

First & Last Name

Professor Martin

American Lit. 1

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Text: *Narrative of the Life of Frederick Douglass*

Passage: “If you teach that n----- how to read, there would be no keeping him. It would forever unfit him to be a slave. He would at once become unmanageable, and of no value to his master. As to himself, it could do him no good, but a great deal of harm. It would make him discontented and unhappy” (Douglass 2054).

Question: How do Mr. Auld’s statements about slavery reveal, inadvertently, his own true intentions, as well as mirror the values that were promoted by society?

Issue: The Issue of Historical and Cultural Context is an issue raised by this passage that is most relevant to answering the question. Not only is it important to have a knowledge of the contemporaneous social and political structures and ideologies when analyzing the passage in order to understand it, but also to draw comparisons between the issues of this time period and other eras, most importantly, to the present in order to make this writing have relevance for us.

Critical Approach: *Marxist Criticism*. Marxists believe that those who are in power in any society strive to maintain that position of power by employing means of preserving the current class hierarchy. Since this passage is dealing with the interaction between two distinct classes of people, the Marxist criticism is a useful way of analyzing it.

Answer: When Mr. Auld says that teaching a slave how to read will make them unfit for work, he may or may not be aware of what he is actually saying. Many people at the time realized that the surest way to enable the oppression of a people was to deprive them of any kind of education or improvement of the mind. While there was nothing to be done about a person's natural intelligence, slave owners did know that they could shape their slaves' environment in a way that would inhibit their intelligence and reverse as much as possible what nature had given them. Not force, but rather the suppression of intelligent thought was, essentially, the backbone of slavery. Without these careful measures, slaves would begin to recognize all kinds of things that would make them want to revolt. Mr. Auld thus, hit the nail on the head when he said that an education makes a slave unfit to be a slave, that it would make them unhappy and discontented with their condition in life. Once they realized that their skin color did not make them in any way inferior, they would become dissatisfied with being treated as such, just as in figuring out that there were enough of them to make a successful revolt, they might not be content with inaction. In realizing just a few of these simple insights, they would no longer allow themselves to be enslaved.