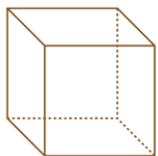


Thinking Inside the Box

A Study Guide for *The Disappearing Man*
Junior High and High School



Talk About It

Chapters 1-9: From the Plantation to Richmond

Discussion Questions

- Henry's mother told him that the life of a slave is like the leaves in autumn. How is this true? What do the leaves represent? What does the wind represent?
- How do you think John Allen felt when Henry Brown freed him from the tree during the lightning storm? How did this affect their relationship later in life?
- In what ways was John Allen's life similar to Henry's?
- How is the slave system in Richmond different than the way you pictured slavery?
- What parts of the slave system in Richmond did you find the most surprising?
- How do you think white plantation owners who separated families and spouses were able to convince themselves that what they were doing was not immoral?
- What was "losing time"?
- What was an overseer's role?
- What was Nat Turner's Rebellion?

Essay

Describe ways that the urban slave system in Richmond differed from the plantation system. Give at least three examples from the book of how the slave system operated in Richmond. Answer in four to five paragraphs.

Key Learning Points

- How the slave system operated in an urban area such as Richmond, Virginia
- How the urban system was different from the plantation system
- The dynamics of master/slave relationships

Chapters 10-17: Courtship and Marriage

Discussion Questions

- What did it mean for slaves to “marry abroad”?
- Compare Henry’s experience with his master to Nancy’s treatment by her various masters.
- Both Henry Brown and Ned Cooper courted Nancy. In what ways were Henry and Ned different? Why do you think Nancy chose Henry over Ned?
- What would it be like to have no say in selecting who you married or even deciding how your wedding day would take place?
- What were slave passes and how were they used?
- What were freedom papers, and how were they different from slave passes?
- Wilson Gregory and James Smith were free blacks, or as some called them “slaves without masters.” What does the phrase “slave without masters” mean?
- What risks did free blacks face?
- What role did music play in slaves’ lives?

Essay

In at least four paragraphs, talk about courtship among slaves. What do you think were the three greatest obstacles? How did Henry and Nancy face each of those obstacles?

Key Learning Points

- Difficulties in courtship among slaves
- The struggles of free blacks
- How masters controlled romantic relationships among slaves

Chapters 18-27: Losses in His Life

Discussion Questions

- How did Henry's master, William Barret, feel about the slave system?
- Why did Colquitt want to punish the slaves who had prayed for his healing?
- Why was Colquitt hesitant to punish Henry?
- Imagine yourself in a box for 27 hours. What would be the most difficult things to endure?
- Why did John Allen harbor such anger at Henry Brown?
- Describe the funeral practices of slaves. What did these traditions mean?
- What did Henry mean when he told his daughter, Sarah, "We belong to the wind"?
- Should Henry have tried to break his family out of the slave jail, or was it wiser trying to talk his master into buying Nancy and the children?
- In what ways were slaves treated like animals at auctions?

Essay

Describe the ways that slaves, free blacks, and masters interacted in Richmond. Support your answer with examples from the book depicting interactions between: (1) a slave and master; (2) a free black and a slave; and (3) a free black and a white. Answer in four to five paragraphs.

Key Learning Points

- Slaves' lack of control over their future
- The treatment of slaves during auctions
- The relationships among slaves, free blacks, and masters

Chapters 28-34: The Plan

Discussion Questions

- The church choir sang, "Hold the wind! Hold the wind! Hold the wind! Don't let it blow!" How does this song apply to the story?
- Why was James afraid to help Henry escape?
- What are the different ways that various characters sacrificed for one another?
- How did the First African Baptist Church deal with the question of whether slaves could remarry after their spouses were sold away?
- What was Hiring Week in Richmond?
- What motivated Samuel Smith, the white gambler, to take the risk of helping Henry?
- What does the box represent to you?
- In what ways had Henry been put into a box all his life?
- Who was Miller McKim?
- What were slave catchers? How were they different from slave patrollers?

Essay

Describe how the Underground Railroad operated. Use at least two examples from *The Disappearing Man*. Also, describe how slave catchers operated and ways they posed risks to people working in the Underground Railroad. Answer in four or five paragraphs.

Key Learning Points

- How the Underground Railroad functioned
- How slave escapes were planned
- The risks of being caught by slave catchers

Chapters 35-39: Philadelphia

Discussion Questions

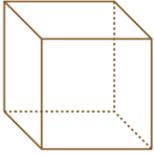
- How did Henry grapple with the lack of power in his life—the lack of control over his own circumstances?
- Why did Miller McKim try to back out of the escape plan?
- What role did lightning and storms play in John Allen's life? How was this theme played out throughout the story?
- Why did John Allen direct so much anger toward William Barret's dog during his final scene in the book?
- Why did the abolitionist Frederick Douglass want to keep the escape methods of certain slaves (such as Henry Brown) a secret?
- How did fear affect the lives of the central characters: Henry, Nancy, Samuel, James, and John Allen? How did each person deal with their fears?
- Why did Henry apologize to Nancy when they were reunited in Boston?
- Why did Henry Brown flee to England in 1850?
- What was the Fugitive Slave Act?

Essay

Select one relationship. For example, it could be Henry and Nancy, James and Henry, James and Samuel, Henry and John Allen, Master Barret and Henry, or any other pair. In three paragraphs, describe that relationship. What were the sources of tension? How did they deal with the tensions? How did their relationship change from the beginning to the end of the story? Answer in at least four paragraphs.

Key Learning Points

- The risks faced by slaves after their escape
- Ways that the Anti-Slavery Society used slave escapes to bring attention to their cause



Going to the Source

The Disappearing Man was based, in part, on two first-person narratives written about Henry Brown's escape. One was written in 1849 and the second one in 1851.

In 1849, "books known as slave narratives were becoming numerous and had gained significant readership," writes Jeffrey Ruggles in *The Unboxing of Henry Brown*. He says abolitionists used these narratives to argue against the proslavery belief that slaves were happy with their lives in bondage.

Henry Brown was illiterate, so the 1849 narrative was written by a white man named Charles Stearns. Brown and Stearns also went out on the road to sell their book at events where Henry told his remarkable story. "The pair may have traveled by rail on occasion, but to get to all the towns they visited, they likely hired a buggy or wagon, loaded the books in the back, and drove from site to site," Ruggles says.

In 1851, Henry Brown put out a second version of his story, which provides many details not found in the original 1849 narrative. No other author is named in the 1851 narrative, but historians believe he likely had help.

Look up one or both of the narratives, which can be found at the University of North Carolina website, *Documenting the American South*. You can find them at these links:

1849 Narrative

<http://docsouth.unc.edu/neh/boxbrown/boxbrown.html>

1851 Narrative

<http://docsouth.unc.edu/neh/brownbox/brownbox.html>

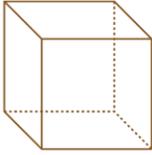
After reading one or both of the narratives, explore them further by tackling these questions.

- How is *The Disappearing Man* different from the narratives?
- Where did *The Disappearing Man* fill in the blanks—covering things that were not mentioned in either of the narratives?
- How were the narratives different from each other?

- Look up another slave narrative on the same University of North Carolina website and report on that story. You can find other slave narratives at this link:
<http://docsouth.unc.edu/neh/>

Going the Extra Mile

William Still, one of the minor characters in *The Disappearing Man*, was a key person in the Underground Railroad. Look up the online version of his book, *The Underground Railroad*, at <http://www.gutenberg.org/files/15263/15263-h/15263-h.htm#PStill>. This book recounts many different slave escapes in the Underground Railroad. Select one of the stories and write it in the first person.



The Great Escape

When Henry Brown was mailed from Richmond to Philadelphia, it wasn't a simple matter of putting him on a train and watching it roll away to Philly. The box went by many different forms of transportation over the span of 27 hours.

Hunt up state maps of Virginia and Pennsylvania, as well as city maps of Philadelphia and Richmond. Because it might be difficult to find historical maps, go ahead and use current-day maps. Mount the maps on a poster and use a marker to track Henry's escape route. For each step, discover the following information.

1. List the time of day that Henry was at each particular location.
2. Describe what happened at each location. (For example, "Henry's box was loaded onto a train.")

1. **Samuel Smith's Home in Richmond.** No one knows for sure where Samuel's home was located at this time, so *The Disappearing Man* places his home on Fifteenth Street, between Marshall and Broad streets.

2. **The Adams Express office in Richmond.** The Adams Express office was found in the Exchange Hotel on Fourteenth and Franklin streets.

3. **The train depot for the Richmond, Fredericksburg, and Potomac Railroad,** 8th and Broad streets in Richmond

4. **The Aquia Creek landing,** 78 miles north of Richmond on the Potomac River

5. **Washington City**

6. **Baltimore**

7. **Susquehanna River crossing,** two hours out of Baltimore

8. **Philadelphia train station,** Eleventh and Market streets

9. **The Pennsylvania Anti-Slavery Society,** 31 N. Fifth Street in Philadelphia

You can also follow Henry's escape path using Dickinson College's "virtual field trip" on the Internet. Check it out at this link:

<http://housedivided.dickinson.edu/fieldtrips/brown.html>

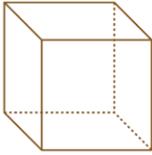
Note that you will have to load Google Earth onto your computer before you can run the program that takes you step-by-step through Henry Brown's escape.

Going the Extra Mile

Three train lines that carried Henry's box were:

1. The Richmond, Fredericksburg, and Potomac Railroad
2. The Baltimore and Ohio Railroad
3. The Philadelphia, Wilmington, and Baltimore Railroad.

Select one of these railroads and write a one-page history of it.



The Box

Henry Brown's box was believed to have been 3 feet by 32 inches by 23½ inches. Using large pieces of cardboard, create the various parts of the box. Then put them together using duct tape.

Here are the dimensions of the five parts of your cardboard box, plus the lid:

Bottom piece

3 feet by 23½ inches

Side pieces

3 feet by 32 inches

3 feet by 32 inches

23½ inches by 32 inches

23½ inches by 32 inches

Lid

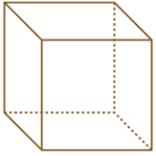
3 feet by 23½ inches

Once your box is created, climb inside to get a sense of the space. This will give you an idea of how cramped the box was for Henry, who stood 5 feet 8 inches tall and weighed 200 pounds.

Going the Extra Mile

Shoot a video of three scenes from *The Disappearing Man*. Use your box for at least one of the scenes. Before shooting, discuss what each character would be feeling in that particular scene.





Transformations

People change. Characters change. It would be difficult to go through the experiences faced by Henry and the other main characters in *The Disappearing Man* without being transformed in some way. Examine the main characters and describe how each of them changed from the beginning of the story to the end.

- Henry Brown
- Nancy Brown
- Samuel Smith
- James Smith
- John Allen

Going the Extra Mile

Create a fake Facebook page for one of the characters, describing their “Likes,” their Relationship Status, their Friends, etc. Also include messages they might have sent to various people. You can create your fake Facebook pages on paper and post them around the room. If you’re ambitious, you can create a Facebook page online.