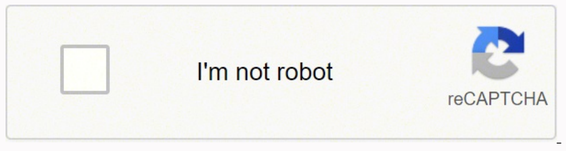

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Narrative of the life of frederick douglass summary pdf

Douglass's Narrative is like a highway map, showing us the road from slavery to freedom. At the beginning of the book, Douglass is a slave in both body and mind. When the book ends, he gets both his legal freedom and frees his mind. And if the book is like a highway map, then the mile markers are a series of "epiphanies," or moments of realization, that he has along the way. These events are turning points in Douglass's life, but they also help show how he got there, and what he had to learn along the way.The first epiphany is Douglass's realization about what slavery is. He's born a slave on Colonel Lloyd's plantation, but as a child he's mostly spared the worst kinds of suffering. He sees his Aunt Hester get beaten, for example, but he's too young to be whipped himself. Instead, he suffers without really knowing it. He never knows his father and only meets his mother a handful of times before she dies – and then, he isn't allowed to go to her funeral. But he doesn't really know for a long time that this isn't normal. So his first turning point is sort of simplistic, but also important: realizing that he is a slave and all that that entails.The second stage of his life begins when the seven-year-old Douglass is sent to work for a new set of masters in Baltimore. Baltimore is a whole new world for him, with a lot of new experiences, but the most important thing he learns there is the power of education. He has this second epiphany when his master's wife starts teaching him to read, which gets her in big trouble with her husband. Douglass finds ways of educating himself, but the real lesson is that slavery exists not because the masters are better than their slaves, but because they keep their slaves ignorant. Douglass starts to suspect that if slaves managed to educate themselves, it would be impossible to stop them from becoming free.As Douglass becomes a young man, he starts fighting to actually be free. When he talks back to his master, his master sends him to work for a notorious "slave breaker," Covey, who tries to destroy Douglass's spirit. For a while it works, and Douglass is reduced to the state of mind of an animal. This is the lowest point in his life. His third epiphany happens, however, when he decides that he'd rather die than be treated like a slave anymore. So the next time Covey tries to whip him, he stands up to him, and after a two-hour fight, Covey leaves him alone. Douglass vows never to be whipped again. And he never is.After this, Douglass bounces from master to master, but he's always on the lookout for a way to escape to freedom. And after one failed attempt, he finally succeeds and makes his way first to New York, then to Massachusetts. But even after he's free, he discovers that his journey isn't over. This is his final epiphany: even after he acquires his own freedom, he realizes he can't rest until all slavery is abolished. He not only becomes an abolitionist activist himself; he writes the narrative of his life to teach others, white and Black, how to follow in his footsteps. I received the tidings of [my mother's] death with much the same emotions I should have probably felt at the death of a stranger. See Important Quotations Explained Douglass was born in Talbot County, Maryland, though he does not know the year, as most slaves are not allowed to know their ages. Douglass remembers being unhappy and confused that white children knew their ages, but he was not allowed even to ask his own. He estimates, based on an overheard comment from his master, that he was born in or around 1818. Douglass's mother is Harriet Bailey, daughter of Isaac and Betsey Bailey. Douglass is separated from his mother soon after birth—a common practice among slave owners. Douglass assumes that this custom is intended to break the natural bond of affection between mother and child. He recalls that he only saw his mother on the rare occasions when she could walk twelve miles after dark to lie next to him at night. Harriet dies when Douglass is about seven. He is told about it afterward and is hardly affected by the news. Douglass knows only that his father is a white man, though many people say that his master is his father. He explains that slaveholders often impregnate their female slaves. A law ensures that mixed-race children become slaves like their mothers. Thus slaveholders actually profit from this practice of rape, as it increases the number of slaves they own. Douglass explains that such mixed-race slaves have a worse lot than other slaves, as the slaveholder's wife, insulted by their existence, ensures that they either suffer constantly or are sold off. Douglass considers that the existence of such a large population of mixed-race slaves contradicts arguments that justify American slavery through the supposed inferiority of the African race. Douglass's first master is Captain Anthony. The Captain's overseer, Mr. Plummer, is a drunk and a cruel man who carries a whip and cudgel with him and often uses them on slaves. The Captain himself is cruel as well. Douglass recalls the Captain frequently whipping Douglass's Aunt Hester. Douglass recalls feeling like both a witness to and a participant in the abuse the first time he ever saw it. He remembers this moment as his introduction into the hellish world of slavery. Douglass cannot, even now, describe what he felt while watching Aunt Hester's whipping. Douglass recalls a particularly violent episode of the Captain whipping Aunt Hester. The Captain calls for Hester at night and finds that she has gone out with a slave named Ned, against the Captain's orders. Douglass implies that the Captain has a particular sexual interest in Hester, who is quite beautiful. The Captain brings Hester home, strips her to the waist, ties her, and whips her until her blood drips on the floor. Young Douglass is so terrified by the scene that he hides in a closet, hoping he will not be whipped next. Summary: Chapter II Douglass's master, Captain Anthony, has two sons, Andrew and Richard, and a daughter, Lucretia, who is married to Captain Thomas Auld. They all live together in one house on a central plantation owned by Colonel Lloyd. Colonel Lloyd employs Captain Anthony as superintendent, meaning that Anthony supervises all of Lloyd's overseers. Lloyd's plantations raise tobacco, corn, and wheat. Captain Anthony and his son-in-law, Captain Auld, take the goods by ship to sell in Baltimore. Lloyd owns about three to four hundred slaves in total. All slaves report to Lloyd's central plantation for their monthly allowances of pork or fish and corn meal. Slaves receive one set of linen clothing for the year. Adult slaves receive one blanket, but no bed. The floor is uncomfortable, but the slaves are so exhausted from work that they hardly notice. The overseer of Captain Anthony's farm is Mr. Severe—an appropriate name for such a cruel man. After Severe dies, Mr. Hopkins replaces him as overseer. Hopkins is less cruel and profane than Severe and is considered a fair overseer. All of Colonel Lloyd's slaves refer to the central plantation, on which Douglass grew up, as the "Great House Farm" because it resembles a small village. Slaves from other plantations feel privileged to be sent to the Great House Farm on an errand. Douglass likens these slaves to state representatives proud to serve in the American Congress. Slaves on their way to the Great House Farm usually sing wild, spontaneous songs that sound both joyful and sad. Douglass explains that he did not know the underlying meaning of these songs while he was a slave, but now understands that the songs are a bitter complaint about slavery. Douglass is now often moved to tears hearing them, and it was while listening to the songs that he first begins to understand the evil of slavery. Northerners who believe that the slaves are singing out of happiness, he says, are misinformed. I did not, when a slave, understand the deep meaning of those rude and apparently incoherent songs. . . . See Important Quotations Explained Analysis: Chapters I–II The first paragraph of Douglass's Narrative demonstrates the double purpose of the work as both a personal account and a public argument. Douglass introduces the reader to his own circumstances—his birthplace and the fact that he does not know his own age. He then generalizes from his own experience, explaining that almost no slaves know their true ages. Next, Douglass takes this detail of his experience and analyzes it. He points out that slave owners deliberately keep their slaves ignorant, and that this is a tactic whites use to gain power over slaves. This is the recurrent structure Douglass uses in his Narrative: he presents his personal experience as a typical slave experience, and then usually makes an analytical point about the experience and what it tells us about how slavery works and why it is wrong. Read more about how slaveholders perpetuated slavery by keeping their slaves ignorant. The main tactic of Douglass's antislavery argument in the Narrative is to analyze the institution of slavery and show how and why it works. This analysis demystifies slavery and reveals its brutality and wrongness. To many people who were not abolitionists, slavery appeared an entirely natural practice. To them, religious and economic arguments had demonstrated that blacks were inherently inferior to whites and belonged as an enslaved labor force. Douglass makes a clear case that slavery is sustained not through the natural superiority of whites, but through many concrete and contrived strategies of gaining and holding power over blacks. For example, Douglass shows how slave owners make slaves vulnerable by taking them from their mothers. Blacks are not subhuman to begin with, but are dehumanized only by such cruel practices of slavery. Read an important quote about Douglass's reaction to the death of his mother. Douglass also intends to use the Narrative to expose the even more evil underside of slavery. He writes to educate white audiences about what really goes on at slave plantations, including more cruel and depraved behaviors. For example, he devotes several paragraphs in Chapter I to a discussion about white slave owners impregnating their slaves. Douglass's narrative technique here is not sensationalist. He does not seek to overly shock or titillate his readers. He does not, for example, dwell on the implied rapes of black women, but rather upon the practical fate of their children. He seeks instead to present a practice and explain how it degrades both slaves and slave owners. Douglass often returns to this theme, depicting slavery as dehumanizing to both slaveholders and slaves. Read more about slavery's damaging effect on slaveholders. Douglass associates his witnessing of Captain Anthony whipping Aunt Hester with his mental initiation into the horror of slavery. Douglass describes the effect of this scene upon his young self and uses this scene to help explain how slavery works. Part of the pain for Douglass was not simply watching the whipping, but being unable to stop it. He presents slavery as not only a type of physical control, but also a type of mental control. Slaves become virtual participants in brutality because they are made to fear for their own safety too much to stop it. Douglass highlights these psychologically damaging effects of slavery as much as physical effects such as lash wounds. The scene of Captain Anthony stripping and whipping Aunt Hester is the first of several scenes that feature the abuse of women. Douglass often uses scenes of the abuse of female slaves to depict the brutality of slave owners. Together, these images of whipped or beaten female bodies constitute a motif in Douglass's Narrative. The motif serves as an emotionally affecting, rather than logic-based, argument about the evils of slavery. Additionally, Douglass's use of women in his imagery serves to safely distance Douglass himself from the dehumanized and demeaned body of the slave. Read more about the victimization of female slaves as a motif. Douglass likewise maintains distance between himself and slavery in his commentary on slave songs. He explains that he did not fully understand the meaning of the songs when he himself was a slave, but can now recognize and interpret them as laments. Douglass's voice in the Narrative is authoritative, and this authority comes from his standing as someone who has escaped mental and physical slavery and embraced education and articulation. Douglass's position as mediator between slaves and the Northern white reading audience rests on his doubleness of self. He must be both the demeaned self who experienced slavery and the liberated, educated self who can interpret the institution of slavery. This doubleness or fracturing of self is not without consequences, though. In his analysis of the slave songs, Douglass exhibits a sense of nostalgia for when he was part of the "circle" of singing slaves. Read an important quote about Douglass's perspective on slave songs.

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