



Background Between the 1600s and 1800s, millions of Africans were taken forcibly to the Americas as enslaved people. Their labor spurred the growth of large-scale farming in the colonies. Despite the hardships of oppression, these people nurtured a strong sense of tradition, passing stories from generation to generation. **Virginia Hamilton** (1934–2002) grew up listening to such stories. As an adult, she put many of them into writing and wrote a number of her own books about African American history and culture.

The People Could Fly

Folk Tale by Virginia Hamilton

SETTING A PURPOSE As you read, think about what this folk tale says about the importance of hope in the lives of oppressed people.

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.

10 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 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



As you read, mark up the text. Save your work to **myNotebook**.

- Highlight details
- Add notes and questions
- Add new words to **myWordList**

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.

20 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.

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 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
30 move faster. Had to.

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.

40 "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.

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.

50 "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.

croon
(krōōn) *v.* When someone *croons*, that person hums or sings softly.

¹ **Overseer** (ō'vər-sē'ər): a person who directs the work of others; a supervisor. During the time of slavery, the overseer was usually a white man.



“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,
60 they sounded like whispers and sighs.

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.
70 Couldn’t believe it. But it was, because they that was there
saw that it was.

snag
(snăg) v. If you *snag*
something, you
catch it quickly and
unexpectedly.

Say 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.

“ She flew clumsily at first, with the child now held tightly in her arms. ”

Another and another fell from the heat. Toby was there. He cried out to the fallen and reached his arms out to them. “*Kum*
80 *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, 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
90 kill old black Toby.

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 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
100 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. 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.

shuffle

(shŭf’əl) *v.* When you *shuffle*, you move with short sliding steps.

plantation

(plăn-tă’shən) *n.* A *plantation* is a large farm or estate on which crops are raised.

110 *“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 children. When they were free. When they sat close before the fire in the free land, they told it. They did
120 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.

COLLABORATIVE DISCUSSION Sarah, Toby, and the others hold onto hope in the most difficult of circumstances. With a partner, discuss what this folk tale says about the nature of hope.

Analyze Story Elements: Folk Tales

ELA RL.7.3
ELD PI.7.6

Folk tales are stories passed down by word of mouth from generation to generation. “The People Could Fly” is a folk tale that would have been around a long time as an oral tradition before it was finally recorded.

Folk tales can vary from culture to culture, but often have these elements:

- supernatural events set in the distant past
- talking animals or other characters with supernatural abilities
- lessons about what is important to the culture of origin

Folk tales are often told using **dialect**—a form of language that is spoken in a particular place or by a particular group of people—to suggest real people talking. In “The People Could Fly,” Virginia Hamilton uses dialect to suggest the folksy speech of the African American storyteller. The use of dialect helps to draw the reader or listener more fully into the setting.

Choose one of the listed features of folk tales. Tell how the feature is shown in “The People Could Fly.”

Summarize Text

ELA RL.7.2
ELD PI.7.10

A **summary** of a story is a brief retelling that gives only the most important details. When you summarize a story, you use your own words to answer the basic questions *who? when and where?* and *what happens?* A story map like the one shown can help you organize your answers.

Title and Genre
(kind of story):

Setting:

Conflict:

Main Events (several events in order):

Outcome/Resolution:

Here is a possible first sentence of a summary of the story you have read:

“The People Could Fly” is a folk tale that originated among people held captive as slaves.

What would you write as the next sentence of the summary?



Analyzing the Text

Cite Text Evidence

Support your responses with evidence from the text.

- 1. Interpret** Folk tales often feature lessons that are important to a culture or group of people. What is the lesson of this folk tale? How would enslaved Africans have perceived the lesson as being important?
- 2. Summarize** Early in the folk tale, the narrator says, “The folks were full of misery, then.” Review the first half of the tale to find details about the conditions under which the slaves lived. Then in your own words, describe these conditions.
- 3. Summarize** Fill out a story map for “The People Could Fly.” Use your completed map to summarize the plot of the folk tale. Compare your summary with that of a classmate.
- 4. Analyze** Reread lines 1–10 to identify examples of dialect. What effect does the use of dialect achieve at the beginning of the story?
- 5. Analyze** Reread lines 23–30. What is the Master compared to? What is the whip compared to? Why might the author have included these figurative comparisons?
- 6. Analyze Theme** Reread lines 98–105. What theme is expressed in this paragraph?

PERFORMANCE TASK



Speaking Activity: Dramatic

Reading With a small group, do a dramatic reading of “The People Could Fly,” using the text of the folk tale as a script. Follow these tips for preparing and performing:

- Rehearse the reading several times.
- Make sure your voices fit the personalities of the characters you portray.
- Deliver lines with the appropriate emotion.
- Keep in mind how the tale begins somberly but builds in intensity.