

Introduction

Fanny Seward, born 1844, lived throughout one of the most turbulent time periods in American history, and witnessed firsthand the social and political changes brought about by the Civil War. Her father, William Henry Seward, served as Secretary of State during this time, and Fanny visited her father in Washington, D.C. several times during this period. In this lesson students will read along with the author of the piece, Reagan Graney, and will then answer a series of questions about the section to check for understanding.

Objective

By reading the historical fiction story about Fanny Seward, students will understand that the 19th Century was a time of radical social, political, and economic change, which was shaped by several important historic actors. Students will also continue developing their reading comprehension, while learning how to think from the viewpoint of others, building empathy.

Common Core Standards

CCSS.ELA-LITERACY.RL.4-5.1

Refer to details and examples in a text when explaining what the text says explicitly and when drawing inferences from the text.

CCSS.ELA-LITERACY.RI.4-5.10

By the end of year, read and comprehend informational texts, including history/social studies, science, and technical texts, in the grades 4-5 text complexity band proficiently, with scaffolding as needed at the high end of the range.

Directions

1. Provide students with a copy of “Chapter 3”, along with the “Fanny Seward: Activity 3” worksheet.
2. Access the video of the author reading, and have students read along with their copy of “Chapter 3”
3. Once complete, ask students to complete the “Fanny Seward: Activity 3” worksheet, and check for understanding.

Chapter Three: The Passengers

In the middle of the night, Fanny awoke with a start.

It was raining outside. Droplets of water pattered against the dark glass window next to her bed. It was the type of rain that, when Fanny awoke, she could hardly believe she'd slept through—and it was just a bit too noisy for her to easily fall back asleep.

Fanny tossed and turned in her tiny bed, the quilted blankets getting wrapped around her legs. Finally, she sat up, disgruntled. Something was itching around in her mind, like a small fly that won't leave you alone during dinner time.

What had her mother been talking about that afternoon? The entire conversation left Fanny feeling confused, and unsettled. *We have a couple downstairs now*, Mrs. Seward had said. It sounded like she had been talking about *people*; but could there really be someone in Fanny's house that she didn't know about?

Fanny sighed. And, to her own surprise, she got out of bed, picked up the lamp next to her, and walked toward her bedroom door.

Fanny did not often feel brave. She was frightened of speaking up in front of other people, and she barely left her own home without another person. But in this moment, Fanny felt another, stronger instinct rise up within her: curiosity. It was the same pull that she'd felt when she spotted the lone kitten in the garden the other day, or the feeling she always got when she picked up a new book.

She opened her door carefully and crept out into the upstairs hallway. Family portraits on the wall glared down at her, and the floorboards creaked beneath her feet. Fanny felt that she must look like a ghost, gliding down the winding staircase and through the dark in her pale nightdress.

When she reached the bottom of the stairs, Fanny walked slowly toward the basement door. She wondered what might be waiting for her beneath the ground—and whether it was something sinister. Was there a reason that her mother tried to keep this from her?

Fanny paused with her hand upon the doorknob. She thought of turning back around, fleeing up the stairs and into the safety of her bed again.

But then Fanny thought back to her diary, the empty pages that lay within, and the writer's block that she encountered every time she tried to write. Maybe, she willed herself to believe, this could be a new story.

And with that, Fanny turned the doorknob.

The basement steps plunged into pure darkness. Fanny made her way down, watching her step, and holding her lamp out in front of her. The air became cooler and cooler as she walked beneath the ground level. The scent of the rain seeped through the walls down here, and the sound of the storm echoed through the floorboards above.

The basement floor was made of earth and stone. Old pieces of kitchenware and crates sat on the ground, coated in dust. Fanny looked around, trying desperately to see in the dark, holding the lamp in front of her. Nobody appeared to be there.

"Hello?" she whispered.

There was no response.

"My name is Fanny Seward," she said. "I live upstairs."

Still, there was no response. Fanny felt silly, talking to herself here in the dark. And she was also starting to feel cold. Disappointed, Fanny turned around, back toward the stairs.

But then, she heard a voice.

“You are a Seward?” the voice asked.

A chill went down Fanny’s spine. She abruptly realized that she was alone, in the dark, with a faceless stranger.

Backing up, and still holding the lamp out in front of her, Fanny said in a shaking voice, “Yes. I’m the Seward’s daughter.”

A quiet moment passed. Suddenly, a person began to emerge from the darkness. She could see the faint outline of a dark brown face, and a body clothed in tattered fabric. Soon, Fanny could make out a man standing before her, cautiously keeping his distance. She could sense fear in his eyes.

“I’m Ed,” he said, his voice hoarse.

Fanny wasn’t quite sure what to say. After regaining her voice, she whispered, “Hello, Ed.”

Ed offered a slight smile. Then, he turned to the side and spoke into the darkness behind him: “Maggie, she’s a Seward. It’s alright.”

Then, a young woman stepped into the lamplight. Fanny noticed a large bruise on the side of her face, visible upon her dark skin.

Fanny suddenly felt concerned for the couple; they appeared timid and tired. “Are you alright?” Fanny asked them. “Can I help you?”

Maggie smiled. “You are helping us more than you know, dear.”

Fanny shook her head. “How?” she asked. She was frozen still—she had never before seen two people who looked so worn.

“You—your house—it is a stop on the Railroad,” Ed said.

“What railroad?” Fanny asked, lost.

“*The Railroad*,” Ed said. “The Underground Railroad. We are on our way to freedom.”

Something clicked in Fanny’s head: these two people were from the South. They were enslaved people—runaway slaves.

Maggie nodded. “We’ve been traveling for many weeks, and have almost made it to Canada,” she said. “Your mama and sister said that we are in New York, and very close.”

“You’ve talked to my mother?” Fanny asked. “And Jenny?”

“Yes, they’ve been so nice to us,” said Ed. “We wanted to leave tonight, but the storm started... so we’re going tomorrow.”

Fanny could not believe that Jenny hadn’t told her about this—but she would speak to her later about it.

“So...” Fanny said, trying to understand, “you’ve been hiding down here? You’re trying to escape slavery?”

Ed and Maggie nodded.

“Where are you going next?” she asked.

“North,” said Maggie. “We’ll find another place. Your mama says there’s another stop close to here. We will have to wait and see.”

“Are there many more of you?” asked Fanny.

“Oh, yes,” said Ed. “Hundreds. We want to escape to safety with our families. We want to earn freedom, and then help fight. Lincoln can’t do it without us.”

Fanny was taken aback. “What do you mean?” she asked. And then, after a pause, she added, “What do you think of President Lincoln?”

“We didn’t vote for Lincoln,” Maggie said.

“Lincoln says he wants to stop the spread of slavery,” said Ed. “But we don’t know if we can trust him. So, it’s up to us to get our freedom.”

At these words, Fanny was unsure how to feel.

“I have heard stories, though,” Maggie continued, sensing her slight disappointment. “Stories of the President visiting plantations, and telling our people that we will soon have freedom. My friend says she saw him, disguised as a peddler. He told her, ‘You will soon be free. Stay strong.’”

“We don’t know if the stories are true,” Ed added, “but he has given us hope.”

“Yes,” Maggie said. “He says he wants a country where all are free. I hope he is telling the truth. But no matter what, we know it is time to save ourselves.”

Fanny nodded. She remembered what Martha Coffin Wright had said earlier in the parlor. “It wouldn’t be a true Union unless we all have the freedom and ability to build it together,” she said.

“Right,” Maggie said.

A silence fell between the three of them, the sound of rain above puncturing it only slightly. Fanny thought about President Lincoln: nobody seemed to know what exactly he did, or what his motivations were. But for Ed and Maggie, at the very least, he was a symbol—a symbol of hope, and freedom.

Finally, Ed spoke again.

“Thank you for giving us a place to stay these past few nights,” he said. “It is very brave of your family.”

But Fanny shook her head. “Don’t thank me,” she said. “You are the brave ones.”

The pair smiled at her and nodded their heads. Then, without another word, they walked back into the safety of the darkness, and out of sight. Fanny walked back upstairs, closing the basement door gingerly behind her.

Fanny heard the sound of soft, swift footsteps padding down the main staircase above her. Shining her lantern up, she saw Jenny, white-faced and scared.

“What are you doing?” Jenny whispered harshly when she reached the bottom of the stairs. “Were you—what did you—?” She glanced at the basement door.

“Jenny, don’t worry,” Fanny said hushedly. “I won’t tell anyone.”

Jenny breathed heavily. “I’m sorry I didn’t tell you, Fan,” she said. “But really, you can’t—”

“I won’t,” Fanny said. “I won’t even write about it.”

This, apparently, calmed Jenny’s nerves. She took Fanny into a tight hug, and then the sisters-in-law journeyed back up the stairs together, toward bed.