

## My Bondage and My Freedom Close Read

Read first section in left column; Then, answer questions for that section in the right column. Write the answers in COMPLETE SENTENCE in your own words, unless otherwise directed. Then, move on to the next section and so on, until you have read the complete text and answered all of the questions. Read slowly and carefully and pay attention to the footnotes.

I lived in the family of Master Hugh, at Baltimore, seven years, during which time—as the almanac makers say of the weather—my condition was variable. The most interesting feature of my history here, was my learning to read and write, under somewhat marked disadvantages. In attaining this knowledge, I was compelled to resort to indirections by no means congenial to my nature, and which were really humiliating to me. My mistress—who, as the reader has already seen, had begun to teach me was suddenly checked in her benevolent design, by the strong advice of her husband. In faithful compliance with this advice, the good lady had not only ceased to instruct me, herself, but had set her face as a flint against my learning to read by any means.

**It is due, however, to my mistress to say, that she did not adopt this course in all its stringency<sup>1</sup> at the first.** She either thought it unnecessary, or she lacked the depravity indispensable to shutting me up in mental darkness. It was, at least, necessary for her to have some training, and some hardening, in the exercise of the slaveholder's prerogative, to make her equal to forgetting my human nature and character, and to treating me as a thing destitute of a moral or an intellectual nature. Mrs. Auld—my mistress—was, as I have said, a most kind and tender-hearted woman; and, in the humanity of her heart, and the simplicity of her mind, she set out, when I first went to live with her, to treat me as she supposed one human being ought to treat another.

<sup>1</sup>*Stringency means severity or strictness*

1. What is the most crucial accomplishment made by Douglass when he lived in Baltimore with the Auld family?
2. Why did Mrs. Auld stop teaching Douglass how to read? Was it her idea?
3. Flint is a hard stone. Explain the connotation in the following sentence: "the good lady...had set her face as a flint against my learning to read by any means". How is the word used?
4. To what does "it" refer in the first sentence of second paragraph?
  - a. A stringent course
  - b. Training and hardening in the exercise of the slaveholder's prerogative
  - c. Her kindness and tender-heartedness
  - d. Her refusal to continue teaching Douglass to read
5. At the time, why might those in society have thought Mrs. Auld a poor slaveholder?
  - a. She treated her slaves kindly.
  - b. Her place in society was not equal to that of a man.
  - c. She was a cruel woman who treated her slaves horridly.
  - d. She had no experience as a slaveholder.

It is easy to see, that, in entering upon the duties of a slaveholder, some little experience is needed. **Nature has done almost nothing to prepare men and women to be either slaves or slaveholders.** Nothing but rigid training, long persisted in, can perfect the character of the one or the other. One cannot easily forget to love freedom; and it is as hard to cease to respect that natural love in our fellow creatures. On entering upon the career of a slaveholding mistress, Mrs. Auld was singularly deficient; nature, which fits nobody for such an office, had done less for her than any lady I had known. It was no easy matter to induce her to think and to feel that the curly-headed boy, who stood by her side, and even leaned on her lap; who was loved by little Tommy<sup>2</sup>, and who loved little Tommy in turn; sustained to her only the relation of a chattel<sup>3</sup>. **I was *more* than that, and she felt me to be more than that.** I could talk and sing; I could laugh and weep; I could reason and remember; I could love and hate. I was human, and she, dear lady, knew and felt me to be so. How could she, then, treat me as a brute, without a mighty struggle with all the noble powers of her own soul. That struggle came, and the will and power of the husband was victorious. Her noble soul was overthrown; but, he that overthrew it did not, himself, escape the consequences. He, not less than the other parties, was injured in his domestic peace by the fall.

2. Tommy is the Auld's son.

3. Chattel is property, such as furniture or livestock. Enslaved people were sometimes referred to as chattel.

((((continued on next page))))

6. Explain the bolded sentence: "Nature has done almost nothing to prepare men and women to be either slaves or slaveholders."
7. What does Douglass mean in describing Mrs. Auld as "singularly deficient"?
8. Read the following sentence: "I was *more* than that, and she felt me to be more than that." A) Why does Douglass emphasize the word "more" in italics? B) What is the meaning of this sentence?

When I went into their family, it was the abode of happiness and contentment. The mistress of the house was a model of affection and tenderness. Her fervent piety and watchful uprightness made it impossible to see her without thinking and feeling—*“that woman is a Christian.”* **There was no sorrow nor suffering for which she had not a tear, and there was no innocent joy for which she did not a smile.** She had bread for the hungry, clothes for the naked, and comfort for every mourner that came within her reach. Slavery soon proved its ability to divest her of these excellent qualities, and her home of its early happiness. ...

One needs very little knowledge of moral philosophy, to see *where* my mistress now landed. She finally became even more violent in her opposition to my learning to read, than was her husband himself. She was not satisfied with simply doing as *well* as her husband had commanded her, but seemed resolved to better his instruction. Nothing appeared to make my poor mistress—after her turning toward the downward path—more angry, than seeing me, seated in some nook or corner, quietly reading a book or a newspaper. I have had her rush at me, with the utmost fury, and snatch from my hand such newspaper or book, with something of the wrath and consternation which a traitor might be supposed to feel on being discovered in a plot by some dangerous spy...

Seized with a determination to learn to read, at any cost, I hit upon many **expedients** to accomplish the desired end. The plea which I mainly adopted, and the one by which I was most successful, was that of using my young white playmates, with whom I met in the streets as teachers. I used to carry, almost constantly, a copy of Webster’s spelling book in my pocket; and, when sent of errands, or when play time was allowed me, I would step, with my young friends, aside, and take a lesson in spelling. I generally paid my *tuition fee* to the boys, with bread, which I also carried in my pocket. For a single biscuit, any of my hungry little comrades would give me a lesson more valuable to me than bread. Not every one, however, demanded this consideration, for there were those who took pleasure in teaching me, whenever I had a chance to be taught by them. I am strongly tempted to give the names of two or three of those little boys, as a slight testimonial of the gratitude and affection I bear them, but prudence forbids; not that it would injure me, but it might, possibly, embarrass them; for it is almost an unpardonable offense to do any thing, directly or

9. How did Douglass feel about Mrs. Auld when he first went to live with their family? Find evidence to prove your answer.
10. The bolded sentence: **“There was no sorrow nor suffering for which she had not a tear, and there was no innocent joy for which she did not a smile”** most likely means
  - a. Mrs. Auld was a cruel woman who smiled at the tears of those who were suffering
  - b. Mrs. Auld shed a tear of sorrow when others were sad and expressed joy when others were joyful.
  - c. Mrs. Auld felt no sorrow of any kind and was never joyful.
  - d. Mrs. Auld was a cold woman who never shed a tear, either happily or sorrowfully.
11. To what does Douglass compare Mrs. Auld’s sudden anger at seeing him read?
12. What does **expedients** most likely mean?
  - a. Assistance
  - b. Determination
  - c. Obstacles
  - d. Rewards
13. Explain the “deal” or agreement between Douglass and his white playmates.
14. Why does Douglass hesitate to mention the names of his white playmates?

indirectly, to promote a slave's freedom, in a slave state. It is enough to say, of my warm-hearted little play fellows, that they lived on Philpot street, very near Durgin & Bailey's shipyard.

Although slavery was a delicate subject, and very cautiously talked about among grown up people in Maryland, I frequently talked about it—and that very freely—with the white boys. I would, sometimes, say to them, while seated on a curb stone or a cellar door, "I wish I could be free, as you will be when you get to be men." "You will be free, you know, as soon as you are twenty-one, and can go where you like, but I am a slave for life. Have I not as good a right to be free as you have?" Words like these, I observed, always troubled them; and I had no small satisfaction in wringing from the boys, occasionally, that fresh and bitter condemnation of slavery, that springs from nature, unseared and unperverted. Of all consciences let me have those to deal with which have not been bewildered by the cares of life. **I do not remember ever to have met with a boy, while I was in slavery, who defended the slave system;** but I have often had boys to console me, with the hope that something would yet occur, by which I might be made free. Over and over again, they have told me, that "they believed I had as good a right to be free as *they* had;" and that "they did not believe God ever made any one to be a slave." The reader will easily see, that such little conversations with my play fellows, had no tendency to weaken my love of liberty, nor to render me contented with my condition as a slave.

When I was about thirteen years old, and had succeeded in learning to read, every increase of knowledge, especially respecting the FREE STATES, added something to the almost intolerable burden of the thought—I AM A SLAVE FOR LIFE. To my bondage I saw no end. It was a terrible reality, and I shall never be able to tell how sadly that thought chafed my young spirit. Fortunately, or unfortunately, about this time in my life, I had made enough money to buy what was then a very popular school book, viz: the *Columbian Orator*. I bought this addition to my library, of Mr. Knight, on Thames street, Fell's Point, Baltimore, and paid him fifty cents for it.

15. Read this paragraph again (beginning with "although slavery"). Now, think about why Douglass italicized the word "boy". It is NOT used in a negative way. Why is this word emphasized in the sentence?  
(Hint: Think about child vs. adult)
16. What negative effect did Douglass' education have on him when he turned 13?
17. What does Douglass purchase? How much does he pay?

