He runs to the beach and screams joyfully. A man shouts to him across the water; they see him. Phillip hears the men come ashore; they sound American. One of the men shouts in surprise when he sees a naked boy and a cat. The man's voice sounds funny when he realizes Phillip is blind. After the men lead Phillip and Stew Cat aboard their small boat, Phillip remembers Timothy's knife. One of the men goes to get the knife; when he returns he is amazed by the hut and the rain catchment Phillip has built. Phillip is helped aboard the destroyer and provided with food and medical care. When he tells them his name and explains he was on the *Hato*, they don't believe him. They explain the *Hato* sank back in April.

Later that night, the captain of the destroyer tells Phillip that the airplane saw the black smoke and radioed the distress signal back to the ship. The captain tells him Timothy was right, the cay is in Devil's Mouth; the cay is so small, however, that it is not on any chart or map. The ship communicates with Willemstad and the next day docks in Panama, where Phillip is taken to the hospital. His parents fly to Panama; before they see him, they are warned that Phillip is blind. His mother cries and tells him she is sorry. They talk a long time; Stew Cat snuggles on the hospital bed with Phillip as he tells his parents about Timothy and the cay. They listen, but he doesn't think they quite understand.

Months later, Phillip has the first of several operations which restore his sight. He has to wear glasses all the time, but at least he can see. In April, he returns to Willemstad with his mother, one year after he left. Grace had returned to Curacao to be with his father after Phillip was lost. Phillip reports that his mother had changed and no longer speaks of leaving the island. Phillip sees Henrik van Boven at school, but Henrik seems very young to him now. Phillip prefers to spend his time with the black people along the bay and in the marketplace; their voices remind him of Timothy. Phillip says he has spent a lot of time poring over ocean charts; he has found all the islands Timothy spoke of, and has even found the Devil's Mouth. One day, he plans to charter a boat and explore the Devil's Mouth. He knows if he finds his old cay, he will know it, not by sight, but by closing his eyes and walking along the island. He will visit Timothy's grave if he finds "dat outrageous cay" (pg. 144)



Chapters 16 - 19 Analysis

In the wake of the storm, Phillip's encounter with the birds symbolizes his struggle for survival. His gratitude towards Timothy redoubles when he finds the fishing poles and when Phillip is able to successfully recreate the hut, water catchment, and signal fire that Timothy originally built. Thanks to Timothy's legacy, Phillip has a strong chance of survival. Yet Phillip realizes his limitations in Chapter 17; without his sight he cannot safely catch langosta. Phillip is wise enough not to exceed his limitations again, but he continues to work to improve his odds of survival. Phillip's idea to put sea-grape on the signal fire to make it burn black is something his mentor had not thought to do. By improving on Timothy's escape plan, Phillip saves himself and proves to himself that he is capable of transcending the limitations of his blindness. Symbolically, his mother transcends her limitations as well. By choosing to fly to Panama, something she had previously been afraid to do, Grace shows Phillip that she, too, has learned from their experience on the *Hato*.



Characters

Phillip Enright

Phillip Enright is a typical, carefree and careless eleven-year-old boy when the story begins. In the year that passes, he gains more wisdom and maturity than many adults display. This transformation comes about through the life-threatening adventures he experiences on the cay. Phillip's amazing friend Timothy is the one who teaches Phillip his remarkable wisdom, but Phillip deserves a great deal of credit for being open to this knowledge. At first, Phillip is not open to learning anything from Timothy. Reeling from having been blinded and stranded at sea, Phillip blames anyone he can think of for his predicament, including Timothy. To be fair, few adults would react any better in the heat of the moment. Yet once Phillip is safely on the island with Timothy, he begins to accept his situation.

Not once does Phillip complain about why this should happen to him. He stops complaining about the quality of the food when he realizes that survival is a precious commodity. Phillip even comes to realize that Timothy's meanness is not mean at all; Timothy is forcing Phillip to work despite his young age and blindness. Through such acts, Timothy gives Phillip the gift of independence. When Phillip finally stops misdirecting his anger at Timothy, he decides he wants to be Timothy's friend. Timothy, in his wisdom, tells Phillip they have been friends from the start. Phillip's initial rage and anger is a product of his innocence, and Timothy knows it. As Phillip senses Timothy's forgiveness, he realizes that Timothy had seen through his angry display all along. Phillip learns an important lesson about angry bravado and how it relates to fear.

Phillip will learn many more lessons from Timothy before their adventure together ends. In addition to this emotional wisdom, Phillip also learns to fish, make water catchments, signal fires, and weave sleeping mats from Timothy. Phillip accomplishes all of this and more despite his blindness. Phillip's courage grows as he masters one task then another. When Phillip takes the initiative to climb the palm tree for coconuts, both he and Timothy know he has graduated from Timothy's survival training course. Phillip's final exam comes after Timothy's death, when Phillip must survive alone on the island. Phillip passes this test with flying colors.

Remembering what Timothy taught him, Phillip rebuilds the hut, makes himself a new cane, and provides food for himself and Stew Cat. Phillip is by now wise enough to know that he must simply get to work and not spend a lot of time thinking about his situation. If he were to consider it well, Phillip would realize that survival is impossible. Phillip manages the impossible with aplomb and leaves the island much older and wiser than his young years.



Timothy

Timothy is a remarkable man. His presence in Phillip's life is a gift, even though it takes Phillip a little while to look past Timothy's skin color to realize it. Timothy never knew his parents and has no formal education. He was raised in the Virgin Islands by a woman named Hannah Grumbs. Timothy went to work on the ships when he was only ten, and has been working ever since. He is past seventy when he meets Phillip, though Timothy does not know his actual age. When Phillip first meets Timothy, he thinks Timothy is inferior because of his lack of education. As Phillip gets to know Timothy, however, he realizes that Timothy is extremely knowledgeable and wise. Life has taught Timothy much, and Timothy shares his wisdom and knowledge with Phillip.

From the moment Timothy pulls Phillip out of the sea, Timothy devotes himself to Phillip's survival. Timothy assesses their situation accurately, but speaks positively to Phillip at all times to keep Phillip's morale high. Timothy knows that they have a better chance of survival if they stay positive and keep moving forward. As Timothy begins to trust Phillip, he shares more information with him, but at first he seeks to protect Phillip from the worst of the news. This approach works well, because Phillip is still in shock from the ship's sinking and cannot assimilate the full burden of their situation in one gulp. Timothy takes the same wise approach to expanding Phillip's boundaries once they are on the island. He first makes a rope for Phillip to follow to the beach, and after building the boy's confidence with simple tasks, Timothy makes him a cane and encourages him to explore the safer parts of the cay. This of course implies that Timothy has already explored the cay and made intelligent decisions as to which areas are safe for a blind twelve-year-old.

Timothy's wisdom also shows up in his treatment of Phillip. Timothy is too mature to get upset when Phillip hits him on the raft; Timothy understands that Phillip is angry and scared over their situation and does not take it personally. By example, he teaches Phillip patience and determination, as well as the value of positive expectation. When Timothy's own hopes plummet, he turns to his spiritual beliefs to uplift himself. Phillip does not understand the practice of Voodoo, but it is important to Timothy. By spending the day symbolically ridding the island of bad luck, Timothy is able to regain his hope.

Timothy's foresight is endless as he prepares Phillip to survive on his own. Timothy thinks of every detail, including the fact that a blind boy cannot see to safely carve his own fishing hooks. The dozen fishing poles - complete with hook, line, and sinker-- which Timothy leaves for Phillip is an important legacy which ensures Phillip's survival. In the end, the seventy-year-old thinks nothing of laying down his life to protect Phillip from the storm. This sacrifice seems a result of friendship, but in truth Timothy showed the same willingness to sacrifice just two days after meeting Phillip, when Timothy dove into the water to save the boy from the sharks. As a main character in a children's book, Timothy shows a character truly worthy of emulation and love.



Stew Cat

Stew Cat originally belonged to the ship's cook. After the *Hato* sinks, Stew Cat finds his own way onto the raft with Timothy. This shows the cat's amazing survival skills, which Stew Cat demonstrates over and over on the cay. Stew Cat survives the hurricane which kills Timothy, and afterwards the cat protects Phillip from the sharp-beaked birds which attack him. Stew Cat is as loyal a friend and protector for Phillip as Timothy was.

Phillip Enright Sr.

Phillip Enright Sr. is a brave but gentle man. No reason is provided as to why he does not join the American armed forces during World War II, but Phillip chooses to serve his country in another way. He bravely moves his family to the island of Curacao where Phillip puts his oil refining expertise to noble use. The increased fuel production for which he is partially responsible serves the Allied forces fighting against Germany in the war. Thus Phillip finds a non-violent yet highly effective way of assisting the war effort. Phillip's courage is further demonstrated by his cool demeanor after the German submarines start patrolling Curacao.

The island is in peril, as evidenced by the destruction of the oil refinery on the neighboring island of Aruba. Phillip assesses the situation intelligently and does not let his emotions carry him away. He knows that even if the refinery is attacked, his family home in Willemstad is most likely safe. Even so, he asks his wife and son to sleep downstairs as an added precaution against torpedoes. Phillip shares important information with his son, respecting Phillip Jr.'s intelligence and maturity-level. Phillip also explains to his son that the Chinese crewmen who refuse to sail oil tankers past the German submarines are not cowards as the angry townspeople imply. Phillip's level-headed wisdom provides an excellent role model for his son.

Grace Enright

Grace Enright is Phillip's mother. She is a nervous woman who lives in fear that Phillip will injure himself. The normal cuts and scrapes sustained by a young boy worry Grace more than they worry some other mothers. Perhaps she was not always so fearful. Grace led a sheltered life in Virginia before her husband moved the family to the exotic island of Curacao to help the war effort. Being uprooted and asked to live in a foreign environment must have been frightening for the already nervous woman. Thus it is no surprise that she reacts with extreme fear when the Germans surround Curacao. Her choice to flee to Virginia is made out of fear, and actually endangers her and Phillip more than if they had stayed in Curacao.

Grace's fear often expresses itself through prejudice. She is afraid of the unknown, and that is why she dislikes black people. Grace's sheltered upbringing in segregated Virginia prevented her from getting to know any of the local African-Americans, and she is frightened by the tough black sailors of Curacao. Her prejudice poisons Phillip's mind



for he doesn't know any black people either; his mother sees to that. Losing her son at sea causes Grace to realize that her fearful flight was a mistake, and she re-evaluates her fears in the wake of the *Hato* disaster. By the end of the book she has overcome her fear of flying. Grace's prejudice is not resolved in the story, but the reader can guess that Timothy's sacrifice has most likely opened her mind.

The Captain of the S.S. Hato

The captain of the *Hato* reacts coolly in a crisis and manages to save the passengers despite the fact that the ship sinks only two minutes after being torpedoed. His name and his fate are unknown in the novel, but the captain symbolizes the heroism found so often in the darkest days of World War II.

The Captain of the American Destroyer

The unnamed captain of the destroyer serves as an information conduit between Phillip and the world he has been isolated from for several months. The captain informs Phillip's parents of his rescue and confirms for Phillip that the cay is located in the Devil's Mouth. When Phillip tells the captain he has been on the cay since April, however, the captain refuses to believe it. The captain's doubt underscores the impossibility of the feat Phillip and Timothy managed. To survive for any length of time on a cay without food or water is amazing. That Timothy survived as long as he did given his advanced age, and that he ensured Phillip's survival, is a remarkable legacy, so remarkable that the captain refuses to believe it at first.

Henrik van Boven

Henrik is Phillip's best friend on the island of Curacao. They attend school together and enjoy playing pretend pirate games along the bay. Henrik is Dutch, as are most of the people on Curacao. Unlike his American friend, Phillip, Henrik has been exposed to various cultures in his young life. Henrik is comfortable with the black people on Curacao and cannot understand why Phillip's mother dislikes blacks. Henrik's own mother is a jolly woman, who does not worry unnecessarily like Phillip's mother does. Henrik's father is in the government. Therefore, Henrik feels important on the schoolyard, because he has more information about the on-going war with Germany than any of his classmates. Yet, despite Henrik's knowledge of the war and his open-minded attitude, Henrik is still an immature young boy. To Henrik, the war is a game like the pirate games he and Phillip play. Henrik enjoys talking about the war's damage reports, but does not sense the depth of the human tragedy which underlies the reports. Henrik's immaturity is normal for his age, but after Phillip returns from his experience on the cay, Phillip finds he no longer has much in common with his former best friend.

Hannah Grumbs

Hannah Grumbs is the woman who raised Timothy in the absence of his parents. He knows no other parent besides her.



Objects/Places

Curacao

Curacao is one of the Dutch islands off the coast of Venezuela. During World War II, Curacao's refinery and oil tankers make it an important strategic site for the Allied Forces. Dutch is the primary language spoken here during this time, yet the island has an international flavor as Americans and people of other nationalities arrive in Curacao to help the war effort.

Willemstad

Willemstad is a town on the island of Curacao. It is here where Phillip and his parents make their home. Phillip's father, an American, moves to Willemstad to work at the refinery there and help with the war effort. Phillip Sr. is an expert at refining petroleum and during World War II the Royal Dutch Shell company recruits him to lend his expertise to increasing the production of aviation fuel for the Allied forces.

Koningin Emma Brug

The Koningin Emma Brug is the Dutch name for the Queen Emma pontoon bridge on the island of Curacao. It spans the channel leading to the harbor of Schottegat. Built on floats, the pontoon bridge swings open to allow ships to pass. From this vantage-point, Phillip and his friend Henrik watch the seas for signs of German submarines.

Fort Amsterdam

Overlooking the harbor at Willemstad, Fort Amsterdam is an ancient fortress built to defend Curacao. Phillip and his friends often play there, imagining they are protecting the harbor from pirate attacks. When the German submarines arrive, however, the townsmen man the fort in earnest, aiming guns from its walls at the deceptively calm sea.

S.S. Empire Tern

The *Tern* is a British tanker armed with machine guns fore and aft. After German ships choke the fuel supply sailing out of Curacao, the British send the armed *Tern* to carry fuel away from the island for use by the Royal Air Force. Even this precaution proves useless as the *Tern* is torpedoed and sunk by a German submarine. Phillip's father gives him a tour of the *Tern* before it sets sail, and Phillip can scarcely believe the huge ship now lies at the bottom of the ocean.



S.S. Hato

The S.S. *Hato* is the small Dutch freighter which is supposed to take Phillip and his mother to Miami after making a delivery in Panama. Two days out of Panama, the *Hato* is torpedoed by a German submarine and sinks to the sea floor. Phillip and his mother become separated during the evacuation of the ship, and Phillip winds up on a raft with Timothy and Stew Cat.

Charlotte Amalie

Charlotte Amalie is Timothy's home town on St. Thomas Island. As St. Thomas is one of the Virgin Islands, Phillip tells Timothy that makes him an American. Phillip has a hard time believing that Timothy was not born in Africa, but Timothy insists he was born and raised in the islands.

The Cay

A cay is a small island, sometimes called a key. The cay where Timothy and Phillip become stranded is isolated from the ocean shipping lanes by a forty mile stretch of underwater reef. Thus a passing aircraft is their only hope of rescue. Timothy has spent a lifetime working on ships and around the ocean, so he knows how to survive on the island and teaches Phillip the survival skills he needs to survive without Timothy. Phillip learns the layout of the entire cay by smell, touch, and sound.

The Hole on the Reef

The coral reef on the north end of the island is a dangerous place for a blind boy to walk. Phillip risks falling off the side, falling through a hole, or stepping on poisonous sea urchins. At first, Timothy won't allow Phillip to walk out on the reef, but when months pass and no one rescues them, Timothy realizes Phillip must learn to fish for himself in case anything happens to Timothy. Timothy drives stakes into the reef so that Phillip can feel his way down to the fishing hole on the reef where Timothy catches most of their food.

Langosta

Langosta are the native lobster found around the cays. They are similar to the common variety of lobster except that they do not have claws.

Setting

The Cay opens in February 1942 on the island of Curacao, then part of the Dutch West Indies. When Phillip is ship wrecked, the setting shifts to an unnamed cay deep in the Devil's Mouth, long U-shaped coral banks in the Caribbean. Most of the action takes place between April and August of 1942, although the narrative actually concludes in April of 1943 and the entire book is written from the perspective of an adult Phillip recalling his childhood adventure.



Social Sensitivity

Theodore Taylor dedicated his book "To Dr. King's dream, which can only come true if the very young know and understand," but failed to recognize elements that have since led critics to label *The Cay* a stereotypical and racist work.

Part of the problem stems from Taylor's choice of Phillip as the sole narrator. Although Taylor attempts to show that Phillip comes to respect and love Timothy, the only physical descriptions of Timothy occur early in their acquaintance, before Phillip goes blind.

For the most part, Taylor's language is carefully chosen. The word "Negro" is used only four times in *The Cay*, and there is one reference to Phillip's recollection of visiting a "colored town" in Virginia. Otherwise, the terms "black people" and "black man" are used. But Taylor has Timothy refer to Phillip as "young bahss" until Phillip asks to be called by his first name—leading some critics to claim that Timothy's dignity is destroyed by his subservient behavior.

Perhaps Taylor intends Timothy to be a patient mentor who allows Phillip to vent his anger within definite limits. When Phillip demands more water, for example, Timothy ignores both his pleas and his insults; he reacts angrily when Timothy stumbles off the raft, and when Phillip refuses to work and insults him, Timothy responds with a slap, then quietly resumes his own work. Although Phillip never, even in anger, calls Timothy anything other than a "black man," he initially thinks of black people as "them—not like 'us,'" and his early descriptions of his companion reflect this bias. Taylor attempts to show that Phillip becomes comfortable enough to question Timothy about racial prejudice. Timothy explains, "I don' like some white people my own self, but 'twould be outrageous if I didn' like any o' dem."

Through his association with Timothy, Phillip learns that friendship can and should transcend racial barriers. At the end of the book, Phillip states that he prefers the companionship of the blacks at Curacao's Ruyterkade market to that of his old friends: "Some of them had known old Timothy from Charlotte Amalie. I felt close to them." But while undoubtedly well-intentioned, Taylor's work leaves itself open to charges of being overly simplistic. Phillip has trouble communicating with his parents upon his return to Curacao, commenting, "I had the feeling that neither of them really understood what had happened on our cay." Early in the book, Taylor would have had readers ascribe Phillip's burgeoning prejudice to his mother's influence: "they are not the same as you, Phillip. They are different and they live differently. That's the way it must be." At the end of the book, Taylor portrays Grace Enright as reconciled to life in Curacao, but it remains unclear whether her underlying prejudice has been or will be changed by Phillip's ordeal.

Taylor's characterization of Grace Enright is also problematic for its sexual stereotyping. Nervous and extremely emotional, Grace scolds Phillip one moment and hugs him the next. She has always wanted to leave Willemstad and return to Virginia, "where no one



talked Dutch, and there was no smell of gas or oil, and there weren't as many black people around." Unlike her husband and her son, she is overly frightened of the submarines and overly annoyed at the wartime shortage of vegetables.

When Phillip and his father balk at the idea of leaving Curacao, Grace cries and accuses them of not loving her; insistent upon leaving but afraid of flying, she books passage on the fated S.S. Hato.

It is clear that the burden of guilt for Phillip's shipwreck ought not to lie solely upon Grace. Nor, similarly, can the source of racial prejudice be so localized.

Taylor successfully illustrates that individuals learn tolerance from other individuals, a lesson that implicitly suggests that racial prejudice can be eradicated. The Cay falls short as a parable, however, because of its imperfectly conceived characters, who as a result are left to speak only for themselves.

Literary Qualities

The Cay reflects Theodore Taylor's experience in the motion picture industry.

Like a movie script, the novel presents an exciting and suspenseful plot in a series of dramatic, vividly described scenes.

Also cinematic are Taylor's effective use of dialogue and his choice of an exotic setting. Cleverly written, the dialogue provides background information while advancing the plot. The setting, the Caribbean during World War II, is portrayed in extensive sensory detail consistent with Phillip's role as narrator.

Early in the book Phillip describes visible characteristics of the people and places he sees, but after he goes blind details of sound, smell, and touch become predominant.

Taylor skillfully combines a number of relatively conventional plot elements: an adventuresome young boy's conflict with an overprotective mother, a helpless town menaced by a wartime enemy, a shipwreck, the need to survive on an uncharted island, the developing cooperation between two people of totally different backgrounds, the characters' serious physical limitations, a young man's growing respect for an old person of lower social status, and an old man's struggle to achieve one final victory over the natural environment.

Because the novel is Phillip's story, the other characters are less fully developed than he, and most seem essentially stereotypical. The characterization of Timothy has been criticized frequently.

Taylor intended both a realistic portrayal of race relationships in the 1940s and an idealistic picture of the friendship that can develop when negative societal influences are removed. But the consistent use of Phillip's point of view, while increasing reader identification with the narrator and thus heightening the tale's suspense, concurrently limits the reader's awareness of Timothy's background and the motivation for his actions. Although Taylor tries to balance the picture by showing him lose his temper, overall Timothy is too wise and patient to be completely believable.



Themes

Man in Nature

Unlike the common literary theme of Man *against* Nature, the survival story told in *The Cay* is about living in harmony with nature. Having spent his entire life fishing along the cays, Timothy recognizes both the assets nature provides and the dangers it poses. Without Timothy's wisdom and foresight, young Phillip would have had no chance at survival. Timothy takes advantage of nature's bounty by fishing and catching langosta. He also boils sea-grape leaves for stew and enhances their diet with mussels and sea urchin eggs. Timothy takes advantage of the falling rain by preparing a water catchment from driftwood and bamboo to funnel the rainfall into their empty water keg. He knows how to determine if food is safe to eat and if water is safe to enter. Timothy gets to know the cay in detail, and then begins gradually teaching its layout to Phillip.

Once Timothy has mastered their natural environment, he encourages Phillip to explore as well, but keeps Phillip from straying beyond safety. Timothy begins by creating a rope from sea-grape vines to guide Phillip from their campsite to the friendly east beach of the cay. When Phillip is comfortable with this routine, Timothy makes him a driftwood cane and encourages him to slowly expand his boundaries. Timothy keeps Phillip away from the dangerous reefs on the north beach where Timothy fishes and catches the langosta. Yet Timothy recognizes the power of nature and knows that a life-threatening storm will inevitably hit their small island. Timothy plans for this event with great care long before he informs Phillip of the risks. By the time the storm arrives, Timothy has taught Phillip to safely navigate to a fishing hole on the reef and taught the blind boy to fish there so that Phillip will be self-sufficient in case Timothy perishes. Timothy sacrifices his life to save Phillip's during the storm. By the time Phillip is left alone on the island, he has gained the survival skills he needs to hold out until help arrives.

Dependence vs. Independence

The first half of *The Cay* deals with the concept of dependence, while the second half of the story explores independence. Twelve-year-old Phillip is blinded when the *Hato* sinks, and Phillip finds himself adrift at sea at the mercy of a stranger. Having learned racial prejudice from his mother, Phillip is loathe to depend on Timothy for survival. However, blind and ill-equipped to survive on his own in the middle of the ocean, Phillip has no choice. Initially he is angered by his dependence on Timothy and seeks to find ways to establish his superiority. However, Timothy proves to be kind, strong, and reliable, and Phillip gradually realizes he has no choice but to depend on Timothy. Phillip is grateful that Timothy is willing to care for him and no longer resents his dependency.

However, Timothy cares enough about Phillip to teach him to be independent. Timothy knows that he may not always be around to provide for Phillip, and determines to teach



him to provide for himself. Comfortable now with his dependency, Phillip resists Timothy's attempts to make him learn survival skills. Phillip prefers to continue relying on Timothy. Timothy refuses to allow Phillip to remain dependent, however. Timothy does not push Phillip beyond his limitations, but gradually teaches him to transcend them. Timothy first insists Phillip learn to weave a sleeping mat for himself. Although Phillip resists this, he eventually does weave the mat and gains confidence from the act. Timothy further encourages him by making him a cane and telling him which areas of the island are safe to explore. Eventually, Phillip becomes so confident he volunteers to climb a tree and pluck coconuts from the top. This marks a turning point for Phillip's independence. From this point on, Timothy is able to teach Phillip all the skills he will need to survive on the island alone.

Racial Prejudice

The Cay is dedicated to Martin Luther King Jr.'s dream of racial equality. King's dream and the novel focus on race relations between blacks and whites. Yet the author transcends this specific focus by setting his story against the backdrop of World War II. The Germans who threaten the waters around Curacao have gone down in history for their violent, systematic murdering of the Jewish people. Germany's actions were founded on extreme racial prejudice, which permeated their entire society. This backdrop serves as a warning against all prejudice everywhere, and in context of the story, it highlights the social prejudice against black people. Phillip's mother is from Virginia, which was once a slave-holding state.

At the time of the story, black people were still segregated in Virginia. This segregation leads to fear of the unknown, expressed as prejudice. Phillip's mother does not like black people, because she does not know them; she is afraid of their cultural differences.

When Phillip meets Timothy, Phillip begins to share his mother's prejudice. Phillip does not understand why Timothy will only give him a little bit of water out of the keg, and he thinks it is because Timothy is mean. As Phillip begins to understand his situation and get to know Timothy, he realizes that Timothy's actions are meant to help them survive. Phillip repents of his prejudicial views, and he and Timothy become friends. However, Phillip's prejudice resurfaces when Timothy speaks of a jumbi on the island. Timothy's spiritual beliefs are grounded in voodoo, a practice common in that time and place amongst the black populace of the West Indies.

Voodoo is completely foreign to Phillip, thus, it scares him, and he is quick to believe that Timothy will become violent because of his belief system. When Timothy's beliefs do not lead to violence, Phillip realizes that ideas which seem strange to him are not necessarily threatening. After Phillip returns to Curacao, he realizes he is now more comfortable around the island's black population than he is with his former friends. Phillip has come full circle, from disliking the black race to embracing it.



Themes/Characters

The principal character in *The Cay* is Phillip Enright Jr., an eleven-year-old boy who is shipwrecked as he returns to the old family home in Norfolk, Virginia, from Willemstad, Curacao. Early in the novel, Phillip considers war a game only slightly more serious than the pirate raids he stages with his friends. After German submarines attack the island, he disobeys his mother and visits the harbor to look for enemy ships. A typical child, he is upset at the prospect of returning to Virginia with his mother, insisting that he will not leave his friends. When their ship, the S.S. Hato, is torpedoed and Phillip finds himself alone on a raft with Timothy, he is filled with self-pity, concerned only about the head wound he suffered while abandoning the sinking Hato and his separation from his mother and father. At first Phillip behaves irresponsibly, demanding extra water and stumbling off the raft.

He opposes landing on the cay and, once there, insults Timothy and refuses to help construct their shelter.

Gradually, however, Phillip comes to respect Timothy's superior knowledge, and develops the courage to climb palm trees and retrieve coconuts, the self-discipline to rebuild the shelter after a storm, and the self-reliance to find food for himself and his adopted cat, Stew Cat, after he has buried Timothy. When he is rescued and returned to Willemstad, Phillip has trouble communicating his experiences and feels much older than his friends.

Other than Phillip, Timothy is the only character developed in any detail, and the increasing depth of his characterization reflects Phillip's maturing sensibilities. Phillip is unaware of Timothy until he regains consciousness and finds himself stranded on the life raft with this old man who he condescendingly decides "look[s] pure African." Phillip loses his sight only after three days at sea; before that, he is able to see his raftmate. He describes Timothy in stereotypical terms, mentioning his "flat" nose, "pink-purple lips," "face [that] couldn't have been blacker," "mass of wiry gray hair," and very white teeth, and he repeatedly refers to Timothy's ugliness over the course of the book, thus establishing and reinforcing this negative image.

Timothy's behavior is gentle and considerate. On the raft, when Phillip is obviously suffering physical and psychological pain, Timothy patiently allows himself to become the target of Phillip's resentment. By addressing the boy as "young bahss," he behaves according to Phillip's expectations and thus further calms his anxieties. Nevertheless, Timothy combines firmness with kindness. He carefully rations water, shames Phillip into weaving sleeping mats, encourages the boy to explore the beach, and cajoles him into climbing the palm tree. When Phillip tries Timothy's patience too far and the old man responds with a slap, Phillip begins to respect his companion.

As Phillip becomes more mature, he gains independence and the ability to survive despite his physical limitations.



He learns that there are many kinds of strength, some of them much more important than physical strength. After Timothy's death, Phillip must find the emotional strength to rely upon himself as well as the mental strength to think for himself and to remember what Timothy has taught him.

Taylor clearly intends to suggest that Phillip's prejudices are eliminated by his experience of nearly ideal friendship on the cay. To emphasize this theme, Taylor employs the device of physical blindness as a metaphor for ignorance and bias; through blindness, Phillip gains insight, and though his sight is restored after his return to civilized society, his attitudes are permanently changed.

Underlying the novel is an anti-war theme. Though Phillip at first reacts to the submarines' presence in Curacao's harbor with childish excitement, he begins to recognize the brutality of war when he witnesses an attack on the S.S.

Empire Tern, a British tanker torpedoed off the coast of the island. Timothy comments on the senseless cruelty of war; when Phillip blames his mother for his plight, Timothy sarcastically responds, "she started dis terrible wahr, eh, young bahss?"



Style

Point of View

The Cay is written as a first-person narrative. The story is told by protagonist Phillip Enright. Initially the reader believes young Phillip is speaking, but as the story progresses, the narrator intrudes to place the events in historical context. Thus the story is actually told by Phillip at an unspecified later date. This technique of narrative intrusion is a wonderful choice for young readers. Given the danger Phillip often finds himself in, it is a comfort to the reader to realize that he has survived to tell the tale.

Phillip's perspective changes radically from the beginning of the novel to the end. The change, however, is not due to a personality change, but rather to a process of maturation which is intensified by his experiences on the cay. The maturity and wisdom which Phillip gains would likely have occurred in any case, for his father at the beginning of the story presents himself as a mature role model. Yet on the cay Phillip achieves a degree of maturity which might not have been possible had he not lived through such a trying ordeal. The role model Timothy provides under these extreme circumstances changes Phillip's views on prejudice and teaches Phillip a level of wisdom which most boys do not have a chance to learn. The narrator, the older Phillip, betrays no hint of bitterness over his ordeal. He has the maturity to appreciate what he gained on the cay.

Setting

The sparse setting of the deserted island where Timothy and Phillip find themselves enables their relationship to play out without distraction. On the cay, there is little to do but survive. Personal growth is a natural result of their success over deprivation and danger. The cay's simplicity is important for Phillip's character. There is not much on the island, and it is only a mile long, so Phillip is able to memorize his environment by touch, smell and sound after being blinded at sea. The loss of his visual sense causes him to rely on his other senses, and Phillip learns to appreciate the cay more than he would have had he been able to see. He comes to love the feel of the sun on his face, its force indicating the time of day; the dampness of the ground tells him when it is early morning. He knows the sound and feel of the two kinds of shrubs on the island, and memorizes the location of each palm tree near their campsite. This memorized detail proves vital to his survival after Timothy dies in the storm.

The novel is set during the World War II era. The menace of German submarines haunts the coastal ports near Phillip's home on Curacao. The oil refineries on Curacao and nearby Aruba elevate these small islands to a position of international prominence. Their ability to ship fuel to the Allied forces makes the islands a strategic battleground between Germany and her enemies. The locals take fierce pride in the service they provide, and the war setting encourages demonstrations of great courage. The natives



in the islands are hard-working and wise, living in tune with nature. This provides a sharp contrast to the technology-driven countries fighting over the islands. Finally, the war setting provides an appropriate backdrop, an ever-present reminder of the author's theme of racial prejudice.

Language and Meaning

Language is important in *The Cay*, because it emphasizes the cultural differences between Timothy and Phillip Enright. To begin with, Timothy does not have a last name. This seems so unlikely to Phillip that he assumes Timothy comes from Africa, even though Timothy assures him he grew up in the Virgin Islands. Timothy's island drawl is the lyrical speech typical of the area's black population. Phillip finds his voice pleasant and soothing, which becomes even more important to Phillip after Phillip loses his sight. Another distinctive facet of Timothy's language is his lack of formal education. Timothy proves himself to be wise and experienced, but his vocabulary lacks the element a formal education can provide.

Timothy's speech is written phonetically by the author, allowing the reader to experience his accented tones. He calls Phillip "young boss" but it is written as "young bahss." Timothy's favorite adjective is outrageous, which he uses to describe virtually everything, yet the adjective takes on a slightly different meaning each time. When Phillip asks why his mother doesn't like black people, Timothy tells him, "'I don' like some white people my own self, but 'twould be outrageous if I didn' like any o' dem.'" (Chapter 10, pg. 79) Aside from Timothy's colorful patois, the language of the cay itself is colorful, too. Young readers will learn about sea-grape bushes, langosta, moray eels, and sea urchins. Basic sea-faring terminology is mixed in with vivid descriptions of the natural environment, immersing the reader fully into the island experience.

Structure

The Cay is divided into nineteen chapters of varying length. The first two chapters are the longest, and tell the story of the American boy, Phillip Enright, and how he came to live in Curacao. The menace of the German navy is introduced and the local reaction to the threat of war is explored. Phillip's mother reacts by leaving and taking Phillip with her, despite the danger of travel by sea. This early section foreshadows the sinking of the passenger ship in Chapter 3. Chapters 4, 5, and 6 cover the time at sea, when Phillip and Timothy find themselves stranded together on a raft with Stew Cat.

Phillip is blinded in Chapter 4, which is the low point of the first half of the book. Chapters 7 through 11 cover the critical first few days on the cay which determine their chances of survival. Also during this section, Phillip learns to trust Timothy and begins to work with his new friend to help them survive. Despite their circumstances, the first month on the island is an idyllic time. Timothy and Phillip are focused on their day to day needs and both have great hope of being rescued quickly.



Chapter 12 marks the turning point of their time on the island. When Timothy suffers a bout of malaria, he and Phillip realize just how vulnerable Phillip would be without Timothy. The malaria episode foreshadows Timothy's ultimate death in Chapter 15. In the intervening chapters, Timothy focuses all his efforts on helping Phillip achieve independence. Chapters 16 through 19 details Phillip's final days, alone now, on the island. He does Timothy's sacrifice justice by using the skills he's learned to rebuild what the storm destroyed and provide for himself and Stew Cat. Phillip's triumph over adversity and his survival on the cay are the climax of the story. Chapter 19 includes Phillip's rescue and a brief resolution as Phillip is reunited with his family.



Quotes

"Father was smiling and very gay but when the *Hato's* whistle blasted three times, meaning it was time to go, he said good-by to us between clenched teeth. I clung to him for a long time." Chapter 2, pg. 27

"I saw a tall man standing on the wall of Fort Amsterdam, waving at us. I knew it was my father. I'll never forget that tall, lonely figure standing on the sea wall." Chapter 2, pg. 27

"I blurted out, 'I wouldn't even be here with you if it wasn't for my mother.'

I knew Timothy was staring at me through the darkness when he said, 'She started dis terrible wahr, eh, young bahss?'" Chapter 3, pg. 39

"Something slapped up against my leg, and I thought it was Timothy. I knew how to swim, but didn't know which way to go. So I was treading water. Then I heard Timothy's frightened roar, 'Sharks,' and he was thrashing about near me." Chapter 6, pg. 55

"Tell me the truth, Timothy, how old are you?'

He sighed deeply, 'More dan seventy. Eben more than seventy....'

He was very old. Old enough to die there." Chapter 8, pg. 70

"Why b'feesh different color, or flower b'different color? I true don't know, Philleep, but I true tink beneath d'skin is all d'same.'" Chapter 10, pg. 79

"I helped him to his feet, and we went up the hill together, Timothy leaning on me for support for the first time. He never really regained his strength." Chapter 12, pg. 96

"I realized then why he had used our rope sparingly; why he had made my guideline down to east beach from vines instead of rope. Everyday, I learned of something new that Timothy had done so we could survive." Chapter 14, pg. 107

"It was strange and eerie in the eye of the hurricane. I knew we were surrounded on all sides by violent winds, but the little cay was calm and quiet. I reached over for Timothy. He was cradling his head in his arms, still making those small noises, like a hurt animal." Chapter 15, pg. 114

"I knew there was very little I could do for him except to sit by him in the light rain, holding his hand. In my world of darkness, I had learned that holding a hand could be like medicine." Chapter 15, pg. 116

"And there they were! Not two or three, but at least a dozen, lashed together, each with a barbed hook and bolt sinker. They were one more part of the legacy Timothy had left me." Chapter 16, pg. 122



"I said, 'Hello.'

There was no answer from the man. I suppose he was just staring at me.

Then he yelled to someone on the boat, 'My Lord, it's a naked boy. And a cat!'" Chapter 19, pg. 140

Adaptations

Several of Taylor's novels deal with the adventures of a young boy forced to grow up quickly in an unfamiliar setting; in addition to *The Cay*, these include *The Children's War*, *The Maldonado Miracle*, and a trilogy set in Hatteras, North Carolina (*Teetoncey*, *Teetoncey and Ben O'Neal*, and *The Odyssey of Ben O'Neal*).

Taylor's interest in combining high adventure with a background of historical fact can be seen not only in these novels but also in many of his nonfiction books such as *Air Raid—Pearl Harbor!*, *Rebellion Town: Williamsburg 1776*, *Battle in the Arctic Seas: The Story of Convoy PQ17*, *The Battle of Midway Island*, *H.M.S. Hood vs. Bismarck: The Battleship Battle*, and *Battle in the English Channel*.

Starring James Earl Jones as Timothy, *The Cay* was filmed for television and aired October 21, 1974.



Topics for Discussion

1. Early in the novel the narrator describes his mock battles with his friends and the submarine attacks upon Aruba and Curacao. How do these details help to prepare the reader for Phillip's later experience? What emotions are aroused by the destruction of the S.S. Empire Tern?

2. Henrik Van Boven is Phillip's closest friend in Curacao. How has Phillip's attitude toward Henrik changed after his stay on the cay?

3. Henrik and his mother are very different from Phillip and Grace Enright.

Why does Taylor emphasize these differences?

4. Grace Enright hates living in Curacao. What are some of the things she objects to? Is Taylor's portrayal of Mrs. Enright largely based on gender stereotypes? Is the negative portrait balanced by the fact that she remains calm when the S.S. Hato is torpedoed?

5. Phillip always speaks admiringly of his father. How does Taylor indicate the closeness of their relationship? Does Timothy eventually become a substitute father? How are the two relationships similar? How are they different?

6. Phillip remembers life in three places: Norfolk (Virginia), Willemstad (Curacao), and the cay. How does he feel about each place? How does his life differ in these places? What part does each location play in his maturation?

7. At different times, Phillip considers his loss of sight both an advantage and a handicap. When is it a handicap?

When is it an advantage? What changes Phillip's attitude toward his blindness?

8. Some critics have described *The Cay* as racist, alleging that Timothy is portrayed as a stereotypical black man.

They object to the description of his physical appearance, the language he uses, and his "subservience" to Phillip.

Do you consider any of these criticisms valid? Which? In what way(s)? Is there any other explanation for Taylor's inclusion of these details?

9. Critics have asserted that while Phillip's attitude toward Timothy changes somewhat, his "conversion" from racism is incomplete. Since the novel is set in 1942, are Phillip's attitudes representative of the time? Are his mother's? How does Phillip's attitude toward Timothy change? Are there similar changes in his attitude toward other blacks?



10. In the early part of the novel Phillip often acts childish and spoiled. What specific actions illustrate his immaturity? In what ways does Phillip mature during his stay on the cay?

11. Phillip returns to Willemstad almost one year after he left on the S.S.

Hato. What changes does Phillip observe in Curacao, his friends, his parents, and himself?



Essay Topics

Give two ways in which Stew Cat helped Phillip survive. How did his presence affect Phillip?

What do you think Phillip means when he says Henrik seems too young to him after he finally returns to Curacao?

Do you think helping Phillip was good for Timothy? Why or why not?

Why do you think Phillip is so angry at Timothy when they are on the raft together?

Was Timothy being kind or mean when he makes Phillip weave his own bed mat? Why?

Why does Timothy's voice sound anxious when Phillip asks him to promise never to leave him?

How do you feel about Timothy and what he did for Phillip? What is the most important thing Phillip learns from Timothy?



Ideas for Reports and Papers

1. The Cay opens with descriptions of the harbor and the city of Willemstad, Curacao. Research the area as it was in 1942 and as it is today. Are Taylor's accounts accurate? What major changes have taken place on Curacao since 1942?

2. Phillip and Henrik mention the conquest of Holland by the Germans and the dispersal of the Dutch fleet. Using histories of World War II, explain how and when Holland was conquered.

3. Phillip hints at the importance of merchant ships in the Caribbean during World War II. Investigate the role of the merchant marine during World War II, especially in the Caribbean.

4. Phillip Enright Sr. is an American oil man working for Royal Dutch Shell during World War II. What role did American oil men play at that time in locating and producing oil in the Caribbean? To what extent are Americans still involved in oil refining in that area?

How has their role affected American policy in the region?

5. Phillip sights a German submarine about a mile outside Willemstad harbor.

How prevalent were German submarines in the Caribbean and off the American coasts during World War II?

What precautions did people on the mainland and in the islands take? Did shipping continue?

6. Taylor has been criticized for having Timothy speak in rather broad dialect.

Using linguistic sources, investigate the dialects spoken in the Caribbean—especially in Timothy's hometown, Charlotte Amalie, St. Thomas. Is Timothy's language realistic? How does it differ from black dialects spoken in the United States during the 1940s?

7. Timothy and Phillip land on an unnamed cay deep inside the Devil's Mouth. Using geography books and other library reference sources, describe the area where Timothy and Phillip land.

How logical is Timothy's theory about the cay's origin?

8. Timothy's death is a direct result of the hurricane which destroys nearly everything on the island. How accurate is Taylor's description of an Atlantic hurricane? What kinds of damage have resulted from recent hurricanes in the Caribbean? Timothy says the July hurricanes are the most destructive. Is there any factual basis for his observation?



9. Phillip and Timothy, adrift on their raft, seem similar to Huck and Jim in *Huckleberry Finn*. Read Mark Twain's novel, and point out the similarities and differences between the two books.

10. *The Cay* also has been compared with *The Adventures of Robinson Crusoe* and other novels dealing with survival in an uncivilized area. Read one of these books and write a report comparing it to *The Cay*.

Further Study

Carpenter, Humphrey and Mari Prichard, eds. *The Oxford Companion to Children's Literature*. New York: Oxford University Press, 1984. Brief biographical entry mentioning *The Cay* as Taylor's best known book.

Commire, Anne, ed. *Something About the Author*. Vol. 54. Detroit: Gale Research, 1982. Extensive biography along with comments from the author about his use of actual experience in his fiction.

De Montreville, Doris and Elizabeth D. Crawford, eds. *Fourth Book of Junior Authors*. New York: H. W. Wilson, 1978. Autobiographical sketch of Taylor, followed by a limited bibliography and a short discussion of the controversy surrounding *The Cay*.

Kirkpatrick, D. L., ed. *Twentieth Century Children's Writers*. New York: St.

Martin's Press, 1983. Brief biographical notes and critical comments, with an extensive listing of Taylor's works for both young readers and adults.

Schwartz, Albert V. "The Cay: Racism Still Rewarded." In *The Black American in Books for Children: Readings in Racism*. Edited by Donnaræ MacCann and Gloria Woodard. Metuchen, NJ: Scarecrow Press, 1972. Criticizes *The Cay* for negative images of Timothy (subservience, physical appearance, and language), for Phillip's "incomplete conversion" from racism, and for emphasis upon the "sameness" of these two characters instead of "celebration of ethnic differences."

Tate, Binnie. "In House and Out House: Authenticity and the Black Experience in Children's Books." In *The Black American in Books for Children: Readings in Racism*. Edited by Donnaræ MacCann and Gloria Woodard.

Metuchen, NJ: Scarecrow Press, 1972.

Criticism of Taylor for his failure to show Phillip's growth in human understanding, and to demonstrate that Timothy's "dignity" and "humaneness" result from "his background and culture."



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