



COMMON CORE CURRICULUM GUIDE TO

Sulwe

LUPITA NYONG'O

ILLUSTRATED BY VASHTI HARRISON

Sulwe

By Lupita Nyong'o

Illustrated by Vashti Harrison

HC: 9781534425361 | EB: 9781534425378

BACKGROUND/SUMMARY

In *Sulwe's* family, everyone's skin is a different shade, but Sulwe is the only one with skin as dark as the midnight sky. At school, her classmates call her hurtful names because of her skin color, causing Sulwe to try almost anything to lighten it. But when none of her attempts work and even a talk with Mama can't lift her spirits, it's the magical storytelling of a shooting star that reveals the beauty in the blackest of nights and the darkest of people. Together, author Nyong'o's compelling narrative and Harrison's emotionally charged illustrations tell a story of a Black girl's journey toward self-love that will resonate with everyone who has ever felt different or out of place.

DISCUSSION QUESTIONS/ACTIVITIES

Key Ideas and Details

The Common Core State Standards consider one's ability to ask and answer questions about a text (RL K.1–2.1), retell stories and express understanding of the central message (RL K.2–2.2), and describe characters, settings, event sequence, and challenges using key details (RL K.3–3.3) The following questions engage these standards.

1. What is the main conflict in this story?
 - How does this conflict make Sulwe feel in the beginning of the book?
 - How is the conflict resolved? What evidence do you find to show that Sulwe's feelings have changed?
2. Based on what you've read, do you feel that *Sulwe* is a good book title for this story? Explain your answer.



3. Sulwe's family members have skin colors that look like the sky throughout the day. Mama is the color of dawn, or sunrise; Baba is the color of dusk, or the sunset. What times of day do Mich and Sulwe represent? Why do you think the author chose a different skin color for each member of Sulwe's family?
4. The shooting star tells Sulwe the story of Night and Day, and how special and important each sister was to the world. Why do you think this story is so important for Sulwe to hear? Explain your answer. With a partner, take turns sharing what makes you special and important to the world.
5. Sulwe's mama tells her that real beauty begins with "*how you see yourself*, not how others see you." What do you think this means? What does real beauty mean to you?
6. Sulwe dreams of being lighter-skinned so that she can make real friends, like her sister, Mich. Why do you think Sulwe believes she must have lighter skin in order to make friends? What advice would you give to Sulwe? Explain your answers.

CRAFT AND STRUCTURE

To learn about craft and structure in literature, the Common Core State Standards ask us to consider the many ways that language is used to convey emotion or appeal to our senses (RL K.4–3.4); to describe the structure of a story including identification of beginning, middle, and ending actions (RL K.5–3.5); and to pay attention to shifting points of view in characters and narration (RL K.6–3.6). The following discussion questions and activities engage these standards.

7. **Language Structure and Form.** The author uses different techniques to tell the story of Sulwe in a way that is appealing and interesting to readers. One of these techniques is poetry.



Poetry is a type of writing that expresses great emotion, and uses rhythm and distinct style to do so. While some poems may rhyme, not all do! In this book, the author uses poetry to write Sulwe’s prayer.

Read a section from the prayer below, and explore how this technique makes you think and feel about Sulwe’s unhappiness with her skin color.

“I want to be beautiful,
not just to pretend.
I want to have daylight.
I want to have friends.”

- a. **Rhyme.** Some of the words in this poem rhyme, or have similar endings. An example of words that rhyme are “moon” and “soon.” Which words in this section of the poem rhyme? How does the rhyme impact the way you read the poem? Think about intonation and pacing.

- b. **Repetition.** In three of the four lines above, Sulwe begins with the phrase “I want.” When a poet reuses words and phrases, it is called *repetition*. Why do you think Sulwe says “I want” over and over again? What does that illustrate about the way she’s feeling?

- c. **Try It Out!** Like Sulwe, you can use poetry to express feelings and desires. Try writing a short poem of your own using rhyme and repetition. You might respond to Sulwe’s prayer, or write about something completely different and original.

INTEGRATION OF KNOWLEDGE AND IDEAS

To learn about the integration of knowledge and ideas, the Common Core State Standards asks students to use both words and illustrations in a text to demonstrate understanding (RL K.7–3.7 & K.9–3.9). Additionally, students are asked to make relevant connections and comparisons to other stories and texts by different authors and/or from different cultures. The following discussion questions and activities consider the goals and outcomes of this strand.

8. **Sequencing and Summary.** One of the best parts about stories is that we can share them with others. Use the space below to help you retell the story of Sulwe for a family member or friend. Draw an image in the blocks, and place your text underneath. (see “Learning About Feelings and Relationships Through Illustrations” reproducible at end of guide.)



9. **Compare and Contrast.** Sometimes, stories we read can remind us of other stories and experiences that are either alike or different. Look closely at this illustration from the story of Night and Day.

Does this story remind you of any other stories you have heard before? How is it similar and different? How does hearing this story impact Sulwe’s view of herself and her own life?

WRITING

The Common Core State Standards emphasize informative and narrative writing in the primary grades. The writing experiences below provide opportunities for children to offer their opinion (W.K.1–W.3.1), accurately sequence narrative story events (W.K.3–W.3.3), and produce and share their writing (W.K.3.6–W.3.6).

10. **Sequencing and Summary.** One of the best parts about stories is that we can share them with others. (see “Sequencing and Summary” reproducible at end of guide.)
11. **Narrative Writing.** Continue the book by writing what might have happened when Sulwe runs into the children who called her names at school. What might she have said to them after being reminded of her brightness? How might they have responded?
12. **Opinion.** At the end of the story, Sulwe understands that she is beautiful inside and out. Write about what makes you or someone you know beautiful in all ways.

EXTENDING THE EXPERIENCE OF READING THE STORY

Read other books similar to *Sulwe*:

- *Skin Again* by Bell Hooks
- *Dancing in the Wings* by Debbie Allen
- *Each Kindness* by Jacqueline Woodson
- *All the Colors We Are* by Katie Kissinger
- *Julián Is a Mermaid* by Jessica Love
- *The Invisible Boy* by Trudy Ludwig
- *You’re Here for a Reason* by Nancy Tillman
- *The Name Jar* by Yangsook Choi

Read other books written and/or illustrated by Vashti Harrison:

- *Festival of Colors* by Kabir Sehgal and Surishtha Sehgal
- *Hair Love* by Matthew Cherry
- *Little Leaders: Bold Women in Black History* by Vashti Harrison



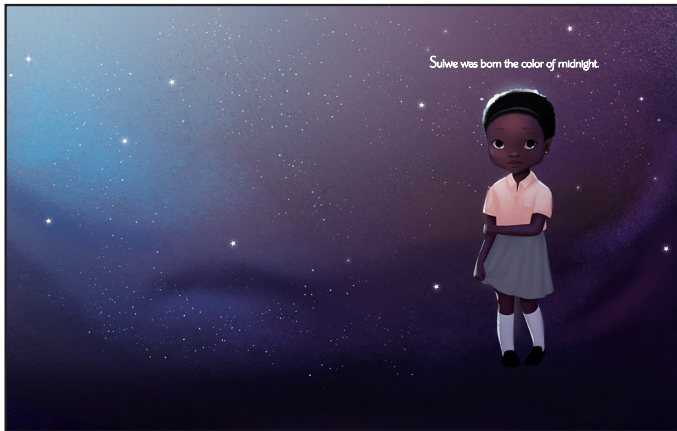
Sulwe

LUPITA NYONG'O
ILLUSTRATED BY VASHTI HARRISON

Learning About Feelings and Relationships Through Illustrations

Carefully examine the words and pictures in each of the double-page spreads below to think about how the characters' feelings about skin color and appearance are shown and expressed. Then answer the following questions:

a. In the book's opening illustration, we are introduced to Sulwe.



What do the *words* in this picture tell us about Sulwe?

What do the *illustrations* in this picture tell us about Sulwe?

b. Here we see Sulwe alongside her family.



What do the *words* tell us about Sulwe and her family? Think about each character pictured.

What do the *illustrations* tell us about Sulwe and her family? Think about each character pictured.

Thinking about both the words and illustrations in the two spreads above, what do you think Sulwe is feeling at this point in the story?



Sulwe

LUPITA NYONG'O
ILLUSTRATED BY VASHTI HARRISON

Sequencing and Summary

Use the space below to help you retell the story of Sulwe for a family member or friend.
Draw an image in the blocks, and place your text underneath.

