

Freedom Task

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Narrative of the Life of Frederick Douglass: an American Slave

By Douglass, Frederick. Boston: Anti-Slavery Office, 1845.

I was now about twelve years old, and the thought of being a slave for life began to bear heavily upon my heart. Just about this time, I got hold of a book "The Columbian Orator." Every opportunity I got, I used to read this book. Among much of its interesting contents, I found a conversation between a master and his slave. The slave was represented as having run away from the master three times, and the conversation took place when the slave was retaken the third time.

In this conversation, the whole argument on behalf of slavery is discussed. The slave had some impressive responses - which had the desired though unexpected effect; for the conversation resulted in the master voluntarily emancipating, or freeing, the slave. These words gave voice to thoughts of my own soul, which had frequently flashed through my mind, but died away because I did not speak them. The moral which I gained from what I read was the power of truth over the conscience of even a slaveholder.

What I read was a bold denunciation of slavery, and a powerful vindication, or justification, of human rights. The reading of these documents enabled me to speak my thoughts, and to meet the arguments brought forward to sustain slavery. However, while they relieved me of one difficulty, they brought on another even more painful than the one of which I was relieved. The more I read, the more I was led to abhor and detest my enslavers. I could regard them in no other light than a band of successful robbers, who had left their homes, and gone to Africa, and stolen us from our homes, and in a strange land reduced us to slavery. I loathed them as being the meanest as well as the most wicked of men. As I read and contemplated the subject, behold! that very discontentment which people had predicted would follow my learning to read had already come. Reading opened doors to ideas, and these ideas began to torment and sting my soul to unutterable anguish.

As I writhed under it, 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. In moments of agony, I envied my fellow-slaves for their stupidity. I have often wished myself a beast. I preferred the condition of the meanest reptile to my own. Anything, no matter what, to get rid of my new understandings! It was this everlasting thinking of my condition that tormented me. There was no getting rid of it. It was pressed upon me by every object within sight or hearing, animate or inanimate. The silver trumpet of freedom had roused my soul to eternal wakefulness. Freedom now appeared to disappear, no more forever. It was heard in every sound, and seen in everything. It was ever present to torment me with a sense of my wretched condition. I saw nothing without seeing it, I heard nothing without hearing it, and felt nothing without feeling it. It looked from every star, it smiled in every calm, breathed in every wind, and moved in every storm.

In Liberty and Slavery

By George Moses Horton

Alas! and am I born for this,
To wear this slavish chain?
Deprived of all created bliss*,
Through hardship, toil, and pain!

How long have I in bondage lain,
And languished to be free!
Alas! and must I still complain--
Deprived of liberty.

Oh, Heaven! and is there no relief
This side the silent grave--
To soothe the pain--to quell the grief
And anguish of a slave?

Come, Liberty, thou cheerful sound,
Roll through my ravished ears!
Come, let my grief in joys be drowned,
And drive away my fears.

Say unto foul oppression, Cease*:
Ye tyrants rage no more,
And let the joyful trump of peace,
Now bid the vassal soar.

Soar on the pinions of that dove
Which long has cooed for thee,
And breathed her notes from Afric's grove,
The sound of Liberty.

Oh, Liberty! thou golden prize,
So often sought by blood--
We crave thy sacred sun to rise,
The gift of nature's God.

**bliss = happiness*

**cease=stop*

Prompt: The Constitution suggested that everyone has the right to "life, liberty and the pursuit of happiness". Yet, these rights were denied to many, and even today, not everyone in the USA enjoys equal protection of these. After reading George Moses Horton's poem, "On Liberty and Slavery" and the excerpt from Frederick Douglass' autobiography, write an essay that explains how the texts portray the timeless human longing for freedom or "liberty". Be sure to cite evidence from both sources.