

The Life of Olaudah Equiano

MEET OLAUDAH EQUIANO

The life of Olaudah Equiano (ō lau' də e kwē ā' nō) was a mixture of tragedy, struggle, and great achievement. The son of an Ibo chieftain, Equiano was born in Essaka, a village in what is now Nigeria. His village was a considerable distance from the coast, and as a child Equiano had never heard of the sea or of the people who lived beyond it. When he was eleven, he had a terrifying introduction to both when he and his sister were kidnapped by slave traders. They were separated, and Equiano was sold to Europeans and packed onto a slave ship headed for the Caribbean island of Barbados. The horrors Equiano witnessed on the ship haunted him for the rest of his life.

“ . . . I might say my sufferings were great; but when I compare my lot with that of most of my countrymen, I regard myself as a particular favorite of heaven. . . . ”

—Olaudah Equiano

In the years after being captured, Equiano spent time in Virginia and England, where he was owned by an officer of the British Royal Navy. Equiano served in the British navy with this officer from 1758 to 1762, during the French and Indian War. Over the years, the officer baptized him, renamed him Gustavus Vassa, and taught him seafaring skills as well as how to read and write. These skills would serve Equiano well after the officer sold him to a merchant in the West Indies in 1763.

Sailor and Trader As a slave to the merchant, Equiano worked on trading ships between the West Indies and mainland American colonies and also did some trading on the side for which he was

paid. In 1766, at the age of 21, he used money he had made to buy his freedom. He spent the next several years working on ships, traveling to Turkey, Italy, and Jamaica.

While sailing, Equiano realized that life as a free man was in many respects no easier than his life as a slave had been. Freed slaves in the British colonies had no legal rights and were often treated miserably. Equiano described his disappointment with the so-called freedom he was allowed to enjoy. Soon after he was freed, he wrote, “Hitherto I had thought only slavery dreadful; but the state of the free negro appeared to me now equally so at least, and in some respects even worse.”

Freedom Fighter In 1776 Equiano settled in England to campaign against slavery. He helped organize several antislavery organizations in London and, along with other abolitionists, petitioned the British parliament to end the slave trade. Equiano was also part of the Committee for Relief of the Black Poor in London and a leader in the Sierra Leone recolonization project, a failed attempt to bring former slaves back to Africa. His greatest contribution to the abolitionist cause, however, was his 1789 autobiography, *The Interesting Narrative of the Life of Olaudah Equiano, or Gustavus Vassa, the African*. It was one of the first books published by a former slave and became one of the most influential slave narratives. Its graphic and powerful descriptions of the inhumanity Equiano and other slaves suffered helped further the abolitionist cause throughout Europe and the United States.

Olaudah Equiano was born in 1745 and died in 1797.

LiteratureOnline Author Search For more about Olaudah Equiano, go to www.glencoe.com.

LITERATURE PREVIEW

Connecting to the Autobiography

Imagine how you would feel if a group of people thought they had the right to deprive you of your freedom. In this excerpt from his narrative, Olaudah Equiano details the horrors he experienced as a slave. As you read, think about the following questions:

- How would you feel if someone tried to take away your freedom?
- What is a cause you care deeply about?

Building Background

From the 1500s to the 1800s, approximately ten million Africans suffered miserable treatment on the forced journey from their homes to enslavement in the Western Hemisphere. The most arduous portion of the journey, known as the Middle Passage, was a two-month voyage from West Africa to the West Indies. Some two million Africans died from malnutrition, disease, suffocation, beatings, and despair during the journey.

Setting Purposes for Reading

Big Idea Life in the New World

As you read, notice what the selection reveals about the suffering endured by many of the Africans who helped build the United States.

Literary Element The Slave Narrative

A **slave narrative** is an autobiographical account of a formerly enslaved person's life. Slave narratives helped abolitionists expose slavery's cruelty. As you read, evaluate Equiano's success in making readers aware of slavery's injustice.

- See Literary Terms Handbook, p. R16–R17.

Literatureonline Interactive Literary Elements Handbook To review or learn more about the literary elements, go to www.glencoe.com.

OBJECTIVES

In studying this selection, you will focus on the following:

- responding personally, critically, and analytically to texts

READING PREVIEW

Reading Strategy Responding

Responding is explaining what you think about a selection and how it affects you. Responding personally includes describing what you like, dislike, or find interesting in a selection and how these aspects of the work relate to your own life. More analytical responses deal with giving your opinion on aspects such as the behavior of the characters or stylistic techniques used by the author. As you read, consider the thoughts and feelings that the selection evokes and what factors contribute to your response.

Reading Tip: Taking Notes As you read the selection, jot down quick notes about the passages you think are especially moving or intense.

Vocabulary

apprehension (ap' ri hen' shən) *n.* fear of what may happen in the future; anxiety; p. 70 *Sam thought of his upcoming speech with apprehension.*

copious (kō' pē əs) *adj.* large in quantity; plentiful; p. 70 *Copious amounts of food were served at the banquet.*

gratify (grat' ə fī') *v.* to satisfy or indulge; p. 71 *Our walks outside gratify my craving for sunlight.*

clamor (klam' ə) *n.* confused, insistent shouting; p. 72 *The clamor woke Kim from her sleep.*

scruple (skrōō' pəl) *n.* moral principle that restrains action; p. 72 *Without a scruple, Nina stole the bike.*

Vocabulary Tip: Antonyms Antonyms are words that have opposite or nearly opposite meanings. For example, *joyful* and *mournful* are antonyms. Note that antonyms are always the same part of speech.

- supporting and defending personal responses with details from the text

from
**The Life of
Olaudah Equiano**



Olaudah Equiano

The first object which saluted¹ 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, (which was very different from any I had ever heard) united to confirm me in this belief. Indeed, such were the horrors of my views and fears at the moment, that, if ten thousand worlds had been my own, I would have freely parted with them all to have exchanged my condition with that of the meanest² slave in my own country. When I looked round the ship too, and saw a large furnace of copper boiling, and a multitude of black people of every description chained together, every one of their countenances³ 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. When I recovered a little, I found some black people about me, who I believed

were some of those who had brought me on board, and had been receiving their pay; they talked to me in order to cheer me, but all in vain.⁴ I asked them if we were not to be eaten by those white men with horrible looks, red faces, and long hair. They told me I was not: and one of the crew brought me a small portion of spirituous liquor in a wine glass, but, being afraid of him, I would not take it out of his hand. One of the blacks, therefore, took it from him and gave it to me, and I took a little down my palate,⁵ which, instead of reviving me, as they thought it would, threw me into the greatest consternation⁶ at the strange feeling it produced, having never tasted any such liquor before. 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, which I now considered as friendly; and I even wished for my former slavery⁷ 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 suffered⁸ 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

1. Here, *saluted* means "became noticeable to" or "struck."

2. Here, *meanest* means "of the lowest social position or rank."

3. *Countenance* means "face" or "facial expressions."

Literary Element **Slave Narrative** Why might Equiano have included these details?

Reading Strategy **Responding** What about this passage makes it striking or memorable?

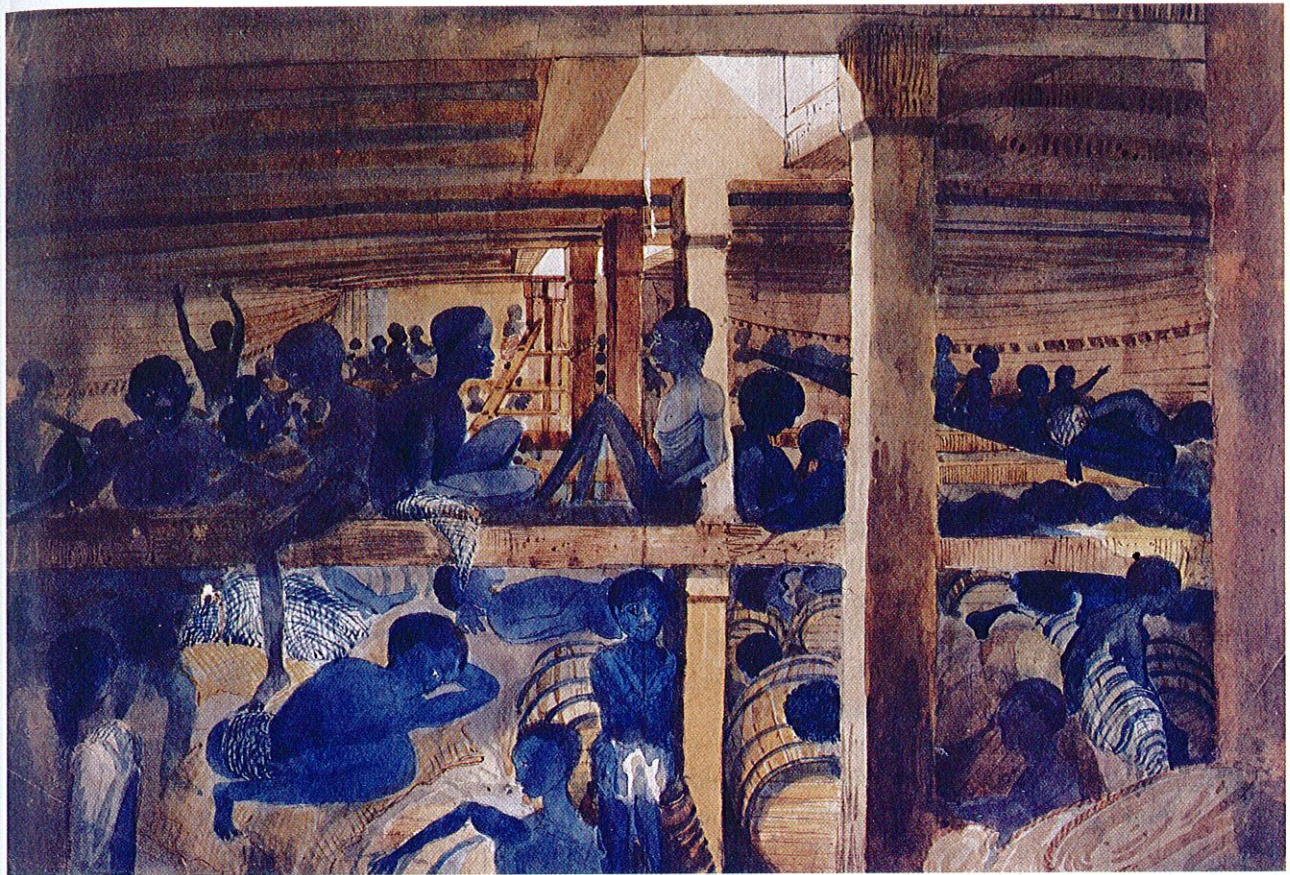
4. Something done *in vain* is done without effect or success.

5. The *palate*, here, is the mouth and throat.

6. *Consternation* is paralyzing dismay or fear.

7. Equiano refers to a brief period of time he spent as a slave to the Africans who kidnapped him and eventually sold him. In his experience, slavery in Africa was far less brutal than slavery in the New World.

8. Here, *suffered* means "allowed."



The Slavedeck of the Albaroz, Prize to the H.M.S. Albatross, 1846. Francis Meynell. Watercolor. National Maritime Museum, London.

Viewing the Art: How do you think this image compares with Olaudah Equiano's description of conditions in the hold of a slave ship?

together, I became so sick and low that I was not able to eat, nor had I the least desire to taste any thing. I now wished for the last friend, death, to relieve me; but soon, to my grief, two of the white men offered me eatables; and, on my refusing to eat, one of them held me fast by the hands, and laid me across, I think the windlass,⁹ and tied my feet, while the other flogged me severely. I had never experienced any thing of this kind before, and although not being used to the water, I naturally feared that element the first time I saw it, yet, nevertheless, could I have got over the nettings,¹⁰ I

9. A *windlass* is a type of crank with a handle. It is used to raise or lower a heavy object such as an anchor.

10. *Nettings* were networks of small ropes on the sides of a ship. On slave ships, nettings were used to prevent captives from jumping overboard.

Literary Element **Slave Narrative** How does the point of view affect the message of this selection?

would have jumped over the side, but I could not; and besides, the crew used to watch us very closely who were not chained down to the decks, lest we should leap into the water; and I have seen some of these poor African prisoners most severely cut, for attempting to do so, and hourly whipped for not eating. This indeed was often the case with myself. In a little time after, amongst the poor chained men, I found some of my own nation, which in a small degree gave ease to my mind. I inquired of these what was to be done with us? They gave me to understand, we were to be carried to these white people's country to work for them. I then was a little revived, and thought, if it were no worse than working, my situation was not so desperate; but still I feared I should be put to death, the white people looked and acted, as I thought, in so savage a manner; for I had never

Big Idea **Life in the New World** What kind of mood does Equiano create here?

seen among any people such instances of brutal cruelty; and this not only shown towards us blacks, but also to some of the whites themselves. One white man in particular I saw, when we were permitted to be on deck, flogged so unmercifully with a large rope near the foremast, that he died in consequence of it; and they tossed him over the side as they would have done a brute. This made me fear these people the more; and I expected nothing less than to be treated in the same manner. I could not help expressing my fears and **apprehensions** to some of my countrymen; I asked them if these people had no country, but lived in this hollow place? (the ship) they told me they did not, but came from a distant one. "Then," said I, "how comes it in all our country we never heard of them?" They told me because they lived so very far off. I then asked where were their women? had they any like themselves? I was told they had. "And why," said I, "do we not see them?" They answered, because they were left behind. I asked how the vessel could go? they told me they could not tell; but that there was cloth put upon the masts by the help of the ropes I saw, and then the vessel went on; and the white men had some spell or magic they put in the water when they liked, in order to stop the vessel. I was exceedingly amazed at this account, and really thought they were spirits. I therefore wished much to be from amongst them, for I expected they would sacrifice me; but my wishes were vain—for we were so quartered that it was impossible for any of us to make our escape.

While we stayed on the coast I was mostly on deck; and one day, to my great astonishment, I saw one of these vessels coming in with the sails up. As soon as the whites saw it, they gave a great shout, at which we were amazed; and the more so, as the vessel appeared larger by approaching nearer. At last, she came to an anchor in my sight, and when the anchor was let go, I and my countrymen who saw it, were lost in astonishment to observe the vessel stop—and

were now convinced it was done by magic. Soon after this the other ship got her boats out, and they came on board of us, and the people of both ships seemed very glad to see each other. Several of the strangers also shook hands with us black people, and made motions with their hands, signifying I suppose, we were to go to their country, but we did not understand them.

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.¹¹ 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 improvident¹² avarice,¹³ as I may call it, of their purchasers. This wretched situation was again aggravated by the galling¹⁴ of the chains, now became insupportable; and the filth of the necessary tubs,¹⁵ into which the children often fell, and were almost suffocated. The shrieks of the women, and the groans of the dying, rendered¹⁶ the whole a scene of horror

Big Idea **Life in the New World** Why might Equiano have included a description of this event?

Vocabulary

apprehensions (ap' ri hen' shən) n. fears of what may happen in the future; anxieties

11. *Pestilential* means "poisonous" or "likely to cause disease or death."
12. *Improvident* means "lacking foresight" or "not providing for the future."
13. *Avarice* is greed.
14. *Galling* is the chafing or rubbing that causes irritation of the skin.
15. *Necessary tubs* are containers for bodily waste.
16. *Render* means "to cause to be" or "to make."

Reading Strategy **Responding** What is significant about Equiano's use of the word *cargo* here?

Vocabulary

copious (kō' pē əs) adj. large in quantity; plentiful



The Slave Ship, 1840. Joseph Mallord William Turner. Oil on canvas. Museum of Fine Arts, Boston.

Viewing the Art: What does this painting tell you about the voyages of slave ships in Equiano's time?

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.¹⁷ 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 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,

17. Fetters are leg irons.

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; I had often with 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

Reading Strategy **Responding** How does this passage illustrate the illogical nature of punishments on the ship?

Vocabulary

gratify (grat' ə fī') *v.* to satisfy or indulge

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 Barbadoes, 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.¹⁸ Many merchants and planters now came on board, though it was in the evening. They put us in separate parcels,¹⁹ and examined us attentively. They also made us jump, 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. As every object was new to me, every thing I saw filled me with surprise. What struck me first, was, that the houses were built with bricks and stories, and in every other respect different from those I had seen in Africa; but I was still more astonished on seeing people on horseback. I did not know what this could mean; and, indeed, I thought these people were full of nothing but magical arts. While I was in this astonishment, one of my fellow-prisoners spoke to a countryman of his, about the horses, who said they were the same kind they had in their country. I understood them, though they were from a distant part of Africa; and I thought it odd I had not seen any horses there; but afterwards, when I came to converse with different Africans, I found

they had many horses amongst them, and much larger than those I then saw.

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. The noise and **clamor** with which this is attended, and the eagerness visible in the countenances of the buyers, serve not a little to increase the apprehension of terrified Africans, who may well be supposed to consider them as the ministers of that destruction to which they think themselves devoted. In this manner, without **scruple**, are relations and friends separated, most of them never to see each other again. I remember, in the vessel in which I was brought over, in the men's apartment, there were several brothers, who, in the sale, were sold in different lots; and it was very moving on this occasion, to see and hear their cries at parting. O, ye nominal²⁰ Christians! might not an African ask you—Learned you this from your God, who says unto you, Do unto all men as you would men should do unto you?²¹ Is it not enough that we are torn from our country and friends, to toil for your luxury and lust of gain? Must every tender feeling be likewise sacrificed to your avarice? Are the dearest friends and relations, now rendered more dear by their separation from their kindred, still to be parted from each other, and thus prevented from cheering the gloom of slavery, with the small comfort of being together, and mingling their sufferings and sorrows? Why are parents to lose their children, brothers their sisters, or husbands their wives? Surely, this is a new refinement in cruelty, which, while it has no advantage to atone²² for it, thus aggravates distress, and adds fresh horrors even to the wretchedness of slavery. ❧

18. *Bridgetown* is the capital of Barbados.

19. Here, *parcels* means "groups."

Reading Strategy **Responding** Why might Equiano have chosen to describe the slaves as sheep?

20. *Nominal* means "in name only."

21. "Therefore all things whatsoever ye would that men should do to you, do ye even so to them." (Matthew 7:12)

22. *Atone* means "to make amends" or "to compensate for."

Literary Element **Slave Narrative** How is this section different from the rest of the work? Why does Equiano make this change?

Vocabulary

clamor (klam' ər) n. confused, insistent shouting
scruple (skrōō' pəl) n. moral principle that restrains action

RESPONDING AND THINKING CRITICALLY

Respond

1. What was your reaction to the description of life on a slave ship?

Recall and Interpret

2. (a)What does Equiano fear will happen to him when he is taken aboard the ship? (b)Why might he be so afraid?
3. (a)In spite of his fear, Equiano displays great curiosity. Relate an incident that reveals this curiosity. (b)What might the incident reveal about his character?
4. (a)What phrases does Equiano use to describe his feelings about slavery's separation of loved ones? (b)Why does he regard it as he does?

Analyze and Evaluate

5. The **tone** of a work is the attitude the author conveys toward his or her subject matter through elements

such as word choice. (a)Review the last paragraph. How does Equiano's tone shift here from what came before? (b)Why does it shift? Explain how this shift in tone affected you.

6. Equiano's book was a best seller in its time. (a)Why do you think his story was so successful at capturing the public's interest? (b)Why would his story have been useful to the cause of abolition?

Connect

7. **Big Idea** **Life in the New World** How has reading this work affected your attitudes about personal freedom, human nature, or our nation's history of enslavement of Africans? Explain, using details from the selection.

LITERARY ANALYSIS

Literary Element **The Slave Narrative**

Equiano's account created a hunger for more information about slaves' lives. In the years that followed, many African Americans published their own slave narratives. Some authors expressed their opposition to slavery through direct statements of opinion. Why might Equiano's narrative have been more successful at reaching some people than an opinion piece? Include details from the narrative in your answer.

Internet Connection

Firsthand Accounts Go to the Library of Congress's home page at www.loc.gov. Search for the "African American History and Culture" page. Download and print a story or a photograph you find interesting and share it with your class.

Literature Online Web Activities For eFlashcards, Selection Quick Checks, and other Web activities, go to www.glencoe.com.

READING AND VOCABULARY

Reading Strategy **Responding**

Responding to literature is reacting in a personal way to what you read. To which aspects of slavery did you react most strongly? Explain.

Vocabulary Practice

Practice with Antonyms Choose the best antonym for each vocabulary word listed below.

1. **apprehension**
 - a. nervousness
 - b. fearlessness
 - c. restlessness
 - d. exhaustion
2. **copious**
 - a. inadequate
 - b. ample
 - c. sufficient
 - d. plentiful
3. **gratify**
 - a. satisfy
 - b. suggest
 - c. neglect
 - d. indulge
4. **clamor**
 - a. silence
 - b. outcry
 - c. tumult
 - d. insistence