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The True Confessions of Charlotte Doyle

by

Avi Wortis

1990



MonkeyNotes Study Guide by Kerry Cottingham

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KEY LITERARY ELEMENTS

SETTING

Most of the novel's action occurs aboard the *Seahawk*, a merchant cargo ship sailing across the Atlantic Ocean from England to the United States. The novel opens at the docks in Liverpool, England, where Charlotte Doyle first boards the ship. Some events at the end of the novel take place in Providence, Rhode Island, where Charlotte's parents live. The year is 1832, and the action occurs between June and September. This is hurricane season in the Atlantic Ocean, and the *Seahawk* does experience such a storm.

The major setting is important to the development of the plot and characters. Those aboard the *Seahawk* are at sea for two months. Therefore, the *Seahawk* becomes a world within itself, isolated from.....

CHARACTER LIST

Major Characters

Charlotte Doyle - Thirteen-year-old Charlotte admits that at the beginning of the story her only goal is to be the "young lady" that her family expects her to be. Charlotte is transformed during her journey, and the novel is meant to be read as Charlotte's journal.

Captain Jaggery - Jaggery is the very strict and proper captain of the *Seahawk*. An employee of her father's company and a gentleman, he befriends Charlotte early on for his own reasons. That friendship abruptly ends when Charlotte observes his cruelty toward the crew.

Zachariah - Zachariah is an older Black man who has been sailing his entire life. He serves as the ship's cook. Although he is uneducated, the wise Zachariah eventually becomes friend, confidant, and guide to Charlotte Doyle.

Minor Characters

Mr. Doyle - Charlotte's father is a rich, proper gentleman who believes in upholding reputations and appearances. Although Charlotte adores her father, his prejudices as a member of the aristocracy eventually let her down. He orders Charlotte to keep a log of her journey across the ocean, then burns it because he does not approve of her stories or her spelling.

Mrs. Doyle - Charlotte's mother is quieter, more feminine version of Mr. Doyle. She is a nervous woman, often teary-eyed. She appears only briefly, and in that time is more concerned with Charlotte's dress and speech than with her thoughts.....

Additional characters are identified in the complete study guide.

CONFLICT

Although there are numerous lesser conflicts throughout the novel, there are essentially two major conflicts.

#1. The external conflict aboard the *Seahawk*

Protagonist - Charlotte Doyle. Although the other crew members conflict with Jaggery and even try to rise against him, the ultimate conflict arises between the captain and Charlotte Doyle herself.

Antagonist - Captain Jaggery

Climax - The final battle aboard the *Seahawk*. The crew members stand back, and the battle is simply between Charlotte and Jaggery.

Outcome - Jaggery falls overboard and drowns. Charlotte is named captain for the remainder of the voyage, which is now peaceful.

#2. The conflict that arises when Charlotte denies her upper-class upbringing

Protagonist - Charlotte Doyle

Antagonist - Society, particularly the aristocratic upper-class of Charlotte's.....

SHORT PLOT/CHAPTER SUMMARY (Synopsis)

Thirteen year-old Charlotte Doyle keeps a journal of her journey from England to America. When Charlotte first boards the *Seahawk*, she is a very proper young lady who dresses and behaves according to societal standards. Although she does not intend to travel alone, circumstances occur so that Charlotte is the lone passenger among a crew of rough and seasoned sailors.

Charlotte is relieved by the company of the courtly and gentlemanly Captain Andrew Jaggery. Though Charlotte hears that Jaggery is a cruel captain and sees harsh discipline firsthand, she believes that Jaggery is as fine a man as her own father. As she welcomes Jaggery's very proper offer of friendship, she looks less favorably upon the same offer from Zachariah, an uneducated Black sailor.

Charlotte's friendship with Captain Jaggery eventually backfires, as he uses her to get information about his crew's plans. Due to Charlotte's spying, a justified attempt at rebellion against Jaggery is thwarted and.....

THEMES

1. The Journey (Major Theme)
2. Courage
3. Friendship and Acceptance.....

Detail regarding the themes is listed in the Overall Analyses section later in the study guide.

MOOD

The mood is suspenseful and dramatic. The story itself is not difficult to read. The only difficult vocabulary is related to sailing and boating jargon, but this is kept at a minimum. The simplicity of the.....

BACKGROUND INFORMATION - BIOGRAPHY

Known simply as Avi, the author of *The True Confessions of Charlotte Doyle* is currently one of the most prolific writers of young adult fiction. His latest historical novel, *Crispin: The Cross of Lead*, recently won the 2003 Newbery Medal, the most coveted price in young adult literature.

On December 23, 1937, Avi Wortis was born in Manhattan. He grew up in the New York City area, living in Brooklyn with his parents, an older brother, and his twin sister. The son of a doctor and a social worker, Avi has said that his family is very intellectual and that he was read to every night. His family took weekly trips to the library, and Avi loved reading even at an early age.

Even though Avi loved to read, school was difficult for him. While both his older brother and his sister were excellent students (his brother even attended college at age fifteen), Avi struggled, especially.....

LITERARY / HISTORICAL INFORMATION

This novel takes place in the early nineteenth century, when a small number of newly rich people were basking in the glow of the Industrial Revolution. During the Industrial Revolution in both England and in the United States, developments in machinery enabled factories to churn out their products in vast quantities. As a result, countries sold more goods than ever before and became wealthy.

The sailing industry was strong, with large amounts of cargo being sold and.....

CHAPTER SUMMARIES WITH NOTES

Introduction: An Important Warning

Summary

The story opens with the narrator directly addressing the reader. Charlotte Doyle introduces herself as a girl

who was tried and found guilty of murder. She insists that she will tell the true story of those events as they happened in 1832, when she was thirteen years old. Charlotte admits that at thirteen she would not have been a likely candidate for a murder suspect. She describes herself as a young upper-class woman - a girl who wears fashionably conservative clothing: buttoned shoes, full skirts, and clean white gloves.

Charlotte was born in America but lived in England in her early school years, until her father's job caused the family to relocate to her birthplace of Providence, Rhode Island. Charlotte explains that her family - mother, father, and a younger brother and sister - traveled back to America early, while Charlotte remained in England to finish the school year at the Barrington School for Better Girls.

In order to join her family in Rhode Island, Charlotte explains that her father booked her passage on a ship owned by his company, and that she is expected to travel to America in the company of two families with children her age. Charlotte also explains that before her trip her father presents her with a blank journal and informs her that she must keep a daily log of her journey across the Atlantic Ocean; specifically, he wants her to use the journal as a tool to help her improve her spelling skills.

Notes

Charlotte points out right away that this story is told from her own point of view. She insists that she is a credible storyteller because she kept accurate records of all the events that occurred on her voyage. It is important to note that Charlotte says that she considered herself a young lady, and that her goal in life was to become a proper lady. This ambition is reflected in her description of her life. She is a privileged girl, economically and educationally. She wears nice clothes and attends a respectable school. She does not seem like a murderer, so the reader immediately has questions: why would such a girl be found guilty of murder? This introduction is important to the novel because it establishes Charlotte as the narrator / protagonist, and it introduces the element of suspense that will drive the action of the novel. This chapter immediately sets the tone for this novel; Charlotte's words about murder and a trial are ominous.

PART ONE

CHAPTER ONE

Summary

Charlotte is escorted to the ship by her father's business associate, Mr. Grummage. As Grummage bustles Charlotte toward the ship, he informs her that this vessel, the *Seahawk*, is manned by a Captain Jaggery. At the mention of Jaggery's name, the working man paid to carry Charlotte's traveling trunk declines to go any further. He simply drops the trunk, refuses payment, and leaves. Grummage angrily hires another man to carry the trunk the rest of the way to the ship, but does not inform the man where he is going. Instead, the second man is simply told to follow. This man does follow when he is given two shillings: one from Charlotte, and one from Grummage. When Charlotte and Grummage arrive at the dock where the *Seahawk* is anchored, this man takes one look at the ship, then hurriedly puts Charlotte's trunk down and runs away. Grummage goes into the ship, presumably to finalize arrangements, and while Charlotte waits on the dock, she admires the sailing vessel. It is two-masted, strong, and sleek. As she is looking at the ship, she sees a man scurrying up the ropes on the side of the boat. This man disappears into the ship just as Grummage returns to inform Charlotte that she will be the only passenger onboard the *Seahawk*. Despite Charlotte's protests that she should not travel alone, Grummage insists that she board the ship "at once."

Notes

The behavior of the working men in this chapter is important because both of these strong, rough men are visibly upset by the *Seahawk* and / or the mention of its captain, the man named Jaggery. Their obvious reluctance to be near the ship is an example of foreshadowing, as we later realize that these men must have heard of Jaggery's cruelty in the past. We also see that Charlotte is a young woman who is very concerned about doing the "right" thing. To her, this means seeing that the man carrying her trunk is well-paid, it means

keeping her word, and it means keeping up appearances. Charlotte is sure that her parents would not approve of her getting on the ship, as she will be the only passenger and the only female onboard. It is important to notice this aspect of Charlotte in light of future development. No one else on board the ship will be female; more importantly, no one will be “a lady.”

Some readers may quickly forget the detail of the man scurrying up the ropes to board the ship. Indeed, Charlotte herself seems to forget this detail in her haste to try to make sure that she will not be traveling without a chaperone. However, the observant reader will notice that there are certainly some unusual things occurring around and about the *Seahawk*. The author continues to build suspense with these details.....

OVERALL ANALYSES

CHARACTER ANALYSIS

Charlotte Doyle - Charlotte undergoes a tremendous change over the course of the novel. Initially a spoiled girl of the aristocracy, she gains insight and maturity as she, as an early feminist, chooses to follow her own heart.

It is easy to dismiss the early Charlotte as nothing more than a spoiled girl who comes from a wealthy family. However, even early on, Charlotte does exhibit characteristics that distinguish her from other members of her social class. When a sailor carries Charlotte's trunk to the ship at the docks in Liverpool, she promises a tip to him from her own money. Mr. Grummage, her father's business associate, does not.....

Captain Jaggery - At the beginning of the novel, the captain dresses fastidiously. His cabin is well-furnished and immaculate. He demands the same care of the ship: no rail is allowed to become tarnished, no part of the deck allowed to go unswabbed.

Jaggery does possess qualities that are admirable in a leader. Though Jaggery works his men to the bone, he is certainly not lazy himself. Charlotte even admits that she must give credit where.....

Zachariah - In many ways, Zachariah serves as the foil to Captain Jaggery. While Jaggery tries to portray himself as a man who believes in honor and justice, it is Zachariah who quietly exhibits those qualities. Furthermore, Zachariah exhibits a great deal of courage. When he is chosen as the.....

PLOT STRUCTURE ANALYSIS

This story is, on the surface, an account of Charlotte's journey across the Atlantic Ocean. On a deeper level, the plot of the novel echoes the plot of many classical journey tales. Just as Greek heroes who embarked upon mythic journeys, Charlotte encounters many challenges, both external and within herself. She learns from experience: though she first trusts Jaggery completely, she eventually recognizes him as a tyrant and.....

THEMES - THEME ANALYSIS

1. **The journey** - The true journey in this novel moves beyond the trip across the Atlantic. In learning to overcome her own prejudices, Charlotte Doyle embarks on the real journey. Over the course of the novel, she gains a maturity that enables her to see the flaws within herself and the hypocrisy of her entire society. This is the major theme in the novel because Charlotte's journey to gain maturity is what enable her to be triumphant in each of the two major conflicts in the novel.....

Additional themes are analyzed in the complete study guide.

POINT OF VIEW

First person. The story is told entirely from Charlotte's perspective. Therefore, when she is confused or doesn't understand something, the reader feels the same way. For example, Charlotte does not.....

OTHER ELEMENTS

VOCABULARY / JARGON

The author makes extensive use of sailing terms, some of which are not fully explained in the story. For example, readers should understand that the ship is manned by a captain, and the two.....

IMPORTANT QUOTATIONS - QUOTES AND ANALYSIS

Page numbers come from the 1990 soft cover edition from Avon Flare.

1. **"Not every thirteen-year-old girl is accused of murder, brought to trial, and found guilty."** (Page 1).
Right away, Charlotte introduces herself to the reader. This opening line sets the tone for the entire novel. It is mysterious and compels the reader to continue reading.

2. **"I was given a volume of blank pages - how typical of my father! - and instructed to keep a daily journal of my voyage across the ocean so that the writing of it should prove of educational value to me."** (Page 3).

According to Charlotte, her journal is proof of the events which take place upon the *Seahawk*. Therefore, she faithfully records all action aboard the ship as it occurs. Although this journal is later burned by her father, Charlotte rewrites it in the margins and blank pages of books that are meant for her education.....

SYMBOLISM/ MOTIFS

The hurricane itself can stand as a symbol for the conflict aboard the *Seahawk*. Before the hurricane hits, the storm seems to be building up and gathering power. The same can be said for.....

IMPORTANT / KEY FACTS SUMMARY

Title / Author: *The True Confessions of Charlotte Doyle* by Avi

Copyright Date: 1990

Genre: Young Adult, Fiction, Mystery / Suspense, Adventure, Coming-of-Age

High Honors / Awards: Newbery Honor Book, Horn Book,

STUDY QUESTIONS - MULTIPLE CHOICE QUIZ

1. Which of the following characteristics does Charlotte NOT show in the novel?
 - a. prejudice
 - b. courage
 - c. fear
 - d. cruelty
2. Who killed Hollybrass?
 - a. Jaggery
 - b. Charlotte
 - c. Zachariah
 - d. the stowaway.....

ESSAY TOPIC IDEAS - BOOK REPORT TOPICS

1. Explore the themes of racial prejudice, classicism, and/or sexism within the novel.
2. Write a character analysis of Charlotte that describes her growth over the course of the novel.
3. Compare / contrast Jaggery with a modern-day leader. Consider the advantages and dangers of leadership.
4. Compare and contrast the leadership styles of Jaggery and.....

ANSWER KEY TO STUDY QUESTIONS

1)D 2)A 3)B 4)C 5)D 6)A 7)B 8)D 9)A 10)C

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