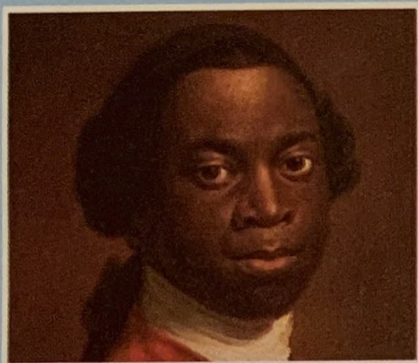


GUIDE FOR INTERPRETING

from The Interesting Narrative of the Life of Olaudah Equiano



Literary Forms

Olaudah Equiano (1745–1797) was eleven years old when he and his sister were kidnapped from their home in West Africa and sold to British slave traders. Separated from his sister, Equiano was taken first to the West Indies, then to Virginia, where he was purchased by a British captain and employed at sea.

Renamed Gustavus Vassa, Equiano was enslaved for nearly ten years. After buying his freedom, he continued to work as a seaman. In later years he settled in England and devoted himself to the abolition of slavery. To publicize the plight of slaves, he wrote his two-volume autobiography, *The Interesting Narrative*.

Published in 1789, Equiano's autobiography created a sensation. It brought polite society face to face with the cruelties of slavery and contributed to the banning of the slave trade in both the United States and England.

Slave Narrative. In the following excerpt, Equiano describes crossing the Atlantic in a slave ship. Called “the middle passage,” this nightmarish voyage was the middle part of the Africans’ journey from freedom to slavery. For six to ten weeks, Africans were crammed below deck in spaces sometimes less than 5 feet high. Families were torn apart, men and women placed in separate holds. Men were often shackled together in pairs.

Confinement in the hot, poorly ventilated holds was torturous. Overcrowding, disease, and despair claimed many lives. Some Africans mutinied. Others tried to starve themselves or jump overboard, as Equiano describes. Historians estimate that nearly 2 million Africans died before reaching the West Indies.

Equiano's account of the middle passage is an early example of a slave narrative. An American literary genre, a **slave narrative** is an autobiographical account of life as a slave. Often written to expose the horrors of human bondage, it documents a slave's experiences from his or her own point of view.

Encouraged by abolitionists, many former slaves published narratives in the years before the Civil War. Others told their stories in the first part of the twentieth century. Henry Louis Gates, Jr., professor of English and African American studies, notes that “no other group of slaves anywhere, at any other period in history, has left such a large repository of testimony about the horror of becoming the legal property of another human being.”

Focus

Imagine you have been kidnapped and taken to a foreign country to perform forced labor. What would you miss most? How would you maintain your memories of home? Respond in a journal entry.

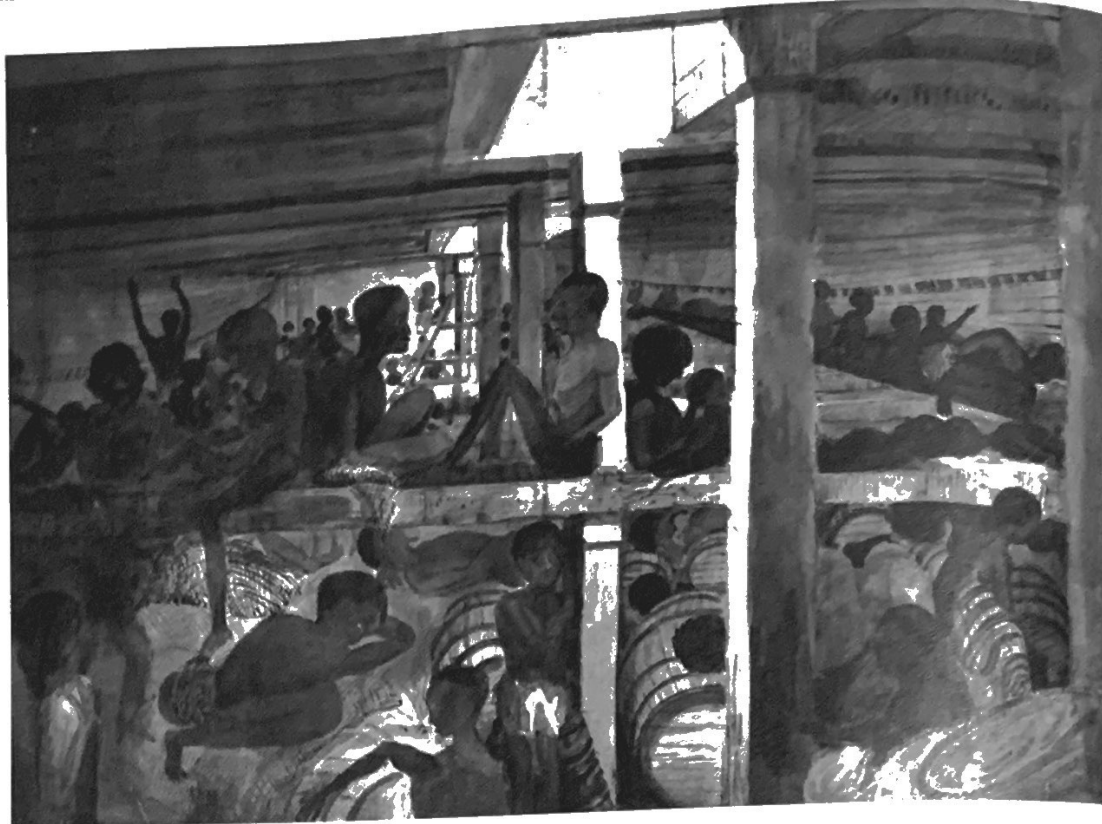
from **The Interesting
Narrative of the Life of
Olaudah Equiano**
Olaudah Equiano

In the first several chapters, Vassa describes how he and his sister were kidnapped from their home in West Africa by slave traders and transported to the African coast. During this six- or seven-month journey, Vassa was separated from his sister and held at a series of way stations. After reaching the coast, Vassa was shipped with other slaves to the New World. The following account describes this horrifying journey.

At last when the ship we were in, had got in all her cargo, they made ready with many fearful noises, and we were all put under deck, so that we could not see how they managed the vessel. But this disappointment was the least of my sorrow. The stench of the hold while we were on the coast was so intolerably loathsome, that it was dangerous to remain there for any time, and some of us had been permitted to stay on the deck for the fresh air; but now that the whole ship's cargo were confined together, it became absolutely pestilential. The closeness of the place, and the heat of the climate, added to the number in the ship, which was so crowded that each had scarcely room to turn himself, almost suffocated us. This produced copious perspirations, so that the air soon became unfit for respiration, from a variety of loathsome smells, and brought on a sickness among the slaves, of which many died—thus falling victims to the improvident avarice, as I may call

it, of their purchasers. This wretched situation was again aggravated by the galling of the chains, now become insupportable, and the filth of the necessary tubs, into which the children often fell, and were almost suffocated. The shrieks of the women, and the groans of the dying, rendered the whole a scene of horror almost inconceivable. Happily perhaps, for myself, I was soon reduced so low here that it was thought necessary to keep me almost always on deck; and from my extreme youth I was not put in fetters.¹ In this situation I expected every hour to share the fate of my companions, some of whom were almost daily brought upon deck at the point of death, which I began to hope would soon put an end to my miseries. Often did I think many of the inhabitants of the deep much more happy than myself. I envied them the freedom they enjoyed, and as often

1. fetters (fet' ərz) *n.*: Chains.



SLAVES BELOW DECK (detail)
Lt. Francis Meynell
 National Maritime
 Museum, Greenwich

wished I could change my condition for theirs. Every circumstance I met with, served only to render my state more painful, and heightened my apprehensions, and my opinion of the cruelty of the whites.

One day they had taken a number of fishes; and when they had killed and satisfied themselves with as many as they thought fit, to our astonishment who were on deck, rather than give any of them to us to eat, as we expected, they tossed the remaining fish into the sea again, although we begged and prayed for some as well as we could, but in vain; and some of my countrymen, being pressed by hunger, took an opportunity, when they thought no one saw them, of trying to get a little privately; but they were discovered, and the attempt procured them some very severe floggings. One day, when we had a smooth sea and moderate wind, two of my wearied countrymen who were chained together (I was near them at the time), preferring death to such a life of misery, somehow made through the nettings and jumped into the sea; immediately, another quite dejected fellow, who, on account of his illness, was suffered to be out of irons, also followed their example; and I believe many more would very

soon have done the same, if they had not been prevented by the ship's crew, who were instantly alarmed. Those of us that were the most active, were in a moment put down under the deck; and there was such a noise and confusion amongst the people of the ship as I never heard before, to stop her, and get the boat out to go after the slaves. However, two of the wretches were drowned, but they got the other, and afterwards flogged him unmercifully, for thus attempting to prefer death to slavery. In this manner we continued to undergo more hardships than I can now relate, hardships which are inseparable from this accursed trade. Many a time we were near suffocation from the want of fresh air, which we were often without for whole days together. This, and the stench of the necessary tubs, carried off many.

During our passage, I first saw flying fishes, which surprised me very much; they used frequently to fly across the ship, and many of them fell on the deck. I also now first saw the use of the quadrant;² I had often with

2. quadrant (kwä' drənt) *n.*: An instrument used by navigators to determine the position of a ship.

astonishment seen the mariners make observations with it, and I could not think what it meant. They at last took notice of my surprise; and one of them, willing to increase it, as well as to gratify my curiosity, made me one day look through it. The clouds appeared to me to be land, which disappeared as they passed along. This heightened my wonder; and I was now more persuaded than ever, that I was in another world, and that every thing about me was magic. At last, we came in sight of the island of Barbados, at which the whites on board gave a great shout, and made many signs of joy to us. We did not know what to think of this; but as the vessel drew nearer, we plainly saw the harbor, and other ships of different kinds and sizes, and we soon anchored amongst them, off Bridgetown.³ Many merchants and planters now came on board, though it was in the evening. They put us in separate parcels,⁴ and examined us attentively. They also made us jump,

3. Bridgetown: The capital of Barbados.

4. parcels (pär' sölz) *n.*: Groups.

and pointed to the land, signifying we were to go there. We thought by this, we should be eaten by these ugly men, as they appeared to us; and, when soon after we were all put down under the deck again, there was much dread and trembling among us, and nothing but bitter cries to be heard all the night from these apprehensions, insomuch, that at last the white people got some old slaves from the land to pacify us. They told us we were not to be eaten, but to work, and were soon to go on land, where we should see many of our country people. This report eased us much. And sure enough, soon after we were landed, there came to us Africans of all languages.

We were conducted immediately to the merchant's yard, where we were all pent up together, like so many sheep in a fold, without regard to sex or age. . . . We were not many days in the merchant's custody, before we were sold after their usual manner, which is this: On a signal given (as the beat of a drum), the buyers rush at once into the yard where the slaves are confined, and make choice of that parcel they like best. . . .

RESPONDING TO THE SELECTION

Your Response

1. What do you find most disturbing about this selection? Explain.
2. Based on his narrative, what is your impression of Equiano?

Interpreting

3. Why does Equiano blame the illness aboard the ship on the "improvident avarice" of the traders?
4. How can you tell that Equiano has a great zest for life despite his assertion that he wanted to die? Provide examples from the selection.

Applying

5. Equiano graphically describes the effects of the slave trade on the enslaved. How do you think the slave traders were affected by their business activities? Explain.

ANALYZING LITERATURE

Slave Narrative

A **slave narrative** is an autobiographical account of life as a slave. In describing significant events in his or her life, the writer often documents the horrors of slavery. This selection from Equiano's narrative provides a sobering description of the middle passage and the operation of the slave trade.

1. Cite two examples of the slave traders' cruelty to the slaves.
2. Cite two examples that show the traders' concern for the slaves' well-being.
3. What might have motivated the traders' behavior toward their human cargo? Explain.