

TEXTS

Solomon Northup: Twelve Years a Slave

(excerpt) 1853

PRE-READING

1. In small groups or pairs discuss the following questions.
 - A. What is a slave? Is being a slave a job?
 - B. What do you value the most about your freedom?
2. Watch the film *Twelve Years a Slave*, directed by Steve McQueen (2013).

manual labourer (her)
arbejdsmand der går til
hånde hvor det er nød-
vendigt
plantation plantage
abolitionist modstander
af slaveri

Solomon Northup (1808-1862/3) was born free in the state of New York, but he was kidnapped and forced to work as a slave for 12 years. In 1829 he married Anne Northup and had three children: Elisabeth, Margaret and Alonzo. Northup was able to read and write as well as play the violin. During the years before his capture, he worked as a manual labourer in various places. Northup was kidnapped in Washington D.C. in 1841 and subsequently lived a hard life as a slave on a Louisiana plantation for 12 years until he managed to escape. Returning to the North, Northup wrote about his experiences as a slave and *Twelve Years a Slave* was published in 1853 and became a bestseller among abolitionists.

In this excerpt (from *Twelve Years a Slave*, chapter 6), Solomon Northup describes a New Orleans slave auction:

Twelve Years a Slave

require påbyde
thoroughly grundigt
furnish with (her) klædt
på, tildelt
frock of calico hvid
lærredsbomuldskjole
conduct (vb.) føre
admission adgang, entrée

In the first place we were required to wash thoroughly, and those with beards, to shave. We were then furnished with a new suit each, cheap, but clean. The men had hat, coat, shirt, pants and shoes; the women frocks of calico, and handkerchiefs to bind about their heads. We were
5 now conducted into a large room in the front part of the building to which the yard was attached, in order to be properly trained, before the admission of customers. The men were arranged on one side of the



Chiwetel Ejiofor (left) as enslaved Solomon Northup and Paul Giamatti as the slave trader Theophilus Freeman

Freeman navn på slave-
handler
charge formane
exhort tilskynde, formane
smart (her) frisk, kvik
hold out holde frem
inducement tilskyndelse
make bold driste sig til
inquire forhøre
"Virginia Reel" folkedans
fra det 17. århundrede
affirmative bekræftende
strike up (præteritum:
struck up) slå an
tune melodi
excel (vb.) overgå
grieve bedrøve
lot parti, gruppe
latter sidst
loquacious snakkesalig
dwell dvæle ved
briskly livligt, raskt
barter for bytte for
purchase købe

room, the women on the other. The tallest was placed at the head of the row, then the next tallest, and so on in the order of their respective heights. Emily was at the foot of the line of women. Freeman charged us to remember our places; exhorted us to appear smart and lively, – sometimes threatening, and again, holding out various inducements. During the day he exercised us in the art of "looking smart", and of the moving to our places with exact precision.

After being fed, in the afternoon, we were again paraded and made to dance. Bob, a colored boy, who had some time belonged to Freeman, played on the violin. Standing near him, I made bold to inquire if he could play the "Virginia Reel". He answered he could not, and asked me if I could play. Replying in the affirmative, he handed me the violin. I struck up a tune, and finished it. Freeman ordered me to continue playing, and seemed well pleased, telling Bob that I far excelled him – a remark that seemed to grieve my musical companion very much.

Next day many customers called to examine Freeman's "new lot". The latter gentleman was very loquacious, dwelling at much length upon our several good points and qualities. He would make us hold up our heads, walk briskly back and forth, while customers would feel of our hands and arms and bodies, turn us about, ask us what we could do, make us open our mouths and show our teeth, precisely as a jockey examines a horse which he is about to barter for or purchase. Sometimes a man or woman was taken back to the small house in the yard,

be strip
minutel
nøje
rebellio
unruly
hurt va
coachma
take a fa
ressere
Burch
bejdspa
resident
conceive
vessel s
of a good
god (he
forfatn
enlarge
attainme
adroitly
call her
Natchez
sissippi
planter
Baton Ro
Louisian
feat bec
exhibit
wring v
beseech
sought
burst into
paroxysm
grief so
weep g
plaintive
savagely
whip (sb)

Slaveown
(Benedic
offers So
(Chiwete

be stripped blive afklædt
 minutely minutiøst, meget
 nøje
 rebellious oprørsk
 unruly uregerlig
 hurt være ødelæggende
 coachman kusk
 take a fancy to blive inter-
 resseret i, blive glad for
 Burch Freemans samar-
 bejdspartner
 resident bosat
 conceive forstå
 vessel skib, fartøj
 of a good constitution i
 god (helbredsmæssig)
 forfatning
 enlarge upon uddybe
 attainment færdighed
 adroitly dygtigt
 call henvende sig
 Natchez by i staten Mis-
 sissippi
 planter plantageejer
 Baton Rouge by i staten
 Louisiana
 feat bedrift, præstation
 exhibit udstille
 wring vride
 beseech (præteritum: be-
 sought) bønfalde
 burst into bryde ud i
 paroxysm voldsomt anfald
 grief sorg
 weep græde
 plaintively klagende
 savagely vildt, barbarisk
 whip (sb) pisk

stripped, and inspected more minutely. Scars upon a slave's back were considered evidence of a rebellious or unruly spirit, and hurt his sale.

One old gentleman, who said he wanted a coachman, appeared to take a fancy to me. From his conversation with Burch, I learned he
 5 was resident in the city. I very much desired that he would buy me, because I conceived it would not be difficult to make my escape from New Orleans on some northern vessel. Freeman asked him fifteen hundred dollars for me. The old gentleman insisted it was too much, as times were very hard. Freeman, however, declared that I was sound
 10 and healthy, of a good constitution, and intelligent. He made it a point to enlarge upon my musical attainments. The old gentleman argued quite adroitly that there was nothing extraordinary about the nigger, and finally, to my regret, went out, saying he would call again. During the day, however, a number of sales were made. David and Caroline
 15 were purchased together by a Natchez planter. They left us grinning broadly, and in the most happy state of mind, caused by the fact of their not being separated. Lethe was sold to a planter of Baton Rouge, her eyes flashing with anger as she was led away.

The same man also purchased Randall. The little fellow was made
 20 to jump, and run across the floor, and perform many other feats, exhibiting his activity and condition. All the time the trade was going on, Eliza was crying aloud, and wringing her hands. She besought the man not to buy him, unless he also bought her self and Emily. She promised, in that case, to be the most faithful slave that ever lived. The
 25 man answered that he could not afford it, and then Eliza burst into a paroxysm of grief, weeping plaintively. Freeman turned round to her, savagely, with his whip in his uplifted hand, ordering her to stop

Slaveowner William Ford
 (Benedict Cumberbatch)
 offers Solomon Northup
 (Chiwetel Ejiofor) a violin



flog piske, prygle
 sniveling klynken, flæben
 cease holde op, stoppe
 lash piskeslag
 d—d = damned
 shrink (præteritum: shrunk)
 krympe sig sammen
 in vain forgæves
 frown panderynken
 threat trussel
 wholly helt, aldeles
 afflicted dybt sørgende,
 hårdt ramt
 piteously bedrøveligt
 former tidligere
 obedient lydig
 labor (vb.) arbejde
 of no avail til ingen nytte
 bargain (sb) handel
 blubbering flæbende
 bawling vrælende
 wench tøs, tøjte
 mighty (adv.) virkelig
 depend upon (her) stole på
 mournful bedrøvelig, trist

her noise, or he would flog her. He would not have such work – such sniveling; and unless she ceased that minute, he would take her to the yard and give her a hundred lashes. Yes, he would take the nonsense out of her pretty quick – if he didn't, might he be d—d. Eliza shrunk
 5 before him, and tried to wipe away her tears, but it was all in vain. She wanted to be with her children, she said, the little time she had to live. All the frowns and threats of Freeman could not wholly silence the afflicted mother. She kept on begging and beseeching them, most piteously not to separate the three. Over and over again she told them
 10 how she loved her boy. A great many times she repeated her former promises – how very faithful and obedient she would be; how hard she would labor day and night, to the last moment of her life, if he would only buy them all together. But it was of no avail; the man could not afford it. The bargain was agreed upon, and Randall must go alone.
 15 Then Eliza ran to him; embraced him passionately; kissed him again and again; told him to remember her – all the while her tears falling in the boy's face like rain.

Freeman damned her, calling her a blubbering, bawling wench, and ordered her to go to her place, and behave herself; and be somebody.
 20 He swore he wouldn't stand such stuff but a little longer. He would soon give her something to cry about, if she was not mighty careful, and *that* she might depend upon.

The planter from Baton Rouge, with his new purchases, was ready to depart. "Don't cry, Mama. I will be a good boy. Don't cry," said Randall,
 25 looking back as they passed out of the door.

What has become of the lad, God knows. It was a mournful scene indeed. I would have cried myself if I had dared.

INTRODUCTORY WORK

Basics

1. Whose point of view is presented in this text?
2. Where and when does the story take place?
3. Who is Freeman?

The characters' appearances

1. How are the slaves told to appear?
2. Why are some of the slaves asked to play the violin?
3. Why are some of the slaves stripped?
4. Why does the old gentleman not want to pay \$1500 for Solomon?
5. Comment on why David and Caroline are happy when they are sold.
6. Describe Eliza's state of mind.
7. How does Randall react when he is taken away?

FURTHER ANALYSIS

The characters

1. In about 100 words, make a written characterization (see the information box below) of Solomon Northup. Pick out three or four of the following adjectives that you believe describe Solomon in the most precise way:

honest, warm-hearted, considerate, sincere, generous, independent, kind, analytical, wise, intelligent, brave, determined, sympathetic, one of a kind, good

2. In about 100 words, make a written characterization (see the information box below) of Freeman. Pick out three or four adjectives from the list below that you believe describe Freeman in the most precise way:

arrogant, cruel, ruthless, determined, stubborn, racist, heartless, unreasonable, reasonable, intolerant, hateful, awkward, business-minded, deceitful, untrustworthy, sexist

Characterization

A character sketch, or a characterization, describes a character from a work of fiction. You may, e.g., comment on the character's physical appearance, age, gender, nationality, social status, job and the time in which the person lives.

When writing a character sketch, you must focus on the character's personality and character traits. These are not always revealed directly, but may be shown through the character's actions, words, thoughts or through other characters' opinions of him or her.

Further, you may describe the character's current situation by commenting on a certain problem, his/her relationship to others, conflicts, challenges, state of mind, development, view of the world, etc.

Usually adjectives are useful when making a characterization. For example, the man is strong, intelligent, worried, desperate ... Furthermore, you may use quotes from the text to back up your interpretation of the character.

Language and themes

1. Discuss the meaning of the following sentence: "... precisely as a jockey examines a horse which he is about to barter for or purchase."
2. Why does Northup say "I would have cried myself if I had dared"?
3. Discuss the themes of the text.

POST-READING

1. Individually, find all the verbs in the past tense, underline them and change them into the present tense in the passage "One old gentleman ..." to "... saying he would call again" (p. 19, ll. 3-13).
2. Hot seat character debate: The entire class performs a debate based on the characters from the auction. Four students sit in "hot seats" as Solomon, Freeman, Eliza and Randall. They have 10 minutes to prepare how they will react to questions about their character. The rest of the students have 10 minutes to prepare questions for the four characters. All students must prepare at least one question per character.