

Reading Strategy (page 331)

Understanding Historical Context

Three Spirituals

Historical context refers to the time period, the major events, and the other details surrounding the lives of the author of a work and/or its characters. Knowing what types of lives the singers of the spirituals led helps give the reader a deeper understanding of the meanings of their songs.

ACTIVITY

Directions On the following chart, collect your thoughts about the purpose of the spirituals in the lives of their singers. In the first column, list the biblical references in the song. In the second column, explain the reference. In the third column, use your knowledge of the historical context to explain how the biblical reference could also apply to the singers.

Swing Low, Sweet Chariot

Biblical Reference	Literal Explanation	How Reference Applies to Singers
"I looked over Jordan"	1.	The singers were slaves. In the song, they look toward freedom.
"A band of angels coming after me"	Angels are the spirits that live closest to God in the Bible.	2.
3.	Heaven is where Christians believe their spirits will live after death.	4.

Active Reading Graphic Organizer

Ask your teacher for a copy of the Three-Column Table Graphic Organizer, and use it to analyze how the historical context helps reveal the meaning of the songs and the enslaved people's yearning for freedom.