

Harriet Tubman: Conductor on the Underground Railroad Study Guide

Harriet Tubman: Conductor on the Underground Railroad by Ann Petry

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Overview

Harriet Tubman: Conductor on the Underground Railroad is an interesting and well-written book that tells the story of an extraordinarily courageous and committed woman. Tubman continues to inspire those seeking dignity for all people in America. Petry's dramatization of Tubman's perseverance and sense of purpose in leading slaves to freedom shows how a motivated individual can bring about change.

Petry intends for Harriet Tubman to fill a void in an important part of United States history and asserts that "the majority of textbooks used in high schools do not give an adequate or accurate picture of the history of slavery in the United States." A completely adequate and accurate account of slavery would no doubt require many volumes, yet this biographical novel represents significant movement toward that ideal. It juxtaposes well-known historical information with details about Tubman's "underground" activities. This technique adds depth and relevance to the story of Tubman's achievements.

About the Author

Born in Old Saybrook, Connecticut, circa 1908, Ann Lane Petry initially followed a family tradition of pharmaceutical practice, graduating from the college of pharmacy at the University of Connecticut and practicing for four years before moving to New York to pursue her literary and journalistic interests. After working for four years as an advertising salesperson and writer at the Amsterdam News New York bureau, she left to work as a reporter and woman's page editor for People's Voice, another New York publication.

Petry's first literary work was a short story published in 1943 in the Crisis, the official publication for the National Association for the Advancement of Colored People (NAACP). The following year, she participated in a project designed to study the effects of segregation on ghetto children. Following the publication of short stories in Phylon and the Crisis, Petry won a fellowship from Houghton Mifflin publishing company in 1945.

Thematically, Petry's work has focused on class and gender distinctions. Her short story "Like a Winding Sheet," about a male who beats his wife after confronting prejudice outside the home, was included in Best American Short Stories of 1946. Petry's novels have also received considerable critical acclaim.

The Street (1946), considered by some to be her most impressive novel, dramatizes the limitations and consequences of ghetto life. Country Life (1947), Petry's second novel, further demonstrates her skill and versatility in depicting the black experience. Her third adult novel, The Narrows (1963), debunks myths that posit the North as a haven for blacks by contrasting the "rootless existence" of northern blacks with the close knit, nurturing relationships of southern blacks.

Setting

The biography begins in 1820 with Tubman's birth into an environment of considerable uncertainty and tension.

At this time, economic hardships plague plantation owners on Maryland's Eastern Shore, so they are selling slaves to traders farther south. The possibility of being sold in response to the current economic uncertainty creates anxiety among the slaves on Edward Brodas's plantation where Tubman is born. They want freedom, but they remain uncertain of the fate of the free Negroes who have escaped to the North.

Brodas's plantation comprises the "Big House," the cookhouse, the stables, and the "quarter" where the slaves live. Slave housing consists of a group of one-room windowless shacks, all alike and sparsely furnished, with crude fireplaces, dirt floors, and smoking chimneys. Although the nearby Buckwater River isolates the Brodas plantation, communication between slaves is so quick and efficient that they usually have advance knowledge about the arrival of slave traders as well as some idea about who will be sold. The plantation owners' increasing tension about escaped slaves and the slaves' apprehension about being sold combine to make the social atmosphere particularly unstable the year Tubman is born.



Social Sensitivity

Petry portrays the social issues surrounding slavery with great sensitivity.

She shows how a compassionate woman dramatically improved the lives of many others through nonviolent rebellion against grave social injustices. The narrative condemns the institution of slavery without vilifying specific individuals or groups, and objectively analyzes the economic and social conditions that promoted slavery. It also addresses universal issues such as the tendency of the ruling class to abuse power and the ability of the oppressed to effect positive social change through the power of cooperation.

Literary Qualities

Petry's essentially straightforward presentation makes the work accessible to most readers. Although a limited number of passages contain elaborate descriptions, the novel as a whole features a clear, interesting, and unsentimental style. Petry sets forth a vivid description of the plantation and other settings without lingering long over particular scenes. She smoothly incorporates many details about slavery into the action of the novel. For instance, when attempting to keep escaped slaves motivated to continue their arduous journey, Tubman often describes the horrors of the Middle Passage, the journey on slave ships from Africa to the U.S. Graphic but controlled scenes dramatize the pain and terror of the Middle Passage, and they help put Tubman's activities into historical context.

Intermittent flashbacks further contribute to the novel's strong historical framework, and at the end of each chapter Petry gives a historical account of relevant national events taking place at the same time Tubman's story unfolds.

Though the resulting change in tone makes these accounts seem somewhat intrusive, they provide valuable insights into the world in which Tubman lived.

Some contain compelling quotations that clarify characterizations; others serve as a kind of foreshadowing of events that will directly affect Tubman later in the novel, such as the account of Thomas and Sarah Garrett's move to Wilmington, Delaware, in 1820, the year of Tubman's birth.

Petry's insertion of numerous slave songs and poetry into the text enhances the vitality of her work. The musical allusions and excerpts from spirituals communicate the distinctive flavor of the slave community as well as the nature and function of slave songs. Several of the song excerpts allude to the freedom of the Israelites from Egyptian bondage, symbolism that fits well with the common comparison between Tubman and the biblical Moses.

Letters interspersed throughout the work contribute to its authenticity and provide personal yet objective information about influential people of the time.

The correspondence between William Still and Thomas Garrett, for example, provides factual information about the underground movement and reveals the intense personalities of two pivotal figures in the movement.



Themes/Characters

In Harriet Tubman, Ann Petry chronicles the important period in U.S. history when diverse groups of people began to challenge the institution of slavery. William Lloyd Garrison, John Brown, William Still, and Thomas Garrett are important historical figures linked directly or indirectly to Tubman's tremendous challenges and achievements.

A sensitive, reflective youngster known as "Minty," Tubman quickly absorbs both the fears and hopes of the older slaves on the Brodas plantation. Many of the slaves whisper about freedom, and Tubman perceives the uneasiness of her parents, particularly her mother.

In a sense, Tubman is rebellious from the start, consistently resisting attempts to train her for housework or the arts. Resourceful beyond her years, she memorizes the bits of information obtained from her father about survival in the wilderness to use later in what becomes her work, leading fugitive slaves to freedom.

This extremely dangerous enterprise requires patience, practical wisdom, and strength, attributes that Tubman possesses in abundance. She often has to hide in fodder shacks or underbrush for days, waiting for the opportunity to continue the journey north with some assurance of safety. And she frequently has to slow down her own pace to accommodate fleeing slaves who lack her skills in stealthy travel. Increasing suspicion on the part of plantation owners requires astute planning and imaginative disguises. In several instances, Tubman threatens escaping slaves with physical harm, even death, to avert their return to the plantation and the possible consequences of having the secret route to freedom revealed to the slave owners.

Even after the enactment of fugitive slave laws makes the practice of returning runaway slaves to their masters a profitable enterprise, Tubman continues her efforts. Her courage and determination bring freedom to more than three hundred slaves, who escape through the Underground Railroad, a network of stations and friends offering encouragement, food, lodging, and other assistance to slaves seeking refuge in the northern United States or Canada.

Tubman demonstrates a singular determination and fortitude in her personal life. Although she is deeply hurt by her husband, John Tubman, who neglects to support her first efforts to gain freedom, later threatens to warn the master of any attempts she might make to escape, and eventually betrays her by marrying another woman during her absence, Tubman stoically maintains her dignity. She is also extremely loyal to her family, carefully planning the escape of her aging parents.

Harriet Greene (Old Rit), Tubman's mother, cares deeply for her children and objects to Tubman's "audacity" only because she recognizes the full implications of the risks Tubman takes. Benjamin Ross, Tubman's father, is generally more optimistic that she will survive. His hope for her ultimate freedom is implied in the care with which he teaches her survival skills without once stating that he expects or desires her escape.



His most lauded character trait is his honesty, plantation lore being that he has never told a lie. Even when his sons hide with Tubman on one of her Harriet Tubman stamp issued by the U.S. Postal Service (1978).

return trips and Ben carries food to them, he turns his face so that he can honestly say he has not seen his sons.

Edward Brodas owns the plantation on which Tubman is born. He displays some degree of compassion, leaving a provision in his will that Old Rit is to be freed when she turns forty-five, a provision that is not carried out. But he also yields to economic pressure, selling slaves and separating families to ensure his own economic survival. When young Tubman suffers a serious head injury, he tries to sell her—just as he sold two of her siblings years ago—because she is no longer worth anything to him. Anthony (Doc) Thompson, a minister who becomes manager of the plantation upon Brodas's death, continues Brodas's practice of selling slaves to the chain gang when faced with financial difficulties.

Other significant characters in the biography include those who try to help the slaves achieve freedom. One such person is William Still, secretary of the Vigilance Committee in Philadelphia, who not only keeps careful, detailed records of all fugitive slaves, but also provides them with food, money, clothing, and other assistance. A resourceful officer, he remains thoroughly familiar with all the station stops along the Underground Railroad. Thomas Garrett, a Quaker who settles in Delaware, is another friend of the fugitives; he always informs Still when another group is on the way. Known for his generosity and his practice of providing new shoes to the fugitives, he allows approximately twenty-five hundred fugitives to use his home as a temporary refuge.

John Brown, owner of a tanning business in Hudson, Ohio, and a zealous anti-slavery activist, ambitiously plans to free a large number of slaves. Soliciting information from Tubman about the Underground Railroad, Brown seems to have good intentions, but his recklessness and willingness to use violence result in his execution. He is hanged at Charlestown, Virginia, on December 2, 1859.

In Petry's novel, details about the conditions under which slaves lived illustrate how horribly unjust the institution of slavery was. Tubman courageously takes action when she can no longer bear the injustices, and the narrative clearly points out that a well-planned course of action is the most effective way to deal with seemingly insurmountable problems. The story of Tubman's accomplishments illuminates how the individual can make a difference. Petry shows how strong the human need for freedom is and how widely diverse groups of people can work together successfully for the cause of freedom. Tubman teaches others to have compassion for all human beings, to overcome the desire for vengeance, and to hate the institution of slavery rather than specific individuals. Petry's biographical novel emphasizes the themes of courage, perseverance, and caring for others that Tubman's life embodies.

Topics for Discussion

1. Discuss features of Tubman's character that enable her to carry out her mission so effectively.
2. Tubman never learns to read and write. What special abilities does she use to compensate for this handicap?
3. What character traits exhibited by Tubman show the influence of her father? Her mother? Which parent seems to contribute more to Tubman's value system?
4. The Underground Railroad is naturally filled with risks and uncertainties. Which incident, in your opinion, is the most dangerous? The most suspenseful?
5. Why does John Tubman threaten to inform the master if Tubman attempts to escape? Explain the difference between John's status and Tubman's on the plantation.
6. Although Tubman continues her work after the disappointment she suffers when her husband marries another woman during her absence, what evidence in the book suggests the permanent hurt she feels as a result of this betrayal?
7. Explain how John Brown's death affects Tubman. Do you view her reactions as negative or positive?

Ideas for Reports and Papers

1. Write a character analysis of William Still or Thomas Garrett using descriptive terms and specific incidents from the book as evidence for your evaluation of the person.

2. Denmark Vesey, a free black, and Nat Turner, a Virginia slave, organized two of the best known slave revolts.

Using reliable historical sources, research the motivations and strategies of one of these men. Comment as well on the consequences of the revolt.

3. This narrative includes several slave songs. Select two of these songs and discuss how the messages or implied messages of the songs relate to Tubman's pain or hopes.

4. Research and report on three abolitionists whose efforts contributed to the success of the Underground Railroad. Specify their contributions.

5. Historians and critics across the years have given conflicting interpretations of the slave songs. Find two conflicting interpretations and write a short paper in which you discuss the view that seems most logical to you.

6. Select the one scene from the biography that best illustrates the essence of Tubman's character. Identify and analyze the character traits emphasized in that scene.

Further Study

Barksdale, Richard, and Keneth Kinnamon, eds. *Black Writers of America: A Comprehensive Anthology*. New York: Macmillan, 1972. The editors of this anthology give a biographical-literary sketch of Petry and a bibliography of secondary sources. They also include her famous short story "Like a Winding Sheet."

Bradford, Sarah H. *Scenes in the Life of Harriet Tubman*. 1869. Rev. ed. *Harriet: The Moses of Her People*. New York: Lockwood, 1886. Bradford had access to the living Tubman, her friends, and her family as she wrote these two versions of Tubman's life.

Differences in the two versions generally center on how many trips Tubman made into the South and how many slaves she actually led to freedom.

Conrad, Earl. *Harriet Tubman*. Washington, DC: Associated Publishers, 1943. The standard modern biography of Tubman. Conrad's research is meticulous and thorough as he attempts to distinguish between the facts and myths associated with Tubman. His documentation lists a number of further bibliographical sources.

Davis, Arthur P. *From the Dark Tower: Afro-American Writers 1900-1960*.

Washington, DC: Howard University Press, 1982. Contains an excellent overview of the life and works of Petry.

Franklin, John Hope. *From Slavery to Freedom*. 4th ed. New York: Alfred A. Knopf, 1974. Provides historical information about Harriet Tubman, William Lloyd Garrison, William Still, and other important abolitionists.

Harris, Trudier, and Thadious M. Davis, eds. *Dictionary of Literary Biography*.

Vol. 76, *Afro-American Writers, 1940-1955*. Detroit: Gale Research, 1988.

Contains an excellent article on Petry.

Mainiero Lina, ed. *American Women Writers*. Vol. 3. New York: Frederick Ungar, 1981. This entry contains a biographical sketch of Petry, a listing and summary of her works with evaluative comments, and a bibliography.

Page, James A., and Jae Min Roh, comps. *Selected Black American, African, and Caribbean Authors: A BioBibliography*. Littleton, CO: Libraries Unlimited, 1985. The compilers present a short biography of Petry.

They also include a listing of her works, interesting sidelights, and a short bibliography.

Rush, Theresa Gunnels, et al. *Black Americans Past and Present: A Biographical and Bibliographical Dictionary*. Metuchen, NJ: Scarecrow Press, 1975. This is an excellent

source for reports. It includes a short biography of Petry, a list of her works classified by genre, and a bibliography of biographical and critical works about the author.

Related Titles

Tituba of Salem Village, published in 1964, is a fictionalized biography about Tituba, a black slave from Barbados, who becomes a part of the infamous Salem witch trials. Like Harriet Tubman, this work sensitively portrays a black woman living in a hostile white society.



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