



Narrative of the Life of Frederick Douglass

Frederick Douglass

BACKGROUND Douglass wrote his autobiography to convince skeptics that such an eloquent speaker had indeed once been a slave. His book became one of the most famous slave narratives ever published and played an enormous role in rallying support for the abolition of slavery. This excerpt recounts a period in Douglass's life during which his owner, Hugh Auld's brother, Thomas, had hired him out to a man with a reputation as a "slave breaker."

I left Master Thomas's house, and went to live with Mr. Covey, on the 1st of January, 1833. I was now, for the first time in my life, a field hand. In my new employment, I found myself even more awkward than a country boy appeared to be in a large city. I had been at my new home but one week before Mr. Covey gave me a very severe whipping, cutting my back, causing the blood to run, and raising ridges on my flesh as large as my little finger. The details of this affair are as follows: Mr. Covey sent me, very early in the morning of one of our coldest days in the month of January, to the woods, to get a load of wood. He gave me a team of unbroken oxen. He told me which was the in-hand ox, and which the off-hand¹ one. He then tied the end of a large rope around the horns of the in-hand ox, and gave me the other end of it, and told me, if the oxen started to run, that

Analyze Visuals ▶

Describe the style of this painting. What impression of its subject does the painting convey?

STYLE

Explain what Douglass means by "this affair" in line 6. What is surprising about his word choice?

1. In-hand . . . off-hand: In a team of animals trained to pull loads, the in-hand animal is the one on the left; the animal on the right is the off-hand one.

Panel 30 from *The Frederick Douglass Series* (1938–1939), Jacob Lawrence, Hampton University Museum. © 2007 The Jacob and Gwendolyn Lawrence Foundation, Seattle/Artists Rights Society (ARS), New York.



The Life of Harrier Tidman, #9 (1940), Jacob Lawrence, Casein tempera on hardboard, 12" x 17 7/8", Hampton University Museum. Photo courtesy of Gwendolyn Knight Lawrence/Art Resource, New York. © 2007 The Jacob and Gwendolyn Lawrence Foundation, Seattle/Artists Rights Society (ARS), New York.

I must hold on upon the rope. I had never driven oxen before, and of course I was very awkward. I, however, succeeded in getting to the edge of the woods with little difficulty; but I had got a very few rods² into the woods, when the oxen took fright, and started full tilt, carrying the cart against trees, and over stumps, in the most frightful manner. I expected every moment that my brains would be dashed out against the trees. After running thus for a considerable distance, they finally upset the cart, dashing it with great force against a tree, and threw themselves into a dense thicket. *D*

20 How I escaped death, I do not know. There I was, entirely alone, in a thick wood, in a place new to me. My cart was upset and shattered, my oxen were entangled among the young trees, and there was none to help me. After a long spell of effort, I succeeded in getting my cart righted, my oxen disentangled, and again yoked to the cart. I now proceeded with my team to the place where I had, the day before, been chopping wood, and loaded my cart pretty heavily, thinking in this way to tame my oxen. I then proceeded on my way home. I had now

▲ Analyze Visuals

Identify details in this painting that are used to represent the experience of slavery. What effects are achieved by centering the image of the figures' feet?

2. rods: units of length equal to 5 1/2 yards.



consumed one half of the day. I got out of the woods safely, and now felt out of danger. I stopped my oxen to open the woods gate; and just as I did so, before I could get hold of my ox rope, the oxen again started, rushed through the gate, catching it between the wheel and the body of the cart, tearing it to pieces, and coming within a few inches of crushing me against the gate-post. Thus twice, in one short day, I escaped death by the merest chance. On my return, I told Mr. Covey what had happened, and how it happened. He ordered me to return to the woods again immediately. I did so, and he followed on after me. Just as I got into the woods, he came up and told me to stop my cart, and that he would teach me how to trifle away my time, and break gates. He then went to a large gum-tree, and with his axe cut three large switches, and, after trimming them up neatly with his pocket-knife, he ordered me to take off my clothes. I made him no answer, but stood with my clothes on. He repeated his order. I still made him no answer, nor did I move to strip myself. Upon this he rushed at me with the fierceness of a tiger, tore off my clothes, and lashed me till he had worn out his switches, cutting me so savagely as to leave the marks visible for a long time after. This whipping was the first of a number just like it, and for similar offenses.

I lived with Mr. Covey one year. During the first six months, of that year, scarce a week passed without his whipping me. I was seldom free from a sore back. My awkwardness was almost always his excuse for whipping me. We were worked fully up to the point of endurance. Long before day we were up, our horses fed, and by the first approach of day we were off to the field with our hoes and ploughing teams. Mr. Covey gave us enough to eat, but scarce time to eat it. We were often less than five minutes taking our meals. We were often in the field from the first approach of day till its last lingering ray had left us; and at saving-fodder time, midnight often caught us in the field binding blades.³

Covey would be out with us. The way he used to stand it, was this. He would spend the most of his afternoons in bed. He would then come out fresh in the evening, ready to urge us on with his words, example, and frequently with the whip. Mr. Covey was one of the few slaveholders who could and did work with his hands. He was a hard-working man. He knew by himself just what a man or a boy could do. There was no deceiving him. His work went on in his absence almost as well as in his presence; and he had the faculty of making us feel that he was ever present with us. This he did by surprising us. He seldom approached the spot where we were at work openly, if he could do it secretly. He always aimed at taking us by surprise. Such was his cunning, that we used to call him, among ourselves, "the snake." When we were at work in the cornfield, he would sometimes crawl on his hands and knees to avoid detection, and all at once he would rise nearly in our midst, and scream out, "Ha, ha! Come, come! Dash on, dash on!" This being his mode of attack, it was never safe to stop a single minute. His comings were like a thief in the night. He appeared to us as being ever at hand. He was under every

Language Coach

Fixed Expressions The term *fixed expression* refers to the normal combination of words—the ways they are often used. "Merest chance" (line 32) means "only by chance." Other fixed expressions with *chance* are "strong chance" and "reasonable chance." Use each expression in a sentence.

STYLE
Reread lines 31–43. What is the effect of Douglass's choice to use little imagery or figurative language in his narration?

AUTHOR'S PURPOSE
Reread lines 46–52. What details does Douglass use to inform his readers about the working conditions of slaves?

GRAMMAR AND STYLE
Reread lines 63–65. Note how Douglass uses the vivid verbs *crawl* and *scream* to characterize Covey's menacing behavior.

3. **saving-fodder . . . binding blades:** They are gathering and bundling ("binding") corn-plant leaves ("blades") to use for livestock ("fodder").



tree, behind every stump, in every bush, and at every window, on the plantation. He would sometimes mount his horse, as if bound to St. Michael's,⁴ a distance of
 70 seven miles, and in half an hour afterwards you would see him coiled up in the corner of the wood-fence, watching every motion of the slaves. He would, for this purpose, leave his horse tied up in the woods. Again, he would sometimes walk up to us, and give us orders as though he was upon the point of starting on a long journey, turn his back upon us, and make as though he was going to the house to get ready; and, before he would get half way thither, he would turn short and crawl into a fence-corner, or behind some tree, and there watch us till the going down of the sun. . . .

If at any one time of my life more than another, I was made to drink the bitterest dregs of slavery, that time was during the first six months of my stay with Mr.
 80 Covey. We were worked in all weathers. It was never too hot or too cold; it could never rain, blow, hail, or snow, too hard for us to work in the field. Work, work, work, was scarcely more the order of the day than of the night. The longest days were too short for him, and the shortest nights too long for him. I was somewhat unmanageable when I first went there, but a few months of this discipline tamed me. 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!

Sunday was my only leisure time. I spent this in a sort of beast-like stupor,
 90 between sleep and wake, under some large tree. At times I would rise up, a flash of energetic freedom would dart through my soul, accompanied with a faint beam of hope, that flickered for a moment, and then vanished. I sank down again, mourning over my wretched condition. I was sometimes prompted to take my life, and that of Covey, but was prevented by a combination of hope and fear. My sufferings on this plantation seem now like a dream rather than a stern reality. . . .

I have already intimated that my condition was much worse, during the first six months of my stay at Mr. Covey's, than in the last six. The circumstances leading to the change in Mr. Covey's course toward me form an epoch in my humble history. You have seen how a man was made a slave; you shall see how a
 100 slave was made a man. On one of the hottest days of the month of August, 1833, Bill Smith, William Hughes,⁵ a slave named Eli, and myself, were engaged in fanning wheat.⁶ Hughes was clearing the fanned wheat from before the fan. Eli was turning, Smith was feeding, and I was carrying wheat to the fan. The work was simple, requiring strength rather than intellect; yet, to one entirely unused to such work, it came very hard. About three o'clock of that day, I broke down; my strength failed me; I was seized with a violent aching of the head, attended with

COMMON CORE RI.4.15

Language Coach

Figurative Language
 "Bitterest dregs of slavery" is figurative language, language that communicates meaning beyond the literal meaning of the words. Read lines 78–80. (*Dregs* means "residue settled at the bottom of a liquid.") What does "bitterest dregs of slavery" mean?

STYLE


Reread lines 78–88. Identify examples of metaphor, repetition, and parallelism. What tone is created by this use of language? What kind of perspective on slavery does it help the writer to achieve?


4. **St. Michael's:** a town southeast of Baltimore, on the east side of the Chesapeake Bay.

5. **Bill Smith, William Hughes:** Bill Smith was a hired man, and William Hughes was Mr. Covey's cousin.

6. **fanning wheat:** using a machine that blows air to separate grains of wheat from the unusable husks.



extreme dizziness; I trembled in every limb. Finding what was coming, I nerved myself up, feeling it would never do to stop work. I stood as long as I could stagger to the hopper⁷ with grain. When I could stand no longer, I fell, and felt as if held down by an immense weight. The fan of course stopped; every one had his own work to do; and no one could do the work of the other, and have his own go on at the same time. 

Mr. Covey was at the house, about one hundred yards from the treading-yard where we were fanning. On hearing the fan stop, he left immediately, and came to the spot where we were. He hastily inquired what the matter was. Bill answered that I was sick, and there was no one to bring wheat to the fan. I had by this time crawled away under the side of the post and rail-fence by which the yard was enclosed, hoping to find relief by getting out of the sun. He then asked where I was. He was told by one of the hands. He came to the spot, and, after looking at me awhile, asked me what was the matter. I told him as well as I could, for I scarce had strength to speak. He then gave me a savage kick in the side, and told me to get up. I tried to do so, but fell back in the attempt. He gave me another kick, and again told me to rise. I again tried, and succeeded in gaining my feet; but, stooping to get the tub with which I was feeding the fan, I again staggered and fell. While down in this situation, Mr. Covey took up the hickory slat with which Hughes had been striking off the half-bushel measure, and with it gave me a heavy blow upon the head, making a large wound, and the blood ran freely; and with this again told me to get up. I made no effort to comply, having now made up my mind to let him do his worst. In a short time after receiving this blow, my head grew better. Mr. Covey had now left me to my fate. At this moment I resolved, for the first time, to go to my master, enter a complaint, and ask his protection. In order to do this, I must that afternoon walk seven miles; and this, under the circumstances, was truly a severe undertaking. I was exceedingly feeble; made so as much by the kicks and blows which I received, as by the severe fit of sickness to which I had been subjected. I, however, watched my chance, while Covey was looking in an opposite direction, and started for St. Michael's. I succeeded in getting a considerable distance on my way to the woods, when Covey discovered me, and called after me to come back, threatening what he would do if I did not come. I disregarded both his calls and his threats, and made my way to the woods as fast as my feeble state would allow; and thinking I might be overhauled by him if I kept the road,⁸ I walked through the woods, keeping far enough from the road to avoid detection, and near enough to prevent losing my way. I had not gone far before my little strength again failed me. I could go no farther. I fell down, and lay for a considerable time. The blood was yet oozing from the wound on my head. For a time I thought I should bleed to death; and think now that I should have done so, but that the blood so matted my hair as to stop the wound. After lying there about three quarters of an hour, I nerved myself up again, and started on my 

COMMON CORE RI 6

AUTHOR'S PURPOSE

Reread lines 113–128. Notice the description of Mr. Covey's violence and the author's reaction to it. Without making judgments about Covey's behavior, Douglass advances a persuasive purpose—to expose slavery's unacceptable brutality. Now read lines 129–144, paying special attention to Douglass's tone and to what he reports about himself and Mr. Covey. How does Douglass advance his purpose in these lines?

7. **hopper**: a funnel-shaped container for storing grain.

8. **kept the road**: stayed on the road.



way, through bogs and briers, barefooted and bareheaded, tearing my feet sometimes at nearly every step; and after a journey of about seven miles, occupying some five hours to perform it, I arrived at master's store. I then presented an appearance enough to affect any but a heart of iron. From the crown of my head to my feet, I was covered with blood. My hair was all clotted with dust and blood; my shirt was stiff with blood. My legs and feet were torn in sundry places with briers and thorns, and were also covered with blood. I suppose I looked like a man who had escaped a den of wild beasts, and barely escaped them. In this state I appeared before my master, humbly entreating him to interpose his authority for my protection. I told him all the circumstances as well as I could, and it seemed, as I spoke, at times to affect him. He would then walk the floor, and seek to justify Covey by saying he expected I deserved it. He asked me what I wanted. I told him, to let me get a new home; that as sure as I lived with Mr. Covey again, I should live with but to die with him; that Covey would surely kill me; he was in a fair way for it. Master Thomas ridiculed the idea that there was any danger of Mr. Covey's killing me, and said that he knew Mr. Covey; that he was a good man, and that he could not think of taking me from him; that, should he do so, he would lose the whole year's wages; that I belonged to Mr. Covey for one year, and that I must go back to him, come what might; and that I must not trouble him with any more stories, or that he would himself *get hold of me*. After threatening me thus, he gave me a very large dose of salts,⁹ telling me that I might remain in St. Michael's that night, (it being quite late,) but that I must be off back to Mr. Covey's early in the morning; and that if I did not, he would get *hold of me*, which meant that he would whip me. I remained all night, and, according to his orders, I started off to Covey's in the morning, (Saturday morning,) wearied in body and broken in spirit. I got no supper that night, or breakfast that morning. I reached Covey's about nine o'clock; and just as I was getting over the fence that divided Mrs. Kemp's fields from ours, out ran Covey with his cowskin, to give me another whipping. Before he could reach me, I succeeded in getting to the cornfield; and as the corn was very high, it afforded me the means of hiding. He seemed very angry, and searched for me a long time. My behavior was altogether unaccountable. He finally gave up the chase, thinking, I suppose, that I must come home for something to eat; he would give himself no further trouble in looking for me. I spent that day mostly in the woods, having the alternative before me,—to go home and be whipped to death, or stay in the woods and be starved to death. That night, I fell in with Sandy Jenkins, a slave with whom I was somewhat acquainted. Sandy had a free wife who lived about four miles from Mr. Covey's; and it being Saturday, he was on his way to see her. I told him my circumstances, and he very kindly invited me to go home with him. I went home with him, and talked this whole matter over, and got his advice as to what course it was best for me to pursue. I found Sandy an old adviser. He told me, with great solemnity, I

STYLE

Reread lines 159–167. Note that Douglass chooses to convey this dialogue without the use of quotations. What effect does he achieve instead by repeating the word *that*?

9. salts: mineral salts used to relieve faintness and headache or to reduce swelling.



must go back to Covey; but that before I went, I must go with him into another
190 part of the woods, where there was a certain *root*, which, if I would take some of it
with me, carrying it *always on my right side*, would render it impossible for Mr.
Covey, or any other white man, to whip me. He said he had carried it for years;
and since he had done so, he had never received a blow, and never expected to
while he carried it. I at first rejected the idea, that the simple carrying of a root in
my pocket would have any such effect as he had said, and was not disposed to take
it; but Sandy impressed the necessity with much earnestness, telling me it could
do no harm, if it did no good. To please him, I at length took the root, and,
according to his direction, carried it upon my right side. This was Sunday
morning. I immediately started for home; and upon entering the yard gate, out
200 came Mr. Covey on his way to meeting.¹⁰ He spoke to me very kindly, made me
drive the pigs from a lot near by, and passed on towards the church. Now, this
singular conduct of Mr. Covey really made me begin to think that there was
something in the *root* which Sandy had given me; and had it been on any other
day than Sunday, I could have attributed the conduct to no other cause than the
influence of that root; and as it was, I was half inclined to think the *root* to be
something more than I at first had taken it to be. All went well till Monday
morning. On this morning, the virtue of the *root* was fully tested. Long before
daylight, I was called to go and rub, curry, and feed, the horses. I obeyed, and was
glad to obey. But whilst thus engaged, whilst in the act of throwing down some
210 blades from the loft, Mr. Covey entered the stable with a long rope; and just as I
was half out of the loft, he caught hold of my legs, and was about tying me. As
soon as I found what he was up to, I gave a sudden spring, and as I did so, he
holding to my legs, I was brought sprawling on the stable floor. Mr. Covey seemed
now to think he had me, and could do what he pleased; but at this moment—
from whence came the spirit I don't know—I resolved to fight; and, suiting my
action to the resolution, I seized Covey hard by the throat; and as I did so, I rose.
He held on to me, and I to him. My resistance was so entirely unexpected, that
Covey seemed taken all aback. He trembled like a leaf. This gave me assurance,
and I held him uneasy, causing the blood to run where I touched him with the
220 ends of my fingers. Mr. Covey soon called out to Hughes for help. Hughes came,
and, while Covey held me, attempted to tie my right hand. While he was in the
act of doing so, I watched my chance, and gave him a heavy kick close under the
ribs. This kick fairly sickened Hughes, so that he left me in the hands of Mr.
Covey. This kick had the effect of not only weakening Hughes, but Covey also.
When he saw Hughes bending over with pain, his courage quailed. He asked me if
I meant to persist in my resistance. I told him I did, come what might; that he
had used me like a brute for six months, and that I was determined to be used so
no longer. With that, he strove to drag me to a stick that was lying just out of the
stable door. He meant to knock me down. But just as he was leaning over to get

10. **meeting:** church service.

COMMON CORE RI.4.L.5b

Language Coach

Connotation A word's connotations are the images and feelings associated with the word. *Brute* (line 227) is very similar in meaning to *animal*, but its connotations are negative ("unable to reason," "cruel," "stupid"). Why is *brute* appropriate here?



230 the stick, I seized him with both hands by his collar, and brought him by a sudden snatch to the ground. By this time, Bill came. Covey called upon him for assistance. Bill wanted to know what he could do. Covey said, "Take hold of him, take hold of him!" Bill said his master hired him out to work, and not to help to whip me; so he left Covey and myself to fight our own battle out. We were at it for nearly two hours. Covey at length let me go, puffing and blowing at a great rate, saying that if I had not resisted, he would not have whipped me half so much. The truth was, that he had not whipped me at all. I considered him as getting entirely the worst end of the bargain; for he had drawn no blood from me, but I had from him. The whole six months afterwards, that I spent
240 with Mr. Covey, he never laid the weight of his finger upon me in anger. He would occasionally say, he didn't want to get hold of me again. "No," thought I, "you need not; for you will come off worse than you did before."

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. The gratification afforded by the triumph was a full compensation¹¹ for whatever else might follow, even death itself. He only can understand the deep satisfaction which I experienced, who has himself repelled by force the bloody arm of slavery. I felt as I never felt before. It was
250 a glorious resurrection, from the tomb of slavery, to the heaven of freedom. My long-crushed spirit rose, cowardice departed, bold defiance took its place; and I now resolved that, however long I might remain a slave in form, the day had passed forever when I could be a slave in fact. I did not hesitate to let it be known of me, that the white man who expected to succeed in whipping, must also succeed in killing me. |

From this time I was never again what might be called fairly whipped, though I remained a slave four years afterwards. I had several fights, but was never whipped. ☹

COMMON CORE RI.4

Language Coach

Figurative Language
"Getting . . . the worst end of the bargain" (line 238) means "having the loss while the other person has the gain"; it is **figurative language**, language that communicates meaning beyond the literal meaning of the words. Why does Douglass have the better position?

AUTHOR'S PURPOSE

Reread lines 243–253. How might this description have helped Douglass achieve his purpose?

11. **compensation**: payment; something of equivalent value.