

Name _____

A Closer Look at "The Slave's Dream" by Longfellow

This poem by Henry Wadsworth Longfellow is about a slave who, while being beaten, escapes into his own mind. He has a dream about his former life in Africa, and is then able to release his pain and die in peace. Let's take a closer look at this poem.

Directions:

Read the poem and answer questions 1-8. Questions 1-4 are in boxes to the right of the poem. The rest are at the end of the poem. (Below, the parts where the slave is in a dream state are written in gray)

The Slave's Dream (1842) Henry Wadsworth Longfellow

Beside the ungathered rice he lay,
His **sickle** in his hand;
His breast was bare, his matted hair
Was buried in the sand.
Again, in the mist and shadow of sleep,
He saw his Native Land. ←

1. The importation of slaves from Africa was banned in 1807. Why do you think Longfellow assumes that the slave's "Native Land" is Africa?

Wide through the landscape of his dreams
The **lordly** Niger flowed;
Beneath the palm-trees on the plain
Once more a king he **strode**;
And heard the tinkling **caravans**
Descend the mountain-road. ←

The Niger River (pronounced ny-jer) flows through western Africa.

He saw once more his dark-eyed queen
Among her children stand;
They clasped his neck, they kissed his cheeks,
They held him by the hand!—
A tear burst from the sleeper's lids
And fell into the sand. ←

2. What was the slave's former life in Africa like? Why do you think he begins to cry?

And then at furious speed he rode
Along the Niger's bank;
His bridle-reins were golden chains,
And, with a **martial** clank,
At each leap he could feel his **scabbard** of steel
Smiting his stallion's **flank**.

Before him, like a blood-red flag,
The bright flamingoes flew;
From morn till night he followed their flight,
O'er plains where the **tamarind** grew,
Till he saw the roofs of **Caffre** huts,
And the ocean rose to view.

3. What imagery in this poem gives the reader a mental picture of Africa?

At night he heard the lion roar,
And the hyena scream,
And the river-horse, as he crushed the reeds
Beside some hidden stream;
And it passed, like a glorious roll of drums,
Through the triumph of his dream.

The forests, with their **myriad** tongues,
Shouted of liberty;
And the Blast of the Desert cried aloud,
With a voice so wild and free,
That he started in his sleep and smiled
At their **tempestuous** glee.

He did not feel the driver's whip,
Nor the burning heat of day; ←
For Death had **illuminated** the Land of Sleep,
And his lifeless body lay A worn-out **fetter**,
that the soul Had broken and thrown away!

4. Why doesn't he "feel the driver's whip nor the burning heat of day?"

About This Poem:

Edgar Allen Poe once said that Longfellow was "unquestionably the best poet in America." One of this country's earliest celebrities, Longfellow's poetry seemed to strike a chord in readers due to its melodic rhythms, cheery tone, and focus on the greatness of America. One thing that no one expected of Longfellow was controversy. But while on an ocean voyage across the Atlantic in 1842, he got the inspiration to tackle the highly debated topic of slavery, so he wrote seven poems exploring the subject. Born in Portland, Maine, Longfellow never experienced slavery first-hand, but believed that owning another person was wrong. The seven poems he wrote, including this one, are sensitive to the harsh life that many slaves experienced. Readers were surprised that Longfellow would dare to risk his popularity to take a stand on such a political issue. Others were outraged that he wrote about an ugly subject in such a beautiful way.

5. Do Longfellow's lovely words make slavery seem less harsh? What do you think? Give an example from the poem.

6. As mentioned above, Longfellow had little first-hand experience with slavery. In your opinion, how well was he able to write from the perspective of a slave? Is it realistic? Give an example from the poem to support your opinion.

7. Many of Longfellow's poems had an emotional tone. This was true of most literature in this era (the Romantic Era). Does this poem trigger emotions in the reader? If so, what emotions?

8. The slave in this poem used his own imagination to escape from a terrible reality. If you were facing an unbearable situation, what would you dream of?

On the back of this page, either

- A) Draw a picture of your dream, or
- B) Write a short description or poem about your dream

Glossary

sickle – a tool used to cut down tall grasses or grain

lordly – grand

strode – past tense for “stride” or walk

caravan – a group of people traveling together

martial – warlike scabbard – a sword holder smiting – striking hard

flank – the side of an animal's body

tamarind – a type of tree that grows in Africa

Caffre – a term for “Black African” that is now thought to be an insult

myriad – a large number of

tempestuous – with raging emotion

illuminated – shines light on; shows clearly

fetter- a chain or shackle