

Learning to Read: Annotated Teacher Version

Verses	Summarized Meanings.
A 1) Very soon the Yankee teachers Came down and set up school;	"Yankee teachers" were white and black women from the North who came South to teach slaves to read after the Civil War. See: Handout "Yankee Teachers."
2) But, oh! how the Rebs did hate it,-- It was agin' their rule.	"Rebs" (abbreviation of "Rebels") were Southerners who rebelled against the Federal Government and formed the Confederacy. They were defeated in the Civil War. Southerners were against teachers from the North coming down to teach former slaves because black literacy was perceived as a threat to white domination. Blacks gaining knowledge through literacy was equated with blacks gaining power.
B 3) Our masters always tried to hide Book learning from our eyes;	Looking back on slavery, Aunt Chloe remembers that Masters saw enslaved literacy as a threat to their authority so they kept their slaves far removed from "book learning" i.e. reading, writing, and education, in general.
4) Knowledge didn't agree with slavery, T'would make us all too wise.	If slaves gained knowledge through reading they could challenge the Master's authority over them; under the system of slavery the master's power over the slave was to be absolute and unassailable.
5) But some of us would try to steal A little from the book,	Despite laws prohibiting teaching slaves to read and write, many resisted this law by teaching themselves, i.e. "stealing a little from the book".
6) And put the words together, And learn by hook or crook.	Slaves taught themselves to read "by hook or crook," another way of saying "by any means available to them."
7) I remember Uncle Caldwell Who took pot-liquor fat	In verses 7–12 below Aunt Chloe provides two vivid case studies of enslaved individuals she knew during slavery who taught themselves to read in ingenious ways.
8) And greased the pages of his book, And hid it in his hat.	
9) And had his Master ever seen The leaves upon his head,	
10) He'd have thought them greasy papers, But nothing to be read.	
11) And there was Mr. Turner's Ben, Who heard the children spell,	

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<p>12) And picked the words right up by heart, And learned to read 'em well.</p>	<p>Digging deeper into the text: Why does Harper have Aunt Chloe look back to her slavery days to provide two cases of enslaved men who taught themselves to read and write, despite its being illegal? One reason is to contrast how difficult it was to achieve literacy during slavery, compared to "now" (during the post-Emancipation era) the time frame in which Aunt Chloe is speaking. Her experience learning to read from "Yankee Teachers" exemplifies how comparatively easy it is to acquire literacy. She also is an exemplar of the benefits of literacy and of the fact that age should not be a barrier to learning to read.</p>
<p>13) Well, the Northern folks kept sending The Yankee teachers down;</p>	<p>Harper links back to Verses 1-2 and signals that she's speaking about the era Aunt Chloe's currently living in, Reconstruction (the period <i>after</i> slavery)</p>
<p>14) And they stood right up and helped us, Though Rebs did sneer and frown</p>	<p>She again mentions the efforts of the "Yankee teachers" who did not back down in their efforts to teach former slaves to read and write, despite resistance ("did sneer/frown") from white Southerners.</p>
<p>15) And, I longed to read my Bible, For precious words it said;</p>	<p>Aunt Chloe reveals a major motivation for learning to read is to be able to read her Bible and interpret it for herself.</p>
<p>16) But when I begun to learn it, Folks just shook their heads.</p>	<p>In verses 16–18 Aunt Chloe explains that many doubted she could learn to read.</p>
<p>17) And said, there is no use trying, Oh! Chloe, you're too late;</p>	<p>They discouraged her because of her advanced age, i.e. "rising sixty" means she was in her late 50s.</p>
<p>18) But as I was rising sixty, I had not time to wait.</p>	<p>Digging Deeper: In her advocacy of black literacy, Harper uses Aunt Chloe as a "role model" to encourage others to not let age stand in their way of learning to read.</p>
<p>19) So I got a pair of glasses And straight to work I went,</p>	<p>Aunt Chloe defied the doubters and devoted herself to learning to read.</p>
<p>20) And never stopped till I could read The hymns and Testament.</p>	<p>Aunt Chloe "never stopped" until she achieved her goal to read her Bible, i.e. "the hymns and testament."</p>
<p>21) Then I got a little cabin-- A place to call my own--</p>	<p>Aunt Chloe implies after learning to read/write, she acquired her own home "Then I got a little cabin"; here Harper links literacy to home-ownership and greater economic independence.</p>
<p>22) And I felt as independent As the queen upon her throne.</p>	<p>The ultimate benefit for Aunt Chloe of attaining literacy is her greater sense of self-empowerment and economic independence through home ownership. What she and other former slaves longed for is now a fact of life</p>

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	for her. Feeling like a "queen upon a throne" demonstrates the high sense self esteem this former slave attained through literacy. The contrast between feeling like a "queen" and having been a "slave" is strong.
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