Name: _____ Class: _____

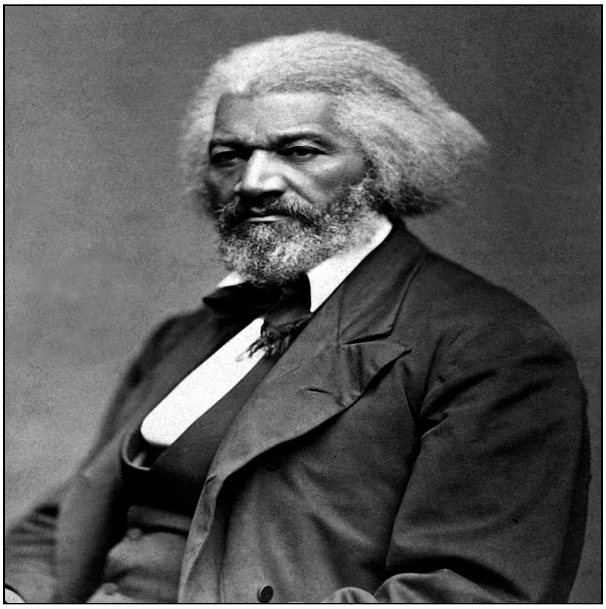
"Narrative of the Life of Frederick Douglass": Excerpts from Chapters 1 & 7

By Frederick Douglass
1845

Frederick Douglass (1818-1895) was an African American social reformer, orator, and writer. He escaped from slavery, taught himself to read and write, and became a national leader of the abolitionist movement, which was dedicated to ending slavery. In these excerpts from his autobiography The Narrative Life of Frederick Douglass, he describes his experiences as an enslaved person. This text contains content that students may find disturbing.

As you read, take notes on the factors that motivated Douglass to educate himself.

Chapter I



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[1] I was born in Tuckahoe, near Hillsborough, and about twelve miles from Easton, in Talbot county, Maryland. I have no accurate knowledge of my age, never having seen any authentic record containing it.

[...] The nearest estimate I can give makes me now between twenty-seven and twenty-eight years of age. I come to this, from hearing my master say, some time during 1835, I was about seventeen years old.

[...] I have had two masters. My first master's name was Anthony. I do not remember his first name. He was generally called Captain Anthony — a title which, I presume, he acquired by sailing a craft on the Chesapeake Bay. He was not considered a rich slaveholder. He owned two or three farms, and about thirty slaves. His farms and slaves were under the care of an overseer. The overseer's name was Plummer. Mr. Plummer was a miserable

drunkard, a profane[1] swearer, and a savage monster. He always went armed with a cowskin and a heavy cudgel.[2] I have known him to cut and slash the women's heads so horribly, that even master would be enraged at his cruelty, and would threaten to whip him if he did not mind himself.

Master, however, was not a humane slaveholder. [...] 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 own 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 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 any thing. 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. [...]

Chapter VII

[5] I lived in Master Hugh's family about seven years. During this time, I succeeded in learning to read and write. In accomplishing this, I was compelled to resort to various stratagems.[3] I had no regular teacher.

[...] The plan which I adopted, and the one by which I was most successful, was that of making friends of all the little white boys whom I met in the street. As many of these as I could, I converted into teachers. With their kindly aid, obtained at different times and in different places, I finally succeeded in learning to read. When I was sent of errands, I always took my book with me, and by going one part of my

1. vulgar
2. a short stick used as a weapon
3. strategy

errand quickly, I found time to get a lesson before my return. I used also to carry bread with me, enough of which was always in the house, and to which I was always welcome; for I was much better off in this regard than many of the poor white children in our neighborhood. This bread I used to bestow upon the hungry little urchins, who, in return, would give me that more valuable bread of knowledge.

[...] I was now about twelve years old, and the thought of being a slave for life began to bear heavily upon my heart.

I often found myself regretting my own existence, and wishing myself dead; and but for the hope of being free, I have no doubt but that I should have killed myself, or done something for which I should have been killed. While in this state of mind, I was eager to hear any one speak of slavery. I was a ready listener. Every little while, I could hear something about the abolitionists. It was some time before I found what the word meant. It was always used in such connections as to make it an interesting word to me. If a slave ran away and succeeded in getting clear, or if a slave killed his master, set fire to a barn, or did any thing very wrong in the mind of a slaveholder, it was spoken of as the fruit of abolition.

[...] The light broke in upon me by degrees. I went one day down on the wharf of Mr. Waters; and seeing two Irishmen unloading a scow[4] of stone, I went, unasked, and helped them. When we had finished, one of them came to me and asked me if I were a slave. I told him I was. He asked, “Are ye a slave for life?” I told him that I was. The good Irishman seemed to be deeply affected by the statement. He said to the other that it was a pity so fine a little fellow as myself should be a slave for life. He said it was a shame to hold me. They both advised me to run away to the north; that I should find friends there, and that I should be free. I pretended not to be interested in what they said, and treated them as if I did not understand them; for I feared they might be treacherous. White men have been known to encourage slaves to escape, and then, to get the reward, catch them and return them to their masters. I was afraid that these seemingly good men might use me so; but I nevertheless remembered their advice, and from that time I resolved to run away. I looked forward to a time at which it would be safe for me to escape. I was too young to think of doing so immediately; besides, I wished to learn how to write, as I might have occasion to write my own pass. I consoled myself with the hope that I should one day find a good chance. Meanwhile, I would learn to write.

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4. a type of boat

[10] The idea as to how I might learn to write was suggested to me by being in Durgin and Bailey's ship-yard, and frequently seeing the ship carpenters, after hewing, and getting a piece of timber ready for use, write on the timber the name of that part of the ship for which it was intended. When a piece of timber was intended for the larboard side, it would be marked thus — "L." When a piece was for the starboard side, it would be marked thus — "S." A piece for the larboard side forward, would be marked thus — "L. F." When a piece was for starboard side forward, it would be marked thus — "S. F." For larboard aft, it would be marked thus — "L. A." For starboard aft, it would be marked thus — "S. A." I soon learned the names of these letters, and for what they were intended when placed upon a piece of timber in the ship-yard. I immediately commenced copying them, and in a short time was able to make the four letters named. After that, when I met with any boy who I knew could write, I would tell him I could write as well as he. The next word would be, "I don't believe you. Let me see you try it." I would then make the letters which I had been so fortunate as to learn, and ask him to beat that. In this way I got a good many lessons in writing, which it is quite possible I should never have gotten in any other way. During this time, my copy-book was the board fence, brick wall, and pavement; my pen and ink was a lump of chalk. With these, I learned mainly how to write.

[...] Thus, after a long, tedious effort for years, I finally succeeded in learning how to write.

Text-Dependent Questions

Directions: For the following questions, choose the best answer or respond in complete sentences.

1. PART A: How do the master's treatment of the slaves, as depicted in chapter 1, affect Douglass?
    A. Like most slaveholders, he does not educate them, which prompts Douglass to learn to read and write.
    B. Douglass witnesses brutal abuses of other slaves and knowing that he will soon enter this life as he grows, he becomes interested in education, escape, and abolition.
    C. Douglass witnesses brutal abuses of other slaves, specifically his aunt, and that motivates him to take revenge on his masters and all other slaveholders.
    D. The master beats and whips Douglass, a painful experience that Douglass will never forget and one he vows to write down for others to know.

2. PART B: Which of the following quotations best supports the answer to Part A?
    A. "I have no accurate knowledge of my age, never having seen any authentic record containing it." (Paragraph 1)
    B. "I have had two masters. My first master's name was Anthony. I do not remember his first name." (Paragraph 3)
    C. "Mr. Plummer was a miserable drunkard, a profane swearer, and a savage monster. He always went armed with a cowskin and a heavy cudgel." (Paragraph 3)
    D. "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." (Paragraph 4)

3. Which of the following best explains why Douglass likely worked so hard to learn to read and write?

    A. He learned because he was curious about the world.
    B. He learned in the hopes of improving his life as a slave, if not total escape from slavery.
    C. He learned so that he may teach other slaves under Anthony's control.
    D. He learned as a sort of revenge on his masters, who kept him in the dark.

4. Which of the following best describes the interaction between Douglass and the two Irishmen?

    A. Douglass fears the two Irishmen recognizing him as a slave after he tells them that he can read.
    B. Douglass helps two Irishmen at the ship yard, and in return, they offer to help him him escape to the North.
    C. Douglass is ordered by two Irishmen to assist them, and afterwards, the men apologize for treating him so poorly.
    D. Douglass is wary of the two Irishmen he helps because white men had been encouraging slaves to run so they could catch them for a reward.

5. What methods did Douglass take to learn to read and write?

Discussion Questions

Directions: Brainstorm your answers to the following questions in the space provided. Be prepared to share your original ideas in a class discussion.

1. Why do you think Frederick Douglass had to learn to read in secret?

2. In the context of this passage, how do people overcome adversity? What role can literacy play in this? Cite evidence from this text, your own experience, and other literature, art, or history in your answer.

3. In the context of this passage, what is the goal of education? Cite evidence from this text, your own experience, and other literature, art, or history in your answer.