

The People Could Fly

Folk Tale retold by Virginia Hamilton



Video link at thinkcentral.com

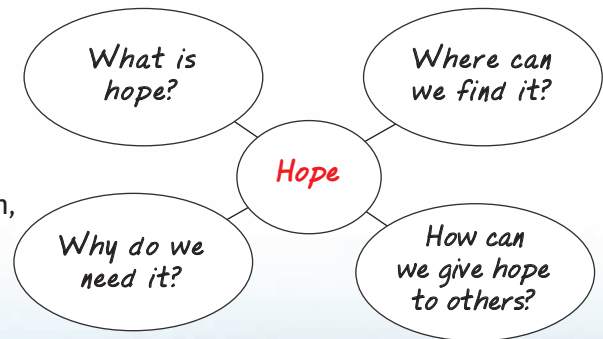
Where do people find **HOPE?**

COMMON CORE

- RL 2** Provide an objective summary of the text.
- RL 3** Analyze how particular elements of a story interact.
- RL 6** Analyze how an author develops and contrasts the points of view of different characters or narrators in a text.

What is hope? Why do we need it? Where can we find it? How can we give hope to others? In her retelling of “The People Could Fly,” Virginia Hamilton shares a story that gave people hope for freedom when little else did.

WEB IT With a partner, discuss the questions posed in the previous paragraph. Record ideas from your conversation in a word web like the one shown, adding to it as necessary.



● TEXT ANALYSIS: STYLE IN FOLK TALES

The selection you are about to read is a **folk tale**, a story that has been passed from generation to generation by word of mouth. In writing the folk tale down, Virginia Hamilton chose to use a **style** that reflects how the story would sound if told aloud. That style includes

- nonstandard spellings that match how people might say certain words
- sentence structure that matches how people might talk

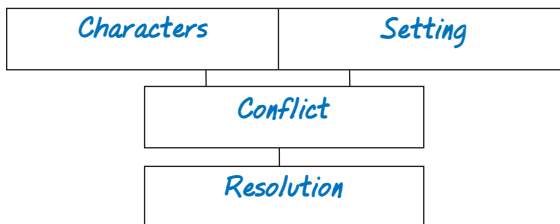
As you read, notice how Hamilton uses language to re-create the sounds and patterns of speech. It may help you to read parts of the story aloud, as it was originally meant to be told.

● READING SKILL: SUMMARIZE

One way to check your understanding of what you are reading is to **summarize** it. A summary is a brief retelling, in your own words, of the main ideas of a story. When you summarize a story, include

- the characters, setting, conflict, and resolution
- key details, so that someone who has not read the story understands your summary

As you read “The People Could Fly,” collect the information for a summary in a story map like the one shown.



▲ VOCABULARY IN CONTEXT

Try to figure out the meaning of each boldfaced word in the context of the numbered phrases.

1. **croon** a lullaby
2. **snagged** by a tree branch
3. slide and **shuffle** to the left
4. **glinty** diamond

Virginia Hamilton

1936–2002

A Storytelling Family

Virginia Hamilton grew up listening to her parents, grandparents, and others tell stories of their past. She has since realized that “they were passing along heritage and culture and a pride in their history.”

From Listener to Writer Hamilton put these stories in writing and added some of her own, publishing more than 35 books. Many of her books, including *The People Could Fly*, deal with African-American history and culture.

BACKGROUND TO THE TALE

Slavery Between the 1500s and 1800s, about 12 million Africans were sent to North and South America as enslaved people. Colonists in the Americas wanted a cheap labor force to support their large-scale farming. People were kidnapped in Africa and sent overseas as enslaved people to be sold.

A Hopeful Community Despite the hardships they faced, enslaved people held on to a sense of community and tradition. They passed on stories, folk tales, and legends from generation to generation. The folk tale “The People Could Fly” is one example of these stories of hope and tradition.



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Complete the activities in your **Reader/Writer Notebook**.

The People Could Fly

Virginia Hamilton

They say the people could fly. Say that long ago in Africa, some of the people knew magic. And they would walk up on the air like climbin' up on a gate. And they flew like blackbirds over the fields. Black, shiny wings flappin' against the blue up there.

Then, many of the people were captured for Slavery. The ones that could fly shed their wings. They couldn't take their wings across the water on the slave ships. Too crowded, don't you know. **A**

The folks were full of misery, then. Got sick with the up and down of the sea. So they forgot about flyin' when they could no longer breathe
10 the sweet scent of Africa.

Say the people who could fly kept their power, although they shed their wings. They kept their secret magic in the land of slavery. They looked the same as the other people from Africa who had been coming over, who had dark skin. Say you couldn't tell anymore one who could fly from one who couldn't.

One such who could was an old man, call him Toby. And standin' tall, yet afraid, was a young woman who once had wings. Call her Sarah. Now Sarah carried a babe tied to her back. She trembled to be so hard worked and scorned.

20 The slaves labored in the fields from sunup to sundown. The owner of the slaves callin' himself their Master. Say he was a hard lump of clay. A hard, **glinty** coal. A hard rock pile, wouldn't be moved. His Overseer¹

Analyze Visuals ▶

Folk tales often include supernatural elements. What supernatural element does this illustration show?

A STYLE

Reread lines 1–7. Note the sentence fragments. How does Hamilton's use of sentence fragments help make it sound like someone is telling the story out loud?

glinty (glĭn'tē) *adj.*
sparkling

1. **Overseer:** a person who directs the work of others; a supervisor.
During the time of slavery, the overseer was usually a white man.



on horseback pointed out the slaves who were slowin' down. So the one called Driver cracked his whip over the slow ones to make them move faster. That whip was a slice-open cut of pain. So they did move faster. Had to. **B**

Sarah hoed and chopped the row as the babe on her back slept.

Say the child grew hungry. That babe started up bawling too loud. Sarah couldn't stop to feed it. Couldn't stop to soothe and quiet it down. She let it cry. She didn't want to. She had no heart to **croon** to it.

30 "Keep that thing quiet," called the Overseer. He pointed his finger at the babe. The woman scrunched low. The Driver cracked his whip across the babe anyhow. The babe hollered like any hurt child, and the woman fell to the earth. **C**

The old man that was there, Toby, came and helped her to her feet.

"I must go soon," she told him.

"Soon," he said.

Sarah couldn't stand up straight any longer. She was too weak. The sun burned her face. The babe cried and cried, "Pity me, oh, pity me," say it sounded like. Sarah was so sad and starvin', she sat down in the row.

40 "Get up, you black cow," called the Overseer. He pointed his hand, and the Driver's whip snarled around Sarah's legs. Her sack dress tore into rags. Her legs bled onto the earth. She couldn't get up.

Toby was there where there was no one to help her and the babe.

"Now, before it's too late," panted Sarah. "Now, Father!"

"Yes, Daughter, the time is come," Toby answered. "Go, as you know how to go!"

He raised his arms, holding them out to her. "*Kum . . . yali, kum buba tambe,*" and more magic words, said so quickly, they sounded like whispers and sighs.

50 The young woman lifted one foot on the air. Then the other. She flew clumsily at first, with the child now held tightly in her arms. Then she felt the magic, the African mystery. Say she rose just as free as a bird. As light as a feather.

The Overseer rode after her, hollerin'. Sarah flew over the fences. She flew over the woods. Tall trees could not **snag** her. Nor could the Overseer. She flew like an eagle now, until she was gone from sight. No one dared speak about it. Couldn't believe it. But it was, because they that was there saw that it was.

60 **S**ay the next day was dead hot in the fields. A young man slave fell from the heat. The Driver come and whipped him. Toby come over and spoke words to the fallen one. The words of ancient Africa once heard are never remembered completely. The young man forgot them as soon as he heard them. They went way inside him. He got up and rolled over on the air. He rode it awhile. And he flew away.

B SUMMARIZE

Note the **setting** and the names of the **characters** in your story map.

croon (krōon) v.
to sing softly

C SUMMARIZE

What is the **conflict**?
Record it in your story map.

snag (snăg) v. to catch
and tear

Another and another fell from the heat. Toby was there. He cried out to the fallen and reached his arms out to them. “*Kum kunka yali, kum . . . tambe!*” Whispers and sighs. And they too rose on the air. They rode the hot breezes. The ones flyin’ were black and shinin’ sticks, wheelin’ above the head of the Overseer. They crossed the rows, the fields,
70 the fences, the streams, and were away.

“Seize the old man!” cried the Overseer.

“I heard him say the magic *words*. Seize him!”

The one callin’ himself Master come runnin’. The Driver got his whip ready to curl around old Toby and tie him up. The slave owner took his hip gun from its place. He meant to kill old black Toby. **D**

But Toby just laughed. Say he threw back his head and said, “Hee, hee! Don’t you know who I am? Don’t you know some of us in this field?” He said it to their faces. “We are ones who fly!”

And he sighed the ancient words that were a dark promise. He said
80 them all around to the others in the field under the whip, “. . . *buba yali . . . buba tambe . . .*”

There was a great outcryin’. The bent backs straighted up. Old and young who were called slaves and could fly joined hands. Say like they would ring-sing. But they didn’t **shuffle** in a circle. They didn’t sing. They rose on the air. They flew in a flock that was black against the heavenly blue. Black crows or black shadows. It didn’t matter, they went so high. Way above the plantation, way over the slavery land. Say they flew away to *Free-dom*.

And the old man, old Toby, flew behind them, takin’ care of them.
90 He wasn’t cryin’. He wasn’t laughin’. He was the seer. His gaze fell on the plantation where the slaves who could not fly waited. **E**

“*Take us with you!*” Their looks spoke it, but they were afraid to shout it. Toby couldn’t take them with him. Hadn’t the time to teach them to fly. They must wait for a chance to run.

“Goodie-bye!” the old man called Toby spoke to them, poor souls! And he was flyin’ gone.

So they say. The Overseer told it. The one called Master said it was a lie, a trick of the light. The Driver kept his mouth shut.

The slaves who could not fly told about the people who could fly to their
100 children. When they were free. When they sat close before the fire in the free land, they told it. They did so love firelight and *Free-dom*, and tellin’.

They say that the children of the ones who could not fly told their children. And now, me, I have told it to you. ∞

D STYLE

In line 73 there is an example of **dialect**, a form of language spoken in a certain place or by a certain group of people. Why might Hamilton use dialect in this story?

shuffle (shŭf’əl) v. to slide the feet along the ground while walking

E SUMMARIZE

What role does Toby play in the **resolution** of the conflict?

SOCIAL STUDIES CONNECTION



Folk tales and other stories that were first told orally rather than written down make up what is called the **oral tradition** of many cultures throughout the world.

Comprehension

1. **Recall** What special power did some of the people in Africa have?
2. **Recall** What does the Driver do to Sarah and her baby?
3. **Clarify** After Toby is gone, who tells the story of the people who could fly?

Text Analysis

4. **Summarize** Use the story map you created as you read to summarize the story. Compare your summary with that of a classmate.
5. **Draw Conclusions** Why do you think the people who first told this folk tale did not have all the slaves fly away?
6. **Evaluate Style in a Folk Tale** Reread lines 82–96. In a graphic like the one shown, note examples of Hamilton’s style that appear in this section. Do you think this is an effective style for telling this story, or would you prefer to read it with standard spellings and complete sentences? Explain.

<i>Hamilton’s Style</i>	
<i>Spellings</i>	<i>Sentence Fragments</i>
• _____	• _____
• _____	• _____
• _____	• _____

7. **Contrast Point of View** The narrator of this folk tale frequently uses the word *say* to mean “They say.” The narrator is probably referring to the people who have told this tale from the period of slavery. How might this narrator be different from the previous tellers?

Extension and Challenge

8. **SOCIAL STUDIES CONNECTION** The African-American **oral tradition** has its roots in Africa—particularly West Africa. Research to find out about griots (grē-ōz’), West African storytellers, and their role in the local culture.



Where do people find HOPE?

Revisit the **WEB IT** activity on page 496. This time, consider how either Toby or Sarah would answer the questions about hope. Use details from the folk tale and your own knowledge and experience to answer the questions as he or she would.

COMMON CORE

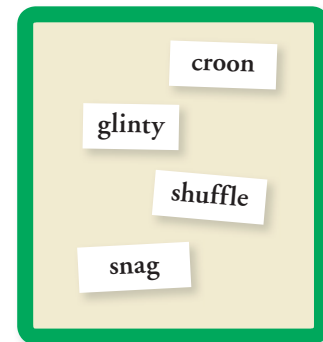
RL 2 Provide an objective summary of the text. **RL 3** Analyze how particular elements of a story interact. **RL 6** Analyze how an author develops and contrasts the points of view of different characters or narrators in a text.

Vocabulary in Context

▲ VOCABULARY PRACTICE

Use **context clues** to choose a vocabulary word to complete each sentence.

1. Though they tried not to ____ them, people often ripped their clothes while doing hard labor in the fields.
2. The people had no money for jewelry or ____ things.
3. Folks would ____ with their heads down to keep the Overseer from noticing them.
4. At night, the mothers might ____ to their weeping children to comfort them.



ACADEMIC VOCABULARY IN WRITING

• communicate • describe • illustrate • interpret • style

In a brief follow-up to the folk tale, **describe** the place where Toby and the others escaped. Include at least one other Academic Vocabulary word in your description.

VOCABULARY STRATEGY: USING A THESAURUS

A **thesaurus**—a book or electronic tool used to find synonyms—can give writing flavor and variety. A thesaurus entry will tell you the spelling, part of speech, and meaning of a word and its synonyms. Common words like *sing* have many **synonyms**, or words with similar meanings. However, not all synonyms are interchangeable. In this story, for example, the verb *croon* gives a much more precise sense of the scene than the more common verb *sing* would convey.

PRACTICE Choose the synonym in parentheses that best replaces each boldfaced word. If you need help, consult a thesaurus or a dictionary.

1. His sleeves got **dirty** from the leaking printer ink. (smudged, dingy)
2. Little children often **frown** if they don't get their way. (glare, pout)
3. Al Capone was a **famous** criminal. (distinguished, notorious)
4. She was so hungry that she **ate** everything in sight. (devoured, dined on)
5. The frightened field mouse **ran** across the kitchen floor. (scampered, jogged)

COMMON CORE

L 4c Consult reference materials to determine or clarify [a word's] precise meaning. **L 5b** Use the relationship between particular words to better understand each of the words.

