



**Classroom Guide for
ETCHED IN CLAY:
The Life of Dave, Enslaved Potter
and Poet
written and illustrated by
Andrea Cheng**

Reading Level

* Reading Level: Grade 4-7

Interest Level: Grades 4-12

Guided Reading Level: T

*Reading level based on the Dale-Chall Readability Formula

Themes

Art (Pottery), Slavery, Power of Reading and Writing, Freedom of Expression, Overcoming Obstacles, Self Esteem/Identity, Creative Inspiration, Poetry, United States and African American History

Synopsis

Sometime before 1818, an enslaved young man named Dave was brought to Edgefield, in the heart of South Carolina's pottery-producing area. From the time he was first taught to turn a potter's wheel, Dave showed exceptional natural talent. Soon he was creating pieces of great beauty and often massive size. He also learned to read and write, even though South Carolina had laws prohibiting slave literacy. And then Dave did something even more daring: he began to sign his jars and carve many of them with sayings and short poems that reflected his daily life and experiences. With these courageous acts, Dave quietly protested the brutality of slavery and asserted his humanity.

This evocative portrait of Dave is as memorable as one of his jars. Through simple yet powerful poetry, including some of Dave's inscriptions, we learn his extraordinary story of perseverance, creative inspiration, and hope. Today Dave's legacy lives on in the artistry of his pottery, in his intriguing words, and as a reminder of the dignity and resilience of the human spirit. Dave is considered to be a master craftsman whose jars are among the most sought-after pieces of Edgefield pottery.

Background

Etched in Clay is a biography of Dave the Potter, told as historical fiction. The story is true to the known facts of Dave's life, although there are some discrepancies among sources about dates and details. Dave's life is related as a collection of free verse poems, with some imagined scenes, people, thoughts and dialogue. These parts of the story are dramatic extensions of historically documented events and interactions.

Historical records show that the first documentation of ownership of the enslaved young man known as Dave is a mortgage agreement dated June 13, 1818. This agreement indicates that Dave was about seventeen years old and was owned by Harvey Drake. Most likely, Drake purchased Dave at a slave auction in Augusta, Georgia, prior to 1818 and took him to Pottersville, a village outside Edgefield, South Carolina, where Drake and his uncles—the Landrum brothers—had a stoneware pottery business. Eventually, Dave was taught how to make pots, jars, and jugs on a potter's wheel, fire them and glaze them using the Landrum's famous alkaline glazes. Soon Dave became one of the best potters in the Edgefield district.

BEFORE READING

Prereading Focus Questions

Before introducing the book to students, you may wish to develop background information and promote anticipation by posing questions such as the following:

1. What was life like for enslaved men and women who lived in the southern part of the United States during the first half of the 1800s? Have you read any nonfiction or historical fiction materials about this time period in US history? What connections can you make to the premise of the story you are about to read?
2. Dave's story is told in verse. How is reading a novel in verse different than reading a novel in prose? How do you think this shift in structure will affect the way you read the story?
3. What is the difference between a right and a privilege? Do you think learning to read and write is a right or a privilege? Why do you think so?

Exploring the Book

Read and talk about the title of the book. Ask students what they think the title means. How does the main title, *Etched in Clay*, relate to the illustration on the front cover?

Read the poem excerpt on the back cover. Ask students who they think is narrating this poem. Talk about the significance of these words from the narrator: "I am not afraid to write on a jar."

Take students on a book walk and draw attention to the following parts of the book: title page, dedication, contents, historical note, map, list of narrators and characters, woodcut illustrations, and backmatter (afterword, note about Edgefield pottery, Dave's inscriptions, author's note, acknowledgments, and author's sources). Point out that students may want to refer to the map and list of narrators and characters to help them keep track of places and people as they read the book.

Setting a Purpose for Reading

Have students read to find out about the life of Dave, the times in which he lived, why he might be considered an unusual person, and why the book is entitled *Etched in Clay*.

Vocabulary

The story contains several descriptive words, historical phrases, and regionally specific nouns. Have students work with some or all of these words and phrases, which may be unfamiliar to them. Talk about the vocabulary below, and then ask students to try and find a synonym for each word or phrase that is more like the words we use today.

love of drink	sound of mind	prudent	Negro
mixing slip	porcelain	glazes	jumping the broomstick
unbrick	wares	Scriptures	salvation
forewarned	magnanimous	sagacity	bondage
shackles	corporosity	incivility	compressibility
submission	nullifier	tariffs	blundering
Unionist	anti-literacy	shards	general assembly
tan your hide	keg of rum	bogs	lamentable
philanthropic	vulnerable	sullen	man without scruples
trustee	mammoth	Confederate	repentance

AFTER READING

Discussion Questions

After students have read the book, use these or similar questions to generate discussion, enhance comprehension, and develop appreciation for the content. Encourage students to refer to passages and woodcuts in the book to support their responses.

Literal Comprehension

1. Who are the different historical persons you meet in this story? What different timeframes and events are covered? How did you keep the speakers and the timeframes straight as you read?
2. Who is Harvey Drake? What is he like? How would you describe him?
3. Who is Eliza? What is her relationship to Dave? How do you know?
4. How do Dave and Eliza feel about being separated? What does this tell you about their relationship? How does Harvey Drake feel about Eliza's departure? What does this tell you about Drake?
5. Describe the process of firing the jars and pots Dave made.
6. How does Dave feel about the pots and jars he made? How do you know?
7. How does Sarah Drake feel about slavery? About religion? What conflict do her feelings present to her?
8. On page 37, read the closing sentence of the poem "The Blue Back Speller." What does this sentence tell you about Dave?
9. What is *The Edgefield Hive*? Why is Dave enlisted by Dr. Landrum to help with *The Hive*?

10. Is Dr. Landrum a Unionist or a Nullifier? What role does he play in this political conflict? Explain each side's position.
11. In "Words and Verses" on page 52, Dave says, "All day long/I'm turning pots and jars/on the potter's wheel/while my words and verses/swirl in my head./But what's a verse/if it can't be read?" What does this passage tell you about Dave? His character? His desires?
12. What does Harvey Drake's death mean for Dave? What does Dave fear? Cite evidence from the text to support your answers.
13. Who purchases Dave after Drake's death? What parts of Dave's life remain the same? What parts change?
14. Reread the poem "On the Train Tracks" on page 71. Who is the man on the tracks? How do you know?
15. How is Henry Simkins helpful to Dave?
16. After Rev. John Landrum dies, what happens to Dave? How does Dave feel about his fate? How does Lewis Miles feel? Who purchases Dave?
17. How does Benjamin Franklin Landrum view Dave? How is this different than how Lewis Miles views Dave?

Extension/Higher Level Thinking
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1. On page 7 in the poem "Augusta Auction," Harvey Drake describes the slaves at auction as follows: "The Negro mothers wail/while their children cling to them/like melons to their vines." Cheng's passage serves two purposes, one descriptive and one historical/sociological. Discuss the dual meanings of the image she creates.
2. Why do you think Cheng selected the title "Dangerous Talent" for the poem on page 14? Why is Harvey Drake concerned about Dave's talent? Where else in the book do you see Harvey Drake express a similar sentiment about Dave and his talent? What does this concern tell us about Harvey Drake?
3. Read the poem "Jumping the Broomstick," which starts on page 15, and then the poem "Departure" on page 23. How are the vows that Eliza and Dave take different from traditional wedding vows most people take today? What can you infer about the status of enslaved people and the way their owners viewed their marriages? How do you feel about these views? Why?
4. Why does Cheng place the poem "Brilliant Glazes" (page 24) right after the poem "Departure"? What purpose does this juxtaposition of focus and images serve?
5. Learning to read and write is important to Dave. What do possessing these skills mean to him? What does this desire to be educated tell you about Dave's character?

6. Reread the poem "A New Husband," starting on page 47. How are the life experiences of Dave and Lydia similar? What benefit does Lydia see to marrying Dave? Why?
7. How does Dave feel about Nat Turner? What acts of rebellion does Dave commit? Why?
8. What does Dave mean when he says on page 76, "How can it be/that I feel pain/in a leg/that is gone?"
9. When does Dave feel like a man? When does he feel he is treated like less than a man? Cite evidence from the poems to support your answers.
10. On page 82, at the end of "Our Legacy," Rev. John Landrum says "The Landrum brothers/will remain/a family of potters." How is this statement ironic?
11. How is Lewis Miles different from Harvey Drake and Dr. Landrum in his treatment of and relationship with Dave? Cite evidence from the poems to support your answers.
12. Why does Dave choose to keep writing on his pots and jars after Lewis Miles tells him not to?
13. Who is Ann? What choices does she make? Why? Do you agree or disagree with her choices? Why?
14. On page 124, at the end of the poem "What Did I Expect," Lewis Miles say "This moment/does not/in any way/belong to me." What does he mean by that?
15. Why does Dave choose Drake as his last name? If you were Dave, what name would you have chosen? Why?
16. How does Cheng end Dave's story? Why do you think she ended it this way? Did you like this ending? Why or why not?

Literature Circles

If you use literature circles during reading time, students might find the following suggestions helpful in focusing on the different roles of the group members.

- The **Questioner** might use questions similar to the ones in the Discussion Question section of this guide.
- The **Passage Locator** might look for lines in the poems that show the effect of one or more of the following slavery-related themes in Dave's life: separation, hope, despair, literacy.
- The **Illustrator** might create illustrations for some of the poems that are not accompanied by woodcuts in the book.
- The **Connector** might look for information about other ways enslaved people found to educate themselves.

- The **Summarizer** might provide a brief summary of the group's reading and discussion points for each meeting.
The **Investigator** might look for additional information about the historical time period during which the story takes place.

There are many resource books available with more information about organizing and implementing literature circles. Three such books you may wish to refer to are: GETTING STARTED WITH LITERATURE CIRCLES by Katherine L. Schlick Noe and Nancy J. Johnson (Christopher-Gordon, 1999), LITERATURE CIRCLES: VOICE AND CHOICE IN BOOK CLUBS AND READING GROUPS by Harvey Daniels (Stenhouse, 2002), and LITERATURE CIRCLES RESOURCE GUIDE by Bonnie Campbell Hill, Katherine L. Schlick Noe, and Nancy J. Johnson (Christopher-Gordon, 2000).

Reader's Response

Use the following questions and writing activities to help students practice active reading and personalize their responses to the book. Suggest that students respond in reader's journals, essays, or oral discussion. You may also want to set aside time for students to share and discuss their written work, if they wish to.

1. The themes of possession and ownership come up multiple times: Drake possessing Dave; Dave and Eliza possessing each other in marriage; Dr. Landrum and Dave taking ownership of the pots and jars created; Dave owning his name and thoughts and being able to express them in writing; and so on. Encourage students to discuss who possesses/takes ownership of what over the course of the story.
2. Which parts of the story did you connect to the most? Why? What are the most positive parts of the story? What are the least positive? Why do you think so?
3. Choose two characters in the story. Compare and contrast their views on slave ownership. Cite evidence/passages from the poems to support your answer.
4. Harvey Drake sees talent and literacy as dangerous. Is talent power? Is knowledge power? Why do you think so?
5. Before Dr. Landrum departs for Columbia, he says to Dave: "a man must stand up/for what he thinks is right/even when/he stands alone." What does this statement tell you about Dr. Landrum's character? How might behaving in this way play out in today's world? If you can, tell how someone you know or are aware of who has stood up for what he or she thinks is right.
6. Is *Etched in Clay* a good title for the book? Why do you think so? Try to come up with three ways in which the phrase "etched in clay" is meaningful in the story.
7. Have students write a book recommendation for this story explaining why they would or would not recommend this book to other students.

ELL Teaching Strategies

These strategies might be helpful to use with students who are English language learners.

1. Assign ELL students to read the poems aloud with strong English readers/speakers.

2. Have each student write three questions about the poems. Then let students pair up and discuss the answers to the questions.
3. Depending on students' level of English proficiency, after the first reading have students work in pairs to retell either the plot of the story or key details. Then ask students to write a short summary, synopsis, or opinion about what they have read.
4. Have students give a short talk about what they admire about the main character or other central figure in the story.

INTERDISCIPLINARY ACTIVITIES

Use some of the following activities to help students integrate their reading experiences with other curriculum areas.

Language Arts

1. The various people who owned Dave had different personalities and differing relationships with their slaves. Have students list Dave's owners (for help, see pages xiv–xv of the book) and come up with at least three adjectives to describe each person. Then have students write a sentence or two describing the personality and character of each person.
2. Review metaphors and similes with students. (A metaphor is a figure of speech in which a word or phrase meaning one kind of object or idea is used in place of another to suggest a similarity between them, and a simile is a figure of speech in which things different in kind or quality are compared by the use of the word *like* or *as*.) Have students search through the poems for both metaphors and similes, and record them on the chalkboard. Have students talk about how using these figures of speech enhance the impact and power of the poems. Students may try rewriting the metaphors and similes in non-figurative language to help them see the difference. For example, "my hands are ice" vs. "my hands are very cold."

Social Studies

1. Have students plot the major events in the story along a timeline covering the years 1810 to 1870. Then have student research historical events in North Carolina during the same time period and plot them along the timeline. Discuss how the history and politics of North Carolina were woven into Dave's life.
2. Research other important African Americas from the Civil War era, such as Robert Smalls, Sojourner Truth, Harriet Tubman, Nat Turner, and Frederick Douglass. Compare and contrast their stories, struggles, and accomplishments with those of Dave.
3. Let interested students research the institution of slavery in the United States, looking at why most Southerners favored slavery and why most Northerners did not. Students may present their findings in a comparison chart or pro-and-con list.

Social Studies/Economics

Ask students to research the economy of the pre- and post-Civil War South. How did slavery affect/contribute to the economy of the slave states? Which industries relied on slave labor? How were these industries impacted when slavery was abolished?

Art

Have students use clay to create their own jars or pots and then inscribe their own words, phrases, or short poems on them before the clay dries. If facilities with a potter's wheel, glaze, and a kiln are available, try to arrange for students to have some basic instruction in pottery-making and then glaze and fire their pots. Students may also wish to create a display of their finished pottery.

About the Author and Illustrator

Andrea Cheng is the author of several critically acclaimed books for young readers, ranging from picture books to young adult novels. Her works for Lee & Low include *Only One Year*, a Parents' Choice recommended title; *Shanghai Messenger*, a Bank Street College Best Children's Book of the Year selection; and *Grandfather Counts*, a Reading Rainbow book. Cheng was inspired to write *Etched in Clay* by Dave's heroism and creative struggle, and by their shared affinity for creating pottery and poetry. When not writing or involved in other artistic pursuits, Cheng teaches English as a Second Language at a community college. Cheng and her husband live in Cincinnati, Ohio. They have three grown children. You can find her online at andreacheng.com.

Book Information

\$17.95 HARDCOVER

978-1-60060-4-515

160 pages, 5 1/4 x 8 1/4

Reading Level: Grade 4-7

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RESOURCES ON THE WEB

Learn more about *Etched in Clay* at:

<http://www.leeandlow.com/books/>

488/hc/etched_in_clay_the_life_of_dave_enlaved_potter_and_poet

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