

The Slave Dancer Study Guide

The Slave Dancer by Paula Fox

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Introduction

Paula Fox did not begin writing until 1962 when she was thirty-nine years old, but since then she has enjoyed critical acclaim and praise from the many readers of her books. She writes fiction for children and novels for adults, and of all her books, *The Slave Dancer* has been the most widely praised and recognized. The book tells the story of thirteen-year-old Jessie Bollier, who in 1840 is kidnapped from his New Orleans home and forced to play his life on a slave ship while the slaves are "danced," or exercised. The book won the Newbery Medal in 1974, and Fox has also won the Hans Christian Andersen medal for her work.

Despite this praise, the book has also been the subject of controversy. Some critics believed it was racist and that it portrayed slaves unfairly, as despairing, weak people unable to fight for themselves, and, indeed, as responsible for their own enslavement. In addition, several characters in the book are racists, and their language and attitudes offended some readers.

However, most reviewers agree that Fox has impeccable control of the English language; *The Slave Dancer*, like her other books, has been widely praised for the poetry of Fox's prose, her rich imagery, and her mythic storytelling, as well as her deft handling of a topic many people previously considered too horrific for children to read about.



Author Biography

Paula Fox was born in New York City, on April 22, 1923. When Fox was five, her parents sent her to live with a minister and his bedridden mother in upstate New York while her parents traveled. They were busy with her father's career as a writer of plays and films and did not have time to raise her. The minister shared his love of reading, poetry, and history with her. At age five, she had her first experience with the thrill of writing when she suggested to the minister that he write a sermon about a waterfall, and he agreed. She told a *New York Times* writer, "I grasped . . . that everything could count, that a word, spoken as meant, contained in itself an energy capable of awakening imagination, thought, emotion."

When she was six, she moved to California for two years and then was sent to live with her grandmother on a sugar plantation in Cuba, where she went to school in a one-room schoolhouse and quickly learned to speak Spanish. Three years later, the revolution in Cuba forced her to leave, and she returned to New York City with her grandmother. By the time she was twelve, she had already attended nine different schools and hardly knew her parents. Of her parents, she told Sybil Steinberg in *Publishers Weekly* only that her mother was very young and was unable to take on the responsibility of a child. What she did know—and took strength from—was books. In every place she lived, except Cuba, there was a library, and Fox always found it.

Fox had to leave high school early, and she worked a wide variety of jobs, including salesperson, rivet-sorter, and machinist to support herself. When she was sixteen, she got a job in California, reading books for Warner Brothers, and when she was twenty-one, a lucky break led her to a job as a journalist in Poland. She eventually returned to Manhattan, married, and had two sons, but the marriage ended in divorce.

Despite her lack of formal education, Fox was accepted into Columbia University, and for almost four years, she studied, worked full time, and raised her sons until lack of money forced her to quit the school. She then took various teaching jobs and began to write. She told Steinberg that she had "an ineradicable tendency to tell stories and listen to them. Reading was everything to me."

Fox married again, and when her new husband won a Guggenheim award, they went to Greece where she wrote her first novel, *Poor George*, which was accepted by Harcourt Brace. Thus began her prolific career as a writer of books for both children and adults. *The Slave Dancer* won the Newbery Medal, and her other books have won her a Newbery Honor, the American Book Award, and the Hans Christian Andersen Medal. She has also received awards from the National Institute of Arts and Letters and the National Endowment of the Arts, as well as a Brandeis Fiction Citation.



Plot Summary

The Errand

Thirteen-year-old Jessie Bollier, his widowed mother, and his sister live in a one-room home in a poor quarter of New Orleans in 1840. His mother makes a meager wage sewing dresses, and Jessie plays his fife to make a few pennies. He dreams of being rich someday, and although he is curious about the lives of slaves he sees, he is forbidden to visit the slave market and knows little about their daily existence. His mother tells him that despite his family's grinding poverty,

there were souls whose fates were so terrible in comparison to ours, that we should consider ourselves among the fortunate of the earth. I knew she was thinking of the slaves who were sold daily so close to where we lived.

When his mother has to make a dress in a hurry, she sends Jessie out to his aunt's house to get some candles so she can stay up late to sew, but on the way home from this errand, two sailors who have seen him playing his fife kidnap him.

The Moonlight

Their ship is *The Moonlight*, a ship bound for Africa, under Captain Cawthorne, a man so brutal that when he meets Jessie, he bites Jessie's ear hard enough to draw blood. Captain Cawthorne tells Jessie that *The Moonlight* is a slave ship, involved in a "lucrative and God-granted trade," and that anyone who tries to interfere with it is a pirate. Jessie will play his fife to make the slaves "dance" once they are on board; this exercise will keep them strong and fit so that they will bring in more money when they are sold. In addition, he is expected to help around the ship.

Jessie meets Ned Spark, the ship's carpenter and occasional doctor, who professes to be a Christian but who will profit from the slave ship's voyage as much as the rest of the crew, including the ill-tempered cook; Nick Spark, the Mate, who is as cruel as the captain; and Ben Stout, who says he is sorry for Jessie's kidnapping, talks kindly to him, and gives him extra clothes and a piece of bread.

Once Jessie settles in, he notices that Purvis, who is a good sailor despite his rough manners and teasing sense of humor, is always busy, and he realizes that even though Purvis is one of the men who kidnapped him, he can trust him. Purvis tells Jessie that other ships will try and stop the slave ship from completing its journey. The British, who are against slavery, will board the ship and confiscate the slaves and the profits.



The Shrouds

Until now, Jessie has been confused by the crew, who defend the trade, saying that so many ships are involved in it that the laws against it don't matter. Claudius Sharkey, a crewmember, tells Jessie that in addition to the British cruisers that make the trade dangerous, American ships also patrol against importers of slaves. However, the possible profit from these voyages outweighs the danger: "He spread his arms as wide as he could to show me the money the smugglers made after they'd taken the slaves inland and sold them."

Although Ben Stout has been kind to him, Jessie doesn't trust him. Instead, he likes Purvis: "Purvis, with his horrible coarse jokes, his bawling and cursing, Purvis, whom I trusted."

One morning, at dawn, he sees a sailor sneaking forward on the ship, and returning with an egg—part of the captain's private food supply. He is not sure who the sailor is, and soon Purvis is named as the culprit, tied up by Ben Stout and another sailor, and brutally flogged and then hung from the rigging. Later, he finds out that Stout stole the egg, and was happy when Purvis was blamed. When he asks Purvis why he didn't deny being the thief, Purvis says, "The officers of this ship would not care what the truth was."

The Bight of Benin

When the ship arrives off the coast of Africa, all the preparations for taking on slaves are completed. They go up and down the coast, and the captain goes out at night in a small boat and deals with the African chiefs who are selling the slaves.

Jessie is sick of being on the ship, sick of what he learns about the slave trade, and when Purvis asks him to help set up a tarp to provide shade for the slaves when they eat their meals, he refuses: "nearly senseless with rage. . . . I considered casting myself over the side and confounding them all!" But he gives in because he believes that no one on the ship would save him, and he would die. "I went slowly toward Purvis, feeling a shame I'd never felt before," he says.

Later, when he protests against the slave trade, Purvis becomes violently angry, and tells Jessie that his own Irish ancestors came to America in ships no better than the slave ships—"locked up in a hold for the whole voyage where they might have died of sickness and suffocation. . . . Do you know my father was haunted all his days by the memory of those who died before his eyes in that ship, and were flung into the sea? And you dare speak of my parents in the same breath with these [slaves]!"



Jessie wonders how Purvis can be so angry about the conditions his parents traveled under, and at the same time fail to see how it's wrong to treat the slaves like this. But Jessie realizes that he can't talk to any of the crew about this; whenever he is upset about slavery, he is beaten.

The slaves arrive. Two of them die, Jessie notes, "and Stout dumped their bodies over the side as I dumped waste." Then a little girl dies and is tossed over the same way. Jessie is horrified, and his punishment when the sailors notice it is observed by one of the slaves, a young boy the same age as Jessie. An instant, unspoken bond forms between Jessie and the young slave boy though they don't speak the same language.

Nicholas Spark Walks on Water

They set sail, back toward America. Every other day, groups of slaves are brought on deck where Jessie plays the fife and Stout whips them to make them "dance," or exercise. He is filled with self-loathing, and also, to his horror, he realizes that he hates the slaves, the symbol of his own slavery on the ship.

I hated their shuffling, their howling, their very suffering!" he says. "I hated the way they spat out their food upon the deck, the overflowing buckets, the emptying of which tried all my strength. . . . I would have snatched the rope from Spark's hand and beaten them myself! Oh, God! I wished them all dead! Not to hear them! Not to smell them! Not to know of their existence!

He drops his fife on the deck and runs to his sleeping quarters, but he is brought back to the deck and flogged by Stout for his disobedience.

But as the blows fell," he says, "I became myself again. I was a thirteen-year-old male, not as tall as, though somewhat heavier than, a boy close to my own age, now doubled up in the dark below, not a dozen yards from where I was being beaten.

The beating changes him, makes him more aware; he observes the sailors "with as little pity as they observed the blacks." He feels pity for the slaves, realizing he is in the same position as they: all of them are on the ship against their will. He says, "I hated what I did [playing the fife]. I tried to comfort myself with the thought that, at least, it gave them time out of the hold. But what was the point of that or anything else?"

As the ship travels on, discipline degenerates; the ship is filthy, the men are filthy and are often drunk. Jessie separates himself from them, stepping away mentally, remembering every object in his home, dissociating himself from the horrible present. During this time, he becomes aware that the slave boy is watching him every time he is on deck. He points to himself with the fife, saying his name: "Jessie."



When a slave attacks the mate, Nicholas Spark, Spark guns him down and is immediately bound with a rope and thrown overboard: by killing the African man, he has destroyed the profit that would come from selling him, and Spark's own life is not worth that much. "Don't you see?" Purvis asks, "There went the profit!"

The Spaniard

By this time, the slaves are all sick, and so are most of the crew. Stout is still trying to make friends with Jessie, who ignores him. To get revenge, Stout steals Jessie's fife and tosses it into the hold where Jessie must walk over the bodies of the slaves to look for it—or be flogged if he doesn't find it. The young slave boy finds it and hands it to Jessie, saving him from the horrendous task and the punishment.

They reach the coast of Cuba, and Captain Cawthorne begins bargaining with a Spaniard to sell the slaves. On the following day, they will be unloaded and sold.

Ben Stout's Mistake

The sailors arrange a party, bringing out rum and chests of clothes, dressing up the slaves like women, and getting drunk. Jessie is ordered to play his fife while the sailors dance and slap the slaves around. A sail appears, indicating a ship is approaching. Stout claims that he knows it, and it won't harm them. Cawthorne, who doesn't believe him and thinks the ship is a threat, orders all the slaves and the evidence of slavery to be thrown over the side, and the sailors begin tossing men, women, and children over the rail. Cawthorne, believing the ship is English, hoists the American flag, and, too late, realizes the ship is American.

The other ship approaches and a battle ensues, perceived only dimly by Jessie, who is in mortal terror. At the same time, a storm breaks over both vessels. Jessie grabs the young slave boy, and both of them crawl to the hold where they hide. While they are down there, a sailor up above closes the hatch, which is always closed in storms.

They remain trapped for several days during the storm. Finally, they hear a violent crash: the ship has run aground. The hatch cover falls away, and they crawl out, finding everyone dead except Captain Cawthorne, who is dying, the slaves gone, and the ship wrecked. Land is nearby, and they swim to it.

The Old Man

The two boys are taken in by an old man, an escaped slave who lives deep in the woods of Mississippi. He feeds them and helps them regain their strength, and he arranges for others to take the slave boy, whose name is Ras, north where he can be free. He tells Jessie how to walk the three-day journey back to New Orleans and asks him not to tell anyone because if Jessie tells anyone about the old man, he may be recaptured and taken back to slavery.



Home and After

Jessie walks home and finds his mother and sister, but he doesn't settle easily back into his old life. He has lost his old dreams of becoming rich since he does not want to do anything that is connected in any way with slavery. He has discovered that "everything I considered bore, somewhere along the way, the imprint of black hands." Eventually, he decides to become an apothecary—the 1840s equivalent of a pharmacist—and moves to Rhode Island where there are no slaves. He sends for his mother and sister and lives a quiet life. He misses the South, and for the rest of his life, he wonders what happened to Ras, but he never finds out. When the Civil War breaks out, he fights on the Northern side.

As the years pass, the horror of the voyage recedes in his consciousness, and he doesn't think about it every day. He marries and has a family. One thing, however, remains from the voyage: he cannot stand the sound of music because it reminds him of dancing the slaves:

For at the first note of a tune or a song, I would see
once again as though they'd never ceased their dancing
in my mind, black men and women and children
lifting their tormented limbs in time to a reedy martial
air, the dust rising from their joyless thumping,
the sound of the fife finally drowned beneath the
clanging of their chains.



The Errand

The Errand Summary

The book opens with the narrator, Jessie, describing his mother's trade being that of a seamstress. Jessie ponders over how a small an object like a sewing needle can provide for his family. Jessie goes on to describe the room he and his family live in which is on the first floor of a house filled with moisture. Jessie's sister, Betty, coughs sometimes from the dampness, yet Jessie's mother claims that the family is lucky to live in a warm climate like New Orleans as opposed to the cold of the north where she grew up. The fog of New Orleans bothers Jessie and makes him feel like a prisoner, yet his mother believes it softens the streets of the Vieux Carre. The family has very few possessions, and Jessie describes a basket of colorful thread as the only pretty object in their room. Jessie's mother uses this thread to make beautiful gowns for the rich ladies of New Orleans.

It is early evening at the end of January when Jessie is walking home trying to think of a story to hide his tardiness from his mother. When Jessie gets home, his mother is so busy that he does not have to hide the fact that he has spent an hour at the slave market. Jessie's mother is busy studying a piece of apricot-colored brocade, and Betty is sitting in a corner. Jessie believes the fabric is beautiful, and his mother comments that she will need more candles to begin working on the dress. Jessie has money from playing his fife for the steamboat crews, but his mother sends him to his Aunt Agatha to borrow candles.

Jessie hates having to go to his aunt's neat house because she tells him to be careful of everything. Jessie calls his aunt a mean old maid behind her back, and his mother tells Jessie that he is surly. Jessie's Aunt Agatha is his father's only living relative. Jessie's father drowned in the Mississippi River when Jessie was four and Betty was not yet born. Jessie dreams of calling out to his father to swim sometimes, and his mother tells him that his father was brave. Again, Jessie's mother comments that others, like the slaves, have lives more difficult than theirs.

Jessie leaves to go to his aunt's house and recalls having seen six Africans for sale at the slave market before being tossed out for peeping. When Jessie arrives at his aunt's house, she begins asking why his mother does not use oil lamps and telling him he should be apprenticed and learning a trade. Jessie leaves his aunt's without much to say in response to her comments. Jessie thinks of the rich families in the neighborhood and recalls often peering into their homes. Once he believes he saw a woman, dancing in a dress his mother made. He also recalls seeing a black woman standing outside who spotted him, and then she was called away. The woman's name had been Star, and Jessie was surprised by the unusual name, but his mother believes it is not a name for a human. Jessie often wonders about that woman's name. What did she think of her name?



Jessie feels restless and decides to take the longest way home. Jessie's mother has often asked him to stay away from the taverns. However, Jessie manages to keep his promise by listening over the rooftops to the men and women in the taverns. Jessie imagines becoming a wealthy chandler and the riches he will acquire. Suddenly, Jessie is covered by a canvas sack and falls to the ground. Jessie hears the sound of men's voices and the comment that he is worthless without his pipe. Jessie struggles inside of the canvas, but he cannot breathe well and his body is twisted. Jessie is lifted up, and he goes unconscious.

When Jessie comes to, he is held up by a tall man and is made to promise to be quiet in order to be set loose. Jessie stands and realizes that he and the two men, one named Claudius, are standing on a raft. Jessie is allowed to sit with his arms wrapped around his legs and is ignored by the men. Jessie imagines that the men must be pirates and feels very alone. Jessie stares at the water and thinks of the fate of drowned people. It is not very long before the three have to travel on land. Jessie walks between the two men and is uncomfortable walking on the marshy ground with his fear of being struck by a cottonmouth. The three walk for several miles before Jessie finally asks if they are at Baratavia Bay. Claudius tells Jessie he is at Lake Borgne and that they have a long sail ahead of them. Jessie realizes that he may never be able to escape from a ship. Claudius lights a lamp, and Jessie gets a good look at his face. Claudius tells him that he is the sailor that had paid Jessie to play for him earlier that day. Jessie recognizes Claudius now and thinks of the pennies that he would have used to buy his mother's candles.

The Errand Analysis

The reader learns that Jessie is from New Orleans and that the story is told from his perspective. The story is told in the past tense which means that Jessie tells it at a later time. The story takes place while the slave trade is still operating during the pre-Civil War era of the early 1800s.

The reader is introduced to a few main characters and their personalities. Jessie is a young boy of thirteen who clearly does not always listen to his mother, for we learn that he lies to her and does not follow her directions perfectly. Jessie's mother is a seamstress and manages to support the family even if they do not have any luxuries. Jessie's mother is also clearly sensitive to the hardships which face the African slaves. Jessie's sister is barely described, but we know that she is four years younger than Jessie is and she suffers from a cough. Aunt Agatha is described meanly by Jessie, and she lives more richly than Jessie's family does. Jessie's father drowned while working on a boat on the Mississippi River when Jessie was four.

At the end of the chapter, Jessie is abducted by two sailors and he only learns that he will be going on a ship. Jessie is taken away from everything he knows and does not know what to expect for the future. Jessie's journey, both mentally and physically, is the heart of this novel.



The Moonlight

The Moonlight Summary

Jessie is still on the bottom of the small boat, and he becomes overwhelmed with sleepiness. Jessie is continually worried of being hit by the swinging wood attached to the sail and cannot get comfortable in the cramped space. Jessie dozes now and then while his captors speak quietly. Jessie feels that hours pass on the small boat, and finally the sky begins to lighten. Jessie is told to remain sitting. Jessie spots a single light flickering on an island and feels alone again. Finally, one of the men points out the ship they are headed for which is named *The Moonlight*. Jessie is hauled up a rope ladder onto the ship and he immediately falls to his face when he tries to stand. Jessie smells an awful stench and manages to get to his feet despite his exhaustion. The two men, Claudius and Purvis, tease him, and Purvis tries unsuccessfully to play Jessie's fife.

An old man appears and tells the two men to leave Jessie alone and to tell him where he is. Jessie notes that the man shows no kindness towards him. Jessie learns that he will be going on a sea voyage and that he will hopefully return in four months. Jessie states that his mother will be worried about him and think he is dead. Jessie tries to run away, but runs into a wooden structure of some sort. Jessie thinks of the apricot-colored dress his mother must sew and his own desire to take the longest way home the evening before. Purvis tells Jessie that he has spoken with his mother, but Jessie knows that the man is clearly lying to him. The old man, Ned, comments that he does not approve of the kidnapping of boys and states that the Captain will get what he wants no matter how he has to do it. Jessie says that he knows nothing about ships, and he is told that he is there to play his fife.

Jessie wanders away from the men with a headache realizing that there is no one to save him. A man puts his hand on Jessie's arm asking him what his name is. Jessie is surprised by the man's simple, civil question and does not respond. The man continues speaking to Jessie and he learns that the man had also been kidnapped as a child and put on a boat. The man comments that Jessie will see bad things during his trip, and Jessie tells the man that he is thirteen. The man states that the boat is heading to Whydah in the Bight of Benin which is in Africa. Jessie tells the man his name, and the man offers to show Jessie the quarters. On the way, the two are stopped by Purvis who calls the man escorting Jessie Benjamin Stout. Benjamin warns Jessie of the Mate and tells him to be sure he answers everything the Captain asks even if he must lie. Purvis is there to take Jessie to see the Captain.

Purvis takes Jessie to the poop deck where he hears a sharp voice. Jessie faces two men, one is the Captain and the other is the Mate. The Captain asks Jessie his name, and we learn that his last name, Bollier, was changed from a French name. The Captain comments that he thinks all French are pirates. The Captain asks Jessie if he knows why he is on the ship, and he responds that it is to play his pipe for kings. The Captain



laughs, knowing that Purvis has misled Jessie. Suddenly, the Captain picks up Jessie and bites his ear until it bleeds. The Captain becomes calm again and explains to Jessie that the ship is a slaver. Captain Cawthorne will purchase slaves from the barracoon in Whydah for ten dollars a head plus rum and tobacco. Then, the Captain will sell the slaves to a Spaniard in Cuba. Jessie's job is to play music for the slaves to exercise to, as well as to make himself useful on the ship. The Captain turns the explaining over to the second man, Spark. However, Jessie's mind is still focused on the fact that he is on board a slaver and he does not listen to Spark.

Later, Benjamin Stout shows Jessie to the quarters he and the other men share, known as 'tween decks. Jessie is surprised by the tight space. Benjamin Stout gives Jessie some extra clothes to wear when his get wet. Stout next shows Jessie a platform that is used by the men as a bathroom. Stout says that Jessie can get used to anything. Jessie curls up in a hammock and falls asleep. Jessie recalls how he finally became used to sleeping in the hammock. However, on this first day, Jessie cracks his head against the deck above and feels a cockroach crawling on his leg. Jessie feels oddly comforted by the cockroach's presence because it reminds him of land. Jessie again notices the foul smell of the ship and goes onto the deck. The fresh air immediately awakens Jessie, and he also notices how hungry he is. Jessie observes men busily working, and Ben Stout gives him a piece of bread to take below to eat. Jessie notices Purvis working seriously at the helm before he goes below.

Jessie must use the platform to relieve himself and is so frightened he must close his eyes. While using the platform, Jessie hears men laughing above, and when he looks to see who it is, he spots four men, including Purvis. Jessie returns to the deck, ignoring the men and spots an island with trees bent in the same direction. Purvis tells him that it is caused by prevailing winds. Purvis begins introducing Jessie to several sailors and takes him to the galley to eat. Purvis warns Jessie that the Captain likes to eat well and to beat men. In the galley, Purvis asks for tea from the cook named Curry. Purvis comments that the smoke maddens cooks on ships and explains to Jessie how to eat his hard biscuit and piece of meat by using the tea to soften it. Jessie describes feeling almost happy and wonders if there is something about a ship that causes men to change feelings so often.

Jessie meets two more men and watches Purvis mend a sail. Another sailor comments that Purvis sews like a lady, and we learn that Purvis is a sails man who knows everything there is to know about sails. Jessie describes believing that Purvis is as unpredictable as knowing where a frog will jump and then thinks that Purvis resembles a frog. Jessie is also beginning to believe that Purvis has a certain fondness for him. Jessie notices that the sailors are never idle and realizes that a ship has to be tended to day and night. Purvis points out a man stationed at the top of the foretop sail yard who is responsible for telling the Captain if he spots a sail. Purvis states that the British are worse than the pirates are because they have abolished slavery and try to block the slavers' trades. Jessie notices that there is a strong wind helping the ship along and describes the gait of sailors who always have to keep their balance on the ship.



Ben Stout shows Jessie a pin which serves three purposes. One purpose of the pin is for killing rats, and Stout tells Jessie he will have to learn to use the pin because the rats can eat out the ship. Ben explains that the water must be rationed for the sailors. The Captain's water is not rationed, and he has different food from the crew as well. Ben shows Jessie where the slaves will be kept, and Jessie is amazed at how small a space it is. The Captain overhears the two speaking and explains that he must have a fast ship because of the British which is why he is such a tight packer. When the Captain leaves, Ben explains that the awful smell on the ship is chloride of lime which was placed in the slave hold to try to clean the air.

Jessie looks at the ship's compass with a sailor named Claudius Sharkey who is at the helm. Jessie has supper and wants to stay up and watch Curry knead dough, but Stout sends him to bed. Jessie is thinking of the rigging and hopes he will never have to climb on the ropes the way the sailors do. Suddenly, Jessie hears a shout and looks over the edge of his hammock to see Purvis. Purvis is talking out loud to himself and he asks Jessie if he heard anything. Purvis claims he was not talking, but when Jessie rolls over in his hammock, Purvis talks again. Purvis asks again if Jessie heard him and teases him that he would have to be deaf not to. Jessie is relieved that Purvis is teasing him and has difficulty suppressing his laughter.

The Moonlight Analysis

Jessie's arrival on the ship brings very new experiences. Jessie learns that the ship is headed for Africa to bring back slaves. The stench that Jessie immediately notices is from a previous cargo of slaves. Jessie's main job on board the ship is to play his fife to accompany the dancing of the slaves. However, Jessie must also learn to help out on the ship in other ways. Jessie also learns of some of the political issues surrounding the slave trade. The British try to prevent the slave ships from trading, and the French are considered to be pirates.

Jessie is introduced to several important people on the ship. Purvis, though seemingly rude in this chapter, does in fact care for Jessie and befriends the boy. Ben Stout is very nice to Jessie in this chapter, but Jessie learns that Stout's nice exterior is not accurate to the kind of person he is on the inside. The Captain and Mate are two characters that Jessie must be careful of, and this is clearly shown by the Captain bizarrely biting Jessie's ear. Stout makes an important comment to Jessie when he tells him that he can adjust to anything. The reader finds that this is not necessarily true for Jessie in all things, and by the end of the book, Jessie recalls this comment and reflects on its new meaning.



The Shrouds

The Shrouds Summary

The reality of Jessie being on an illegal slave trade ship slowly sinks in for him. The crew declares that the number of ships involved in the slave trade cancel out the validity of the laws which prohibit it. Ned Grime, the carpenter, is the only one who does not protest the laws, but when Jessie learns that he earns money from the success of the shipment the same as the other sailors, Jessie is not impressed by his loftiness. Sharkey, another sailor, tells Jessie about the danger of American ships catching them. Jessie learns of the American laws against slavery and Sharkey tells him of the huge amounts of money in the trade.

The first days on the ship, the weather is perfect for sailing, and Captain Cawthorne is in a great mood. Jessie describes being at the beck and call of everyone on deck, but sometimes he manages to get some quiet time. Jessie describes how odd it seems to see other ships and explains that he never got used to living on a moving ship. Jessie describes the different colors that the sea takes on other than blue. Jessie says that he does not worry about his mother and sister often, but sometimes he feels pained when he thinks that they must believe he is dead. Once, during a storm, Jessie so wishes that he were off the ship that he becomes breathless. Purvis shakes Jessie to snap him out of it.

Jessie believes that nighttime and life at sea leads a person to think about his or her life. Jessie thinks about how he has really only had women in his life until now. Jessie had not realized how different men are, and thinks about why he likes Purvis more than he likes Ben Stout even though Ben Stout is very nice to him. However, Purvis is the man Jessie trusts. The Captain calls Jessie "Bollweevil," which he hates, and when anyone else calls him that, he ignores him. Jessie describes not bothering himself to learn the issues involved with sailing a ship. Jessie comments that he has little interaction with the Mate Nicholas Spark.

After being at sea for three weeks, the wind suddenly dies down. Now that the ship has slowed down Jessie begins noticing certain changes. Gratings are now used to cover the hatches over the holds, Curry has a huge cauldron in his galley and John Cooley is working on a whip with nine knotted cords. Jessie is very disturbed by the whip, and for a moment, Spark stares at Jessie observing his reaction to it. With the wind quiet, the men on the ship quarrel, and Ben Stout is very angry when someone empties out his sea chest. Everyone on the ship becomes weak and restless. Ben Stout accuses Purvis of being responsible for what happened to his sea chest. Jessie tries to stay away from the quarters, and one night he sees a hooded figure steal an egg. Jessie thinks about the water ration having been cut short again and hastens below decks. Purvis, Ben Stout and Sharkey are all staring at the egg, and Jessie asks whether they think Curry would give him some beer. Ben responds that he will take care of Jessie while Purvis



tells Jessie to stop crying because at least he gets as much water as everyone else. Jessie feels better after Purvis' comments.

In the morning, the wind picks up again, and only Nicholas Spark walks around in a bad mood. All of the men were ordered on deck where the Captain announces that an egg has been stolen. Purvis is accused of the crime and has his shirt whipped off of his back by Nicholas Spark. Jessie is very upset by the event, and Purvis is even tied to the shrouds to hang over night. Jessie can barely sleep that night and even goes to look at Purvis. In the morning, Jessie hears Smith accusing Ben Stout of handing Purvis over to the Captain. Stout responds that Purvis would have done the same to him. Stout explains that he believes Spark probably saw him take the egg, but because he and Purvis have both sailed with Spark and the Captain before, and they liked Stout better, Purvis was chosen for the flogging. Jessie does not understand why Stout is so calm about the situation. Purvis is taken down from the shrouds and Jessie describes how awful he looks. Jessie has a few moments alone with Purvis and asks him why he had not denied it. Purvis responds that the Captain was looking to flog someone to remind the men what he was capable of. Jessie does not understand and goes above decks, where Stout tries to give him a piece of cheese. Jessie throws the cheese overboard and Stout smiles as if he understands.

The Shrouds Analysis

Jessie begins trying to understand the politics surrounding the slave trade. The crew of the ship tries to overlook the wrongness of their actions, but Jessie cannot ignore the wickedness of what the Captain and crew will accomplish on their trip. Jessie also notices changes on board the ship which indicate the crew is preparing for its cargo. Jessie is beginning to adjust to his new life on board and rarely thinks of his mother and sister. However, at times Jessie feels extremely distressed by his predicament. Jessie contemplates his different feelings for Purvis and Ben Stout. Although Stout is very kind to Jessie, Jessie finds himself trusting Purvis more. By the end of the chapter, when Stout allows Purvis to take his punishment for him, Jessie clearly dislikes the untrustworthy Stout. The reader also sees how ruthless and mean the Captain can be when he whips Purvis for merely stealing an egg. The reader can only imagine what would happen if the Captain was to lose something of true value. These character traits of greed and viciousness will reveal themselves again in this book.



The Bight of Benin

The Bight of Benin Summary

Ned, the carpenter, has been very busy building a platform, upon which sits a carronade which Nicholas Spark seems to touch for good luck. Jessie knows that the ship will soon be meeting up with other men. Jessie learns that the Captain has a variety of national flags and paperwork he can use to change the ship's nationality should they be boarded. Purvis explains that he once worked with a Captain who had traded slaves for ten years before being caught because no one could prove anything. Jessie comments on how many are against the trading, and Purvis responds that the British have outlawed it, but have probably found something equally as profitable.

Jessie has much on his mind and thinks about his friend, Purvis. Jessie also evaluates the fact that some native kings sell the slaves willingly and some would kill the slavers if they could. Jessie is asked to pay his fife for the sailors one night. The ship sails into the Bight of Benin at midday, and when the anchor is dropped Jessie looks longingly at the shore. However, the shore is on fire because the British have set the barracoon, a holding place for the slaves, on fire. Smith explains to Jessie that the Captain will go ashore to fetch the slaves regardless of the circumstances. The two spot several ships from the British squadron waiting for their ship.

Although Jessie still does not understand the full power of the sea, he recalls a fire in New Orleans that destroyed 107 homes. Jessie would stare at a candle's flame for a long time after thinking about the power of fire. Smith goes on to explain that the Captain will bring back boat loads of Africans during the night, and the only danger the ship faces is if the British contact the American patrol somehow. Jessie asks what the British can do, and Smith explains that they can blockade them. Smith also goes on to say that all of the sailors will carry pistols to make sure none of the Africans can attempt anything while in sight of their land. Jessie recalls hearing stories of slave uprisings in Virginia and South Carolina. Jessie also goes on to ask why he must play his pipe to make the slaves dance, and Smith responds that it is to keep them healthy. Jessie is left feeling apprehensive and untrusting of the crew on the ship again. Seeing land again also makes Jessie feel homesick and longing for the days of plentiful food and water.

Jessie spots Purvis, who asks him to help him drag a tarpaulin across the deck, and he feels a pang of hate towards the man. Jessie tries to ignore Purvis, but Nicholas Spark is there to make him get to work. Jessie feels a new sense of shame. With Purvis and Gardere, Jessie helps set up a tent which is to be used for the slaves to eat their dinners under. Jessie is in a foul mood, and Ben Stout keeps trying to ask him why. Jessie insists he wants to be left alone and describes Stout as being the foulest creature he has ever known. Purvis tells Stout that he is not worried about Jessie, but rather that it is his wicked curiosity that makes him ask. Purvis tells Jessie that everyone is worried by being so close to land and not being able to go on it. Purvis also reminds Jessie that the trip is half over. Jessie stays below deck for a long time to be left alone.



For three days the ship just sits. Sharkey gets drunk, and Spark kicks him so that his head bleeds. Jessie feels no sadness towards the man. A big cauldron is brought up on deck, and the Captain passes out pistols to all of the men except Purvis and Jessie. All of the men on the ship, other than Ben Stout and Ned, get drunk. On the fourth night, the Captain comes on board with a *cabociero*, or broker, who is described by Purvis as being a Portuguese black. Jessie notes that only one ship of the British Squadron is left and he asks Purvis why they have not bothered the Captain on shore. Purvis responds that the Captain is allowed to trade his goods. Purvis tells of the Captain getting so drunk with one of the African kings once that the two had decided to switch places. Purvis comments that alcohol gets men turned around, and Jessie retorts that the kidnapping of African slaves does also. Jessie begins thinking of the barracoon and the captured men and women and suddenly recalls his memory of the black woman in New Orleans named Star. Purvis is offended by Jessie's comment and takes a swing at him, but Jessie manages to duck out of the way. Purvis tells Jessie of his Irish family who sailed to Boston while locked in a hold and may have died of sickness and suffocation. Jessie does not claim to know what happened to Purvis' family, but states that they were not sold. Purvis disagrees and states that the Irish were sold. Purvis continues yelling at Jessie, who does not understand how Purvis can object to what happened to the Irish, but not to what is happening to the Africans. Purvis kicks Jessie in the shins and tell him to bring buckets which are to be used as latrines for the Africans in the hold.

The next day Jessie and Purvis do not speak to one another. However, at midnight that night the arrival of the first boatload of slaves stops the quarreling and the drinking of the men. Jessie recalls hearing a scream and seeing a small girl's face suddenly appearing over the side of the ship. A man behind her helps push her on the ship, and for a moment, she tries to scramble back over the side. The man stops the girl, and Nicholas Spark grabs both the man and girl and throws them over the side onto the ship. Jessie hears the clanging of shackles as one slave after another climbs over the side and is dropped or dragged onto the ship. Jessie also recalls hearing muffled sobs, and one man's head was lolled to the side. Purvis goes to the man, yanks him to his feet and throws him about roughly. All of the other slaves, except the little girl who runs towards the man, look away from the sight. Jessie is told to give the man some rum, but his mouth is shut. Stout forces the man's mouth open.

Later, Jessie is lying in his hammock thinking about the man who was forced to drink rum and hears the Africans crying out in the hold. Jessie suddenly feels like the world is not as grand as he had imagined. Jessie wakes Gardere and asks him about the man who was forced to drink the rum. Gardere explains that he has seen men die who were in that man's condition, and explains that it is a mystery why. Gardere goes on to say that the Africans are different than them.

For four nights, boats show up in the night and deliver Africans. Jessie describes the *cabociero* as feeling clear self-importance in his role, and a black man holding a whip next to him seems to hate those of both black and white races. Once, the captain accuses the *cabociero* of giving him a macaroon, or a slave too old to be of use. Jessie describes the holds on the ship as being pits of misery. Two men were found dead on the second morning, and Curry served the Africans horse beans, which they spat out.



Then, the Africans were served yams which they ate more readily. However, Jessie learns that when they get away from land the Africans will have to eat the beans twice a day and receive a half-pint of water. Purvis grumbles that it will be the sailors who will get less water when the supplies get low. On the last morning, Jessie witnesses Stout throw the little girl, who has foam dried to her mouth, into the sea. Jessie cries out, and Ned slaps him across the mouth. Jessie spies a young boy among the Africans who seems to be near his age watching him.

The Captain has learned that one of the ships of the American patrol is nearby. With more than one hundred slaves on board, this obviously disturbs Cawthorne who is worried that the British have somehow managed to tell the Americans about the ship. It has become quite hot, and the water ration has been reduced again. Jessie's new job is to empty the latrine buckets when Stout, who walks across the African bodies, hands them up to him. Jessie feels relieved when the ship is to head for Sao Tomé to get more water and food. After that, it will take approximately three weeks to get to Cuba. Jessie is disappointed when he realizes that his journey has really just begun.

The Bight of Benin Analysis

With the arrival of the ship at the Bight of Benin, Jessie is aware of the presence of the British and learns of how the Captain uses different flags and papers to avoid being caught. The fire on land reminds Jessie of one in New Orleans. Jessie comments that he is not yet aware of the true power of the sea, and this foreshadows the sequence of events at the end of the book. Jessie becomes very pensive and begins to distrust the crew again. Jessie also feels more homesick. Purvis tries to reassure Jessie that the trip is half over, but at the end of the chapter, Jessie realizes that the journey, with the presence of the slaves, is only just beginning to be difficult.

Jessie connects his memory of the woman Star with the slaves who are to be brought on board which shows his ability to humanize them. However, the crew calling the slaves "niggers" all of the time seems to dehumanize them. Purvis is upset when he believes Jessie underestimates what happened to the Irish on their journey to America. However, Jessie does not understand how Purvis cannot see the similarity between what happened to his family and what is happening to the slaves. The arrival of the slaves on the ship is a monumental event in the book, and Jessie clearly feels more apathy towards them than ever when he describes the holds and what happens to the slaves. Jessie's attention is clearly caught by one African boy who seems to be close to his age.



Nicholas Spark Walks on Water

Nicholas Spark Walks on Water Summary

The chapter opens with Purvis telling a story of a ship whose crew and captain went blind from a horrible disease. Jessie questions the story and asks how anyone could know of it if everyone died and the ship was lost at sea. Jessie cannot understand the truth of the story, but can understand the truth in the horror of the story. Jessie asks if there was a cure for the disease, and Ned responds that there was no cure, "[n]o more than there's a cure for man himself." Jessie still wonders why Ned hit him, and wonders if it was to protect him from the others who are disturbed by Jessie's sensitivity to the plight of the slaves. All of the men are again drinking heavily. The ship is sailing in the evening so that the slaves will not see the shoreline of their homeland disappear before their eyes. The men have been telling each other stories of lost ships. However, nothing can drown out the sounds from the holds. Jessie describes the twisting of the slaves cramped together in the holds and their attempts to make room for themselves on the water casks.

Jessie goes on to explain that Ben Stout seems to be in charge of the slaves. Jessie is repulsed by the energy Stout seems to put toward his new job. Stout can even speak some of the African language, and Jessie asks if Ned can speak it as well. Ned explains that there are as many African languages as there are tribes and that they have those of Ashanti origin on board. Ned describes the warring tribes and their need for material goods and involvement in the slave trade as the devil's work. Ned defends his own involvement in the slave trade by explaining to Jessie that his heart is not in it.

The ship hits a vicious storm that makes Jessie very seasick for the first time. Jessie describes the terror which torments the Africans in the holds. Ben Stout, the Captain, and Nicholas Spark seem to be the only crewmembers who are unaffected by the misery of the human cargo. The rest of the crew tries to avoid the holds as much as possible. Suddenly, once the ship is free of the storm, Jessie is called for by the Captain to bring his fife to play for the slaves. Stout tells Jessie to go below to get his fife, but Jessie stands unmoving until he is called for. The slaves from one of the holds are being brought up, and the women and small children are unshackled. Jessie notes how weak the slaves look from only being on board for a few days. All of the men of the crew are on deck and at attention. The slaves are given water and food and they sigh in relief. Purvis explains that some of the slaves believe that the men will eat them. Jessie describes how mournfully the Africans eat and that only the children speak.

After the meal, the Captain wants Stout to tell the slaves that they are to dance, but Stout explains that he does not know enough in their language. Stout tells them to get to their feet, but many do not even look at him. Many of the slaves are naked, and Jessie feels feverish and agitated. Ned's eyes are turned towards heaven, and Jessie realizes how much more powerless the Africans are because of their nakedness. Jessie also notes that all of the men are aware of the nakedness of the women, and Jessie recalls



his late walks and peering in on naked women at home. Sometimes Jessie felt ashamed of himself and sometimes he would laugh. However, on the ship he feels absolute mortification at seeing the naked bodies.

Many of the slaves have stood to their feet, and Stout uses the cat -o'-nine on those who have not. Jessie is told to begin, but he can barely make a note on his fife. Finally, after the Captain waves his arms and Spark claps his hands, most of the slaves begin to dance. Jessie describes the iron dirge created by the sound of the shackles and the women holding the children close. Soon, Jessie's fife is drowned out by the singing and chanting of the slaves. Jessie plays for three groups of slaves that morning and must complete this ritual every other morning. Jessie dreads this job and listens without interest to the rumors the men speak of, including that Stout is the Captain's spy among the crew. In the harbor of Sao Tomé, Jessie imagines jumping into the sea, but he realizes that finding himself aboard another ship could be worse.

The slaves have begun fighting among themselves, for many of them are afflicted with a stomach illness which makes it impossible for them to get to the latrine buckets in time. One night Jessie hears a horrible scream and begins weeping to himself. The ship leaves the island after getting their supplies delivered to them and sets sail from the island. Two days into their journey, Jessie hears the scream again while he is playing his fife. Spark signals to Jessie to stop playing, and Stout goes down to the hold and drags out a woman who is then thrown overboard. Stout explains to Jessie that the woman had the fever and she would have infected the rest of the slaves. Jessie knows that Stout is aware of his feelings towards him, yet Stout still continues to suggest that Jessie feels otherwise. Jessie finds himself feeling hatred towards the slaves and wishes that he did not know of their existence.

Jessie drops his fife to the deck and runs to his hammock. Jessie is dragged back to the deck by Seth Smith and is flogged by Stout five times for not following the Captain's orders. Jessie tries not to cry, but he cannot stop himself. Jessie thinks of his hatred for the slaves and the way the hatred drove him to defy the Captain and crew. However, as he is beat he becomes himself again and realizes that he is a thirteen-year-old male just like the African boy on board. Smith drags Jessie back down to his hammock again, and Jessie notices a stupid determination on his face like that of a drunken man. Later, Ned tends Jessie's back and Purvis tries to make Jessie feel better. However, Ned exclaims that everything on the ship happens because of greed. Ned and Purvis bicker while Jessie's thoughts become focused on his pain. Jessie is given beer and instead of feeling better, he finds himself feeling a sad tranquility. Jessie is not surprised when Stout comes to tell him that he was light with the rope when he whipped him. Stout goes on to say that he has the Captain's good will and Jessie should be aware of that.

Jessie's wounds heal, but he becomes skeptical of his understanding of the ship and its crew which he thought he had begun to taken root with. Jessie views the crew without pity and wonders at the odds which placed the slaves on the ship. All of the men, except Ned who thinks little of all men, believe the slaves to be less than human. However, except for Stout, Spark, and the Captain, none of the men treat the slaves in an especially cruel manner. In fact, the crew plays with the children who roam the decks



when Captain and Spark are not watching, and they even make wooden toys for them. Jessie believes Spark to be brainless and evil, but finds the Captain to be especially dangerous because of his greed. However, Stout was especially bad because he could not be shamed. Jessie speaks of this with Purvis, and Purvis tells Jessie how Stout had been the one to torment the black woman who had been thrown overboard. Apparently, Stout had the woman brought up on deck with him, spoke to her in her language and made her cry and wail. Jessie asks why the Captain did not interfere, and Purvis responds that the Captain only cares that the slaves remain alive so that he can collect his money on them. Purvis goes on to explain that even if the slaves are sick there are still ways to hide their condition.

The ship hits a bit of bad weather, and again the men quarrel and the rations are cut. Jessie is ill all of the time with stomach trouble. Again, Jessie notes how bad the men's ankles are cut by the shackles. Often, only Stout and Jessie are at the slave dancing sessions. Jessie describes how poorly the ship looks now and the awful stench from the slave's holds that permeates the ship. The men have also started drinking heavily again. Jessie recalls one of the seamen telling him he could get used to anything, and Jessie admits that this is half-true, for if your only option is to drown in the ocean then you can. However, Jessie finds a sense of freedom in his mind by imagining being at home with his mother and his sister. Jessie dislikes being interrupted when he is in such a reverie and finds his anger growing. One morning Jessie notices that the African boy's eyes are on him and it seems like he is trying to dance closer to him. When Jessie sees that Stout's attention is elsewhere he takes the fife away from his lips and whispers his name to the African boy; for the rest of the morning, the African boy's eyes never leave Jessie's face.

Jessie describes rare moments of peace when the day is calm, the slaves sit quietly under the tarpaulin and the crew is settled. However, two startling events occur before the journey ends. The first is the death of Louis Gardere. Gardere had been at the wheel when his face suddenly twisted and his body convulsed. The next thing everyone knew, Gardere dropped to the deck twitching. Ned, who was sick himself, had to look over Gardere to determine what was wrong with him, but Gardere dies one hour later. Ned claims that it had not been a seizure that killed Gardere, but instead it was a fever of some sort which he caught from the slaves. That night six Africans died, and again Ned examines the bodies to determine that it was a fever which killed them. Ned faints after making this statement, and Jessie describes the fear all of the crew begins to feel. Ned becomes thinner, and when Jessie asks him what he has, Ned's reply is that he has caught a touch of death that are the wages of sin.

The day that the ship changes course, Jessie describes Nicholas Spark losing his senses. Spark stepped on the heel of an African man who had spat out his food, and the African leapt at Spark's throat. Spark could not get to his pistol, but Stout intervened. The African was flogged until he was unconscious and hung on the ropes. Jessie is heading toward the crew's quarters when he sees Spark walking towards the African with his pistol drawn. Spark shoots the African, and the Captain faces Spark angrily. Spark points his pistol at the Captain. The Captain has Spark tied in ropes and thrown overboard to drown. Jessie runs below to tell Ned of the events, and Ned explains that



he is not surprised. Ned states that the Captain had Spark killed for shooting the slave and not for pointing the gun at him, for the Captain only cares about the loss of his money.

Nicholas Spark Walks on Water Analysis

Ned's words at the beginning of this chapter, stating that there are no cures for the disease of man, set the stage for the events of this chapter. First, Jessie describes the awful sounds coming from the slave holds and the terror the slaves experience from the storm. There is a significant difference between how the crew is affected by the presence of the slaves and how the Captain, Ben Stout and Nicholas Spark are not. Jessie describes the first time he must play his pipe for the slaves and their poor condition. Jessie feels mortified by the slaves' nakedness and the crew's abuse of power.

On board, there is an illness which is spreading amongst the slaves. At one point, Jessie feels a strong hatred towards the slaves and their suffering. However, Jessie witnesses a woman who Stout tormented being thrown overboard; he flees his duties and he is whipped. After Jessie's whipping he returns to his more normal, yet sad, state. Jessie notices that although the crew believes the slaves are less human than they are, they are not particularly mean to them. Jessie also seems to make a connection with one African boy who will play an important role later in the book. In contrast, Stout seems to enjoy tormenting the slaves. Jessie recalls someone, who was in fact Stout, telling him that he can adjust to anything, and Jessie only believes this is true when the alternative is death.

Two important events happen at the end of the chapter. First, Gardere and Ned both die. Second, Nicholas Spark shoots one of the slaves and he is thrown overboard by the Captain. The title of this chapter comes from Jessie believing that he sees Spark take a few steps on water before drowning. This incident shows to what extent the Captain will go to protect his cargo. Again, the reader is reminded of the greed and cruelty of the Captain.



The Spaniard

The Spaniard Summary

The chapter opens with Cooley, one of the sailors, telling Jessie about cockfighting and about Cooley's goal of owning a cockfighting pit. Sam Wick exclaims that only savages enjoy watching cockfights. That day Ned Grime's body had been thrown overboard, and eight slaves were found dead. Jessie finds himself believing that everything on the ship is wrong. The slaves seem to be near death, and Stout has taken on the duties of Nicholas Spark. Although the quality of food and water is not much different between the slaves and the sailors, Jessie believes that the crew's ability to walk freely explains the difference in their conditions. However, Stout does increase the misery of the crew. The weather has not been too poor, and Purvis is always commenting on how lucky they are that the ship has not become becalmed. Purvis tries to convince Jessie that there is only clear sailing ahead and that he will never sail on another slaver again. Jessie continues playing the fife for the slaves and tries not to show his emotions. However, Jessie is becoming increasingly agitated at the slaves' poor health, for the slaves are all sick and weak.

Once, Jessie goes above decks when Sharkey is complaining of a stomachache, and he is amazed at the quiet. Jessie reflects on the meaning of the words "lost at sea," and he has lost his certainty that he will make it home. Jessie wonders if the Africans are aware of where they are headed. Stout suddenly appears and warns Jessie to stay away from the holds. Stout wants to speak to Jessie about the mood of the crew. Jessie asks Stout if he wants him to be a spy for him, and when Stout asks him how he is feeling, Jessie hesitates before he comments that he hates the ship. Stout states that Jessie must hate him, too. Stout comments that he has never understood Jessie's ingratitude. Jessie hurries below deck disturbed by his conversation with Stout and tells Purvis he wishes Stout were dead. Purvis comments that Stout is dead, and claims that there are dead wooden dolls who are placed on every ship who act just like Stout. Sharkey laughs at Purvis' joke.

Jessie imagines that each British crew he sees will board *The Moonlight* and set the slaves free, send him and Purvis to Boston, and hang Stout. However, the ship is not pursued by the British, and Jessie is aware that only French pirates could probably catch their ship. One morning Jessie cannot find his fife and begins looking all over for it. Jessie is wanted on deck to play his music when he sees Stout and realizes that he must have stolen his fife. When Jessie tells the Captain that he cannot find his fife, the Captain tells Stout to take care of the problem. Stout takes Jessie to the slave holds and tells him that he must go down and look for his pipe there because Purvis likes to play such games. Purvis is watching the situation and he tries to step in by offering to go down into the slave holds for Jessie, but Stout tells Purvis to resume his own duties. Stout forces Jessie to climb down into the hold, and Jessie finds himself wedged in between two water casks. One of the slaves lifts Jessie back up on top of the cask, and Jessie describes the shifting of the bodies, groaning and the awful stench in the dark.



Jessie feels helpless and as though his will has died. Jessie recognizes the African boy holding the fife in his hand. The boy begins passing the fife towards Jessie. Jessie is then taken back to play for the slaves and eventually falls exhausted in his hammock.

Purvis approaches Jessie and tries to play cat's cradle, a string game, with Jessie. Jessie recalls playing the same game with his sister Betty before he became too old for it. Purvis again tries to boost Jessie's spirits by reminding him that there are only three weeks left on the journey, and Jessie responds that he is afraid of Stout. Jessie feels that misery has nothing to do with time. Purvis whispers that Sharkey has warned Stout that if anything happens to him then the crew will hunt him down when they get to shore. Purvis warns Jessie not to let Stout see his fear, for Stout enjoys this. Jessie notices how thin Purvis has become and notes that Purvis is a very tidy man when he neatly wraps up the bit of string they had been playing with.

Sharkey never seems to recover from his illness, and Jessie asks Purvis if so much illness is always the case on ships. Purvis claims that he has seen worse and tells Jessie of a ship he was on that was carrying five hundred slaves and thirty crew members, but only one hundred eighty-three slaves and eleven crew members survived. The captain of that ship became a walking preacher. Jessie recalls the early weeks on *The Moonlight* and compares them with the present which is so full of thirst and work. Sometimes Jessie wonders why Ned would let his life run out on a ship instead of living in a town with a church for him to attend. Jessie believes that there must be something mad in any man who would voluntarily go to sea. Once Jessie sees sharks in the water, and on another day he sees a small island. Purvis asks Jessie if he would like to get off on that island, but explains that Jessie would not be happy there for long, for there is not anything on the island. Purvis explains that there are little bits of land like that all over the world.

For the first time in weeks, Jessie wonders whether he will make it home. Jessie sees flying fish which remind him of creatures on one of his mother's sewing boxes which he had always believed were imaginary. Stout interrupts Purvis and Jessie talking about the fish by telling them there is work to be done, for they will be in Cuban waters in a day or so. Jessie is told he will not be dancing the slaves as often. Stout grabs Jessie's arm, tells him to empty the buckets and accuses him of neglecting the Africans who he likes. Jessie finds that the buckets are filled with dead rats and he believes that the Africans must have killed them with their shackles.

Later, Jessie returns to look at the island and believes that it now looks cold and lonely. Purvis is working on filing the shackles off of the male slaves, and by mid-afternoon, all of the slaves are free of the shackles. Sharkey believes the Captain is a fool for keeping the shackles and other objects on board that are evidence that the ship is a slaver, but he also comments that the Captain is so greedy he would risk anything to make more money. Jessie notes that thirty of the slaves must have died and asks why the slaves are no longer a threat. The slaves seem to not be surprised of their new freedom and ability to wander about the deck, and Jessie describes them as being beyond surprise. The crew is trying to clean out the holds, and Purvis complains that nothing can get the smell out.



Three days after leaving the island, the ship flies the Spanish flag that will allow them to anchor in Cuban waters. Jessie is told that if they see a British ship they will fly the American flag again. Jessie asks if they are in danger now, and Purvis explains that they always have been, but that the end of the journey is more dangerous. Now the ship begins to wait, and one night a light flickers from shore, and the ship responds likewise. At midnight, a boat arrives at the ship and a man with black hair and a frilly shirt boards along with a black man who keeps his head bowed. Purvis explains that the Spaniard's slave has no tongue. Jessie suddenly feels dizzy and cannot hear Purvis speaking. Jessie has had several moments of faintness before during this journey. Jessie returns to normal and hears Purvis explaining that the Spanish broker is said to be very wealthy and bribes the highest officials. Purvis goes on to explain that the Spanish officials must be bribed because their government has tried to stop the slave trade as well. Purvis tells Jessie that the slaves will be taken off the ship in skiffs and taken to a plantation inland, and the Captain receives his money when the slaves are unloaded. Jessie asks Purvis where he lives and if he has a family. Purvis explains that he only has a sister who lives in Boston, but that he has not seen her in fifteen years and she may even be dead. Purvis states that his home is where he is. Jessie thinks of his home, and knows that if he returns he will never visit the slave market again.

The Spaniard Analysis

Jessie's mood and thoughts play a predominant role in this chapter. First, Jessie is finding life to be increasingly miserable on board the ship and believes everything is going wrong. Next, Jessie finds himself feeling lost at sea and questions whether or not he will actually make it home. Jessie also realizes that he is facing the most dangerous part of his trip. Jessie tries to find comfort in his imagination, but his depression seems to win out. At the end of the chapter, we know just how much Jessie has changed on his journey when he states that he will never visit the slave market again. The reader knows that this change comes from Jessie witnessing the awful conditions and treatment the slaves must endure.

The danger in this chapter comes from the ship's presence in Cuban waters. The Spanish are against the slave trade, and the Captain must raise the Spanish flag in order to anchor. Jessie also faces danger in the fact that he has angered Stout by not becoming his ally or spy amongst the crew.



Ben Stout's Mistake

Ben Stout's Mistake Summary

It is evening and Jessie describes the Cuban shoreline as looking smoky and indistinct. This is the last night the slaves will be on board, and the crew and slaves are all agitated. Before dawn, the slaves will be placed on boats to be rowed to shore, and there the Spaniard will fatten and strengthen the slaves before selling them in the market. There are a few lanterns lit on the deck that make the ship look strange, and Purvis comments that he does not like the sea in this area.

Jessie feels tired and heavy when Stout tells him that he must get a chest out of the Captain's quarters. Jessie considers the possibility that Stout is lying to him, and he has never seen the Captain's quarters before. Jessie feels curious and fearful when he enters the Captain's quarters which he finds is twice as large as the crew's quarters. The Captain points out the chest Jessie is to carry on deck and asks him to guess what is inside. Jessie is nervous when he guesses rum, and the Captain tells him it is full of frilly dress clothes. The Captain says that the slaves like to dress up and that it amuses the crew to watch them. The Captain also gives Jessie biscuits for guessing, but says that if he had been correct in guessing he would not have gotten them.

Jessie takes the chest on deck, and Stout tells Jessie to get his fife and get ready for the festivities. The slaves are huddled together near the bow of the ship, and Jessie hears the slap of oars. The Spaniard has arrived on the ship with his slave again, and the Captain, who is wearing a comical hat, greets him with a slap on the back. The Spaniard seems offended, the slave steps closer as if to protect the Spaniard, and the Captain puts his hand to his pistol for a moment. Everyone is distracted when Stout begins rounding up the slaves. The Captain orders the chest to be opened, and Purvis comments that he did not believe the Captain would hold this event again. Purvis explains that the Captain holds a ball for the slaves because he believes they deserve a bit of pleasure before they go to the Spaniards who are especially cruel. However, the last time the Captain held this ball two men were knifed.

Stout tries to teach the Africans how to put on the clothes, and he holds up a man so bent that Jessie thinks he is an old man. However, when Jessie sees the man's face more clearly, he can see that the man must only be seventeen or eighteen years old. The Spaniard's servant steps forward and begins waving his hands and acting as though he is putting the clothes on. The slaves begin dressing themselves, and the sailors circulate among the slaves adjusting the outfits. Jessie sees the young African boy with a white undergarment around his shoulders. The rum keg is tapped, and the sailors begin drinking clumsily. The Captain tells the sailors to give some rum to their guests, meaning the slaves. Jessie must play his fife, and everyone begins to dance. Jessie watches the Captain dancing quickly and gracefully, yet he still manages to slap the slaves and the sailors about. Jessie notes that Purvis tries to stay away, but Stout seems to put himself in the Captain's path purposefully.



The slaves and seamen drink the rum heavily. The sailors are swinging the slaves about, and a few of the children break away and run to the bow. The dancing is frantic and begins to frighten Jessie who drops his fife. The Spaniard's servant begins waving his hands, and the Spaniard says that his servant sees a sail. Stout looks over the side and states that he sees an English ship, but that he knows her and she will not disturb them. The Captain orders the Spanish flag to be taken down and replaced with the American one. Jessie is ordered to stay by the children and overhears the Captain telling Stout to get the Africans by the rail.

Jessie states that what happens next happens so quickly that later he remembers only pieces at a time. The sailors worked on the ropes, the American flag was hoisted and Stout tossed shackles overboard. Porter cries out that he sees boats, and the Captain sees that the ship and boats are American. Immediately following this, the Captain orders that the slaves be tossed over the side, and Jessie sees Sam Wick pick up a black woman and toss her into the water. The slaves pile themselves upon one another as though trying to protect themselves. Jessie sees the Captain even throwing slaves over the side. Three African men head towards the Captain waving their arms at him, and Jessie sees the Captain shoot one of the men in the face. Jessie races to the bow wailing, and then he hears the African children weeping and tries to show them that he means them no harm. Jessie spies the familiar African boy as well. Seth Smith appears and begins throwing the children overboard, and the African boy strikes at him. Smith orders Jessie to get to work, and the African boy runs behind a mast. Jessie fakes having his foot caught in a coil of rope.

Jessie grabs the African boy's arm and points in the direction of the forehold. The two boys drop down into the hold and crouch there waiting. The African boy whispers something to Jessie, but he does not understand. Jessie is horrified when the hatch cover is placed over the hold. The stench makes breathing difficult for Jessie, and the African boy guides Jessie's fingers to the dampness on the outside of the water casks. Jessie finds himself sleeping and dozing, and the two feel a terrible storm outside. Jessie thinks of how horrible it will be when Stout finds them. The African boy and Jessie talk to one another even though they cannot understand each other. The two sleep, and Jessie believes that more than just hours are passing and that days are as well. Once Jessie wakes to hear the boy crooning to himself and shares his biscuits from the Captain with the boy. The two hear a horrible crash above and a horrible shudder passes through the ship.

Later, the hatch cover finally disappears, and the two boys look above and see a gray turbulent sky. Jessie climbs to the deck and sees the ship's boat smashed and the mainmast lying across Purvis. Jessie sees the ship's wheel floating among the ship's debris. Jessie becomes soaked instantly and is amazed by the sight of land. Jessie is frightened by the powerful storm. Jessie hears a moan and spots Stout, but when another wave comes, Stout disappears in it. Jessie believes it must have taken him an hour to get back to the hold and survive the crashing waves. Once, Jessie grabs onto what he thinks is Cooley's leg. Jessie thinks he hears a cry for help but is unsure in the howling storm. Jessie spots a moving, living thing and sees that it is the African boy's



arm who helps him back into the hold. The two hold on to one another, trembling in the hold and riding out the waves.

Gradually the storm subsides, and the ship settles upon something like a reef or rock. Jessie and the boy go up on deck, and even though it is nearly dark, they can clearly see the shoreline. The African boy's eyes light up and Jessie knows he must be thinking that he sees his homeland, so Jessie shakes his head and the boy feels disappointed. Jessie hears wild laughter and sees that the Captain is still alive. The boy points towards shore, and Jessie spots a piece of wood from the boom to use. Jessie hears the captain shout but realizes the man has not seen them.

Jessie can only swim like a dog, and he does not know if the boy can swim at all. However, Jessie knows if the boys stay on the ship they will drown. The two jump into the water, take hold of the wood, and begin making their way towards the shore. Jessie looks back at the ship sinking and sees the Captain's hand clawing at the air. Jessie feels a twinge in his ear as though the Captain has bitten him again. Jessie describes the struggle of getting to the shore. Jessie does not know how long the swim took, and he states, "But even now I can feel the urgency of our struggle, the hope that delivered me from the depths and brought me up to air again and again as though most of my life had taken place in that stretch of sea."

Ben Stout's Mistake Analysis

The tone of this chapter is very chaotic, wild and destructive, and the events of this chapter make up the climax of the book. In the beginning of the chapter, Purvis states that he does not like the sea in the Cuban waters which foreshadows the very destructive storm that demolishes the ship. The Captain's ball for the slaves becomes very wild and everyone is drunk. However, the arrival of the American boats begins a chain of events that ends with the African boy and Jessie making it to the Cuban shore safely while the rest of the crew and slaves seem to have died. Jessie's words at the end of the chapter about the urgency of his struggle are perhaps the most important words of the book, for they encapsulate what he has learned from his journey on board the slave ship.



The Old Man

The Old Man Summary

When the two boys awake, the sea is tranquil, and Jessie smells the land. Jessie is shocked to smell what he believes to be chickens, and the African boy believes he smells the same thing. Jessie sees a chicken come bobbing out of the nearby trees, and he knows that means people are nearby which makes him nervous. The boy acts as if to try and throw a stone at the chicken, but Jessie dissuades him. The two start off down the beach but are stopped when they hear a man's voice shout at them to stop. The boys keep going until they find that the beach ends in steep faced rocks. When the two turn around, they see an elderly black man with his hen beside him. The African boy's face lights up until he sees that the black man is dressed in white man's clothing. Jessie and the boy go to meet the man, and Jessie is nervous about how he will explain himself.

The old man asks the two where they came from, and he observes the African boy very closely. Jessie has to tell the man that he is not the other boy's master. Jessie hastens to explain what happened to their ship, and the old man tells them that they are in Mississippi. Jessie explains that the boy is African and has not learned English. The man asks what the boy's name is, and Jessie finds out that his name is Ras. The man invites the boys to follow him.

Jessie is surprised when the man leads them down a path in the forest and comes to a large clearing where a small hut was. The man gives the boys water and takes them into the hut. Jessie is overcome with a feeling of heaviness and finds himself feeling like crying. Jessie wonders how he and the African boy made it to shore, and he recalls hearing an inner voice telling him to swim that echoes the same voice he used to cry out for his father to swim. A few days later, the boys and the man find some debris from the ship, and Jessie pays special attention to a decayed rope that he recalls having once been full of life. Jessie does not eat much at their first meal, but makes up for it later.

Ras and Jessie manage to talk to each other a little and are dressed in clothes which the old man has given them. Jessie describes how much the old man must work and figures out that he must be an escaped slave. Jessie feels like the clearing is as remote as a deserted island. The old man finally tells the boys that his name is Daniel, and the two boys are gaining weight. The boys help Daniel with the chores, but they also manage to find time for games and playing. One evening Daniel rests his hand on Ras's head, and Jessie finds out the next evening what will happen to Ras.

After dinner, Jessie hears a footstep, and Daniel goes outside to speak with someone. Daniel asks Jessie to wait outside and tells him not to worry. Two black men are outside and enter the hut when Jessie leaves. After a while, Jessie is called back into the hut by Daniel, and he sees that the two men are gone. Jessie asks what will happen, and Daniel responds that they are taking Ras up north. One of the men spoke Ras'



language, and Jessie can see how much Ras is thinking to himself. Daniel tells Jessie that he must go home to his family and that it will take a few days of walking. Ras is to leave the next night as soon as it gets dark, and the two boys try to stay close to each other all day. That night, Daniel gives Ras some food and the men arrive to take him away. Jessie can see the determination in Ras's face to go through with the plan. Ras is gone in an instant and Jessie is left with Daniel.

Jessie feels hollow inside, and Daniel asks him to tell him about the journey on the ship. When Jessie is done speaking, Daniel merely states that was the way it was, and Jessie is left wondering if the man had been through the same experience. Daniel warns Jessie that if Jessie tells anyone about him Daniel will be taken away, and Jessie states that he will not tell anyone. In the morning, Daniel wakes Jessie early and has him wrap his feet in rags for his journey. Daniel tells Jessie how to get home. Jessie wants Daniel to touch his head the way he had with Ras, but the man merely wishes him a safe journey. Jessie feels a mix of gratitude and disappointment, and finds himself thinking of Purvis.

The Old Man Analysis

This chapter is the beginning of a new life for Ras and a return to an old life for Jessie. Jessie and Ras become better friends in the home of Daniel and they are bonded by their shared experience. Jessie recalls the struggle to get to shore and thinks of the drowning of his father in comparison to his own survival. Jessie notes that there is a particular affection between Daniel and Ras and he feels a little left out. However, Jessie thinks of his friendship with Purvis, and the reader must realize that Jessie did not get to say goodbye to him.



Home and After

Home and After Summary

Jessie is frightened of being in the dark woods by himself. The path is difficult to stay on, and Jessie feels torn between moving quickly or staying where he is until daylight. Jessie is mostly frightened by the idea of a snake biting him. Jessie comes to the first marker Daniel had given him and feels comforted. Eventually, Jessie is on a rutted road and spies a sail on the sea, which makes him wonder what sort of ship it is. Jessie passes through a marsh, eats his dinner that Daniel has given him, and sleeps in an abandoned wagon. Jessie passes two more of Daniel's markers the next day, one a pile of stones with human figures painted on each and the other a gray cabin. That night, Jessie sleeps in the open air.

The next morning, Jessie is on a dirt road patterned by horse's hooves which he follows along to a plantation house. Jessie is frightened when he is in open sight of a man on a black horse, until the man is helped up the stairs to his house by his three black servants. Later that day, a steady downpour of rain begins, and Jessie finds himself feeling like he can go no further even though he is close to home. Jessie finds himself holding his breath and recalls someone telling him of people who can suffocate themselves by will. At twilight the rain stops and Jessie feels better again. Jessie sleeps that night in an overturned boat.

By late afternoon the next day, Jessie is walking towards Jackson Square and looks like a scarecrow. Jessie walks into his home and he is met by a shriek and a cry from his mother and Betty. The three talk late into the night, and Jessie learns of his family's search for him. Jessie's mother is horrified by Jessie's story of what happened to the slaves on the ship. Jessie is surprised at how little time it takes for him to readjust to his old life. The most startling change comes from Jessie's Aunt Agatha, who treats Jessie courteously now.

Jessie realizes, however, that he is not the same person that he was. Sometimes while walking along, he pauses to look at a black man to see the man he may have been before his trip on a slave trader. Jessie looks for a profession that will have no connection with the slave trade, and eventually becomes an apothecary, which is far from his old desire to become a rich chandler. After Jessie's apprenticeship, he goes north to Rhode Island and sends for his mother and Betty. Jessie misses the south and the Mississippi River. Jessie is also aware that some part of him is always looking for Ras, and once he believes he sees him in Boston.

Jessie fights in the Civil War on the side of the Union and spends three months in Andersonville surviving its horrors. However, he feels that his experience on *The Moonlight* prepared him for that experience. After the war, Jessie lives his life like anyone else does and rarely speaks or thinks of his experience on the slave ship. However, Jessie experiences one drastic change, for he cannot listen to music



anymore. The sound of music or any instrument makes him leave and lock himself away. The sound of an instrument makes him see again the tormented dancing of the slaves and hear the clanging of the shackles.

Home and After Analysis

Jessie's final challenge in this book is getting home to his family in New Orleans. One of the markers Daniel has Jessie look for is a peculiar pile of stones with human figures painted on them which may have been from the Underground Railroad. During the rainfall, Jessie feels a certain hopelessness and recalls being told of slaves who could suffocate themselves by will. At the end of the book, Jessie can understand why a slave would do this when he or she faces such a miserable journey in life. Although Jessie returns to his old life, he is a very different person and wants to escape a life that is connected with the slave trade in any way. Therefore, Jessie becomes an apothecary, moves to the north and fights on the side of the Union during the Civil War. However, Jessie is always haunted by the images and sounds of the slave dances when he hears music.



Characters

Agatha Bollier

Agatha is Jessie's aunt (the sister of his father) and is more well-to-do than the Bolliers. They turn to her in times of trouble, asking for small things, such as extra candles so that Jessie's mother can stay up late working on dresses. Since Jessie's father's death, Agatha has been irritable and withdrawn, and she is also fussy and demanding, telling Jessie how to walk and warning him not to be clumsy with her furniture whenever he enters her house. Jessie says, "I had no other memory of Aunt Agatha except as a woman who especially disliked me." Agatha dislikes the fact that Jessie makes a living playing the fife and tells him he should be apprenticed and learn a respectable trade, saying that she doubts he would gain any benefit from school. However, she is generous with her candles and other gifts, and although Fox never says this directly, the reader senses that Agatha does care about Jessie; She wants his life to be better than it is but can't express this wish in a positive way. When Jessie eventually returns from his long and harrowing journey, she treats Jessie with affection and kindness and no longer accuses him of being a "bayou lout."

Betty Bollier

Betty is Jessie's sister. She is four years younger than he and has little part in the story. She is quiet and kind, and he thinks of her often during the voyage. When he comes back, she is even nicer to him, treating him like an invalid. When he moves to Rhode Island, he sends for her and his mother and takes care of both of them financially.

Jessie Bollier

Thirteen-year-old Jessie Bollier makes a few pennies each day by playing his fife in the rougher districts of 1840s New Orleans. He, his mother, and his young sister Betty are very poor, and they own almost nothing, living in a single damp room on Pirate's Alley where his mother works as a seamstress for the wealthy women of New Orleans.

Until this point, Jessie has largely been protected from experiencing the horrors of slavery because his family is too poor to own slaves and because his mother has forbidden him to loiter near the slave market. He dreams of being rich one day, "in a fine suit, with a thousand candles to hand if I needed them instead of three grudgingly given stubs. I imagined the splendid house I would live in, my gardens, my carriage and horses." He is intrigued by the slaves he sees, curious about their lives.

In January of 1840, while he is walking along daydreaming, Jessie is abducted by sailors who have seen him playing his fife. They carry him off to a slave ship called the *Moonlight*, and tell him that after the ship reaches Africa and they take on slaves, his job



will be to play for the slaves so that they will "dance" and thus keep themselves strong, fit, and profitable.

The voyage is a living hell for Jessie, who sees the slaves treated worse than animals and who finds depths of ugliness within himself that he never dreamed existed. Forced to have his whole existence revolve around the slaves, he is shocked to find himself hating them, hating the entire ship's crew, hating himself. He sees men, women, and children die, sees them thrown over the side of the ship, and sees the crewmembers mercilessly flogged. When the ship is overtaken by an American anti-slavery vessel, the crew begins throwing the slaves overboard, but at the same time, a ferocious storm hits. Jessie and a slave boy, Ras, go hide in the hold, and the two of them become friends. When the ship founders on a reef, everyone but Jessie and Ras dies. They make their way to shore and are taken in by an escaped slave, Daniel, who tells Jessie how to walk back to New Orleans, three days' journey away.

Later, Jessie's earlier dreams of becoming rich have been tempered by reality as he realizes that all the wealth he saw around him was either the result of slaves' work or was somehow connected with the slave trade because slavery is so deeply ingrained in his culture. He eventually is apprenticed to an apothecary and moves to Rhode Island where there is no slavery and brings his mother and sister there, too. Despite his new life, he is still homesick for the South—the Mississippi, the tropical smells—and for his friend Ras, whom he never sees again.

During the Civil War, he fights for the North and spends some time in a horrendous prisoner-of-war camp, which he survives, he believes, because he was prepared for its horrors on the *Moonlight*.

Eventually, he largely forgets his terrible voyage; he has a family and a peaceful life, except for one legacy of that trip that remains: for the rest of his life, he cannot stand hearing music because it reminds him of the slaves' tormented dancing.

Mrs. Bollier

Mrs. Bollier is Jessie's mother, a young widow who was originally from Massachusetts. She makes her living by sewing dresses for the wealthy ladies of New Orleans. One of the only beautiful things in their one-room home is her wooden sewing box, which has a winged fish carved on the top and beside which sits her basket of spools of bright thread. Jessie says, "By candlelight, the warmth of the colors made me think the thread would throw off a perfume like a garden of flowers." Sometimes, their home is filled with her work—rich swathes of damask or silk. She is harried and worried, always struggling to make enough money to feed her children. Even after Jessie returns from his voyage, his mother still sometimes weeps at the thought of what he has been through and at the thought of what happened to the slaves. Perhaps because of her Northern upbringing, she is against slavery. She warns Jessie to stay away from the market where slaves are sold and is shocked to hear of a slave called Star by her owner: "It's not a human name," she says.



Captain Cawthorne

Captain of the *Moonlight*, he is a ruthless man with a capricious temper, who, when he first meets Jessie, picks him up and bites his ear hard enough to draw blood, as a sort of warning about who's boss on the ship. His crew is afraid of him, although they know that on other ships there are captains who are worse. He lives in relative luxury on the ship, with private quarters, good food, and plenty of water, when the others do without, and he does not hesitate to flog Purvis when he is accused of stealing an egg from the captain's hen. He is single-mindedly devoted to profit and despises the anti-slavery British ships that run down slavers and confiscate their slaves and their profits. He also despises the African chiefs who sell their own people to the slavers. Eventually, Jessie realizes, "I was on a ship engaged in an illegal venture, and Captain Cawthorne was no better than a pirate."

Adolph Curry

Adolph is the ship's cook. Jessie describes him as "the thinnest man I'd ever seen. . . . His skin was the color of suet except for uneven salmon-colored patches along the prominent ridges of his cheekbones." He is in a perpetual bad temper, and Purvis explains that this is habitual with ships' cooks: "It's the smoke that maddens them, and whatever good humor they start with is fried to a crisp by the head."

Daniel

Daniel is an escaped slave who has found a safe haven deep in the woods near the coast of Mississippi. When Jessie and Ras swim to shore, he finds them, takes them in, and takes care of them until they are strong enough to leave. Although it is dangerous for him to shelter Jessie since Jessie is white and may tell others where he is, Daniel treats him kindly and trusts him to keep his secret. Daniel is resourceful, living entirely on the produce of his small garden and a few farm animals. Daniel arranges for friendly people to take Ras north where he can be free and tells Jessie the route back to New Orleans, three days' walk away. He gives him food for the journey and wishes him safe travel. As Jessie says, "Daniel had saved my life. I couldn't expect more than that."

Ned Grime

Grime is an older man who serves as the ship's carpenter (and, occasionally, the surgeon). He is not a sailor and knows little about running the ship. He holds himself apart from the crew, "as if he lived a mile from the earth and had nothing to do with the idiot carryings on of the human race," Jessie says. He is against taking boys and men on as sailors against their will, and he is religious and talks about the evils of slavery, saying "It's all the Devil's work," but Jessie stops listening when he finds out that like all the crew, Grime will eventually profit from the voyage. When Ned says of slavery, "My



heart's not in it," Jessie says, "I wondered about his heart, imagining it to be something like one of the raisins Curry used to slip into the plum duff."

Jessie's Father

Jessie's father died when Jessie was four. He worked on a snagboat, which cleared away the tree stumps and other debris that blocked steamboat navigation on the river. His small boat was caught by a current, he lost his balance, fell, and was sucked underwater before anyone could help him. He appears in Jessie's dreams, mostly as a voice crying, "Oh, swim!" and Jessie still grieves his loss.

Clay Purvis

Purvis is an Irishman and one of the two sailors who abduct Jessie and carry him off to the *Moonlight*. Purvis has seen Jessie playing his fife in the market earlier and has even given him money. "Don't you remember a man who gave you money?" he asks Jessie. "I'm about to do even more for you. I'm going to take you on a fine sea voyage." Purvis is a big, rough man with a mocking sense of humor, and though he is uneducated and loutish, he has a soft spot for Jessie, disguised under his rough treatment of him. For example, one day when Jessie begins to cry with homesickness, Purvis picks him up, shakes him, and threatens to hang him up in the rigging in an attempt to take his mind off it. He is a good sailor, never idle, skilled at many tasks on board, and a good teller of sea tales. When Ben Stout steals an egg from the captain's private supply, Purvis is blamed and takes the flogging that results without protest.

Purvis is a man of his time, and he does not have much sympathy for the slaves, regarding them as less than human and noting that his own Irish ancestors crossed the sea in conditions just as bad as theirs. When Jessie shows any sympathy for the slaves, Purvis is enraged, as if sympathy for them somehow lessens his ancestors' suffering. He asks Jessie, "Do you know my father was haunted all his days by the memory of those who died before his eyes in that ship, and were flung into the sea? And you dare speak of my parents in the same breath with these [slaves]!" Jessie rightly thinks it's senseless of Purvis to protest how his parents were treated but not to object to the same treatment when it is applied to Africans, but he can never talk sense into Purvis about this topic. Despite this, he trusts Purvis over Ben Stout. "It was Purvis whom I was eager to see when I woke up in the morning," he says, "Purvis with his horrible coarse jokes, his bawling and cursing, Purvis whom I trusted."

Ras

Ras is a slave boy on the ship who is fascinated by Jessie. Jessie is also intrigued by him because they are the same age and they are both on the ship against their will. When Stout throws overboard a young slave girl who has died, Jessie cries out, and Ned Sharkey smacks him so hard he falls down. Jessie says, "When I got up, I saw a boy close to my own age, staring at me from among the group of silent slaves squatting



beneath the tarpaulin. I could not read his expression." When the two of them are the only survivors of a raid and shipwreck of the *Moonlight*, they are taken in by an escaped slave, and Ras is thrilled, thinking he has found a piece of home until he realizes the old man is wearing white people's clothes. Eventually, Daniel, the escaped slave, helps Ras escape, too, sending him to the North with allies.

Claudius Sharkey

Sharkey is the other sailor involved in Jessie's abduction. He explains the facts of the slave trade to Jessie: that British cruisers made it dangerous by watching out for illegal American slavers, pursuing them, confiscating their cargo, and arresting their crews. The trade was also made dangerous by American ships that patrolled, looking for privateers like the *Moonlight*.

Nicholas Spark

Spark is the Mate, who, Jessie says, "kept to the Captain's side like a shadow. He had a brooding look on his face, and when he spoke, his voice sizzled like a hot poker plunged into water." He does whatever the Captain orders, usually brutally. Although he is obviously evil, Jessie finds that he is easier to deal with than someone like Stout, whose evil is hidden at first.

Benjamin Stout

At first, Ben Stout appears to be trustworthy; the first thing he says to Jessie is, "I'm sorry for what's been done to you." Unlike the other sailors, he is quiet and polite. Like Jessie, he was forced to become a sailor but eventually came to like it and quickly becomes bored and restless on land. He takes Jessie in hand, shows him around the ship, and gives him clothes to wear, as well as a chunk of bread, and tells him what chores to do. Other than Purvis, he is the only crewmember who takes much notice of Jessie at all. Although he seems kind, this is only a thin veneer over an untrustworthy and sly heart: Stout steals an egg, blames Purvis, and then, at the Captain's orders, assists in flogging Purvis for the crime Stout did. He speaks the slaves' language and talks softly to them, saying things that Jessie cannot understand but which seem to drive the slaves mad with fear or sadness. He seems to take pleasure in tormenting people in this subtle, sly way. Jessie stops trusting him and regards him with deep mistrust and fear. Stout is bothered by this since he wants to influence Jessie. "I've been so good to you," he says. "I don't understand your ingratitude. They've all talked against me. I suppose that accounts for it." Jessie does not answer him. Purvis later tells Jessie, "He is dead. He's been dead for years." He tells Jessie there is someone like him on almost every ship: someone spiritually, morally dead, "and no one's the wiser until two weeks at sea when one of the crew says to another, 'Ain't he dead? That one over there by the helm?' and the other says, 'Just what I was thinking—we've got a dead man on the ship.'" When Jessie won't speak to him, Stout steals his wife and drops

it in the hold where Jessie has to scramble over the bodies of the slaves to look for it, or else be punished by the captain for losing it. The slave boy, Ras, finds it and hands it to him.



Themes

Freedom and Imprisonment

From the very beginning of *The Slave Dancer*, themes of imprisonment and escape run through the book. In the opening chapter, Jessie and his family live in one tiny room, little more than a cell, with a few meager possessions, and Jessie feels crowded there, particularly in bad weather: "I hated the fog," he says. "It made me a prisoner." When he visits his Aunt Agatha to ask for a few candles, he is ordered about like a prisoner: "'Don't walk there!' she would cry. 'Take your huge feet off that carpet! Watch the chair—it'll fall!'"

Soon after this visit to his aunt, Jessie is captured and taken to the slave ship—a fate that will soon be paralleled in the fates of the slaves he must play his life for. Like them, he is beaten; like them, he eats horrible food; like them, he has no option for escape other than jumping over the side and drowning. However, no matter how much he suffers, their suffering is always worse, a fact of which he is always aware.

The sailor Purvis, whose parents came from Ireland under conditions similar to those of the slaves, resents any pity Jessie feels for the slaves, because somehow, to him, it dishonors his parents' suffering when anyone cares about how the Africans are treated.

Jessie's physical imprisonment is bad enough, but Fox also shows how he becomes mentally imprisoned—how, from feeling sorry for the slaves, Jessie enters a time when he hates them—for they are the reason he was taken from his home, the reason for his own servitude on the ship. Also, as David Rees noted in *The Marble in the Water*, Jessie, after being abused by the crew, briefly becomes one of them, one of the abusers. He is only woken from this terrible state of mind by a beating.

Although the sailors are technically free men, they are not mentally free: limited by their lack of education and their brutally difficult lives, they can only muster up compassion for the slaves for a short time, and only when the voyage is going well. Some, such as Nicholas Spark and Ben Stout, never do; Stout is described as "dead," in an emotional or spiritual sense, and Jessie says that Spark is "entirely brainless and evil only in the way that certain plants are poisonous": he is mindlessly, ruthlessly evil, not even human.

Even after Jessie returns home, he is never completely free again. He has been deeply marked by his experiences and they shape everything he does, from his choice of a career, to his decision to move to Rhode Island, and his fighting for the North in the Civil War. He is never truly carefree again: for the rest of his life, he cannot bear to listen to music because it brings up memories of the slaves' suffering.

The only truly free person in the book is, ironically, Daniel, the escaped slave who has created a small farmstead deep in the Mississippi forest. However, his freedom is precarious: if anyone finds him, or even if Jessie tells anyone about him, he may be



recaptured and forced into slavery again. Interestingly, Daniel constantly risks his hard-won freedom: the book implies that he is involved with the Underground Railroad and has a network of contacts who lead slaves to freedom.

Hypocrisy Versus Integrity

Jessie's mother is religious, and she warns him to stay away from the slave market and from taverns. She is also aware that no matter how poor she and her family are, "there were souls whose fates were so terrible in comparison to ours, that we should consider ourselves among the fortunate of the earth," meaning the slaves.

Purvis tells Jessie a story of a captain of a slave ship that started out with 500 slaves and 30 crewmembers, and ended with 183 slaves and 11 crewmembers alive; most were killed by disease, some by violence.

The Captain took his Bible and left that ship and the sea. I've heard tales that he's a walking preacher now, goes to towns and villages and gets up on a box and tells people the world is going to end any day and if there ain't no people he tells the trees and the stones." This story parallels the real life of John Newton, a slave ship captain who quit his work, became a preacher, and wrote the well-known hymn "Amazing Grace."

However, there are more hypocrites than truly religious people in the book. Like Jessie's mother and the reformed captain, Ned Grime, the ship's carpenter, professes to be religious. However, he holds himself aloof from the rest of the crew, and talks "as if he lived a mile from the earth and had nothing to do with the idiot carryings on of the human race." He has a chilly view of God, stating, "God has no wish to share his secrets with Adam's descendants." When Purvis is flogged and Jessie, upset, leans against Ned, Ned not only does not console him, but also "made not the slightest accommodation of his body to my weight," Jessie says. Ned talks about religion often, but when Jessie discovers that he will make just as much profit as the rest of the crew from the voyage, he discounts him.

Captain Cawthorne, who is in charge of the slave ship, mentions in the same breath that the slave trade is both "lucrative and God-given," and the sailors justify it by saying that everyone else is doing it. So many ships are transporting slaves that the laws against such transport are meaningless.

In fact, the book implies that most people are hypocrites as bad as Cawthorne, if not as obvious, and that, as Jessie realizes later, almost every job, profession, or source of income available is connected in some way with the transport, sale, or labor of slaves. Almost everyone, no matter what he or she does, is living off slave labor, however distantly. With this realization, the book becomes an indictment of almost everyone in



white society. As David Rees wrote in *The Marble in the Water*, "It is a savage indictment of a whole society, intensely political in its overtones which ring down through the ages to the present day."



Style

Poetic Prose

"The distinction and beauty of the words she uses and her absolute command of subtlety and nuance in rhythms and sentence structure place Paula Fox above almost all other children's writers," Rees states in his book. Other critics agree: Fox's use of language has brought her the Newbery Medal, the Hans Christian Andersen Award, and recognition in both the United States and England. Fox's prose is spare but poetic, filled with rich imagery grounded in intense physical detail, rhythm, and cadence. For example, when Jessie is captured and taken by a small boat to the ship, Fox writes:

We passed a small island. I saw the glimmer of a light in a window—only that solitary, flickering yellow beacon. I felt helpless and sad as though everyone in the world had died save the three of us and the unknown lamplighter on the shore. Then, as if daylight was being born inside the boat itself, I began to make out piles of rope, a wooden bucket, a heap of rusty looking net, the thick boots of my captors.

In passages like these, Fox juxtaposes accurately drawn emotion with exact detail of place, time, and people, making the events—and the emotions—seem absolutely real.

Emotional Accuracy

Throughout the book, Fox describes Jessie's mixed emotions with stunning clarity, even when they are shocking in their intensity and negativity, or when they are not what the reader expects. Soon after he is captured, Jessie experiences a surge of happiness as the ship speeds on, and even he is surprised by this. "When I remembered the wretchedness of my situation, I wondered if there was something about a ship that makes men glide from one state of mind to another as the ship cuts through water."

Later, forced to play for the slaves, forced to be a part of their suffering, he is shocked to find that he hates them—he hates their shackled shuffling, their groaning, hates their suffering—and hates himself for hating them. Because the sailors have abused him, he now takes it out on them, seeing them as the cause of his captivity on the ship. Although this state of mind is short-lived, and ends when Jessie himself is beaten, Fox does not shy away from depicting it. Like other people in intolerable situations, Jessie develops the ability to mentally retreat from the situation: "I found a kind of freedom in my mind, I found how to be in another place." However, unlike Ned Grime, the hypocritical carpenter, he can't sustain this, and is soon slapped back to reality and to awareness of his place in the tormenting of the slaves.



When Jessie and Ras are rescued by Daniel, the escaped slave, Fox shows Jessie's wistful desire to be as close to Daniel as Ras is, and his awareness that because he is white, Daniel will never trust him in the same way.

Long after the voyage and for the rest of his life in Rhode Island, Jessie is marked by the experience, like all people who have been through intense suffering. Although outwardly he is like his neighbors, inwardly he retains the memory of the short voyage, and he can never enjoy music as he did when he was still a child.

First Person

The book is told in first person—an excellent choice since the reader can "hear" Jessie telling his story, and it seems far more alive and realistic than if the same story was were told in third-person. Like the spellbinding sea stories Purvis tells, readers are right there in the story with Jessie as he describes the ship, the crew, the slaves, and the horrifying events. By the end of the book, the reader knows Jessie intimately: he has shared every thought and feeling as honestly as if he were in the same room with the reader, confessing the terrible story that has weighed on his mind for most of his life.

Historical Context

The Slave Trade

Paula Fox is a contemporary writer, but *The Slave Dancer* is set in 1840, in New Orleans, and on the slave ship *The Moonlight*. Fox brings this time to life through Jessie's eyes: the reader learns that although it was illegal to import slaves from Africa, this trade went on, and that the sale of American-born slaves was open and accepted. As a *World Book* article on the trade noted, by the early 1800s, more than 700,000 slaves lived in the southern United States, and by 1860, there were about four million slaves in these states. Although Jessie's family is too poor to own slaves, he sees them in the streets and in the homes of the wealthy, and it is understood that anyone who has any money owns servants, and that most occupations are directly or indirectly related to the work of slaves. Until Jessie sees the truth about slavery, it doesn't occur to him to question whether this is right or wrong—it's just the way things are in his time and place. Attitudes toward people of African descent were also affected by the common racist conviction among whites, as Jessie notes, that "the least of them was better than any black alive."

Because the sole motive of the slave trade was profit, some captains of slave ships tried to pack as many people as possible into their ships and transport them for the lowest possible cost. Others believed in "loose packing"; they did not take on as many slaves, and allowed them more room on the ship, hoping that this would cut down on sickness and death among the captives. (In the book, Captain Cawthorne is called "a tight packer" by his crew.) On all ships, the slaves were kept chained in the hold at all times except when they were brought on deck to exercise. This crowding, and the complete lack of any sanitary facilities, led to disease and death on all slave ships, whether tightly or loosely packed. The slave trade across the Atlantic, between the Americas and Africa, lasted from the 1500s to the mid-1800s, and although no one knows for sure how many Africans were taken from their homeland, most sources estimate that around 10 million people were transported, according to the *World Book*.

The Underground Railroad

The Underground Railroad was not a railroad, and it was not underground. It was a network of people who helped slaves escape and find freedom in the northern United States and in Canada where slavery was illegal. The slaves traveled mostly at night, on foot or any other way they could, and hid during the day in secret places or in the homes and buildings of anti-slavery activists. Because running away and helping slaves to run away was illegal in the South, people involved in this mission used code words, often from the railroad, so that others would not know what they were doing. For example, the people who helped the slaves were called "conductors," and the hiding places were called "stations." In *The Slave Dancer*, Daniel, and the two men who come



to help Ras to escape, are conductors. Because their work endangers them, they are concerned that Jessie might tell others about them.

The Underground Railroad mainly operated from 1830 until the 1860s and helped many thousands of people escape from slavery. Although these people made it to the North, some were recaptured by slave hunters and taken back to the South. Because of this, many people fled even to Canada, particularly Ontario, where they were safer. In 1850, the U.S. Congress passed a fugitive slave law against returning escaped slaves to bondage.

The most famous conductor on the Underground Railroad was Harriet Tubman, who had run away from slavery. Not content with finding her own freedom, she returned to the South 19 times and helped about 300 people to escape.

Sailors' Hard Lives

As Fox makes clear, it was common for men and boys to be "pressed," or kidnapped, onto ships to become sailors as Jessie is. Benjamin Stout confides, "I was pressed too, although when I was older than you, and for a much longer voyage than this will be." Taken against their will, these sailors served under the iron command of captains who, like Cawthorne, used violence and punishment to enforce discipline on board their ships. Being a sailor was a dangerous occupation: death from illness and shipwreck was common, and for slavers, so was the threat of prosecution by British or American forces if they were caught.



Critical Overview

A Widely Praised Writer

Paula Fox has been praised by many critics for the beauty, clarity, authority, and subtle poetry of her prose, as well as the depth of her ideas and her execution of them in fiction. *The Slave Dancer* is generally considered one of her finest works. For example, John Rowe Townsend wrote in *A Sounding of Storytellers* that *The Slave Dancer* "is a historical novel of weight and intensity which stands on its own, at a distance from [Fox's] other books," and called the book her "finest achievement."

Controversy Over the Book

Although the book has been widely praised, some critics have objected to it, claiming that it is racist. In *Interracial Books for Children*, Binnie Tate wrote that:

through the characters' words, [Fox] excuses the captors and places the blame for the slaves' captivity on Africans themselves. The author slowly and systematically excuses all the whites in the story for their participation in the slave venture and by innuendo places the blame elsewhere.

Binnie Tate, quoted in *Cultural Conformity in Books for Children*, wrote that the book "perpetuates racism . . . [with] constantly repeated racist implications and negative illusions," and in the same volume, Sharon Bell Mathis called the book "an insult to black children."

In the case of *The Slave Dancer*, some have objected to the fact that the slaves are portrayed as nonresistant, demoralized, nameless victims. However, Hamida Bosmajian wrote about this namelessness in *Nightmares of History*, commenting that "both the point of view of the novel and the circumstances of history make it impossible to name the slaves. Only after the shipwreck can Jessie exchange names with Ras, the sole black survivor."

Controversy over the novel's possible racist undertones extended to the ceremony in which Fox received the Newbery Award for the book where there were demonstrations against the book. Fox was shaken by this news but gave her speech; afterward, some of the demonstrators came up to her and let her know that she was "forgiven."

Emotionally Accurate

In *Nightmares of History*, Hamida Bosmajian wrote that Fox "is accurate in portraying the psychology of human beings in extreme situations," referring to the changing and conflicting emotions Jessie experiences, from apathy to rage to detachment, and even



occasional happiness. Bosmajian, who analyzed books dealing with historical traumatic events and their survivors, noted that in these situations, people often do not behave admirably, or as we would like them to behave. Bosmajian also wrote that we

would like our children to sing songs of innocence, but it is difficult to delude children who have intimations of nuclear war. By breaking with the convictions of children's literature, [books such as *The Slave Dancer*] open spaces or blanks for the young readers' thoughts.

Uncompromising Moral Integrity

In an essay in *Horn Book*, Alice Bach described *The Slave Dancer* as "one of the finest examples of a writer's control over her material. . . . With an underplayed implicit sense of rage, Paula Fox exposes the men who dealt in selling human beings." In the *New Statesman*, Kevin Crossley-Holland wrote that the book is "a novel of great moral integrity. . . . From start to finish . . . Fox tells her story quietly and economically; she is candid but she never wallows." And Bob Dixon, in *Catching Them Young: Sex, Race and Class in Children's Fiction*, praised the book as "a novel of great horror and as great humanity . . . [approaching] perfection as a work of art."

Bach also wrote that what sets Fox apart from other writers

who are knocking out books as fast as kids can swallow them, is her uncompromising integrity. Fox is nobody's mouthpiece. Her unique vision admits to the child what he already suspects: Life is part grit, part disappointment, part nonsense, and occasionally victory. . . . And by offering children no more than the humanness we all share—child, adult, reader, writer—she acknowledges them as equals.

David Rees wrote in *The Marble in the Water* that

the way [Fox] constructs her plots and the way she uses the English language make her second to none. And in *The Slave Dancer*, she has given us a masterpiece, the equal of which would be hard to find.

Criticism

- Critical Essay #1
- Critical Essay #2



Critical Essay #1

Winters is a freelance writer and editor who has written for a wide variety of academic and educational publishers. In the following essay, she discusses themes of truth and moral questions in Fox's story.

As John Rowe Townsend pointed out in *A Sounding of Storytellers*, children's literature in the 1950s and early 1960s tended to promote a gentle, reassuring view of children, their families, and their role in society. He wrote, "Childhood was part of a continuing pattern—the orderly succession of the generations—and [in the accepted view] children were growing up to take their place in a known and understood world." By the late 1960s, however, people were becoming aware that this notion of childhood as a safe, protected time was just that—a notion—and it did not reflect the reality of children's lives. Children, like adults, suffer, experience trauma, and live through conflicting emotions about events they cannot control or justify.

As Townsend noted, Fox was one of the first writers to wake up to this reality. He wrote that she "was one of the small number of writers who brought quick sharp perceptions to the new and in many ways uneasy scene, and also an instinctive sympathy for the young who . . . had to deal with it." In her early works, children and adults fail to understand each other: there is no cozy bond between the generations. In *The Slave Dancer*, Fox takes a larger step and looks at a terrifying time in human history through the eyes of a boy who, like the slaves, is taken captive and experiences the horrendous reality of *The Moonlight*. Even worse, he must help others mistreat the slaves, using his gift for music as an instrument of torment. As Townsend wrote, the presence of a child in this setting is an alarming and awakening touch of truth. In *The Slave Dancer*,

The 'young eye at the centre' is no mere convention of the adventure story for children; it is the one perspective from which the witnessing of dreadful events can be fully and freshly experienced, and at the same time the moral burden be made clear.

Some reviewers have questioned whether this exposure to horrendous events is appropriate for children and whether books like *The Slave Dancer* can be considered children's literature, despite the presence of the "young eye at the center." In her essay, "Nightmares of History," in *Children's Literature Association Quarterly*, Hamida Bosmajian wrote that such books not only can but should be included in the canon of writing for young people. Bosmajian wrote that for children who are personally experiencing trauma such books can have "therapeutic value" and can "raise the consciousness of youngsters whose environment is stable."

As Bosmajian points out, historical "nightmares" created by adults, such as the Nazi Holocaust, nuclear war, or the enslavement of Africans, always include children since they affect whole societies. It is impossible to pretend, given the reality of these circumstances, that all children live the protected lives that earlier books portrayed.



Bosmajian wrote that perhaps some adults object to stories about these events because "we fear that to depict the children within the nightmare of history will both taint our own image of innocence and deny young readers trust in the future we shape." However, she notes, telling children about these events and letting them discuss their concerns about them "cannot but be therapeutic."

Paula Fox obviously supports the view that writers should not shy away from portraying real pain and notes that some contemporary books may pretend to look at the dark side of life but in the end try to make readers believe that everything will be all right. Fox told Sylvia Steinberg in *Publishers Weekly*, "The American idea is that everything can be solved. Our lives are not problems to be solved! They're to be lived! . . . Children are given liar's clothes early on. It's a way of not looking." And, more heatedly she said, "At the core of everything I write is the feeling that the denial of the truth imprisons us even further in ourselves." In her essay "Some Thoughts on Imagination in Children's Literature" in *Celebrating Children's Books: Essay on Children's Literature in Honor of Zena Sutherland*, she described such books as "tract literature" and as

stories that strain to teach children how to manage life by merely naming such "problems" as disease, physical anomalies, and even death and by assuring them there is nothing to be afraid of, nothing to suffer about, nothing complex.

Clearly, *The Slave Dancer* is not that kind of book. The book contains disease, physical (and moral) anomalies, death, and a host of other frightening things: Jessie's father is dead, his family is extremely poor, he is kidnapped, he is beaten and sees others beaten, he sees slaves thrown over the rail of the ship—both dead and alive—after being starved, exposed to disease, and tormented—and he doesn't know if he will ever make it home alive. Worse, he not only has to witness the torment of the slaves but he is forced to become one of their oppressors as he plays his flute; he is aware that, even though he is like them in the sense that he is a prisoner on the ship, when they reach land, he will be free to go home to his mother and sister, a choice that will forever be denied to the slaves. In addition, he is aware that because he is white, the crew automatically regards him as "human," whereas they don't see the slaves as human at all. For Jessie, who has noted his kinship with the slave boy Ras, this false dichotomy is troubling: he knows that, at bottom, there is no difference between them, but the sailors beat him whenever he shows compassion for the slaves' humanity and their suffering.

Jessie cannot find an easy solution to these moral questions and to the questions of why people are cruel and why people suffer. Even after Jessie makes it home, he is changed permanently. Although he grows up and manages to make a modestly successful life, with a decent career, a wife, and a child, the scars of the voyage are always with him. His decisions to become an apothecary, move to the North, and fight for the Union side during the Civil War are all direct results of his harrowing childhood experience. For his whole life, he avoids or fights against anything that helps the cause of slavery. For his whole life, he struggles against the memory of his own brief captivity on the ship and the marks it has left on his psyche. Even though he appears normal and



well adjusted to his neighbors and even when he rarely thinks consciously about the ship, he is unable to hear any music□no matter how simple□without pain. His musical gift, which was once so lighthearted and free, has become a continuing symbol of the slaves' torment, and of his own.

This loss of a certain amount of joy, this tempering of the soul and of hope, is only natural in someone who has seen what Jessie has seen. To write a book in which someone saw the suffering of slaves and who then went home and "recovered" from the experience would be shallow and false. In "Some Thoughts on Imagination in Children's Literature," Fox wrote of books that bring up social problems and then provide easy answers: "The implicit instructions of contemporary 'realistic' books may vary . . . but they have the same sequel: they smother speculation, they stifle uncertainty, they strangle imagination." In these books, she wrote, "We present children with cozy books about desertion and death and sex, promising them that, in the end, everything can be made all right. Thus we drown eternal human questions with contemporary bromides."

Although Fox's work is painfully realistic, it is not pessimistic. Jessie does manage to create a good life; he is not scarred to the point of being unable to contribute positively to the world. As John Rowe Townsend wrote in *A Sounding of Storytellers*, "Ultimately the book is not depressing; the human spirit is not defeated."

Fox's insistence on telling the truth is allied to her sense that writing for adults is no different from writing for children. She once stopped to write a children's book in the middle of writing a novel for adults and says that she does not write differently for her two audiences. John Rowe Townsend, in *A Sense of Story*, quoted Fox as having said, "I never think I'm writing for children when I work. A story does not start for anyone, nor an idea, nor a feeling of an idea; but starts more for oneself." Unlike other writers, who "write down" for children or try to teach some moral lesson, Fox follows her instincts and tells the truth about events, believing that the truth is inherently interesting and that only by exploring it can readers, and writers, grow as human beings.

In her acceptance speech for the Newbery Award, reprinted in *Newbery and Caldecott Winners, 1966-1975*, Fox wrote that writing helps us "to connect ourselves with the reality of our own lives. It is painful; but if we are to become human, we cannot abandon it."

Source: Kelly Winters, Critical Essay on *The Slave Dancer*, in *Novels for Students*, The Gale Group, 2001.?



Critical Essay #2

*In the following essay excerpt, Townsend calls *The Slave Dancer* Fox's "finest achievement," and says children "ought not to grow up without it."*

I have left until last the book which, so far, is Paula Fox's finest achievement. I do not think it could have been predicted from her earlier work that she would write such a book as *The Slave Dancer*. It is the story of Jessie Bollier, a boy who is pressed into the crew of the slave ship *Moonlight* in 1840 for a voyage to Africa, picking up a cargo of blacks to be sold in Cuba. This is a case where the discipline of writing for the children's list has been wholly to the benefit of the book as a work of art. The 'young eye at the centre' is no mere convention of the adventure story for children; it is the one perspective from which the witnessing of dreadful events can be fully and freshly experienced, and at the same time the moral burden be made clear. Jessie is horrified by the treatment of the slaves, but he is powerless to prevent it; moreover he is young, white, and one of the crew, and the oppressors are his fellow-countrymen.

Jessie plays the fife, and his job is to make music to which, for brief periods daily, the slaves can exercise. This is called dancing the slaves. The aim is to keep them (relatively) healthy and therefore marketable, in spite of the crowded and filthy conditions in which they live. A slave has no human value but has a financial one: a dead slave is a lost profit. As the voyage goes on, the slaves, crammed together in the reeking hold, become sick, halfstarved and hopeless, most of them suffering from 'the bloody flux', an affliction that makes the latrine buckets inadequate. And Jesse finds that 'a dreadful thing' is happening in his mind:

I hated the slaves! I hated their shuffling, their howling, their very suffering! I hated the way they spat out their food upon the deck, the overflowing buckets, the emptying of which tried all my strength. I hated the foul stench that came from the holds no matter which way the wind blew, as though the ship itself were soaked with human excrement. I would have snatched the rope from Spark's [the mate's] hand and beaten them myself! Oh, God! I wished them all dead! Not to hear them! Not to smell them! Not to know of their existence!

The Slave Dancer is not a story solely of horror. It is also a novel of action, violence and suspense, culminating in shipwreck (which was indeed the fate of a slaver called *Moonlight* in the Gulf of Mexico in 1840; the actual names of her crew are used). Jessie and a black boy named Ras with whom he has made a precarious friendship are the only survivors; they reach land and there is a limited happy ending. Ras is set on the road to freedom; Jessie gets home to his mother and sister, is apprenticed, lives an ordinary, modestly-successful life, and fights in the Civil War on the Union side.



After the war my life went on much like my neighbors' lives. I no longer spoke of my journey on a slave ship back in 1840. I did not often think of it myself. Time softened my memory as though it was kneading wax. But there was one thing that did not yield to time. I was unable to listen to music. I could not bear to hear a woman sing, and at the sound of any instrument, a fiddle, a flute, a drum, a comb with paper wrapped around it played by my own child, I would leave instantly and shut myself away. For at the first note of a tune or of a song, I would see once again, as though they'd never ceased their dancing in my mind, black men and women and children lifting their tormented limbs in time to a reedy martial air, the dust rising from their joyless thumping, the sound of the fife finally drowned beneath the clanging of their chains.

Those are the closing sentences of *The Slave Dancer*. Ultimately the book is not depressing; the human spirit is not defeated. But it is permeated through and through by the horror it describes. The casual brutality of the ordinary seamen towards the slaves is as fearful in its way as the more positive and corrupt cruelty of the captain and mate and the revolting, hypocritical crew member Ben Stout. For the seamen are 'not especially cruel save in their shared and unshakable conviction that the least of them was better than any black alive'. They are merely ignorant. Villainy is exceptional by definition, but dreadful things done by decent men, to people whom they manage to look on as not really human, are a reminder of our own self-deceit and lack of imagination, of the capacity we all have for evil. There, but for the grace of God, go all of us.

Is such knowledge fit for children? Yes, it is; they ought not to grow up without it. This book looks at a terrifying side of human nature, and one which—in the specific manifestation of the slave trade—has left deeply-planted obstacles in the way of human brotherhood. The implication was made plain by Paula Fox in her Newbery acceptance speech in 1974. We must face this history of evil, and our capacity for evil, if the barriers are ever to come down.

Source: John Rowe Townsend, "Paula Fox," in *A Sounding of Storytellers: New and Revised Essays on Contemporary Writers for Children*, J. B. Lippincott, 1979, pp. 55-65.



Topics for Further Study

Create a map and draw the route that Jessie took from his kidnapping in New Orleans to Africa and then to the shipwreck in the Gulf of Mexico and his walk home to New Orleans. Also, calculate how many miles Jessie traveled.

Jessie and Ras feel very close to each other even though they don't speak the same language. Many years later, Jessie is still looking for Ras and hoping that someday he will see him. Why do you think this is the case? How did the boys communicate with each other on the ship, during the shipwreck, and at Daniel's house?

In the book, the slaves on board *The Moonlight* do not rebel against their captors. However, on a real ship named the *Amistad* in 1839, the slaves did rebel under the leadership of a slave named Cinque and took control of the ship for some time until it landed in Long Island. Research the *Amistad* uprising and compare and contrast it to events in *The Slave Dancer*. What eventually happened to the slaves on the *Amistad*?

Jessie spends three days and nights walking alone through the woods from Mississippi to New Orleans. If you were hiking alone in the woods for that time, what would you need to survive? Jessie had very little. What is the smallest amount of food and gear that you think you would need to survive? What would you be most afraid of and why?

Ras is sent north with friends of Daniel's, presumably to freedom. Jessie looks for him but never finds him. What do you think happened to Ras? Write a story telling what his life was like, starting from the time he left Daniel's hut in the forests of Mississippi.

In New Orleans in 1840, poor children were expected to work. If you lived in 1840 and had to work at age thirteen, what work could you have done to help your family survive?

In *Interracial Books for Children*, Binnie Tate wrote that "through the characters' words, [Fox] excuses the captors and places the blame for the slaves' captivity on Africans themselves. The author slowly and systematically excuses all the whites in the story for their participation in the slave venture and by innuendo places the blame elsewhere." Do you agree with this statement? Why or why not?



Compare and Contrast

1840s: Slavery is legal in the southern part of the United States, and African Americans have no rights.

Today: African Americans are legally entitled to all the same rights as other Americans, although American society is still struggling against racism.

1840s: It takes a ship four months to travel from North America to Africa and back, and the journey is extremely hazardous.

Today: Airplanes can safely make the trip from North America to Africa and back in just a matter of hours.

1840s: Children are not required to attend school, but they are expected to work to help their families make a living, and they often work long hours.

Today: Child labor is against the law, and all children must attend school.

1840s: The area around New Orleans is forest, farms, and swamps. Jessie could walk toward the city for three days and see almost no people and few signs of human habitation.

Today: Large-scale urban growth and development of highways have made wilderness like the one Jessie walks through increasingly rare, especially around large cities such as New Orleans.

What Do I Read Next?

In *Western Wind* (1993), by Paula Fox, a lonely young girl is sent to live with her grandmother on a remote island off the coast of Maine.

Paula Fox's *Monkey Island* (1991) tells the story of a homeless boy, Clay Garrity, who lives on the streets and is eventually helped by two other homeless men.

In *Up From Slavery*, originally published in 1901 and reprinted in 2000 by Signet, Booker T. Washington tells the story of his early life as a slave and how he rose to become president of Tuskegee Institute in Alabama.

To Be a Slave (1988), by Julius Lester, is a collection of reminiscences of ex-slaves about their experiences, from leaving Africa, through the Civil War, and into the early twentieth century.

Narrative of the Life of Frederick Douglass: An American Slave, by Frederick Douglass, originally published in 1845 and reprinted by Signet in 1997, relates his life as a former slave who eventually became a minister, orator, and leader of his people. The book talks of his days as a slave and describes how he gained his freedom.

The Narrative of Sojourner Truth (1997), by Sojourner Truth (d. 1883) and Olive Gilbert, is a partial autobiography of a slave woman who became a pioneer in the struggles for racial and sexual equality.

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In this essay, Fox discusses how books fuel the imagination of children.

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Hamilton offers a collection of African-American folktales, fairy tales, and true stories. The book won the 1996 Coretta Scott King award.

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This contains Fox's acceptance speech for the Newbery Medal, which she won for *Slave Dancer*.

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Editor Fogelman discusses young adult literature about African Americans.

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Myers tells the history of African Americans through the narratives of outstanding individuals.



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Introduction

Purpose of the Book

The purpose of Novels for Students (NfS) is to provide readers with a guide to understanding, enjoying, and studying novels by giving them easy access to information about the work. Part of Gale's □For Students□ Literature line, NfS is specifically designed to meet the curricular needs of high school and undergraduate college students and their teachers, as well as the interests of general readers and researchers considering specific novels. While each volume contains entries on □classic□ novels



frequently studied in classrooms, there are also entries containing hard-to-find information on contemporary novels, including works by multicultural, international, and women novelists.

The information covered in each entry includes an introduction to the novel and the novel's author; a plot summary, to help readers unravel and understand the events in a novel; descriptions of important characters, including explanation of a given character's role in the novel as well as discussion about that character's relationship to other characters in the novel; analysis of important themes in the novel; and an explanation of important literary techniques and movements as they are demonstrated in the novel.

In addition to this material, which helps the readers analyze the novel itself, students are also provided with important information on the literary and historical background informing each work. This includes a historical context essay, a box comparing the time or place the novel was written to modern Western culture, a critical overview essay, and excerpts from critical essays on the novel. A unique feature of NfS is a specially commissioned critical essay on each novel, targeted toward the student reader.

To further aid the student in studying and enjoying each novel, information on media adaptations is provided, as well as reading suggestions for works of fiction and nonfiction on similar themes and topics. Classroom aids include ideas for research papers and lists of critical sources that provide additional material on the novel.

Selection Criteria

The titles for each volume of NfS were selected by surveying numerous sources on teaching literature and analyzing course curricula for various school districts. Some of the sources surveyed included: literature anthologies; Reading Lists for College-Bound Students: The Books Most Recommended by America's Top Colleges; textbooks on teaching the novel; a College Board survey of novels commonly studied in high schools; a National Council of Teachers of English (NCTE) survey of novels commonly studied in high schools; the NCTE's Teaching Literature in High School: The Novel; and the Young Adult Library Services Association (YALSA) list of best books for young adults of the past twenty-five years. Input was also solicited from our advisory board, as well as educators from various areas. From these discussions, it was determined that each volume should have a mix of □classic□ novels (those works commonly taught in literature classes) and contemporary novels for which information is often hard to find. Because of the interest in expanding the canon of literature, an emphasis was also placed on including works by international, multicultural, and women authors. Our advisory board members□educational professionals□ helped pare down the list for each volume. If a work was not selected for the present volume, it was often noted as a possibility for a future volume. As always, the editor welcomes suggestions for titles to be included in future volumes.

How Each Entry Is Organized



Each entry, or chapter, in NfS focuses on one novel. Each entry heading lists the full name of the novel, the author's name, and the date of the novel's publication. The following elements are contained in each entry:

- **Introduction:** a brief overview of the novel which provides information about its first appearance, its literary standing, any controversies surrounding the work, and major conflicts or themes within the work.
- **Author Biography:** this section includes basic facts about the author's life, and focuses on events and times in the author's life that inspired the novel in question.
- **Plot Summary:** a factual description of the major events in the novel. Lengthy summaries are broken down with subheads.
- **Characters:** an alphabetical listing of major characters in the novel. Each character name is followed by a brief to an extensive description of the character's role in the novel, as well as discussion of the character's actions, relationships, and possible motivation. Characters are listed alphabetically by last name. If a character is unnamed—for instance, the narrator in *Invisible Man*—the character is listed as "The Narrator" and alphabetized as "Narrator." If a character's first name is the only one given, the name will appear alphabetically by that name. Variant names are also included for each character. Thus, the full name "Jean Louise Finch" would head the listing for the narrator of *To Kill a Mockingbird*, but listed in a separate cross-reference would be the nickname "Scout Finch."
- **Themes:** a thorough overview of how the major topics, themes, and issues are addressed within the novel. Each theme discussed appears in a separate subhead, and is easily accessed through the boldface entries in the Subject/Theme Index.
- **Style:** this section addresses important style elements of the novel, such as setting, point of view, and narration; important literary devices used, such as imagery, foreshadowing, symbolism; and, if applicable, genres to which the work might have belonged, such as Gothicism or Romanticism. Literary terms are explained within the entry, but can also be found in the Glossary.
- **Historical Context:** This section outlines the social, political, and cultural climate in which the author lived and the novel was created. This section may include descriptions of related historical events, pertinent aspects of daily life in the culture, and the artistic and literary sensibilities of the time in which the work was written. If the novel is a historical work, information regarding the time in which the novel is set is also included. Each section is broken down with helpful subheads.
- **Critical Overview:** this section provides background on the critical reputation of the novel, including bannings or any other public controversies surrounding the work. For older works, this section includes a history of how the novel was first received and how perceptions of it may have changed over the years; for more recent novels, direct quotes from early reviews may also be included.
- **Criticism:** an essay commissioned by NfS which specifically deals with the novel and is written specifically for the student audience, as well as excerpts from previously published criticism on the work (if available).



- Sources: an alphabetical list of critical material quoted in the entry, with full bibliographical information.
- Further Reading: an alphabetical list of other critical sources which may prove useful for the student. Includes full bibliographical information and a brief annotation.

In addition, each entry contains the following highlighted sections, set apart from the main text as sidebars:

- Media Adaptations: a list of important film and television adaptations of the novel, including source information. The list also includes stage adaptations, audio recordings, musical adaptations, etc.
- Topics for Further Study: a list of potential study questions or research topics dealing with the novel. This section includes questions related to other disciplines the student may be studying, such as American history, world history, science, math, government, business, geography, economics, psychology, etc.
- Compare and Contrast Box: an "at-a-glance" comparison of the cultural and historical differences between the author's time and culture and late twentieth century/early twenty-first century Western culture. This box includes pertinent parallels between the major scientific, political, and cultural movements of the time or place the novel was written, the time or place the novel was set (if a historical work), and modern Western culture. Works written after 1990 may not have this box.
- What Do I Read Next?: a list of works that might complement the featured novel or serve as a contrast to it. This includes works by the same author and others, works of fiction and nonfiction, and works from various genres, cultures, and eras.

Other Features

NfS includes "The Informed Dialogue: Interacting with Literature," a foreword by Anne Devereaux Jordan, Senior Editor for Teaching and Learning Literature (TALL), and a founder of the Children's Literature Association. This essay provides an enlightening look at how readers interact with literature and how Novels for Students can help teachers show students how to enrich their own reading experiences.

A Cumulative Author/Title Index lists the authors and titles covered in each volume of the NfS series.

A Cumulative Nationality/Ethnicity Index breaks down the authors and titles covered in each volume of the NfS series by nationality and ethnicity.

A Subject/Theme Index, specific to each volume, provides easy reference for users who may be studying a particular subject or theme rather than a single work. Significant subjects from events to broad themes are included, and the entries pointing to the specific theme discussions in each entry are indicated in boldface.



Each entry has several illustrations, including photos of the author, stills from film adaptations (if available), maps, and/or photos of key historical events.

Citing Novels for Students

When writing papers, students who quote directly from any volume of Novels for Students may use the following general forms. These examples are based on MLA style; teachers may request that students adhere to a different style, so the following examples may be adapted as needed. When citing text from NfS that is not attributed to a particular author (i.e., the Themes, Style, Historical Context sections, etc.), the following format should be used in the bibliography section:

□Night.□ Novels for Students. Ed. Marie Rose Napierkowski. Vol. 4. Detroit: Gale, 1998. 234-35.

When quoting the specially commissioned essay from NfS (usually the first piece under the □Criticism□ subhead), the following format should be used:

Miller, Tyrus. Critical Essay on □Winesburg, Ohio.□ Novels for Students. Ed. Marie Rose Napierkowski. Vol. 4. Detroit: Gale, 1998. 335-39.

When quoting a journal or newspaper essay that is reprinted in a volume of NfS, the following form may be used:

Malak, Amin. □Margaret Atwood's □The Handmaid's Tale and the Dystopian Tradition,□ Canadian Literature No. 112 (Spring, 1987), 9-16; excerpted and reprinted in Novels for Students, Vol. 4, ed. Marie Rose Napierkowski (Detroit: Gale, 1998), pp. 133-36.

When quoting material reprinted from a book that appears in a volume of NfS, the following form may be used:

Adams, Timothy Dow. □Richard Wright: □Wearing the Mask,□ in Telling Lies in Modern American Autobiography (University of North Carolina Press, 1990), 69-83; excerpted and reprinted in Novels for Students, Vol. 1, ed. Diane Telgen (Detroit: Gale, 1997), pp. 59-61.

We Welcome Your Suggestions

The editor of Novels for Students welcomes your comments and ideas. Readers who wish to suggest novels to appear in future volumes, or who have other suggestions, are cordially invited to contact the editor. You may contact the editor via email at: ForStudentsEditors@gale.com. Or write to the editor at:

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