

Douglass Literary Discussion Questions

Directions:

1. Pre-read the discussion questions
2. Read the assigned chapters
3. Post-reading: Create Student Generated Discussion Questions (2 per chapter; see directions); record your questions directly on the handout in the space provided
4. Group Discussion: As a group, discuss all teacher and student discussion questions for the assigned reading recording the answers to the questions as you go. **Each individual should be taking their own notes.** Answers are to be in bullet point format, handwritten and in blue/black ink only on a **separate sheet of paper.**
5. Post-Group Discussion: 4-5 sentence handwritten summary completed for homework; the summary is meant to reflect on the text reading and the group discussion; summary is only for every 2 chapters; please see sentence starter handout for assistance; write the summary on the same paper used to record your answers for the discussion questions. Please use complete sentences and blue/black ink only.

Chapter 1

Sets the scene; Frederick tells us some of his early life and begins to explain life on the plantation.

1. Is family history important in shaping a person's identity? If so, how? If not, why not?
2. In the first paragraph Douglass writes, "By far the larger part of the slaves know as little of their ages as horses know of theirs," What does Douglass mean in this statement?
3. Douglass then states, "and it is the wish of most masters to keep their slaves thus ignorant." Why would most slave masters want this?
4. Toward the bottom of the second page Douglass acknowledges, "the whisper that my master was my father." Why does he use the word "whisper" in this sentence?
5. Douglass then writes, "the children of slave women shall in all cases follow the condition of their mothers"? What does he mean by the "condition of mothers" and in what way do "the children of slave women follow the condition of their mothers"?
6. Why, according to Douglass, was it profitable for slave masters to have children with their slaves? How were the children of slave women and slave masters treated?
7. "I have no accurate knowledge of my age, ...A want of information concerning my [birthday] was a source of unhappiness to me...The white children could tell their ages. I could not tell why I ought to be deprived of the same privilege." How do you feel on your birthday? How do you celebrate your birthday? How would you feel if you did not get to celebrate your birthday, or didn't even know when your birthday was or exactly how old you were?
8. Student Created Discussion Question:
9. Student Created Discussion Question:

Chapter 2

Describes the plantation system of Colonel Lloyd; discusses the daily existence of slaves on the plantation.

1. What tools do human beings use to transcend (rise above) difficulties?
2. Describe the living conditions and rations of most slaves on Colonel Lloyd's plantations. How did some slaves supplement their necessities?
3. According to Douglass, what does the singing of a slave communicate? How does Douglass feel about slave songs? In what way is a slave's singing misinterpreted by some people?
4. "I have often been utterly astonished, since I came to the north, to find persons who could speak of the singing, among slaves, of evidence of their contentment and happiness. It is impossible to conceive of a greater mistake. Slaves sing most when they are most unhappy." Describe a time in your life when you felt sad or upset, but on the surface you appeared happy. What did you do that gave the impression that you were content? How did these actions hide your true feelings?
5. Student Created Discussion Question:
6. Student Created Discussion Question:

Write a 4-5 Sentence Summary Chapters 1-2.

Chapter 3

Relates several anecdotes that tell readers more about plantation life and the thinking of slaves.

1. What are the effects of some people having great riches, while other live in extreme poverty?
2. What is ironic about Colonel Lloyd's treatment of his horses compared to the treatment of his slaves?
3. Douglass describes how slaves would argue about whose master was greater, despite the fact that they may hate their masters. How does he explain the slave's reasoning for boasting (bragging/speaking positively) about their masters? Why, according to Douglass, might slaves feel inclined to speak favorably about their masters?
4. *"This is the penalty of telling the truth, of telling the simple truth, in answer to a series of plain questions. It is partly in consequence of such facts that slaves, when inquired as to their condition and the character of their masters, almost universally say they are contented, and that their masters are kind."* Describe a situation in which you felt pressured to lie. Why did you withhold from telling the truth? What happened as a result? How would the situation have been different if you would have been truthful?
5. Student Created Discussion Question
6. Student Created Discussion Question

Chapter 4

Tells readers more about overseers and describes incidents of slave murders.

1. Dehumanization is the process of removing or denying a person of *human qualities*. How were slaves dehumanized?
2. Why is Mr. Austin Gore seen as a "first-rate overseer"? Why is this description ironic?
3. What does Douglass mean when he says, "'He dealt sparingly with his words, and bountifully with his whip, never using the former where the latter would answer as well.'" How do Mr. Gore's actions reflect the slaveholders' motto? In what ways is Mr. Austin Gore a first-rate overseer? Give examples
4. Why was Mr. Gore so quick to find fault with the slaves, and why didn't he give them the opportunity to defend themselves? Why did he punish Demby so severely for his disobedience?
5. Mr. Gore said he killed Demby because *"He was setting a dangerous example for the other slaves...He argued that if one slave refused to be corrected, and escaped with his life, the other slaves would soon copy the example."* Recall a time when you witnessed an individual being singled out, punished, or treated unfairly in order to set an example for a larger group. Why was that individual singled out, and what message was the person in charge trying to send? Did you think this treatment was fair? Was it effective? Why or why not?
6. Student Created Discussion Question
7. Student Created Discussion Question

Write a 4-5 Sentence Summary Chapters 3-4.

Chapter 5

Examines Frederick's life as a slave child and discusses his leaving the plantation.

1. When good things happen to people is it because they deserve it, or is it chance or luck in play? *general group opinion*
2. Douglass was approximately eight years old when he went to live with the Auld family. How does Douglass contrast his childhood on Colonel Lloyd's plantation with this arrival in Baltimore at the Auld's?
3. Describe how the slave children are fed.
4. Describe Douglass's preparations before leaving for Baltimore.

5. Why was Douglass full of joy at the prospect of leaving the plantation? Why wasn't he sad to leave his home?
6. *"I look upon my departure from Colonel Lloyd's plantation as one of the most interesting events of my life...Going to live at Baltimore laid the foundation, and opened the gateway, to all my subsequent prosperity."* Douglass described going to Baltimore as a turning point in his life. What is a moment in your life that has changed, or has the possibility to change, the course of your life? How would your life be different if this circumstance had not occurred?
7. Student Created Discussion Question
8. Student Created Discussion Question

Chapter 6

Discusses learning to read and explains its importance.

1. How does education give us power?
2. Frederick Douglass once said, "There can be no freedom without education." How would your life be different if you could not read or write?
3. Why does Douglass choose to alter his behavior around Sophia Auld? How does he act differently?
4. Describe Douglass's new mistress Mrs. Auld and how she treated him in the beginning. How does she change, and why?
5. Why was Mr. Auld so against his wife educating Douglass? What was he fearful would happen if Douglass learned to read and write? In turn, what does Douglass hope to gain by learning to read?
6. Describe how Douglass felt when he first learned how to read. Why did the lessons stop? How did this affect Douglass?
7. Compare and contrast the treatment of slaves on the plantation to the treatment of slaves in town.
8. *"I now understood what had been to me a most perplexing difficulty—to wit, the white man's power to enslave the black man...From that moment, I understood the pathway from freedom to slavery."* Describe a situation in your life in which you felt a lack of power. What did you do to empower yourself? What made you realize what course of action you needed to take in order to gain that power?
9. Student Created Discussion Question
10. Student Created Discussion Question

Write a 4-5 Sentence Summary Chapters 5-6.

Chapter 7

Relates what Mrs. Auld learned from keeping slaves; how Frederick came to hate slavery and how he learned to write.

1. Why is learning to read so important to practicing freedom? How does knowing how to read and write give you power in society?
2. Why is it ironic that Douglass bribed the white boys to teach him to read? How is his life different from theirs?
3. Why would Douglass avoid giving the names of the boys who taught him to read?
4. Why does Douglass find this statement ironic: "It is almost an unpardonable offence to teach slaves to read in this Christian country."
5. What prediction did the slaveholder make about what would happen if Douglass learned to read? Did it come true? Explain.
6. When Douglass states, "I would at times feel that learning to read had been a curse rather than a blessing. It had given me a view of my wretched condition, without the remedy. It opened my eyes to the horrible pit, but to no ladder upon which to get out," What is the horrible pit he speaks of?
7. Douglass says that his mistress needed "some training in the exercise of irresponsible power." Does he believe that some people inherently possess qualities that enable them to hold slaves, while others do not?
8. In describing his mistress's transformation, is Douglass implying that no one put in her position, however morally superior, would be immune to the corrupting power of slavery?
9. When Douglass says that slavery proved "as injurious to her as it did to me," is he reducing her responsibility for the way she begins to treat him?

10. *“As I read and contemplated the subject, behold! that very discontentment which Master Hugh had predicted would follow my learning to read had already come, to torment and sting my soul to unutterable anguish... I would at times feel that learning to read had been a curse rather than a blessing.”* Recall a time when you expected something to be a blessing, but it turned out to feel like more of a curse. In other words, what benefit or good outcome did you expect, and how did the situation turn out poorly or differently than you imagined? Also consider, how can something be both a blessing AND a curse?
11. Student Created Discussion Question
12. Student Created Discussion Question

Chapter 8

Discussion of slaves as property; plight of old slaves; return to Baltimore.

1. Does doing harm to another harm the wrong-doer as well? How are we affected when we choose to mistreat someone else? *general group opinion*
2. In this chapter Douglass states, "At this moment, I saw more clearly than ever the brutalizing effects of slavery upon both slave and slaveholder." What evidence does Douglass give to support his claim that slavery is brutal for slaveholders as well as slaves?
3. Douglas describes in great detail what he supposes his grandmother's experience to be after being set out on her own. Why does he tell this story? What was the effect of this experience on him?
4. When his old master dies, and Douglass is "sent for, to be valued with his other property," why does this produce in him a "new conception" of his "degraded condition"? At the valuation of property, Douglass "saw more clearly than ever the brutalizing effects of slavery upon both slave and slaveholder". What about this event brought this realization to Douglass?
5. *“Not long after his marriage, a misunderstanding took place between [Master Thomas] and Master Hugh; and as a means of punishing his brother, he took me from him to live with himself at St. Michael's.”* Describe an instance when you were caught in the middle of a conflict between other people. What was the disagreement or issue between these people, and how did you end up involved? What was the outcome for you, and how did you feel to be mixed up in it?
6. Student Created Discussion Question
7. Student Created Discussion Question

Write a 4-5 Sentence Summary Chapters 7-8.

Chapter 9

Moves to St. Michael's, Maryland, with Master Thomas Auld; the irony of the Christian slaveholder is discussed.

1. How do people justify wrongdoing to others? When people make excuses or justifications for their mistreatment of others, do you think they really believe those justifications? Give an example. *general group opinion*
2. What is different in Douglass' life that may affect him now knowing the date?
3. Thomas Auld violates one of the few rules of decency that most slave owners adhere to. What is this unspoken rule, and how does it affect Douglass?
4. Douglass states of Captain Auld, "After his conversion, he found religious sanction and support for his slaveholding cruelty." How does Captain Auld justify his actions as a slave-holder with religious reasoning? Give examples from the text to support your answer.
5. What does Douglass mean when he says, *"Here was a recently converted man, holding on upon the mother, and at the same time turning out her helpless child, to starve and die! Master Thomas was one of the many pious slaveholders who hold slaves for the very charitable purpose of taking care of them."*
6. According to Douglass, why are masters who are not born slaveholders "the worst"?
7. *"The leading trait in [Captain Auld's] character was meanness; and if there were any other element in his nature, it was made subject to this. He was mean; and like most other mean men, he lacked the ability to conceal his meanness."* Evoke the meanest person you have ever encountered. What actions made this person so mean? Why do you think he or she acted so cruelly?

8. Student Created Discussion Question
9. Student Created Discussion Question

Chapter 10

How a man is made a slave; a slave made a man.

1. What is humanity? What does it mean to be a human being (vs. an animal)? What are some of the criteria by which we could judge human, (and/or humane) behavior.
2. When Douglass states that, "Mr. Covey succeeded in breaking me. I was broken in body, soul, and spirit. My natural elasticity was crushed, my intellect languished, the disposition to read departed, the cheerful spark that lingered about my eye died; the dark night of slavery closed in upon me; and behold a man transformed into a brute!" How does this passage portray the mental and emotional state of a slave who has been dehumanized? What images does the passage bring to mind?
3. Douglass writes, "You have seen how a man was made a slave; you shall see how a slave was made a man". How did Douglass transform himself from a "slave" to a "man," despite still being physically enslaved?
4. "*This battle with Mr. Covey was the turning-point in my career as a slave. It rekindled the few expiring embers of freedom, and revived within me a sense of my own manhood. It recalled the departed self-confidence, and inspired me again with a determination to be free.*" Recall a time when you stood up for yourself. Why did you decide to stand up for yourself, and how did you do it? How did the other person respond? How did you feel as a result?
5. "*I have said that this mode of treatment is a part of the whole system of fraud and inhumanity of slavery. It is so. The mode here adopted to disgust the slave with freedom, by allowing him to see only the abuse of it, is carried out in other things.*" Describe an instance when, on the surface, it appeared that someone had your best interests at heart, but they had an ulterior motive. How did it appear that they were helping you, and what negative outcome did they actually anticipate?
6. Student Created Discussion Question
7. Student Created Discussion Question

Write a 4-5 Sentence Summary Chapters 9-10.

Chapter 11

Escape from slavery; becoming a free man; involvement in the anti-slavery movement.

1. How does Douglass's story embody the pursuit of life, liberty, and happiness the rights which the Declaration of Independence granted to all but slaves and women?
2. In what ways does Douglass demonstrate his courage? Is courage a defining element of the human spirit?
3. What is Douglass argument about escaped slaves recounting their methods of escape, and what reasons does he give to support his claim?
4. Why does Douglass relate the history of his name? Why does Douglass let someone else choose a new last name for him?
5. When first asked to speak at an antislavery meeting, why does Douglass say, "I felt myself a slave, and the idea of speaking to white people weighed me down"? Why does Douglass feel "a degree of freedom" after speaking for a few moments?
6. What misconception did Douglass have about people in the North? Specifically, why had he believed that people in the North didn't own slaves? What kinds of people did he expect to meet, and how was the reality of the North different?
7. Student Created Discussion Question
8. Student Created Discussion Question

Write a 4-5 Sentence Summary Chapter 11.