



**OwlTeacher**  
**Teaching with Movies & Literature**

**AMISTAD**

**Good for the following school subjects:**

- ✓ World History
- ✓ American History
- ✓ African History
- ✓ African American History
- ✓ Studies on Slavery
- ✓ Studies on the Middle Passage
- ✓ Studies on John Adams
- ✓ History of the American Judicial System
- ✓ Sociology

Directed by Steven Spielberg  
1997; Rated R (violence); Drama; 155 minutes; Color;  
Available from [www.OwlTeacher.com](http://www.OwlTeacher.com) bookstore

**Synopsis:** Off the coast of Cuba on a slave ship named La Amistad, fifty three Africans, led by Cinque, rise up against their captors in a violent, bloody struggle. They break free of their shackles and take control of the ship. The year is 1839. Their only goal is to return to Africa and reclaim their freedom. The Africans are at the mercy of the only two surviving crew members to guide them back to Africa. Two months later, while in American waters, La Amistad is captured by an American naval ship. The Africans are taken to America and put on trial for the murder of the crew members. President Martin Van Buren is looking to be reelected and is thus willing to sacrifice the Africans to appease Southern votes. However, former President John Adams steps out of retirement to fight for the cause of the Africans in the Supreme Court. This case goes down in history as one to challenge the very structure of the American legal system. The nation is divided: on one hand you have abolitionists and human rights activists and on the other you have slave owners, politicians with political interests, and the South. Add to the mix the fact that the La Amistad was a Spanish ship sailing for Spain and you have Queen Isabella of Spain claiming to own them as well. For the Africans on trial, however, it is only a matter a freedom, not political ideologies. That is all they want: the freedom that every human being has a right to.

**Educational Benefits of this movie:** This film offers a thorough background on attitudes in early America regarding slavery. It is also excellent in learning about the Middle Passage and the American legal system. Debate classes could also use this film as a topic to discuss and debate. This movie is based on actual events and is very accurate in its portrayal of the story.

**Historical Background:** The Middle Passage is the term used to define the time that Africans spent in slave ships during the crossing of the Atlantic Ocean. These captured slaves were stripped naked, shaved clean, and herded onto the ships like

cattle. There, they were tightly sardined so to fit as many as possible in order for money to be saved and fewer trips needed. They were forced to lie on their backs with their knees bent or they were packed sideways in the "spooning" position. They were unable to change positions throughout the entire journey. The slaves were fed twice a day and were flogged if they did not eat "properly", whatever that meant. Many deaths occurred before, during, and after the journey. Many of the deaths while on the ship occurred because of highly dangerous diseases such as dysentery, smallpox, and measles. While on the ships, the slaves were the property of many different factions and were branded in order to be identifiable.

### Map Activity:

On a [blank map of the Triangular Trade](#), illustrate and label the sea journey/route that the La Amistad captives made from Africa via Cuba to the coast of Long Island in the United States of America where they ended up. On the map make sure you label the following as well:

- ✓ West Africa (lightly shaded in your choice of color & labeled)
- ✓ Cuba (lightly shaded in your choice of color & labeled)
- ✓ The Thirteen British Colonies (lightly shaded in your choice of color & labeled)
- ✓ Long Island, New York (lightly shaded in your choice of color & labeled)
- ✓ The West Indies (lightly shaded in your choice of color & labeled)
- ✓ Great Britain (lightly shaded in your choice of color & labeled)
- ✓ A color coded key for your map

### Study Questions:

1. When Cinque calls upon his ancestors to come and help him in the hearing of the Supreme Court, he states that he was "the whole reason they have existed at all." What do you think he means by this?
2. What did the Spanish Ambassador imply when he told President Van Buren "*If you cannot rule the courts, you cannot rule?*"
3. President Van Buren's answer to this was, "*It's the independence of our courts that keeps us free.*" What do you think of this statement and does the President act on it?
4. The abolitionists are portrayed in an unflattering light in this movie. They are seen as fanatical zealots and the Africans look at the religious singers as miserably unhappy people who only sing and pray when action is what is needed. Do you agree with these comments? Why or why not?
5. Explain what you see the abolitionists doing in this film with the concept of "bearing witness."



6. Who acted bravely in this film? What were their courageous acts? Give specific examples from the film to prove your point.

7. Do you think that the Africans on La Amistad should have dealt peacefully with their anger or did they do the ethical thing in revolting even if that meant killing most members of the crew? Be specific.

**Project:**

Research the effect that the slave trade within Africa had on the social and economic development of the countries of East and West Africa. Likewise research the effect that the slave trade from Africa had on the social and economic development of the Thirteen British colonies. Create a visual representation of your research findings; one side of your visual devoted to Africa and the other to the colonies. Compare and contrast the two effects on your visual. Be creative & cite the sources you used.