



HAMILTON

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SLAVERY IN THE FOUNDING ERA
PRIMARY SOURCE TEXT ANALYSIS ACTIVITY

THE INTERESTING NARRATIVE OF THE LIFE OF OLAUDAH EQUIANO (1789)

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OVERVIEW

In this activity students will read four brief excerpts from *The Interesting Narrative of the Life of Olaudah Equiano*. Each excerpt is followed by two questions for the students to answer. Olaudah Equiano (1745–1797) was enslaved by a British sea captain and, in 1766, purchased his own freedom and settled in England. Equiano soon became a widely known abolitionist, lecturing about his own experiences, condemning the slave trade, and, in 1789, publishing his autobiographical narrative. Although he wrote that he was born in West Africa and kidnapped at about 11 years of age, historians have recently considered evidence that he was actually born in South Carolina. Equiano’s story helped turn British public opinion against the slave trade, and the book became one of the most famous and influential slave narratives.

MATERIALS

- Excerpts from Olaudah Equiano, *The Interesting Narrative of the Life of Olaudah Equiano*, or Gustavas Vassa, the African, Written by Himself, London, 1789, with critical thinking questions. You can find the entire narrative online at Project Gutenberg, gutenberg.org/ebooks/15399.

PROCEDURE

1. The four excerpts provide Olaudah Equiano's account of being kidnapped as a child, being sold into slavery, seeing a slave ship for the first time, and being confined to the ship. Each chunk of text is followed by two types of questions to build different types of comprehension. You may choose to discuss the two types of question with your students:
 - **Literal questions:** The answers to literal questions can be found in the text. The answers are explicitly stated. We sometimes say this information is on the surface (e.g., What is the main character's name? What happened in the story on that page?).
 - **Inferential questions:** The answers to inferential questions can be found in the text too, but they are implied, not explicitly stated. We often say the information is in between the lines or under the surface (e.g., Why did the main character laugh? What do you think will happen next?).
2. Depending on your students' experience with reading primary sources, you may choose to have them read the text and answer the questions independently, in pairs, or in small groups of three or four. In a group of four, each student could focus on one of the excerpts and then share their findings with the other members of their group.
3. You may "share read" the text with the class by having the students follow along silently while you begin to read aloud, modeling prosody, inflection, and punctuation. Then ask the class to join in with the reading after a few sentences while you continue to read aloud, still serving as the model. This technique will support struggling readers as well as English language learners (ELL). You may also choose to model the answers to the questions after the first excerpt.
4. After the students have completed the activity sheet, reconvene the class and have them share their responses to the questions.
5. **Extension Activities**
 - Have the students write a response to the following essential question: How does a first-person account of slavery help us better understand this moment in history?
 - Direct students to *Slavery Images: A Visual Record of the African Slave Trade and Slave Life in the Early African Diaspora* (<http://www.slaveryimages.org>). Ask them to identify images of the seven steps in the slave trade: capture, march to the sea, inspection and boarding the ships, the "middle passage," "seasoning" in the islands, the slave market, and plantation life. Lead a Socratic discussion of the different perspectives arising from these images.

EXCERPTS FROM *THE INTERESTING NARRATIVE OF THE LIFE OF OLAUDAH EQUIANO WITH CRITICAL THINKING QUESTIONS*

1. "One day, when all our people were gone out to their works as usual, and only I and my dear sister were left to mind the house, two men and a woman got over our walls, and in a moment seized us both; and, without giving us time to cry out, or make resistance, they stopped our mouths, tied our hands, and ran off with us into the nearest wood: and continued to carry us as far as they could, till night came on, when we reached a small house, where the robbers halted for refreshment, and spent the night. We were then unbound, but were unable to take any food; and being quite overpowered by fatigue and grief, our only relief was some slumber, which allayed our misfortune for a short time. The next morning we left the house, and continued travelling all the day. For a long time we had kept the woods, but at last we came into a road which I believed I knew. I had now some hopes of being delivered; for we had advanced but a little way before I discovered some people at a distance, on which I began to cry out for their assistance: but my cries had no other effect than to make them tie me faster and stop my mouth, and then they put me into a large sack. They also stopped my sister's mouth, and tied her hands; and in this manner we proceeded till we were out of the sight of these people. . . . At length, after many days travelling, during which I had often changed masters, I got into the hands of a chieftain, in a very pleasant country."

What do the three adults do to the two children? Provide at least four examples.

Is this merely a kidnapping or something else? Are there clues to the motives of the people who have taken the children away from their home?

Source: Olaudah Equiano, *The Interesting Narrative of the Life of Olaudah Equiano, or Gustavas Vassa, the African, Written by Himself*, London, 1789

EXCERPTS FROM *THE INTERESTING NARRATIVE OF THE LIFE OF OLAUDAH EQUIANO WITH CRITICAL THINKING QUESTIONS*

2. “I was again sold, and carried through a number of places, till, after travelling a considerable time, I came to a town called Tinmah, in the most beautiful country I had yet seen in Africa. It was extremely rich, and there were many rivulets which flowed through it . . . Here I first saw and tasted cocoa nuts . . . Here I also saw and tasted for the first time sugar-cane. Their money consisted of little white shells, the size of the finger nail. I was sold here for one hundred and seventy-two of them by a merchant who lived and brought me there . . . In this resemblance to my former happy state, I passed about two months; and I now began to think I was to be adopted into the family, and was beginning to be reconciled to my situation, and to forget by degrees my misfortunes, when all at once the delusion vanished; for, without the least previous knowledge, one morning early, while my dear master and companion was still asleep, I was awakened out of my reverie to fresh sorrow, and hurried away . . . Thus, at the very moment I dreamed of the greatest happiness, I found myself most miserable; and it seemed as if fortune wished to give me this taste of joy, only to render the reverse more poignant.”

What did Equiano experience while he was living in Tinmah? Please be specific. Cite at least four examples.

How do Equiano’s emotions reflect a change in tone in this section?

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3. “The first object which saluted my eyes when I arrived on the coast was the sea, and a slave ship, which was then riding at anchor, and waiting for its cargo. These filled me with astonishment, which was soon converted into terror when I was carried on board. I was immediately handled and tossed up to see if I were sound, by some of the crew; and I was now persuaded that I had gotten into a world of bad spirits, and that they were going to kill me. Their complexions too differing so much from ours, their long hair, and the language they spoke . . . united to confirm me in this belief. Indeed, such were the horrors of my views and fears at the moment, that . . . I would have freely exchanged my condition with that of the meanest slave in my own country.”

What emotions does Equiano feel as he arrives on the coast? What physical characteristics of his captors does he highlight?

What does Equiano mean when he says, “I would have freely exchanged my condition with that of the meanest slave in my own country”?

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EXCERPTS FROM *THE INTERESTING NARRATIVE OF THE LIFE OF OLAUDAH EQUIANO WITH CRITICAL THINKING QUESTIONS*

4. “When I looked round the ship too and saw a large furnace or copper boiling, and a multitude of black people of every description chained together, every one of their countenances expressing dejection and sorrow, I no longer doubted of my fate; and, quite overpowered with horror and anguish, I fell motionless on the deck and fainted . . . Soon after this the blacks who brought me on board went off and left me abandoned to despair. I now saw myself deprived of all chance of returning to my native country, or even the least glimpse of hope of gaining the shore . . . and I even wished for my former slavery in preference to my present situation, which was filled with horrors of every kind, still heightened by my ignorance of what I was to undergo. I was not long suffered to indulge my grief; I was soon put down under the decks, and there I received such a salutation in my nostrils as I had never experienced in my life: so that, with the loathsomeness of the stench, and crying together, I became so sick and |low that I was not able to eat, nor had I the least desire to taste anything. I now wished for the last friend, death, to relieve me . . .”

How does Equiano describe the other people on the ship and their situation?

What can you infer from Equiano’s use of emotional language in this fragment?

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