

Twelve Years a Slave Study Guide

Twelve Years a Slave by Solomon Northup

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Plot Summary

"Twelve Years a Slave" is the autobiographical account of Solomon Northup's years spent as a slave in Louisiana. Solomon Northup is born a free man in upstate New York in July of 1808. There, he aspires to work and raise a family as any ordinary American might do. While looking for work, his skills as a violinist are sought by two white men, who later arrange for Solomon to be kidnapped and sold into slavery. Solomon is transported to New Orleans, where he is sold to William Ford, whom Solomon describes as deeply religious and kind, though blinded to the evils of slavery based on his upbringing. Ford protects and cares for Solomon until Ford's finances force him to sell Solomon, where he ultimately ends up in the hands of Edwin Epps, a disgusting, cruel, and vile man who routinely beats his slaves for even the slightest offenses. It is under Epps that Solomon labors for ten years until a crew of white men come to construct a house on the Epps property. One of the laborers, a transplanted Canadian named Bass who favors abolition, writes to New York on Epps' behalf, securing the services of Henry B. Northup, a local white New York lawyer from whom Solomon's family has taken their last name. Northup takes Solomon's case to the Governor of New York, from where Northup travels to Washington, D.C., to gain letters of support. From there, he travels to Louisiana and has Solomon freed. Solomon then returns to his grown children and loving wife in New York. He vows to enjoy the rest of his life.

Chapters 1-5

Summary

Chapter 1

Born a free black man, Solomon Northup explains that the twelve years after he was kidnapped in which he was held as a slave has been of interest to many. It has been recommended that he set down his experiences in writing, which he now does. He wishes not only to give an account of his life, but of his experiences with slavery. Solomon is born in July of 1808, in Minerva, Essex County, New York, the son of a slave freed in the will of his master. Solomon's father teaches Solomon and Solomon's older brother Joseph about morality and to trust in God. Solomon spends his childhood working on the family's farm and playing the violin, which is his passion. Solomon marries a black girl named Anne Hampton on Christmas Day in 1829. They take up residence in a house near Fort Edward village. Solomon goes to work for the Champlain Canal, where he saves his money and buys a team of horses and hires hands to begin contracting the transportation of timber. He then goes on to become a lumberjack through the winter of 1831-32. In March of 1834, Solomon and his wife move to Saratoga Springs. He frequents the stores of Cephas Parker and William Perry, gentlemen who will later be instrumental in freeing Solomon.

It is while living at the United States Hotel in Saratoga Springs that Solomon first meets slaves traveling up from the South with their masters. Most of these slaves secretly desire freedom. Yet, fear of punishment prevents them from attempting to escape. It is now the spring of 1841. Solomon and Anne have three children – Elizabeth, Margaret, and Alonzo. Solomon comments that up until then, there was nothing unusual or distinct about his life.

Chapter 2

Solomon heads through Saratoga Springs in March of 1841, looking for employment in between seasonal work. Solomon is approached by two men – Merrill Brown and Abram Hamilton – who are curious about Solomon's skills with the violin. They are seeking musicians for a performance in New York. Solomon readily accepts based on the promises of strong pay. They entreat Solomon to come along with them to Washington, D.C. However, to get there they must pass through Maryland, a slave-holding state. They pass through a customs house, swearing to Solomon's free nature. It is now April of 1841. President Harrison dies and is buried. All of the capital city turns out to mourn, and Brown, Hamilton, and Solomon drink. Solomon gets drunk and becomes ill. He passes out. He wakes up just enough to understand that there are other people in his room. When he fully wakes up, he is in a dark cellar in chains. Solomon has no idea of what is going on. So, he prays to God and weeps.

Chapter 3



In the morning, a well-known slave dealer named James H. Burch enters the room, along with Theophilus Freeman of New Orleans, and a lackey named Ebenezer Radburn. The building in which Solomon is being kept is obviously intended for the keeping and selling of slaves. However, the exterior of the building, which fronts a public street in Washington, makes it look like an ordinary private residence. It is Williams's Slave Pen. Burch denies that Solomon is free. He says that Solomon was purchased in Georgia and that he will be sent to New Orleans. Solomon says he is a free man of New York. He is beaten with a massive paddle for his refusal to say he is a slave. A short time later, they leave. Redburn returns with food and water for Solomon. Over time, Solomon befriends three slaves in the Pen. One is Clemens Ray, a free man who lived and worked in Washington and is terrified of being sent South. John Williams is a slave from Virginia, taken for payment by Burch. Randall, the youngest at ten years old, misses his mother more so than anything else. The night before Solomon is taken from the slave pen, Randall's mother and half-sister are brought in. Randall's mother, Eliza, is well-dressed and clearly above the position of a slave. Promised freedom by their master, they dressed in their finest clothing – only to be given to Burch. Eliza, Solomon explains, has since died.

Chapter 4

Under cover of darkness, the slaves are all taken to a steamboat where they are taken out of Washington, with Burch overseeing them. Solomon and the others are taken through Fredericksburg to Richmond, where they are put in Goodin's Slave Pen. Burch reminds Solomon that if he ever mentions New York again, Solomon will be killed. At Goodin's, Solomon meets other slaves: David and his wife, Caroline; Mary, a tall girl who is without much intelligence; and, Lethe, who speaks with hatred of revenge. The next morning, Burch announces he will be taking Clem back to Washington, while the others are to continue south.

Chapter 5

Taken aboard the ship Orleans, Solomon and the others are taken down the James River and into the Chesapeake Bay. Four more slaves are brought on board. They include Maria, Frederick, Henry, and Arthur. Arthur fights his fate every step of the way. Arthur and Solomon become friends and agree that death is far better than slavery. They consider taking over the ship. Another slave named Robert readily agrees. As they await their chance, Robert comes down with smallpox and dies. Solomon later confides in a sailor that the reason for his sadness is that he is actually a free man. The sailor gives Solomon pen and paper so he can write home to tell Henry B. Northup of Sandy Hill the situation. The sailor is John Manning, an English-American, now living in Boston. He agrees to post the letter. Upon landing in New Orleans, men come to free Arthur, who is thrilled to be taken to his freedom. Yet, there is no one there for Solomon. Slave traders and buyers come aboard to look at Solomon and the other blacks. Solomon, Eliza and her children, Harry, Lethe, and a few others comprise the group taken by Theophilus Freeman. Solomon is given the name of "Platt." Freeman orders Solomon and the others taken to his pen, which contains about fifty slaves. Solomon continues praying to God that He will see Solomon through this trial.



Analysis

Solomon Northup begins his account “Twelve Years a Slave” in a very humble fashion. He says that there is nothing special about him. He explains he is just an ordinary person attempting to make his way in the world and find some kind of happiness. His life consists of a handful of things: his family, work, and a passion for the violin.

Solomon is a regular sort of hero; he is an ordinary American who is seeking to find his way in the world – though the time in which he lives makes this more difficult, for Solomon is black. Never once, however, does Solomon allow the prejudices of others to hold him back, nor does he blame them for any difficulties he encounters. Solomon is determined to succeed and get by no matter the cost. His moral character and his skills earn him the respect and friendship of many, including store owners and lawyers.

Indeed, Solomon appears relatively poised for success. He is able to buy his own team of horses and to hire men to carry out contracts for lumber transportation. Given the day and age in which this occurs, his success is even more remarkable. When lumber season ends, Solomon simply reorients himself to find more work. No job is above him, especially because it means supporting his family. He presents an excellent role model for all contemporary Americans.

Despite the fact that Solomon is born free and lives in a state where slavery is not permitted, Solomon is not safe from the evils of slavery. Unscrupulous whites engage in kidnapping free blacks to send them south, claiming that they are escaped slaves. Solomon becomes the victim of such a heinous plot, in the capital of the United States, no less. There, Solomon is imprisoned as a slave in a slave pen and taken away under cover of night with others to be sent south to be sold.

Discussion Question 1

What is Solomon’s life like prior to being kidnapped? What are his goals and dreams in life?

Discussion Question 2

Why does Solomon agree to go along with two white men whom he has never before met to play the violin?

Discussion Question 3

Why is the kidnapping of free blacks such a lucrative trade? How does Solomon fall prey to kidnappers?

Vocabulary

liberation, degradation, suffrage, unabated, appellations, importune, incredulous, indefinite, execrable, emphatic, imprecations, becalmed, thralldom, supplications

Chapters 6-10

Summary

Chapter 6

Theophilus Freeman, like Burch, is cruel and impatient. He kicks slaves to wake them up. He orders them to bathe, and they are given new clothes and taught how to act and carry themselves. The next day the buyers show up. David and Caroline are bought by the same person, which makes them happy. Lethe is sold to a planter of Baton Rouge. The same planter also buys Randall, causing Eliza much grief at being separated from her son. Solomon has no idea of what has become of Randall. That night, all the slaves from the brig Orleans not purchased become ill, presumably with smallpox. They are taken to the hospital to be treated. After this, a tall, thin man who seems good-natured buys Solomon, Harry, and Eliza. Eliza pleads for Emily to be purchased as well, and the man agrees to purchase Emily, but Freeman will not be moved. He plans to sell Emily when she is a few years older, believing her beauty will fetch a great price. Eliza is then parted from Emily, and Solomon has no idea of Emily's fate.

Chapter 7

Solomon, Harry, and Eliza now belong to William Ford, who resides in the Great Pine Woods of Avoyelles, on the right bank of Red River, near Bayou Boeuf. Ford has since become a Baptist preacher. Solomon understands the irony of a man of God owning another man. While Solomon cannot stand slavery, he defends Ford, saying that he is a noble, kind, and candid Christian man. It is his upbringing and the situation in the South that blind him to the moral wrongs of owning slaves. As they travel overland, Ford allows Solomon, Eliza, and Harry to rest and care for themselves as they are still recovering from smallpox. They at last come to Ford's place, a pleasant, two-story place in the middle of the woods. Sally, one of the slaves, brings Solomon, Eliza, and Harry to her cabin. They also meet the cook named John and Rose, a light-colored house servant.

Ford deals in lumber, and is wealthy from it. Rose's husband, Walton, works the lumber business. Walton has been Ford's slave all his life, and speaks kindly of Ford. Walton brings Solomon and Harry to work lumber with him. There, they meet Sam and Antony. Ford teaches the slaves about relying on God. He even allows them to own Bibles, despite the disapproval of most other whites. Solomon, who knows the lumber trade, convinces Ford to let him try to transport lumber by raft rather than land, to increase productivity and profit, and Ford allows him to give it a go. Solomon's success earns the respect of all who are aware of the feat, and Solomon feels pride in what he has done. Solomon goes on to build a loom for Sally to weave cloth for winter clothing for the slaves, which Solomon does so well he begins building looms for others.

Chapter 8



Suffering from financial difficulties, Ford is ultimately forced to sell eighteen of his slaves, including Solomon, who is sold to John M. Tibeats, a carpenter, with whom Solomon has previously worked. They work on Ford's plantation. Tibeats is an angry, unkind man, who constantly verbally insults and maligns Solomon. In an attempt to whip Solomon, Solomon fights Tibeats. Chapin, the overseer, steps in to stop the fight. Tibeats departs and returns with a mob, which Chapin stops from hanging Solomon. Chapin sends Lawson to bring back Ford after Tibeats and the others disappear.

Chapter 9

Expecting trouble, Chapin remains armed throughout the day. Ford is aware of the situation. He arrives at the plantation and confronts Tibeats on his return. Tibeats hires out Solomon to work under a carpenter by the name of Myers for Peter Tanner across the river. Tanner is the brother of the wife of Ford and a deacon in the church, so he metes out punishments to slaves who err in the ways of the church.

Chapter 10

Solomon and Tibeats go to work on a cotton press. With Chapin gone for the day, Tibeats seeks his revenge on Solomon. Enraged over Solomon's work, Tibeats attempts to beat Solomon with intentions of killing him. The two grapple. Solomon soon gains the upper hand. Rather than kill Tibeats, Solomon flees into Bayou Boeuf. He is chased by a pack of dogs. He flees into the Great Pacoudrie Swamp. Snakes and alligators are all over. Solomon continues fleeing into the night, outpacing the dogs. In the morning, he comes across a small plantation and a young master and his slave catching hogs. They direct him back to Ford's plantation, seven miles distant. Ford makes sure Solomon is given food and then goes to sleep when he gets there.

Analysis

Solomon's experiences – which have so far included being chained in irons, being savagely beaten and brutalized, and having his humanity denied – only continue to get worse. He is utterly humiliated by the knowledge that he is now considered chattel, mere property, to be bought and sold at random to people who consider him of no real difference than cattle or livestock. But, Solomon's first owner is one the reader is not expecting to come across.

William Ford is a deeply Christian man who comes to buy slaves for his property and his thriving lumber business. Ford, Solomon explains, is a noble and good man. If Ford's upbringing and circumstances had been different, he would certainly be opposed to slavery. Ford intends to buy only three slaves, but he is willing to buy Emily as well so that she will not be separated from her mother. Ford is denied the sale. Ford is incredibly kind with Solomon and the others as he leads them to his home, respecting their physical health. Ford does not whip them or compel them along, but he moves at a pace they require due to their recovery from illness. Ford's wife is kind toward the



slaves, too. Despite the horrendous situation in which Solomon finds himself overall, he is mortified by Ford, who is literally a walking contradiction. Solomon admires Ford.

The relationship with Ford does not last forever, however, as Ford is forced to sell Solomon and various others in order to handle debts accrued over years. Solomon is rented out to Tibeats, who is brutal and unkind to Solomon. Tibeats attempts to kill Solomon after trying to beat him into submission. Solomon is saved by Ford on two occasions. Ford confronts Tibeats, arguing for Solomon's safety, and then later gives him refuge in his house. The tragedy of Ford is that his human kindness is overshadowed by his ownership of human beings. Solomon recognizes this tragedy and spares no expense to compliment Ford and decry the evils of slavery.

Discussion Question 1

What is the tragedy of William Ford?

Discussion Question 2

Despite William Ford's kind and Christian nature, he owns slaves. Why? What does Solomon have to say on this matter?

Discussion Question 3

Why is the relationship between Tibeats and Solomon so combative? How does Solomon manage to survive this stage of slavery?

Vocabulary

adroitly, paroxysm, superlative, expound, pecuniary, chattel, morose, regale

Chapters 11-15

Summary

Chapter 11

To repay the kindness of Ford and his wife for allowing him refuge, Solomon helps trim and tend to her garden. Four days later, Ford and Solomon return to the bayou. As they journey, Tibeats joins them. Ford tells Tibeats that he must sell or hire out Solomon, or Ford himself will take matters into his own hands. Eliza believes it would have been better if Solomon had died in the swamps. Solomon is hired out to Mr. Eldret to work thirty-eight miles south on the Big Cane Brake, off the Red River. There, Solomon works to clear the land for a massive plantation expansion for Eldret. Four large girls are sent to hack down trees and undergrowth in addition to Solomon and another slave, Sam. Eldret allows Solomon the right to visit Ford's plantation in exchange for good work. But, Tibeats shows up, trying to stop the plan, but Eldret convinces Tibeats otherwise. Solomon is questioned for his slave pass by many on his journey, so he is grateful to have it. Most of the people who stop him are poor, for catching runaway slaves is a lucrative business. Solomon is then sold by Tibeats to Edwin Epps.

Chapter 12

Edwin Epps is a big man. Epps leases a plantation from his uncle on Bayou Huff Power. There, Solomon is put to work in the cotton fields. Slaves are expected to pick two hundred pounds of cotton each day. With too little, a slave will be punished. With too much, a slave will be expected to bring in the same amount at least the next day. Slaves fear the final weigh-ins of the day because of this. After work in the fields is done, chores are to be handled which range from feeding livestock to cleaning. Solomon may then go to bed, which consists of a twelve-inch-wide by ten-foot-long plank, with only a ragged blanket. The large number of tame and untamed cattle in the area caused the French to give Bayou Boeuf its name.

Chapter 13

While working for Epps through the autumn, Solomon becomes ill. Epps does not wish to take a loss on paying a thousand dollars for Solomon, so he sends for a doctor from nearby Holmesville. A few weeks later, only partially recovered, Solomon is sent into the cotton fields. Those who fail to bring in the necessary amount of cotton are whipped. Whippings occur frequently at the Epps plantation. The more severe the infraction, the greater the punishment. Twenty-five lashes are given for a leaf being found in a bale of cotton or for a cotton plant branch being broken. Five hundred lashes are given to runaways. Epps is a drunkard. He often returns from Holmesville drunk, terrorizing his family and slaves alike. He often forces the slaves to dance for him when he comes home, drunk. Solomon works for Epps for ten long years. There is nothing good that can be said about Epps, for Epps is rude, callous, and cruel. Only one man is worse

than Epps on Bayou Boeuf. That is Jim Burns'. Burns keeps only women slaves on his plantation. He beats them regularly, bragging of his cruelty.

With the money he earns from work at Huff Power, Epps buys a plantation on the east bank of Bayou Boeuf. He keeps nine slaves: Abram, Wiley, Phebe, Bob, Henry, Edward, and Patsey, as well as Solomon. Solomon feels sorry for Patsey, who is young and beautiful. Mrs. Epps beats Patsey out of jealousy. Edwin Epps sexually abuses Patsey.

Chapter 14

The first year on the bayou, caterpillars almost totally destroy the cotton crop. To make up for the loss, slaves are rented out for hard labor. Solomon is hired out to Judge Turner, wealthy and well-respected, whose massive plantation is on Bayou Salle. There, he works as a carpenter and in the sugar cane fields. Turner pays his hired slaves wages for their work. Solomon saves ten dollars, which makes him the wealthiest slave around. Returning to the Epps plantation, Solomon learns that the abuse Patsey has suffered has increased. Mrs. Epps demands Patsey be dispensed with, but her husband knows how valuable she is in the field, so he will not get rid of her, only beat her. To supplement infested food rations, Solomon begins hunting raccoons by trapping along the riverbank.

Across the way at the Marshall plantation, Marshall, the owner, gets into a fight with a man interested in buying his property. Marshall kills the man. Marshall is acquitted of any wrongdoing. White men in the South are afforded privileges and opportunities men in the northern states are not afforded. While many men of the South say they are civilized and enlightened, they are frequently engaging in duels and knife fights. These men prove to be humane and inhumane masters. Yet, the slaves they own cherish freedom no matter what their circumstances.

Chapter 15

Epps continues to hire Solomon out to other sugar plantations, including the Hawkins plantation. Sugar fields, Solomon explains, are planted only once every three years, for the seeds and plants will last three years. Solomon specifically works for Hawkins in the sugar house, churning out fine, white sugar. The only relief for slaves comes at Christmas, where they are allowed a few days of rest. Epps allows only three days; others allow considerably more. Each year, a plantation owner gives a Christmas supper for all the slaves of the surrounding plantations. The meal is had in the open air and is followed by dancing. Solomon puts his skills with a violin to good use. Christmas is also a time when romances are kindled and marriages are contracted with the consent of the owners.

Analysis

Even with the volatile ownership of Tibeats, Solomon is still guaranteed relative safety by the hand and authority of William Ford. But this does not last as Solomon is sold by Tibeats to Edwin Epps. Things go from bad to worse with the exchange of masters. If



the reader thought Tibeats was bad, the reader is not prepared for Edwin Epps – a drunken lout who sexually abuses his slave Patsey and routinely beats his slaves for even the slightest offenses. And the work expected of slaves is immense: each slave is required to pick two hundred pounds of cotton each day, as well as to perform chores and routine activities around the plantation.

Not only is Solomon forced to spend ten years of his life working for Epps, but Epps routinely hires out Solomon and other slaves to do work for other plantation owners, both near and far. Solomon explains that there are no days off for the slaves under Epp's watch – except for Christmas, when the slaves enjoy a blissful three days from work. The amount of time slaves are given for Christmas varies according to the owner, but Epps gives his slaves an absolute minimum amount of time to rest and recover. The slaves take every advantage of this time, to celebrate and to engage in things like marriage. They make the most out of a bad situation, which, as times goes on, only continues to get worse.

Discussion Question 1

What is the tragedy of Patsey's existence? How does she get by?

Discussion Question 2

As things grow increasingly bad for Solomon, how does he manage to get by? On what things and thoughts does Solomon focus instead of bondage?

Discussion Question 3

Compare and contrast the persons of William Ford and Edwin Epps. Can one be considered better than the other as an owner or as a person, or are both morally culpable and guilty for their engaging in the system of slavery at all?

Vocabulary

omitting, thither, fugitive, immaculate, desolating, dexterity, delinquent, avaricious, genealogical, patriarch, excoriated, monotonous, dilapidated, remuneration, vigilant, confiscation, requisite, condign, omnipresent, coquette, connubial, dalliance

Chapters 16-20

Summary

Chapter 16

During cotton season, Epps hires more slaves in order to get more work done quickly and increase his profits. He also hires overseers who use whips and pistols. Solomon becomes a driver, whose duty is to revive passed-out slaves, and force them back to labor. Solomon is very lenient when Epps is not around, but when Epps is around he must make a show of driving. If Epps is at a distance, Solomon only pretends to whip others, allowing them to pretend they are being whipped. One day, while Epps is seeking to satisfy himself with Patsey, Solomon tells Patsey to pretend she is working. This enrages Epps, who chases Solomon around and around the fields until Epps gives up, scolded by his wife. Solomon, meanwhile, manages to steal a sheet of foolscap paper, and creates his own ink so that he may write to his friends in the North. Epps finds out about Solomon's attempts to write his way to freedom, and confronts Solomon. Solomon denies everything, and says that the white people who are attempting to get him in trouble just want to be hired as overseers. Epps believes Solomon, and lets the case drop.

Chapter 17

It is now 1850. Wiley, husband of Phebe, goes to visit another slave cabin one night, only to stay too long. He is caught by patrollers, whipped, and brought to Epps for another whipping. A short time later, Wiley escapes for good. The swamps are a refuge for runaways. Solomon remembers daily considering escape. Epps's plantation borders the sugar plantation of Mr. Carey, who owns a driver named Augustus, whom becomes friends with Solomon. Augustus attempts escape, but is nearly torn apart by dogs in the process. He dies the following day. A young, beautiful girl named Celeste, also from the Carey plantation, who is very white but actually African, attempts to escape by depending on Solomon's kindness. Celeste ends up living in the bayou for quite a while, living off the kindness of Solomon. Nevertheless, she ultimately tires of living like a fugitive, and returns home to be whipped and sent back out into the fields. Before Solomon arrives on the bayou, a slave named Lew Cheney convinces numerous others to flee to Mexico, but found out, Cheney betrays everyone to escape punishment. Cheney tells the whites, however, that fleeing to Mexico is not the plan, but murdering whites is the plan. The group of slaves are all executed. Lew Cheney survives, but is much hated by the slaves in the area.

Chapter 18

A man named O'Niel comes to Epps to purchase Solomon. O'Niel is a tanner-and-currer by trade. They disagree on the price, and no sale is made. It is overheard by Mrs. Epps that Solomon no longer wishes to work in the cotton fields, and hopes that



O’Niel will buy him. Epps confronts Solomon on this fact and whips him for it. The worst whipping Solomon ever sees is delivered to Patsey. Seen coming home from Shaw’s place, Epps assumes Patsey is visiting Shaw for sex, rather than his wife, Harriet, and so Epps has Patsey stripped naked, staked to the ground with ropes, and orders Solomon to carry out the whipping. When Solomon refuses to continue whipping, Epps does it himself. She passes out from the pain of being whipped so many times, with small pieces of flesh being torn out of her back. Solomon is horrified and enraged at Epps. Patsey still turns to God even in such darkness. She also dreams of freedom and liberty in ways never before done. Solomon also reflects sadly on the tragic nature of the oldest Epps son, who at ten or twelve years old, imitates his father, for he has no other example by which to live.

Chapter 19

It is now June, 1852. A carpenter named Avery comes to build a house for Epps, and Solomon is assigned to him. A Canadian American named Samuel Bass, who politically and socially is the opposite of all who live in the area, but still well-liked and treated with amusement rather than disdain for his opinions, works for Avery. Bass and Epps get into a discussion one day on slaves, with Bass saying that blacks are human beings, too. Bass says slavery is a sin and must be abolished. One day, Solomon gets to talk to Bass privately, during which time he recounts his story of kidnapping and enslavement. Bass agrees to send out letters on Solomon’s behalf, including to store owners William Perry and Cephas Parker. Solomon tells no others about what he and Bass are doing.

Chapter 20

Bass comes to visit before Christmas. Bass, on a free moment, tells Solomon that he has received no replies to his letters, and that he will save some money up, and go to Saratoga himself in the spring. Christmas for the slaves is held at the Tanner plantation. It is now January 3, 1853, and Solomon decides to recount the events between the preceding August and then.

Analysis

As time goes on, Solomon continues to plot escape, but he never follows through with the plans for various reasons, including knowledge of what happens to escaped slaves. Escaped slaves are beaten and treated far worse than before, sometimes even killed. Solomon, nevertheless, keeps his faith in God that God should one day deliver him to freedom. Yet things only get worse, both for Solomon, but for the other slaves – especially poor Patsey. Solomon is forced to whip Patsey at the will of Epps, which horrifies Solomon to the point where he can no longer whip her, at which time Epps takes over. Epps so savagely whips Patsey that chunks of the flesh on her back come out. The beating is so savage that Patsey literally blacks out from the pain.

When things seem darkest – when Solomon believes he will never again see his family or live freely – Epps decides a house must be constructed on his property, which brings



a white construction crew onto the plantation, including a man by the name of Bass. Bass, a Canadian transplant who has become an American citizen, is living in Louisiana and working as a carpenter. While working at Epps', Bass and Solomon get to talking, during which time Solomon relates the truth of his life. Bass is immediately impressed, and writes at once to friends of Solomon in New York. Bass is literally a one-in-million sort of ally to have found in the midst of the Louisiana bayous, who can not only verify the truth of Solomon's account by way of intimate knowledge of upstate New York and Canada, but who has the freedom and power to be able to write up North.

Indeed, Bass is so impressed and moved by Solomon's account, that he volunteers to travel up North in the spring once he has saved up some money to do so, so that he may personally plead Solomon's case to the locals. Solomon has finally found an ally in Bass, and Bass is committed to making sure that Solomon is freed, even at risk to his own life.

Discussion Question 1

How is Bass able to verify the truth of Solomon's account of kidnapping and slavery?

Discussion Question 2

Why does Bass commit so readily – and at great risk to himself – to free Solomon?

Discussion Question 3

What reasons does Solomon have for not attempting escape himself? Are these sound reasons? Why or why not?

Vocabulary

expiate, foolscap, deliberating, miasmas, taciturn, exuberance, discretionary, chastisement, flagellation, elude, provocation, profligate, tempestuous, abhorrence, iniquity, fervent

Chapters 21-22

Summary

Chapter 21

Henry B. Northup, a distinguished lawyer from whom Solomon and his family take their name, is a major actor in the events to come. The letter to Perry and Parker arrives in September, during which time Henry is consulted. New York law provides for the freeing of enslaved free men based on two facts. It must be a fact that the individual is indeed a free man and that the individual is wrongly held in bondage. By November, the Governor takes up the case. Northup is appointed to go to Washington in December to handle things. There, Northup meets with elected officials from Louisiana, the Secretary of War, and a member of the Supreme Court. Senator Soule of Louisiana especially insists that this wrong must be made right. Letters are given to Northup, who then journeys to Marksville, Louisiana, where he learns of Bass. Bass is suspicious of Northup at first, ultimately consenting to his part in seeking to help Solomon get to freedom. Northup then goes to effect Solomon's release by the signature of the local judge and the sheriff. They then confront Solomon in the field, who is stunned and thrilled to see Northup. He is so overjoyed that he hugs Northup. Epps is surprised and stunned by the truth about Solomon. Epps demands to know who wrote the letter, but Solomon does not reveal Bass. All of the slaves are happy for Solomon. In a court hearing the next day, January 4, 1853, Solomon is declared free.

Chapter 22

Solomon and Northup travel to New Orleans where Mr. Genois, under recommendation from Senator Soule, writes a legal pass for continued travel. They then travel by rail to Charleston, traveling then to Richmond and to Washington, where they arrive on January 17, 1853. The next day, warrants are issued for the arrest of Burch and Radburn, and court is begun. Both are taken into custody. Several unscrupulous men attempt to defend Burch and Radburn. Burch contends Solomon is attempting to defraud him with the two white men who originally brought him down to New York. Burch is discharged and has the records stricken. By the end of January, Solomon returns home. He is first greeted by his daughter Margaret, who is now married and has a son. Soon after comes Elizabeth and then Anne, all overjoyed to see Solomon. Alonzo is detained in New York, having committed to a life of hard work to buy his father's freedom. Solomon in turn thanks God and resolves to live out his life happily, and to be interred where his father is also buried.

Analysis

Bass's efforts at writing up to New York pay off. The store owner friends of Solomon at once go to see Henry B. Northup, a distinguished lawyer, who quickly takes on



Solomon's case by going to the governor of New York. Northup then travels to Washington, D.C., to build support for his case by getting letters from several officials, including Senator Soule of Louisiana, who is determined that justice should be done for Solomon. Northup then travels to Marksville, Louisiana, to inquire after Bass, who, suspicious at first of Northup, ultimately reveals the truth of Solomon and his case to Northup. Northup at once goes to see a judge, who then oversees Solomon's freeing.

Solomon attempts to secure justice against Burch, but Burch is released based on denial of knowledge that Solomon was a free man, and that those who sold Solomon to Burch did so with the intent to defame his character. While justice is not completely done, that Solomon is able to be freed does present a measure of justice, though he will never be able to get the twelve years of his life back spent as a slave. Solomon's experiences here also serve as a greater problem. While Solomon may have lost twelve years of his life to slavery, countless others spend their entire lives in bondage without ever knowing true freedom or real liberty. Solomon not only recounts the experiences he has while in bondage, but he clearly elaborates on the fact that slavery is evil. It is a scourge that must be done abolished.

Discussion Question 1

What must Henry B. Northup do to convince the governor that Solomon is a free man? Why?

Discussion Question 2

Is the fact that Northup gains the support of a southern US Senator to free Solomon surprising? Why or why not?

Discussion Question 3

What becomes of Burch and the kidnappers? Why? Do you believe that justice is done as a result? Why or why not?

Vocabulary

vehemently, fanatic, propound, countenance, essayed, nativity, corroborate, defraud, conjecture

Characters

Solomon Northup

A free black man born in the state of New York in July 1808, Solomon Northup is a kind, respected, and faithful man who seeks to find his way in the world. He is married to a free woman named Anne, and they have three children together by the names of Elizabeth, Alonzo, and Margaret. Solomon endeavors to support his family through industrious hard work, which he does successfully. He also has the ability to play the violin very well, and can read and write which is something that not even all white people have the ability to do. While looking for work, Solomon's talents as a violinist are seized upon by kidnappers, who ultimately bring Solomon to Washington, D.C., where he is delivered into the hands of slave trader James Burch. Burch then sells Solomon south, where Solomon is ultimately purchased by William Ford.

Solomon writes kindly about Ford, who is not cruel by any measure. Ford is eventually forced to sell Solomon to Tibeats, who in turn sells Solomon to Epps. Epps is a harsh, cruel, and vile master who routinely beats his slaves for even the slightest offenses. For ten years, Solomon labors under Epps, until Solomon meets Bass, to whom Solomon explains his situation. Through the efforts of Bass, local friends in New York, and Henry B. Northup's legal efforts, Solomon is freed and returns home to his family, where he vows to live out his life, and to be buried in the same cemetery as his father.

Anne Hampton

Anne Hampton is the loving and devoted wife of Solomon Northup. A free black woman, she marries Solomon and lovingly tends to the three children she has by him. When Solomon is kidnapped, she prays and keeps hope alive that she will one day again see Solomon. She is working at a hotel when Solomon returns home, and rushes to see him upon his arrival, embracing him.

James H. Burch

James H. Burch is a scurrilous and cruel man who engages in kidnapping and the slave trade to turn a profit. He oversees the transfer of Solomon to the deep South to make a profit. Burch is later arrested for his part in Solomon's kidnapping, but he gets off based on testimony from others and his own statements that he claims not to have known Solomon was a free man.



Theophilus Freeman

A vile slave trader, Theophilus Freeman works for James Burch, and assists in the kidnapping and selling of slaves. Among the slaves Freeman transports to the South is Solomon Northup.

John Manning

John Manning is an Englishman-turned-American citizen who resides in Boston, and who works on the brig Orleans, which transports Solomon south. Manning, upon learning of Solomon's situation, writes to Solomon's friends up north to explain what has happened.

John M. Tibeats

John M. Tibeats is a carpenter who lives and works in Bayou Boeuf in Louisiana. He is cruel, vindictive, and brutal towards Solomon, whom he owns for a short while of time. Having purchased Solomon from William Ford, Tibeats eventually sells Solomon to Edwin Epps.

William Ford

William Ford is perhaps, besides Solomon Northup himself, the most tragic figure in Solomon's narrative. Solomon describes Ford as noble, kind, and deeply human and Christian. He believes that Ford is a very good man. Ford is tall and thin. Despite his devoutly Christian identity, Ford owns slaves. Given the situation of his raising, Solomon believes that Ford is simply blinded to the evils of slavery. He thinks that given a different place, Ford would be an abolitionist. Nevertheless, Ford owns slaves. However, he personally intervenes to save Solomon's life on several occasions.

Edwin Epps

As a heavy drinker and cruel slave owner, Edwin Epps owns Solomon for ten years. Epps is a large man who routinely beats his slaves for the slightest offenses and sexually abuses twenty-three year-old slave Patsey regularly. Epps is angered when it is demonstrated that Solomon is actually a free man, but he has no recourse to Solomon's freedom.

Bass

Bass, a native of Canada, is now an American citizen who lives in Louisiana where he works as a carpenter. He learns of Solomon's story when he comes to work on the Epps plantation, and at once writes north to alert Solomon's friends and family of Solomon's

conditions. When Solomon is freed, Epps demands to know who alerted Solomon's friends and family, but Solomon refuses to tell Epps, thereby protecting Bass.

Henry B. Northup

Henry B. Northup is an esteemed and successful lawyer from whose family Solomon and his family take their name. When Solomon's situation is made apparent to Henry, he travels south, gathering support along the way, to effect Solomon's release.

Symbols and Symbolism

Violin

A violin is carried and played by Solomon Northup throughout the novel. First learning to play as a child, the violin is a passion for him. His talents for playing are well-known, and ultimately lead to his kidnapping as he attempts to work as a musician. Solomon's violin skills lend to his being sent around to various plantations to perform for other slaves, especially at Christmas. The pursuit of this passion helps to keep Solomon grounded.

Bibles

Bibles are given by William Ford to his slaves at a time when it is illegal for slaves to be taught to read. Bibles contain the inspired word of God, and is made up of the Old and New Testaments. The Bible speaks of human freedom and the end of suffering, and inspires the slaves toward God, and toward dreams of freedom. Faith becomes integral to the survival of many slaves, including Solomon, who turns to God frequently throughout his ordeal.

Foolscap

Foolscap is a kind of paper popular in the antebellum era that Solomon is sent to purchase from town. On one such occasion, he steals a sheet in order to write a letter to friends and family up north. He is unable to send the letter. So, he conceals it beneath the floorboards of the slave shack in which he resides.

Letters

Letters are sent up North to Solomon's family and friends, written by both John Manning and Bass. The letters explain Solomon's situation and his condition, and entreat help on Solomon's behalf. These letters ultimately have the desired effect of having Henry B. Northup come south as soon as he is able in order to have Solomon rightfully freed.

Lumber

Lumber is made from the cutting down and processing of trees. It is transported by canal and over the land to market. Solomon works in the lumber yard in New York. Later, he works in the lumber yard as a slave in the South. Solomon uses his experience with the New York canals to create a raft system to transport Ford's lumber cheaper and more efficiently by water, for which Solomon is commended.

Chains

Chains are often metaphorically used to describe the conditions of slavery. In reality, they were very much used. Solomon wakes up following heavy drinking to find himself in chains. This demonstrates to him quite clearly that his life has changed and his freedom has been lost.

Settings

Saratoga Springs

Saratoga Springs is located in upstate New York. Saratoga Springs is where Solomon Northup, his wife, Anne, and their three children reside. It is where they attempt to build a life, and is where Solomon is initially led away from to be kidnapped. Solomon is well-liked and well-respected in Saratoga Springs, and it is his friends who prevail upon Henry B. Northup over in Sandy Hill to take up the case for Solomon's freedom.

Washington, DC

Washington, D.C. is where Solomon is initially pressed into slavery against his will. It is the location of William's Slave Pen, where Solomon is kept by Burch. Washington, D.C., is located in a Southern, slave holding state. This is ironic since it is the capital of the United States of America. Solomon is taken out of Washington under cover of night and sold in the South. When Henry Northup travels to free Solomon, he travels to Washington to gain the support of elected and judicial officials to effect Solomon's release. Washington also hosts a trial against Burch, though Burch is let off on crude evidence.

New Orleans

New Orleans is a major port and commercial center in Louisiana, in the deep South, built at the mouth of the Mississippi River. It is a major hub on the slave trade circuit, and is where Solomon is taken to be sold. It is to New Orleans that William Ford travels to buy three slaves, and ends up purchasing Solomon. New Orleans is the city where Henry Northup arrives and leaves with Solomon on his return to freedom.

Bayou Boeuf

Bayou Boeuf is a bayou and water-rich region in Louisiana in which numerous plantations and towns are located, including Marksville and the Ford and Epps plantations. Bayou Boeuf was so-named by the French for the innumerable wild and domesticated cattle in the area. It is to the region in and around Bayou Boeuf that Solomon becomes a slave to Ford and later, Epps. Solomon spends all twelve years of his bondage in the area, which is replete with alligators, gnats, mosquitoes, various illnesses, great heat and humidity, and especially harsh masters.

Canada

Canada is the native country of Bass, and the country to which Solomon journeys while working in the lumber trade in upstate New York. It is Bass's knowledge of Canada and New York, as well as Solomon's knowledge of Canada and upstate New York, that makes Bass realize Solomon is telling the truth about being a kidnapped free man. Based on this evidence, Bass writes on behalf of Solomon to his friends and family in New York state.

Themes and Motifs

Slavery

Slavery is a major theme in the book “Twelve Years a Slave” by Solomon Northup. Slavery is an evil practice wherein one human being owns and treats another as mere property. It is a dehumanizing and malignant practice ended in the United States through the American Civil War. When Solomon is kidnapped and sold into slavery, the Civil War is still two decades off, and the anti-slavery Republican Party has not yet made its mark, nor been founded. Solomon, a free man, is aware of slavery only insofar as he has heard about it, and conversed with the slaves of southerners visiting up north.

Upon his release from bondage, Solomon is urged to write down his experiences of the “peculiar institution” of slavery, for Solomon has now experienced slavery firsthand not from birth, but after being born and living free. Solomon is in a unique position not only to condemn slavery, but to explain it with an insider’s account. Solomon does this in great detail, revealing that slaves are expected to pick two hundred pounds of cotton a day, are not permitted to read or write, are whipped, beaten, sexually violated, and leased, lent, traded, and sold like cattle. The punishments slaves must endure – from whippings to dehumanizing humiliation – underscore the horrific nature of slavery under people like Epps.

However, Solomon is quick to point out the tragic ironies of slavery. Despite the inhuman evil that is slavery, Solomon reveals that not all slave owners are cruel and merciless people. There are figures like William Ford, who defy convention. Ford, whom Solomon soundly defends as noble, good, kind, and deeply Christian, not only protects and saves Solomon’s life on several occasions, but treats his slaves like they are human beings. Ford even gives his slaves Bibles at a time when it is illegal to teach slaves how to read, and urges his slaves to keep their faith in God. Solomon believes sincerely that, given a different set of circumstances in terms of upbringing and where Ford lives, Ford would be an abolitionist. Unfortunately, Ford has been blinded to the inhumanity of slavery, despite the comparatively humane conditions in which slaves exist.

Justice

Justice is an underlying theme in the book “Twelve Years a Slave” by Solomon Northup. Justice involves the moral meting out of punishments and materialization of circumstances in response to great wrongs, sufferings, or evils. In the novel, justice is done and fails to be done in response to Solomon’s twelve years of captivity.

When Henry Northup learns of Solomon’s situation, he sets out to make it right as quickly as he can. Motivated by both morality and by the law, Northup presents Solomon’s circumstances to the Governor of New York, who readily consents to

Northup's quest to free Solomon. Northup then travels to Washington, D.C., to gain political and legal support for his case to free Solomon. Justice is a moral and colorblind thing to those with whom Northup speaks and prevails upon, including US Senator Soule of Louisiana. Soule is especially moved by Solomon's case, and is determined that justice should be done for Solomon. In a local court, Solomon's free status is asserted. Orders are given for Solomon's release. In so doing, justice is done.

However, back in Washington, D.C., a court case is commenced against Burch and his slave trading operation in pursuit of justice for the wrongs and crimes committed against Solomon and to prevent such future episodes from being repeated. Based on denials from Burch and the false testimonies of character witnesses for Burch, Burch is released for his crimes. In this instance, justice is not served. However, it is not because there is a lack of justice. Corruption has effectively kept justice from prevailing.

Faith

Faith is a dominant theme in the book "Twelve Years a Slave" by Solomon Northup. Faith in this instance is distinctly religious in nature, and Christian, specifically. Faith is an integral part of the slave experience, and the experiences of Solomon Northup through his life and twelve years in bondage. Faith includes prayer and appealing to God and Jesus Christ, in the hopes of sustenance, courage, and deliverance.

From an early age, Solomon is taught by his father to trust God implicitly no matter what troubles he faces in his life. Solomon takes such sound advice to heart, relying on God when all else fails in his life. When Solomon first realizes he has been kidnapped, he prays to God and weeps before anything else. His faith in God is, ironically, strengthened through his experiences with the slave owner William Ford, who is himself devoutly Christian, and gives his slaves Bibles. Over time, Solomon's faith in God does not wane, but continues to grow. The only thing that Solomon truly has to rely on is God, and this is demonstrated repeatedly.

Through the remarkable chance meeting of Solomon and Bass, in which Solomon ultimately sees the Hand of God, Solomon is able to begin the process that will lead to his rescue. All the time, every step of the way, Solomon prays that God will not call Bass home to Heaven, and prays that God will see Solomon through the ordeal. When Solomon is at last freed, he thanks God above all else for getting him through the terrifying trials he has faced. Solomon thanks God both at the beginning and end of his account, and reaffirms the importance of faith through struggle.

Styles

Point of View

Solomon Northup writes his book “Twelve Years a Slave” in the first-person omniscient reflective narrative. The experience is a firsthand account of twelve years spent as a slave in the deep south, and so it is only natural that the writer – Solomon Northup – who experienced the ordeal, should be the one to tell it. Because he is telling the account after the fact, he is able to add details not readily available to him at the time, such as the names of players and places. This helps to contextualize things, and give a greater understanding of events to, the reader. The account, told after the fact, also merits a reflective tone, wherein Solomon Northup is able to look back at slavery, make pronouncements about it, and understand things now that he is removed from the situation.

Language and Meaning

Solomon Northup tells his account “Twelve Years a Slave” in language that is educated and straightforward. Solomon, a free black man living in New York, has had the ability to be educated in terms of reading and writing, and his strong vocabulary and intelligence are on clear display. Nevertheless, he writes in an engaging and straightforward manner in order to make his points quite clear – such as that slavery is indeed a tremendous evil – and so that readers of all backgrounds will be able to understand his account.

Structure

Solomon Northup divides his account “Twelve Years a Slave” into twenty-two chronological, linear, numbered chapters. This is done for at least two reasons. Novels of past centuries were usually organized in such straightforward ways, with chapters, parts, and volumes. This is common practice still usually observed in contemporary literature. This is also done because it allows the reader to follow along with events as they unfold. The reader can effortlessly move between chapters to follow the account. This does not distract the reader’s attention or focus away from the plot.

Quotes

I can speak of Slavery only so far as it came under my own observation – only so far as I have known and experienced it in my own person.

-- Solomon Northup (chapter 1 paragraph 3)

Importance: Solomon Northup's purpose in crafting a memoir of his time spent in bondage is underscored by two important points. First, he will speak freely about slavery as he has experienced. Second, he will not speak about slavery that he has not experienced. That way he can give an accurate account of his own experience, and of slavery as experienced personally by him.

James H. Burch was a slave trader – buying men, women and children at low prices, and selling them at an advance. He was a speculator in human flesh – a disreputable calling – and so considered at the South.

-- Solomon Northup (chapter 4 paragraph 29)

Importance: When it comes to rendering moral judgments, Solomon Northup does not hold back. This is especially true of the cruel and malicious James H. Burch, which Solomon describes as nothing more than a speculator of flesh – of selling and buying human beings like cattle.

Let not those who have never been placed in like circumstances, judge me harshly. Until they have been chained and beaten – until they find themselves in the situation I was, borne away from home and family towards a land of bondage – let them refrain from saying what they would not do for liberty.

-- Solomon Northup (chapter 5 paragraph 8)

Importance: While contemplating things such as escape, murder, and suicide, Solomon knows that he will be judged by others. Yet, he kindly cautions others not to judge him, for they have not been in so similar and so grave a situation as to warrant such thoughts. With liberty as the ultimate goal, there is no telling what some men will do. Solomon is one of those men.

The influences and associations that had always surrounded him, blinded him to the inherent wrong at the bottom of the system of Slavery. He never doubted the moral right of one man holding another in subjection... Brought up under other circumstances and influences, his notions would undoubtedly have been different.

-- Solomon Northup (chapter 7 paragraph 25)

Importance: Solomon Northup's ability to render sound moral judgments also extends to people like William Ford, whom Solomon goes so far as to call noble, despite the fact that Ford owns slaves. Had his circumstances been different, Solomon believes Ford would not have been a slaveholder, and would have tended to abolition. This is especially important given the moral complexity of the situation with Ford.

Ten years I toiled for that man without reward. Ten years of my incessant labor has contributed to increase the bulk of his possessions".

-- Solomon Northup (chapter 13 paragraph 15)

Importance: Following ownership by Ford, Solomon is owned by Edwin Epps, a degenerate, drunken lout. Solomon recounts with bitterness that he spends ten long, grueling years – an entire decade of his life – slaving away without reward for Epps. This is important for the modern reader to reflect on: imagine ten years -an entire decade -of hard labor in difficult conditions with the threat of violence as motivation, and no pay for all that has been done.

That little paradise in the Great Pine Woods was the oasis in the desert, towards which my heart turned lovingly, during many years of bondage.

-- Solomon Northup (chapter 11 paragraph 5)

Importance: Solomon's time spent at William Ford's plantation and lumber business are so unusually positive given the fact that Solomon is imprisoned, that he only reflects on his time spent with the Fords as pleasant. Indeed, he goes so far as to reflect on his life with the Fords in the darkest of times.

The existence of Slavery in its most cruel form among them has a tendency to brutalize the humane and finer feelings of their nature.

-- Solomon Northup (chapter 14 paragraph 31)

Importance: Solomon Northup explains that beyond the general idea of the inhumanity of slavery is the fact that slavery truly does dehumanize. It destroys feelings of goodness, of self-worth, and emotions. It numbs and deadens the human soul. And the cruelest of slave owners take delight in not just owning slaves, but in breaking them down.

The summer of my life was passing away; I felt I was growing prematurely old; that a few years more, and toil, and grief, and the poisonous miasmas of the swamps would accomplish their work on me – would consign me to the grave's embrace, to moulder and be forgotten.

-- Solomon Northup (chapter 16 paragraph 33)

Importance: The toll that slavery exacts on human beings is not just mental or emotional, but most clearly physical. Hard, incessant labor, little sleep, no motivation of reward, and helplessness all work together to physically exhaust, strain, and wear away the human body. The same is true of Solomon Northup as he continues to work for Epps.

The secret was out –the mystery unraveled. Through the thick, black cloud, amid whose dark and dismal shadows I had walked twelve years, broke the star that was to light me back to liberty.

-- Solomon Northup (chapter 21 paragraph 33)



Importance: Solomon Northup describes with great poetic beauty the discovery that his story has been made apparent to those who will rescue him. Solomon has lived under a metaphorical black cloud (metaphorical for slavery) for twelve years, and now he is at least free of it.