

First & Last Name

Professor Martin

American Literature

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Text: *Narrative in the Life of Frederick Douglass* by Frederick Douglass

Passage: “I am going away to the Great House Farm! O, yea! O, yea! O!”

This they would sing, as a chorus, to words which, to many would seem unmeaning jargon, but which, nevertheless, were full of meaning to themselves. I have sometimes thought that the mere hearing of those songs would do more to impress some minds with the horrible character of slavery, than the reading of whole volumes of philosophy on the subject could do.”

(Douglass 2045)

Question: How does Douglass illuminate the appalling treatment of the slaves by comparing the slave’s music to the character of slavery itself?

Issue: The Issue of Historical and Cultural Context. This issue is the best way to approach this passage, and to appropriately answer the stated question. It is important to understand the historical framework, in which the narrative was written. This was a time period, in which, the African American people had absolutely none of the basic rights of humanity, they we today, take for granted; included in these rights are freedom, social justice, and equal rights.

Critical Approach: *Marxist Criticism*. This approach examines literature in its cultural, economic, and political context, as it explores the relationship between the writer and the society in which they lived. Marxists feel that society is guided by its economy and class system. Douglass used this *Narrative* to demonstrate to reader of all classes and time periods the hardship, and cruel lives that he and all of the slaves led.

Answer: This passage refers to the selective position of the slave chosen to do errands at *The Great House Farm*, the plantation owner's headquarters. Douglass uses this passage to prove to the reader all that the free world takes for granted. The slaves were so imprisoned amongst their owner's plantations that they had so little to be joyful about, this "privilege", as it was not really a privilege at all, was just one of the few "privileged" things that these people could aspire to. Further on in this passage Douglass writes that as a slave, he had no understanding of those songs, but that once he was outside the circle of slavery, by fleeing to his freedom in the north, he had a new perspective of the incoherent songs, which the slaves would sing. He states that "Every tone was a testimony against slavery, and a prayer to God for deliverance from chains" and "To those songs I trace my first glimmering conception of the dehumanizing character of slavery."(Douglass 2045). I believe that Douglass is attempting to convey to the reader the fact that the slaves had so few joys, happiness, and privileges in their meager lives, that they did not truly understand what freedom was; and what a life beyond the boundaries of the plantation would be like. Douglass answers the stated question best himself by saying, "Slaves sing most when they are most unhappy. The songs of the slaves represent the sorrows of his heart; and he is relieved by them, only as an aching heart is relieved by its tears. . . . The singing of a man cast away upon a desolate island might be as appropriately considered as evidence of contentment and happiness, as the singing of a slave; the songs of the one and of the other are prompted by the same emotion"(Douglass 2046).