

Narrative of the Life of Frederick Douglass Study Guide

CHAPTER I

Sets the scene; Frederick tells us some of his early life and begins to explain life on the plantation.

QUESTIONS

- 1) Why is Frederick not sure when he was born?
- 2) What is Frederick's last name at birth?
- 3) Why would slaveholders want to keep a slave ignorant of such a simple thing as the date of his birth?
- 4) Who were Frederick's mother and father?
- 5) Why does Frederick make the point that a slaveholder who has fathered a child is likely to be tougher on that child?
- 6) Why does Frederick only rarely see his mother?
- 7) Is Frederick's relationship with his mother typical of other slave children?
- 8) What is the role of the overseer on the plantation?
- 9) What is the relationship of the slaveholder to the overseer to the slave on the plantation?
- 10) Who is Frederick's first master?
- 11) Why does Frederick tell the story of Lloyd's Ned?
- 12) What do we learn about Plummer, the overseer?

CHAPTER II

Describes the plantation system of Colonel Lloyd; discusses the daily existence of slaves on the plantation.

QUESTIONS

- 1) Who were the family members of Frederick's master Colonel Edward Lloyd?
- 2) What is the relationship of Colonel Lloyd to Frederick's master?
- 3) Was there a pecking order among slaves? Explain.
- 4) Why would a slave whose life on a plantation was very bad fear being sold to a slave-trader?
- 5) Why was 'Severe' an appropriate name for the overseer?
- 6) Why is it difficult to find copies of slave songs?
- 7) Why does Frederick suggest that slaves sing out of sorrow rather than out of joy?

CHAPTER III

Relates several anecdotes that tell readers more about plantation life and the thinking of slaves.

QUESTIONS

- 1) How did Colonel Lloyd keep the slave boys from taking his fruit?
- 2) Why was it particularly difficult to be the slaves in charge of Colonel Lloyd's horses?
- 3) What is ironic about Colonel Lloyd's treatment of his horses compared to the treatment of his slaves?
- 4) What happened to the slave who told Colonel Lloyd the truth about his master?
- 5) Define the term 'maxim.'

CHAPTER IV

Tells readers more about overseers and relates incidents of slave murders.

QUESTIONS

- 1) Why is Mr. Austin Gore a "first-rate overseer"? What is the irony of this description of him? What is ironic about his name?
- 2) What reason does Mr. Gore give for killing Demby the slave?
- 3) What other examples does Frederick give of his statement "that killing a slave, or any colored person,... is not treated as a crime, either by the courts or the community?"

CHAPTER V

Examines Frederick's life as a slave child and discusses his leaving the plantation.

QUESTIONS

- 1) What was life like for Frederick on the plantation?
- 2) Why was Frederick so happy to be leaving the plantation?
- 3) Why did he particularly want to go to Baltimore?
- 4) What relationship did his new master have to his old master?
- 5) Why did Frederick, who was seven or eight, not know the month or year of his sailing?
- 6) What were Frederick's initial impressions of his new mistress, Mrs. Sophia Auld?

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CHAPTER VI

Discusses learning to read and explains its importance.

QUESTIONS

- 1) To what does Frederick attribute the kindness of Mrs. Auld?
- 2) What, according to Frederick, changes her?
- 3) Why is Mr. Auld angry when he finds that Mrs. Auld is teaching Frederick his letters?
- 4) Why does Frederick call Mr. Auld's forbidding his learning how to read "invaluable instruction?"
- 5) Why does inability to read keep men enslaved according to Frederick and to Mr. Auld?
- 6) What does Frederick hope to gain by learning how to read?
- 7) Who teaches Frederick why black men are not taught to read?
- 8) Why is this lesson so important to him?
- 9) Why is the life of a city slave so much better than the life of a plantation slave?
- 10) Why does Frederick relate the story of the slaves Henrietta and Mary?

CHAPTER VII

Relates what Mrs. Auld learned from keeping slaves; how Frederick came to hate slavery and how he learned to write.

QUESTIONS

- 1) How did Mrs. Auld change and why did she change?
- 2) What plan did Frederick adopt to learn how to read now that Mrs. Auld was no longer teaching him?
- 3) Why is it ironic that he bribed the little white boys to teach him to read?
- 4) What irony does Frederick find in this statement: "It is almost an unpardonable offence to teach slaves to read in this Christian country?"
- 5) What did Frederick learn from the book *The Columbian Orator*?
- 6) How does Master Auld's prediction about Frederick and learning come true?
- 7) How does Frederick learn the meanings of the words abolition and abolitionist?
- 8) What do the two Irishmen encourage him to do? Why does he not trust them?
- 9) How does Frederick learn to write?
- 10) How does he trick the white boys into teaching him new letters?

CHAPTER VIII

Discussion of slaves as property; plight of old slaves; return to Baltimore.

QUESTIONS

- 1) Why was Frederick forced to return to the plantation after the death of his master?
- 2) How was the value of the master's property determined? How were the slaves valued?
- 3) Why was the division of property between Mistress Lucretia and Master Andrew so horrifying to the slaves?
- 4) What happened to Frederick's grandmother after the deaths of Lucretia and Andrew? How does this anecdote help explain the value of slaves? How are slaves valued when compared to livestock? [The ironic comparison of slaves to livestock is a continuous theme of the narrative.]
- 5) Who owns Frederick by the end of chapter eight?
- 6) Why is Frederick forced to leave Baltimore?

CHAPTER IX

Moves to St. Michael's, Maryland, with Master Thomas Auld; the irony of the Christian slaveholder is discussed.

QUESTIONS

- 1) Why does Frederick now know the date?
- 2) Who is Frederick's newest Master?
- 3) What rule of slaveholding does Master Thomas Auld violate?
- 4) How did the slaves get food?
- 5) Why does Frederick say that "adopted slaveholders are the worst"?
- 6) What, according to Frederick, happens to Master Thomas Auld after his conversion to Christianity? Why?
- 7) Why does Frederick find irony in the fact that the slaves sabbath school is discontinued?
- 8) Why does Frederick let Master Thomas's horse run away?
- 9) Again, Frederick compares the treatment of slaves to the treatment of horses. How?
- 10) How does Master Thomas propose to 'break' Frederick?
- 11) Why was Mr. Covey's reputation for breaking slaves of great value to him?

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CHAPTER X

How a man is made a slave; a slave made a man.

QUESTIONS

- 1) Why does Mr. Covey whip Frederick?
- 2) Why are the slaves so fearful of Mr. Covey? Why does their work go on in his absence?
- 3) Why is it “never safe to stop a single minute”?
- 4) What does Frederick mean by “Mr. Covey’s forte consisted in his power to deceive”?
- 5) Why does Mr. Covey buy a slave to use as a breeder?
- 6) Why does he hire Mr. Samuel Harrison, a married man? What irony does Frederick find in this?
- 7) How does Mr. Covey succeed in breaking Frederick?
- 8) How does Frederick succeed in again becoming a man?
- 9) Why does Frederick go to Master Thomas Auld?
- 10) Why does he return to Covey? Who convinces him to do so? What does Sandy Jenkins suggest that Frederick do?
- 11) How does Frederick win the fight with Mr. Covey?
- 12) Why does Frederick contend that Mr. Covey does not turn him in?
- 13) What would have happened to Frederick had Mr. Covey turned him in?
- 14) Why is Frederick’s battle with Mr. Covey “the turning-point in my career as a slave”?
- 15) How are the holidays used to “disgust the slave with freedom”?
- 16) Where does Frederick go after leaving Mr. Covey’s on January 1, 1834?
- 17) Who is his new master and how does he treat Frederick?
- 18) Why does Frederick include the anecdotes about the two religious slave holders Mr. Hopkins and Mr. Weeden? What point is he attempting to make?
- 19) Why and where does Frederick begin a Sabbath school? Why is it essential that the slaves tell no one about it?
- 20) What would the slaveholders like the slaves to do on the sabbath? Why is this ironic?
- 21) Why does Frederick decide to include the slaves in his Sabbath school in his plans to obtain his freedom? Why is this dangerous?
- 22) Frederick makes the point that many slaves would “rather bear those ills we had, than fly to others, that we knew not of .” How does this help explain why so few slaves escaped?
- 23) How do the slaves plan to run away?
- 24) What is the purpose of the “protections” written by Frederick?
- 25) What happens to their plan, and how do the “protections” nearly cause their deaths?
- 26) What happens to each of the slaves who attempted to run away?
- 27) When Frederick returns to Baltimore, what does he do?
- 28) Frederick again decides to fight when he is attacked. What happens to him? What does Master Hugh attempt to do for Frederick?
- 29) What must Frederick do with the wages he earns each week as a caulker? Why?

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CHAPTER XI

Escape from slavery; becoming a free man; involvement in the anti-slavery movement.

QUESTIONS

- 1) For what two reasons does Frederick tell us that he cannot relate the means of his escape?
- 2) Why does he not approve of the underground railroad?
- 3) What does Master Hugh do to attempt to encourage Frederick to continue to earn money? What effect does his encouragement have?
- 4) What does Frederick ask of Master Thomas? What is he told?
- 5) What arrangement does Frederick eventually make with Master Hugh? Why is this arrangement to Master Hugh's advantage? Why does Frederick agree to it?
- 6) What does Master Hugh do when he discovers that Frederick has left town to find work?
- 7) Why does Frederick decide to work hard despite the dissolution of their agreement?
- 8) When and to where does Frederick run away?
- 9) Why does he feel so lonely?
- 10) Who helps Frederick in New York? How?
- 11) How is it possible for Frederick and Anna to marry? Why is their marriage such an important event?
- 12) Why does Mr. Ruggles suggest that Frederick not stay in New York and go to New Bedford, Massachusetts?
- 13) Who helps Frederick and Anna in New Bedford? What does he do for them?
- 14) Why did Frederick change his name so many times? Who chooses Douglass? Why?
- 15) What had Douglass believed about life in the North? Was he correct? What does he find about life in the North?
- 16) How were the wharves in New Bedford different from those in Baltimore?
- 17) What conditions did he find for "colored people"?
- 18) What does Douglass discover about prejudice against color in New Bedford?
- 19) How does Douglass make a living when he can't find work as a caulker?
- 20) How does Douglass become known to the "anti-slavery world"?
- 21) Why is Douglass at first reluctant to speak out against slavery?

APPENDIX

Defense of his speaking out against the Christianity of slave holders.

QUESTIONS

- 1) Why do you think Douglass added the appendix?
- 2) What does he mean by "slaveholding religion"?
- 3) Why does Douglass contend that the church turns the other cheek on the treatment of slaves?
- 4) How does he compare the slaveholding Christians to the Pharisees and ancient scribes?
- 5) How does he criticize the church of the north?