

Succession in Telling a Story

Paula Fox, a widely respected author, writes books for children and young adults. Mrs. Fox was born April 23, 1923 in New York City to Paul Hervey and Elsie Fox. Paula primarily writes children's books, but she has branched out and written eight adult novels. Some of Paula Fox's many literary credentials include winning the National Book Award in 1983 for her novel *Place Apart*, and Paula Fox also won the Newberry Medal in 1974 for this novel being discussed, *The Slave Dancer*.

Paula Fox's ambition for writing *The Slave Dancer* was to entertain children and young adults, and yet at the same time, providing them with a more accurate explanation of the slave trade--both on the trade and the people behind it. One very good example of the cruelty toward slaves in the book was the passage when Captain Hawthorne, the Captain of *The Moonlight*, spotted the American ship that was going to free the slaves on board his ship.

"By God!" Cawthorne thundered. "I see the ship! I see it. It's American! You disaster stout (a crew member) You were murdered me! Get the slaves over! Get them over!" I cried out in terror as I saw the luminous crest of a wave in the darkness, and right behind it on the next crest, a number of small boats coming directly at us, the rowers bent against the wind. At that moment, Sam Wick picked up a black woman and simply dropped her over the side. With hardly a pause he then kicked over two men. Now the slaves, aware of their mortal danger, sank down, piling themselves up on one another as though in this way they could protect themselves. They scratched the deck frantically as the seamen ran among them, grabbing them up and shoving them to the rail, three black men moved unsteadily toward him, flailing the air with their arms as though he were a wild animal. Cawthorne instantly drew his pistol and fired it directly into the face of one of the blacks, and proceeded to shoot four more women and children.....

That scene seems like it came out of a fiction movie, but it did not. Many of these tragic occurrences happened every day on slave boats. But the great ability of Paula Fox to weave a seemingly perfect replication of actual history in a book is amazing. Has she succeeded? Most definitely yes. Many of these powerful passages from the story illustrate the cruelty faced by millions of slaves for nearly three centuries. Many of these such occurrences in the story greatly altered Jessie's views about the goodness of man, his outlook on life, and his fears involving the slaves. Another good example in the novel is when Jessie is reflecting on his experience in the closing pages of the novel.

"In the war between the states, I fought on the Union side and a year after the Emancipation Proclamation in 1864, I spent three months in Andersonville, surviving the horrors, I often thought, because I had been prepared for them on *The Moonlight*.

After the war, my life went on much like my neighbors' lives. I no longer spoke of my journey on a slave ship back in 1840. I did not think of it myself. Time softened my memory as though it was kneading wax. But there was one thing that did not yield to time.

I was unable to listen to music. I could not bear to hear a woman sing, and at the sound of any instrument, a fiddle, a flute, a drum, a comb with paper wrapped around it played by my own child, I would leave instantly and shut myself away. For at the first note of a tune or of a song, I would see once again as though they never ceased their dancing in my mind, black men and women and children lifting their tormented limbs in time to reedy martial air, the dust rising from their joyless thumping, the sound of the fife finally drowned beneath the clanging of their chains.

Paula Fox's careful and tedious description of the crew's voyage on *The Moonlight* has created a saddening image of just what it was really like in the ship. The torture of slaves, the hardships faced by the crew, and the mental changes that went on in Jessie's head. These changes resulted in Jessie never being to listen to music again, to preparing him for the grueling hardships of war, and to rethning his moral values on Man. Mrs. Fox has done a wonderful job in writing this book--making it entertaining, yet informal; and also giving the book wide appeal for boys and girls of all ages.