

Using Excerpts about Slavery

Notes for the Teacher

Students need to be cognizant that any historical account is one person's truth. An author's point of view is colored by his or her own experiences and belief system. Lack of direct experience can result in an author making assumptions that are not borne out. As an example, who but a slave could effectively understand the perspective of a slave or what the life of a slave was like? Of course, accounts of slavery might differ from slave to slave. Without direct experience, however, any account of slavery could not adequately capture the reality of being a slave.

Following are four accounts of slavery from differing points of view. The first is taken from the textbook formerly used to teach Virginia history in public schools during the 1960s and early 1970s. The second is from an autobiography written by Harriett A. Jacobs, a slave who hid under the eaves of a shed for seven years awaiting an opportunity for escape. The third is a piece written by Charles Lyell, who was a well-educated member of an upper-class English family. His description is based on his observations of slave life on a Georgia plantation in the 1840s and 1850s. The last is from a speech given in New York by Frederick Douglass, a former slave who escaped to freedom and went on to become a vocal abolitionist.

Copy the excerpts and distribute them to small groups of students, one each day for four days. Before students are given the excerpts, explain that an ellipse (. . .) is used to denote that part of the original text was omitted. Also, alert students that in some cases, words of explanation have

been given in parentheses. Have each group discuss the questions that go with the piece in preparation for a class discussion. Focus the discussion on whether or not the author(s) believe(s) that slavery was a positive or negative experience for the slaves. During the discussion, write pertinent student comments on chart paper to later be displayed in the classroom. Each day, after the discussion, compare the previous day's excerpt with the one for the day.

The important goal in this critical literacy activity is for the students to discern whether or not an author's work is credible. Following, remind students to use this skill in other works of nonfiction that they read.

Excerpt from *Virginia: History, Government, Geography*

by Francis Butler Simkins, Spotswood Hunnicutt Jones, and Sidman P. Poole
Charles Scribner's Sons, New York, 1964¹

"How Negroes Lived under Slavery," pp. 368-376

A feeling of strong affection existed between masters and slaves in a majority of Virginia homes. . . The house servants became almost as much a part of the planter's family circle as its white members. . . The Negroes were always present at family weddings. They were allowed to look on at dances and other entertainments . . . A strong tie existed between slave and master because each was dependent on the other. . . The slave system demanded that the master care for the slave in childhood, in sickness, and in old age. The regard that master and slaves had for each other made plantation life happy and prosperous.

Life among the Negroes of Virginia in slavery times was generally happy. The Negroes went about in a cheerful manner making a living for themselves and for those for whom they worked. . . But they were not worried by the furious arguments going on between Northerners and Southerners over what should be done with them. In fact, they paid little attention to these arguments.

Questions to Consider:

1. How long after the Civil War was this written?
2. Who do you think the authors were? Could they have been former slaves? Why or why not?
3. How do you think they came up with their account of slavery?
4. Do you believe the account is an accurate portrayal of slavery? Why or why not?
5. The excerpt is from a book that was once used to teach children in Virginia about slavery. Why would a textbook want students of Virginia to believe slavery was a positive experience for slaves?

¹Textbook used in Virginia schools as late as 1972.

Excerpt: *Incidents in the Life of a Slave Girl: by Herself*

by Harriet A. Jacobs

Harriet A. Jacobs was a slave in North Carolina. After an altercation with her master, she decided to escape to the North. Jacobs went into hiding under the eaves of an old shed near her master's house. She lay flat on her back while waiting for a good time to escape. Her two young children were left in the care of other slaves. Jacobs could watch them play through cracks in the shed. They did not know their mother was nearby hiding. Other slaves smuggled food to Jacobs and tried to provide the things she needed. At night she would climb down for a few minutes to exercise her arms and legs in order to keep the muscles from withering. Jacobs lay in hiding for seven long years before she was able to make her escape.

As the months passed on, my boy improved in health. When he was a year old, they called him beautiful. The little vine was taking deep root in my existence, though its clinging fondness excited a mixture of love and pain. When I was most sorely oppressed I found a solace in his smiles. I loved to watch his infant slumbers; but always there was a dark cloud over my enjoyment. I could never forget that he was a slave. Sometimes I wished that he might die in infancy. God tried me. My darling became very ill. The bright eyes grew dull, and the little feet and hands were so icy cold that I thought death had already touched him. I prayed for his death, but never so earnestly as I now prayed for his life; and my prayer was heard. Alas, what mockery it is for a slave mother to try to pray back her dying child to life! Death is better than slavery.

Questions to Consider:

1. Why did the slave mother at first wish her baby would die?
2. Why did she then change her mind and pray for him to live?
3. Who is the author?
4. What kind of person is she?
5. How do you know?
6. How would her account of slavery differ from a person who was not a slave describing it?
7. How does the author feel about slavery? How do you know?

Excerpt from the Writings of Sir Charles Lyell

Lyell was a well-educated member of an upper-class English family. His description is based on his observations of slave life on a Georgia plantation in the 1840s and 1850s. Whether or not he spoke directly with the slaves he observed is not known. His writing is based on his interpretation of what he saw.

“The laborers (slaves) begin work at six o’clock in the morning, have an hour’s rest at nine for breakfast, and many have finished their assigned task by two o’clock, all of them by three o’clock. In summer they divide their work differently, going to bed in the middle of the day, then rising to finish their task, and afterward spending a great part of the night in chatting, merry-making, preaching, and Psalm-singing. . .”

Questions to Consider:

1. How long was it from the time the slaves had to go to work until they got to have breakfast?
2. Why were slaves given time to rest in the middle of the day? Think about the climate in the South during the summer. Think about a master wanting to get as much work as possible from his slaves.
3. What kind of interaction would a rich visitor probably have with slaves?
4. What would have happened to slaves who told visitors that they were unhappy with their lives?
5. Why might Lyell draw the conclusion that the lives of slaves weren’t so bad?
6. If slaves’ lives were bad, why would they sing and read Psalms at night? (Think about the words of the songs or the Psalms. Would they be happy words? Sad ones? Words that promise hope or reassure?)

Excerpt from Lecture by Frederick Douglass

Rochester, New York, December 1, 1850

Frederick Douglass was a slave who made his escape to freedom. He became an outspoken abolitionist who lectured against slavery many times. He was considered a great orator and was held in with high regard by President Lincoln. Douglass gave a speech in New York in 1850. The following words are from that speech.

More than twenty years of my life were consumed in a state of slavery . . . The law gives the master absolute power over the slave. He may flog (whip) him, hire him out, sell him, and in certain contingencies (circumstances), *kill* him, with perfect impunity (freely). The slave is a human being, divested (stripped) of all rights—reduced to the level of a brute—a mere “chattel” (property) in the eye of the law—placed beyond the circle of human brotherhood—cut off from his kind—his name is impiously inserted in a *master’s ledger*, with horses, sheep and swine (pigs). In law, the slave has no wife, no children, no country, and no home. He can own nothing, possess nothing, acquire nothing, but what must belong to another.² To eat the fruit of his own toil (work), to clothe his person with the work of his own hands, is considered stealing. He toils that another (someone else) may reap the fruit; he is industrious that another may live in idleness; he eats unbolted meal, that another may ride in ease and splendor abroad; he lives in ignorance, that another may be educated; he is abused, that another may be exalted; he rests his toil-worm limbs on the cold, damp ground, that another may repose (sleep) on the softest pillow; he is clad in coarse and tattered raiment (clothing), that another may be arrayed in purple and fine linen; he is sheltered only by the wretched hovel (shack), [so] that a master may dwell in a magnificent mansion; and to this condition he is bound down as by an arm of iron.

²Slaves were not allowed to enter into legal contracts. This meant they could not own property or marry. A slave’s children belonged *not to the slave*, but to the master who could do with them as he wished.

Questions to Consider:

1. Frederick Douglass spent part of his life as a slave before escaping to freedom.
2. Why would people come to hear a slave speak?
3. Who would come?

4. Why does Douglass's account of slavery sound so different from Lyell's?
5. When something unpleasant happens to you directly, how do you feel about it differently from when you observe the same thing happening to someone else? How do you feel when you see something bad happen to someone else that never happened to you? Can you really understand how that person feels? If you talked directly to the person, might you better understand his or her feelings?