

Songs of the Slaves

Objective

Students will understand the significance of song in a slaves life.

Procedure

1. The teacher will lead a discussion of Negro spirituals and music to carry information.
2. Students will read the "Drinking Gourd Song."
3. The teacher will lead a discussion about the significance of each line.
4. Students will read and interpret two excerpts from "Go Down Moses" and "Sweet Low Sweet Chariot."

Evaluation

Class discussion.

Additional Resources

1. Folk Music in America by Brian Van DerHorst
2. Walk Together Children by Ashley Bryan
3. All Night All Day by Ashley Bryan
4. Folk Song in South Carolina by Charles W. Joyner

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Drinking Gourd Song

This song talks about the Drinking Gourd also (known as the north star). If you follow the Drinking Gourd (north star) it leads you to Canada. In Canada slaves are free the moment they set foot on it.

When the sun comes back and the first quail calls,
Follow the Drinking Gourd.
For the old man is waiting for to carry you to freedom,
If you follow the Drinking Gourd.

The river bank makes a very good road,
The dead trees show you the way,
Left foot, peg foot, traveling on
Follow the Drinking Gourd.

The river ends between two hills,
Follow the Drinking Gourd.
There's another river on the other side,
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Where the great big river meets the little river,
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The Wings of the Morning

Arranged from a Western Melody

Oh, had I the wings of the morning,
I'd fly away to Canaan's shore,
Bright angels should convey me home,
To the new Jerusalem.

O Thou Almighty Father,
Come help me now to praise thy glory.
Methinks I hear the trumpet sound
Before the break of day.

Oh, had I the wings of the morning,
I'd fly away to Canaan's shore,
Bright angels should convey me home,
To the new Jerusalem.

Amazing Grace

Written by John Newton

The earth shall soon dissolve
like snow,
The sun forbear to shine;
But God, who called me here
below,
Will be forever mine.

Yes, when this flesh and heart
shall fail,
And mortal life shall cease,
I shall possess, within the veil,
A life of joy and peace.

Amazing grace! how sweet the
sound
That saved a wretch like me!
I once was lost, but now am
found,
Was blind, but now I see.

Bright Canaan

Early American folk hymn

O who will come and go with
me?

I am bound for the land of
Canaan.

I'm bound fair Canaan's land to
see,

I am bound for the land of
Canaan.

I'll join with them who've gone
before,

I am bound for the land of
Canaan.

Where sin and sorrow are no
more,

I am bound for the land of
Canaan.

Oh, Canaan; bright Canaan!

I'm bound for the land of
Canaan,

Oh, Canaan, it is my happy
home,

I am bound for the land of
Canaan.

Die in the Fiel'

Traditional Spiritual,
from an arrangement by J. Raymond
Johnson

O what do you say seekers,
O what do you say seekers,
O what do you say seekers,
About that gospel war?

And what do you brothers,
O what do you say brothers,
O what do you saw brothers,
About that gospel war?

And I will die in the fiel',
Will die in the fiel',
Will die in the fiel',
I'm on my journey home.

Sing it over!
I will die in the fiel',
Will die in the fiel',
Will die in the fiel',
I'm on my journey home.

Underground to Canada

WELCOME TO OUR SITE ABOUT THE NOVEL

UNDERGROUND TO CANADA

BY BARBARA SMUCKER

This novel is set in 19th century America. It is the story of two young girls who escape from slavery in Mississippi to freedom in Canada. They travel on the 'Underground Railroad', the term used to describe the network that existed to help runaway slaves reach safety. Many of the people who ran the railroad were members of religious groups who supported the abolition of slavery.

As with any novel, the meaning of *Underground to Canada* relies on the combination of the five key elements of fiction:

plot

characters

themes

structure

style



As *Underground to Canada* concerns slavery in C19th America, the historical background to the novel is also important.

NEGRO SPIRITUALS

Negro Spirituals are religious songs that were developed by the plantation's slaves in the United States. These songs express the hopes and beliefs of the slaves and their longing for freedom. The Negro Spirituals play an important role, because they are there throughout, in times of despair, hope, and achievement. They aren't just for one emotion, because they can represent joy as well as sorrow.

Four Negro Spirituals appear in five chapters in *Underground To Canada*: one, four, thirteen, fifteen and nineteen.

'Go Down Moses'

The book opens with 'Go Down Moses,' which shows what people hoped for. The first verse, relates to the slaves, and their experiences, of being worked too hard, and been badly mistreated. The plantation owners did not like this song, because they thought the words mean't that the slaves were thinking about freedom. Moses protesting for the rights of the Israelites, might give them strength to fight back like Moses did. The words are hummed softly over and over, making a dieing chant, rather than a religious hymn. Here is the first verse:

When Israel was in Egypt's Land,

Let My People Go.

Oppressed so hard they could not stand

Let My People Go.

'I Am Bound For The Promised Land'

In Chapter four, the song 'I Am Bound For The Promised Land,' is a way of reminding Julilly and the children of home and Canada. In chapter thirteen, it is used to express a happiness, and that they are one stage further to reaching Canada. It is about the hope that they have of reaching a place where they can be happy and free. 'I am bound for the promised land,' is repeated many times throughout the song, and is the focus point of it.

'Swing Low Sweet Chariot'

The book ends with Julilly softly humming the words to 'Swing low sweet chariot.' This represents their happiness and achievements. It shows the desire to be somewhere in their

dreams and that they have finally made it. This is one of the most important verses:

I Looked across the Jordon,
And what did I see,
Coming for to carry me home,
A band of angels coming for to carry me,
Coming for to carry me home.

This shows what an important role spirituals have in the book. They provide an introduction and an end, as well as a background commentary. The same way, music might be in a film.

'Jenny Crack The Corn'

This is more like a nursery rhyme than a religious chant, though like all the others, it has important meaning. It is a more cheerful song than the others, and it is sung with the children.

The Spirituals affect other characters by drawing them together, to listen or join in. They may also stir up emotions, for example, on the wagon Julilly's song makes the children think of home.

Negro Spirituals show the reader, what the majority of characters are feeling and thinking. The songs may seem difficult to understand at first, but it makes the slaves' feelings easier to relate to. Also, you can sympathise with their feelings through the songs, and they give you a powerful feeling of the atmosphere of a scene.

Negro Spirituals are linked to the theme of the book, because they show the determination to be free like that of the Israelites escaping from Egypt. These feelings that are the theme of the book, are shown through the songs, and are represented by the songs. Without the spirituals, the theme would not be so clear or so moving.

Another spiritual mentioned in the book is *Follow The Drinking Gourd*. Click [here](#) to access it

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Is Underground Railroad

Drinking Gourd Song

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The river ends between two hills,
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There's another river on the other side,
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Where the great big river meets the little river,
Follow the Drinking Gourd.
For the old man is awaiting to carry you to freedom if you
follow the Drinking Gourd.

Leah
Mr. Leahy's Class

Links

[Explanation of "Follow the Drinking Gourd"](#)

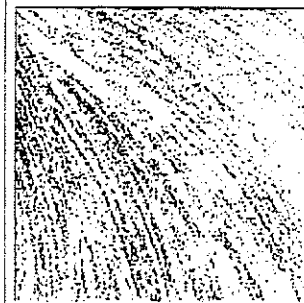
[Hear a Primary Class Sing "Follow the Drinking Gourd"](#)

[On an Underground Railroad A song by Kinny Landrum.](#)

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"Folow The Drinking Gourd"

<http://www.okbu.edu/academics/natsci/planet/shows/gourd.htm>, May 18, 1999.



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Amanda*

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Explanation of "Follow the Drinking Gourd"

The song and its translation are as follows:

When the sun comes back and the first quail calls,
Follow the Drinking Gourd.
For the old man is waiting for to carry you to freedom,
If you follow the Drinking Gourd.

"When the sun comes back" means winter and spring when the altitude of the sun at noon is higher each day. Quail are migratory bird wintering in the South. The Drinking Gourd is the Big Dipper. The old man is Peg Leg Joe. The verse tells slaves to leave in the winter and walk towards the Drinking Gourd. Eventually they will meet a guide who will escort them for the remainder of the trip.

Most escapees had to cross the Ohio River which is too wide and too swift to swim. The Railroad struggled with the problem of how to get escapees across, and with experience, came to believe the best crossing time was winter. Then the river was frozen, and escapees could walk across on the ice. Since it took most escapees a year to travel from the South to the Ohio, the Railroad urged slaves to start their trip in winter in order to be at the Ohio the next winter.

The river bank makes a very good road,
The dead trees show you the way,
Left foot, peg foot, traveling on
Follow the Drinking Gourd.

This verse taught slaves to follow the bank of the Tombighee River north looking for dead trees that were marked with drawings of a left foot and a peg foot. The markings distinguished the Tombighee from other north-south rivers that flow into it.

The river ends between two hills,
Follow the Drinking Gourd.
There's another river on the other side,
Follow the Drinking Gourd.

These words told the slaves that when they reached the headwaters of the Tombighee, they were to continue north over the hills until they met another river. Then they were to travel north along the new river which is the Tennessee River. A number of the southern escape routes converged on the Tennessee.

Where the great big river meets the little river,
 Follow the Drinking Gourd.
 For the old man is awaiting to carry you to freedom if you
 follow the Drinking Gourd.

This verse told the slaves the Tennessee joined another river. They were to cross that river (which is the Ohio River), and on the north bank, meet a guide from the Underground Railroad.

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SLAVE NARRATIVES

We found a lot of slave narratives from the Internet. These are written by people that have been slaves, people who have witnessed slave trading and the mistreatment of slaves.

This is an extract from a narrative by Solomon Northrup.

Solomon Northrup was a black slave for 12 years. He was born a free man until he was kidnapped in New York and made a slave. He tells the story of his cotton picking on the Louisiana plantation.

"The hands are required to be in the cotton field as soon as it is light in the morning, and, with the exception of ten or fifteen minutes, which is given them at noon to swallow their allowance of cold bacon, they are not permitted to be a moment idle until it is too dark to see, and when the moon is full, they often times labor till the middle of the night. They do not dare to stop even at dinner time, nor return to the quarters, however late it be, until the order to halt is given by the driver. "

In *Underground to Canada* the slaves are required in the cotton fields at 4 O'clock in the morning, about the same time as Solomon Northrup. Solomon Northrup had slightly longer day than Julilly and Liza maybe this is because he was an adult and the girls were children.

According to Underground Rail Road records, Anna Weems disguised her gender and used several male aliases in order to escape her plight and acquire freedom.

In *Underground to Canada* Julilly and Liza also disguised their gender so they would not be recognised easily: this would make it easier to escape.

One of the best online sources for slave narratives is the Documenting the American South site.

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Underground to Canada

THEMES

The main themes of the novel are courage, desire and strength. All the slaves trying to escape have the desire for freedom in Canada. However, most slaves do not dare to even try for freedom, as they know they may be caught and receive severe punishment. It is only the truly brave slaves that have enough courage to get them to their land of freedom - Canada. Julilly, Liza, Lester and Adam are the miserable, but hopeful, slaves with the physical and mental strength to escape to Canada.

Like the escaping slaves, all those who help them show courage and strength, and the will to help. These people risk their lives to help slaves get their life's goal - freedom. Section 7 of the Fugitive Slave Act prescribes up to six months in prison for any one helping a fugitive. We learn in Chapter 11 that Alexander Ross is serving such a sentence. The only way that the slaves can escape is if all the kind helping people on the underground railroad, pull together. Thus teamwork is another theme.

In contrast, there are many cowards, such as Sims who thinks that he is stronger and better than the slaves because of his skin colour. Though he may be white, the strength and will of Sims will never match up to that of the people who have suffered through the horror of slavery. Another coward is the man with the dog who gave Liza and Julilly directions to Jeb Brown's house. This man thinks Jeb and others in the "helping chain" from Mississippi to Canada are in a dangerous business which he is too frightened to join.

In the novel chains symbolise the horror of slavery. In Chapter 17, Alexander Ross explains how Adam died:

Mr. Ross's shoulders slumped. "It was the chains." His voice was husky. "They were too tight and cut through the flesh. When we filed them off, there was blood poisoning. Adam had lived in Canada for one day. We buried him under a tall pine tree."

There was nothing more to say. The evil chains. Julilly felt herself wanting to pry them

apart forever - to strain every muscle in her body to pull every chain loose from the legs, and arms, and necks of every slave.

However, as Jullily realises not all chains are evil. Amidst all the torture and inhumanity of slavery, there was another type of chain that Jullily finds the meaning of. In Chapter 15 she describes these chains: "*These helpin' hands is the rails and the engines of the Underground Railroad,*" Jullily thought to herself. "*All the way from Mississippi to Canada they is pullin' and workin' and makin' a helpin' chain. There is some good people across the land.*" Jullily knew these were the good chains of teamwork and kindness, not the evil chains of slavery.

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Underground to Canada

STRUCTURE

The novel is quite simple structurally. The story is told in chronological sequence with no flashbacks or leaps forward.

One of the key structural elements in the novel is its focalisation. Although the novel is written in the third person, it is focalised through Julilly throughout. In other words we only know what Julilly knows, only experience what she experiences. She is the window through which we see the story.

This method of story telling has several advantages.

It is more realistic than using Julilly as a first person narrator: in the novel Julilly can neither read nor write so she could not narrate her own story.

Even supposing that she could narrate her own story, this would decrease the tension, as we would know from the beginning that she survived the adventure.

Concentrating on Julilly throughout, rather than describing the actions of many characters through an omniscient narrator, allows the reader to identify closely with her and share her perspective without distractions and interruptions.

On the other hand, the fixed focalisation does not allow the reader to discover what is happening to the other characters while they are away from Julilly. Thus, we only learn of Lester's safe arrival in Canada and Adam's death when Julilly is informed by Alexander Ross. Most importantly, this narrative method leaves us in doubt until the last few pages over whether Mammy Sally made it to Canada or not.

We imagined how the story might have been written if it were focalised through Mammy Sally.

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BARBARA SMUCKER'S STYLE

Barbara Smucker uses a wide range of vocabulary and some dialect in the dialogue. Throughout the book, she manages to add information in a subtle and interesting way. She manages to get the point across, without just having the information written straight onto the page.

Barbara Smucker changes the sentence length and structure to fit the scene. Descriptive scenes have much longer sentences than scenes that include speech or dramatic action. For example, Chapter Two begins with a description of how this morning is similar to, yet differs from others.

As on every other morning, Julilly smoothed down her crinkly hair and twisted it tight in a knot at the back of her head. But Mammy Sally, who always wore a clean, white head-rag neatly tied, this morning put on a black on in its place. There was no laughter in her full strong voice as she called to one slave after another who passed by their door.

The sentences here are much longer than when the slave trader arrives:

Willie was ripped from his mother's arms without a comment.

Lily screamed and fell to the ground.

At this dramatic moment, the sentences are very short to reflect the brutality of the scene. Each short sentence is a complete paragraph, increasing the speed and finality of the action. Any more description here would be out of place for the action happened "without a comment".

In contrast, the very long sentences that begin Chapter Four reflect the

long and exhausting journey that the slaves must make to the Deep South:

Sometimes it was cold when the night came and the wagon stopped on a tall hill with black trees and silver stars and a biting wind that never stopped. The children clung to Julilly and she warmed them as best she could in her thin, strong arms.

When the day came with white-hot sun that baked the road into sifting dust, Julilly cooled the children's mouths with water from the drinking gourd that the free black boy had given her.

Notice how many times "and" is used. This creates the impression of a relentless journey. Notice, too, the way extreme temperatures are described.

Barbara Smucker does not use many similes or metaphors in her narrative and descriptions. However, the steps of the Riley's House "fanned out like a peacock's plume", suggesting their pride. Usually it is the characters who use similes, making the dialogue lively and amusing. For example, in Chapter Thirteen, Liza says "that woman looked as mean as a one-eyed crow."

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