

Literacy Skills Teacher's Guide for The Confessions of Nat Turner by William Styron

Book Information

William Styron, The Confessions of Nat Turner
Quiz Number: 10834
Random House, 1993
ISBN 0-679-73663-8; LCCN
428 Pages
Book Level: 8.5
Interest Level: UG

This novel is based on the true story of an aborted slave rebellion in 1831.

Award: Pulitzer Prize

Topics: History, Slavery; People, Slaves; Popular Groupings, College Bound; Religion, Christianity; U.S. States/Regions, Virginia

Main Characters

Benjamin Turner Nat's original owner

Hark a cherished friend and fellow slave of Nat's on the Travis property, who becomes a general in the insurrection

Henry a deaf slave and general in the insurrection

Joseph Travis a kind master and a wheelwright by trade; the last person for whom Nat works

Margaret Whitehead the only person Nat personally kills during the insurrection

Mr. Gray the court appointed lawyer who takes Nat's confession

Mr. Jeremiah Cobb the judge of the trial and of Southampton county

Nat Turner a slave who leads an insurrection in Southampton County, Virginia, in 1831

Nathaniel Francis one of the cruelest owners of slaves; owner of Will and Sam

Reverend Eppes a homosexual Baptist minister; the caretaker of Nat after Samuel Turner leaves the county

Samuel Turner Nat's owner after Benjamin dies; he believes in education for Negroes and promises to free Nat after assuring he has an employable skill

Thomas Moore the penultimate owner of Nat; a small farmer

Will a frenzied, twenty-five-year-old chronic runaway slave who joins the insurrection

Willis a friend of Nat's who is sold to slave traders

Vocabulary

ague a chill or fit of shivering

folderol foolishness; nonsense

garrulous given to excessive and often trivial or rambling talk; tiresomely talkative

pickaninnies (offensive) used as a disparaging term for young Black children

skylarking to play actively and boisterously; frolic

unctuous characterized by affected, exaggerated, or insincere earnestness

videlicet that is; namely; used to introduce examples, lists, or items

Synopsis

This fictional account begins as Nat Turner awaits trial for a slave insurrection he led in which fifty-five white people were killed. Shackled in a Virginia jail cell after avoiding capture for ten weeks, he learns that he is the last of the insurgents to be found. All except his friend, Hark, have been tried and hung, Hark being spared in the hope that he would inform on Nat's whereabouts or the reasons behind the insurrection. Nat's court-appointed lawyer, Thomas Gray, takes Nat's confession. Nat, a preacher, feels abandoned by God, unable to pray. The book's narrative is a collection of Nat's reflections on his upbringing and the events in his life that shaped his psyche and led him to become an avenging "angel" for his people, who were bound by the institution of slavery.

Nat was born the property of Benjamin Turner and at an early age declared to be a prophet and destined for a great purpose. Recognizing his intelligence and uncommon manners, Nat was raised in the Turner household, living in the room off the kitchen with his mother who cooked and cleaned for the Turners, instead of working as a field hand. He learned to read and was schooled in the scriptures. Nat was especially fond of the Old Testament and the Psalms and found comfort and

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meaning in them. When Benjamin died, Nat became the property of his brother, Samuel, who schooled Nat in a trade and promised him his freedom.

As the economic conditions of the county declined, Samuel sold some of his slaves. Among those was Willis, a dear friend of Nat's and the first person Nat baptized. Samuel Turner eventually moves South, and being a trusting man, places Nat under the watchful eye of Reverend Eppes, who was to carry out Samuel's wishes for Nat's freedom. Reverend Eppes is a homosexual, but Nat is able to avoid his advances. Nat's hopes of freedom are extinguished when, after a time, he sells Nat to slave traders, and Thomas Moore purchases him. It is while with Moore that God speaks to Nat for the first time, saying, "I abide." His ten years with Moore are filled with toil, but give him occasions to reflect, contemplate, and evangelize. Toward the end of these years, he has a vision of a black angel engaged in battle with and vanquishing a white angel. The destitution of a free black family, and the humiliation of two slaves forced to fight each other for the entertainment of white men, sealed Nat's interpretation of the task that he was called to lead--the destruction of the white people in the county.

Nat becomes obsessed with his mission and is tormented by feelings of sympathy, hatred, and sexual defilement of women. Upon the accidental death of Thomas Moore, he moves to the adjacent farm with Moore's widow when she weds Joe Travis.

Over the years, Nat builds his group of men for the mission by discovering or nurturing hatred among those Negroes he could trust. The plan included killing all the white people, both young and old, mean or good. Once the insurrection begins, Nat finds himself to be an inept killer. Will, a mentally unstable runaway slave who joined the group, killed with no remorse. Nat claimed to have killed only one person, Margaret Whitehead, a teenager who had been sympathetic to the plight of slaves and whom Nat desired. It is the one person whom he regrets was killed in the insurrection. The story ends as Nat is led away to the gallows.

Open-Ended Questions

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

Initial Understanding

Why were Nat's feelings toward Will so complex?

Will is a person so broken by abuse that he is without conscience. He exists by instinct and anger. Nat felt sorrow for Will's circumstances, but comes to fear him as he had no other person before. Nat does not trust Will and knows he couldn't control him. He is both grateful for and horrified by Will's ability to murder. Nat's remorse for killing Margaret Whitehead may also be tied to his response to a "dare" by Will to kill her or lose his leadership of the insurrection.

Literary Analysis

Why do you think Styron chose the first-person point of view in *The Confessions of Nat Turner*?

The choice allowed Styron as an author to express the intricacies and nuances of the effects of racial oppression upon the psyche of an individual. The book becomes more than a documentary and gives the reader poignant illustrations of the destructiveness of the institution of slavery to all involved.

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Inferential Comprehension

Examine the interactions between Nat and Judge Cobb. How is the Judge different from other whites with which Nat interacted?

When Judge Cobb saw Nat and Hark, he does not expect them to wait on him, nor stand in his presence. He speaks to Nat as a man, challenging him not to play dumb. He decries the institution of slavery and has been admonished by those at the College of William and Mary for his views. Nat feels threatened because his anonymity, his most cherished possession, was gone. In the end, Nat feels that Judge Cobb should be spared the sword. After the trial, Cobb is the lone vote for Nat to receive a Bible.

Constructing Meaning

What imagery is used in the scene in which Hark is taken to his death? Comment on its significance.

Hark is shown being carried by men grunting as they strain beneath their burden, like an emperor being borne through the streets in a procession. It is an image of role reversal and gives illustration to the motto that the group of insurrectionists used: "the first shall be last and the last shall be first."

Teachable Skills

Recognizing Setting The story takes place in the tidewater area of Virginia. Locate this area on a map. Find Southampton County and Jerusalem. Hark hoped to escape to freedom after his master had sold his wife and child. Trace the escape route that Hannibal shared with him, skirting the cities of Petersburg, Richmond, Washington, and Baltimore to the Susquehanna River in Maryland by following the North Star. How many miles would this journey be? Hark was not successful, due to cloudy nights and his provincial upbringing. He instead spent six weeks spiraling within forty miles of home, mistaking the towns of Jerusalem, Drewryville, and Smithfield for the larger cities and was captured by the James River. Again, locate these. Identify the Dismal Swamp where Nat intended to hide out. Why was

this an ideal place to seek refuge?

Understanding the Author's Craft The author took a literary license and depicted Nat as spending his childhood years as the Turner's house servant and family "pet." How would this setting affect Nat? Respond on issues such as his friendships, education, job skills, attraction to women, and reaction to being sold as a slave. Would he have had a different perspective on these issues had he been a field hand? Explain.

Making Inferences Nat is identified by his mother and members of his community as a prophet from a young age. He studies the Bible, fasts, and prays. He draws parallels between the prophets of old and the plight of the blacks and his mission to lead his people out of bondage. Research the history and discipline of fasting and prayer. Name others who spent time fasting before discerning their mission. Choose a prophet mentioned in *The Confessions of Nat Turner*. Compare Nat and the bondage of slavery to that of the prophet and the bondage of the Israelites.

Recognizing Cause and Effect Nat Turner's insurrection fueled the anti-abolitionist sentiments in the South. In addition to the immediate atrocities that Thomas Gray spoke of in retaliation for the deaths of the fifty-five whites who were murdered, what were the wide-sweeping effects on the white population's psyche towards blacks and slavery? Research the post-insurrection effects on the laws encompassing slavery in 1831.