

Door of No Return: Oceans of Trouble, Rivers of Hope in Sharon M. Draper's 'Copper Sun'

The word 'water' occurs more than 100 times in Sharon M. Draper's *Copper Sun*, and the word 'river' occurs over 50 times. *Copper Sun* is a well-researched work of historical fiction that follows the harrowing journey of the protagonist, Amari, an African teenager, from her Ghanaian village to a South Carolina plantation in America.

This paper explores the pathways to enslavement and the pathways to freedom that water posed for Africans during the Atlantic slave trade and during slavery in the Americas in colonial times within this novel. The positive and negative impacts that water have on Amari and others who are enslaved on this plantation are discussed. This includes Amari and others from her African village who were forced onto ships to endure the Middle Passage as well as enslaved blacks already residing on the plantation, such as Tidbit being used as alligator bait.

The portion of the novel relating the horrors of the Middle Passage is juxtaposed with the art of Tom Feelings in his 1995 work titled *Middle Passage: White Ships, Black Cargo*. This juxtaposition is fitting because Tom Feelings talked about his own "psychological and spiritual journey" with his personal, cultural, and artistic history that led him to travel the African diaspora – finally moving to Ghana in 1964 for two years – and ultimately to creating this 1996 Coretta Scott King Illustrator Award Winner (Feelings, 1995, author note). Written more than ten years before *Copper Sun*, Feelings captured in pictures what Draper eloquently described in words as Amari's experience crossing the Atlantic Ocean aboard the "ship of death" (Draper, 2006, Ch. 7).

I use textual analysis to make interpretations about Draper's use of water in *Copper Sun* and make specific comparisons to Feelings' artwork to portray the Middle Passage as a waterway to the attempted destruction of the African's mind, body, and spirit. Finally, I examine Draper's use of water as a flowing river of hope in the promise of freedom and newness of being as Amari and Polly finally experience when they escape to Fort Mose in Florida.