



ONE NOBLE JOURNEY

DISCUSSION GUIDE

Mike Wiley – The Playwright and Actor

Actor and playwright Mike Wiley has spent the last decade fulfilling his mission to bring educational theatre to young audiences. In the early days of his career, Wiley found few theatrical resources to shine light on key events and figures in black history. To bring these often ignored stories to life, Wiley started his own production company. Through his work, he has introduced countless students to the stories and legacies of Emmett Till, the Tuskegee Airmen, Henry “Box” Brown and more. Most recently he has brought Timothy B. Tyson’s acclaimed book “Blood Done Sign My Name” to the stage. Mike Wiley has a Masters of Fine Arts from the University of North Carolina at Chapel Hill, has appeared on the Discovery Channel, The Learning Channel and the National Geographic Channel and was recently profiled in *Our State* magazine.

Synopsis

Henry “Box” Brown was an African American born into slavery in 1816 in Louisa County, Virginia. Although he was not subjected to physical violence, Henry’s story (the basis for *One Noble Journey*) demonstrates the cruelty of slavery was every bit as devastating to the heart as it could be on the body.

At the death of his master, Henry’s family was torn apart and parceled out to various beneficiaries of the estate. Henry, who was 33 at the time, was bequeathed to his master’s son and sent to work in Richmond, VA. While there, he experienced the joys of marriage and children, only to have slavery lash his heart again. Henry’s wife and children were taken from him, sold to North Carolina slaveholders and never seen again.

This devastating incident marked Brown’s breaking point; in response, he devised an ingenious escape plan, sealing himself in a wooden box that was shipped to friends – and freedom – in Philadelphia. Eventually, he traveled the northern states telling his tale of liberation to abolitionist groups.

One Noble Journey also recounts the daring and miraculous leap for freedom of Elizabeth Craft and her husband William, who were born into slavery in Georgia.* In December 1848, Ellen Craft, who was very light skinned, disguised herself as a sickly, white gentleman traveling to Philadelphia for medical treatment. Ellen and William, who acted as her slave throughout the journey, bravely traveled on public trains and steamers as they made their way up the eastern seaboard to Philadelphia. Eventually they were forced to sail for England after the Fugitive Slave Law enabled slave hunters to pursue them even in free states.

*The story of the Crafts is only included in the full-length version of the play.



The Setting

Philadelphia, Pennsylvania, 1848

Themes

Freedom, Love, Hope, Determination

Key Characters

Henry “Box” Brown, a former slave

Ellen Craft, a former slave*

William Craft, a former slave*

Vocabulary

Slave Narrative

Abolitionist

Emancipation

Mulatto

Middle Passage

Slave Overseer

The Fugitive Slave Law

Discussion Questions

- The play opens with an African listing the horrors associated with the arrival of slave traders and the journeys of those captured and enslaved. His last words are, “In the beginning there was freedom. Now there is only hope.” Why did he choose the word “hope”? Why not “sadness,” “despair” or “desperation”?
- Consider the words spoken by the “Founding Father” (“We hold these truths to be self-evident that all men are created equal, that they are endowed with certain unalienable rights, that among those are life, liberty and the pursuit of happiness.”) and Patrick Henry (“Is life so dear or peace so sweet, as to be purchased at the price of chains and slavery? Forbid it, Almighty God I know not what course others may take, but as for me, give me liberty or give me death.”). Why weren’t these statements applicable to slaves (even those born in this country)?
- The Crafts chose to “hide in plain sight” and succeeded in their escape. What does this tell us about the perceptions of many southern citizens of the time regarding the abilities and intellect of African Americans? Whose escape scenario was more daring – the Crafts’ or Henry “Box” Brown’s?
- Following their escape, the Crafts’ former owners charged them with “stealing themselves and their clothes.” Discuss the wording of this charge as it relates to the relationship between slaves and their owners.
- Define the word “pious.” John F. Allen, Henry Brown’s overseer, considered himself a pious man – teaching children at Sunday school and shouting scriptures at working slaves. How might people like Mr. Allen have justified their treatment of slaves with respect to the teachings of the Bible?
- Henry Brown and The Crafts made “desperate leaps” to gain their personal freedom. Name some types of freedom you desire and the “leaps” you’re taking or would be willing to take to insure you obtain them.
- Think about the physical restraints put on slaves to keep them bound to their masters. Now consider the mental “restraints” used. Cite some examples and explain how these tactics prevented slaves from seeking their freedom. Is one of these two approaches any crueler than the other or are they equally debilitating?
- Henry Brown tells us that many slaveholders on their deathbeds freed their slaves. What are some reasons these owners may have taken this action? As a token of appreciation? Disagreeing with the principles of slavery, but feeling compelled to participate based on their southern heritage? Out of concern for their destination in the afterlife?
- Discuss the power and presence of love in the stories of Henry Brown and the Crafts. What risks were the characters willing or forced to take to protect, honor or pursue love? Did it appear many slaveholders were not willing to believe slaves were capable of feeling this emotion? If not, why?
- In the preface to Henry Brown’s slave narrative, Charles Stearns writes, “Here is the plain narrative of our friend, and is it asking too much of you, whose sympathies may be aroused by the recital which follows, to continue to peruse these pages until the cause of all his suffering is depicted before you, and your duty is pointed out?***” What “duty” is he speaking of? Are there current stories of human suffering that motivate you to act on behalf of another?

Recommended Reading & Viewing

Narrative of Henry Box Brown by Henry Brown and Charles Stearns

Great Slave Narratives compiled by Arna Bontemps

Born a Child of Freedom, Yet a Slave by Norece Jones

Incidents in the Life of a Slave Girl by Harriet Jacobs

American Value: Equality from Teaching Tolerance, visit <http://www.tolerance.org/activity/american-value-equality>

* The story of the Crafts is only included in the full-length version of the play.

** Brown, Henry Box. *Narrative of Henry Box Brown*. Philadelphia, PA: Rhistoric Publications, 1969. Print.