

Study Guide: Narrative of the Life of Frederick Douglass

Chapter 1

Why do you think Douglass is so detailed in describing his home and its location?

What kinds of knowledge about themselves does he believe are kept from slaves, and why does he believe this is important?

What does Douglass regret in his memories of his parents? What qualities does he associate with memories of his mother? Why wasn't he able to live with her?

What does he believe are some of the worse consequences of masters' siring of children on their slaves?

What kinds of cruelty did Douglass witness as a boy? What may be the motivation of the cruel beating of Aunt Hester?

Chapter 2

What were the economic circumstances of Douglass's master, Colonel Lloyd? What conditions does he describe on the plantations? How were the slaves housed and clothed? Under what conditions did they work?

What explanation does Douglass give for the singing of slaves? What features does he ascribe to the songs he heard? How do you interpret the refrain he reproduces? ("I am going away to the Great House Farm!/ O, yea! O, yea! O!")

What seems his attitude toward the desire of other slaves to travel to the Great House Farm?

Chapter 3

How did Col. Lloyd treat his stable keepers? What incident does Douglass narrate to indicate why slaves often gave seemingly contented replies when asked about their treatment?

What does Douglass think of the practice he describes of slaves fighting to defend the alleged virtues of their masters? To what psychological impulse does he attribute this?

Chapter 4

What violent events does this chapter record? Why do you think nothing was done to prosecute the murder of slaves?

How would you describe Douglass's style? How does he show emotion in recounting the horrible sights he has witnessed?

Chapter 5

What were the circumstances of Douglass's life in childhood? What was his relationship to his siblings?

What was his response to his removal to Baltimore? What sentiment did he hold about his future?

What seems to be indicated about Douglass's character by his account of his childhood?

Chapter 6

What effect on the character of his new mistress Mrs. Auld does Douglass ascribe to slavery? What information does Mr. Auld unintentionally provide him?

How was Baltimore life different from that on the plantation?

Chapter 7

How does Mrs. Auld try to inhibit Douglass from learning to read and write? How does he succeed in attaining his aim?

What books does he read, and how do these influence his beliefs about slavery? How does he come to learn about the abolitionist movement?

What first suggests to his mind the possibility of escape?

Chapter 8

What happens to Douglass after the death of Captain Anthony? What treatment of his brother does he witness?

After his return to Baltimore and the death of Master Andrew Auld, what is done to Douglass's grandmother?

Whom does Douglass regret to leave when Master Thomas orders him sent from Master Hugh's residence? What kind of information does he seek before he leaves Baltimore, and for what purpose?

What are some general features of Douglass's writing style? Which qualities help make it effective? Does the narrative create suspense?

Chapter 9

Under what conditions did Douglass live when with Thomas Auld and his wife at St. Michael's? What behavior toward a lame woman slave does Douglass record?

In Douglass's view, what was the disappointing effect of Mr. Auld's conversion? What was the fate of Mr. Wilson's Sabbath school for slaves? What effect may the behavior of professing Methodists have had on his later opinions?

What motivated Mr. Auld to send Frederick to Mr. Covey's farm?

Would it surprise you to learn that years later Douglass visited Mr. Auld and bade him a kind farewell shortly before the latter's death?

Chapter 10

How did Mr. Covey treat Douglass and his peers? What enabled Douglass to survive the incidents of the oxen and the beatings?

What psychological effect did Covey's brutality have on Douglass? What thoughts or hopes encouraged him in his despair? (46)

What assistance in his plight did Douglass seek? What responses did he receive? Why do you think Mr. Auld refused to help him?

Why do you think Douglass included the incident of Sandy's offer of the root? What seems to have been Douglass's attitude toward this form of African folk practice?

How did Douglass regain his self-confidence? How does he add interest to his description of his long fight with Mr. Covey?

How does he analyze the fact that Mr. Covey failed to prosecute him for resistance? What lesson does he seem to have gained from this experience?

How does Douglass interpret the motives and psychological effects of the owner's encouragement of excess among the slaves during holidays? Do you think his analysis may be correct?

What improvements does Douglass find in his labors for Mr. Freeland?

What were the results of Douglass's efforts to teach his fellow slaves?

How did he and his friends resolve to emancipate themselves, and how is their effort failed?

Why do you think Mr. Auld sent the imprisoned Douglass back to Baltimore, rather than punishing him more severely?

In Baltimore, how was Douglass treated in Mr. Gardner's shipyard, and how did he resist? Why was his master unable to obtain legal redress on his behalf?

What trade did he learn, and how did this alter his status?

Chapter 11

What reasons does Douglass give for not describing more of his manner of escape? From his other writings, how in fact was this escape effected?

What immediate considerations prompted Douglass to act? How did he plan to leave without arousing suspicion?

What aspects of his escape does he especially remember?

What part does his intended wife play in these recollections?

How does he choose his new name? Why may he have found it fitting?

What aspects of New Bedford life surprised him? What difficulties followed him in the exercise of his work?

What publication especially inspired Douglass? How did he commence his career as an orator and writer?

What is the effect of the book's closure?

Appendix:

What clarification of his views about the relation of religion and slavery does Douglass provide in the appendix?

What effect might it have had on religious readers?

Do you think the appendix provides a useful addition to the narrative of his life?

As you think back on this book, what features of its content or rhetoric most impress you?