

# **To Be a Slave Study Guide**

## **To Be a Slave by Julius Lester**

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## Overview

To Be a Slave fills a void in the documentation of American history by providing a concrete illustration of the culture and history of blacks in the Americas, particularly in the United States. The book focuses on the plight of blacks: their brutal capture in Africa, their confined passage to America in slave ships, and their subsequent servitude. Rather than offering a dry summary of these events, Lester brings history to life, presenting the testimony of former slaves who describe their experiences in visceral detail. Because most slaves were illiterate, their stories were passed along orally, but most written historical accounts of slavery ignore this oral tradition, focusing instead on how slavery as an institution affected the white, mainstream society. Hence, Lester fills a historical gap by providing a black perspective on the same situation. The quote from an ex-slave that begins Lester's book indicates the significance of To Be a Slave: "In all the books that you have studied you never have studied Negro history, have you?...If you want Negro history, you will have to get it from somebody who wore the shoe..."

## About the Author

Julius Bernard Lester was born in St.

Louis, Missouri, on January 27, 1939. His father, a Methodist minister, inspired Lester's interest in southern black folklore and culture, as did Lester's maternal grandmother from Arkansas, with whom the boy spent many summers. He was educated at Fisk University in Memphis, where he earned a degree in music and literature in 1960. Despite legalized racism and segregation in the South, Lester focused on the positive traditions of rural southern blacks in his writing.

Lester's editor for his adult books suggested that he try writing literature for children, which eventually led to his publishing *To Be a Slave*. Lester says that his hope in writing stories for young adults is to provide them with the kind of books he never had as a child.

*To Be a Slave* became a best-selling work that received the Nancy Bloch Award and a New York Times Outstanding Book Award in 1968 and a Newbery Honor Book citation in 1969. Another of Lester's books for young adults, *Long Journey Home*, was honored as a National Book Award finalist in 1973 and won the Lewis Carroll Shelf Award in 1972. Lester's books have been translated into German, Swedish, Finnish, Japanese, and Spanish.

## Plot Summary

In the mid-nineteenth century, white abolitionists interviewed current slaves in an effort to use their testimony to create interest in a war to stop the slavery. Often, the white abolitionists would change the words of the slaves so that they would be more in line with the English language. After The Civil War, interest in the slaves, their tumultuous lives, and their stories began to fade away. In the 1930s, the Federal Writers' Project was formed in an effort to collect as many slaves' stories as possible to record this part of American history before it was too late. Two books were published because of those efforts, but thousands of other stories remained in the archives at the Library of Congress. These writers interviewed the former slaves and wrote down their stories word for word. Published in 1968, this book chronicles what it was like *To Be a Slave*.

The writer breaks down the gathered stories and organizes them into periods, starting with the onset of slavery and its beginnings. The writer then presents stories that describe what it was like to be a slave in the American South during the period of slavery. He writes about the rare, happy occasions, but he also writes in depth about the mostly miserable existence slaves experienced. From there, readers learn about the time when slaves and abolitionists started the resistance movement and how that affected the life of a slave. Unlike most slavery books, this one does not stop when it comes to the Emancipation Proclamation that freed the slaves. It goes further to illustrate the misery of the former slaves' lives because the government granted their freedom but gave them nothing else. From the thousands of slave interviews, Mr. Lester presents the accounts of many in this book, including the accounts of what life was really like once they were free. What may surprise some readers is that their struggles and hardships truly began with their freedom.

Many authors have written books about slavery from a white perspective. This book is written in the words of the former slaves themselves, presented as a whole. An ex-slave from Tennessee states it like this: "If you want Negro history, you will have to get it from somebody who wore the shoe, and by and by from one to the other, you will get a book." That is exactly what a reader will get upon completing this book.



# Prologue

## Prologue Summary

Colonists first tried to have Indians work to help with the settlements. Their susceptibility to disease eliminated them as slaves. Then the English tried to recruit the poor whites, prisoners, and debtors from England and Ireland to work as indentured servants for 7 years and then release them. This created a constant demand for slaves. Because these slaves were white, they could easily run away, change their names, and gain their freedom. Eventually, the English colonists realized the Africans with their black skin were helpful to them since they could not easily escape and blend in elsewhere. The other great advantages were that the white men could buy the Africans "for life" and the supply was as great as the need. An estimated 50 million Africans were sold into the slave trade.

This book is about hearing about slavery from the voices of the slaves themselves, sometimes in their own words and sometimes in the words of the white man. Slavery was prevalent in most countries, but it was in America that slaves were treated in the cruellest ways.

## Prologue Analysis

Laziness is the biggest motivation for the use of slavery in America, second only to greed. As the author highlights the attempts the slave owners made to find cheap labor, it is evident that the slave owners were lazy. They had big ideas for getting the colonies settled, but they were not necessarily interested in performing the hard work. Instead of making their own sacrifices, they sacrificed the health, well being, and rights of others. The author also reveals the cunning tricks of the slave owners. When the attempts to enslave the American Indians failed, the slave owners tried other sources of free labor. It did not take them long to figure out that the white indentured servants could easily run away and blend in to society. When they realized the dark-skinned people stood out from the rest, the slave owners quickly turned the slave trade into a brisk business.



# Chapter 1, To Be a Slave

## Chapter 1, To Be a Slave Summary

The slaves thought slavery existed for two reasons: possession of a renewable source of free labor and the creation of capital earned from the slaves' work and from the selling of slaves. Slavery was a very profitable business. This chapter addresses the essence of what being a slave really meant. Some slaves define it as not being human; others describe it as being a piece of property. Some, accustomed to always being told what to do, upon being freed would consider visiting their old master and ask him what they should do. Being a slave meant enduring beatings, whippings, brainwashing, and pretty much being treated like an animal or lower than an animal.

Some masters were even fathers to their slaves. Most did not acknowledge this, but some did. One master, Powhatan Mitchell, a Whig who owned slaves but was against slavery, introduced his slave son and white son as brothers. He related a comparison of the two to pigs in a litter: brothers, despite having different colors. This father went as far as teaching his slave son that black was just as good as white and instructed him never to address a white man as "master." While fathering slaves was a common occurrence, this type of treatment was very rare. Most of the time, the slaves' lives were full of misery, cruelty, and pain.

## Chapter 1, To Be a Slave Analysis

The most prevalent theme in this chapter is power, shown through the ability of some to own a slave and administer beatings. To the slave owners, the more slaves they owned, the more powerful they were. Greed is at the root of slavery. If it were not for the desire to have the settlements developed quickly and the slave owner's desire for wealth, slavery might not have begun in the U.S. or received support as long as it did. Examples of compassion were rare, but sometimes occurred, as in the case of Byrl Anderson. Often the only compassion that slaves experienced occurred among the slaves themselves.

Also important in this first chapter is the use of fear. Most slaves were constantly afraid of the whip, and they lived in fear all the time. In the case of Roberta Manson's father, the white men whipped him because he looked at a slave the white men killed and cried.



# Chapter 2, The Auction Block

## Chapter 2, The Auction Block Summary

The auction block was a frequent sight during slavery. Slave owners usually sold their slaves to get out of debt or sell a "problem" slave, one who was belligerent or ran away often. Sometimes slaves were traded or sold in an informal process through two businessmen. Often, their masters sold them to slave traders who resold them at an auction. At the auction, they were chained together, sometimes even with padlocks around their necks, and marched to the area two-by-two, usually singing praise songs to cover up their misery and sorrow.

Just like with the stock market, the slave trade was dependent on the economy of the country. When things were good, the prices for slaves were high. When the economy was down, prices were down. Sometimes there would be a lot of trading and other times very little. When the nation elected Abraham Lincoln as president in 1860, many masters feared losing their slaves and money altogether so they put up all their slaves for sale.

Before the bidding began, the traders put the slaves on display for all bidders to view them. Then, the auctioneer would present them to the crowd, open their mouths, and examine their teeth as if they were horses. The masters selling the slaves would feed them well until a few days before the sale so they at least looked healthy. In fact, most of the slaves were quite sick.

The slave trade also included slave breeders. Some masters bred women and sold off their children. One woman, who suffered through the sale of multiple children, decided that this master would not sell her fourth baby recounts, "I just decided I'm not going to let ol' master sell this baby; he just ain't going to do it." She got up; put something in the baby's bottle, and shortly thereafter, the baby died (40).

## Chapter 2, The Auction Block Analysis

The masters and slave traders treated slaves more like animals than humans. This disregard for humankind is prevalent throughout slavery, but peaks concerning the selling and trading of human life. For example, the masters would feed the slaves well up to 3 days prior to the sale so they would look healthy and well fed, but many were really quite sick. The masters did not care; they just wanted to make as much profit from the slaves as possible. Greed continues to be an important theme in this book. It is what drives the slave business.

The constant in the life of a slave is suffering. During the trade season, the slave traders often forced the slaves to walk on foot without regard to the time of year: heat and humidity in the summer or freezing cold in the winter. One master killed a boy's mother

because her feet could not tolerate walking in the snow any more. He shot her and left her on the side of the road.

The most touching theme is sorrow. The slaves felt tremendous sorrow during much of their lives but more so at the auction or while completing a transaction. When a new master appeared to take a newly hired slave, the family members often were not able to say goodbye, hug each other, or sometimes, even see them leave. At the auction block, one former slave remembers it as the breaking up of families: "My brothers and sisters were bid off first...Her turn came...Then I was offered..." (48).



# Chapter 3, The Plantation

## Chapter 3, The Plantation Summary

Contrary to popular belief, the plantation owners did not live richly. Perhaps a few did, but the majority lived a very modest lifestyle and some were even poor. In fact, most slave owners owned fewer than 20 slaves. Only 3,000 slave owners owned more than 100 slaves. The more slaves a white man owned, the more the community respected him. If a white man owned just one or two slaves, the community respected him more than a man who owned none at all. A little known fact is that 75% of the South's population held no slaves, yet the economy depended on the slave trade business.

Life for slaves on the plantation was difficult, to say the least. The slaves' housing quarters, commonly referred to as "slave row," consisted of tiny cabins that were comparable to quarters for animals. One witness recalls, "The houses of the slaves were generally more fit for animals than human beings." (62) They usually were log huts with nothing in between the logs to act as a barrier to the elements of the weather or nature. They had no furniture, no sheets or pillows, and barely any clothes. They worked in the fields either completely naked or only half-clothed. For most, their work started at daylight when they entered the cotton field to plant, hoe, and pick the cotton, stopping only briefly at midday for rest and refuelling with a modest lunch of corn and/or bacon. Their days ended with the "weigh in": weighing their baskets of cotton. There were consequences in the form of lashings (25, 50, or 100) if the cotton did not weigh 200 pounds or exceeded it by more than 10-20 pounds. When they left the field, their work was not finished. They often had other chores to do before they could go to bed, including cutting wood, feeding mules or hogs, making the fire in the cabin, grinding the corn and fixing the bacon so they could make their supper and next day's noontime meal. Often, bedtime was at midnight.

## Chapter 3, The Plantation Analysis

Fear and physical labor are the two most important themes in this chapter. From sun up to sun down and beyond, the masters forced the slaves to work. They suffered through physical labor planting the cotton, hoeing the fields multiple times, and then picking the cotton during whatever weather Mother Nature provided. They lived in fear every moment of their day. From the fear of whippings for "standing idle" in the field to oversleeping, the slaves were constantly afraid. At the end of the day when the master blew the horn for quitting time, their fears did not subside because they had to go through the weigh-in challenge. If a slave's basket was underweight, the slave would get "lashings." If it was overweight by 10-20 pounds, their master would increase their next days' workload by that amount. Not only did they suffer from their hard work, they suffered at the end of the whip. Lashings were a daily occurrence, mostly occurring at the weigh-in where the master would strip them and make them lie face down on the ground for the whipping. As a result, they often lived in pain.



# Chapter 4, Resistance to Slavery - 1

## Chapter 4, Resistance to Slavery - 1 Summary

Slaves stayed in slavery by force and the use of brainwashing. The masters would beat, whip, sell, or kill slaves that did not comply with the rules or expectations. The use of brainwashing was an effective method that "destroyed the slave's mind and replaced it with the mind of his master." This method taught slaves that they were better off as a slave and that it was for "their own good." With this latter method, slaves would police themselves. The slaves were "dehumanized" by not having their own last names but rather took the last names of their current owner. Most slaves had two or three last names during their lives. Slaves were addressed by masters as "Whose nigger are you?" instead of the more respected "Who are you?" expression. This matter of address kept the slaves from developing an identity separate from that of their owner.

The masters often used religion as a means to control the slaves by additional "brainwashing." The slaves could not attend church by themselves because the slave owners feared uprisings, so the masters would bring in white preachers who would often preach about the things that would make a slave happy to be a slave. Proper conduct with regard to the master-slave relationship, working in the field, and that God created them to be slaves were common preaching themes. The slaves took what they needed from the sermons and what they could use and disregarded the rest. They firmly believed that their reward for all their hard work and suffering came in heaven. Soon, religion became a purifying force for them that offered them release from their everyday miseries. They remembered the Old Testament stories and used them as testimonies to their own suffering.

The white people ingrained in the slaves that they were "inferior" to the "superior" white people. One way the whites attempted to dehumanize them was with the bastardization of the Spanish word for black "negro" and changing it to "nigger." The slaves would not allow this to strip them of any more dignity and began using it as a term of endearment among them.

Not all slaves were equal even among the slaves. Some were elevated to "house servant," which was "the greatest honor that could come" (89). These slaves slept in the master's house either on the floor in his bedroom or just outside his bedroom. Often, the house servants spied on other slaves and then tattled to the owner, usually at the risk of being traded to avoid retaliation from the other slaves. Sometimes, the house servants spied on the master.

The slaves used many tricks to avoid work. Most of the time, it was advantageous for them to appear ignorant. The more ignorant they appeared to be, the less work they had to do. If they turned in sloppy work, it was tolerated because their masters thought them stupid.



Slavery was not pleasant, but the slaves did make time and muster up energy to celebrate. Mostly, they celebrated deep in the woods on Saturday nights because Sunday mornings they did not work. They had to sneak into the woods, and the white men, known as "paddyrolls," would try to find them and break up the celebration. The slaves would dance, sing, and worship. It gave them a release, an escape from their everyday turmoil and hardship.

## Chapter 4, Resistance to Slavery - 1 Analysis

Manipulation, loyalty, betrayal, perseverance, faith, and determination are themes of this chapter. The white men manipulate the Africans and American-born blacks into slavery. The slaves manipulate the white men by feigning "ignorance" to avoid work or to get away with sloppy work. Despite being a slave, some, like Josiah Henson, are tremendously loyal to their masters. Some slaves betray other slaves in an effort to demonstrate their loyalty to their masters. In doing so, they betray their fellow slaves. Perseverance and determination are prevalent when the former slaves retell their stories of the joys they had on those Saturday night celebrations. The nights when they forgot how tired and beat up they were and danced the night away or worshipped. Their faith helped them get through their toughest times, even when the white preachers preached against their freedoms.

In the case of Paul, the slave who escaped to the swamp, the reader can see a powerful display of symbolism. The slave is taking refuge in the swamp but because of the three-bell contraption that is above his head that jingles each time he moves he is heard before he is finally spotted. Paul is also wearing an iron collar around his neck with a large padlock on the backside of his neck. His owner treated him like an animal. The collar around the slave's neck is something the reader can equate to a collar a dog would wear today. The bells dangling from his head are akin to the bells found on a cat's collar to alert the birds and mice of its presence. The padlock expresses the extreme power the white man has over the slave.



## Chapter 5, Resistance to Slavery - 2

### Chapter 5, Resistance to Slavery - 2 Summary

There was always much talk about insurrections. Most of the time they failed and ended tragically. Those who were most determined to escape proceeded with the insurrections, which, for the most part, the house servants ruined. The slave owners responded with additional force. Still, the slaves wanted to escape. Some left knowing only to follow the North Star to find their freedom. During their flight, the escaped slaves would find protection and assistance from other slaves. Many slaves who escaped chose to live with the Indians. Others started their own settlements. When escapees feared that white people would capture them, most chose to run knowing that the white people were going to shoot them. Others chose to kill themselves to avoid capture.

### Chapter 5, Resistance to Slavery - 2 Analysis

Freedom is at the core of this chapter. It is the notion of freedom that entices the slaves to run away from their situation. They risk their lives to enjoy a taste of freedom, often choosing to end their lives instead of returning to the life of a slave. Despite the slave owners' mostly successful attempts at brainwashing the slaves to believe they are better off as slaves, human nature yearns to be free. This yearning is what motivates the slave to choose to run away, knowing there will be consequences either way.



# Chapter 6, Emancipation

## Chapter 6, Emancipation Summary

In 1861, the Civil War began. Slaves left to join the North almost immediately. President Lincoln, in an effort to preserve the Union, ordered the commanders to return the slaves. Twice that many returned. Soon, the army kept them and they were paid wages for the first time in their lives for the work they were doing. Blacks also served their masters in the South as bodyguards in the war. Most slaves remained at the plantation to feed and clothe the army.

Most of the slaves were not freed until after the war ended in 1865 because the Emancipation Proclamation applied only to Union-controlled states. Once the South surrendered, the slaves were free. Some slave owners relocated to Texas in an effort to hang on to their slaves as long as possible. Some unscrupulous slave owners did not tell the slaves that they were free until much later. In one case, Armacie Adams recalls, "...I been free more than a year." (141).

## Chapter 6, Emancipation Analysis

Desperation, desire, and joy illustrate the different emotions that both white and black alike felt during the Emancipation efforts. Out of the desire to be free, the slaves join the Northern effort just as soon as they can. They want to help the people that are helping them. The slave owners, however, feel desperation. They want to hang on to their slaves as long as possible, with some even fleeing to Texas or hiding the truth from the freed slaves to keep them on longer. Once the slaves found out they were free, every one of the slaves interviewed expressed utter joy.



# Chapter 7, After Emancipation

## Chapter 7, After Emancipation Summary

This chapter chronicles the lives of the slaves once they get their freedom. There was talk that the government would give them land, animals, and property, but that did not happen. The slaves left the slave owners' land and were instantly homeless and hungry. The joy of their newfound freedom was short-lived because of the desperation and hardships that they endured once again. The freed slaves had to learn economic independence from the white man. Some returned to work on the plantations to work on a "share" system, wherein the farm owner would advance them room and board but take the payments from these items out of the farms' profits. Often, there was nothing left for the freed slaves so they were forced into continuing to work as a sharecropper. One former slave remembers, "We did not have a hard time until after we were freed." (147).

Some former slaves thought that slavery would return so they changed their names so they would not be as easy to find. Just a few short years after the Emancipation Proclamation freed all slaves, a terrorist group formed called the Ku Klux Klan (KKK). If a black farmer became successful, the KKK murdered him. The lives of the freed slaves were not easy after their freedom was granted, especially after the Union Army left the South in 1876. At that time, the political power returned to the former slave owners, and they passed laws restricting the rights of the black people. They called it "segregation." One former slave explains it like this, "Two snakes full of poison. One lying with his head pointing north, the other with his head pointing south. Their names was slavery and freedom...Both bit the nigger and they was both bad." (152).

## Chapter 7, After Emancipation Analysis

The government fought to end slavery, but they did not plan enough to provide guidance for the transition period. The slaves had nowhere to go, no food to eat, no land to grow food on, so many returned to work for their former owners. There, the farmers continued to take advantage of their hard labor again. Instead of paying them wages to work, the white people thought of an effective fraud to keep them working on the plantation for what it cost the former owners when they "owned" them: room and board in the same old shabby cabins. Even though the former slaves were "free," they were not free in the sense of the white people. The white folks still controlled them; it just took shape in another form. The white people always instructed them on what to do and when to do it; the former slaves were at a loss with this new freedom. Some even returned to their former owners to ask them what to do. Most would just dismiss them, so their confusion and loss continued.



# Epilogue

## Epilogue Summary

The writers assigned to the Federal Writers' Project interviewed the former slaves in the 1930s so they could record their words and experiences before they died and the memories died with them. Mostly, their sentiments contained much bitterness about slavery and the freedom they were granted. According to Thomas Hall, "...the Negro is still in a bad way in the United States, no matter in what part he lives." Thomas was so bitter about the whole thing that he would not tell his story to the writers, mainly because he claims that the "white folks have been and are now and always will be against the Negro." (156).

## Epilogue Analysis

Honest reflection is the result of the Federal Writers' Project that began in the 1930s. With the research, compilation, and editing of Julius Lester, that is accomplished with *To Be a Slave*. Written in the words of the former slaves themselves, the author presents slavery how it truly was, not how the white people have chosen to tell it. The book encompasses the feelings and experiences these former slaves felt and for some, still felt when these accounts were recorded.



# Objects/Places

## The Coffle

The slave traders rounded up the slaves, buying them from various parts of the country and took them to an auction so others could buy them. The slave traders lined them up and chained them together.

## The Auction Block

This is an area of town designated for the sale of slaves. Here, the slave traders would "exhibit" the slaves up for sale, demonstrate the health and quality of the slave, and where buyers would buy the slaves.

## The Woods

As far away as possible from the master's house, the slaves would gather to worship, dance, and sing as a means of escape from their daily misery.

## The Whip (Also Called a Switch)

Used daily as a consequence for idling in the field, disagreeing, not performing as expected, or just because the master wanted to show his power over the slaves. The slaves often felt the sting of this object.

## The Big House

Not always a large home, this is the name that the slaves used when referring to the house owned by the master on the plantation.

## Slave Row

This term refers to the line of tiny cabins that were "home" to the slaves on the plantation. Built of logs, the builder did not put any insulation of any type between the logs to protect the occupants from the elements of the weather or nature.

## The Swamp

Often runaway slaves would find solace in the swamp, along with food to sustain themselves.



## **Padlock and Chains**

The slave owners used these items when transporting slaves to the auction or in the form of punishment.

## **Bill of Sale**

Often this is the only document former slaves or their family have to document their lineage. It is also the proof that a white man had indeed purchased a slave.

## **Shirt or Pants**

It was typical for a slave to have one or the other but uncommon for a slave to have both items of clothing.

## **Twisted Hickory Bark**

Paul used this to hang himself from the sassafras tree in the swamp to escape the brutality of his life.

## **The Three Bells**

The bells that Paul's master attached to his constraints were to prevent further successful escapes. In the end, the bells preserved his corpse by scaring away the birds as he hung from the sassafras tree.



## Setting

The story has no one certain setting since it consists of a series of separate narratives, many of which are attributed to anonymous sources. But because Lester arranges these selections in chronological order, beginning with the initial capture of the slaves and ending with their emancipation, the story begins in Africa in the early seventeenth century, when Europeans are in quest of black people whom they can capture.

After a sea voyage to such places as South Carolina or Virginia, the slaves are auctioned and dispersed to various plantations across the South. Lester follows the destiny of his characters as they experience personal upheavals, and as America faces tremendous change through the 1860s and 1870s with the Civil War, emancipation, and Reconstruction.

## Social Sensitivity

Although *To Be a Slave* depicts conditions of blacks during a time that has long passed, it raises many questions about the treatment of minorities in contemporary society. *To Be a Slave* shows the tragic effects that ensue when a society discriminates against people because of race, religion, or gender. *To Be a Slave* is a cry for equality and justice for all. If the injustices vividly depicted during the time of slavery threaten readers because they parallel injustices committed in modern times, then Lester's themes and techniques have accomplished their purpose.

# Literary Qualities

As Lester explains in an introductory note, *To Be a Slave* sprang from his research of slave narratives, documented in the nineteenth century by abolitionists, and from interviews with ex-slaves, recorded in the 1930s by members of the Federal Writers' Project.

Lester's voice mingles with those of the slaves as his commentary, woven throughout the book, sets the historical context for the narratives. He arranges the stories chronologically, dividing the book into chapters that tell the history of slavery from a black perspective, from the capture of blacks in Africa to their emancipation and continued persecution years later in the United States.

Lester's narration is deliberate and powerful, and his understated style underscores the dramatic effect of the slave narratives. The words of those who actually experienced the anguish of slavery create a vivid, wrenching historical account. These narratives contain most of the book's symbolism and imagery. In the following passage, for example, an ex-slave describes the frustration experienced by newly emancipated slaves—who faced restrictive laws, economic oppression, and the Ku Klux Klan—in terms of a metaphor: Two snakes full of poison...The snake called slavery lay with his head pointed south and the snake called freedom lay with his head pointed north. Both bit the nigger and they was both bad."

Lester's own voice never overwhelms such moving statements. He conveys his message through the words of the slaves and ex-slaves. Lester, writing during the civil rights movement of the 1960s, does not write the story of the slaves. He allows them to tell their own stories.

As a collection of slave narratives, *To Be a Slave* is part of a whole body of literature that historians see as a rich source of information on American history and life. Slave narratives, which began to appear in the mid-1700s as a unique form of literature, may have been encouraged by abolitionists in the North in order to portray the evil nature of slavery. The slave narratives published early on tended to be far more religious than those published later.

The first published slave narrative was *The Narrative of the Uncommon Suffering and Surprising Deliverance of Briton Hammon, a Negro Man* (1760). Since then, many narratives have been published; among the most notable is Frederick Douglass's autobiography, *Narrative of the Life of Frederick Douglass* (1845).

# Themes

## Power

Power is the most obvious theme in slavery. It is amazing to us today to think that slavery even existed, let alone that it was socially accepted for so long. It is remarkable that even though only 25% of the South's population participated in slave ownership, they were able to perpetuate it for so long. That is another testimony to power. It is interesting to note that for hundreds of years the white man was able to exert power over thousands of slaves. Even though the white man fears insurrection by his slaves, the white man had the ultimate power: power over an individual.

The slave owners illustrated their power over the slaves daily with the use of forced labor, beatings, whippings, and even killings. It is their belief that they were inferior that kept them obedient and on the premises. Who made them believe they were inferior? The white man brainwashed them, another form of power, to believe it.

Even mothers bearing children were powerless over their masters when it came to their children. Since the owner owned the mother, he owned the mother's child. Many mothers went through the pain of losing their children at the early age of just 1 or 2 in a slave sale. The mothers could only cry out and beg, often enduring beatings at the same time. One day, after losing multiple children to "sales," a mother poisoned her own child. That way, she knew that her baby would not be sold or grow up a slave. The slave showed power over the owner in that rare instance.

Power is also obvious when the South concedes the loss of the war. Here, they are losing their power to have slaves. The power shifts to the North as they begin to inform the slaves of their new freedom and to help enforce the new law.

## Selflessness

The slave owners used many tactics to convince the slaves that they were property, not human beings. They were not given their own last name, they did not know their birthdate, they were not taught to read, they lived in conditions worse than some animals, and they were constantly beaten. Perhaps the most evident loss of self resulted from "being sold" like property. These things all contributed to the loss of the black person's "self." To this day, many black people can trace their lineage to a bill of sale.

Eventually, the human need to be free began to rise within the slaves. Resistance gained strength, abolitionists argued vehemently to turn public opinion against slavery, and slowly, the slaves began to feel a sense of "self." Their Saturday night secret gatherings also contributed to their burgeoning awareness of self. In their hiding places, they were free to express themselves in worship, dance, song, and thought.



Once the government freed the slaves, they still struggled with their sense of self. They found themselves homeless, hungry, and with nothing to do. They knew farming but didn't own land. They were at such a loss that they were unsure of what to do. This lack of direction and ability to take care of themselves led them back to the plantation to work as sharecroppers, which reinforced the lack of self once again.

## Perseverance

Withstanding physical and mental beatings takes perseverance. As these former slaves tell their stories of torture and brutality, it is a testament to their strength and determination. For some, they survived the disease-ridden, food- and sleep-deprived journey from Africa. Like so many others, these ex-slaves survived the daily beatings and the extremely strenuous work in the field that the whites used to brainwash them into believing that they truly were inferior to the whites.

They persevered even after they gained freedom. At that point, most of them eventually turned to sharecropping to get by. At least then, they had more than they did when they just had their freedom. However, their perseverance lasted longer than that. Their perseverance enabled them to get through the segregation period that began shortly after the end of the Civil War. They persevered through discrimination, separation, lower-quality schools for their children, and much more. They persevered through the harassment of the KKK, murders of their fellow former slaves, and a general sense of inequality in the white man's world. They have persevered through it all, as have their descendants.





## Themes/Characters

To Be a Slave aims to educate readers about slavery in America and about the dehumanizing misconceptions about blacks that even the intellectuals of the day believed. Thomas Jefferson, author of the Declaration of Independence and statesman, supported the idea of the "natural inferiority" of blacks. Lester notes that corporal punishment by masters was commonplace, while lynching by the Ku Klux Klan was generally accepted by whites as a necessary practice. Religion, which many slaves used as a positive spiritual weapon against suffering, was misused by manipulative slave masters who hired preachers who maintained that God had created blacks to be slaves and servants, and that the greatest glory blacks could give to God was to accept their place in God's grand universal structure. Slaves were subjected to further psychological cruelty when they were forced to adopt the surname of their owner.

The large cast of characters in To Be a Slave consists mostly of the slaves and slave owners mentioned in the brief, dramatic narratives that make up the book. But Lester's focus is not on the development of any one character; rather he presents the reader with the distinct voices of a wide assortment of characters. Several characters stand out; among them is Uncle Silas, an elderly slave who questions the philosophy that eternal rest in heaven is earned by serving one's master on earth with unqualified loyalty. Another memorable character is Lew Cheney, a charismatic young slave who raises the expectations of the slaves on the Hawkins plantation by planning a revolt and a crusade to Mexico. But Cheney betrays his people, which results in the hanging of many innocent slaves.

Powhatan Mitchell, a slaveowner, differs from many of the "master" characters in that he claims his mulatto child as his own son and teaches him that he is a white man's equal. Despite this gesture of humanity, Mitchell continues to hold slaves. Dozens of additional characters spring to life in the narratives, and though each is part of a separate story, they all serve as vivid illustrations of Lester's overall theme of the dehumanizing force of slavery.

# Style

## Points of View

These stories of the American slaves are told in three ways: their own words, their own words edited by the white abolitionists in an effort to refute the notion that they were "inferior" to the whites, and in the author's summaries of his research of the thousands of stories. Some are eloquently stated; others are crude.

This style allows the reader to get a sense of what it was like to be a slave. Without hearing it directly from the one who experienced something, readers tend not to believe it as much. When the former slaves describe their experiences, it is much easier for the reader to feel the essence of what the slave describes and experiences. That is more powerful than a retelling the slave's story.

## Setting

This collection of testimonies from former slaves has several settings. The main setting is the South, where the slave trade and slave business was a major boon to the economy. This is where the plantations were located, the cotton was grown, the slaves found comfort in the woods and the swamps, and where the white man continued to exercise power over the blacks.

In the North where the abolitionists were strong, some of the slaves escaped to help the Union's army and the efforts to end slavery. At first, President Lincoln ordered the escaped slaves to return to their masters, but when the number of escaped slaves multiplied, the Army kept them on. This is where some former slaves received their first wages. Eventually, the Union army allowed the former slaves to fight battles against the Confederate soldiers in which they were very fierce.

Slavery is traced back to the early 16th Century but the author focuses on the American slavery period that began in 1619 and continued through the Civil War. It also continues into the period immediately following the Civil War.

## Language and Meaning

With the events transpiring hundreds of years ago, much of the language is now archaic. For example, with the end of slavery, people do not use the word "coffle" today as it relates specifically only to the slave trade. Since many of the slaves came from Africa, there is a language barrier. Obviously, the slave owners did not learn the African tribal languages of their slaves. The slaves had to pick up the English language from their masters and other white folk. Their language became a mixture of their former language and English. This is one reason why white people believed that they were "superior" over the blacks.



Perhaps no other word in American history is as vile as the derogatory name for "Negro." The white men commonly referred to the blacks as "niggers" in an attempt to dehumanize them and make them believe they were inferior to the white race. Fortunately, the blacks themselves began to use it as a term of endearment so the effect was not as strong at the time. Still to this day, that word is not a socially accepted term.

## Structure

The novel comprises seven chapters, each broken down by the period the chapter covers. The author begins each chapter with a summary of what the chapter contains. For example, in Chapter 1, he begins with a summary of what life was like for slaves in general. Then he adds the stories from individual former slaves that paint the picture of what it was like for them. In this particular chapter, the author includes stories from 14 different former slaves on their accounts of what it was like to be a slave.

The longest chapter is Chapter 4, Resistance to Slavery-1. This chapter begins with "how" people become enslaved and what keeps them enslaved. Mr. Lester includes several accounts from persons who, despite the brainwashing, could not control themselves in the worship service and started to believe they deserved to be free. Some retold how they thought they would get their freedom only in heaven. These varying accounts show you how different slaves felt at different times. This chapter gets to the heart of the inferiority discussion, which builds to the decision for the Union to go to war, which is why it is longer than the other chapters. It also includes facts about the Saturday night gatherings when the slaves hid deep in the woods from their masters and lists several accounts from different ex-slaves who participated in these much-anticipated gatherings.

Chapter 5 Resistance to Slavery-2 is the second longest chapter. It includes descriptions of the former slaves that escaped or helped other slaves in their escape attempts. This chapter is longer because it details an account of a slave who escaped and found refuge in the swamp, illustrating the point that some slaves with their heightened sense of awareness (their desire for freedom), would choose to either be killed on the run or kill themselves instead of returning to their master.

The author chose to end the recollection with an update from the end of the war to the 1930s when they interviewed the former slaves. Not surprisingly, many ex-slaves were still bitter about the way the whites treated them all those years. The way Mr. Lester ended it was just another way to let the words of the former slaves end their story.



## Quotes

"When I came here, colored people didn't have their ages. The boss man had it." - Anonymous, Chapter 1, p. 30.

"Slaves were whipped for the most trifling incidents and the whip was as often wielded by the slave owner's wife as the slave owner him self." - Roberta Manson, Chapter 1, p. 32.

"Out of seventeen of us sold to him, only four of us got back home. Some died; others he killed." -Anonymous, Chapter 2, p. 45.

"They would stand the slaves upon the block and talk about what a fine-looking specimen of black manhood or womanhood they was, tell how healthy they was, look in their mouth and examine their teeth just like they was a horse, and talk about the kind of work they would be fit for and could do." - Morris Hillyer, Chapter 2, p. 46.

"Yet it is all the more remarkable that even now the two hundred years of slavery are looked upon matter-of-factly and not as a time of unrelieved horror." - Anonymous, Chapter 3, p. 74.

"...I advance it therefore as a suspicion only, that the blacks...are inferior to the whites in the endowments of both body and mind." -Thomas Jefferson, Chapter 4, p. 87.

"I forgave him the causeless blows and injuries he had inflicted on me in childhood and youth and was proud of the favour he now shoed me and of the character and reputation I had earned by strenuous and persevering efforts." - Josiah Henson, Chapter 4, p. 95.

"Freedom had ever been an object of my ambition, though no other means of obtaining it had occurred to me but purchasing myself." - Josiah Henson, Chapter 4, p. 96.

"We bought you to serve us." - a paddyroll tells then-slave West Turner, Chapter 4, p. 105.

"We wasn't there in Texas long when the solders marched in to tell us that we were free." - Anna Woods, Chapter 6, p. 136.

"'Don't you understand,' says she, 'you're free. You don't have to ask me what you can do.'" - Tom Robinson, Chapter 6, p. 137.

"Now you may be all right; there're a few white men who are, but the pressure is such from your white friends that you will be compelled to talk against us and give us the cold shoulder when you are around them, even if your heart is right towards us." - Thomas Hall, Epilogue, p. 156.

# Topics for Discussion

1. What were the most difficult aspects of being a slave, according to Lester?
2. Was Christianity a positive factor in the lives of the slaves? What were the differences between the Christianity preached by the slaves' owners and the religion fashioned by the slaves themselves?
3. What aspects of African culture did the slaves bring to the plantations, and what measures were employed by the slave owners to destroy this influence?
4. What is meant by the expression "Jim Crow"? How does it apply to the period after the emancipation of the slaves?
5. Why did Thomas Jefferson believe blacks were inferior?
6. The NAACP (National Association for the Advancement of Colored People) protests flying the Confederate flag or singing "Dixie" because these are symbols of slavery. Explain your position, drawing on what you have learned from reading *To Be a Slave*.



## Essay Topics

Discuss how the lives of blacks have changed since the days of slavery to today.

What do you think of the Whig who was against slavery yet owned them, and who accepted his slave son and instructed him never to accept being less because he was black?

What do you think about the slaves given the last names of their owners and not having a last name of their own? How do you think this changed once they gained their freedom?

With powerful people like Thomas Jefferson stating his opinion that "blacks are inferior to the whites," how do you think viewpoints like this made the commoners feel?

Describe why Josiah Henson felt that his freedom had to be "purchased."

How does the word "nigger" make you feel when you read it in this book?

Define "coffle" as used in the story and explain why it is no longer a commonly used word.

Reread Thomas Hall's explanation for refusing to tell his story on page 156. After reading this book, do you think the stories benefit only the white person? Explain.



## Ideas for Reports and Papers

1. Research the Reconstruction period of American history (the twenty years following the end of the Civil War). Explain its significance, both positive and negative, to blacks in America.
2. Rhody Holsell, a slave in the book, says that if President Lincoln had lived, there would have been no violence perpetrated against blacks after the war. He thinks that Lincoln would have separated blacks from whites and given them their own nation. How do you think that this solution would have worked?
3. Read Harriet Beecher Stowe's *Uncle Tom's Cabin* and explain what the term "Uncle Tom" means to that book.

Thomas Hall, an ex-slave quoted in *To Be a Slave* says of Stowe, "I didn't like her book and I hate her." Why might Hall have this response to the book?

4. Research and report on how the "underground railroad" functioned.
5. Write a rebuttal to Thomas Jefferson's doctrine of "natural inferiority."

## Further Study

Butterfield, Stephen. *Black Autobiography in America*. Amherst: University of Massachusetts Press, 1974. Survey of black autobiography from the slave narratives to modern times. Includes detailed descriptions of the most important autobiographies, including those of Frederick Douglass, Richard Wright, James Baldwin, and George Jackson.

Davis, Charles T., and Henry Louis Gates, Jr. *The Slave's Narrative*. New York: Oxford University Press, 1985. A useful collection of critical works on the slave narratives as literature and history, written by notable scholars.

Includes a chronological list of all published narratives and a bibliography.

Huggins, Nathan I. *Key Issues in the Afro-American Experience*. Vol. 1. New York: Harcourt Brace Jovanovich, 1971. Collection of essays by prominent Afro-American scholars. Particularly interesting are the essays in Chapter 3, including "The Daily Life of Southern Slaves" and "The Social Consequences of Slavery."

Mannix, Daniel P., and Malcolm Cowley.

*Black Cargoes: A History of the Atlantic Slave Trade, 1518-1865*. New York: Penguin Books, 1976. An examination of the Atlantic slave trade from its beginning until abolition.

Osofsky, Gilbert, ed. *Puttin' on Ole Massa: The Slave Narratives of Henry Bibb, William Wells Brown, and Solomon Northup*. New York: Harper & Row, 1969. An anthology of slave narratives. The introductory chapters on the significance of slave narratives and a note on the usefulness of folklore are very useful. Includes an invaluable bibliographical note.

Starobin, Robert S., ed. *Blacks in Bondage: Letters of American Slaves*.

New York: New Viewpoints, 1974. A collection of letters written by the slaves with some letters by their masters. Gives useful insight into the experience of the slaves.

Williamson, Joel R. *After Slavery: The Negro in South Carolina during the Reconstruction, 1861-1877*. A detailed study of the emancipation and Reconstruction periods.





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