

## **Activity 1.1. Analyzing the Text: Answer Sheet**

*Question:* Among the basic principles that define the institution of marriage in America is fidelity to one's spouse until death. Marriage also entails parental responsibilities to the children born to a legally sanctioned marriage. "Family" refers to a social unit in which there is love, trust, and decency shared among the members who are often related by blood. In *Twelve Years a Slave*, we find numerous examples of how the institutions of marriage and the family are undermined and perverted by the institution of slavery. Identify at least four illustrations of the corruption of marriage and the family in this excerpt from Northup's narrative and discuss, by providing evidence from the text.\*

(Note: If students have additional responses that support the antislavery argument that slavery corrupted marriage and the family and they can justify their responses with evidence from the text, by all means applaud their astute inferences.)

### *Responses for Discussion*

1. Mr. Berry, Eliza's Master, breaks the marriage vows to his legal wife by having extra-marital sexual relationships with Eliza, a woman to whom Berry is not married.
2. Marriage as defined in America is monogamous. Berry had two families living on his estate, his legal white family and his family with Eliza and her children. This situation undermined the principle of monogamy a basic tenet of the institution of marriage.
3. Marriage entails parental responsibilities to the children born into a legally sanctioned marriage. In a legal marriage, the wife has rights, though limited in the early nineteenth century, to expect her husband to provide for the children of their union. Mr. Berry abandoned his legal wife and child by living for nine years with Eliza and her children (one of whom was his own child). His paternal obligations to his *legal daughter* as well as his *spousal obligations* to his legal wife were undermined by these actions.
4. This excerpt illustrates how the institution of slavery, in rendering the natural bonds and obligations of parents to their children irrelevant, created conditions that were dangerous for the extra-marital children. Enslaved, mixed-race children born into an extra-marital relationship in general had no one legally responsible for parenting and protecting them.

This is illustrated by what happens to Emily, the child of Berry and Eliza. Emily may be her master-father's biological child, but her relationship to him as his slave is legal, whereas her relationship to him as her father is not. As a slave with no legal right to protection except as a slave, Emily could be disposed of by her father for any reason, regardless of his paternal relationship to her. (There were some slave owners who freed their mixed race children or made efforts to provide for their welfare, but such behavior was not the norm.) Emily's mother Eliza, also a slave, has no legal claim to her child either, thus Emily ends up in the hands of Theophilus Freeman, a vile slave dealer who intends to groom the beautiful little girl to become a valuable sex slave. Emily likely had to succumb to Freeman's scheme because as a slave she had no say in the matter. She would then have also become the mother of another generation of extra-legal, mixed-race children, whose white biological fathers had no legal obligations to care for them.