

Individual Learning Packet

Teaching Unit

Narrative of the Life of Frederick Douglass

by Frederick Douglass

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Narrative of the Life of Frederick Douglass

Notes

Written in 1845, the narrative autobiography of Frederick Douglass details his life as a slave, his escape to freedom, and the importance of literacy in his life. It serves as a record of Douglass' personal growth in self-respect, courage, intelligence, and racial pride. Douglass' escape from slavery—a feat that came from his ability to learn to read and develop his mind—reinforces the importance of education as a tool to better one's life.

All references come from the Prestwick House Literary Touchstone Classics Edition of *Narrative of the Life of Frederick Douglass*, copyright 2004.

HISTORICAL TERMS AND BACKGROUND INFORMATION

Underground Railroad – Before the Civil War, the Underground Railroad helped an estimated 40,000 to 100,000 slaves escape to the Northern states and Canada. It was called the Underground Railroad because it was secret (underground) and covertly referred to in railway terms (escaping slaves were called freight). Northern abolitionists and former slaves like Harriet Tubman ran the Underground Railroad until it ceased operation at the start of the Civil War.

Abolitionist Movement – The Abolitionist Movement began in the 1780's in Western Europe and the United States with the goal to gradually eliminate slavery. In 1831, William Lloyd Garrison, founder of the American Anti-Slavery Society, published the *Liberator* newspaper, calling for the immediate emancipation of all slaves. His platform included:

- speaking out against the immorality of slavery.
- urging Northern states to secede from the union.
- advocating the boycott of Southern goods.
- participating in the Underground Railroad.

FREDERICK DOUGLASS – THE ABOLITIONIST

Frederick Douglass became an agent for the Anti-Slavery Society, lecturing about the wrongs of slavery. He traveled widely, facing discrimination and pro-slavery mobs. Many of his listeners were so impressed with his speaking skills that they could not believe he had been a slave.

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Objectives

By the end of this Unit, the student will be able to:

1. define the vocabulary words listed at the beginning of each chapter of the study guide and comment on the significance of Douglass' accomplishment at overcoming illiteracy to develop his substantial vocabulary.
2. trace Douglass' thirst for knowledge and discuss how the development of his mind impacts his quest for freedom.
3. relate events in the narrative demonstrating Douglass' personal growth in the following areas:
 - self respect
 - aggressiveness
 - courage
 - intelligence
 - racial pride
4. define persuasive writing and demonstrate how this autobiographical narrative is an example of persuasive writing intended to gain support for the abolitionist movement.
5. identify examples of allusion used in Douglass' arguments against slavery.
6. support or refute that Douglass believes in destiny or fate and that he credits "kind providence" with his successful escape to freedom as a result.
7. identify the author's use of sarcasm and puns to add humor and interest to the narrative.
8. comment on the dramatic descriptions of slavery and point out how these descriptions manipulate the reader's feelings to gain support for the anti-slavery movement.

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Questions for Essay and Discussion

1. Review the vocabulary words at the beginning of each chapter. List the words whose meanings suggest they are used by Douglass in his narrative to describe the horrors of slavery. For example: abhorrence means loathing, detestation, and disgust. It can be linked to the abolitionist's hatred of slavery. However, barouche is a four-wheeled carriage, and does not describe the horrors of slavery.
2. How does Douglass learn the meaning of the word "abolitionist"?
3. In what way does Douglass' career as an orator influence the way he has written this narrative?
4. How does Mr. Covey succeed in turning Douglass into a "brute"? How does a "root" help Douglass develop the aggressiveness necessary to resist Mr. Covey?
5. Why does Douglass' first escape attempt fail?
6. List the qualities of a good overseer and give an example of an overseer Douglass defines as good.
7. Why does Douglass not know the date of his birth? What evidence is there that his mother cares about him even though they are separated early in his life?
8. How is the quality of Douglass' life in Baltimore different from his life on the plantation?
9. What surprises Douglass about life in New Bedford?
10. Why do the masters give slaves a whole week off at the holidays? What do the slaves do with their free time?
11. Briefly identify the following men: David Ruggles, Rev. J.W.C. Pennington, William C. Coffin, Nathan Johnson.
12. Why do the slaves sing in the forest on their way to the Big Farm to collect their rations? How is their singing often misinterpreted by white people?
13. Discuss the following statement: A religious master is the worst kind of slaveholder.
14. Which do you think is worse for Douglass, the physical imprisonment or the mental deprivation imposed by slavery?
15. Why do more slaves, particularly those living in Baltimore, not try to escape?

Chapter 2

Vocabulary

anguish – great suffering from worry, grief, or pain
betides – to happen, befall
coopering – making or repairing barrels or casks
ineffable – too overwhelming to be expressed
obdurate – not easily moved to pity or sympathy
pathetic – expressing or arousing pity, sorrow, or sympathy
privation – depriving or being deprived
providence – the care or benevolent guidance of God or nature

1. What is the purpose of the sloop Captain Auld commands?

2. What is the monthly food and clothing allowance for an adult slave? What do the children receive?

3. Why do the slaves consider Mr. Hopkins to be a good overseer?

Chapter 9

Vocabulary

copyist – a person who makes written copies; a person who imitates
pernicious – causing great injury or destruction
pretensions – pretexts or allegations; claims
subsist – to continue to be or exist; to stay alive
sufficiency – adequate means, ability, or resources

1. Support the following statement: Captain Auld “was a slaveholder without the ability to hold slaves.”

2. Cite an example from the story of how Captain Auld gives “religious sanction and support for his slaveholding cruelty.”

3. What does Douglass do that angers Captain Auld enough to send him to live with Mr. Covey, who is known for “breaking” slaves?

4. Despite Mr. Covey’s reputation as a hard master, why does Douglass willingly go to work on his farm?
