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Teaching Unit™

Sample

Prestwick House
Literature
Teaching Unit
Chapter-by-Chapter Study Guide



Jubilee

by Margaret Walker

- Learning objectives
- Study Guide with short-answer questions
- Background information
- Vocabulary in context
- Multiple-choice test
- Essay questions
- Literary terms



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ISBN: 978-1-60389-822-5

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Item No: 201453

Jubilee

Note to the Teacher

Jubilee is Margaret Walker's 1966 story based on the life story of her great-grandmother. It also contains many incidents and facts based on thirty years of research by Walker. It is a realistic, comprehensive look at the everyday life of slaves before, during, and after the Civil War. No brutality goes unmentioned, no cruelty unspoken. The slave owners are portrayed as complex human beings, despite their shortcomings. No one in this story comes across as a simple character. Walker has fleshed out each character completely, regardless of their color.

Though she does so tactfully, there are still some issues that might be considered controversial, such as: a white master carrying on a 15-year sexual relationship with a black slave, against her will; vivid descriptions of the horrible violence inherent in slavery, war, and beatings; and blatantly racist attitudes held by many of the white characters. The word "nigger" and variations of it appear countless times in the story as Walker strives to make her characters as believable as possible. Though troubling to read this word over and over again as a means of dehumanizing the slaves, the use of it does indeed help Walker reinforce the degradation that went on during that period. Another possible controversial aspect of the story is the use of the Bible by slave owners as support for their right to own slaves. This point is nicely balanced, however, by her use of the same Bible to support the slave's belief in deliverance from slavery and the main character's unwavering belief in the power of love, tolerance, and forgiveness.

It would be good to go over some relevant historical and social movements and events of the time either while teaching the book, or before beginning it. Those include:

- slavery as practiced before the Civil War
- the abolitionist movement
- the underground railroad
- Lincoln's rise to the presidency
- the South's secession from the Union
- the Confederacy
- Black Codes of the time regulating movement and rights of blacks
- the Emancipation Proclamation
- carpetbaggers
- the rise of the Ku Klux Klan after the Civil War
- the Homesteading Act

Walker explains many of these things in the book, but none in great detail. More study before reading the book might be helpful, especially for students who have not yet studied these events in American History courses.

Jubilee

Objectives

By the end of this Unit, the student will be able to:

1. understand the importance of old spiritual songs as a means of self and cultural expression for blacks during slavery.
2. discuss the use of black minstrel songs as a way to demonstrate the white perception of the experience of being a slave.
3. recognize dialect as an effective tool for building authentic characters of a certain time and place.
4. infer characters' emotions and intent from their actions and words.
5. analyze Walker's choice for point of view.
6. define vocabulary and important historical terms from the story.
7. discuss the conflicting views of Christianity presented in the story.
8. explain the effects of slavery on both the black and white families in the story.
9. understand the positive and negative effects of the Civil War on individuals, communities, and American society as a whole.
10. comprehend the importance of education as a means of ensuring one's civil rights are being upheld.
11. analyze the different philosophies of racial relationships: prejudice and violence against a race, tolerance of racial differences, and active charity and love towards all, regardless of race.
12. compare the effects of bitterness and hatred in the character of Randall Ware to forgiveness and love in the character of Vyry.

Jubilee

Questions for Essay and Discussion

1. From what point of view is this story told? Why do you believe Margaret Walker chose this point of view? Do you believe it is the best point of view for telling this particular story? Explain your answer.
2. What is the purpose of the song lyric excerpts on the first page of each chapter? Do you think they worked well in helping to tell the story? Explain.
3. What difference, if any, does it make to you, the reader, to know that this story is based on the author's great-grandmother's real life?
4. Brother Zeke is always moving around and has secretly learned how to forge signatures. Though the book does not come right out and say it, what are we led to believe he is involved in? Why do you suppose he takes such a huge risk with his life?
5. This story ends with a great deal of controversy over the education of the children of former black slaves. Many of the former slaves believe learning is the key to maintaining their freedom and having a better life. What are their reasons for believing this? Why are many of the whites opposed to educating the blacks?
6. At the end of the story, Walker says that Vyry is "the best true example of the motherhood of her race." Describe Vyry's mothering style and techniques. What values does she try to pass on to her children? Who were her role models? What keeps her going when she wants to give up? What are her hopes for her children?
7. In order for the owners to justify their keeping of slaves, the Southerners consider them as property, like cattle or horses, rather than people. Explain, using examples from the book, actions and words which demonstrate, and reinforce, this belief that the slaves are not humans like the slave owners.
8. Even though the slaves resent and are hurt by the extreme prejudice against them, they themselves show prejudice against each other on the basis of jobs (e.g. being a field hand or a house servant). How do you explain this? Why would they do this to each other if they know how much it hurts to have people treat them a certain way based on a label or stereotype.
9. At the end of the story, Randall talks about never having known any of his family. Imagine yourself in that position having no idea who your parents are, or your siblings, aunts or uncles not knowing one relative. How would that affect your identity, your concept of who you are? How has it affected Randall in the way he relates to Vyry and her children, and then to his own child? Give examples to explain your point of view.

Jubilee

Part I. Sis Hetta's Child—The Ante-Bellum Years

1. Death is a mystery that only the squinch owl knows

VOCABULARY

akimbo – hands on hips and elbows bent outward
ante-bellum – before the American Civil War
chagrin – embarrassment
cloying – too much of something; too rich, too sweet
crone – old woman
fetid – stinking
laudanum – a drug made from opium
miscegenation – interbreeding between people of different races
pickaninny – term for a young slave
pious – religiously devout
procreation – the act of producing young
saltpeter – potassium or sodium nitrate
stupor – dazed or drunken state
tallow – candle
titillated – excited pleurably or sexually
tribulation – great distress
verity – truth
wench – young woman with questionable morals
wizened – withered

1. Why does the sound of the squinch owl make May Liza nervous?

2. Who is on her deathbed as the chapter opens, and why?

5. Describe Aunt Sally and the life that she and Vyry share.

6. Now that Vyry is 10 years old, what does she look like?

7. What advice does Aunt Sally give to Vyry after she tells her the circumstances of her birth?

8. What goes on at Big Meeting Nights, and why are the slaves secretive about the gatherings?

9. What does Aunt Sally tell Vyry about what she hears at the Big Meetings, and what does Vyry then conclude about white people?

10. Why does Aunt Sally need to ask Marster John for permission to go to his other plantation, and what does he say to her about it?

Chapter 10. Wedding in the Big House

VOCABULARY

accosted – attacked
beaux – boyfriends
cynical – antisocial
dandies – men of extreme elegance
demurred – objected
docile – submissive
ergot – a medicinal fungus
haughty – overly proud
impudent – disrespectful
inarticulate – unable to express in words
parson – preacher
patently – plainly
proverbial – as in a short, popular saying
provocation – intentional irritation
sullen – gloomy mood
tenacity – persistence
trousseau – wardrobe
unfathomable – hard to understand
veranda – porch
wrath – anger

1. Describe Johnny Dutton and Kevin MacDougall and their love interests.

2. What is ironic about Kevin's statement regarding his pursuit of Lillian when he says, "I'm dedicated to be her slave until she approves of me"?

Chapter 24. They made us sing “Dixie”

VOCABULARY

afforded – provided
blockade – enforced barrier
Dixie – the Southern states
munitions – ammunition for war
vicinity – area

1. Who is winning the war in 1862?

2. Though the battle has not yet come to Georgia, how is this state helping in the effort?

3. Who shows up unexpectedly at the Dutton plantation? What does he want from Missy Salina?

4. Why is Grimes not fighting in the war?

5. Describe the working conditions for the slaves in the munitions factory.
