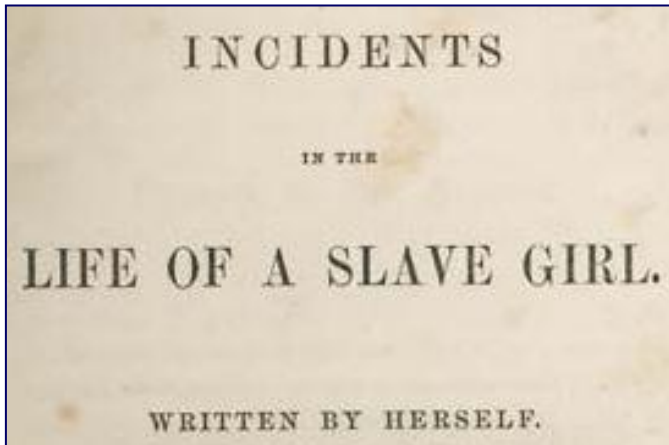


Class in the Slave Narrative

An Online Professional Development Seminar



William L. Andrews

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AMERICA *in* CLASS[®]

from the National Humanities Center

GOALS

- To learn how a class-based analysis of slave narratives can enrich our understanding of their meaning and complexity.
- To learn how class helps to illuminate the diversity of experience, especially work and social status, of the enslaved, as reflected in slave narratives.

FROM THE FORUM

- In the slave narrative how does the theme of class relate to the theme of identity, which seems to be the predominant concern of the genre?
- How sharp were class distinctions among the enslaved on plantations? Did they extend beyond the field hand/house servant distinction?



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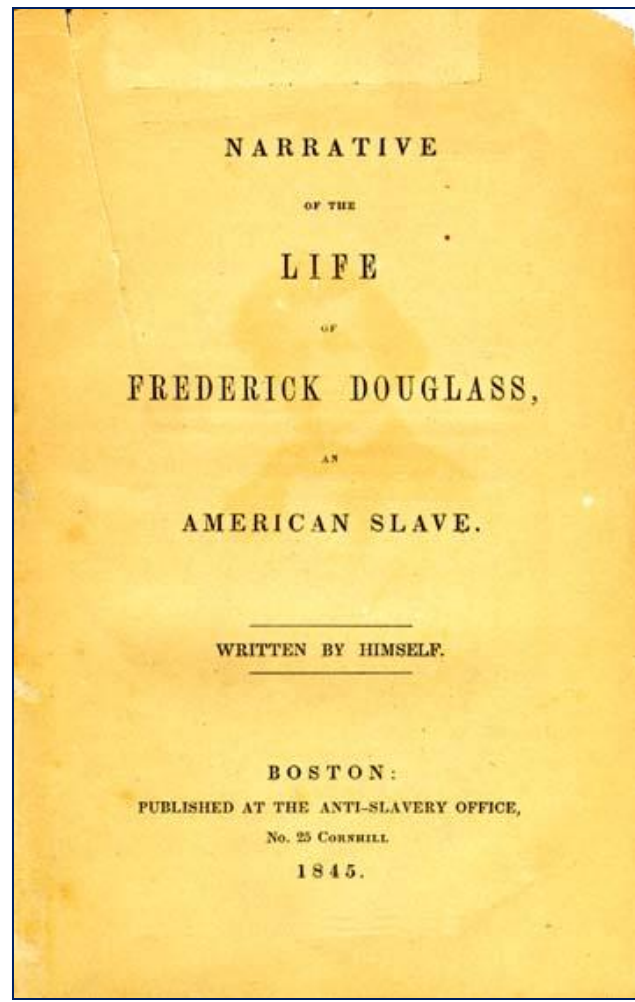
INTRODUCTION

- How a caste-based analysis differs from a class-based analysis of slave narratives.
- Why class helps us understand the individuality of those who produced these narratives.
- How class helps to illuminate the diversity of experience, especially work and social status, of the enslaved, as reflected in the slave narratives.

Narrative of the Life of Frederick Douglass,
an American Slave, Frederick Douglass, 1845



Frontispiece



Title Page

I was born in Tuckahoe, near Hillsborough, and about twelve miles from Easton, in Talbot county, Maryland. I have no accurate knowledge of my age, never having seen any authentic record containing it. By far the larger part of the slaves know as little of their ages as horses know of theirs, and it is the wish of most masters within my knowledge to keep their slaves thus ignorant. I do not remember to have ever met a slave who could tell of his birthday. They seldom come nearer to it than planting-time, harvest-time, cherry-time, spring-time, or fall-time. A want of information concerning my own was a source of unhappiness to me even during childhood. The white children could tell their ages. I could not tell why I ought to be deprived of the same privilege. I was not allowed to make any inquiries of my master concerning it. He deemed all such inquiries on the part of a slave improper and impertinent, and evidence of a restless spirit. The nearest estimate I can give makes me now between twenty-seven and twenty-eight years of age. I come to this, from hearing my master say, some time during 1835, I was about seventeen years old.

(Pp. 1-2)

Discussion Question

- What does the opening paragraph of Douglass's 1845 *Narrative* suggest about Frederick Douglass, even as a little boy, that distinguished him from other slaves on Edward Lloyd's plantation?

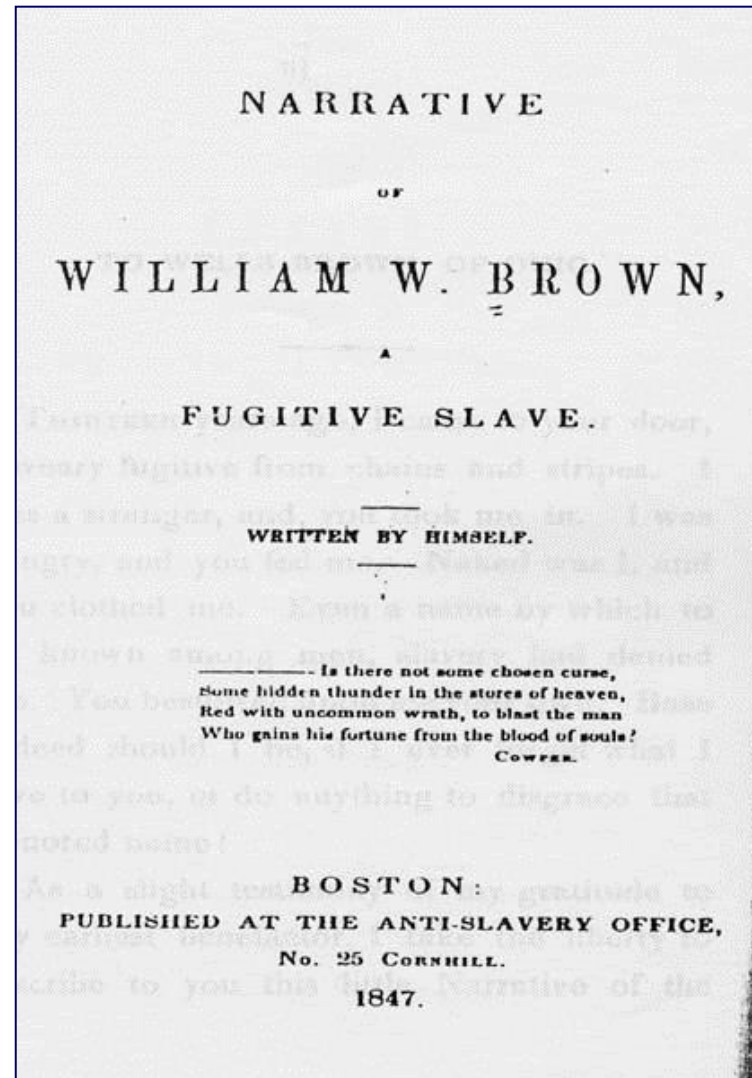
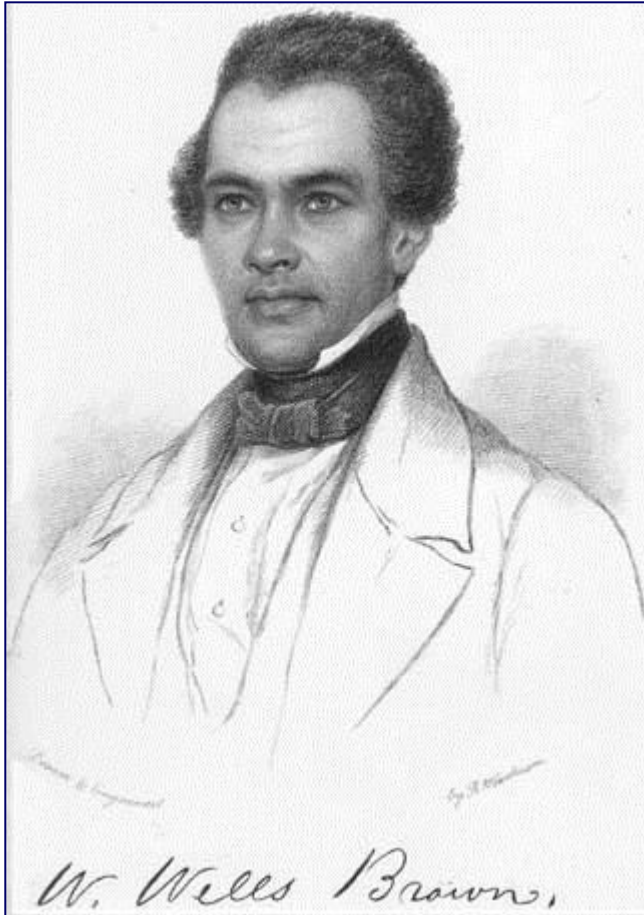
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(Pp. 1-2)

Discussion Questions

- If privilege is a sign of class status, what does Douglass mean when he says that, as a little boy, he could not “tell why I ought to be deprived of the same privilege” as white children who knew their birthdays?
- Who were these “white children,” anyway, and why did Frederick Douglass know them so well when he was a small enslaved boy?

Narrative William W. Brown, a Fugitive Slave,
William Wells Brown (1847)



I was born in Lexington, Ky. The man who stole me as soon as I was born, recorded the births of all the infants which he claimed to be born his property, in a book which he kept for that purpose. My mother's name was Elizabeth. She had seven children, viz: Solomon, Leander, Benjamin, Joseph, Millford, Elizabeth, and myself. No two of us were children of the same father. My father's name, as I learned from my mother, was George Higgins. He was a white man, a relative of my master, and connected with some of the first families in Kentucky.

My master owned about forty slaves, twenty-five of whom were field hands. He removed from Kentucky to Missouri, when I was quite young, and settled thirty or forty miles above St. Charles, on the Missouri, where, in addition to his practice as a physician, he carried on milling, merchandizing and farming. He had a large farm, the principal productions of which were tobacco and hemp. The slave cabins were situated on the back part of the farm, with the house of the overseer, whose name was Grove Cook, in their midst. He had the entire charge of the farm, and having no family, was allowed a woman to keep house for him, whose business it was to deal out the provisions for the hands.

(Pp. 13-16)

A woman was also kept at the quarters to do the cooking for the field hands, who were summoned to their unrequited toil every morning at four o'clock, by the ringing of a bell, hung on a post near the house of the overseer. They were allowed half an hour to eat their breakfast, and get to the field. At half past four, a horn was blown by the overseer, which was the signal to commence work; and every one that was not on the spot at the time, had to receive ten lashes from the negro-whip, with which the overseer always went armed. The handle was about three feet long, with the butt-end filled with lead, and the lash six or seven feet in length, made of cowhide, with platted wire on the end of it. This whip was put in requisition very frequently and freely, and a small offence on the part of a slave furnished an occasion for its use. During the time that Mr. Cook was overseer, I was a house servant--a situation preferable to that of a field hand, as I was better fed, better clothed, and not obliged to rise at the ringing of the bell, but about half an hour after. I have often laid and heard the crack of the whip, and the screams of the slave. My mother was a field hand, and one morning was ten or fifteen minutes behind the others in getting into the field. As soon as she reached the spot where they were at work, the overseer commenced whipping her. She cried, "Oh! pray--Oh! pray--Oh! pray"--these are generally the words of slaves, when imploring mercy at the hands of their oppressors. I heard her voice, and knew it, and jumped out of my bunk, and went to the door. Though the field was some distance from the house, I could hear every crack of the whip, and every groan and cry of my poor mother. I remained at the door, not daring to venture any farther. The cold chills ran over me, and I wept aloud. After giving her ten lashes, the sound of the whip ceased, and I returned to my bed, and found no consolation but in my tears. It was not yet daylight.

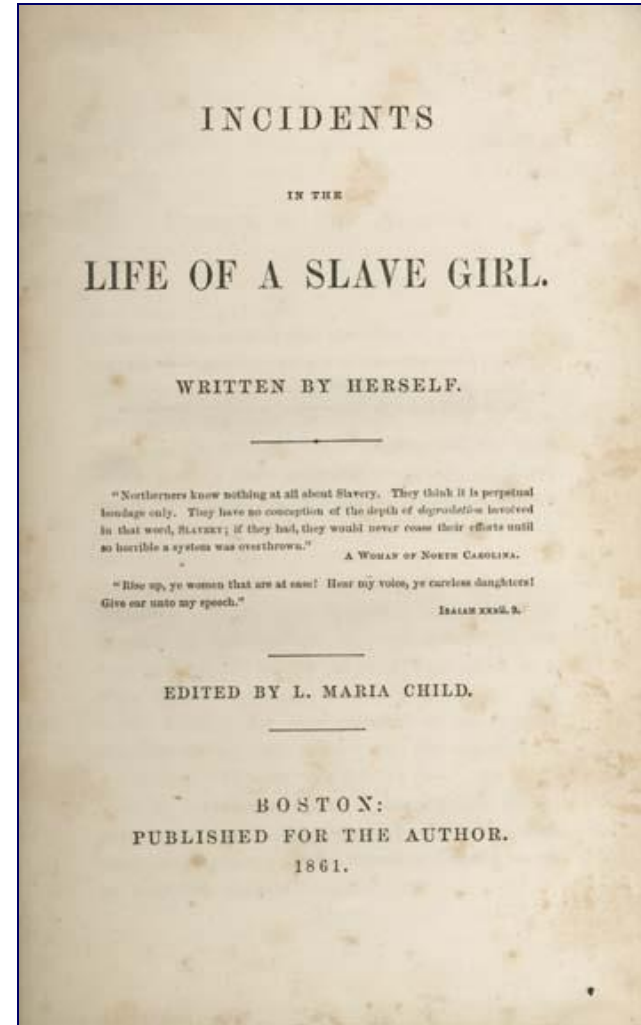
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Discussion Questions

- William Wells Brown states that when he was a little boy, "my mother was a field hand." Did Brown live with her? If not, where did he live?
- When he heard Elizabeth, his mother, being beaten by the overseer before dawn, where was he?
- What was the difference in status and class between his mother and himself?
- What emotional effect did this difference have on Brown even when he was a little boy?

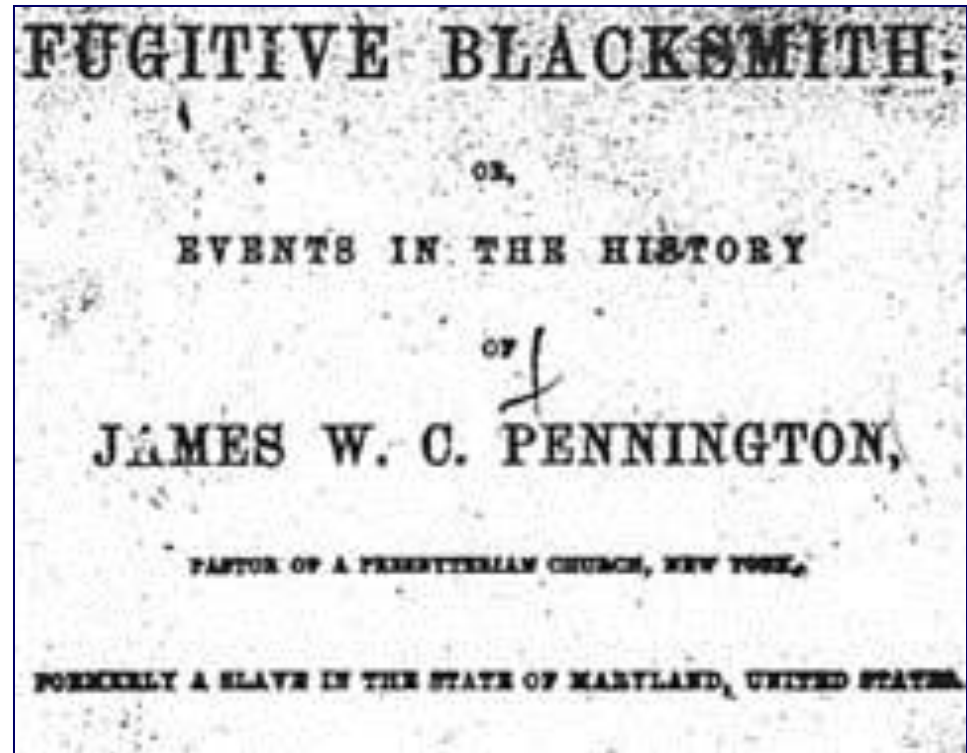
Incidents in the Life of a Slave Girl,
Harriet Jacobs, (1861)



I was born a slave; but I never knew it till six years of happy childhood had passed away. My father was a carpenter, and considered so intelligent and skilful in his trade, that, when buildings out of the common line were to be erected, he was sent for from long distances, to be head workman. On condition of paying his mistress two hundred dollars a year, and supporting himself, he was allowed to work at his trade, and manage his own affairs. His strongest wish was to purchase his children; but, though he several times offered his hard earnings for that purpose, he never succeeded. In complexion my parents were a light shade of brownish yellow, and were termed mulattoes. They lived together in a comfortable home; and, though we were all slaves, I was so fondly shielded that I never dreamed I was a piece of merchandise, trusted to them for safe keeping, and liable to be demanded of them at any moment.

Discussion Questions

- Why did Harriet Jacobs not know that she was a slave until she was about 6 years old?
- What does this paragraph indicate about her parents' status in Edenton, North Carolina?
- What does their complexion have to do with their class status in Edenton?



My father, among other numerous and responsible duties, discharged that of shepherd to a large and valuable flock of Merino sheep. This morning he was engaged in the tenderest of a shepherd's duties; -- a little lamb, not able to go alone, lost its mother; he was feeding it by hand. He had been keeping it in the house for several days. As he stooped over it in the yard, with a vessel of new milk he had obtained, with which to feed it, my master came along, and without the least provocation, began by asking, "Bazil, have you fed the flock?"

"Yes, sir."

"Were you away yesterday?"

"No, sir."

"Do you know why these boys have not got home this morning yet?"

"No, sir, I have not seen any of them since Saturday night."

"By the Eternal, I'll make them know their hour. The fact is, I have too many of you; my people are getting to be the most careless, lazy, and worthless in the country."

"Master," said my father, "I am always at my post; Monday morning never finds me off the plantation."

"Hush, Bazil! I shall have to sell some of you; and then the rest will have enough to do; I have not work enough to keep you all tightly employed; I have too many of you."

All this was said in an angry, threatening, and exceedingly insulting tone. My father was a high-spirited man, and feeling deeply the insult, replied to the last expression, -- "If I am one too many, sir, give me a chance to get a purchaser, and I am willing to be sold when it may suit you."

"Bazil, I told you to hush!" and suiting the action to the word, he drew forth the "cowhide" from under his arm, fell upon him with most savage cruelty, and inflicted fifteen or twenty severe stripes with all his strength, over his shoulders and the small of his back. As he raised himself upon his toes, and gave the last stripe, he said, "By the * * * I will make you know that I am master of your tongue as well as of your time!"

Being a tradesman, and just at that time getting my breakfast, I was near enough to hear the insolent words that were spoken to my father, and to hear, see, and even count the savage stripes inflicted upon him.

Let me ask any one of Anglo-Saxon blood and spirit, how would you expect a *son* to feel at such a sight?

This act created an open rupture with our family--each member felt the deep insult that had been inflicted upon our head; the spirit of the whole family was roused; we talked of it in our nightly gatherings, and showed it in our daily melancholy aspect. The oppressor saw this, and with the heartlessness that was in perfect keeping with the first insult, commenced a series of tauntings, threatenings, and insinuations, with a view to crush the spirit of the whole family.

Although it was sometime after this event before I took the decisive step, yet in my mind and spirit, I never was a *Slave* after it.

Whenever I thought of the great contrast between my father's employment on that memorable Monday morning, (feeding the little lamb,) and the barbarous conduct of my master, I could not help cordially despising the proud abuser of my sire; and I believe he discovered it, for he seemed to have diligently sought an occasion against me.

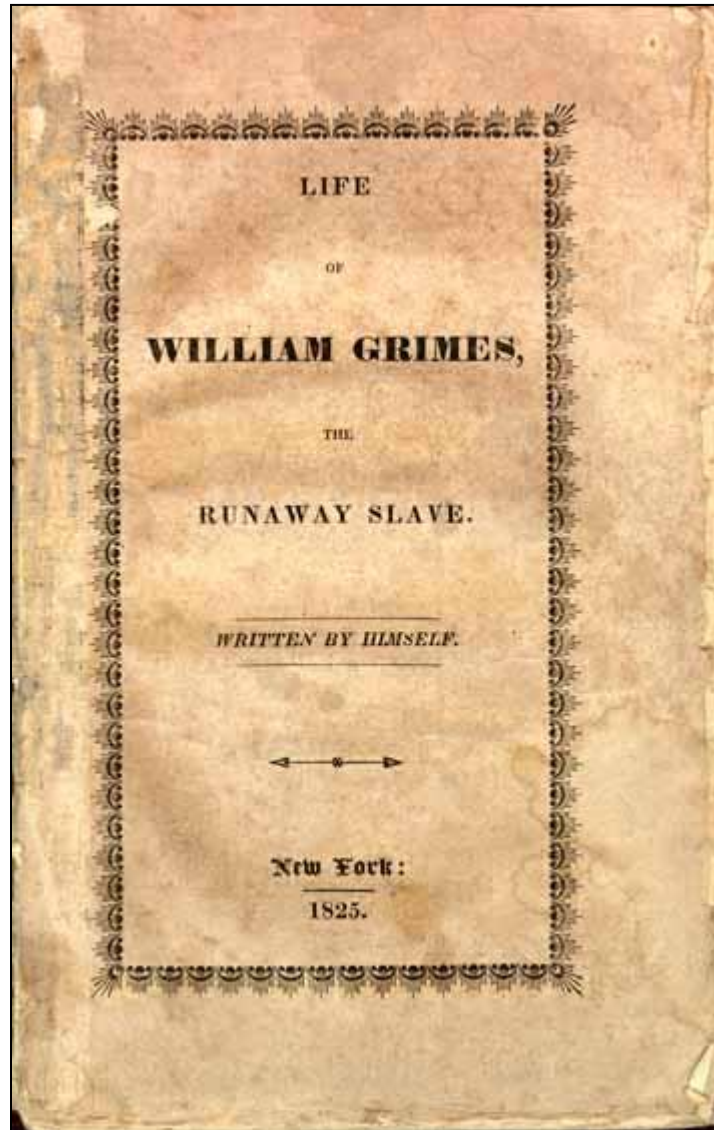
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Discussion Questions

- When Pennington speaks of “the deep insult that had been inflicted upon our head,” i.e., the head of the family, Basil, what does this say about his family’s sense of pride and identity, despite their enslavement?
- Where did this pride come from? What role did this sense of family pride have in Pennington’s decision to escape from slavery? Is this pride a sign of class identity on the part of Pennington’s enslaved family?

Life of William Grimes, the Runaway Slave,
William Grimes (1825)



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William Grimes (1825)

To say that a man is better off in one situation than another, if in the one he is better clothed and better fed, and has less care than in the other, is false. It is true, if you regard him as a brute, as destitute of the feelings of human nature. But I will not speak on the subject more. Those slaves who have kind masters are, perhaps, as happy as the generality of mankind. They are not aware that their condition can be better, and I don't know as it can: indeed it cannot, except by their own exertions.

I would advise no slave to leave his master. If he runs away, he is most sure to be taken: if he is not, he will ever be in the apprehension of it; and I do think there is no inducement for a slave to leave his master and be set free in the Northern States. I have had to work hard; I have been often cheated, insulted, abused and injured; yet a black man, if he will be industrious and honest, can get along here as well as anyone who is poor and in a situation to be imposed on. I have been very unfortunate in life in this respect. Notwithstanding all my struggles, and sufferings, and injuries, I have been an honest man. There is no one who can come forward and say he knows anything against Grimes. This I know, that I have been punished for being suspected of things of which some of those who were loudest against me were actually guilty. The practice of warning poor people out of town is very cruel. It may be necessary that towns should have that power, otherwise some might be overrun with paupers. But it is mighty apt to be abused. A poor man just gets a going in business, and is then warned to depart; perhaps he has a family, and don't know where to go, or what to do. I am a poor man, and ignorant; but I am a man of sense. I have seen them contributing at church for the heathen, to build churches, and send preachers to them, yet there was no place where I could get a seat in the church. interesting, and injured myself.

I knew in New Haven indians and negroes, come from a great many thousand miles, sent to be educated, while there were people I knew in the town cold and hungry, and ignorant. They have kind of societies to make clothes for those who, they say, go naked in their own countries. The ladies sometimes do this at one end of a town, while their fathers, who may happen to be selectmen, may be warning a poor man and his family out at the other end, for fear they may have to be buried at the town expense. It sounds rather strange upon a man's ear who feels that he is friendless and abused in society, to hear so many speeches about charity; for I was always inclined to be observing.

I have forebore to mention names in my history where it might give the least pain; in this I have made it less interesting, and injured myself.

I may sometimes be a little mistaken, as I have to write from from memory, and there is a great deal I have omitted from want of recollection at the time of writing. I cannot speak as I feel on some subjects. If those who read my history think I have not led a life of trial, I have failed to give a correct representation. I think I must be forty years of age, but don't know; I could not tell my wife my age. I have learned to read and write pretty well; if I had an opportunity I could learn very fast. My wife has had a tolerable good education, which has been a help to me.

Discussion Question

- What was Grimes's experience in Connecticut that caused him to speak so negatively about life in the "free states" for a fugitive slave?

I hope some will buy my books from charity; but I am no beggar. I am now entirely destitute of property; where and how I shall live I don't know; where and how I shall die I don't know; but I hope I may be prepared. If it were not for the stripes on my back which were made while I was a slave, I would in my will leave my skin as a legacy to the government, desiring that it might be taken off and made into parchment, and then bind the constitution of glorious, happy and free America. Let the skin of an American slave bind the charter of American liberty!

Discussion Questions

- What is the tone of Grimes's final statement in his narrative?
- In the last paragraphs of his narrative, Grimes refers to himself more as a "poor man" than as a black man or a fugitive slave. What might he be saying about class as well as caste discrimination in the North by using these terms to identify himself?

Narrative of the Life of Frederick Douglass, an American Slave, **Frederick Douglass (1845)**

I found employment, the third day after my arrival, in stowing a sloop with a load of oil. It was new, dirty, and hard work for me; but I went at it with a glad heart and a willing hand. I was now my own master. It was a happy moment, the rapture of which can be understood only by those who have been slaves. It was the first work, the reward of which was to be entirely my own. There was no Master Hugh standing ready, the moment I earned the money, to rob me of it. I worked that day with a pleasure I had never before experienced. I was at work for myself and newly-married wife. It was to me the starting-point of a new existence. When I got through with that job, I went in pursuit of a job of calking; but such was the strength of prejudice against color, among the white calkers, that they refused to work with me, and of course I could get no employment.* Finding my trade of no immediate benefit, I threw off my calking habiliments, and prepared myself to do any kind of work I could get to do. Mr. Johnson kindly let me have his wood-horse and saw, and I very soon found myself a plenty of work. There was no work too hard--none too dirty. I was ready to saw wood, shovel coal, carry the hod, sweep the chimney, or roll oil casks,--all of which I did for nearly three years in New Bedford, before I became known to the anti-slavery world.

In about four months after I went to New Bedford, there came a young man to me, and inquired if I did not wish to take the "Liberator." I told him I did; but, just having made my escape from slavery, I remarked that I was unable to pay for it then. I, however, finally became a subscriber to it. The paper came, and I read it from week to week with such feelings as it would be quite idle for me to attempt to describe. The paper became my meat and my drink. My soul was set all on fire. Its sympathy for my brethren in bonds--its scathing denunciations of slaveholders--its faithful exposures of slavery--and its powerful attacks upon the upholders of the institution--sent a thrill of joy through my soul, such as I had never felt before!

*I am told that colored persons can now get employment at calking in New Bedford--a result of anti-slavery effort.

I had not long been a reader of the "Liberator," before I got a pretty correct idea of the principles, measures and spirit of the anti-slavery reform. I took right hold of the cause. I could do but little; but what I could, I did with a joyful heart, and never felt happier than when in an anti-slavery meeting. I seldom had much to say at the meetings, because what I wanted to say was said so much better by others. But, while attending an anti-slavery convention at Nantucket, on the 11th of August, 1841, I felt strongly moved to speak, and was at the same time much urged to do so by Mr. William C. Coffin, a gentleman who had heard me speak in the colored people's meeting at New Bedford. It was a severe cross, and I took it up reluctantly. The truth was, I felt myself a slave, and the idea of speaking to white people weighed me down. I spoke but a few moments, when I felt a degree of freedom, and said what I desired with considerable ease. From that time until now, I have been engaged in pleading the cause of my brethren--with what success, and with what devotion, I leave those acquainted with my labors to decide.

Compare Douglass and Grimes

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Grimes: I hope some will buy my books from charity; but I am no beggar. I am now entirely destitute of property; where and how I shall live I don't know; where and how I shall die I don't know; but I hope I may be prepared. If it were not for the stripes on my back which were made while I was a slave, I would in my will leave my skin as a legacy to the government, desiring that it might be taken off and made into parchment, and then bind the constitution of glorious, happy and free America. Let the skin of an American slave bind the charter of American liberty!

Discussion Questions

- Compare the end of Douglass's *Narrative* to the end of Grimes's *Life*. Compare the portrayal of the black working class in the North in each.
- Does Douglass sound more optimistic about his future than Grimes? If so, why?

Final slide

Thank you.