

INFORMATIONAL READING COMPREHENSION:

Excerpt
from

Narrative of the Life of Frederick Douglass, an American Slave

Frederick Douglass (1818–1895) was a celebrated abolitionist, writer, and orator. His 1845 memoir, Narrative of the Life of Frederick Douglass, an American Slave, was not simply a memoir but also a work of resistance against the institution of slavery in America. In this excerpt, Douglass reflects on the emotional significance of the songs that his fellow enslaved people would sing.



The slaves...would make the dense old woods, for miles around, **reverberate** with their wild songs, revealing at once the highest joy and the deepest sadness. They would compose and sing as they went along, consulting neither time nor tune. The thought that came up, came out—if not in the word, in the sound—and as frequently in the one as in the other. They would sometimes sing the most pathetic sentiment in the most **rapturous** tone, and the most rapturous sentiment in the most pathetic tone....

I have sometimes thought that the mere hearing of those songs would do more to impress some minds with the horrible character of slavery, than the reading of whole volumes of philosophy on the subject could do.

...They told a tale of woe which was then altogether beyond my feeble comprehension; they were tones loud, long, and deep; they breathed the prayer and complaint of souls **boiling over** with the bitterest anguish. Every tone was a testimony against slavery and a prayer to God for **deliverance** from chains. The hearing of those wild notes always depressed my spirit and filled me with ineffable sadness. I have frequently found myself

in tears while hearing them. The mere recurrence to those songs, even now, **afflicts** me; and while I am writing these lines, an expression of feeling has already found its way down my cheek. To those songs I trace my first glimmering conception of the dehumanizing character of slavery. I can never get rid of that conception. Those songs still follow me, to deepen my hatred of slavery and quicken my sympathies for my brethren in bonds....

I have often been utterly astonished, since I came to the north, to find persons who could speak of the singing, among slaves, as evidence of their contentment and happiness. It is impossible to conceive of a greater mistake. Slaves sing most when they are most unhappy. The songs of the slave represent the sorrows of his heart; and he is relieved by them, only as an aching heart is relieved by its tears. At least, such is my experience. I have often sung to drown my sorrow, but seldom to express my happiness. Crying for joy and singing for joy were alike uncommon to me while in the jaws of slavery. The singing of a man cast away upon a desolate island might be as appropriately considered as evidence of contentment and happiness, as the singing of a slave; the songs of the one and of the other are prompted by the same emotion.

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Answer the following questions about the passage.

- 1. Use context clues to help you define the following terms from the passage.

reverberate	
rapturous	
deliverance	
afflicts	

- 2. Which quote from the text best represents the main idea of the passage?
 - a. "They would compose and sing as they went along, consulting neither time nor tune."
 - b. "The hearing of those wild notes always depressed my spirit and filled me with ineffable sadness."
 - c. "Slaves sing most when they are most unhappy. The songs of the slave represent the sorrows of his heart."
 - d. "Crying for joy, and singing for joy, were alike uncommon to me while in the jaws of slavery."
- 3. What does the phrase *boiling over* indicate about the songs of the people enslaved?
 - a. The songs expressed joy as well as sorrow.
 - b. The songs released deeply suppressed emotions.
 - c. The songs described what it was like to work all day in the kitchen.
 - d. The songs were a way of getting messages to those who heard them.

- 4a. What opposing viewpoint does Douglass address in the text?

- 4b. What explanation does Douglass give to respond to that conflicting viewpoint? What analogy does he use to illustrate his point?

- 5. What is the significance of the songs to Douglass himself? Cite evidence from the text to support your answer.

- 6. How might historians use the content in this excerpt to learn about the past? Select the two most likely choices.

- a. as a precise chronology of historical events
- b. as information about what kinds of work enslaved people did
- c. as a first-person account of the songs sung by enslaved people
- d. as examples of Frederick Douglass's thoughts and feelings about slavery