

Nightjohn by gary paulsen novel analysis

Literature



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Slavery was a very discussed theme in the American society, but it was also an used topic in literature. It was controversial because that period was a very sad one, that limited the human being and that unchained him with some obstacles that a person should not have.

Gary Paulsen wrote a short novel based on slavery: “ Nightjohn”. The novel was appreciated because it emphasized the slavery in a very original way. He shown the implications of that period, and the reactions of the people in front of such hard time.

Nightjohn was a slave who managed to escape in the North, but he returned in the South, having the same purpose. This is the interesting part of the novel and maybe the most important issue of slavery: that through their acts, slave people proved that they are also human beings like whites, and they wanted freedom from all points of view.

So, Nightjohn was not thinking only to himself, he realized that his acts could release the slaves. But Nightjohn did not see freedom in a war, or he did not want for him and his people the white’s money. Slave people understood differently the slavery. They wanted rights which could allow them to learn, to travel, to feel themselves free people. Money is not important at all for a man that stays withdrawn like a bird.

Nightjohn finds a different way of liberation: words. This thing comes from the fact that slavers were forbidden to read and to write. They had to communicate their feelings in other ways, and not to be seen of their master.

It is a mean treatment because even birds from a cage can speak on their language . So, Nightjohn sees liberation in words, and we can extent, in education. “ Words are freedom, old man. Cause that’s all that slavery’s

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made of : words. Laws, deeds, passes: all they are is words. White folks got all the words , and they mean to keep them. You get some words for yourself and you bee free!”(qtd. Night John)

Words may be a symbol for freedom, but they also may express a symbol for the impossibility of the slavers to demand their rights , the fear to talk free.

The proof is when Sarny learns her first letters she becomes more confident in herself with every letter. At one certain moment Nightjohn says ” My lesson’s got no bottom at all. It stands on its own to feet.”(qtd. Nightjohn)

So, he does not learn Sarny a lesson, or just a lesson. He gives her confidence, power to move forward and the belief that she is like other people, and she has the same rights with them.

The protagonist of this short novel is Nightjohn that fights for slavers’ rights. He becomes even a stereotype because he embodies the spirit of freedom and equality. The plot is common for the slavery period and eloquent for the theme. The conflict is of two types. We can say that it is an internal conflict, but it is also an interpersonal conflict. The setting is known: the Waller plantation , in the South during the time of slavery. Paulsen uses also a dialect to make everything more lively. The main theme of this short novel is slavery, but we cannot stop only at this one because are others that derive from slavery: prejudice, freedom, leadership.

“ Nightjohn” is a masterpiece because it involves all of these elements, managing to show a past world, with its sorrows and injustices. But in the end the human being is the most important and how he can release him from the physical and moral oppressions.

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