

# **The Classic Slave Narratives Study Guide**

## **The Classic Slave Narratives by Various**

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## Plot Summary

Gustavus Vassas was born Olaudah Equiano in the African province called Essaka in 1745. He was the youngest son of seven surviving children and was very close to his mother. He describes a happy childhood during which he learned - as all his people did - to work hard. He is kidnapped and taken as a slave while still very young and soon finds that he has a talent for the sea and for trading. By being very frugal, he is able to save enough to buy his freedom after only a few years, though his master initially refuses to honor their agreement for the sale. He does gain his freedom and soon returns to the sea, seeing there a greater opportunity for financial gain than any other he can find. He spends his time also in pursuit of an acceptable religious affiliation and eventually finds himself ready to become a missionary.

Mary Prince writes that she was born in Bermuda at a place called Brackish-Pond. She and her mother are sold and Mary is friends with a young child of the new household. Mary admits to being very happy during this time and says it's because she was too young to realize her condition as a slave and to know what the future holds for her. Then Mary's mother is forced to take three of her daughters to town to be sold. Her new situation is much worse and she hasn't the comfort of family near. She works hard, for a period of time in a salt mine and later as a caretaker for a child. Her health deteriorates rapidly and she is on one occasion near death. She holds to the idea that she has a right to freedom and when her master literally kicks her out of the house, sets about to achieve that goal and to be able to return to her husband.

Fredrick Douglass notes that he doesn't know his age and equates that as one of the basic rights of a person that is denied a slave. He is industrious and works hard, finally learning the skill of caulking ships. He earns money which his master takes, leaving Douglass only a pittance. Douglas eventually escapes to New York, sends for his intended wife, Anna, and is happy to work for a living as a freedman, though the work is manual labor and difficult.

Harriett Jacobs is born into slavery and soon finds herself in the home of Dr. Flint, and older man who often has sex with his slaves. To avoid his advances, the sixteen-year-old Harriett engages in a relationship with a free white man who fathers two children. Those children are used as leverage against Harriett but she perseveres in her attempt for freedom. She finally escapes and lives for almost seven years in the cramped attic of her grandmother's home, able to hear her children playing below but never daring to let them know she's so near. She eventually makes her way to New York, is constantly pursued by the daughter of a previous owner who claims to still have a hold on her and her children and plagued by broken promises of freedom. There she becomes friends with a woman of means who eventually buys her freedom and Harriett notes that her story ends with that gift of freedom.



# Gustavus Vassa

## Gustavus Vassa Summary and Analysis

Gustavus Vassas was born Olaudah Equiano in the African province called Essaka in 1745. He was the youngest son of seven surviving children and was very close to his mother. He describes a happy childhood during which he learned - as all his people did - to work hard. He recalls little of any true religion though he describes briefly some ceremonies in which dancing and feasting were important. He writes that his people were circumcised, one of many similarities to the Jewish religion. Chapter three begins when, at age eleven, Gustavus and his sister are alone at their house while the adults worked at their agricultural pursuits. While alone, they are kidnapped by slavers. They are soon separated and Gustavus is sold to several masters for various reasons over the next six or seven months. He encounters his sister briefly during that time but notes that she was soon taken away and he never saw her again.

At the end of those months, Gustavus was taken to the coast where he is put aboard a slave ship. He promptly faints. When he wakes, he asks if the strange looking people aboard are going to eat him and is reassured that he won't be eaten. He remains on that ship for several days until a new ship arrives. He says that the whites aboard were happy to see the other ship and those who, like Gustavus, had never seen a ship in motion under the power of sails were convinced it was magic. In chapter three, Gustavus is first taken to Barbados where he is among the few who aren't sold. He is then sold to a plantation owner in Virginia but stays only a short period of time before being bought by a man named Michael Henry Pascal who intends him as a gift. At that time, Gustavus is called Jacob but Pascal refuses to call him such and renames him Gustavus. On the voyage to England aboard Pascal's trading ship, Gustavus meets a young educated white boy named Richard Baker who sees past the slavery issue and becomes friends with Gustavus - a situation that lasts until Richard's death.

Gustavus spends about two years in England, mostly traveling by ship with his master. He talks of the kindness of the people - especially two women named Guerin - who care for him at various times while his master is away. In chapter four, Gustavus talks about his emerging self-confidence and his waning fears. In 1759, Gustavus has learned about Heaven and requests baptism. In February, he is baptized at St. Margaret's Church in Westminster. Over the coming months, Gustavus is involved in many battles as the French and English clash. Eventually, Gustavus's master is released from his service and plans to return to private business. Gustavus has now met a man named Daniel Queen who has taught Gustavus many things. Gustavus regards him as a father figure and often spends his meager earnings on sugar or tobacco for Daniel. Gustavus plans to go into business with Daniel as soon as he is released from his military service but his master refuses to release Gustavus and instead sells him to another ship's captain, James Doran. Several of Gustavus's former shipmates vow to redeem him as soon as they are paid but he is, in the meantime, at Doran's mercy.



As chapter five begins, Gustavus writes that his current situation is a punishment for having said he planned to spend an entire day in London on "rambling and sport." He is initially forlorn but comes to believe that God gives suffering of this kind for a reason. In the West Indies, Gustavus learns that Doran has sold him to a Quaker named Robert King who says Gustavus will learn to be a clerk. Gustavus learns to handle almost all aspects of his master's businesses which include shipping. King is kind and Gustavus knows that several other plantation owners make offers for Gustavus. When King turns them down, Gustavus always works harder and thanks God for putting him in this place.

Gustavus describes the cruel treatment of most slaves and says that he was once threatened by a man who says he will shoot Gustavus and then pay for him. Gustavus offers up the typical arguments in favor of slavery saying that men who say they believe these arguments are fooling themselves. He also points out that those with kind masters and plenty of food work harder and live longer than those who are mistreated, and that those with cruelty as a daily part of life are more likely to simply give up and kill themselves. Gustavus points out that the slave trade is a study in avarice, and that slavers lie and cheat the slaves. He says that if slaves were treated "as men" they would be "faithful, honest, intelligent and vigorous." As chapter six begins, Gustavus says that he could list many more instances of cruelty, but that to list them all would be "tedious and disgusting." He is soon given the opportunity to become a sailor on one of his master's vessels and chooses to do so, trading a little to make some profit for himself. He notes that he is anxious to earn money and that escape and freedom is, of course, the ultimate goal though he wants it to be by honest means.

Gustavus prepares to go to Philadelphia with the captain. Gustavus's master hears a rumor that he is going to try to run away once they reach America but Gustavus points out that he's had opportunities and hasn't done so. His master sees the wisdom of the words, provides Gustavus credit for some goods to sell on his own in an effort to earn money and promises that he can buy his freedom if he earns forty pounds sterling money. He goes on the voyage to America though he is ill treated by the whites who would buy his items for sale. In Savannah, Georgia, he is beaten by a white overseer and left for dead but the captain finds him and with the help of a capable doctor, Gustavus recovers. In chapter seven, Gustavus earns enough money to buy his freedom. His master is initially upset, saying that he hasn't expected Gustavus to earn the money so quickly; but the captain intercedes and Gustavus is freed in return for forty pounds.

Gustavus agrees to another voyage as a freed man for a wage and wants to buy bullocks to take back with him for sale but the captain refuses and insists that Gustavus buy turkeys instead. He does so against his wishes and the bullocks all die on the crossing though his turkeys survive. The captain takes ill on the voyage and also dies and Gustavus safely takes the ship to port. He's offered the captain's position but refuses though he agrees to yet another voyage under the new captain, William Phillips, who runs the ship aground. They are stranded on an island for days and then find themselves at the mercy of a crew who picks them up. Phillips sells some of the slaves that had been cargo on the ship and buys passage to Georgia with plans to sell the rest,



parting here from Gustavus. It's in Georgia that Gustavus reluctantly agrees to perform a burial ceremony for a child and he notes that it's the first time he serves as parson.

In chapter nine, Gustavus begins working his way toward his goal of reaching London. There, he encounters the Guerins and Pascal and notes that Pascal seems indifferent of the way he treated Gustavus even after being confronted about it. Gustavus begins learning hairdressing as a means of supporting himself and begins studying the French horn and arithmetic. He soon learns that he can earn very little money in this way and decides to go to sea again, this time with a desire to see Turkey. He hires on as a hairdresser with John Jolly on a ship called the Delaware. He remains with that ship and captain until 1771, seeing and being enchanted with Turkey but declining the offer there of two wives and eventually parting ways to join Captain William Robertson on the ship Grenada Planter and then on the Jamaica under Captain David Watt. He later ends up on the North Pole, trapped for a period of time by ice.

As chapter ten begins, Gustavus continues his travels, going to Turkey for awhile, then London again and then to Spain. In chapter eleven, he is appalled by the bull baiting and eventually returns to Plymouth. In chapter twelve, Gustavus spends more time with the Quakers and is impressed by their actions and their church activities. He wants to become a missionary and says that the rest of his life is to be spent with an eye toward assisting "the cause of my much injured countrymen."

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Gustavus's story begins with descriptions of his own people. He notes that they possess slaves that are usually captured in battle or are people among his own tribe who broke specific laws. However, he writes that those slaves are not treated badly. They are required to work, but their masters work just as hard. The slaves are typically given their own house to live in and the only difference appears to be that those people are not free to leave. He doesn't go into this discussion to any great depth. Though Gustavus couldn't have known the horrors that awaited him aboard the slave ship, he notes that he is immediately afraid. He mentions a fear that he'll be eaten, but doesn't explain. It seems likely that his people were among those who commonly told their children that kidnappers were frequently cannibals. In any case, Gustavus writes that, had he had entire worlds of his own at that moment, he would have traded them all for the chance to swap places with the lowest slave in his country.

Gustavus talks at length about the fact that his people believed in cleanliness and that they were circumcised, and that many of the rituals seem to indicate that the Jewish and the African tribes of that region were related. He quotes a writer who believes that to be true and says the writer indicates that climate is the reason for the dark-skinned appearance of the Africans compared to the traditional light-skinned appearance of the Jews. Gustavus also points out that men with higher degrees of education have discussed the matter and that he isn't the person to answer the question definitively.

As Gustavus writes about his early travels, he seems to flit from one incident to another. He relates the story of a man who got something in his eye and then lost the eye. He



talks of being hospitalized for chilblains and small pox. He also mentions a man who saved him from being flogged for fighting with a "gentleman," but does not go into any additional details.

Gustavus seems to expect that his master is going to simply release him once the military stint is over and goes so far as to make plans for his future. He admits to being heartbroken upon the completion of his sale to a new master. It's interesting that Gustavus, having encountered so many kind and generous people at this point, has ceased to believe himself a slave. He points out that he's served his master well for many years and has earned nothing for it, and seems to expect that to be sufficient. He has become somewhat educated and expects a slave owner to have a moral responsibility to allow him to leave when he wants.

At one point, Gustavus is enamored with a tribe of the Mosquito Coast. He talks at length about their customs, including that they love the color red and that they enjoy their ceremonies. Gustavus seems to enjoy the actions of the people. He also talks of the fact that they seem similar to his own family of his childhood.



# Mary Prince

## Mary Prince Summary and Analysis

Mary Prince writes that she was born in Bermuda at a place called Brackish-Pond. Her first master is Charles Myners and her mother belongs to him. Her father belongs to a master named Trimmingham who is a ship builder. When Myners dies, Mary and her mother are bought by a man named Captain Darrell who gives them to his granddaughter, Miss Betsey. Miss Betsey and Mary grow fond of each other and Mary notes that Miss Betsey pulls her around by holding her hand and calls her "my little nigger." Mary admits to being very happy during this time and says it's because she was too young to realize her condition as a slave and to know what the future holds for her. Mary and her younger siblings have light chores to do but Miss Betsey's father - their master - is harsh to all, including his wife, Mrs. Williams. When the family falls on hard times, Mary's services as a nursemaid are rented out and she notes that this mistress is high-strung but seldom raises her hand against Mary. When his wife dies and Miss Betsey's father plans to remarry, he decides to sell off several of the slaves in order to pay for his upcoming wedding.

Mary Prince's mother is ordered to take three of her daughters to town to be sold. The girls, Mary, Hannah and Dinah, are sold according to age with Mary bringing what is considered a high sum. At her new home, she's met by slaves who say "poor child" upon her arrival, indicating that she is not being brought into a good home. On her first night, Mary hears a young female slave named Hetty being beaten severely because she hasn't completed assigned chores. There are also two young boys - Cyrus and Jack - who are beaten regularly, usually without cause. Hetty is very kind to Mary but is soon beaten to death by her owners, which leaves all the chores to Mary. Mary notes that she is soon so tired and fearful of the next beating that she wishes she could join Hetty in death. Her beatings are for all infractions, even one so minor as a cracked earthen jar falling apart. Another time, the master hits Mary as she's milking, causing the cow to kick over the bucket of milk and prompting more abuse.

Mary eventually runs away and her mother hides her for some time in a cave, bringing her food each night. When Mary's father, a man named Prince, finds out, he takes her back, pleading with Mary's master that he treat Mary more kindly. Mary says she expects to be beaten immediately, but that it doesn't happen that day. After about five years, Mary is sent to Turk's Island to "Mr. D." who immediately puts her to work in the "salt works." She writes that the slaves work in the water daily from four in the morning until nine, are given some boiled corn that they must eat quickly and return to work where they remain at their labors until dinner time. The food is mainly corn and the salt water work causes severe sores and other ailments. Beatings are common and Mary notes that she's simply gone "from one butcher to another."

After several years, Mary is returned to her master. She notes that there is too much work but that she is better than the situation on Turk's Island. When Mary is beaten for



breaking a plate, she "defends herself," saying that it was "high time to do so." She refuses to work for him anymore and leaves briefly but returns, having no other place to go. She is soon hired out to work at Cedar Hills but doesn't remain long before going to Antigua with Mr. and Mrs. Woods who eventually buy Mary for three hundred dollars. Mary becomes ill with rheumatism and can hardly lift her limbs. The Woods offer no care for her and another slave nurses her while she is ill.

Mary attends a Methodist prayer meeting and realizes the need for salvation. She joins the church and wants to join a Sunday school group but is told she must have a note from her owners. Fearing rejection, she doesn't ask. It's at this time that Mary meets Daniel James, a cooper who she marries in 1826. When her master finds out about the marriage, he beats Mary and she objects to the reason. She believes that her mistress merely worries that Mary will pay attention to her husband and that will take time away from her duties as a slave. Mary and Daniel are eventually given "a place" in the yard of her master. She asks for permission to buy her freedom and is refused. She's then taken to England and agrees to go, believing it might be good for her rheumatism which is again severe. In England she is forced to wash clothes in hot water and the changing from hot water to the cold rinse water further aggravates her condition.

After thirteen years with the Woods, Mary is ordered out of the house and finally decides to take the threat at face value and leave. She lives with "Mash, the shoe black" and his wife for some time. She gives them what little money she has to help defray the cost of her care. At this same time, she learns of the Anti-Slavery Society and that organization tries to purchase her freedom, but Mr. Woods refuses even though Mary is no longer living under his roof.

Over the coming months, Mary works as often as she can find a position and depends on the Anti-Slavery Society to help her make ends meet when she can't find work, though she says it irks her to depend on charity when she is able to work. She concludes her narrative with her thoughts on slavery - including that a person hired to work in England is much better off than a slave. She says that all a slave wants is fair pay and fair labor requirements along with the opportunity to keep the Sabbath. She also notes that she is living as well as can be expected but desires to return to her husband.

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As Mary is standing in the market place waiting to be sold, she notes that the men about to do the purchasing look at the slaves "carelessly" with no regard for their feelings. She says that she knows the buyers are "not all bad," but is hurt that they have no regard for the fact that her mother is about to give up three of her children. Mary also points out that as her mother helps them dress, she cries piteously and that she laments them as if they were dead and she were shrouding them for burial. The analogy is interesting as Mary herself will come to wish she were dead rather than enduring the hardships which face her. It seems a horrible task - the mother being ordered to take her children to the market for sale.



At the point in which Mary is sold away from her mother and siblings, the editor includes a passage describing a similar scene but from the point of view of a buyer who talks of the looks of sadness and fear on the faces of a mother and her three children being sold in a similar situation.

Mary talks of an old slave named Daniel who is beaten regularly while in the salt mines for not moving quickly enough. Daniel is usually whipped with briars, which leave horrible sores that are then doused with salt water so that Daniel screams out in pain. His sores never have time to heal and are often infected with maggots. Mary notes that he is an example of what could become of any of them, if they live as long as Daniel.

The Woods seem intent on mentally abusing Mary. At one point, Mr. Woods tells her that she's to "find a new owner," and when she finds someone who would buy her, he refuses to sell her. Mary says that the threat to sell her was an empty threat and that the point was to pacify his wife who was angry at Mary at the time. It's interesting to note that there are times during which Mary stands up for herself, telling her masters that she should be treated more kindly. It's noteworthy that Mary, though a slave for her entire life, realizes that the condition is not acceptable and that she deserves to be treated like a human regardless of her skin color.

A supplement by the editor follows Mary's narrative. This section includes evidence of Mary's visits to the Anti-Slavery Society and other documentation. There are some statements and information that indicates Mary had engaged in a relationship with a white man, but that statement includes the fact that these relationships are so common as to be hardly important at all. This statement indicates that in Mary's case, the relationship ended when she became "impressed with religion." It's note worthy that Mary herself seems to have more control over her life than is often credited with slaves, such as her decision to leave the Woods when they ordered her out of the house. She doesn't go into great detail on the subject, but it seems incredible that they would continue to own her, refuse to sell her, and would allow her to live away from them where she makes them no profit and does no work for them. It's left to the reader to determine the significance.



# A Narrative of the Life of Fredrick Douglass

## A Narrative of the Life of Fredrick Douglass Summary and Analysis

Fredrick Douglass is born in Tuckahoe, Maryland, the son of a slave woman named Harriet Bailey and grandson of Isaac and Betsey Bailey. His father is a white man, possibly his mother's master. Douglass and his mother are separated by the time he is a year old and Douglass notes that this practice is likely designed to eliminate the possibility of familial ties - and that it's successful in this goal. His mother sometimes slips in to sleep with him but is not allowed to miss work for any reason and so is always gone by the time he wakes. He notes that she dies suddenly and that he had little emotion upon hearing the news, but that he never learns the true identity of his father from her.

Douglass describes the beating of a woman he calls Aunt Hester who was caught with another slave. Her owner strips her to the waist and beats her unmercifully - the first incident Douglass witnesses of the atrocities common to the slaves. In chapter two, Douglass describes the rations of clothing and food given to the slaves. They were given eight pounds of pork or fish and a bushel of corn meal each month. Clothes were given out annually and consisted of a couple of shirts, one pair of pants and a pair especially for winter, a jack, shoes and socks. Children too young to work were given only a shirt and Douglass says naked children were a normal sight.

Chapter three opens with Douglass telling of the lengths to which his owner, Colonel Lloyd, goes in order to keep the slaves out of his magnificent gardens. The walls are tarred and any slave with tar on his body is considered immediately guilty - an association that prompts fear in the slaves. The keepers of the horses are at Colonel Lloyd's mercy and are often beaten when it seems there might have been any small improper handling of the horses - including not being fed at exactly the right time. The slaves were also beaten by Colonel Lloyd's three sons and his three sons-in-law at any infraction, whether real or perceived. Douglass says spies that seek out slaves who would talk badly about their masters are common and the result is that slaves almost always say they have kind masters and are happy in their situation, fearing punishment or being sold away from family and friends. Douglass speaks of another phenomenon in which slaves will defend their masters to other slaves and puts it down to uneducated prejudice and the belief that to be associated with a good master is somehow transferred to make them a better person.

In chapter four, Mr. Hopkins is sent away for apparently not being sufficiently cruel and is replaced by Mr. Gore who is exceedingly so. Mr. Gore shoots a slave who tries to run away from a flogging, explaining to the plantation owner that to have done nothing would inspire others to do the same. Douglass recounts other incidents of murder,



saying that the killing of a slave was not a punishable offense and though one woman had been charged for beating a slave to death with a stick, she was never arrested. In chapter five, Douglass learns he is being sent to Baltimore and has hopes of a better life there, but is disappointed on that front. He arrives at Allliciana Street to his new home and his mistress, Sophia Auld, where he is to care for her young son, Thomas.

In chapter six, Sophia begins teaching Douglass to read and write but her husband, Hugh, objects, saying that the slave who has this kind of knowledge is never again satisfied with his station. Douglass notes that he is disappointed at losing her as a teacher but has learned a valuable lesson from his master and now knows that he will settle for nothing less than freedom. In chapter seven, his mistress changes from the gentle, giving woman to a hateful slave owner, constantly watching for signs Douglass is trying to learn on his own. He notes that it's simply too late to stop his learning and he continues to read avidly, especially works that deal with slavery. In chapter eight, Douglass is sent back to the plantation to be "valued" with the other property so that the estate can be split among the heirs but soon returns to Baltimore.

In chapter nine, more of the heirs die and the slaves remaining are split up. Douglass's grandmother, now old and having devoted her life to serving the family, is given a small hut and left to fend for herself. Hugh Auld and his brother, Douglass's true owner, argue and Douglass is sent back to the country to Richard Auld where Douglass never has enough to eat though the Auld's stores are full. In chapter ten, Douglass is sent to live with Mr. Covey, a poor farmer with a reputation for "breaking" slaves, where he hopes to at least have enough to eat but is treated with even more cruelty. He eventually clashes with Covey, who doesn't again whip Douglass and doesn't call for the authorities to intervene, apparently fearing that to do so would tarnish his reputation. He talks at length about establishing a small Sabbath-day gathering during which he taught slaves to read but declines to mention the name of the freeman who furnished the gathering place.

In 1835, having brought several area slaves to understand that their condition is unacceptable, Douglass concocts a plan to escape by water some seventy miles outside the borders of Maryland. On the day they are to run away, the group of men are arrested but Douglass manages to burn the paper he'd written for himself, declaring himself free, and passes the word to the others to eat their own papers with biscuits provided for the trip and to admit to nothing. Douglass notes that their faith in each other was unshakable. Then all but Douglass are returned to the plantation and he, as apparent instigator of the plan, left in jail for a time. When he is freed, he is sent to Baltimore for fear that he'll be killed. There he's apprenticed to a ship builder where he learns nothing but is at the beck and call of all the carpenters for eight months. When he's severely beaten at the ship yard, his mater, Hugh Auld, takes him instead to another ship yard where he does learn caulking and is soon being hired for a dollar, fifty cents per day though Mr. Auld gets it all. He continues to think of freedom.

In chapter eleven, Douglass escapes to New York and soon sends for Anna, his intended wife. They are married by Mr. David Ruggles who is very active in helping slaves obtain freedom. They then travel to New Bedford and it's there that Douglass -



named Fredrick Augustus Washington Bailey at birth - accepts the recommendation to change his name and is thereafter called Fredrick Douglass. He attends many anti-slavery meetings and one day stands up to make a comment, earning respect and additional requests to address groups.

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Douglass notes that he doesn't know how old he is and this fact seems to hold great importance for him. He says that people other than slaves have the right to know their age and that was denied him. This seems important to him and may very well be a symbol of the oppression of slavery. He will later be urged to change his name and allows a benefactor to select for him, saying that he wants to keep his first name in order to retain a piece of his identity. This is another sign of the need for identity among a group of people who are denied most opportunities for self-identification.

Among the places owned by his first master, the "Great House Farm" is the most coveted assignment and Douglass notes that slaves live carefully with the hope of being sent there on any errand. This seems to be equated in the lives of the slaves as a great honor and a sign of trust on the part of the overseer. Douglass notes that the songs sung by those headed to the "great house" are his first clue to the "dehumanizing" aspect of slavery.

Douglass notes that the slaves are not required to labor over the Christmas holidays other than to tend stock. Some make brooms, baskets and other items they need while some hunt for food. Douglass says most simply play at games and spend most of their time drinking, and that slave owners - perversely - prefer that slaves do nothing. It's an interesting concept and Douglass says that the slave owner who has industrious slaves seem to also have the idea that the slaves don't "need" the owners.

Douglass writes about his impression of the people of the north and admits that it's not what he expected. He says that in the south, the people who did not own slaves were poor people and that, because the northerners did not own slaves, they would also be poor. He also writes about his willingness to perform menial labor though he had been trained as a ship's caulker and that, as such, he would have earned a decent living.



# Incidents in the Life of a Slave Girl

## Incidents in the Life of a Slave Girl Summary and Analysis

Harriett Jacobs writes her story using the name Linda Brent. She says that she had an extraordinarily happy childhood and did not know she was a slave until she was seven and her mother died. Harriett's mistress promises Harriett's mother - on her deathbed - that she will set the children free, but fails to keep that promise. In chapter two, Harriett is moved to the home of Dr. Flint - brother-in-law of Harriett's mistress. She is sad to be away from her father, a kind carpenter who has permission to get work for himself and pays his mistress two hundred dollars each year. When he dies, Mrs. Flint refuses to allow Harriet to leave, saying that her father's notion that his children are "human" is dangerous for both slave and owner. Harriett's brother, William, says he plans to run away as soon as he's strong enough and able, but Harriett holds to the hope that she'll be able to buy her freedom.

Harriett's grandmother, Aunt Marthy, is promised her freedom but when her mistress dies, Dr. Flint puts Aunt Marthy up for sale. She refuses a private sale, wanting his shame in selling her when she'd been promised her freedom to be made public. The people know of the situation and one old woman bids fifty dollars with no one willing to bid against her. In this way, Aunt Marthy was given her freedom. Meanwhile, Harriett sees many atrocities at the hands of Dr. Flint. One woman was sold for bearing his child and saying she had; a man received one hundred lashes; and the cook had his mouth and throat stuffed with food that the master found unacceptable.

In chapter three, Harriett describes January second, or "hiring day" in which slaves that are hired out by the year are given their assignments, typically with families ripped apart. In chapter four, Harriett's young uncle Benjamin escapes, is returned and escapes again, this time making it at least as far as New York though the family never again hears from him. Harriett's grandmother then manages to save eight hundred dollars and buys the freedom of another of her sons, Phillip.

In chapters five and six, Harriet continues to evade the advances of her master, Dr. Flint. Mrs. Flint is angry at the situation and seems for a time to take Harriett under her wing but is actually trying to prove the girl as guilty as Dr. Flint. Harriett says this is a common situation and that many master have fathered slave children. She says the exception to the rule of ignoring these indiscretions is the wife who insists that these children be freed. Chapter seven covers Harriett's love for a free Negro and her master's refusal to allow them to be together. In chapter eight, Harriett says slave owners tell their slaves about the hardships that would face them as free Negroes in the north and that many slaves believe it. Chapter nine contains details about the cruelties visited on slaves and the fact that the moral corruption follows. She relates that some daughters of slave owners, hearing that their fathers have sex with the slave girls,



choose the lowest of the field hands for their own lovers because they have that same kind of control over those men as their fathers over the slave women.

In chapter ten, Harriett gives in to the advances of a white man named Mr. Sands in her efforts to escape those of her master and becomes pregnant. In chapter eleven, Harriett falls ill and gives birth to a son though both are ill for a full year. During this time, she remains with her grandmother and Mrs. Flint threatens to kill her if she returns. Her child's father is quite taken with the boy but Dr. Flint reminds Harriett that the child is now his property.

In chapters twelve and thirteen, Harriett discusses the Nat Turner incident and its local effect of prompting a gathering of local military men and the connection - or lack of - between religion and slavery. Chapter fourteen covers Harriett's opportunity when Dr. Flint is out of town to christen the children, with the son being named Benjamin. In chapter fifteen, Dr. Flint refuses an offer to buy Harriett for nine hundred dollars and points out that the children are becoming more valuable with age, then forces Harriett to choose between a life with him and being moved to the plantation as a common worker. She chooses the plantation and leaves Benjamin with her grandmother because he is sick. When the daughter, Ellen, later becomes ill, Harriett sends her there as well and continues to seek a way to escape.

In chapters sixteen, seventeen, and eighteen, Harriett talks about the fact that life on the plantation is hard and Harriett soon comes up with a plan of escape. She hides first with a friend then with a wealthy, kind slave owner who goes so far as to lend Dr. Flint five hundred dollars to make a trip to New York to search for Harriett while her children and her brother, William, are jailed in an attempt to draw her out. In chapter nineteen, the children and William are sold to a trader operating on behalf of Mr. Sands, father of the children, who releases them back to Harriett's grandmother. In chapter twenty, Harriett is moved from her hiding place and lives briefly between a ship and a place called Snaky Swamp. In chapter twenty-one, she begins months of living in the attic crawl space of her grandmother's house, able to see and hear her children through a tiny hole but unable to talk to them. In chapter twenty-two, Harriett sews clothes for her children for Christmas and remains hidden as her grandmother invites the constable in for dinner, showing him that she has nothing to hide in her house. In chapters twenty-three and twenty-four, Harriett remains hidden for more than a year and her limbs become almost useless. When she learns that Mr. Sands has been elected to Congress, she comes out of hiding long enough to beg him to release the children from slavery in case something happens to him, and he agrees. She is so weak, she cannot return to her hiding place without her Uncle Phillip's help.

In chapter twenty-five, Harriett has been in her prison for five years and her legs barely work. She sends a letter to Dr. Flint, dated and postmarked from New York by having a friend mail it there for her, and he becomes convinced from the contents of the letter that she is now in Boston, taking some of the pressure off her family. Chapters twenty-six and twenty-seven find Harriett remaining hidden and Mr. Sands agrees to send Ellen to the north, citing the fact that Dr. Flint is claiming that Ellen belonged to his daughter, a child, and therefore the contract to sell her is not binding. Harriett fears that Ellen has



merely been loaned out as a slave. In chapter twenty-eight, her Aunt Nancy dies and as chapter twenty-nine opens, Harriet has been in her tiny prison for almost seven years and finds a means of escape. As she prepares to go, she spends a little time with Benjamin who says he's known of her presence for years but fears for her so greatly that he never told anyone.

In chapter thirty-one, Harriett travels to Philadelphia aboard a boat with her friend and fellow escapee, Fanny, and then by train to New York. She is disappointed to find that the Negroes are not allowed first-class seating and are piled aboard a crowded, dirty "box" of a car - to Harriett, a mimic of slave conditions in the south. In chapter thirty-two, Harriett learns that Ellen is being held and treated as a slave and is not - as promised - attending school. Harriett writes to Dr. Flint, asking him the price for which she could gain her freedom and he replies that she must return home. In chapter thirty-three, Harriett gains employment as a nurse for the child of an Englishwoman named Mrs. Bruce and is reunited with William, though constantly worrying over Ellen and Benjamin. Chapter thirty-four describes Harriett's correspondence with Dr. Flint who again urges her to return home but denies her freedom at any price and the arrival of Benjamin to be with his mother. In chapter thirty-five and thirty-six, Harriett learns that Dr. Flint has been alerted as to her whereabouts and, with the help of Mrs. Bruce and under the care of William, she and Ellen go to Boston where Benjamin has already been sent to wait for her.

In chapter thirty-seven, Harriett travels to England with Mary, the child of Mrs. Bruce, after Mrs. Bruce's death, leaving Ben and Ellen in America with friends. There for ten months, she sees little prejudice and earns good money. In chapter thirty-nine, she is encouraged to return to the south by Dr. Flint's daughter, now married, but sees it only as a ruse to return her to slavery and refuses. In chapters forty and forty-one, Harriett learns that Dr. Flint has died and his daughter is now in dire financial straits which prompts a trip to New York to search for her. By now, Harriett has worked for the new Mrs. Bruce and they have become close friends with Harriett helping to raise this Mrs. Bruce's child. Mrs. Bruce buys Harriett's freedom with the negotiator promising that if she isn't released, she'll simply leave the country. Harriett learns that her grandmother knows of her freedom but soon after dies, followed by her Uncle Phillip. She notes that she still longs for a home of her own but that her story ends with this achievement, her freedom.

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Harriett's first longing for freedom seems to come with her first understanding that she was a slave. She notes that her grandmother works at an enterprise of her own in order to save a little money each year to buy her children their freedom. Her grandmother had briefly been freed and though that grant of freedom was apparently legal, she and her mother had been captured and resold to a different master. Harriett also mentions one instance in which her father calls to Harriett's brother, William, at the same time the slave owner calls and William goes first to the owner, prompting his father's wrath and a warning that when he calls, his children are to do whatever it takes to answer. That idea

of familial loyalty seems to be among the reasons Harriett, from an early age, longs for freedom.

Harriett and her brother, William, are very close and the two want to find a way to escape, but Harriett is watched too closely. Harriett's grandmother fears this plan because of the fate that befell Benjamin on his first attempt. Harriett notes that she wants William to escape with the idea that she'll then follow, and admits that this is the desire of many a young slave girl. She also notes that brother and sister are careful not to show their love for each other because their cruel master will then tear them apart. Though Dr. Flint is her owner and can force her to have sex with him, he refrains and it seems to be because he fears that her grandmother will make a public outcry. While he can't be convicted for raping Harriett, he seems to crave a positive public opinion.



# Characters

## Gustavus Vassa

Born Olaudah Equiano and sometimes called "The African," he was born in the African province of Essaka in 1745. Gustavus says that he'd been given another name in the early days of his slavery and had initially refused to answer to the name "Gustavus," but eventually gave in. He is an intelligent man and adept at trading. His services are coveted because he is so capable and hardworking. When he's purchased by a master who has land and shipping ventures, Gustavus wants desperately to go to sea. He's learned much about shipping and knows that he has the potential to make enough money there to buy his freedom. He accomplishes saving that money in a matter of only a few years, though there are some pitfalls along the way. When he then asks his owner to release him, the owner initially refuses but is convinced by an employee - a ship's captain - who has taken a liking to Gustavus and prevails on the man's sense of fair play.

Gustavus loves to learn and devotes as much of his time as possible to learning a variety of things ranging from the Bible to the French horn. He says that he hates to be idle and will take on some new endeavor rather than spend evenings with nothing to occupy his hands and mind. He comes to love London and Turkey as his two favorite destinations among all those he visits. Gustavus finds an array of friends during his travels and learns from many of them. He seems often overly trusting and occasionally finds himself in trouble when he trusts someone to make good on a promise, especially with regard to money. He says that there are those who defend slavery and that they are delusional in their arguments. Gustavus eventually applies to become a missionary.

## Harriett Jacobs

Writing as Linda Brent and referred to as "Linda" throughout the text of the story, Harriett Jacobs is born into slavery but says she doesn't realize her condition for many years. She has the advantage of living with both parents and her grandmother and their love results in Harriett's sense of self worth and confidence often beaten out of slaves. Her father has more freedom than most slaves, a condition that has an important impact on Harriett's life. She craves freedom for herself throughout most of her life. She depends greatly on her grandmother and that woman's care also plays an important role in Harriett's life. When Harriett's master, Dr. Flint, would have molested Harriett, the threat of her grandmother's admonition seems to at least temporarily halt it. When Harriett feels she can no longer fend off his advances, she gives in to those of another white man who fathers two children, Benjamin and Ellen. This man, Mr. Sands, is later elected to Congress and promises to free the children but actually buys them in the name of Harriett's grandmother leaving them still vulnerable to the laws of slavery.



Harriett's desire to be free finally prompts her to run away, leaving her children behind in the care of her grandmother. Though they are imprisoned for a time, Harriett is urged to remain strong in her resolve while her master searches for her in vain. In fact, Harriett lives for almost seven years in a cramped crawl space under her grandmother's roof until she is able to make her way to New York, is reunited with her children, and meets a kindly benefactress who eventually buys her freedom.

## **Fredrick Douglass**

Born Fredrick Augustus Washington Bailey, he changes his name upon beginning his new life as a free man in the north. Douglass is literally taken from his mother while he is still a baby and notes that the object seems to be to break the love the typically binds families. In this case, it works and he expresses little distress when his mother dies. He is likely the child of a white father but never knows his identity because his mother dies while Douglass is so very young. He is taken into a new household where he's taught the alphabet but the lessons are interrupted by the master who explains that a slave who is knowledgeable is never content with his situation. It's here that Douglass, upset at having lost his teacher, learns a more important lesson and sets about anxiously in the pursuit of knowledge. He eventually makes his escape to northern soil, marries and works as a common laborer though he has mastered the skill of caulking ships. He notes that he's happier working as a free laborer than he ever was as a slave with a sought-after trade.

## **Mary Prince**

As a youngster, Mary is purchased by a man as a gift to his granddaughter, Miss Betsey, who makes a "pet" of Mary. Mary is later rented out as a nurse and when her owner's wife dies, is one of three children sold to raise money for her master's upcoming wedding. Mary arrives at a brutal household with too much work to do and never a word of kindness. She endures for many years and her health eventually takes a toll. When she is too ill to work, her master summarily puts her out, leaving her to fend for herself too far from home to return to her husband, a freedman.

## **Hetty**

Hetty is a young female slave in the home of the master who purchases Mary Prince. Hetty is a graceful, pretty young woman that may be part of the reason she so frequently incites the anger of her mistress. Mary notes that she enjoys watching Hetty because she is so industrious and because she is the only friendly face among the household. Hetty is beaten to death by her owners.



## **Sophia Auld**

Sophia is the sister-in-law of the daughter of a wealthy slave owner who owns Frederick Douglas. When Douglas arrives at her home, he finds that she is a paragon of gentleness and kindness. She soon begins to teach him to read but when her husband discovers the situation she's told that it's dangerous because a slave who can read is never again content in his station. She changes then to a hateful, serious taskmaster and diligently watches Douglas in an effort to keep him from honing his reading skills. Douglas notes that he hated to lose her as a teacher but is glad to have learned from her husband the truth about his position as a slave because it made the way to freedom more desirable and clear than any other incident could have.

## **Harriett Jacobs' Grandmother**

Known as "Aunt Marthy," she is a kind woman who longs above all else to keep her family together. Having had a brief taste of freedom as a child, she works every evening making food stuffs to sell. From that money, she is to buy clothes for herself and her children and manages to put a little money aside each year with the ultimate goal aimed at buying her children's freedom. Harriett notes that it's her grandmother who provides comfort, helps supplement her meager food ration and keeps her strong when she is facing childhood without either of her parents.

## **The Second Mrs. Bruce**

Harriett Jacobs works as the nurse for the child of a woman named Mrs. Bruce after her escape to New York. This Mrs. Bruce is kind but soon dies. The second Mrs. Bruce also hires Harriett as a nurse and the two become close friends. It's this Mrs. Bruce who helps Harriett evade capture on several occasions when Dr. Flint pursues Harriett, and who eventually buys Harriett's freedom.

## **Dr. Flint**

The son-in-law of Harriett Jacob's master and the man who eventually controls Harriett though she officially belongs to Dr. Flint's young daughter. Dr. Flint, though much older than Harriett, wants her in his bed and makes a number of offers to make her life better if she succumbs to his wishes. He dies broke and leaves his family practically destitute.

## **Mr. Sands**

The father of Harriett Jacob's two children, he is elected to Congress soon after their affair. He purchases Harriett's brother, William, and Harriett's two children who are also his children, with the promise to set them all free. Though he vows William will be released after a five-year period, William fears that Mr. Sands will have a change of

heart and runs away. As it turns out, Mr. Sands never grants the promised freedom to his children either.



## **Objects/Places**

### **Essaka**

The African province where Gustavus Vassa is born in 1745.

### **Barbados**

Where Gustavus is first taken as a slave though he is not sold.

### **Virginia**

Where Gustavus is initially sold as a slave to a plantation owner.

### **St. Margaret's Church**

The Westminster church where Gustavus is baptized in 1759.

### **Brackish-Pond, Bermuda**

Where Mary Prince is born.

### **Turk's Island**

Where Mary Prince is sent to work in the salt mines.

### **Winthrops**

The plantation where Mary Prince attends a Methodist prayer meeting and realizes that she needs to join the church.

### **Tuckahoe, Maryland**

A town near Hillsborough in Talbot County where Fredrick Douglas was born.

### **Snaky Swamp**

The place where Harriett Jacobs remains hidden part of the time as she tries to evade capture and return to slavery.



## **Aunt Marthy's Attic**

Where Harriett Jacobs for almost seven years to evade capture.

## **New York**

Where Harriett Jacobs is granted her freedom when Mrs. Bruce buys her and sets her free.

# Themes

## The Desire for Freedom

The desire for freedom is an overriding theme and the slaves who wrote these stories are each determined to find freedom, regardless of the cost. This can be seen clearly in the fact that slaves are brutally beaten if caught in a runaway attempt, yet many continue to take the chance. One of the best examples of this desire for freedom is seen in Harriet Jacobs' brother, William. William has been purchased by Harriett's lover and the father of her children, Mr. Sands. Mr. Sands is subsequently elected to Congress and takes William along with him. William has the opportunity to travel through many states and to see many things, and it's noted that Mr. Sands is not a cruel master. Despite the fact that William is treated well with enough to eat and has the promise of eventual freedom, he seizes an opportunity to run away. In his case, there's little cause for worry about reprisal because Mr. Sands isn't cruel and isn't likely to track him down. By contrast, Harriett's Uncle Benjamin runs away, is captured and brought back where he is treated severely, and still runs away again.

In the case of Gustavus, he had a master who was willing to allow him time at sea where he was able to make money on his own, but spent a great deal of money to buy his freedom. This willingness to work for many years at jobs in addition to their regular tasks is another common theme in the quest for freedom and those who achieve that freedom are often then working to "buy" their family.

## The Importance of Family Ties

The importance of family ties is repeated often though the lack of feeling is often attributed to the blacks by their owners. It's Mary Prince's mother who is ordered to take three of her daughters to the auction block. She notes as she's dressing them that she might as well be shrouding them for their burial because the three girls are going to be lost forever to her.

In the case of Fredrick Douglass, he has a decided lack of family ties. He notes that he never knew the identity of his father though he supposed him to be a slave owner, and that he was taken from his mother as a toddler. The result is that Douglass's mother sometimes stole away to spend a night with him but always had to be back in the fields the next day, meaning she was never there by the time he woke and there was never any meaningful relationship between them. Douglass notes that the slave owners seem to do this with the express purpose of eliminating family ties. It seems that this may sometimes have been counterproductive because others cited the fact that family ties sometimes held slaves in a particular place when they might otherwise have run away in search of freedom.



## Power Breeds Corruption

There is no doubt that many slave owners and traders, given the complete power over another human being, abused that power. Stories of beatings and murders are common to all four of the stories related here, but another interesting phenomenon is also true - those who were kind were often corrupted by the slave system. It is Fredrick Douglass who tells the story of his mistress, Sophia Auld, who begins the process of teaching Douglass to read and write. She has barely begun when her husband discovers the lessons and puts a stop to them. This lady is a wonderful woman, kind and gentle and apparently with Douglass's best interests at heart until she has put in some time as overseer of slaves. Douglass notes that she is then hateful and cruel.

The frequency with which male slave owners take advantage of their female slaves is another common thread throughout these stories. Harriett Jacobs relates another level of this corruption. She says that the young slave girls, in tending their young white mistresses, are often the source of sexual information that these young ladies should not be subjected to. When they gain this information, they seek an outlet of their own and often order the slave men of the household or plantation to satisfy their own sexual urges. The children of both sides of these unions are then subjected to lives of hardship and cruelty with the law stating that the child would be born into the mother's situation, meaning the children of these slave owners born to slave women were automatically considered the property of their fathers.

# Style

## Perspective

Each of the stories is written in first person from the perspective of the author. It should be noted that three of these have two different names. For example, Gustavus Vassa was named Obaudah Equiano at birth and was later named Gustavus Vassa by a master. Because Gustavus used that name more frequently than the name given to him by his parents, he is referred to as Gustavus throughout the story. Fredrick Douglass is a well-known name, though he was born Fredrick Augustus Washington Bailey. He took the name Douglass upon his arrival in the free states of the north, though he insisted on retaining his first name as some link to his true identity. For the sake of familiarity, he is referred to throughout this text as Fredrick Douglass.

The same is true in the case of Harriett Jacobs who is writing as Linda Benton, and this author is referred to as Harriett Jacobs throughout the text. It should be noted that Jacobs admits at the beginning of the story to having changed the names of some of the people in her book. In fact, research shows that she changed many of the names and it therefore seems appropriate that she would have changed her own name for the purposes of the story.

Writing in first person seems the only possible option available to each of these authors because the stories are presented as factual events in the lives of each.

## Tone

The story is written in a straight-forward manner but it should be noted that there are some graphic scenes that may be offensive to some readers. They are, however, a part of the history of these people and it seems appropriate that they should be presented. For example, Gustavus Vassa describes the cruelties visited on the slaves of the Jamaican Islands. Those people were routinely beaten but the tortures often took the form of tying them in impossible positions where they were at the mercy of elements and creatures. In the case of each, the stories of separations of family members are a common theme and will likely touch the reader.

It's interesting to note that all three of these use words that may not commonly be associated with people of little formal education. In most parts, the meanings of words are easily discerned but it should not be assumed that the level of writing is that of an uneducated person. Of the four stories, the messages of all are aptly conveyed but it seems that Harriett Jacobs' story has a more personal slant, possibly because her story is of a more personal nature and involves her family and friends on a deeper level whereas the others, especially Gustavus Vassa, tells more of his travels and how other people treated him. The tone is often hopeless and a sensitive reader may find himself feeling pity for those involved.

## Structure

The book is divided into four stories, one for each of the authors that include Gustavus Vassa, Fredrick Douglass, Mary Prince and Harriett Jacobs.

The first of these, Gustavus Vassa, is divided into chapters. There are twelve chapters and these are further divided into sections, identified only by number. Each of the chapters begins with a synopsis of what will be found in that chapter. For example, chapter one begins with, "The Author's account of his country - The manners and customs of the Inhabitants - Administration of justice," and so on. Each item of that synopsis is one of the smaller sections within that chapter. The story ends with an appendix containing several additional pieces of information, including the document from Gustavus's owner releasing him from slavery and a letter from Gustavus to the Queen and signed, "Gustavus Vassa, The Oppressed Ethiopian." The story of Gustavus takes up approximately two hundred, fifty pages.

The History of Mary Prince is written in one long narrative with no chapter breaks. It was, according to the title page, published in 1831. There is absolutely no division within the story which ends with a supplemental offering that details some methods used to authenticate the story. This is among the shorter of the stories of this book and is only about forty-five pages with the supplement being about thirty additional pages.

The Narrative of Fredrick Douglass is about one hundred pages in length and begins with two letters, one a preface written by Wm. Lloyd Garrison in 1845 and the second a letter from Wendell Phillips. The book, according to the title page, was published in 1845. The story is divided into eleven chapters, each titled only with a Roman numeral. There follows an appendix, also written by Douglass.

Incidents in the Life of a Slave Girl is the final story in the book. The story is approximately two hundred, twenty pages in length and is broken into forty-one chapters that are also titled. The titles include Childhood, The New Master and Mistress, The Slaves' New Year, The Slave Who Dared to Feel Like a Man, The Trials of Girlhood, The Jealous Mistress, The Lover, What Slaves Are Taught to Think of the North, Sketches of Neighboring Slaveholders, The Children Sold and more.



## Quotes

"I asked them if we were not to be eaten by those white men with horrible looks, red faces, and long hair." Gustavus Vassa upon arrival at the slave ship, Chapter II, Page 57

"When you make men slaves, you deprive them of half their virtue, you set them, in your own conduct, an example of fraud, rapine, and cruelty, and compel them to live with you in a state of war; and yet you complain that they are not honest and faithful!" Gustavus Vassa, Chapter V, Page 117

"A seraskier, or officer, took a liking to me here, and wanted me to stay, offering me two wives. But I refused the temptation, thinking one was as much as some could manage, and more than others would venture on." Gustavus Vassa, Chapter IX, Page 175

"I was made quite a pet by Miss Betsey, and loved her very much. She used to lead me about by the hand and call me her little nigger. This was the happiest period of my life; for I was too young to understand rightly my condition as a slave, and too thoughtless and full of spirits to look forward to the days of toil and sorrow." A History of Mary Prince, Page 253

"Let them work ever so hard in England, they are far better off than slaves. If they get a bad master, they give warning and go hire to another. They have their liberty. That's just what we want. We don't mind hard work, if we had proper treatment, and proper wages like the English servants, and proper time given in the week to keep us from breaking the Sabbath." A History of Mary Prince, Page 288

"It was the blood-stained gate, the entrance to the hell of slavery, through which I was about to pass. It was a most terrible spectacle." Fredrick Douglas describing the beating of a slave, Chapter I, Page 343

"He spoke but to command, and commanded but to be obeyed; he dealt sparingly with his words and bountifully with his whip, never using the former where the latter would answer as well." The Life of Fredrick Douglas, Chapter IV, Page 353

"I was born a slave; but I never knew it till six years of happy childhood had passed away." Incidents in the Life of a Slave Girl, Chapter I, Page 445

"When a man is hunted like a wild beast he forgets there is a God, a Heaven. He forgets every thing in his struggle to get beyond the reach of the bloodhounds." Incidents in the Life of a Slave Girl, Chapter IV, Page 464

"When these remarks were reported to me, I smiled at Mrs. Flint's saying that she would either kill my child or spoil her. I thought to myself there was very little danger of the latter." Incidents in the Life of a Slave Girl, Chapter XVIII, Page 555



"I staid a month after this, and finding I was resolved to stand up for my rights, they concluded to treat me well. Let every colored man and woman do this, and eventually we shall cease to be trampled under foot by our oppressors." Incidents in the Life of a Slave Girl, Chapter XXXV, Page 637

"My grandmother lived to rejoice in my freedom; but not long after, a letter came with a black seal. She had gone 'where the wicked cease from troubling, and the weary are at rest.'" Incident in the Life of a Slave Girl, Chapter XLI, Page 664



## Topics for Discussion

What does the reader learn about the life of Gustavus Vassa prior to his life as a slave? Why is this information crucial to understanding him as a man?

What does Harriet Jacobs, also known as Linda Brent, say about her childhood? Who are the people who bring stability to her childhood? What is the impact of that love and stability on the rest of her life?

What does Mary Prince say about the amount of work she is forced to do? What is the impact on Prince and other slaves of the period of this level of work? Make your answer specific to Prince and general in terms of other slaves.

What does Fredrick Douglass say about his age? Why is it important to him? What are some other symbols Douglass uses with regard to slavery?

What is the trade that Douglass learns and how does that trade benefit his owner? How does Douglass make his living once he is married and has attained his freedom? What does he say about the work and is he willing to do general labor when he has a specialized skill? Why or why not?

Compare the methods by which Gustavus Vassa and Harriett Jacobs obtain their freedom. What do their methods say about the two former slaves? What can be inferred by their level of commitment?

Compare the lives of Harriet Jacobs, Mary Prince, Gustavus Vassa and Fredrick Douglass. What are the familial ties of each? What impact do these ties have on the people and their actions in later life?

Compare the impressions of Fredrick Douglass and Harriett Jacobs upon reaching the northern free states. How do those compare to the impressions of Jacobs and Gustavus Vassa concerning the treatment of blacks by people in England?