

Narrative of the Life of Frederick Douglass, an American Slave

Frederick Douglass

Frederick Douglass (c. 1818–1895) was born and raised in slavery in Maryland. One of his owners broke the law by teaching Douglass to read and write. Frederick escaped from slavery in 1838 and made his way to freedom in the North. There he began to speak against slavery.

This passage comes from Chapter 1 of Frederick Douglass's autobiography. He wrote the autobiography because many people doubted his story. They heard him speak against slavery and thought he spoke too well to have been a slave. Douglass decided to tell his life story as a way to quiet these critics.



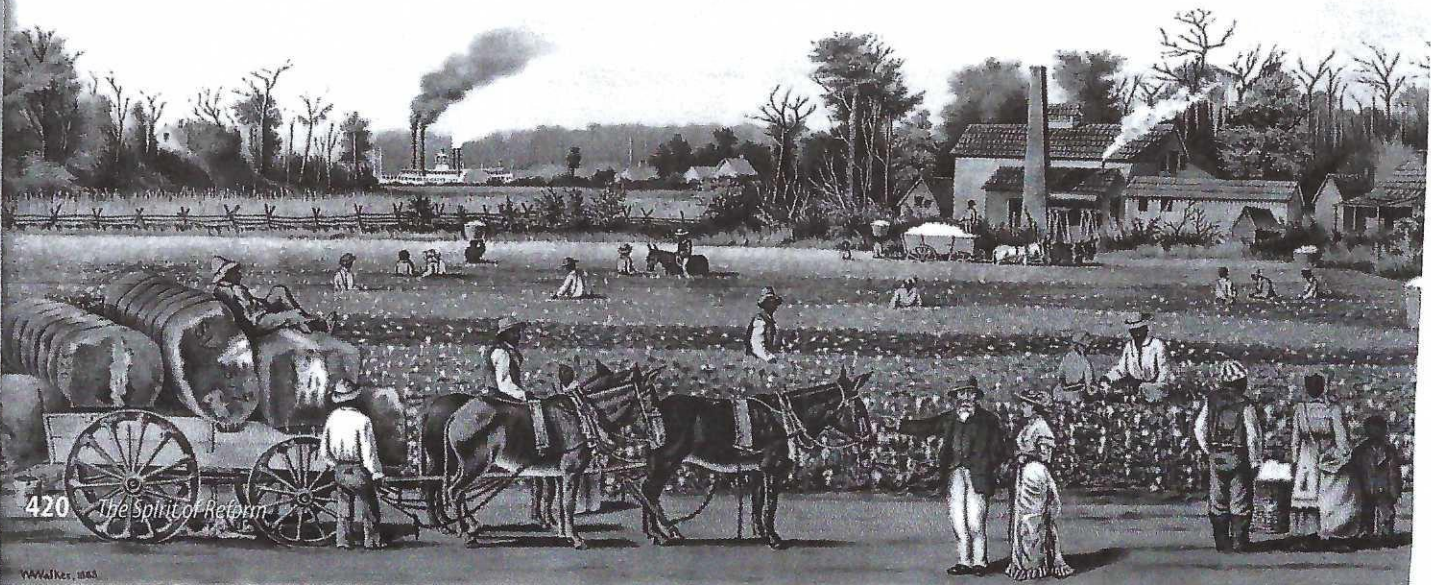
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New York Academic Standards

7.7b

Frederick Douglass escaped a life of slavery to become a leading abolitionist.



PRIMARY SOURCE

“I was born in Tuckahoe, near Hillsborough, and about twelve miles from Easton, in Talbot County, Maryland. I have no accurate knowledge of my age, never having seen any authentic record containing it. By far the larger part of the slaves know as little of their ages as horses know of theirs, and it is the wish of most masters within my knowledge to keep their slaves thus ignorant. I do not remember to have ever met a slave who could tell of his birthday. They seldom come nearer to it than planting-time, harvest-time, cherry-time, spring-time, or fall-time. A want of information concerning my own was a source of unhappiness to me even during childhood. The white children could tell their ages. I could not tell why I ought to be deprived of the same privilege. I was not allowed to make any inquiries of my master concerning it. . . . The nearest estimate I can give makes me now between twenty-seven and twenty-eight years of age. I come to this, from hearing my master say, some time during 1835, I was about seventeen years old. . . .

My mother and I were separated when I was but an infant—before I knew her as my mother. It is a common custom, in the part of Maryland from which I ran away, to part children from their mothers at a very early age. Frequently, before the child has reached its twelfth month, its mother is taken from it, and hired out on some farm a considerable distance off, and the child is placed under the care of an old woman, too old for field labor. For what this separation is done, I do not know, unless it be to **hinder** the development of the child’s affection toward its mother, and to blunt and destroy the natural affection of the mother for the child. This is the inevitable result.

I never saw my mother, to know her as such, more than four or five times in my life; and each of these times was very short in duration, and at night. She was hired by a Mr. Stewart, who lived about twelve miles from my home. She made her journeys to see me in the night, traveling the whole distance on foot, after the performance of her day’s work. She was a field hand, and a whipping is the penalty of not being in the field at sunrise . . . I do not recollect of ever seeing my mother by the light of day. . . . Death soon ended what little [relationship] we could have while she lived, and with it her hardships and suffering. She died when I was about seven years old . . . I was not allowed to be present during her illness, at her death, or burial. . . . Never having enjoyed, to any considerable extent, her soothing presence, her tender and watchful care, I received the **tidings** of her death with much the same emotions I should have probably felt at the death of a stranger.”

Literary Element

First-Person Point of View occurs when a story’s narrator tells his or her own experiences. First-person narrators use the pronouns *I*, *me*, and *we*. These narrators tell readers a lot about their own experience but very little about the experiences of other people or characters in their stories. As you read, think about what you learn because Douglass tells his own story—and what you don’t learn.

Vocabulary

hinder

prevent

tidings

news

Analyzing Literature DBQ

- 1 **Recalling** How old was Frederick Douglass when he wrote this narrative?
- 2 **Analyzing** How does Douglass feel about his age? Explain.
- 3 **Making Inferences** How does Douglass feel about his mother and her death? Explain.