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Narrative of the Life of Frederick Douglass

BY FREDERICK DOUGLASS



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Name: _____

Date: _____

Pre-Reading**Reliability**

Objective: Recognizing that a contemporaneous narrative is usually a primary, reliable, historical source of information

Activity

Read the following excerpts from the Preface by William Lloyd Garrison and the letter from Wendell Phillips, Esq. Based on these, complete the following chart to evaluate the accuracy of this narrative.

Excerpt One: Preface by William Lloyd Garrison, Boston, May 1, 1845

“Mr. DOUGLASS has very properly chosen to write his own Narrative, in his own style, and according to the best of his ability, rather than to employ some one else. It is, therefore, entirely his own production; and considering how long and dark was the career he had to run as a slave, - how few have been his opportunities to improve his mind since he broke his iron fetters, - it is, in my judgment, highly creditable to his head and heart. He who can peruse it without a tearful eye, a heaving breast, an afflicted spirit, - without being filled with an unutterable abhorrence of slavery and all its abettors, and animated with a determination to seek the immediate overthrow of that execrable system, - without trembling for the fate of this country in the hands of a righteous God, who is ever on the side of the oppressed, and whose arm is not shortened that it cannot save, - must have a flinty heart, and be qualified to act the part of a trafficker “in slaves and the souls of men.” I am confident that it is essentially true in all its statements; that nothing has been set down in malice, nothing exaggerated, nothing drawn from the imagination; that it comes short of the reality, rather than overstates a single fact in regard to SLAVERY AS IT IS. The experience of FREDERICK DOUGLASS, as a slave, was not a peculiar one; his lot was not especially a hard one; his case may be regarded as a very fair specimen of the treatment of slaves in Maryland, in which State it is conceded that they are better fed and less cruelly treated than in Georgia, Alabama, or Louisiana.”

Excerpt Two: Letter from Wendell Phillips, Esq., to Frederick Douglass, Boston, April 22, 1845

“After all, I shall read your book with trembling for you. Some years ago, when you were beginning to tell me your real name and birthplace, you may remember I stopped you, and preferred to remain ignorant of all. With the exception of a vague description, so I continued, till the other day, when you read me your memoirs. I hardly knew, at the time whether to thank you or not for the sight of them, when I reflected that it was still dangerous, in Massachusetts, for honest men to tell their names! They say the fathers, in 1776, signed the Declaration of Independence with the halter about their necks. You, too, publish your declaration of freedom with danger compassing you around. In all the broad lands which the Constitution of the United States overshadows, there is no single spot, — however narrow or desolate, — where a fugitive slave can plant himself and say, “I am safe.” The whole armory of Northern Law has no shield for you. I am free to say that, in your place, I should throw the MS. into the fire.”

Based on these excerpts, decide whether each of the statements in the Reliability Chart that follows is true or false. Then, decide whether the statement contributes to your belief that the narrative you are about to read is reliable.

Name: _____

Date: _____

Chapter II

Visual Irony

Objective: Recognizing irony in visual works

Activity

State why the editorial cartoon below could be called satirical. Draw a political cartoon of your own in which you satirize a modern-day political issue or evil.



Name: _____

Date: _____

Chapters I – IV**African American Culture and Oral Tradition****Objective:** Recognizing slave songs as part of African-American oral tradition**Activity**

The lyrics of slave songs often told of the miseries the slaves suffered, without being so directly insulting to the white Masters as to cause the singer to be punished. In addition, many of the slave songs are today referred to as “Spirituals” or Gospel songs because of the religious ideas expressed in the lyrics. Since most slaves did not know how to read or write, these songs are remembered through oral tradition, and, as such, usually include repeating phrases which can be easily remembered by a group of singers. Read the following examples of slave songs and complete the following chart.

Song 1

Oh, my Lord!
Oh, my good Lord!
Keep me from sinkin; down.
I tell you what I mean to do.
(Keep me from sinkin' down.)
I mean to go to heaven too.
(Keep me from sinkin' down.)
I look up yonder and what do I see?
(Keep me from sinkin' down.)
I see the angels beckonin' me.
(Keep me from sinkin' down)

Song 2

You got a right, I got a right,
We all got a right to the tree of life;
Yes, you got a right, I got a right,
We all got a right to the tree of life.
The very time I thought I was los'
The dungeon shook an' the chain fell off.
You may hinder me here
But you cannot there
'Cause God in his heaven
Goin' to answer prayer.
O Brethren, You got a right
I got a right
We all got a right to the tree of life.

Name: _____

Date: _____

Chapters I – VI**Persuasive Writing**

Objective: Identifying the arguments Douglass makes in this narrative which support his contention that slavery is immoral

Activity

By the time Frederick Douglass wrote this narrative, in 1845, he was acquainted with abolitionist William Lloyd Garrison. Garrison and his followers argued that slavery must be eliminated because its practice caused the moral degradation of both the slaveholder and the slave. Although it is clear from his speeches that by the start of the Civil War, Frederick Douglass also believed in political action to end slavery, at the time of the writing of his *Narrative*, Douglass was merely making speeches to persuade others of the immorality of slavery.

As you read through the narrative, note the incidents from Chapters I through VI on the Immorality Log which support Douglass' contentions that slavery is immoral, that it violates Christian doctrines, and that slaveholding contributes to the immorality of both the slave and the slaveholder. Include as many incidents of immorality as you can find in each chapter and then note the way each incident contributes to immoral behavior by the slave, the slaveholder, or both. The first example is done for you.

Name: _____

Date: _____

Chapter X

Dialogue

Objective: Understanding how dialogue is constructed

Activity

Select one of the following dramatic incidents from Chapter 10, and write a dramatic dialogue for it.

- Frederick collapses from exhaustion while fanning wheat.
- Frederick entreats his Master to remove him from Covey's plantation.
- Frederick and Covey battle for nearly two hours.
- Frederick and the other slaves plan to escape.
- Frederick tells Master Hugh about the fight at Mr. Gardner's shipyard, and Hugh discusses the fight with Esquire Watson.
- Frederick tries to explain to Covey the problems with the oxen.

The dialogue might begin as follows:

[Exhausted and out of breath, Frederick is talking to Covey by the broken gate. Covey is angry, but listening.]

Mr. Covey: How did that gate get broken?

Frederick: I stopped the oxen so I could open the gate, but before I could get hold of the ox-rope, the oxen rushed through the gate. The wheel of the cart got caught on the gate, and I nearly got crushed to death against the gate post. There wasn't anything I could do to stop it.

Mr. Covey: And how do you explain why it took you half a day to bring back one load of wood?

In your group, rewrite one of the six incidents mentioned above as a dramatic dialogue. Be sure to include any necessary stage directions.

Name: _____

Date: _____

Chapter X

Style and Oral Presentation

Objective: Recognizing the power of the author's oratorical style

Activity

If possible, read the following excerpt from Frederick Douglass' Independence Day Speech from 1852 aloud.

What to the American slave is your Fourth of July? I answer: a day that reveals to him, more than all other days in the year, the gross injustice and cruelty to which he is the constant victim. To him, your celebration is a sham; your boasted liberty an unholy license; your national greatness, swelling vanity; your sound of rejoicing are empty and heartless; your denunciation of tyrants, brass-fronted impudence; your shouts of liberty and equality, hollow mockery; your prayers and hymns, your sermons and thanksgiving with all your religious parade and solemnity, are, to Him, mere bombast, fraud, deception, impiety, and hypocrisy a thin veil to cover up crimes which would disgrace a nation of savages. There is not a nation of savages. There is not a nation on earth guilty of practices more shocking and bloody than are the people of the United States at this very hour.

Based on this excerpt, complete the following chart.