

The Drinking Gourd Study Guide

by Colleen Schreurs

For the book
by F. N. Monjo



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Synopsis

Deacon Fuller sends his son Tommy home early from church for misbehaving. Alone, Tommy goes to the barn to visit the horses, but when he hears a noise in the loft, he discovers a family of runaway slaves hiding in the hay.

Big Jeff, his wife Vinnie, his son Little Jeff, and Baby Pearl have escaped from a plantation in South Carolina and are headed north to Canada where they can be free. They are following the drinking gourd, a constellation in the northern sky that points the way to freedom. Tommy learns that his father has hidden the family in the barn until he can take them across the river at night.

When Tommy's father comes home, they hide the runaways in a hay wagon and drive them to the river. Tommy's father explains that he is a part of the Underground Railroad, a secret group of people who help runaway slaves escape to freedom. When they reach the river, Deacon Fuller leaves Tommy alone with the fugitives to get a boat that will take them across.

While Tommy waits for his father to return, a searching party looking for the runaway slaves finds Tommy near the river with the hay wagon. They are prepared to search in the hay wagon where Big Jeff and his family are hidden. But Tommy tells them he is Deacon Fuller's son and he is running away from home. The men decide they are on the wrong trail and ride away.

Deacon Fuller returns with the boat and rows Big Jeff and his family across the river. He sends Tommy home with the hay wagon. Tommy stays awake until he hears his father come home. Deacon Fuller explains to Tommy that although he believes one should obey laws, he cannot obey the law that says that Big Jeff and his family are slaves who belong to another man. Tommy lies in bed thinking about the runaways, and out his window he can see the stars of the drinking gourd pointing the way to freedom.

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4. Compare a real railroad to the Underground Railroad by matching the terms in the two columns below.

Real Railroad

- _____ stations
- _____ passengers
- _____ conductors
- _____ stationmaster

Underground Railroad

- a. guide or helper
- b. owner of the house or shelter
- c. houses, barns or shelters
- d. escaped slaves

Looking Closer:

Read and study the reward poster on page 37.

5. According to the poster, what year is it? _____

6. What is the reward for returning Jeff's family to the Master? _____

7. Write out the sentence in the poster that tells you if it is against the law to help runaway slaves. _____

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12. Did Tommy tell the truth? _____

13. What did the Marshal and his men do? _____

14. What do you think would have happened to Jeff and his family, Tommy, and Tommy's father if Tommy had told the truth? _____

15. How did Tommy's father reassure him after the Marshal left? _____

Dig Deeper:

16. Discuss with your teacher God's concern for truth and God's concern for life. How can we decide what God would have us do if we were in a situation like Tommy's? _____

Answer Key

Note: Most of the questions in Progeny Press study guides deal with students' understanding and interpretation of issues in the novel; therefore, most answers will be individual to the student. Progeny Press answer keys are designed to be as inclusive as possible for the teacher and/or parent, giving enough background and information to judge whether the student has grasped the essence of the issue and the question. We try to point out some directions students' answers might take, which directions might be best, and some errors that may appear. Students are not expected to answer as completely as the answers provided in the Answer Key.

Before-you-read Activities

2.c. Most slaves were uneducated and illiterate. (It was against the law to teach slaves.) Songs are easily memorized. There is a rich heritage of folk songs and spirituals among African-Americans.

6. Daniel Webster—a senator from Massachusetts (a northern state) and a lifelong enemy of slavery. He believed in preserving the Union above all and urged the Senate to accept the Compromise that Henry Clay proposed. Henry Clay—a senator from Kentucky (a southern state) and a slave owner. He also did not want to see the Union split and so proposed a Compromise that would persuade each side of the issue to give up something in order to reach an agreement. The Compromise of 1850 consisted of five resolutions which, among other things, set up tougher fugitive slave laws making it a crime for people to help escaped slaves and requiring people to return them.

Vocabulary

1. something owned; 2. a room under a sloping roof; 3. a loud noise; 4. fasten or tie; 5. hiding; 6. costly; 7. not well lit; 8. a nocturnal bird; 9. big dipper; 10. a balcony.

Looking at the Story

Chapters 1 and 2:

1. In Tommy's church the parents and children sit on different floors. The boys and girls are separated. In churches today the atmosphere is often more casual and people sit together in families.
2. six
3. A deacon is a lay official having various duties in protestant churches.
4. Accept reasonable responses. Some suggested responses: we can test people by noticing what they say and how they act, by observing how they handles their families, by how involved they are with helping others, by what others might say about them, and by seeing if they are honest and hardworking.
5. He is trustworthy, a good father and husband, God-fearing, honest, sincere, and, respected. Accept similar responses.
6. Tommy went "fishing" for geese with an apple core, causing them to make loud noises and interrupt the church service. Tommy's father took him out of church and sent him home to his room.
7. Tommy's Father: he looks angry and disappointed with Tommy. Tommy: he looks sad and maybe sorry for what he has done (his head is hanging down).
8. Tommy went to the barn to feed the horses. It wasn't the right thing to do because he was disobeying his father's instructions.