

Get Ready to Read!

The People Could Fly

Meet Virginia Hamilton



Virginia Hamilton was born in 1936. Her writing celebrates her African American heritage and culture. She says, "In the background of much of my writing is the dream of freedom." But this freedom is out of reach for many of her characters. The dream of freedom and her interest in African folklore are the sources of many of her folktales. "The People Could Fly" is a folktale that had been told orally for two hundred years before Hamilton retold it in 1985.

What You Know

Where could someone who is treated unfairly go for help? Think of ways that people can escape a bad situation. As a class, make a list of ideas.

Reason to Read

Read this folktale to discover how a group of people deal with unfairness and cruelty.

Background Info

This story takes place on a plantation, or large farm, in North America during the 1700s.

When Europe was struggling through the Dark Ages (A.D. 476 to 1000), Africa had thriving kingdoms and talented artists. Then, in 1619, Africans began to be kidnapped and brought to North America for slave labor. Slavery was allowed to continue in parts of the United States until the end of the Civil War in 1865. It was only at this point that all enslaved people in the United States were freed.

Word Power

scorned (skôrnd) v. treated with dislike or disrespect; p. 205
The people in the village *scorned* those who did not work hard all day.

bawling (bôl' ing) v. crying loudly; p. 205
I was *bawling* so hard at the sad movie that I ran out of tissues.

croon (krōon) v. to gently sing or hum; p. 205
The singer promised to *croon* a romantic song for my mother.

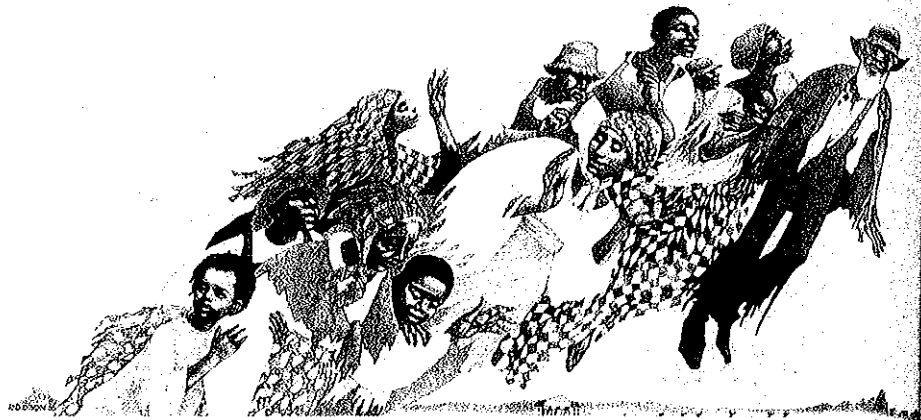
scrunched (skrunchd) v. crouched; squatted; p. 205
The little boy who was playing hide and seek *scrunched* behind the bush.

seize (sēz) v. to grab and take hold of someone or something, possibly by force; p. 207
The officer tried to *seize* the thief who was running away from the bank.

**Answer the following questions, using one of the new words above.
Write your answers in the spaces provided.**

1. Which word goes with "to capture"? _____
2. Which word goes with "sat on one's heels or bent low"? _____
3. Which word goes with "showed disapproval"? _____
4. Which word goes with "sobbing or wailing"? _____
5. Which word goes with "to softly sing a song"? _____

The People Could Fly



*The People Could Fly, 1985. Leo & Diana Dillon.
Pastel and watercolor. Private collection.*

Told by Virginia Hamilton

Background Info

Slavery refers to the practice of keeping people as property. From the 1500s through the 1800s, more than 10 million Africans were enslaved and brought to the Americas. They traveled across the Atlantic Ocean in overcrowded slave ships and had to stay in hot, airless spaces below deck. Many died during the journey.

They say the people could fly. Say that long ago in Africa, some of the people knew magic. And they would walk up on the air like climbin up on a gate. And they flew like blackbirds over the fields. Black, shiny wings flappin against the blue up there.

Then, many of the people were captured for **Slavery**. The ones that could fly shed their wings. They couldn't take their wings across the water on the **slave ships**. Too crowded, don't you know.

The folks were full of misery, then. Got sick with the up and down of the sea. So they forgot about flyin when they could no longer breathe the sweet scent of Africa.

Say the people who could fly kept their power, although they shed their wings. They kept their secret magic in the land of slavery. They looked the same as the other people from Africa who had been coming over, who had dark skin. Say you couldn't tell anymore one who could fly from one who couldn't.

One such who could was an old man, call him Toby. And standin tall, yet afraid, was a young woman who once had wings. Call her Sarah. Now Sarah carried a babe tied to her back. She trembled to be so hard worked and **scorned**.

The slaves labored in the fields from sunup to sundown. The owner of the slaves callin himself their Master. Say he was a hard lump of clay. A hard, glinty coal. A hard rock pile, wouldn't be moved. His Overseer on horseback pointed out the slaves who were slowin down. So the one called Driver cracked his whip over the slow ones to make them move faster. That whip was a slice-open cut of pain. So they did move faster. Had to.

Sarah hoed and chopped the row as the babe on her back slept.

Say the child grew hungry. That babe started up **bawling** too loud. Sarah couldn't stop to feed it. Couldn't stop to soothe and quiet it down. She let it cry. She didn't want to. She had no heart to **croon** to it.

"Keep that thing quiet," called the Overseer. He pointed his finger at the babe. The woman **scrunched** low. The Driver cracked his whip across the babe anyhow. The babe hollered like any hurt child, and the woman fell to the earth.

The old man that was there, Toby, came and helped her to her feet.

"I must go soon," she told him.

"Soon," he said.

Sarah couldn't stand up straight any longer. She was too weak. The sun burned her face. The babe cried and cried, "Pity me, oh, pity me," say it sounded like.

Word Power

scorned (skôrnd) v. treated with dislike or disrespect

bawling (bôl' ing) v. crying loudly

croon (krōon) v. to gently sing or hum

scrunched (skrunchd) v. crouched; squatted

English Coach

Reread the words highlighted in pink. This description is a *metaphor*. A metaphor is a comparison of two unlike things without clue words such as *like* or *as*. Here, the Master is being compared to *a hard lump of clay*. Underline two more metaphors in the paragraph that describe the Master.

Comprehension Check

Reread the boxed paragraph. What does the Overseer do when Sarah's baby does not stop crying?

Reading Skill

Infer Reread the highlighted text. What can you infer about what Sarah thinks will happen to her if she does not leave? Check the correct response.

- She thinks she will be able to escape.
- She thinks she will die.
- She thinks she will be rewarded.

Sarah was so sad and starvin, she sat down in the row.

"Get up, you black cow," called the Overseer. He pointed his hand, and the Driver's whip snarled around Sarah's legs. Her sack dress tore into rags. Her legs bled onto the earth. She couldn't get up.

Toby was there where there was no one to help her and the babe.

"Now, before it's too late," panted Sarah. "Now, Father!"

"Yes, Daughter, the time is come," Toby answered. "Go, as you know how to go!"

He raised his arms, holding them out to her. "*Kum . . . yali, kum buba tambe,*" and more magic words, said so quickly, they sounded like whispers and sighs.



Alexander Chandler, 1955. Andrew Wyeth. Drybrush, 21¼ x 14½ in. Private collection. Photograph courtesy of the Wyeth Collection. © Andrew Wyeth.

What qualities might the man in the painting have in common with Toby?

The young woman lifted one foot on the air. Then the other. She flew clumsily at first, with the child now held tightly in her arms. Then she felt the magic, the African mystery. Say she rose just as free as a bird. As light as a feather.

The Overseer rode after her, hollerin. Sarah flew over the fences. She flew over the woods. Tall trees could not snag her. Nor could the Overseer. She flew like an eagle now, until she was gone from sight. No one dared speak about it. Couldn't believe it. But it was, because they that was there saw that it was.

Say the next day was dead hot in the fields. A young man slave fell from the heat. The Driver come and whipped him. Toby come over and spoke words to the fallen one. The words of ancient Africa once heard are never remembered completely. The young man forgot them as soon as he heard them. They went way inside him. He got up and rolled over on the air. He rode it awhile. And he flew away.

Another and another fell from the heat. Toby was there. He cried out to the fallen and reached his arms out to them. "*Kum kunka yali, kum . . . tambel!*" Whispers and sighs. And they too rose on the air. They rode the hot breezes. The ones flyin were black and shinin sticks, wheelin above the head of the Overseer. They crossed the rows, the fields, the fences, the streams, and were away.

"Seize the old man!" cried the Overseer. "I heard him say the magic words. Seize him!"

Word Power

seize (sēz) v. to grab and take hold of someone or something, possibly by force

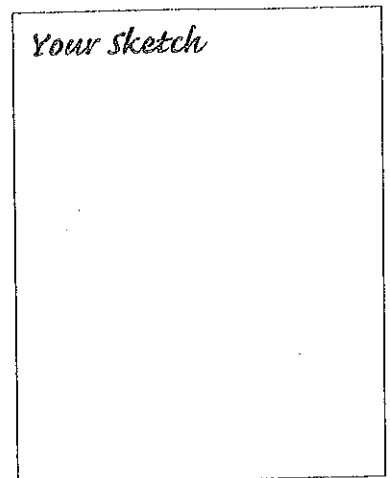
Literary Element

Symbol Reread the sentences highlighted in blue. What does flying symbolize to the enslaved men and women?

Reading Skill

Visualize Reread the sentences highlighted in green. In the frame below, draw a picture of what you think the flying people look like. If you have room, you can add the fields, fences, streams, or the Overseer.

Your Sketch



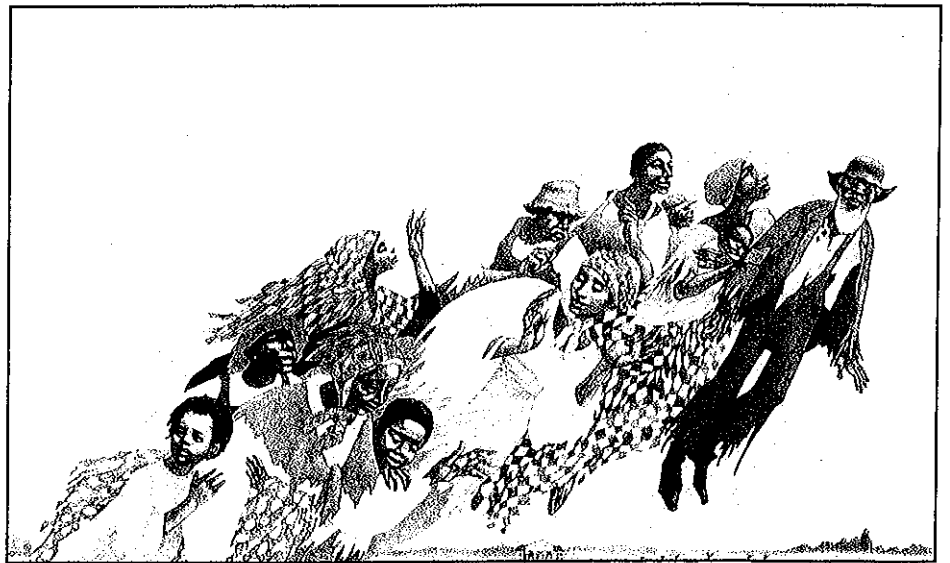
Background Info

A *ring-sing*, or ring shout, is a custom that was performed after a long day of work on the plantation. Singers and dancers would form a circle. Then they would shuffle their feet on the ground, move their bodies, clap their hands, and sing. Ring-sings are still performed today in some parts of the United States.

The one callin himself Master come runnin. The Driver got his whip ready to curl around old Toby and tie him up. The slaveowner took his hip gun from its place. He meant to kill old, black Toby. But Toby just laughed. Say he threw back his head and said, "Hee, hee! Don't you know who I am? Don't you know some of us in this field?" He said it to their faces. "We are ones who fly!"

And he sighed the ancient words that were a dark promise. He said them all around to the others in the field under the whip, "... *buba yali ... buba tambe...*"

There was a great outcryin. The bent backs straighted up. Old and young who were called slaves and could fly joined hands. Say like they would ring-sing. But they didn't shuffle in a circle. They didn't sing. They rose on the air. They flew in a flock that was black against the heavenly blue. Black crows or black shadows. It didn't matter, they went so high. Way above the plantation, way over the slavery land. Say they flew away to *Free-dom*.



The People Could Fly, 1985. Leo & Diana Dillon. Pastel and watercolor. Private collection.

Do you think this picture is a good illustration of what is happening in the story? Why?

And the old man, old Toby, flew behind them, takin care of them. He wasn't cryin. He wasn't laughin. He was the seer. His gaze fell on the plantation where the slaves who could not fly waited.

"Take us with you!" Their looks spoke it but they were afraid to shout it. Toby couldn't take them with him. Hadn't the time to teach them to fly. They must wait for a chance to run.

"Goodie-bye!" The old man called Toby spoke to them, poor souls! And he was flyin gone.

So they say. The Overseer told it. The one called Master said it was a lie, a trick of the light. The Driver kept his mouth shut.

The slaves who could not fly told about the people who could fly to their children. When they were free. When they sat close before the fire in the free land, they told it. They did so love firelight and *Free-dom*, and tellin.

They say that the children of the ones who could not fly told their children. And now, me, I have told it to you.

Reading Skill

Infer Reread the highlighted paragraph. Why do you think the Master says that the people didn't fly? Why does the Driver say nothing?



Respond to Literature

The People Could Fly

A Comprehension Check

Answer the following questions in the spaces provided.

1. Why are the people who are captured unable to take their wings with them? _____

2. How do the enslaved people who cannot fly react to the amazing flight of the others? _____

B Reading Skills

Complete the following activities in the spaces provided.

1. **Visualize** The following passage describes how the people who could not fly react: " 'Take us with you!' Their looks spoke it but they were afraid to shout it." Describe what you think their faces look like.

2. **Infer** The men want to kill Toby for saying the magic words. But Toby laughs at them while he flies away. What can you infer about how Toby feels? _____

Respond to Literature

G Word Power

Complete each sentence below, using one of the words in the box.

scorned bawling croon scrunched seize

1. The little boy started _____ when he accidentally let go of his balloon.
2. Jill _____ to look under the bed for her slippers.
3. The birds will _____ the fish from the water and fly away.
4. The long, dull movie was _____ by film critics.
5. The baby will fall asleep if you _____ a lullaby to her.

Circle the word that best completes each sentence.

6. Amy (**scorned**, **scrunched**) her friends after they lied to her.
7. The clown was supposed to be funny, but all the children were (**seize**, **bawling**) when he left the party.
8. The plumber (**bawling**, **scrunched**) down to work on the pipes under the sink.
9. Carlos tried to (**croon**, **seize**) the ball from Edgar, but Edgar held on tightly to it.
10. The glee club will softly (**croon**, **scorned**) our school song as the audience watches the slide show.

D Literary Element: Symbol

Read the passages below from "The People Could Fly." As you read, think about how some of the elements in the story also stand for something else. Then answer the questions that follow.

Say the people who could fly kept their power, although they shed their wings.¹ They kept their secret magic in the land of slavery.² They looked the same as the other people from Africa who had been coming over, who had dark skin.³

So the one called Driver cracked his whip over the slow ones to make them move faster.⁴ The whip was a slice-open cut of pain.⁵

He said them all around to the others in the field under the whip, "... *buba yali ... buba tambe ...*"⁶

1. In sentences 1–3, what do the wings and the power to fly symbolize?

2. In sentences 4–6, what does the whip symbolize?

Respond to Literature

E Late-Edition Scoop

Imagine that you are a newspaper reporter. Your boss wants you to cover a late-breaking story about the unusual events happening on the plantation. Write your report below.

ESCAPE TO FREEDOM

Reported by _____

What looked like an ordinary scene this evening was anything but ordinary earlier today.

Said one witness, "An old man called Toby whispered

The next thing I saw was _____"

Another witness said that as the people fled they _____

When asked about this strange event, the Master of the plantation said,

But what many people said happened was that _____

Only time will tell what happened to those who fled away and what will happen to those who remain behind.

Assessment

Fill in the circle next to each correct answer.

1. Why can't the people who are captured take their wings with them?
 - A. The ships do not have room for wings.
 - B. The wings are never supposed to leave Africa.
 - C. The people do not have time to get their wings.
 - D. The wings would not work where the people are going.
2. Which of the following sentences from the story helps the reader visualize what the Master is like?
 - A. Got sick with the up and down of the sea.
 - B. Black, shiny wings flappin against the blue up there.
 - C. Say the next day was dead hot in the fields.
 - D. A hard rock pile, wouldn't be moved.
3. Which sentence **best** describes why Toby finally says the magic words for the first time?
 - A. He gets tired of listening to Sarah and her baby.
 - B. He cannot bear to see Sarah and the baby getting whipped.
 - C. He is being chased by the Overseer and the Driver.
 - D. He is afraid that he will be killed for not helping Sarah.
4. What does flying symbolize for the enslaved people?
 - A. death
 - B. forgetting
 - C. freedom
 - D. slavery
5. Which of the following words means "loud crying"?
 - A. bawling
 - B. scorned
 - C. scrunched
 - D. seize