

Before You Read

Three Spirituals

Who Wrote the Spirituals?

The spirituals featured here came out of the oral tradition of African Americans enslaved in the South before the outbreak of the Civil War. These “sorrow songs,” as they were called, were created by anonymous artists and transmitted by word of mouth. As a result, several versions of the same spiritual may exist. According to the Library of Congress, more than six thousand spirituals have been documented, though some are not known in their entirety.

Cultures Old and New African American spirituals combined the tunes and texts of Christian hymns with the rhythms, finger-snapping, clapping, and stamping of traditional African music. The spirituals allowed enslaved Africans to retain some of the culture of their homelands and forge a new culture while facing the hardships of captive life in the United States. Many spirituals followed a call-and-response pattern in which a leader sang the verses and was answered by a group of singers. The singers often improvised the songs by changing words or adding new verses.

“Every tone [in the spirituals] was a testimony against slavery, and a prayer to God for deliverance from chains.”

—Frederick Douglass

Enslaved African Americans sang spirituals both in worship and while laboring in the field. Many of the songs have a dual meaning, expressing both religious faith and a hunger for freedom. The *New York Tribune* published “Go Down, Moses” after Reverend Lewis Lockwood heard African Americans singing it on September 3, 1861, and submitted the lyrics.



The Life of Harriet Tubman, #4, 1940. Jacob Lawrence. Casein tempera on hardboard, 12 x 17⁷/₈ in. Hampton University Museum, Hampton, VA.

Encoded Messages Some spirituals served as encoded messages by which enslaved field workers, forbidden to speak to each other, could communicate practical information about escape plans. Some typical code words included *Egypt*, referring to the South or the state of bondage, and the *promised land* or *heaven*, referring to the North or freedom. To communicate a message of hope, spirituals frequently recounted Bible stories about people liberated from oppression through divine intervention. The spiritual “Keep Your Hand on the Plow,” for example, tells the story of Paul and Silas, who were released from prison after God sent an earthquake to free them.

Saved from Obscurity The spirituals were saved from obscurity after the Civil War by the Jubilee Singers of Fisk University in Nashville, Tennessee. To raise money for the school during a time of financial hardship, the small university choir sang spirituals to church groups around the country. The Jubilee Singers were soon in demand and eventually performed the spirituals for President Ulysses S. Grant and England’s Queen Victoria.

The spirituals became a part of American pop culture, paving the way for other musical forms including blues and jazz and influencing poets such as James Weldon Johnson. When Martin Luther King Jr. led the march in Washington, D.C., for civil rights in March 1963, he quoted from the spiritual “Free at Last”: “You can hinder me here, but you can’t hinder me there.”

Literature and Reading Preview

Connect to the Spirituals

What music do you turn to for inspiration or comfort? Why do you think it helps you? Discuss these questions with a partner.

Build Background

For many enslaved African Americans, the situation of the Jews in the Bible was especially poignant. According to the Bible, the Jews were forced into slavery by a pharaoh, or ruler, of Egypt. Moses, a leader of the Jews, asked the pharaoh to free his people, warning that otherwise God would send ten plagues upon the Egyptians. The plagues came, and the pharaoh released the Jews. After Egyptian soldiers chased the Jews to the shores of the Red Sea, Moses called upon God to part the waters so his people could cross. The sea rolled back for the Jews to pass but closed in on the Egyptian soldiers. When the Jews "reached the other shore," they were free people once again.

Set Purposes for Reading

Big Idea Resistance to Slavery

As you read, ask yourself, What role did spirituals play in the African American struggle for freedom?

Literary Element Refrain

A **refrain** is a line or lines repeated in a poem or song. For example, the line "Let my people go" is repeated in every stanza of the spiritual "Go Down, Moses." As you read, ask yourself, How do the refrains in each spiritual help emphasize a central idea?

Reading Strategy Analyze Historical Context

Understanding the context in which the spirituals were created can help you better appreciate them. Enslaved African Americans toiled long hours, were barred from communicating with each other, and were frequently threatened with violence. In spirituals, African Americans were depicted as the beloved children of a just and mighty God, destined for freedom.

Spirituals were a fundamental part of slave life. They were sung during worship, rest, work, and play. As you read the spirituals, jot down your thoughts about how they reflect the hopes and beliefs of...

Learning Objectives

For pages 344–349

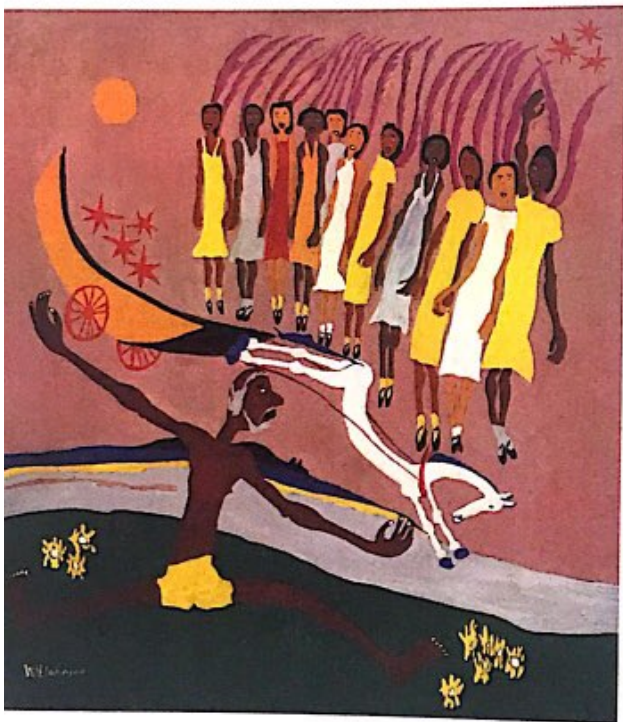
In studying these texts, you will focus on the following objectives:

Literary Study: Analyzing repetition.

Reading: Analyzing historical context.

Writing: Writing a list.

Swing Low, Sweet Chariot



Swing Low, Sweet Chariot, 1944. William H. Johnson. Oil on board, 28½ x 26½ in. National Museum of American Art, Washington, DC.

Swing low, sweet chariot,
Coming for to carry me home,
Swing low, sweet chariot,
Coming for to carry me home.

- 5 I looked over Jordan¹ and what did I see,
Coming for to carry me home?
A band of angels coming after me,
Coming for to carry me home.

- If you get there before I do,
10 Coming for to carry me home,
Tell all my friends I'm coming too;
Coming for to carry me home.

- I'm sometimes up, I'm sometimes down,
Coming for to carry me home,
15 But still my soul feels heavenly bound;
Coming for to carry me home.

- Swing low, sweet chariot,
Coming for to carry me home,
Swing low, sweet chariot,
20 Coming for to carry me home.

1. Jordan refers to the Jordan River. In the Book of Exodus in the Bible, when the Jews were fleeing from slavery in Egypt, they had to cross the Jordan to reach their Promised Land.

Refrain How does the refrain function in the spiritual?



Harriet Tubman Series No. 11, 1939-40. Jacob Lawrence. Casein tempera on gessoed hardboard, 12 x 17⁷/₈ in. Hampton University Museum, Hampton, VA.

Go Down, Moses

Go down, Moses,
 'Way down in Egypt's land;
 Tell ole Pharaoh
 Let my people go.

5 When Israel was in Egypt's land,
 Let my people go;
 Oppressed so hard they could not stand,
 Let my people go.

10 Thus saith the Lord, bold Moses said,
 Let my people go;
 Let them come out with Egypt's spoil,
 Let my people go.

The Lord told Moses what to do,
 Let my people go;
 15 To lead the children of Israel thro',
 Let my people go.

When they had reached the other shore,
 Let my people go;
 They sang a song of triumph o'er.
 20 Let my people go.

Go down, Moses,
 'Way down in Egypt's land;
 Tell ole Pharaoh
 Let my people go.

Resistance to Slavery *How does this biblical allusion reflect the enslaved people's desire to escape slavery?*



Going to Church, 1940–1941. William H. Johnson. Oil on burlap, 38½ x 45½ in. Smithsonian American Art Museum, Washington, DC.

Keep Your Hand on the Plow

Mary wo' three links of chain,
Ev'ry link was Jesus' name.
Keep your hand on the plow,
Hold on.

CHORUS

5 Hold on, hold on,
Keep your hand on the plow,
Hold on.

Paul and Silas bound in jail,¹
Had nobody for to go their bail,
10 Keep your hand on the plow,
Hold on.

Paul and Silas began to shout,
Jail doors opened and they walked out . . .

Peter was so nice and neat,²
15 Wouldn't let Jesus wash his feet . . .

Jesus said, "If I wash them not,
You'll have no father in this lot" . . .

Peter got anxious and he said,
"Wash my feet, my hands and head," . . .

20 Got my hand on the gospel plow,
Wouldn't take nothin' for my journey
now, . . .

1. In the Bible (Acts 16:16–40) the Apostle *Paul* and his companion *Silas* are imprisoned, but an earthquake shakes the prison and releases them.
2. In the Bible (John 13:4–20) the Apostle *Peter* objects at first when Jesus wants to wash his feet.

Resistance to Slavery How might these lines have helped singers and listeners endure slavery?

Analyze Historical Context Why might enslaved people have connected with these lines in the spiritual?

After You Read

Respond and Think Critically

Respond and Interpret

1. Which phrases or lines from these spirituals did you find most comforting or inspiring?
2. (a) What feelings does the speaker express in lines 13–16 of “Swing Low, Sweet Chariot”? (b) Why do you think the speaker’s “soul feels heavenly bound”?
3. (a) In lines 1–8 of “Go Down, Moses,” what is the speaker asking Moses to do? (b) What might these lines say about the experiences and hopes of enslaved African Americans?
4. (a) Summarize the two Bible stories retold in “Keep Your Hand on the Plow.” (b) Why do you think these particular stories were included in a spiritual? Explain.

Analyze and Evaluate

5. (a) What do you think is the meaning of lines 1–3 of “Keep Your Hand on the Plow”? (b) In what way do these lines illuminate the **theme**, or overall message, of the song?
6. Describe the **mood**, or overall feeling, created by each of the spirituals. Use specific examples from each song to support your response.

Connect

7. **Big Idea** **Resistance to Slavery** What elements of the spirituals helped singers and listeners endure and overcome slavery? Include details from the spirituals in your answer.
8. **Connect to the Author** From what you have read, what do you think the authors of the spirituals were like? Explain.

Literary Element Refrain

Spirituals usually contain at least one refrain that emphasizes the central idea, or **theme**, and that also helps establish the **mood**.

1. What mood is created by the refrain in “Swing Low, Sweet Chariot”?
2. In “Go Down, Moses,” what impact does the repetition of “Let my people go” create?

Reading Strategy Analyze Historical Context

Spirituals often combined phrases from English hymns with harmonies and rhythms found in African music. How do spirituals reflect the history of African Americans?

LOG ON



Literature Online

Selection Resources For Selection Quizzes, eFlashcards, and Reading-Writing Connection activities, go to glencoe.com and enter QuickPass code GLA9800u3.

Academic Vocabulary

The South’s economic **reliance** on slavery made the prospect of abolition an unsavory one.

Reliance is an academic word. In more casual conversation, someone might say a man with terrible eyesight has an unavoidable **reliance** on his glasses.

To study the word further, finish the sentence below.

A person who has a **reliance** on _____ needs it/them for _____.

Writing

Write a List Think about a modern-day issue that might be the subject of a spiritual. Write a list of five refrains that you think represent that issue. Remember that a refrain contributes to theme, mood, and rhythm. Next to each refrain, jot down a reason for your choice.