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Study Guide

for

**The Slave
Dancer**

by **Paula Fox**



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New York, New York Columbus, Ohio Woodland Hills, California Peoria, Illinois

Meet Paula Fox



I write to find out. I write to discover, over and over again, my connections with myself, with others. Each book deepens the question. It does not answer it.

—Paula Fox

Growing up, Paula Fox often referred to herself as a “traveling child.” Born in 1923 in New York City, Fox seldom saw her parents or even lived in the same place for more than a year or two. Her father wrote scripts for stage plays and for movies. While her parents were working in Hollywood and London, Fox lived with relatives and family friends.

Fox spent the first six years of her life in New York State at the home of a minister. The minister, who enjoyed writing, taught the young girl to read and to appreciate the art of storytelling. One day, while preparing a sermon, the minister asked Fox to suggest a topic. He worked her response, a waterfall, into his sermon the following week. It was then that Fox realized that “everything could count, that a word, spoken as meant, contained in itself an energy capable of awakening imagination, thought, emotion.” Soon thereafter,

Fox told the minister she hoped to some day become a writer.

After leaving the minister’s care, Fox was taken to California for a brief period of time. She was then sent to live with her grandmother on a sugar plantation in Cuba, where she learned to speak Spanish fluently. During a political revolution, for her own safety, she was sent back to the United States. By the time she was twelve years old, Fox had attended nine schools and received her education in three countries. She went to elementary school in New York and Cuba and to high school in New Hampshire and Canada.

Fox started college at Columbia University in New York City and studied piano at the Julliard School, but left both before getting a degree. At seventeen, she wanted to travel and found jobs that allowed her to do this—as a newspaper reporter in Poland and a manuscript reader for a publisher in London. After returning to Columbia University, she taught at a school for children who were emotionally disabled.

Fox began writing books for children in the early 1960s. Although she has written several plays and novels for adults, her novels for children and teenagers remain her favorites. She is asked frequently to explain the differences between writing for young people and writing for adult readers. She says:

One thing is certain: the criteria for artistry and integrity must be every bit as high in books for children as for adults. We must never, ever try to pull the wool over children’s eyes by “watering down” powerful stories. Contrary to popular belief, children are not easily fooled; they know if a story is authentic, or not. And for this they deserve our respect and the best literature that can be made available.

Introducing the Novel

In *The Slave Dancer*, the captain of a slave ship orders two of his crew members to kidnap Jessie, a thirteen-year-old boy. Jessie had been seen playing a musical pipe, or fife, for money on the streets of New Orleans. The captain wants someone to play music while his crew forces enslaved Africans to exercise, or “dance,” during the weeks-long trip across the Atlantic Ocean. The crew tells Jessie that this exercise keeps the African men and women in good condition, which will guarantee that the Africans will be worth more money. These are some of the excuses the ship’s crew use to explain their brutal treatment of the Africans. Throughout the long voyage, the crew members reveal their greed (all will share in the profits of selling the Africans) and their cowardice.

The Slave Dancer focuses on a period in history when humans were bought and sold like farm animals or pieces of property. It was a practice that was tolerated by some governments and by people on both sides of the Atlantic Ocean. Readers witness the inhumane treatment of enslaved Africans by the sailors and the captain of the slave ship, *The Moonlight*.

Although *The Slave Dancer* won the Newbery Medal, the most prestigious honor given to books for young readers, the book also caused controversy. Some reviewers objected to the way Fox tells the story of the captured Africans on board the ship. The reviewers criticized her for the point of view she chose in writing the novel.

Point of view is the standpoint from which a story is told. In *The Slave Dancer*, Fox chose to tell the story through Jessie’s eyes. This is called **first-person point of view**. A first-person point of view is told by one of the characters, referred to as “I.”

Jessie knows little about the slave trade that accounts for much of the wealth in his hometown. Just as a typical young person

today in New York City might be aware of—but not be knowledgeable about—the financial district, Jessie was aware of the slave auctions but had no understanding of the extent and power of the trade.

Like Jessie, the reader learns what is happening on the ship from the crew members. Critics of the book think that the author should have chosen a point of view that would allow the reader to better understand the emotions, fears, and hopes of the ninety-eight African men, women, and children enslaved on the ship.

THE TIME AND PLACE

The setting of *The Slave Dancer*—New Orleans and a ship at sea—tells readers something about U.S. history during the first half of the nineteenth century.

The novel begins in the city of New Orleans during January of 1840. Although the French had sold the city to the United States in 1803, New Orleans still retained much of its European flavor. For example, inhabitants were referred to as *creoles*. As it was originally used, the word applied to any native-born person whose family was directly linked either to France or Spain. Although New Orleans was on its way to becoming one of the nation’s major cities, a good portion of city life was still centered in the old town, called the *Vieux Carré*, or French Quarter.

Although *The Slave Dancer* is a work of fiction, Paula Fox went to great lengths to guarantee that it was historically accurate. She describes in great detail the voyage of *The Moonlight* along the “Middle Passage,” the route between Africa and the Americas, and the unbearable conditions to which enslaved Africans were subjected.

On real slave ships, enslaved men were crammed below decks with handcuffs on their wrists and leg irons around their ankles. Often, the men were grouped in pairs and chained

together, to further limit their mobility. On many of these ships, platforms were built between decks to hold an extra layer of people. Each layer was less than three feet high, making it impossible to stand upright. Women and children were usually unchained, but they were still treated brutally.

The Atlantic crossing normally took about seven weeks but could take longer in bad weather. Once or twice a day, the Africans were taken up on deck for exercise, but below decks, their living conditions grew worse and

worse as the voyage progressed. Enslaved men would sometimes turn on one another as they were often shackled together with men from opposing African peoples. Additionally, there were no sanitary facilities for hundreds of people who suffered from seasickness and serious illness. Many Africans were so overcome with fear and despair that they threw themselves overboard. It is impossible to know exactly how many died during the Middle Passage, but historians estimate that one in every five or six Africans perished.

Did You Know?

At least 10 million enslaved Africans were transported to North and South America between 1500 and the early 1800s. During this period, six times more Africans than Europeans crossed the Atlantic Ocean to the Americas. Most of these Africans came from the West African regions of Congo and Angola, and the land around the lower Niger River.

Seventy-six percent of the enslaved Africans arrived in the Americas between

1701 and 1810. Of the 76 percent, about half of the people were taken to sugar plantations in the Caribbean, a third to Brazil, and 10 percent to Spanish America. An estimated 596,000 enslaved Africans—about 5 percent—were brought to the British colonies of North America.

Enslaved men outnumbered enslaved women in the Americas two to one, and the majority of the enslaved Africans were between the ages of fifteen and thirty.

Before You Read

The Slave Dancer Chapters 1–3

FOCUS ACTIVITY

How would you respond to being forced to take part in an activity you believed was wrong?

Freewrite

Describe your response in writing. Would you take a stand? What if taking a stand meant serious consequences for you?

Setting a Purpose

Read to find out what role a kidnapped thirteen-year-old boy will play on board a slave ship.

BACKGROUND

Time and Place

During the late eighteenth century, religious leaders in England urged Parliament to outlaw the slave trade. By making the sale of Africans in the British colonies of the United States illegal, abolitionists, or people who wanted to stop the practice of slavery, hoped to force plantation owners to treat their workers better. Even though planters, ship owners, merchants, and bankers believed that slavery was essential to the economy, the British government passed the Abolition Act in 1807.

Despite the new law, many ships continued to transport enslaved people because fines for breaking the law were low and profits were high. Britain tried to prevent this illegal activity. Between 1820 and 1870, the British Royal Navy stopped nearly 1,600 slaving vessels in the ocean off the West African coast and freed the people on board.

Figurative Language

In *The Slave Dancer*, Paula Fox creates vivid images for readers by describing the new or unusual in terms of things that are known to the reader. One kind of comparison the author makes between two things that seem unlike is called a **simile**. The parallel qualities of the two things are shown with the words *like* or *as*, as in “I was carelessly unwrapped like a gift no one wanted.”

Another way Paula Fox makes the unfamiliar more understandable is by using **personification**. This is a figure of speech in which an animal, object, or idea is given human characteristics, as in “. . . the sea groaned around us, bearing upon its heaving back great forks of lightning.”

VOCABULARY PREVIEW

bayou [bī'ōō] *n.* a sluggish stream that wanders through lowlands and marshes

fetid [fet'id] *adj.* having an offensive odor

gorge [gôrj] *v.* to stuff with food

lucrative [lōō'krə tiv] *adj.* profitable

prevail [pri vāl'] *v.* to triumph; win out

profusion [prə fū'zhən] *n.* abundance

sustain [sə stān'] *v.* to keep in existence; to provide for

swathe [swoth] *n.* a wrapping, binding, or bandage

truss [trus] *v.* to tie up tightly

Responding

The Slave Dancer Chapters 1–3

Personal Response

What is your impression of Jessie? Explain.

Look back at the freewriting you did for the **Focus Activity** on page 12. What do you think of Jessie's reaction to being forced to take part in an activity that he believes is wrong?

Analyzing Literature

Recall and Interpret

1. Why did the sailors choose to kidnap Jessie?

2. What kind of person is Aunt Agatha? Describe some of her characteristics.

3. Why, in your opinion, does the crew of *The Moonlight* spend so much time explaining to Jessie their involvement in the slave trade?

Responding

The Slave Dancer Chapters 1–3

Analyzing Literature (*continued*)

Evaluate and Connect

4. Jessie believes that Captain Cawthorne is no better than a pirate, a person who preys on others. Do you agree or disagree with Jessie’s assessment? Why?

5. What are your thoughts about Benjamin Stout at this point in your reading? Why do you think that Jessie does not like him?

Literature and Writing

Persuasive Letter

Suppose that you have a friend who typically does not enjoy historical novels. However, you are so enthusiastic about this first section of *The Slave Dancer* that you think he or she should make an exception. Choose several qualities about the novel, such as the figurative language or the characters, and write a letter describing those qualities that will persuade your friend to read the book. Be sure to give specific examples from the novel.

Extending Your Response

Literature Groups

Even though Jessie is young and inexperienced as the novel begins, he learns much in this first section. With your group, search Chapters 1 through 3 for details that show how life aboard *The Moonlight* affects Jessie. Organize the details in a web diagram and share the diagram with the other literature groups.

Art Connection

With a small group of your classmates, paint a mural of the sea. Begin by collecting descriptive details from the novel. Make a list of the characteristics of the sea that your painting should incorporate. Once you have completed the mural, display it in the classroom.

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Before You Read

The Slave Dancer Chapters 4–6

FOCUS ACTIVITY

Do you think it is possible to get used to, or accept, disagreeable and unpleasant conditions if there seems to be no alternative?

Discuss

With a group of classmates, discuss people who have overcome great odds by surviving difficult conditions.

Setting a Purpose

Read about how life on *The Moonlight* changes once the enslaved Africans are brought aboard.

BACKGROUND

Escape Attempts

In Chapter 4, “The Bight of Benin,” enslaved Africans are brought aboard *The Moonlight*, despite the presence of the British ships that are trying to prevent the slave trading. Smith tells Jessie of the rebellions he has seen, some of them while the ship is still near shore. Africans did not sail off to an unknown fate without a struggle. Many tried to escape while the ships were in port or close to land. Enslaved Africans attempted to communicate with one another and to work together to overpower sailors who were not being cautious. Women and children could relay messages or pass weapons without attracting attention.

Did You Know?

A famous shipboard rebellion took place in 1839 on the *Amistad*, a Spanish ship transferring about fifty enslaved Africans between ports on the island of Cuba. The men were provoked by a cruel joke from the ship’s cook, who was himself enslaved. Fearing that they were going to be eaten after arriving at their destination, the Africans armed themselves. They took over the ship and prepared to sail it back to Africa. The ship was captured by an American vessel and the Africans were taken to New York. There, a group of abolitionists came to their defense. In a trial, the judge ruled that the Africans had been kidnapped and ordered their return to Africa. The Supreme Court upheld the decision.

VOCABULARY PREVIEW

aggrieved [ə grēvd’] *adj.* distressed

chagrined [shə grind’] *adj.* uncomfortable due to failure or disappointment

clamber [klam’ bər] *v.* to climb with difficulty

depraved [di prāvd’] *adj.* morally corrupt; perverted

disengage [dis’ in gāj’] *v.* to release from something that connects or entangles

doldrums [dôl’ drəmz] *n.* a period of calm, light winds

melancholy [mel’ ən kol’ ē] *n.* sadness

mortification [môr’ tə fi kâ’ shən] *n.* humiliation

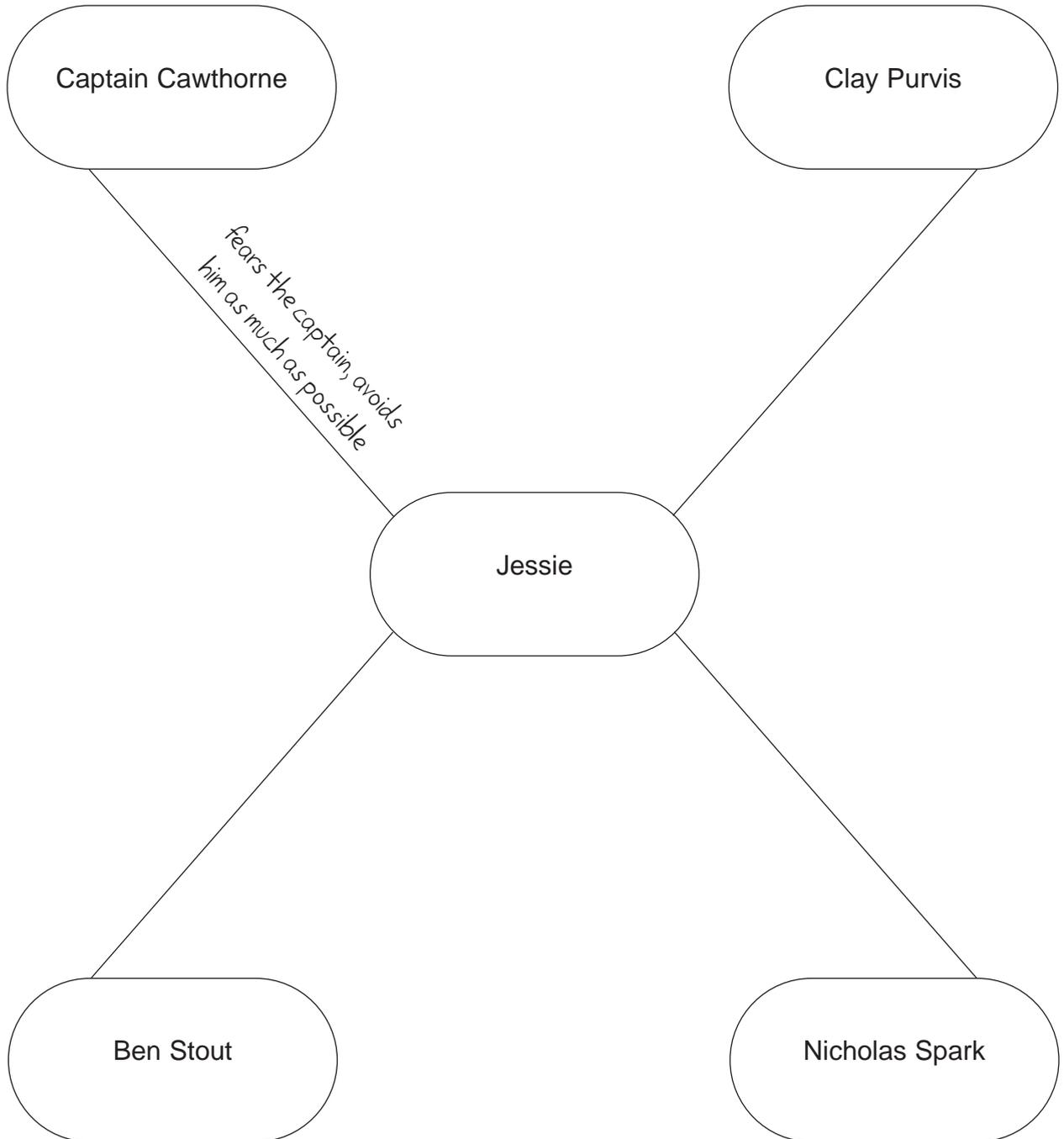
pensively [pen’ siv lē] *adv.* thoughtfully

repulsive [ri pul’ siv] *adj.* disgusting

Active Reading

The Slave Dancer Chapters 4–6

The author carefully shows how relationships between the kidnapped Jessie and his captors develop during the long, eventful voyage. In the diagram below, describe briefly, on the connecting lines, the relationships between Jessie and the crew members named.



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Responding

The Slave Dancer Chapters 4–6

Personal Response

What emotional impact did this account of enslavement have on you? Describe the emotions you experienced while reading.

Analyzing Literature

Recall and Interpret

1. Why does Clay Purvis become so upset when Jessie shows concern for the kidnapped Africans?

2. Describe Jessie's thoughts and feelings the first time he must make the enslaved Africans dance. Why do you think he feels this way?

3. Why do the enslaved Africans help Jessie find his wife?

Responding

The Slave Dancer Chapters 4–6

Analyzing Literature (*continued*)

Evaluate and Connect

4. Seth Smith, one of the crew members of *The Moonlight*, justifies the slave trade by saying the Africans live “in savagery and ignorance.” By whose standards does Smith make his judgement?

5. At one point, Jessie claims to hate the Africans and even wants to grab the rope from Sharkey and beat them. Do you believe Jessie means what he says? Explain your answer.

Literature and Writing

Analyzing Attitude

One of the ship’s crew says of cockfighting, “It’s only savages who’d take pleasure in such a spectacle. We’ve outlawed it in Massachusetts.” At the same time, this crew member willingly works on a slave ship. What comment do you think the author is making about this character or about his attitude toward slavery? In your paragraph, cite other places in the text that support your interpretation of the author’s attitude toward her subject.

Extending Your Response

Literature Groups

With your group, review what Jessie does to make his displeasure about the treatment of the Africans known. Then brainstorm a list of other things he might have considered that may have had different consequences. Share your ideas on what Jessie learned from being beaten and forced to find his life in the hold.

Point of View

With a partner, choose a passage from this section. Rewrite that passage from the viewpoint of a kidnapped young African. Choose an event that would likely be observed while the boy or girl was on deck. Remember that the African would not understand the language or the customs of the crew. Share your passages with other pairs in your group.

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Before You Read

The Slave Dancer Chapters 7–9

FOCUS ACTIVITY

If you were Jessie, what dreams of home would you have at night?

Journal

Describe in your journal what you would miss most about your home and family. What feelings would you have at the thought of never returning home again?

Setting a Purpose

Read to find out what happens to Jessie and all those on board *The Moonlight*.

BACKGROUND

Underground Railroad

Life for enslaved Africans did not improve once they were sold to American slaveholders. Thousands of enslaved people ran away every year, and slaveholders took great pains to prevent escapes. The plantations and neighboring roads were patrolled by armed men with bloodhounds. Southern newspapers carried daily advertisements offering rewards for the return of runaways.

Although some of the runaways hid in the woods or on other plantations, most fugitive slaves tried to make their way north. With the help of the Underground Railroad, a network of land and sea routes leading from the slave states to the free states, enslaved Africans stowed away on boats or walked at night and hid by day until they reached a safe border. Between 1830 and 1860, perhaps 2,500 enslaved Africans a year took the Underground Railroad to freedom. No records were kept of those who escaped without help.

Did You Know?

Some Africans who were kidnapped and enslaved when they were young later wrote accounts describing their experiences and treatment. One particularly powerful narrative was written by Olaudah Equiano, who was kidnapped at about the age of ten from his home in West Africa. Equiano's account, *The Interesting Narrative of Olaudah Equiano or Gustavus Vassa, the African*, was published in 1789. His powerful words, as well as those written by other enslaved or formerly enslaved persons, fueled the campaign to end the slave trade.

VOCABULARY PREVIEW

assuage [ə swāj'] *v.* to lessen; to relieve

avidly [av' id lē] *adv.* enthusiastically

fathom [fath' əm] *v.* to understand; to determine the depth of

flailing [flāl' ing] *adj.* waving or swinging vigorously

harbinger [här' bin jər] *n.* something that indicates what is to come

impassively [im pas' iv lē] *adv.* emotionlessly

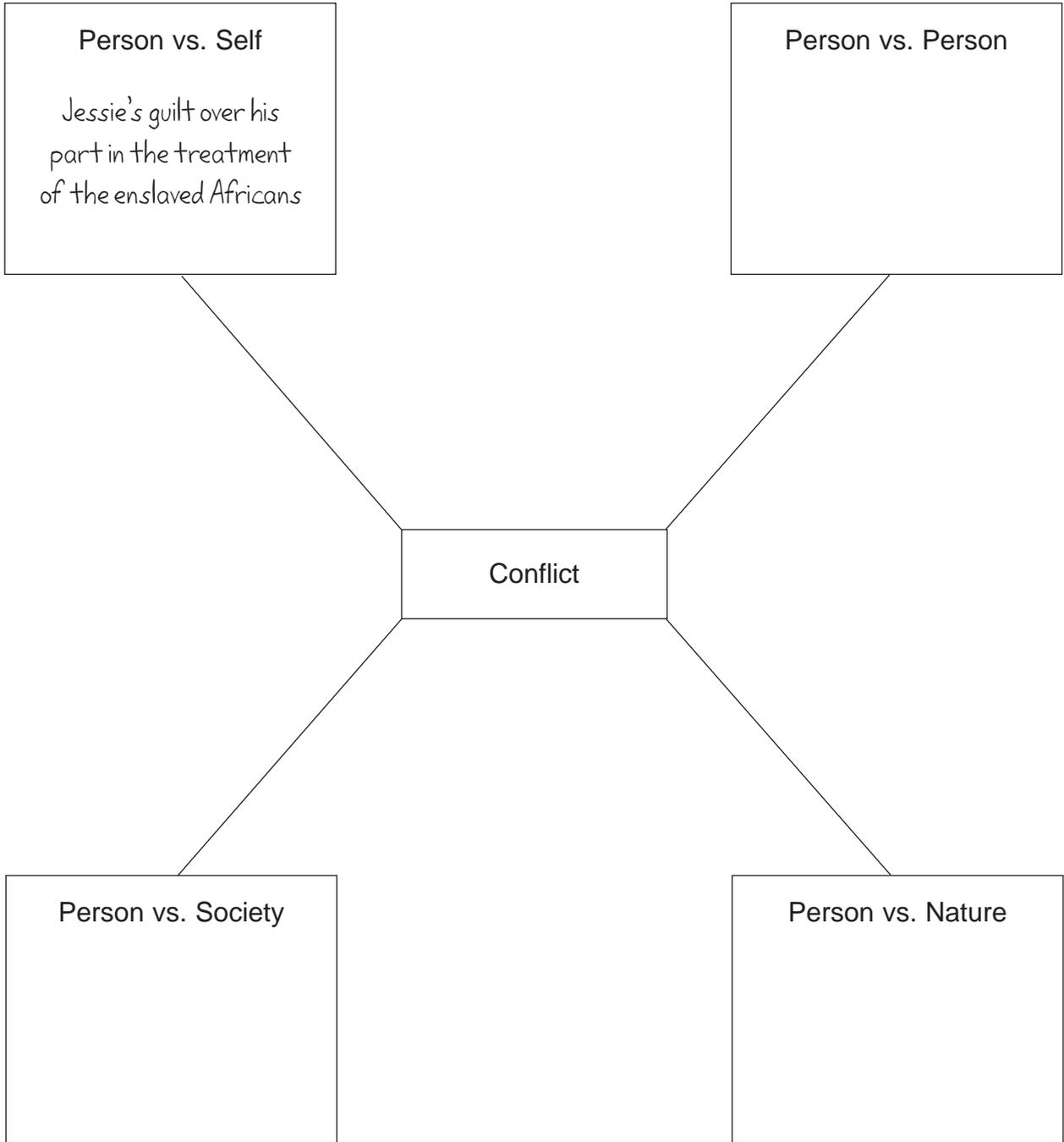
languorous [lang' gər əs] *adj.* lazy; quiet

ludicrous [lōō' də krəs] *adj.* obviously ridiculous and therefore laughable

Active Reading

The Slave Dancer Chapters 7-9

Conflict is the central struggle between two opposing forces in a novel, story, or play. Solving the problem, or resolving the struggle, drives the action of the story and generally involves the main character. More than one type of conflict may exist within a story. Conflict may take the following forms: person against nature; person against person; person against society; and person against self. As you come across examples in the reading, note them in the correct box in the diagram.



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Responding

The Slave Dancer Chapters 7–9

Personal Response

If you could use only one adjective to describe your feelings about this book so far, what would it be? Explain the reasons for your choice.

Analyzing Literature

Recall and Interpret

1. What is Ben Stout's mistake?

2. What makes Jessie suspect that Daniel may be an escaped slave?

3. At the end of the novel, Jessie says, "I was back in my life, but I was not the same." What, do you think, does he mean by this? How has he changed?

Responding

The Slave Dancer Chapters 7–9

Analyzing Literature (*continued*)

Evaluate and Connect

4. Why does the Captain force the enslaved Africans to dress up in the silk and lace clothing?

5. What conversation might Jessie and Ras have had if they had met unexpectedly in Boston?

Literature and Writing

An Expert’s View

Imagine an editor of a book about literary personalities has asked you to contribute an article about Jessie Bollier. Consider the details that Paula Fox uses to describe him and his actions, and decide whether he is a believable character. Write your conclusion and the reasons for it in an article that will be read by other middle school students.

Extending Your Response

Literature Groups

Jessie and Ras form a friendship under the worst conditions. Discuss how the boys are able to communicate despite a language barrier. Did the difficult conditions hinder or contribute to the bond formed by Jessie and Ras? Would you be able to establish a friendship under such unfavorable conditions? Discuss why or why not.

Dramatic Reading

Present your own historical drama in the form of a dramatic reading. Using online or print reference sources, research narratives written by formerly enslaved persons. The key words “slave narrative” will help you begin your search. Assume the character of the person who wrote the narrative and present it orally to the class. To make your presentation as effective as possible use a tone of voice and gestures that are appropriate for the emotions you wish to convey.

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from *Escape from the Slave Traders* Dave and Neta Jackson

Before You Read

Focus Question

What freedoms do you cherish the most?

Background

Husband and wife writing team Dave and Neta Jackson have written a fictional story, based on historical truths, about two young boys. Like Jessie Bollier and the Africans from *The Slave Dancer*, the boys are captured by slave traders.

Responding to the Reading

1. Why do the Red Caps spread the sheep's blood around the area where Chuma and Wikatani are captured?

2. What do the Red Caps use to buy the Manganja people from the Ajawa tribe? What will the Red Caps do with all the people they buy and capture?

3. How do you think the young girl feels when she learns that Chuma and Wikatani are Ajawas? Do you think her feelings towards them change when she hears their story? Explain your answer.

4. **Making Connections** Does the capture of Chuma and Wikatani in *Escape from the Slave Traders* have the same purpose as the capture of Jessie in *The Slave Dancer*? Explain.

Finish the Story

What fate lies ahead for Chuma and Wikatani? On a separate sheet of paper, write the next chapter to *Escape from the Slave Traders*, telling what happens to Chuma and Wikatani after the Manganja girl says, "Then . . . we might never get home."

The Fiery Abolitionists

William Loren Katz

Before You Read

Focus Question

What causes or ideas would you be willing to fight for?

Background

Many enslaved people escaped to freedom in the North by way of the Underground Railroad, mostly run by white people opposed to slavery—abolitionists. Others, both black and white, fought the evils of slavery in different ways. This reading by William Loren Katz, author of nearly forty books on African American history, gives an overview of the climate of the times prior to the time when slavery was outlawed.

Responding to the Reading

1. What did the newspapers begin to report about the mood of the enslaved people of the South?

2. What did John Brown plan to do to help enslaved people? What did his fight prove even though he was captured?

3. **Making Connections** What do you think Jessie would have said about John Brown's raid at Harper's Ferry? Give reasons for your opinion.

Journal Entry

Write an entry that John Brown might have written in his journal concerning his plan to free enslaved people. Include his reasons for believing slavery is wrong and his plan to establish colonies in the Allegheny Mountains. Use a separate sheet of paper.

Bury Me In a Free Land Frances E.W. Harper
Afro-American Fragment and American Heartbreak Langston Hughes

Before You Read

Focus Question

If you were asked to write a poem about your ancestors and their experiences, what details would you include?

Background

African American poets Frances E. W. Harper and Langston Hughes tell us about slavery and its impact on people long after the first slaves were brought to North America. When you read these poems, can you tell that the authors lived at different times? Harper, who lived in northern states during the nineteenth century, published her first collection of verses and prose writings in 1845. Hughes, who lived in the twentieth century, had his first poem published in 1921.

Responding to the Readings

1. Do you think the narrator of Hughes’s poem, “Afro-American Fragment,” was born in Africa? Do you think he or she has ever been to Africa? Explain your answers.

2. Knowing that Hughes is writing about the African American experience, what do you think “The great mistake/That Jamestown/Made long ago” refers to?

3. How does knowing the poets’ ethnic heritage affect your reaction to the poems?

4. **Making Connections** With which of these poems do you think Ras would most identify? Explain your answer.

A Poetry Reading

Choose one of the poems here or another poem about the African American experience. Read your selection to yourself and decide what words and lines you want to emphasize. Then, in groups of four or five, have each person read aloud the poem he or she chose. Discuss in your group how the way the poem is read affects its meaning.

Clayton Holbert

interviewed by Leta Gray

Before You Read

Focus Question

What do you remember from your early childhood? Do earlier events in your life seem different now that you have had a chance to reflect on your memories?

Background

President Franklin D. Roosevelt established the Works Progress Administration (WPA) in 1935 to create jobs for the thousands of people who were unemployed as a result of the Depression. WPA workers constructed buildings, bridges, and highways and even wrote a series of state and regional guidebooks. Between 1936 and 1938, formerly enslaved people were interviewed by WPA writers and journalists. The resulting narratives offered readers insight into the various experiences of enslaved people. Clayton Holbert, one of the 2,300 people interviewed, told his story to WPA writer Leta Gray.

Responding to the Reading

1. How old was Holbert and his siblings when they were granted their freedom? In your opinion, how did that affect Holbert's impression of slavery? Do you think his impression of slavery would have been different if he had been freed when he was an adult?

2. How did Holbert and his family provide for themselves? What did they do for food, shelter, and clothing?

3. **Making Connections** From the little that you know about Daniel in *The Slave Dancer*, do you think his experiences were similar to Holbert's? Explain.

Interview

With a partner discuss your childhood memories. Take turns interviewing each other, asking specific questions to draw out your partner's recollections. Try to remember as much as you can about your general living conditions and specific incidents that happened when you were six or seven years old, the age Holbert was when he was freed. After your interviews, write a paragraph describing your partner's childhood.

from Return with Honor

Captain Scott O'Grady

Before You Read

Focus Question

Have you ever been lost? How did you find your way again?

Background

In 1995 U. S. Air Force Captain Scott O'Grady's plane was shot down during the Bosnian conflict. O'Grady tells how he used his military training and survival skills to find his way to safety. As you read, recall from *The Slave Dancer* Jessie's trip back home from Mississippi.

Responding to the Reading

1. What did Captain O'Grady eat to survive while hiding in the woods? Would you eat the same things if you were in Captain O'Grady's situation? Why or why not?

2. Explain what Captain O'Grady means when he says, "And I can't deny that it was nice to be the hunter for a change."

3. Why do you think Captain O'Grady was fearful that the cows would discover him?

4. **Making Connections** Compare the tactics that Jessie used on his trip home with the survival skills Captain O'Grady used.

Math and Science Connection

In a group of two or three, develop a survival scheme. Assume that you are lost on the distant border of your state. Use a road map, an atlas, or another source to determine how many miles you are from home. Next, look carefully at a map of your state for physical barriers such as rivers or mountains that might determine your route, either by providing a landmark to follow or by interfering with the path you want to take. How many miles are you from home? How many miles will the physical barriers add to your trip? Suppose you can walk four miles an hour for ten hours each day. How long will it take you to walk home? Create a table that shows the daily mileage, the number of days the trip will take, and the number of meals you will have to provide for yourself. Find out about plants and wildlife in your state that you might be able to eat, or about those that might pose a danger. With your group, present your survival plan and route home to the class.