

The Life of Olaudah Equiano Close Read

The purpose of a close read is to encourage the reader to SLOW DOWN and read deliberately.

Instructions: Read the first section in the left column. Answer the corresponding questions in the right column. Pay close attention to footnotes. Then, move to the second section in the left column and repeat until you have completed all the reading and answered all of the questions.

The first object which saluted my eyes when I arrived on the coast was the sea, and a slave ship, which was then riding at anchor and waiting for its **cargo**¹. These filled me with astonishment which was soon converted to terror when I was carried on board.

I was immediately handled and tossed up to see if I were **sound** by some of the crew; and I was now persuaded that I had gotten into a world of bad spirits and that they were going to kill me.

¹**Cargo** – (n) Goods carried on a ship, aircraft, or motor vehicle

Their complexion too differing so much from ours, their long hair, and the language they spoke united to confirm me in this belief. Indeed such were the horrors of my views and fears at the moment, that, if ten thousand worlds had been my own, I would freely parted with them all to have exchanged my condition with that of the meanest slave in my own country.

When I looked round the ship too, and saw a large furnace of copper boiling, and a multitude of black people of every description chained together, every one of their countenances expressing **dejection**² and sorrow, I no longer doubted of my fate; and, quite overpowered with horror and anguish, I fell motionless on the deck and fainted. When I recovered a little, I found some black people about me, who I believed were some of those who had brought me on board, and had been receiving their pay; they talked to me in order to cheer me, **but all in vain**. I asked them if we were not to be eaten by those white men with horrible looks, red faces, and long hair.

²**Dejection** – (n) a sad and depressed state

I now saw myself deprived of all chance of returning to my native country, or even the least glimpse of hope of gaining the shore, which I now considered as friendly; and I even wished for my former slavery in preference to my present situation, which was filled with horrors of every kind, still heightened by my ignorance of what I was to undergo. I was not long suffered to indulge my grief; I was soon put down under the decks, and there I received such a salutation³ in my nostrils as I had never experienced in my life; so that, with the loathsomeness of the stench, and crying together, I became so sick and low that I was not able to eat, nor I had the least desire to taste anything. I now wished for the last friend, death, to relieve me; but soon, to my grief, two of the white men offered me eatables; and, on my refusing to eat, one of them held me fast by the hands, and laid me across, I think, the windlass, and tied my feet, while the other flogged me severely.

I had never experienced anything of this kind before, and, although not being used to the water, I naturally feared the element the first time I saw it, yet, nevertheless, could I have

1. In which point of view is the selection written?

2. Read the definition of cargo in footnote. What is being referred to as "cargo"? Why is this ironic?

3. What is the most likely meaning of sound in this context?

4. Identify the hyperbole in this section and explain its meaning.

5. What is the most likely meaning of countenance?

6. Explain, in your own words, the meaning of "but all in vain". What specific action was Equiano referring to?

7. What did Equiano think was going to happen to him?

8. Explain, in your own words, the meaning of the underlined phrase in this section.

9. What is the most likely definition of loathsomeness?

10. Who did Equiano believe to be his last friend?

11. What happened when Equiano refused to eat?

got over the nettings, I would have jumped over the side, but I could not; and besides, the crew used to watch us very closely who were not chained down to the decks, lest we should leap into the water; and I have seen some of these poor African prisoners most severely cut, for attempting to do so, and hourly whipped for not eating. This indeed was often the case with myself.

³ **salutation** – (n) a gesture made as a greeting

In a little time after, amongst the poor chained men, I found some of my own nation, which in a small degree gave ease to my mind. I inquired of these what was to be done with us? They gave me to understand, we were to be carried to these white people’s country to work for them. I then was a little revived, and thought, if it were no worse than working, my situation was not so desperate; but still I feared I should be put to death, the white people looked and acted, as I thought, in so savage a manner; for I had never seen among any people such instances of brutal cruelty; and this not only shown towards us blacks, but also to some of the whites themselves.

One white man in particular I saw, when we were permitted to be on deck, flogged so unmercifully with a large rope near the foremast, that he died in consequence of it; and they tossed him over the side as they would have done a brute. This made me fear these people the more; and I expected nothing less than to be treated in the same manner. I could not help expressing my fears and apprehensions to some of my countrymen; I asked them if these people had no country, but lived in this hollow place (the ship)? They told me they did not but came from a distant one. “Then,” said I, “how comes it in all our country we never heard of them?” They told me because they lived so very far off. I then asked where were their women? had they any like themselves? I was told they had. “And why,” said I, “do we not see them?” They answered, because they were left behind. I asked how the vessel could go? They told me they could not tell; but that there was cloth put upon the masts by the help of the ropes I saw, and then the vessel went on; and the white men had some spell or magic they put in the water when they liked, in order to stop the vessel-

While we stayed on the coast I was mostly on deck; and one day, to my great astonishment, I saw one of these vessels coming in with the sails up. As soon as the whites saw it, they gave a great shout, at which we were amazed; and the more so as the vessel appeared larger by approaching nearer. At last she came to an anchor in my sight, and when the anchor was let go I and my countrymen who saw it were lost in astonishment to observe the vessel stop; and were now convinced it was done by magic. Soon after this the other ship got her boats out, and they came on board of us, and the people of both ships seemed very glad to see each other. Several of the strangers also shook hands with us black people, and made motions with their hands, signifying I suppose we were to go to their country; but we did not understand them.

12. Why did the crew keep a closer eye on those people that were allowed to remain on deck?

13. Why would the white men be concerned with whether or not the prisoners would eat?

14. What gave Equiano a little comfort?

15. What is the most likely definition of brute?

16. Like any young child, Equiano was very inquisitive. What were 3 things that he questioned his own countrymen about?

17. What did Equiano and the others believe caused the ships to be able to stop?

At last, when the ship we were in had got in all her cargo, they made ready with many fearful noises, and we were all put under deck, so that we could not see how they managed the vessel. But this disappointment was the least of my sorrow. The stench of the hold while we were on the coast was so intolerably loathsome, that it was dangerous to remain there for any time, and some of us had been permitted to stay on the deck for the fresh air; but now that the whole ship's cargo were confined together, it became absolutely pestilential.

The closeness of the place, and the heat of the climate, added to the number in the ship, which was so crowded that each had scarcely room to turn himself, almost suffocated us. This produced copious perspirations, so that the air soon became unfit for respiration, from a variety of loathsome smells, and brought on a sickness among the slaves, of which many died, thus falling victims to the improvident avarice⁴, as I may call it, of their purchasers. This wretched situation was again aggravated by the galling of the chains, now become insupportable; and the filth of the necessary tubs, into which the children often fell, and were almost suffocated.

The shrieks of the women, and the groans of the dying, rendered the whole a scene of horror almost inconceivable. Happily perhaps for myself I was soon reduced so low here that it was thought necessary to keep me almost always on deck; and from my extreme youth I was not put in fetters. In this situation I expected every hour to share the fate of my companions, some of whom were almost daily brought upon deck at the point of death, which I began to hope would soon put an end to my miseries. Often did I think many of the inhabitants of the deep much more happy than myself. I envied them the freedom they enjoyed, and as often wished I could change my condition for theirs.

⁴ **improvident avarice** – thoughtless greed

One day they had taken a number of fishes and when they had killed and satisfied themselves with as many as they thought fit, to our astonishment who were on the deck, rather than give any of them to us to eat as we expected, they tossed the remaining fish into the sea again, although we begged and prayed for some as well as we could, but in vain; and some of my countrymen, being pressed by hunger, took an opportunity, when they thought no one saw them, of trying to get a little privately; but they were discovered, and the attempt procured them some very severe floggings.

One day, when we had a smooth sea and moderate wind, two of my wearied countrymen who were chained together (I was near them at the time), preferring death to such a life of misery, somehow made through the nettings and jumped into the sea: immediately another quite dejected fellow, who, on account of his illness, was suffered to be out of irons, also followed their example; and I believe many more would very soon have done the same if they had not been prevented by the ship's crew, who were instantly alarmed. Those of us that were the most active were in a moment put down under the deck, and there was such a noise and confusion amongst the people of the ship as I never heard before, to stop her, and get the boat out to go after the slaves. However two of the wretches were drowned, but they got the other, and afterwards flogged him unmercifully for thus attempting to prefer death to slavery

18. For what specific reason does Equiano become disappointed at this point in the journey?

19. What is the most likely definition of pestilential?

20. Describe, in your own words, the conditions below deck.

21. What is the most likely definition of “necessary tubs”?

22. Read footnote 4. Explain in your own words the meaning of the underlined phrase.

23. Why was Equiano not put in fetters (chains)?

24. Who was Equiano referring to as “inhabitants of the deep”? Why would he envy them?

25. What specific act caused Equiano and the others to be completely astonished at the cruelty of the white men?

26. What happened to the men who tried to steal fish?

27. What is the most likely definition of dejected?

28. Explain, in your own words, what action was taken by the two men in this section? What happened to them?

At last we came in sight of the island of Barbados, at which the whites on board gave a great shout, and made many signs of joy to us. We did not know what to think of this; but as the vessel drew nearer we plainly saw the harbour, and other ships of different kinds and sizes; and we soon anchored amongst them off Bridge Town. Many merchants and planters now came on board, though it was in the evening. They put us in separate parcels, and examined us attentively. They also made us jump, and pointed to the land, signifying we were to go there. We thought by this we should be eaten by those ugly men, as they appeared to us; and, when soon after we were all put down under the deck again, there was much dread and trembling among us, and nothing but bitter cries to be heard all the night from these apprehensions, insomuch that at last the white people got some old slaves from the land to pacify us. They told us we were not to be eaten, but to work, and were soon to go on land, where we should see many of our country people. This report eased us much; and sure enough, soon after we were landed, there came to us Africans of all languages.

We were conducted immediately to the merchant's yard, where we were all pent up ----- together like so many sheep in a fold, without regard to sex or age.

We were not many days in the merchant's custody before we were sold after their usual manner, which is this: On a signal given (as the beat of a drum), the buyers rush at once into the yard where the slaves are confined, and make choice of that parcel they like best. The noise and clamor with which this is attended, and the eagerness visible in the countenances of the buyers serve not a little to increase the apprehensions of the terrified Africans, who may well be supposed to consider them as the ministers of that destruction to which they think themselves devoted.

⁵**Apprehension** – (n) anxiety or fear

In this manner, without scruple, are relations and friends separated, most of them never to see each other again. I remember in the vessel in which I was brought over, in the men's apartment, there were several brothers, who, in the sale, were sold in different lots; and it was very moving on this occasion to see and hear their cries at parting.

O, ye nominal⁶ Christians! might not an African ask you, learned you this from your God, who says unto you, Do unto all men as you would men should do unto you? Is it not enough that we are torn from our country and friends to toil for your luxury and lust of gain? Must every tender feeling be likewise sacrificed to your avarice? Are the dearest friends and relations, now rendered more dear by their separation from their kindred, still to be parted from each other, and thus prevented from cheering the gloom of slavery with the small comfort of being together and mingling their sufferings and sorrows? Why are parents to lose their children, brothers their sisters, or husbands their wives? Surely this is a new refinement in cruelty, which, while it has no advantage to atone for it, thus aggravates distress, and adds fresh horrors even to the wretchedness of slavery.

⁶ **nominal** – in name only

29. What is the most likely definition of parcels?

30. What is the most likely definition of pacify?

31. How did the white men get the slaves to calm their fears upon arriving in Barbados?

32. What is the most likely definition of clamor?

33. Read footnote 5. Explain in your own words the underlined phrase.

34. What is the tone up to this point in the narrative?

35. The last paragraph is the first time that Equiano directly addresses his audience. What may have been his purpose in referring to (“calling out”) his audience as nominal Christians?

36. What effect does the series of rhetorical questions have on the reader? (Author’s purpose)

37. What is the tone of this last section?

