

## Activity 2. Beatings and the Myth of the Happy Slave

Student Name \_\_\_\_\_ Date \_\_\_\_\_

Suggested Sequence for Close Reading:

### *Reading 1*

The teacher will model a reading of the entire first section with the class. Instruct them as they read to **highlight unfamiliar words or passages**. For each chunk of text, have students briefly note what they think the unfamiliar words mean and then the passage as a whole.

### *Reading 2*

Read again the first section aloud to the class, modeling the types of questions that students will be answering when they read the rest of the sections on their own.

### *Individual Readings*

Divide the class into small groups of 2 to 4 students and have them go through the remaining passages on their own, finding answers to the questions in the right hand column. Before the students break into groups, go over the unfamiliar words in the entire passage. Include the underlined words in the text and any words that the students identified in their independent reading.

### *Assessment*

Have student volunteers read each passage aloud and then have the student groups share their responses to the focus questions with the class. Encourage the class to refine their own answers and come to consensus about the best responses to the questions.

**Frederick Douglass's Narrative: Myth of the Happy Slave**

*Section 1*

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 anything. 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

The tone of this section is set by the opening sentences. How would you describe that tone?

Circle the images and words that stand out in this passage.

What effect do these images and words have upon you? Why?

Does Douglass successfully convey the plight of the slaves in this passage?

What does this passage say about Captain Anthony? Can we generalize from this passage about slave masters?

We don't know what caused the beatings. Is that significant?

What finally ended the beatings? Why is this significant?

Why do you think Douglass calls this scene a "horrible exhibition"?

How does Douglass style change in this passage? Give examples. Why does it change?

*Section 2*

The home plantation of Colonel Lloyd wore the appearance of a country village. All the mechanical operations for all the farms were performed here. The shoemaking and mending, the blacksmithing, cartwrighting, coopering, weaving, and grain-grinding, were all performed by the slaves on the home plantation. The whole place wore a business-like aspect very unlike the neighboring farms. The number of houses, too, conspired to give it advantage over the neighboring farms. It was called by the slaves the Great House Farm. Few **privileges** were esteemed higher, by the slaves of the out-farms, than that of being selected to do errands at the Great House Farm. It was associated in their minds with greatness. A representative could not be prouder of his election to a seat in the American Congress, than a slave on one of the out-farms would be of his election to do errands at the Great House Farm. They regarded it as evidence of great confidence reposed in them by their overseers; and it was on this account, as well as a constant desire to be out of the field from under the driver's lash, that they esteemed it a high privilege, one worth careful living for.

Why do the slaves call Colonel Lloyd's plantation the "Great House" farm?

Why do the slaves associate the farm with "greatness"?

Why do they want to be selected to go there?

Why does Douglass compare the slaves to members of Congress? What does it mean to call members of Congress slaves? Slaves to what?

What effect does this comparison have? Is this ironic?

Douglass once again uses the idea of "pride". Is he being ironic?

Section 3

The slaves selected to go to the Great House Farm, for the monthly allowance for themselves and their fellow-slaves, were peculiarly **enthusiastic**. While on their way, they would make the dense old woods, for miles around, **reverberate** with their wild songs, **revealing** at once the highest joy and the deepest sadness. They would compose and sing as they went along, consulting neither time nor tune. The thought that came up, came out—if not in the word, in the sound;—and as frequently in the one as in the other. They would sometimes sing the most **pathetic sentiment** in the most **rapturous** tone, and the most **rapturous** sentiment in the most **pathetic** tone. Into all of their songs they would manage to weave something of the Great House Farm. Especially would they do this, when leaving home. They would then sing most exultingly the following words:—

"I am going away to the Great House Farm!  
O, yea! O, yea! O!"

Look up the words “enthusiasm”, “pathetic” and “rapture” in a good dictionary.

What do you learn about their original meanings?

Why do you think Douglass gives us this look the group of slaves composing and singing deep in the woods?

What is the relationship between joy and sorrow in this passage?

Section 4:

I have sometimes thought that the mere hearing of those songs would do more to impress some minds with the horrible character of slavery, than the reading of whole **volumes of philosophy** on the subject could do.

I did not, when a slave, understand the deep meaning of those **rude** and apparently **incoherent** songs. I was myself within the circle; so that I neither saw nor heard as those without might see and hear. They told a tale of woe which was then altogether beyond my **feeble comprehension**; they were tones loud, long, and deep; they breathed the prayer and **complaint** of souls boiling over with the bitterest anguish. Every tone was a **testimony** against slavery, and a prayer I did not, when a slave, understand the deep meaning of those rude and apparently incoherent songs. I was myself within the circle; so that I neither saw nor heard as those without might see and hear. They told a tale of woe which was then altogether beyond my feeble comprehension; they were tones loud, long, and deep; they breathed the prayer and complaint of souls boiling over with the **bitterest anguish**. Every tone was a testimony against slavery, and a prayer to God for deliverance from chains. The hearing of those wild notes always depressed my spirit, and filled me with **ineffable** sadness. I have frequently found myself in tears while hearing them. The mere **recurrence** to those songs, even now, afflicts me; and while I am writing these lines, an expression of feeling has already found its way down my cheek. To those songs I trace my first glimmering conception of the **dehumanizing** character of slavery. I can never get rid of that conception. Those songs still follow me, to deepen my hatred of slavery, and quicken my **sympathies** for my brethren in bonds. If any one wishes to be impressed with the soul-killing effects of slavery, let him go to Colonel Lloyd's plantation, and, on allowance-day, place himself in the deep pine woods, and there let him, in silence, analyze the sounds that shall pass through the chambers of his soul,—and if

What does the opening sentence mean? What does it imply about Douglass' own estimate of the value of his narrative?

What revelation about slavery came to Douglass when he looked back as a free man on this episode?

Why does Douglas call the songs "testimony"?

How do the last two paragraphs sum up the entire section we have been analyzing?

Why would hearing the songs be more effective than a philosophical argument on the injustice of slavery?

**Frederick Douglass's Narrative: Myth of the Happy Slave**

he is not thus impressed, it will only be because 'there is no flesh in his obdurate heart.'

I have often been utterly astonished, since I came to the north, to find persons who could speak of the singing, among slaves, as evidence of their contentment and happiness. It is impossible to conceive of a greater mistake. Slaves sing most when they are most unhappy. The songs of the slave represent the sorrows of his heart; and he is relieved by them, only as an aching heart is relieved by its tears. At least, such is my experience.

The singing of a man cast away upon a **desolate** island might be as **appropriately** considered as evidence of contentment and happiness, as the singing of a slave; the songs of the one and of the other are prompted by the same emotion.”

Source: Frederick Douglass, *Narrative of the Life of Frederick Douglass, an American Slave* (Anti-Slavery Office. Boston, Mass.1845)

Accessed: Documenting the American South

<http://docsouth.unc.edu/neh/douglass/douglass.html>