

Frederick Douglass: Chapter One analysis

1. Douglass speaks of being “deprived of the same privilege” as white children. What was this privilege?
2. Who is most likely Douglass’s father?
3. Describe Douglass’s relationship with his mother.
4. What was the penalty if a field hand did not arrive in the field at sunrise?
5. If a slave owner fathers a child by one of his slaves, what does the law say will happen to the baby?
6. Explain how the “mulatto” children “must” be treated by their master/father.
7. Describe the type of person Captain Anthony was.
8. What did Aunt Hester do to “deserve” being whipped?
9. Douglass writes of Capt. Anthony, “Had he been a man of pure morals himself, he might have been thought interested in protecting the innocence of my aunt; but those who knew him will not suspect him of any such virtue.” What does Douglass imply was Capt. Anthony’s real purpose was for treating Hester so harshly?

"He was a cruel man, hardened by a long life of slaveholding. He would at times seem to take great pleasure in whipping a slave. I have often been awakened at the dawn of day by the most heart-rending shrieks of an old aunt of mine, whom he used to tie up to a joist, and whip upon her naked back till she was literally covered with blood. No words, no tears, no prayers, from his gory victim, seemed to move his iron heart from its bloody purpose. The louder she screamed, the harder he whipped; and where the blood ran fastest, there he whipped the longest. He would whip her to make her scream, and whip her to make her hush; and not until overcome by fatigue, would he cease to swing the blood-clotted cowskin. I remember the first time I ever witnessed this horrible exhibition. I was quite a child, but I well remember it. I never shall forget it whilst I remember anything. It was the first of a long series of such outrages, of which I was doomed to be a witness and a participant. It struck me with awful force. It was the blood-stained gate, the entrance to the hell of slavery, through which I was about to pass. It was a most terrible spectacle. I wish I could commit to paper the feelings with which I beheld it."

10. What is Douglass trying to accomplish in this passage? What is his purpose (what do all of the details add up to)?
11. How does he accomplish it? Explain his use of rhetoric.

Frederick Douglass: Chapter Two Slave Spiritual Analysis

12. Why did the other slaves admire Peter, Isaac, Rich and Jake?
13. What was the fate of a slave once he/she went to the home plantation?
14. What items were the slaves given on allowance-day?
15. How did Mr. Severe make the fields “fields of blood and blasphemy”?
16. What does Douglass compare to the pride felt by being elected to the American Congress?

17. What is it that Douglass describes as “deepening his hatred of slavery and quickening his sympathies for his brothers in bonds”?
18. How do outsiders view the answer to the question #6?
19. What did the slave-owners think the slaves’ singing meant?
20. Why did the slaves actually sing?
21. How does Douglass describe the songs or spirituals that the slaves would sing?

"The slaves selected to go to the Great House Farm, for the monthly allowance for themselves and their fellow-slaves, were peculiarly enthusiastic. While on their way, they would make the dense old woods, for miles around, reverberate with their wild songs, revealing at once the highest joy and the deepest sadness. They would compose and sing as they went along, consulting neither time nor tune. The thought that came up, came out-if not in the word, in the sound;--and as frequently in the one as in the other. They would sometimes sing the most pathetic sentiment in the most rapturous tone, and the most rapturous sentiment in the most pathetic tone. Into all of their songs they would manage to weave something of the Great House Farm. Especially would they do this, when leaving home. They would then sing most exultingly the following words:

*"I am going away to the Great House Farm!
O, yea! O, yea! O!"*

This they would sing, as a chorus, to words which to many would seem unmeaning jargon, but which, nevertheless, were full of meaning to themselves. I have sometimes thought that the mere hearing of those songs would do more to impress some minds with the horrible character of slavery, than the reading of whole volumes of philosophy on the subject would do."

22. What seems to be the tone of the spiritual "Great House Farm"? Why?
23. For what might the phrase "Great House" be a metaphor? Consider the context of the song and explain the difference in the denotation (actual meaning) and connotation (implied meaning) of "Great House." How does this contribute to the slave-owners’ misconception about what the slaves singing meant?

Read this spiritual. What might the lyrics mean? Is this a happy song? Explain.

I Want to Go Home"

*"Dere's no rain to wet you,
O, yes, I want to go home.
Dere's no sun to burn you,
O, yes, I want to go home;*

*O, push along, believers,
O, yes, I want to go home.
Dere's no hard trials,
O, yes, I want to go home.*

*Dere's no whips on de wayside,
O, yes, I want to go home.
O, push along, my brudder,
O, yes, I want to go home.*

*Where dere's no stormy weather,
O, yes, I want to go home.
Dere's no tribulation,
O, yes, I want too home.*

Read this passage:

"I did not, when a slave, understand the deep meaning of those rude and apparently incoherent songs. I was myself within the circle, so that I neither saw nor heard as those without might see and hear. They told a tale of woe which was then altogether beyond my feeble comprehension; they were tones loud, long, and deep; they breathed the prayer and complaint of souls boiling over with the bitterest anguish. Every tone was a testimony against slavery, and a prayer to God for deliverance from chains. The hearing of those wild notes always depressed my spirit, and filled me with ineffable sadness. I have frequently found myself in tears while hearing them. . . To those songs I trace my first glimmering conception of the dehumanizing character of slavery. I can never get rid of that conception. Those songs still follow me, to deepen my hatred of slavery, and quicken my sympathies for my brethren in bonds. If any one wishes to be impressed with the soul-killing effects of slavery, let him go to Colonel Lloyd's plantation, and, on allowance-day, place himself in the deep pine woods, and there let him, in silence, analyze the sounds that shall pass through the chambers of his soul,—and if he is not thus impressed, it will only be because 'there is no flesh in his obdurate heart.'"

24. Upon reflection, what does Douglass realize about why slaves sang spirituals and about the basic purpose of the spirituals?
25. Which of Douglass's descriptive words or phrases in the passage show the extent to which he deplores (hates) slavery? List one rhetorical appeal Douglass uses and its intended effect?

Read the following passage:

"I have often been utterly astonished, since I came to the north, to find persons who could speak of the singing, among slaves, as evidence of their contentment and happiness. It is impossible to conceive of a greater mistake. Slaves sing most when they are most unhappy. The songs of the slave represent the sorrows of his heart; and he is relieved by them, only as an aching heart is relieved by its tears. At least, such is my experience. I have often sung to drown my sorrow, but seldom to express my happiness. Crying for joy, and singing for joy, were alike uncommon to me while in the jaws of slavery. The singing of a man cast away upon a desolate island might be as appropriately considered as evidence of contentment and happiness, as the singing of a slave; the songs of the one and of the other are prompted by the same emotion."

26. How does Douglass dismiss the misconception that a singing slave is necessarily a content and happy slave?
27. What analogy (comparison) does he use? Is this analogy effective? Explain.

Frederick Douglass: Chapter three, four and five

28. In chapter three, what "became as fearful as the lash"?
29. Describe what happened to the slave who was eventually sold to a Georgia trader. What was his crime?
30. Why did slaves always tend to speak favorably about their masters?
31. Why did Douglass, when asked, say that his master was kind?
32. What is considered to be a disgrace to the slaves?
33. Who was the overseer most dreaded by the slaves?
34. Who was Demby? What happened to him? Why did it happen?
35. What was the punishment for killing a black man or woman in Talbot county?

36. How did Douglass's wife's cousin die?
37. Complete this phrase: "It was worth a half-cent to _____ a "nigger," and a half-cent to _____ one."
38. What did Douglass sleep in as a small boy?
39. To what city was Douglass being sent in chapter 5? How did he feel about moving?
40. What was it about Sophia Auld that was different from anything Douglass had seen before?
41. What was Douglass's job going to be at Mrs. Auld's?
42. What one event does Douglass say "opened the gate way to all his subsequent prosperity" and eventual freedom?

Frederick Douglass: Chapter Six, Seven, and Eight: analysis of the dehumanizing effects of slave-ownership

43. How is Douglass' new mistress unlike any white woman he'd met before?
44. What initially had keep Sophia Auld from treating Douglass as a slave?

Read the following passage:

"Her face was made of heavenly smiles, and her voice of tranquil music." [He then notes the change in her by writing:] "But, alas! This kind heart had but a short time to remain such. The fatal poison of irresponsible power was already in her hands, and soon commenced its infernal work. That cheerful eye, under the influence of slavery, soon became red with rage; that voice, made all of sweet accord, changed to one of harsh and horrid discord; and that angelic face gave place to that of a demon."

45. How does the word choice in this passage help Douglass prove his point that slavery hurts the slave owner?
46. How does Douglass's appearance of concern for Mrs. Auld emphasize slavery's debilitating effects on both of the slave and the slave-owner?

Read this passage:

"Now if you teach that nigger how to read, there would be no keeping him. It would forever unfit him to be a slave. He would at once become unmanageable, and of no value to his master. As to himself, it could do him no good, but a great deal of harm. It would make him discontented and unhappy."

47. How does Douglass's quotation of Mr. Auld serve Douglass's own persuasive aims?
48. How does this information prove to be a turning point in Frederick Douglass's life?
49. What revelation occurs to him in this chapter? And what irony is involved in this revelation?

50. Consider the importance of literacy and the effectiveness of using illiteracy as a tool of control. What are some things that an individual might normally do in the course of an average day, but could not do because he/she is illiterate?
51. What, according to Douglass, is the “pathway from slavery to freedom”?
52. Why are city slave owners less cruel than those of the country?
53. Explain why the slave Mary was more often called “Pecked.”
54. What was it that gave Douglass a “new conception of [his] degraded position”?
55. Describe the type of man Master Andrew was.
56. Douglass complains of the ingratitude shown towards his grandmother. Explain this.
57. Why was Douglass sorry he hadn’t tried to run away before this time?

Frederick Douglass: Chapter 9: Criticism of misuse of Christianity to perpetuate slavery

58. In what way, according to Douglass, were Mr. and Mrs. Auld “well matched”?
59. What did Douglass hope religion would do for Capt. Auld?
60. What was the *actual* effect of religion on Capt. Auld?

Read the following passage:

"I have said my master found religious sanction for his cruelty. As an example, I will state one of many facts going to prove the charge. I have seen him tie up a lame young woman, and whip her with a heavy cowskin upon her naked shoulders, causing the warm red blood to drip; and, in justification of the bloody deed, he would quote this passage of Scripture -- "He that knoweth his master's will, and doeth it not, shall be beaten with many stripes."

Master would keep this lacerated young woman tied up in this horrid situation four or five hours at a time. I have known him to tie her up early in the morning, and whip her before breakfast; leave her, go to his store, return at dinner, and whip her again, cutting her in the places already made raw with his cruel lash. The secret of master's cruelty toward 'Henny' is found in the fact of her being almost helpless. When quite a child, she fell into the fire, and burned herself horribly. Her hands were so burnt that she never got the use of them. She could do very little but bear heavy burdens. She was to master a bill of expense; and as he was a mean man, she was a constant offence to him. He seemed desirous of getting the poor girl out of existence. He gave her away once to his sister; but, being a poor gift, she was not disposed to keep her. Finally, my benevolent master, to use his own words, "set her adrift to take care of herself" Here was a recently-converted man, holding on upon the mother, and at the same time turning out her helpless child, to starve and die! Master Thomas was one of the many pious slaveholders who hold slaves for the very charitable purpose of taking care of them".

61. How does Captain Auld demonstrate that he reads the Bible in order to find support for his own needs and desires-in this case, upholding slavery? Consider his treatment of the slave girl, Henny.
62. What scriptural passage does Auld quote to justify his inhumane behavior?
63. What is Douglass doing by pointing out Auld’s newfound Christianity as justification for his slavery? How does Douglass expose the hypocrisy?

Read the passage:

"Here was a recently converted man, holding on upon the mother, and at the same time turning out her helpless child, to starve and die! Master Thomas was one of the many pious slaveholders who hold slaves for the very charitable purpose of taking care of them."

64. What point is Douglass making in this passage?
65. How is irony used in this passage?
66. How does the irony help Douglass accomplish his purpose?

Read the passage

"Mr. Covey had acquired a very high reputation for breaking young slaves, and this reputation was of immense value to him. It enabled him to get his farm tilled with much less expense to himself than he could have had it done without such a reputation. Some slaveholders thought it not much loss to allow Mr. Covey to have their slaves one year, for the sake of the training to which they were subjected, without any compensation. He could hire young help with great ease, in consequence of his reputation. Added to the natural good qualities of Mr. Covey, he was a professor of religion,—a pious soul—a member and class-leader in the Methodist church. All of this added weight to his reputation as a "nigger-breaker."

67. Explain the irony in this passage.
68. What is the tone of this passage? How does Douglass create the tone? Cite specific words and phrases.
69. Consider the phrase "high reputation" in the context of "breaking young slaves." Explain the point Douglass is making. Think of the choice of the word "break" to refer to training slaves--- what kind of training does the word "break" usually associate with? (Think: who/what "gets broken" as training? What does that association imply about slaves?)
70. Later in the passage, why does Douglass use the word "professor" to describe Mr. Covey? Define "professor" as Douglass is using it. What point is he making about Covey as a religious man?
71. Why does Douglass use phrases like "pious soul," "class-leader," and "nigger-breaker"? How do these contribute to his characterization of Mr. Covey?
72. Why might Mr. Covey's religious observance "add weight to his reputation"? How does Douglass expose the hypocrisy of Christian slave owners?

Frederick Douglass: Chapter Ten and Elven: The Courage to Fight back

73. What job did Douglass hold for the first time at Mr. Covey's?
74. How did Covey earn the nickname "the snake?"
75. Describe the situation with the slave Caroline.

Read the following passage:

"Mr. Covey succeeded in breaking me. I was broken in body, soul, and spirit. My natural elasticity was crushed, my intellect languished, the disposition to read departed, the cheerful spark that lingered about my eye died; the dark night of slavery closed in upon me; and behold a man transformed into a brute!"

76. What image or images does the passage evoke?
77. Is this passage a persuasive piece of rhetoric against slavery? How?
78. Why did Douglass leave the farm and return to Capt. Auld? How did Auld respond to Douglass' coming back?
79. What was the "turning point" in Douglass' career as a slave?

"You have seen how a man was made a slave; you shall see how a slave was made a man."

80. Analyze Douglass' decision to separate slave and man, what is he implying by the separation?

"I felt as I never felt before. It was a glorious resurrection, from the tomb of slavery, to the heaven of freedom. My long-crushed spirit rose, cowardice departed, bold defiance took its place; and I now resolved that, however long I might remain a slave in form, the day has passed forever when I could be a slave in fact. I did not hesitate to let it be known of me, that the white man who expected to succeed in whipping, must also succeed in killing me."

81. Characterize the language Douglass uses in describing how he felt after fighting with Mr. Covey. Analyze the types of words he uses and what this accomplishes.
82. How does this passage compare to his self-description above, when he had been "broken" by Mr. Covey?
83. How does Douglass use religious references to strengthen his claims, such as in the phrase "from the tomb of slavery, to the heaven of freedom"?
84. Explain how Douglass saw the Christmas holiday as just another means of enforcing slavery.
85. According to Douglass, what purpose did religion in the South serve?
86. How did Douglass begin to occupy himself on Sundays?
87. What did Douglass resolve to do before the end of 1835?
88. Explain the phrase, "it made us 'rather bare those ills we had,/ Than fly to others, that we knew not of."
89. What did Douglass and his group of friends dread almost as much as death?
90. Why did Capt. Auld send Douglass to Baltimore? What did he fear?
91. Why did the white carpenters refuse to work? What did they fear?
92. Explain the phrase, "and in thinking of my life, I almost forgot my liberty."

93. Explain how Douglass felt about Master Hugh taking his wages.

Chapter Eleven

94. Why won't Douglass disclose details of his escape (two reasons)?

95. What is Douglass' criticism of the Underground Railroad?

96. To where did Douglass escape? Why didn't he stay there?

97. What motto does Douglass adopt?

98. Who are Frederick Bailey and Frederick Stanley?

99. Explain the influence of the "Lady of the Lake."

100. Explain what Douglass thought the North would be like?

101. Why was Douglass reluctant to speak at the anti-slavery meeting?

