Before You Read

from Narrative of the Life of Frederick Douglass

Points of View

Quickwrite

While he was still enslaved, Frederick Douglass fought to assert his human rights and defend his dignity against a brutal social institution. His courageous action became a turning point in his life. Think of other heroic men and women who have fought against slavery, and jot down the qualities or attitudes you admire in them.

Literary Focus

Metaphor

Writers and poets use **metaphors** to make creative comparisons. Near the end of the selection, Douglass uses a metaphor that compares his triumph over Mr. Covey to resurrection from the dead: "It was a glorious resurrection, from the tomb of slavery, to the heaven of freedom." The metaphor adds a spiritual dimension to the story by connecting a physical victory to a victory of the soul.

> A **metaphor** is a figure of speech that makes a comparison between two unlike things without the use of a specific word of comparison, such as *like, as, than,* or *resembles.*
>
> *For more on Metaphor, see the Handbook of Literary and Historical Terms.*

SKILLS FOCUS

Literary Skills Analyze points of view on a topic. Understand metaphor.

Reading Skills Analyze a writer's purpose.

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Vocabulary Practice

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More About Frederick Douglass

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Keyword: LE7 11-4

Reading Skills

Analyzing a Writer's Purpose

In many cases, writers combine several modes of expression—such as description, narration, exposition, and persuasion—in order to accomplish their purpose. Douglass's writing provides a good example. He does not rely on *persuasion* to prove that slavery is dehumanizing. Instead, he *describes* the life of a slave and *narrates* his experiences in order to persuade readers to take action against slavery.

Background

In the following selection, Douglass provides a graphic account of a critical incident that occurred when he was sixteen years old. Earlier in his narrative he explains to his readers "how a man was made a slave"; now he sets out to explain "how a slave was made a man." At the time, Douglass was "owned" by a man named Thomas, who had rented Douglass's services out for a year to a man named Covey.

Vocabulary Development

intimated (in'tə·māt'id) *v.*: stated indirectly; hinted.

comply (kəm·plī') *v.*: obey; agree to a request.

interpose (in'tər·pōz') *v.*: put forth in order to interfere.

afforded (ə·fôrd'id) *v.*: gave; provided.

solemnity (sə·lem'nə·tē) *n.*: seriousness.

render (ren'dər) *v.*: make.

singular (siŋ'gyə·lər) *adj.*: remarkable.

attributed (ə·trib'yo͞ot·id) *v.*: thought of as resulting from.

expiring (ek·spīr'iŋ) *v.* used as *adj.*: dying.

from Narrative of the Life of Frederick Douglass

Frederick Douglass

The Battle with Mr. Covey

I have already intimated that my condition was much worse, during the first six months of my stay at Mr. Covey's, than in the last six. The circumstances leading to the change in Mr. Covey's course toward me form an epoch[1] in my humble history. You have seen how a man was made a slave; you shall see how a slave was made a man. On one of the hottest days of the month of August, 1833, Bill Smith, William Hughes, a slave named Eli, and myself, were engaged in fanning wheat.[2] Hughes was clearing the fanned wheat from before the fan, Eli was turning, Smith was feeding, and I was carrying wheat to the fan. The work was simple, requiring strength rather than intellect; yet, to one entirely unused to such work, it came very hard.

About three o'clock of that day, I broke down; my strength failed me; I was seized with a violent aching of the head, attended with extreme dizziness; I trembled in every limb. Finding what was coming, I nerved myself up, feeling it would never do to stop work. I stood as long as I could drag to the hopper with grain. When I could stand no longer, I fell, and felt as if held down by some immense weight. The fan of course stopped; for everyone had his own work to do; and no one could do the work of the other, and have his own go on at the same time.

Mr. Covey was at the house, about one hundred yards from the treading yard where we were fanning. On hearing the fan stop, he left immediately, and came to the spot where we were. He hastily inquired what the matter was. Bill answered that I was sick, and there was no one to bring wheat to the fan. I had by this time crawled away under the side of the post-and-rail fence by which the yard was enclosed, hoping to find relief by getting out of the sun. He then asked where I was. He was told by one of the hands.

He came to the spot, and, after looking at me awhile, asked me what was the matter. I told him as well as I could, for I scarce had strength to speak. He then gave me a savage kick in the side, and told me to get up. I tried to do so, but fell back in the attempt. He gave me another kick, and again told me to rise. I again tried, and succeeded in gaining my feet; but, stooping to get the tub with which I was feeding the fan, I again staggered and fell. While down in this situation, Mr. Covey took up the hickory slat with which Hughes had been striking off the half-bushel measure, and with it gave me a heavy blow upon the head, making a large wound, and the blood ran freely; and with this again told me to get up. I made no effort to comply, having now made up my mind to let him do his worst. In a short time after receiving this blow, my head grew better. Mr. Covey had now left me to my fate.

At this moment I resolved, for the first time, to go to my master, enter a complaint, and ask his protection. In order to [do] this, I must that afternoon walk seven miles; and this, under the circumstances, was truly a severe undertaking. I was exceedingly feeble; made so as much by the kicks and blows which I received, as by the severe fit of sickness to which I had been subjected. I, however, watched my chance, while Covey was looking in an opposite direction, and started for St. Michael's. I succeeded in

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1. **epoch** (ep'ək) *n.*: noteworthy period of time.
2. **fanning wheat:** separating out usable grain.

Vocabulary

intimated (in'tə·māt'id) *v.*: stated indirectly; hinted.
comply (kəm·plī') *v.*: obey; agree to a request.

...a considerable distance on my way to ...woods, when Covey discovered me, and ...after me to come back, threatening what ...would do if I did not come. I disregarded ...his calls and his threats, and made my way ...the woods as fast as my feeble state would ...and thinking I might be overhauled by ...I kept the road, I walked through the ...woods, keeping far enough from the road to ...detection, and near enough to prevent ...my way.

...had not gone far before my little strength ...failed me. I could go no farther. I fell ...and lay for a considerable time. The ...was yet oozing from the wound on my ...For a time I thought I should bleed to ...death, and think now that I should have done ...but that the blood so matted my hair as to ...the wound. After lying there about three ...quarters of an hour, I nerved myself up again, ...started on my way, through bogs and briers, ...barefooted and bareheaded, tearing my feet ...sometimes at nearly every step; and after a ...journey of about seven miles, occupying some ...hours to perform it, I arrived at master's ...I then presented an appearance enough to ...any but a heart of iron. From the crown of ...head to my feet, I was covered with blood. ...hair was all clotted with dust and blood; my ...was stiff with blood. My legs and feet were ...in sundry places with briers and thorns, ...were also covered with blood. I suppose ...looked like a man who had escaped a den of ...beasts, and barely escaped them.

...this state I appeared before my master, ...humbly entreating him to interpose his author- ...for my protection. I told him all the circum- ...as well as I could, and it seemed, as I ...at times to affect him. He would then ...the floor, and seek to justify Covey by say- ...he expected I deserved it. He asked me what ...I told him, to let me get a new home; ...sure as I lived with Mr. Covey again, I ...live with but to die with him; that Covey ...surely kill me; he was in a fair way for it. Master Thomas ridiculed the idea that there was any danger of Mr. Covey's killing me, and said that he knew Mr. Covey; that he was a good man, and that he could not think of taking me from him; that, should he do so, he would lose the whole year's wages; that I belonged to Mr. Covey for one year, and that I must go back to him, come what might; and that I must not trouble him with any more stories, or that he would himself *get hold of me.* After threatening me thus, he gave me a very large dose of salts, telling me that I might remain in St. Michael's that night (it being quite late), but that I must be off back to Mr. Covey's early in the morning; and that if I did not, he would *get hold of me,* which meant that he would whip me.

I remained all night, and, according to his orders, I started off to Covey's in the morning (Saturday morning), wearied in body and broken in spirit. I got no supper that night, or breakfast that morning. I reached Covey's about nine o'clock; and just as I was getting over the fence that divided Mrs. Kemp's fields from ours, out ran Covey with his cowskin, to give me another whipping. Before he could reach me, I succeeded in getting to the cornfield; and as the corn was very high, it afforded me the means of hiding. He seemed very angry, and searched for me a long time. My behavior was altogether unaccountable. He finally gave up the chase, thinking, I suppose, that I must come home for something to eat; he would give himself no further trouble in looking for me. I spent that day mostly in the woods, having the alternative before me—to go home and be whipped to death, or stay in the woods and be starved to death.

That night, I fell in with Sandy Jenkins, a slave with whom I was somewhat acquainted. Sandy had a free wife who lived about four miles from Mr. Covey's; and it being Saturday,

Vocabulary

interpose (in'tər·pōz') *v.:* put forth in order to interfere.
afforded (ə·fôrd'id) *v.:* gave; provided.

he was on his way to see her. I told him my circumstances, and he very kindly invited me to go home with him. I went home with him, and talked this whole matter over, and got his advice as to what course it was best for me to pursue. I found Sandy an old advisor.[3] He told me, with great solemnity, I must go back to Covey; but that before I went, I must go with him into another part of the woods, where there was a certain *root*, which, if I would take some of it with me, carrying it *always on my right side*, would render it impossible for Mr. Covey, or any other white man, to whip me. He said he had carried it for years; and since he had done so, he had never received a blow, and never expected to while he carried it. I at first rejected the idea, that the simple carrying of a root in my pocket would have any such effect as he had said, and was not disposed to take it; but Sandy impressed the necessity with much earnestness, telling me it could do no harm, if it did no good. To please him, I at length took the root, and, according to his direction, carried it upon my right side. This was Sunday morning.

I immediately started for home; and upon entering the yard gate, out came Mr. Covey on his way to meeting. He spoke to me very kindly, made me drive the pigs from a lot nearby, and passed on toward the church. Now, this singular conduct of Mr. Covey really made me begin to think that there was something in the *root* which Sandy had given me; and had it been on any other day than Sunday, I could have attributed the conduct to no other cause than the influence of that root; and as it was, I was half inclined to think the *root* to be something more than I at first had taken it to be. All went well till Monday morning. On this morning, the virtue of the *root* was fully tested.

Long before daylight, I was called to go and rub, curry, and feed the horses. I obeyed, and was glad to obey. But while thus engaged, while in the act of throwing down some blades from the loft, Mr. Covey entered the stable with a long rope; and just as I was half out of the loft, he caught hold of my legs, and was about tying me. As soon as I found what he was up to, I gave a sudden spring, and as I did so, he holding to my legs, I was brought sprawling on the stable floor. Mr. Covey seemed now to think he had me, and could do what he pleased; but at this moment—from whence came the spirit I don't know—I resolved to fight; and, suiting my action to the resolution, I seized Covey hard by the throat; and as I did so, I rose. He held on to me, and I to him. My resistance was so entirely unexpected, that Covey seemed taken all aback. He trembled like a leaf. This gave me assurance, and I held him uneasy, causing the blood to run where I touched him with the ends of my fingers. Mr. Covey soon called out to Hughes for help. Hughes came, and, while Covey held me, attempted to tie my right hand. While he was in the act of doing so, I watched my chance, and gave him a heavy kick close under the ribs. This kick fairly sickened Hughes, so that he left me in the hands of Mr. Covey.

This kick had the effect of not only weakening Hughes, but Covey also. When he saw Hughes bending over with pain, his courage quailed.[4] He asked me if I meant to persist in my resistance. I told him I did, come what might; that he had used me like a brute for six months, and that I was determined to be used so no longer. With that, he strove to drag me to a stick that was lying just out of the stable door. He meant to knock me down. But just as he was leaning over to get the stick, I seized him with both hands by his collar, and brought him by a

3. **an old advisor:** someone who can offer good advice.

4. **quailed** *v.*: faltered.

Vocabulary

solemnity (sə·lem′nə·tē) *n.*: seriousness.
render (ren′dər) *v.*: make.
singular (siŋ′gyə·lər) *adj.*: remarkable.
attributed (ə·trib′yo͞ot·id) *v.*: thought of as resulting from

The Life of Frederick Douglass (1938–1939), No. 9, by Jacob Lawrence. "Transferred back to the eastern shore of Maryland, being one of the few Negroes who could read or write, Douglass was approached by James Mitchell, a free Negro, and asked to help teach a Sabbath School. However, their work was stopped by a mob who threatened them with death if they continued their class—1833." (12" × 17⅞").

sudden snatch to the ground. By this time, Bill came. Covey called upon him for assistance. Bill wanted to know what he could do. Covey said, "Take hold of him, take hold of him!" Bill said his master hired him out to work, and not to help to whip me; so he left Covey and myself to fight our own battle out. We were at it for nearly two hours. Covey at length let me go, puffing and blowing at a great rate, saying that if I had not resisted, he would not have whipped me half so much. The truth was, that he had not whipped me at all. I considered him as getting entirely the worst end of the bargain; for he had drawn no blood from me, but I had from him. The whole six months afterward, that I spent with Mr. Covey, he never laid the weight of his finger upon me in anger. He would occasionally say, he didn't want to get hold of me again. "No," thought I, "you need not; for you will come off worse than you did before."

This battle with Mr. Covey was the turning point in my career as a slave. It rekindled the few expiring embers of freedom, and revived within me a sense of my own manhood. It recalled the departed self-confidence, and inspired me again with a determination to be free. The gratification afforded by the triumph was a full compensation for whatever else might follow, even death itself. He only can understand the deep satisfaction which I experienced, who has himself repelled by force the bloody arm of slavery. I felt as I never felt before. It was a glorious resurrection,[5] from the tomb of slavery, to the heaven of freedom. My long-crushed spirit rose, cowardice departed, bold defiance took its place; and I now resolved that, however long I might remain a slave in form, the day had passed forever when I could be a slave in fact. ■

5. **resurrection** *n.:* coming back to life.

Vocabulary

expiring (ek·spīr′iŋ) *v.* used as *adj.:* dying.

Response and Analysis

Reading Check

1. What action did Douglass take after Covey struck him? What did Thomas order Douglass to do?
2. Explain how Sandy Jenkins helped Douglass.

Thinking Critically

3. The root Douglass carried was thought to have supernatural powers. What made him think the root was magical? What did he discover was more powerful than the root?
4. Based on this account, how would you **characterize** the young Frederick Douglass? Did he possess any of the qualities or attributes you noted in the Quickwrite? Explain.
5. Explain the **metaphor** implied in this line: "It [the battle with Covey] rekindled the few expiring embers of freedom." How is the metaphor related to the idea of rebirth?
6. At the end of the selection, Douglass distinguishes between being "a slave in form" and "a slave in fact." How does this distinction support the **theme** of this selection?
7. Think about Douglass's **purpose** in writing this narrative. Consider Douglass's **style**, including his objectivity and restraint in describing painful incidents. How does Douglass win over an audience that might be uneasy at the idea of a black man's fighting a white man?

Literary Criticism

8. **Political approach.** In every period of history, certain conditions and events shape the character of people who live during that time. How was Douglass influenced by slavery, and in what ways does his story influence the institution of slavery?

WRITING

Douglass Writes Back

American literature abounds with writers who have championed principles of freedom—such as Jefferson, Paine, Emerson, and Thoreau. Write a letter in which Douglass responds to one of these writers. Have Douglass express his views on slavery and then comment on the author's writings and beliefs.

SKILLS FOCUS

Literary Skills Analyze points of view on a topic. Analyze metaphor.

Reading Skills Analyze a writer's purpose.

Writing Skills Write a letter expressing political views.

Vocabulary Skills Use context clues to determine the meanings of words.

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Projects and Activities

Keyword: LE7 11-4

Vocabulary Development

Context Clues

intimated	*afforded*	*singular*
comply	*solemnity*	*attributes*
interpose	*render*	*expiring*

Look back at the selection now, and see if there are any clues in the **context** (the surrounding sentences) that would help figure out the meaning of each underlined Vocabulary word. Record your findings in a chart like this one:

curry

Meaning: *comb and groom*

Clues: *"I was called to go and rub, curry, and feed the horses." Curry must be something done to a horse.*

Possible meaning from context: *He is rubbing and feeding the horses; perhaps he is washing and combing them as well.*

Before You Read

from Incidents in the Life of a Slave Girl

Points of View

The most obvious influence in Harriet Jacobs's life was slavery. It established her identity, ruled her daily existence, controlled her family life, and dominated her ideas and emotions. Jacobs was not only a slave, though; she was also a woman and a mother. Her autobiography brings us this additional perspective on the dehumanizing effects of slavery.

Literary Focus

Internal and External Conflict

Conflict is central to Jacobs's narrative. She experienced **external conflicts** when she escaped from her furious owner and tried to avoid recapture. In a larger context her life can be seen as one long struggle against the slave system.

Jacobs's **internal conflicts** were just as intense (for example, she pondered whether she dared abandon her children or involve her friends). These internal conflicts also had a direct influence on how her external conflicts were resolved.

SKILLS FOCUS

Literary Skills Analyze points of view on a topic. Understand internal and external conflict.

Conflict is the struggle between opposing forces or characters in a story. Conflict can be **internal** (a character struggles with conscience, for example) or **external** (a character struggles with another person or with society).

For more on Conflict, see the Handbook of Literary and Historical Terms.

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Vocabulary Practice

Keyword: LE7 11-4

Background

Harriet Jacobs's autobiography is an autobiographical historical narrative. She used language and dialect that were typical of her time but would be considered offensive by today's readers. Although *Incidents in the Life of a Slave Girl* is nonfiction, Jacobs used pseudonyms for the characters. The narrator, who says she is writing her autobiography, is called Linda Brent. Dr. James Norcom, the slaveholder who pursued Jacobs for years, is called Dr. or Mr. Flint.

Vocabulary Development

malice (mal′is) *n.*: ill will; desire to harm

fervently (fʉr′vənt·lē) *adv.*: with intense feeling

unnerve (un·nʉrv′) *v.*: cause to lose one's courage

provocation (präv′ə·kā′shən) *n.*: something that stirs up action or feeling

distressed (di·strest′) *adj.*: suffering; troubled

cunning (kun′iŋ) *adj.*: sly or crafty

compelled (kəm·peld′) *v.*: driven; forced

impulse (im′puls′) *n.*: sudden desire or urge

from Incidents in the Life of a Slave Girl

Harriet A. Jacobs

The Flight

Mr. Flint was hard pushed for house servants, and rather than lose me he had restrained his malice. I did my work faithfully, though not, of course, with a willing mind. They were evidently afraid I should leave them. Mr. Flint wished that I should sleep in the great house instead of the servants' quarters. His wife objected to the proposition, but said I mustn't bring my bed into the house, because it would scatter feathers on her carpet. I knew when I left there that they would never think of such a thing as furnishing a bed of any kind for me or any little one. I therefore carried my own bed, and now I was forbidden to use it. I did as I was ordered. But now that I was certain my children were to be put in their power, in order to give them a stronger hold on me, I resolved to leave them that night. I remembered the grief my step would bring upon my dear old grandmother; and nothing less than the freedom of my children would have induced me to disregard her advice. I went about my evening work with trembling steps. Mr. Flint twice called at his chamber door to inquire why the house was not locked up. I replied that I had not done work. "You have had time enough to do it," he said. "Take care how you answer me!" I shut all the windows, locked all the doors, and went up to the third story, to wait till midnight. How long those hours seemed, and how fervently I prayed that God would not forsake[1] me in this hour of utmost need! I was about to risk everything on the throw of a die; and if I failed, on what would become of me and my children? They would be made to suffer for my fault.

Half past twelve, I stole softly downstairs. I paused on the second floor, thinking I heard a noise. I felt my way down into the parlor, and looked out of the window. The night was so intensely dark that I could see nothing. I raised the window very softly and jumped out. Large drops of rain were falling, and the darkness bewildered me. I dropped on my knees, and breathed a short prayer to God for guidance and protection. I groped my way to the road, and rushed toward the town with almost lightning speed. I arrived at my grandmother's house, but dared not see her. She would say, "Linda,[2] you are killing me," and I knew that would unnerve me. I tapped softly at the window of a room occupied by a woman who had lived in the house several years. I knew she was a faithful friend, and could be trusted with my secret. I tapped several times before she heard me. At last she raised the window, and I whispered, "Sally, I have run away. Let me in, quick." She opened the door softly, and said in low tones, "For God's sake, don't. Your grandmother is trying to buy you and de chillern. Mr. Sands was here last week. He tole her he was going away on business, but he wanted her to go ahead about buying you and de chillern, and he would help her all he could. Don't run away, Linda. Your grandmother is all bowed down wid trouble now."

I replied, "Sally, they are going to carry my children to the plantation tomorrow; and they will never sell them to anybody so long as they have me in their power. Now, would you advise me to go back?"

"No, chile, no," answered she. "When dey finds you is gone, dey won't want de plague ob de chillern; but where is you going to hide? Dey knows ebery inch ob dis house."

1. **forsake** *v.*: abandon; give up.

2. **Linda:** Jacobs's made-up name for herself (see Background, page 472).

Vocabulary

malice (mal'is) *n.*: ill will; desire to harm.
fervently (fur'vənt·lē) *adv.*: with intense feeling.
unnerve (un·nurv') *v.*: cause to lose one's courage.

I told her I had a hiding place, and that was all it was best for her to know. I asked her to go into my room as soon as it was light, and take all my clothes out of my trunk, and pack them in hers; for I knew Mr. Flint and the constable[3] would be there early to search my room. I feared the sight of my children would be too much for my full heart; but I could not go out into the uncertain future without one last look. I bent over the bed where lay my little Benny and baby Ellen. Poor little ones! Fatherless and motherless! Memories of their father came over me. He wanted to be kind to them; but they were not all to him, as they were to my womanly heart. I knelt and prayed for the innocent little sleepers. I kissed them lightly, and turned away.

As I was about to open the street door, Sally laid her hand on my shoulder, and said, "Linda, are you gwine all alone? Let me call your uncle."

"No, Sally," I replied, "I want no one to be brought into trouble on my account."

I went forth into the darkness and rain. I ran on till I came to the house of the friend who was to conceal me.

Early the next morning Mr. Flint was at my grandmother's inquiring for me. She told him she had not seen me, and supposed I was at the plantation. He watched her face narrowly, and said, "Don't you know anything about her running off?" She assured him that she did not. He went on to say, "Last night she ran off without the least provocation. We had treated her very kindly. My wife liked her. She will soon be found and brought back. Are her children with you?" When told that they were, he said, "I am very glad to hear that. If they are here, she cannot be far off. If I find out that any of my niggers have had anything to do with this damned business, I'll give 'em five hundred lashes." As he started to go to his father's, he turned round and added, persuasively, "Let her be brought back, and she shall have her children to live with her."

3. **constable** *n.*: officer of the law, ranking just below sheriff.

The tidings[4] made the old doctor rave and storm at a furious rate. It was a busy day for them. My grandmother's house was searched from top to bottom. As my trunk was empty, they concluded I had taken my clothes with me. Before ten o'clock every vessel northward bound was thoroughly examined, and the law against harboring[5] fugitives was read to all onboard. At night a watch was set over the town. Knowing how distressed my grandmother would be, I wanted to send her a message; but it could not be done. Everyone who went in or out of her house was closely watched. The doctor said he would take my children, unless she became responsible for them; which of course she willingly did. The next day was spent in searching. Before night, the following advertisement was posted at every corner, and in every public place for miles round:

$300 REWARD! Ran away from the subscriber,[6] an intelligent, bright mulatto[7] girl, named Linda, 21 years of age. Five feet four inches high. Dark eyes, and black hair inclined to curl; but it can be made straight. Has a decayed spot on a front tooth. She can read and write, and in all probability will try to get to the Free States. All persons are forbidden, under penalty of the law, to harbor or employ said slave. $150 will be given to whoever takes her in the state, and $300 if taken out of the state and delivered to me, or lodged in jail.

Dr. Flint

4. **tidings** *n. pl.*: news.
5. **harboring** *v.* used as *n.*: providing protection or shelter.
6. **subscriber** *n.*: literally, the person whose name is "written below"; that is, Dr. Flint.
7. **mulatto** *adj.*: of mixed black and white ancestry.

Vocabulary

provocation (präv'ə·kā'shən) *n.*: something that stirs up action or feeling.

distressed (di·strest') *adj.*: suffering; troubled.

Jacobs (Linda) passed a terrifying week in hiding. Then one night she heard her pursuers nearby. Afraid of capture, she rushed out of her friend's house and concealed herself in a thicket, where she was bitten by a poisonous reptile. Determined not to give up, Jacobs adopted the motto "Give me liberty, or give me death." With the aid of her friend Betty, she found shelter with the sympathetic wife of a local slaveholder. The woman urged Jacobs never to reveal who had helped her, and she hid the fugitive in a small upstairs storeroom.

Months of Peril

I went to sleep that night with the feeling that I was for the present the most fortunate slave in town. Morning came and filled my little cell with light. I thanked the heavenly Father for this safe retreat. Opposite my window was a pile of feather beds. On the top of these I could lie perfectly concealed, and command a view of the street through which Dr. Flint passed to his office. Anxious as I was, I felt a gleam of satisfaction when I saw him. Thus far I had outwitted him, and I triumphed over it. Who can blame slaves for being cunning? They are constantly compelled to resort to it. It is the only weapon of the weak and oppressed against the strength of their tyrants.

I was daily hoping to hear that my master had sold my children; for I knew who was on the watch to buy them. But Dr. Flint cared even more for revenge than he did for money. My brother William, and the good aunt who had served in his family twenty years, and my little Benny, and Ellen, who was a little over two years old, were thrust into jail, as a means of compelling my relatives to give some information about me. He swore my grandmother should never see one of them again till I was brought back. They kept these facts from me for several days. When I heard that my little ones were in a loathsome jail, my first impulse was to go to them. I was encountering dangers for the sake of freeing them, and must I be the cause of their death? The thought was agonizing. My benefactress[8] tried to soothe me by telling me that my aunt would take good care of the children while they remained in jail. But it added to my pain to think that the good old aunt, who had always been so kind to her sister's orphan children, should be shut up in prison for no other crime than loving them. I suppose my friends feared a reckless movement on my part, knowing, as they did, that my life was bound up in my children. I received a note from my brother William. It was scarcely legible, and ran thus: "Wherever you are, dear sister, I beg of you not to come here. We are all much better off than you are. If you come, you will ruin us all. They would force you to tell where you had been, or they would kill you. Take the advice of your friends; if not for the sake of me and your children, at least for the sake of those you would ruin."

Poor William! He also must suffer for being my brother. I took his advice and kept quiet. My aunt was taken out of jail at the end of a month, because Mrs. Flint could not spare her any longer. She was tired of being her own housekeeper. It was quite too fatiguing to order her dinner and eat it too. My children remained in jail, where brother William did all he could for their comfort. Betty went to see them sometimes, and brought me tidings. She was not permitted to enter the jail; but William would hold them up to the grated window while she chatted with them. When she repeated their prattle,[9] and told me how they wanted to see their ma, my tears would flow. Old Betty would exclaim, "Lors, chile! what's you crying 'bout? Dem young uns vil kill you dead. Don't be so chick'n-hearted! If you does, you vil nebber git thro' dis world." ■

8. **benefactress** *n.*: woman who gives aid.
9. **prattle** *n.*: chatter; babble.

Vocabulary
cunning (kun'iŋ) *adj.*: sly or crafty.
compelled (kəm•peld') *v.*: driven; forced.
impulse (im'puls') *n.*: sudden desire or urge.

Response and Analysis

Reading Check

1. Why did Jacobs finally decide to escape?
2. What did Jacobs ask Sally to do for her at dawn?
3. What did Jacobs's grandmother tell Dr. Flint about the escape?
4. What did Dr. Flint assume Jacobs would try to do?
5. What advice did Jacobs receive from her brother William?

Thinking Critically

6. How would you describe Jacobs's **character**? Find details in the text that reveal her character traits.
7. Describe how Jacobs resolved one of her **internal conflicts.** How did her decision affect the **external conflict** she faced?
8. Cite specific passages in Jacobs's narrative that illustrate the religious influences that affected Jacobs and her decisions.

Extending and Evaluating

9. Explain Jacobs's **purpose** in writing and publishing her story. Judging from this excerpt, do you think she achieved her purpose? Why or why not?
10. Jacobs's writing has been criticized as resembling too much the melodramatic novels popular in her time. Do you think her story rings true, or do you find parts of it sentimental? How might you change the language or alter her word choice to update the selection?

Literary Criticism

11. **Political approach.** Frederick Douglass (page 463) and Harriet Jacobs narrate two different episodes of slave life. Compare and contrast their situations, their actions, their emotions, and their opinions. How do their attitudes and views contribute to their credibility? In other words, what do they believe, and do you believe them?

WRITING

Across the Lines

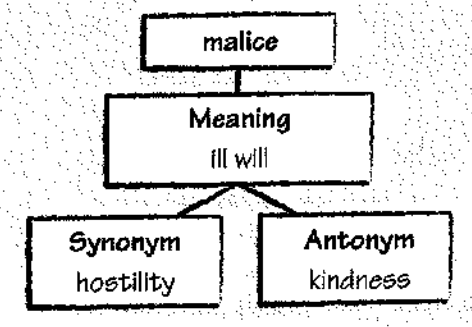
Imagine that Jacobs escaped to the North and sent a written message back to one of the characters in the excerpt—Sally, Betty, her grandmother, the woman who hid her in the storeroom, or Dr. Flint. Write the **message,** explaining Jacobs's motivations, expressing her feelings, and describing her plans and hopes for the future.

Vocabulary Development

Mapping Meanings

Create a word map like the one below for each of the remaining Vocabulary words. (Not all words will have an antonym.)

malice ***provocation*** ***compelled***
fervently ***distressed*** ***impulse***
unnerve ***cunning***



SKILLS FOCUS

Literary Skills Analyze points of view on a topic. Analyze internal and external conflict.

Writing Skills Write a message or letter from the point of view of a character.

Vocabulary Skills Create semantic maps with synonyms and antonyms.

Connected Readings

Slavery

Frederick Douglass ..... *from* **My Bondage and My Freedom**

Spirituals ..... **Go Down, Moses / Follow the Drinking Gourd / Swing Low, Sweet Chariot**

Commonwealth and *Freeman's Record* ..... **The Most Remarkable Woman of This Age**

You have just read selections from the autobiographies of Frederick Douglass and Harriet A. Jacobs describing their experiences of slavery. The next three selections you will be reading—another piece by Douglass, some spirituals, and an article about Harriet Tubman—present other views on slavery. As you read, ask yourself how the experiences and views expressed in the selections are alike and how they are different. At the end, on page 487, you'll find questions asking you to compare all five selections in this Comparing Points of View feature on slavery.

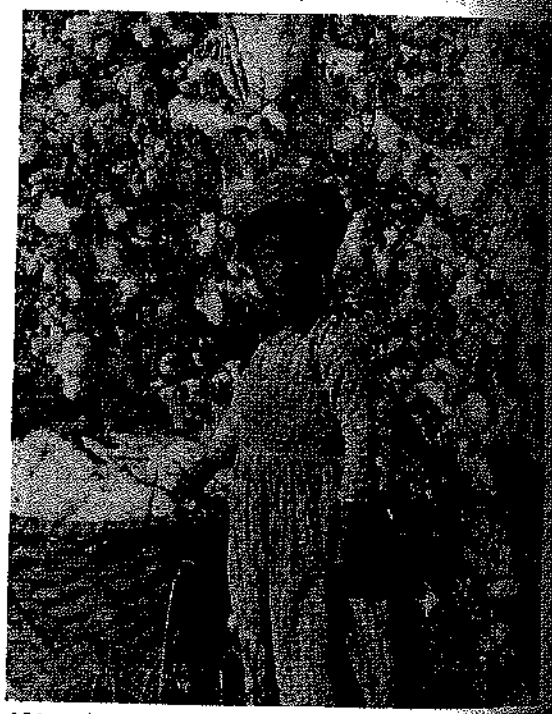
Points of View

Before You Read

In this excerpt from *My Bondage and My Freedom,* Frederick Douglass writes eloquently about the songs of slavery—compositions later called sorrow songs by the African American writer W.E.B. DuBois. In his 1903 book *The Souls of Black Folk,* DuBois made the following comments about sorrow songs:

> "Through all the sorrow of the Sorrow Songs there breathes a hope—a faith in the ultimate justice of things. The minor cadences of despair change often to triumph and calm confidence. Sometimes it is faith in life, sometimes a faith in death, sometimes assurance of boundless justice in some fair world beyond. But whichever it is, the meaning is always clear: that sometime, somewhere, men will judge men by their souls and not by their skins."

In the same way, when Frederick Douglass describes his intense responses to those "wild notes" in *My Bondage and My Freedom,* he demonstrates how a literary composition, born out of hard real-world experience, can ultimately have a political impact.



African American girl picking cotton on a Georgia plantation (1895).

AUTOBIOGRAPHY

INFORMATIONAL TEXT

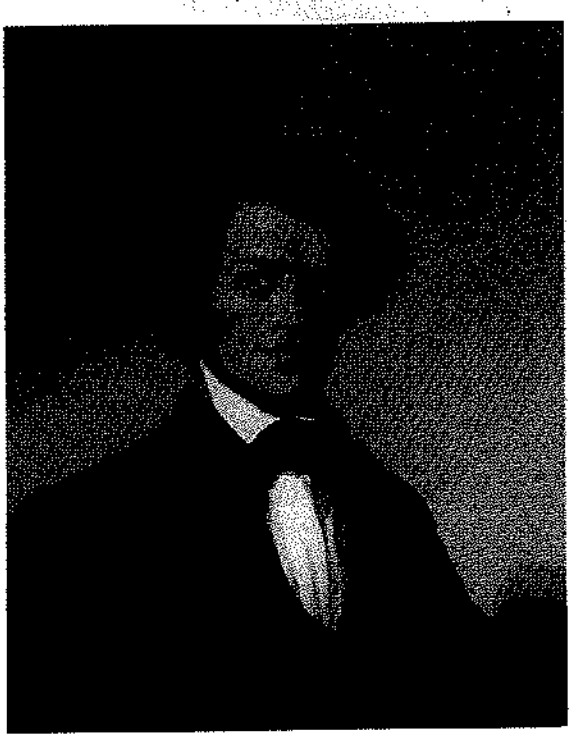
from My Bondage and My Freedom

Frederick Douglass

Slaves are generally expected to sing as well as to work. A silent slave is not liked by masters or overseers. *"Make a noise, make a noise,"* and *"bear a hand"* are the words usually addressed to the slaves when there is silence amongst them. This may account for the almost constant singing heard in the southern states. . . . On allowance day, those who visited the great house farm were peculiarly excited and noisy. While on their way, they would make the dense old woods, for miles around, reverberate with their wild notes. These were not always merry because they were wild. On the contrary, they were mostly of a plaintive[1] cast, and told a tale of grief and sorrow. In the most boisterous outbursts of rapturous sentiment, there was ever a tinge of deep melancholy.[2] I have never heard sad songs like those anywhere since I left slavery, except when in Ireland. There I heard the same *wailing notes,* and was much affected by them. It was during the famine of 1845–1846. To all the songs of the slaves, there was ever some expression in praise of the great house farm, something which would flatter the pride of the owner, and, possibly, draw a favorable notice from him.

. . . I cannot better express my sense of them now, than ten years ago, when, in sketching my life, I thus spoke of this feature of my plantation experience:

. . . The hearing of those wild notes always depressed my spirits, and filled my heart with indescribable[3] sadness. The mere recurrence, even now, afflicts my spirit, and while I am writing these lines, my tears are falling. To those songs I trace my first glimmering conceptions 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 anyone wishes to be impressed with a sense of the soul-killing power 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, thoughtfully analyze the sounds that shall pass through the chambers of his soul, and if he is not thus impressed, it will only be because 'there is no flesh in his obdurate[4] heart.'"



Frederick Douglass (detail) (c. 1844), attributed to Elisha Hammond. Oil on canvas (27½" × 22½").

National Portrait Gallery, Smithsonian Institution. Courtesy Art Resource, New York.

1. **plaintive** *adj.:* mournful; sad.
2. **melancholy** *n.:* sadness; gloom.
3. **indescribable** *adj.:* too great to be expressed; undescribable.
4. **obdurate** *adj.:* without sympathy; pitiless.

The Cotton Pickers (1876) by Winslow Homer: Oil on canvas (61.0 cm x 97.1 cm).

Points of View

Before You Read

The moving and intensely emotional songs known as spirituals developed largely from the oral traditions of Africans held in slavery in the South before the Civil War. Spirituals, like other kinds of folk literature and music, were composed by anonymous artists and passed on orally. They often combine African melodies and rhythms with elements of white southern religious music.

Even though individuals probably composed the spirituals, the ideas and the language came from a common group of images and idioms. As the songs were passed from generation to generation by word of mouth, lines were changed and new stanzas were added, so that numerous versions of a particular spiritual might exist.

Spirituals were concerned above all with issues of freedom: spiritual freedom in the form of salvation and literal freedom from the shackles of slavery. The biblical Moses delivered the ancient Israelites from slavery in Egypt. Many people during the time of slavery were therefore called Moses by those longing for deliverance. Harriet Tubman, for example, used Moses as her code name with the Underground Railroad. A Methodist minister named Francis Asbury was also known as Moses, and according to some scholars, the spiritual "Go Down, Moses" is really a plea for Asbury's help.

Some of the songs were code songs, or signal songs—that is, songs with details that provided runaways with directions, times, and meeting places for their escapes. For example, in "Follow the Drinking Gourd," the drinking gourd refers literally to the shell of a vegetable related to the squash or melon, dried and hollowed out for drinking. Slaves, however, knew that the drinking gourd was also the Big Dipper, a group of stars. Two stars in the bowl of the Big Dipper point to the North Star—and the direction of freedom.

SPIRITUALS

Go Down, Moses

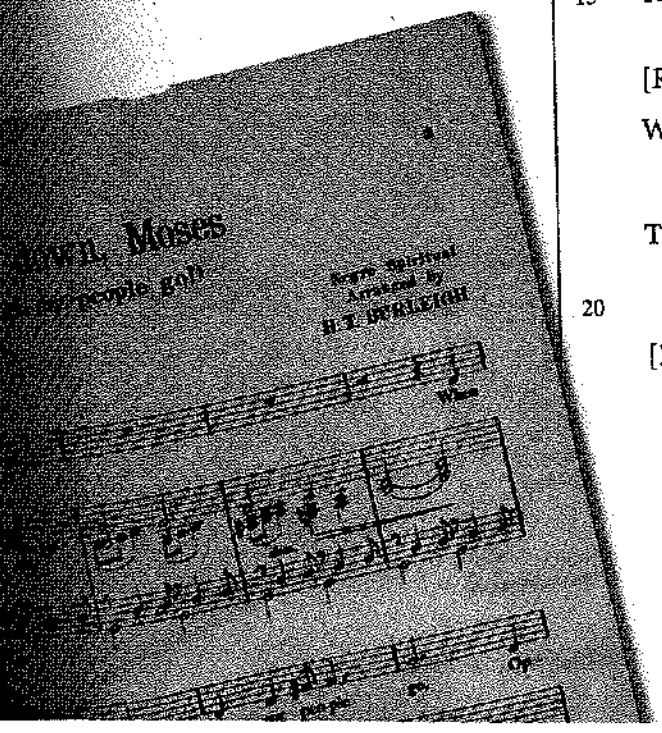
Go down, Moses,
Way down in Egypt land
Tell old Pharaoh
To let my people go.

When Israel was in Egypt land
Let my people go
Oppressed so hard they could not stand
Let my people go.

Go down, Moses,
Way down in Egypt land
Tell old Pharaoh,
"Let my people go."

"Thus saith the Lord," bold Moses said,
"Let my people go;
If not I'll smite your firstborn dead
Let my people go."

Go down, Moses,
Way down in Egypt land,
Tell old Pharaoh,
"Let my people go!"



Follow the Drinking Gourd

When the sun comes back and the first
quail calls,
Follow the drinking gourd,
For the old man is a-waiting for to carry
you to freedom
If you follow the drinking gourd.

[Refrain]

Follow the drinking gourd,
Follow the drinking gourd,
For the old man is a-waiting for to carry
you to freedom
If you follow the drinking gourd.

The river bank will make a very good road,
The dead trees show you the way,
Left foot, peg foot traveling on
Follow the drinking gourd.

[Refrain]

The river ends between two hills,
Follow the drinking gourd.
There's another river on the other side,
Following the drinking gourd.

[Refrain]

Where the little river meets the great big
river,
Follow the drinking gourd.
The old man is a-waiting for to carry you
to freedom,
If you follow the drinking gourd.

[Refrain]

Swing Low, Sweet Chariot

Swing low, sweet chariot,
Coming for to carry me home,
Swing low, sweet chariot,
Coming for to carry me home.

I looked over Jordan and what did I see
Coming for to carry me home,
A band of angels, coming after me,
Coming for to carry me home.

If you get there before I do,
Coming for to carry me home,
Tell all my friends I'm coming too,
Coming for to carry me home.

Swing low, sweet chariot,
Coming for to carry me home,
Swing low, sweet chariot,
Coming for to carry me home.