

Literacy Skills Teacher's Guide for

If You Please, President Lincoln

by

Harriette Gillem Robinet

Book Information

Harriette Gillem Robinet, If You Please, President Lincoln
Quiz Number: 14818
Atheneum, 1995
ISBN 0-689-31969-X; LCCN
142 Pages
Book Level: 5.1
Interest Level: MG

Shortly after the Christmas of 1863, fourteen-year-old Moses thinks he is beginning a new, free life when he becomes part of a group of other former slaves headed for a small island off the coast of Haiti.

Topics: Community Life, Freedoms; People, African American; People, Slaves

Main Characters

Aunt Rebekah an elderly slave woman who raised Moses after his parents died

Father Fitzpatrick a Catholic priest who owned Moses and Aunt Rebekah

Goshen an educated, blind former slave who meets and befriends Moses soon after he runs away from Father Fitzpatrick

Governor/Mr. Kock a white man who tricks 400 free slaves into boarding a ship with promises of free land and money and plans for starting a colony on an island in the Republic of Hayti

Moses Lincoln Christmas the principal character, a 14-year old slave boy who runs away from his master and ends up the leader of about 400 former slaves on an island in the Republic of Hayti

Sarah, Cassius and Simeon minor characters and fellow free slaves recruited for the colonization plan who quickly become like family to Moses

Vocabulary

emancipation setting free from bondage or slavery

flogging beating a person with a strap, stick or whip as punishment

fob a short chain attached to a watch

ginning picking the seeds out of cotton bolls

innards a person's internal organs

interrogation asking questions

jibs small sails

Synopsis

Moses Lincoln Christmas is a fourteen-year-old, orphaned slave boy who finds himself alone in the world when his "Aunt" Rebekah dies Christmas night. After learning that he is going to be sold, Moses escapes on a boat bound for Washington, D.C. Briefly, he works for a fishmonger at the wharf, but leaves when Father Fitzpatrick comes looking for him. Hopping onto a wagonload of straw, he travels to a barn somewhere outside Washington, D.C.

There he meets a blind, free colored man named Goshen. Goshen attaches himself to Moses and together they travel to Annapolis, Maryland, to find work. Since Goshen has experience working on ships, they agree to work aboard a Baltimore clipper ship docked in the harbor. Once on board, they discover they have been lied to and are actually headed to the Isle a Vache (Cow Island) in the Republic of Hayti to start a colony of free colored people.

Moses quickly finds himself the unofficial leader of the 400 black people aboard the ship when it is discovered that he can read and write. As they sail, he gains respect by helping to solve problems, easing others' pains and otherwise making life more tolerable for his fellow passengers.

When the ship leaves the group on the island with Mr. Kock as their leader, they find the island is not suited to raise crops and has no fresh water supply. While Mr. Kock becomes delusional, and Goshen falls ill with small pox, Moses once again finds himself the leader of the group. After many weeks it becomes clear to the group that their only hope of rescue lies in getting someone to the main island of Hayti. Eventually, Moses floats on a barrel to Hayti to seek help for the group. There he is imprisoned for a few days and decides he must escape and return to Cow Island.

Literacy Skills Teacher's Guide for

If You Please, President Lincoln

by

Harriette Gillem Robinet

A few weeks after Moses returns to Cow Island, an American steamship arrives to rescue the group and return them to the United States. Goshen and Moses settle in Washington, D.C., where Goshen becomes a barber and Moses enrolls in a school where he teaches, takes classes and dreams of one day becoming a lawyer.

Open-Ended Questions

Use these open-ended questions as the basis for class discussions, student presentations, or extended writing assignments.

Initial Understanding

Why were the free slaves so easily talked into boarding the ship and trusting Governor Kock's promises?

Many valid arguments could be made: they were desperate to find work and begin a new life; they were uneducated and did not understand the nature of what he was offering; they were raised to accept what a white man told them.

Literary Analysis

What do you think Moses hoped to accomplish by writing his story for President Lincoln?

Moses may have hoped President Lincoln would understand that the colonization idea was not acceptable. He may have hoped the government would help the people involved find their own land in the United States.

Inferential Comprehension

During the time the group spent on Cow Island, Mr. Kock slowly lost touch with reality. What might have caused this change in his personality?

His personality may have changed from the heat, a lack of food and water, the shock of being called an imposter, or the shock of realizing his plan was not going to succeed.

Constructing Meaning

In the story, Moses remembered reading that slavery was often referred to as a "peculiar institution." What do you think this phrase meant?

It was unusual for one human being to believe he or she had the right to own another human being; yet so many accepted the institution and economics of slavery.

Teachable Skills

Understanding Characterization Mr. Kock, also known as Governor Kock, is the antagonist in this story. The antagonist is the character who creates the major conflict or problem in the story. Mr. Kock creates the conflict by going ahead with a plan to colonize a Caribbean island with former slaves. List all the signs and signals from the story that show why his plan was doomed to fail. Discuss what kind of person would go through with a plan like this despite the likelihood of failure.

Understanding Hist./Cultural Factors This story is set in the time of the Emancipation Proclamation, when President Lincoln freed slaves in the Confederacy. Research this period in United States history. Locate information about the life of a slave, the process of buying and selling slaves, and the debate over freeing the slaves. Try to find information about proposed plans for the freed slaves. Discuss what was happening during this time in U.S. history and how it affected the different people of the country.

Understanding Hist./Cultural Factors Moses heard many hymns being sung by the other captives. It is explained to him that many of them came from the experiences of slaves and from the writings of people like Frederick Douglass. Locate and listen to some old hymns and slave songs. Interpret the messages they are trying to get across. Discuss why slaves relied so heavily on song.

Recognizing Details One of Moses's goals in telling this story is to let President Lincoln know what happened to him and the other people who

Literacy Skills Teacher's Guide for
If You Please, President Lincoln
by
Harriette Gillem Robinet

were taken to Cow Island. Though President Lincoln died before Moses got a chance to share the story with him, what details do you think Moses would have included in a letter to the president? Write a letter to President Lincoln from Moses relating what happened to him and the others and how he felt about it.