The Life of Olaudah Equiano

INTRODUCTION

BRIEF BIOGRAPHY OF OLAUDAH EQUIANO

Equiano was born in an African village and kidnapped into slavery at the age of eleven. After being transported to the African coast and subsequently to Barbados and Virginia, he was bought by a former naval officer and merchant, Michael Henry Pascal, who brought him to England. From there he was traded between a number of different masters and participated in the French and Indian wars, events that he recounts at length in his autobiography, before finally purchasing his freedom. Later he settled in England and began to spend a great deal of time involved in the abolitionist movement as part of the "Sons of Africa," a group of prominent African men in London. His autobiography was published when he was 44 years old and became an international bestseller, reissued in nine different editions and highly influential in the American abolitionist movement. Later in life, Equiano married a white woman, Susannah Cullen. They had several children, but only one survived into adulthood.

HISTORICAL CONTEXT

For the nearly 300 years that preceded Olaudah Equiano's writing of his life, the international slave trade had shrunk the world like never before: "globalization" could already describe this interconnected relationship between humans, goods, and places. Within this framework, European powers—first the Portuguese and Spanish, and later the British, French, Dutch, and others—vied to "discover" lands abroad, but of course these lands were largely already inhabited. Slavery, as Equiano's description of his own African village implies, had existed in some form for thousands of years, but it was the age of exploration that institutionalized a particular kind of slavery, bolstered by a growing set of arguments among Europeans about the ethical and intellectual inferiority of non-white races. Europeans would capture black people in Africa, or buy them from traders on the coast; they would then ship them to the West Indies to be sold as slaves, trading them for raw goods cultivated on plantations, and would carry these raw materials back to Europe to be processed and then sold in Africa and elsewhere. By the end of the eighteenth century, this "triangular trade" was thriving, and yet, for the first time, many more people than ever before began to object to slavery as a moral atrocity. The Quakers were a potent example of a group vocally opposed to slavery, though, of course, slaves themselves had protested and revolted against their condition for hundreds of years. Starting in 1772, slavery was no longer legal within Britain, but it wasn't until 1807 that the Slave Trade Act suppressed the international slave trade in the British Empire. This act passed in large part thanks to agitations by Equiano and others.

RELATED LITERARY WORKS

Equiano's *Narrative* is often considered the prototypical slave narrative, even though it doesn't perfectly fit into the structure of slavery, escape, and freedom that tends to encapsulate the form. But it is one of the first in a long tradition of memoirs by former slaves that often agitate for the end of slavery through a personal story. Harriet Jacobs's *Incidents in the Life of a Slave Girl* is an example in the American context, as is Frederick Douglass's *The Narrative of Frederick Douglass*. The narrative is also a clear example of the form of spiritual autobiography that involves a recounting of a sinful, weak life followed by a conversion or spiritual epiphany, much like Saint Augustine's *Confessions*. There are also elements of the adventure story in Equiano's narrative, and, in that way, it evokes books like *Robinson Crusoe* or *Gulliver's Travels*. Finally, Equiano's book can be placed into the general context of the birth of modern autobiography, which is concerned with the ways in which a rational but also feeling self develops over time, and the various experiences and influences that come to shape a mature human being. Another example in this genre is *The Autobiography of Benjamin Franklin*.

KEY FACTS

- **Full Title:** *The Interesting Narrative of the Life of Olaudah Equiano, or Gustavus Vassa, the African*
- **When Written:** ?-1789
- **Where Written:** London, England
- **When Published:** 1789
- **Literary Period:** Enlightenment/18th-century
- **Genre:** Autobiography
- **Antagonist:** The slave trade in general is the vast, inhuman antagonist against which Equiano struggles throughout the book—indeed, it is the slave trade against which Equiano writes the narrative itself. The slave trade's evils and barbarities give it a kind of human agency, especially since Equiano argues that it is slavery itself that corrupts slave traders, not any inherent evilness in them. But this cruelty is encapsulated to different extents in various white people whom Equiano encounters, from his apparently kindly master Pascal (who ultimately betrays him) to the various captains in Jamaica who threaten to return him to servitude.
- **Point of View:** As an autobiography, the book is written in the first person by a narrator who is looking back over his life and recounting its events chronologically. At times, Equiano's

narrative voice intrudes from the present, as he makes comments and judgments on his past behavior.

EXTRA CREDIT

Origin stories. While almost all of Equiano's narrative has been independently corroborated, scholars have, for several decades, debated whether or not he was actually born in Africa. One historian has argued that he was actually from South Carolina originally, though others have countered that his detailed account of the trade from Africa to the U.S. makes those origins unlikely.

Just for kids? Equiano's narrative has also been adapted into a book for children, published in the United States with the title *The Kidnapped Prince: The Life of Olaudah Equiano*.

PLOT SUMMARY

Olaudah Equiano begins his narrative by describing the customs of his native land in modern-day Nigeria. The customs are very different from those of England, but he also makes the case for their similarity to traditions of the Jews, even suggesting that Jews and Africans share a common heritage. This argument allows Equiano to begin to assert the full humanity of slaves and of black people in general, who only seem inferior to Europeans because they are cruelly subjugated by white people. While Equiano describes the practice of slavery as common among his own people, he contrasts slavery within Africa to the brutal racial hierarchy established by white Europeans.

Equiano recounts being kidnapped along with his sister by slave traders at the age of eleven. After spending time with a number of different masters in the interior of Africa, he was eventually separated from his sister and brought to the coast. There he saw a slave ship for the first time and was stunned by the cramped, unclean, even inhuman condition in which black Africans were confined on the ships. He was entranced and frightened, too, by the strange workings of the ship, which seemed to him to be driven by magic. He was initially terrified that the frightening-looking white men directing the ship were going to eat him, but the other captives eventually convinced Equiano that they were being brought across the sea to work for white men. After a long, torturous voyage, in which the conditions were so bad as to provoke some of the slaves to commit suicide, they reached Barbados, where Equiano witnessed families being separated without any thought to the pain and distress this caused. He himself was subsequently taken to Virginia, where he was isolated on a plantation. He spoke little English and had almost no one to talk to.

After a few months, a merchant and naval officer, Michael Henry Pascal, came to visit Equiano's master and liked the look of Equiano. Pascal purchased Equiano and brought him to the ship to be taken to England. Pascal treated Equiano better than any other white man had in the past, though he also refused to call Equiano by the name of Jacob as Equiano preferred, instead naming him Gustavus Vassa. On the ship Equiano also befriended a young white boy named Richard (Dick) Baker, and the two became inseparable. In London Equiano lodged with relatives of Pascal, two sisters called the Miss Guerins, who were kind to Equiano and began to teach him to read and write. They also instructed him in the **Bible** and took him to be baptized. Equiano accompanied Pascal on a few more voyages in which they participated in battles of the French and Indian Wars, and then they left for Gibraltar and the Mediterranean. After a number of further battles, they returned to England, where Equiano began to hope he might gain his freedom. However, Pascal betrayed Equiano by preventing him from leaving the ship and forcing him into yet another form of slavery under Captain James Doran. Pascal also stole everything in Equiano's possession besides nine guineas he'd saved over the years.

Under Doran, Equiano traveled to the West Indies, where the subjugated state of the slaves there deeply affected him and reminded him of his own enslavement. Soon Doran sold Equiano to a Quaker merchant, Mr. Robert King, who treated Equiano with greater respect and acknowledged his substantial skills as a seaman. King hired Equiano out to a captain, Thomas Farmer, and eventually permitted him to participate in a series of voyages between the West Indies, St. Eustatia, and Georgia—voyages that involved the transport and exchange of slaves and other goods. Farmer allowed Equiano to develop his own commercial activities: starting with three pence, Equiano slowly built up savings and goods to trade himself. All throughout their voyages, though, Equiano constantly struggled with unfair treatment by white men who refused to pay him or tried to cheat him. Equiano realized that as a black man it was impossible for him to get legal retribution. Finally Equiano managed to save forty pounds, which King had agreed would be the price of his freedom, and he bought his own manumission. Still, King and Farmer cajoled him into staying with them as an employee, to which he agreed. Equiano still observed a number of cases in which freemen were forced back into slavery—something which nearly happened to him as well—and this underlined for him the fragility of his freedom. On the way back from one trip to Georgia, Farmer grew ill and died, and Equiano became the de facto captain. He continued to travel and participate in the slave trade under a new captain, William Phillips, though Equiano was increasingly desirous of making his way back to England. After being betrayed by a number of different captains, he finally managed to return to the West Indies, where he obtained a **certificate of good behavior** from Mr. King and returned to England.

In England Equiano got back into contact with the Miss

Guerins, who helped him attain a trade as a hairdresser, and also went to see Pascal, who seemed entirely unremorseful for his betrayal. After a time, Equiano grew restless and decided he could make more money at sea, so he worked on a number of voyages. During this time, he also began to struggle with his faith, wandering among churches and growing unsatisfied both with his questions about eternal life, and with the sinfulness he saw among apparent Christians all around him. In Turkey, Equiano became acquainted with a group of people who helped him better understand Bible verses. These Christians seemed far holier than many of those he knew in England. On one voyage back to England, he experienced a spiritual epiphany, which included a vision of Jesus on the cross: this proved to be a spiritual rebirth, solidifying Equiano's faith but also distancing him from other sailors, who were more likely to belittle his conversion.

Equiano had been hired by Dr. Irving, who decided to establish a plantation in Jamaica and asked Equiano to join. On the voyage, he tried to instruct a Musquito Indian prince in Christianity, with uncertain results. Equiano helped Irving establish a plantation, and he himself treated the slaves kindly and generously. Eventually he wanted to return to England, but once again he found himself stymied by betrayals and cruel treatment by white captains. Finally he did manage to return to England, where he began to settle down, though he never remained on land for too long. He participated in one unsuccessful, though theoretically inspiring, voyage to Africa to return some former slaves to their place of origin. He concludes with a powerful rhetorical argument against the slave trade, calling on the Christian feelings of the British and making economic and commercial arguments for abolishing slavery and opening Africa up to British goods and products.

CHARACTERS

MAJOR CHARACTERS

Olaudah Equiano (Gustavus Vassa) – The narrator and protagonist of the book, Equiano was born in modern-day Nigeria, where he was kidnapped at the age of eleven before being transported to the coast and sold into slavery. He was brought on the "middle passage" from Africa to the West Indies, and then to Virginia where he was bought by an officer with whom he participated in a number of sea voyages, as well as the French and Indian wars. Eventually he earns enough money to purchase his own freedom, Both before and after his attainment of freedom, though he depicts how even after attaining his freedom he is often belittled, betrayed, and otherwise put in danger by white men. Over the course of the book, the character of Equiano that emerges from these pages is one of a curious, bright, and determined person. He picks up English relatively easily and, despite a halting and often interrupted education, he learns to read and write well enough to compose hundreds of pages of a narrative of his life. Equiano is thoughtful, sometimes painfully so. He takes what he learns to heart, and he is unable to simply parrot the teachings of Christianity, for instance, without fully grappling with their implications for his own life. Equiano's relationship to England is also complex. He expresses both nostalgia for his home country, and a burgeoning desire to be like Englishmen, even though they are often cruel to him. By the end of the book Equiano strongly advocates for the end of slavery. Yet even as he agitates for the end of the slave trade, Equiano doesn't want to cut off all ties to the culture that he's adopted; instead, he argues for the ability of black people and former slaves to fully participate in British life and culture.

Michael Henry Pascal – Pascal is the owner of a merchant ship who buys Equiano from the first plantation where he works. Though Pascal is the first white man to treat Equiano kindly, he later cruelly betrays Equiano and sells him to another master. While Equiano seems to forgive him, Pascal—out of either malice or guilt—refuses to engage with Equiano even after Equiano returns as a free man to England.

MINOR CHARACTERS

Equiano's sister – Kidnapped into slavery along with Equiano, his sister is initially a source of comfort. However, they are separated, never to see each other again (in a custom that turns out to be normal in the slave trade).

Richard (Dick) Baker – A close friend to Equiano who spends time with him aboard several ships. Dick is one of the first white people his own age to treat Equiano kindly and without prejudice.

Nicholas Doberry – A merchant who hosted Pascal and Equiano for a few months with his family.

Nicholas Doberry's daughter – A little girl who befriends Equiano while he is lodging with her family. He contrasts his own dark skin to her light skin, which unlike his grows red after washing, an experience that gives him one of his first frustrations with his race.

The Miss Guerins – Two relatives of Pascal with whom Equiano lodges when he first arrives in London. The women treat him kindly and set him on his life path by sending him to school and encouraging him to be baptized.

John Mondle – A sailor with questionable morals whose near-death experience is proof to Equiano of the role of Providence in human affairs.

Daniel Queen – A fellow passenger aboard the Aetna ship with Equiano who teaches him how to dress hair and instructs him in the Bible.

Captain James Doran – A captain who purchases Equiano from Pascal.

Mr. Robert King – A Quaker merchant who buys Equiano from

Doran. King agrees to set Equiano's price at 40 pounds, and allows Equiano to earn that much money and buy his own freedom.

Thomas Farmer – Another ship captain who hires Equiano and treats him relatively well, for example, by lending Equiano money for his own commercial projects.

Joseph Clipson – A free mulatto man who is forced back into slavery by a cruel captain. Clipson serves as a reminder to Equiano that freedom is always fragile for black people.

Mrs. Davis – A fortune teller in Philadelphia who foretells Equiano's freedom, but also the suffering that lies ahead for him.

Dr. Perkins – A cruel slave owner in Georgia who, with his friend, beats Equiano nearly to death for loitering with his slaves.

Mr. Read – A merchant whose slave Equiano fights with in Georgia. Read threatens to have Equiano whipped and carried throughout the town like a slave.

William Phillips – The captain who replaces Farmer on King's ships.

Mosa – A friend of Equiano's, also black, in Gerogia.

Dr. Charles Irving – Equiano's master (after he gains his freedom) in England, who hires him as a hairdresser.

John Annis – A free black man who is an acquaintance of Equiano's. Annis is hired as cook on a ship destined for Turkey, but on the way there his former master finds him and forces him off the ship and back into slavery.

Mr. C— – A man in Turkey who is crucial to Equiano's spiritual awakening.

The Musquito Prince George – A young man who is traveling with Equiano back from England to Jamaica, whom Equiano attempts to instruct in Christianity.

Hughes – A ship owner who treats Equiano cruelly, refusing to accept his status as a free man.

John Baker – Another ship captain who tricks Equiano into joining his ship and also treats him cruelly.

Governor Macnamara – Another of Equiano's employers, who proposes that he join missionary trip to Africa.

THEMES

In LitCharts literature guides, each theme gets its own color-coded icon. These icons make it easy to track where the themes occur most prominently throughout the work. If you don't have a color printer, you can still use the icons to track themes in black and white.

CULTURE, EDUCATION, AND "CIVILIZING"

In telling the story of his life from his childhood to the present day, Olaudah Equiano seeks to acquaint his British readers with the richness of life in his African home by detailing the dances, rites, and other social customs of his village. Equiano thus makes a case for the vibrant cultural life of African peoples, which Europeans at the time tended to belittle. At a number of points, Equiano describes his home village by comparing his native customs to Jewish customs. By doing so, Equiano attempts to provide a familiar context within which a European reader could understand African customs: the Jews were then a group within England that maintained its own customs, but was still relatively assimilated to the majority culture.

Nonetheless, even while Equiano argues that Africans, like Europeans, have complex culture, he also seems to agree with European stereotypes about African "backwardness." Equiano argues that Africans are no less intelligent than Europeans—they simply haven't been educated in the same way. Equiano thus does not critique the basis of the European distinction between their own "civilized" society and "barbaric" African culture. Instead, he argues that Africans may be "uncivilized" but they *can* become "civilized," if only they're given the opportunity. Equiano's own life illustrates his point. At some points, indeed, the narrative seems to portray Equiano's earlier self as humorously untutored: he thinks that ships run thanks to magic forces, or that compasses have a life of their own. But the autobiography also captures his growth into a supremely skilled seaman.

Throughout the book Equiano shows a deep desire to gain access to European culture and customs. He seeks to "imbibe" and "imitate" the Europeans through a long process of education that is meant to make him into one of the "civilized" subjects, despite the fact that these "civilized" subjects have enslaved and subjugated him. By writing his autobiography, Equiano emphasizes that he has completed the civilizing process, and can now be fully accepted as a rational, enlightened European subject himself. He's no longer even just a reader, but also a writer, able to trace his own path of education. He does this in part in order to prove to his prejudiced readers that an African man can complete this path. A modern reader may find Equiano's path here self-defeating or upsetting, as he embraces the terms of the very society that enslaved him. But from Equiano's point of view it is an individual story of triumph, which might allow other people like him to follow in his path.

FREEDOM AND SLAVERY

Equiano doesn't overly idealize the African hometown where he came from: there too, he says,

slavery existed. But that slavery pales in comparison to the violence of captivity that he experiences from the white men who enslave him. If one way of reading Equiano's narrative is of a path from ignorance to knowledge, another is as a movement from freedom into captivity and back to freedom. Unlike Equiano's gradual attainment of education, however, freedom is far more unstable and fragile in this story, in need of constant vigilance lest it be taken away. Some of the most moving passages in Equiano's narrative involve his lamentations about being enslaved and held captive against his will. He describes his captivity as a flagrant denial of the human right to move freely, a cruelty imposed without justification.

By describing the shocking experience of witnessing slaves decide to kill themselves by jumping off a ship rather than continue to live in slavery, Equiano emphasizes that enslavement can actually be worse than death. Indeed, captivity in the book is always joined to violence. On the slave ship and on the various plantations in the Caribbean and in the United States, Equiano endures beatings and whippings that both injure him physically and wound his very sense of self. Even when Equiano thinks he's established a profound connection with his master, Michael Henry Pascal, Pascal's betrayal of Equiano by selling him to a cruel master underlines the way in which slaveowners deny slaves' humanity by treating them as property. Even after Equiano does attain his freedom—by paying for it himself—his status as a black man means that he's always in danger of being recaptured and re-enslaved. He witnesses this happen to another freeman in the West Indies, and he himself is kidnapped by two white men who attempt to re-enslave him, a "trick" he only manages to evade by using the excellent English skills he's acquired.

Tragically, Equiano isn't able to fully escape from the overwhelming power and logic of the international slave trade. Even after he's freed, he participates in the slave trade himself: as he earns a living and develops his own independent fortune, he travels around the world on ships carrying slaves to plantations, just as he once was carried himself. He writes his autobiography with the explicit purpose of ending the slave trade, but he only rarely acknowledges the paradox of his own involvement in it. Instead, that involvement remains an implicit example of just how pervasive the logic of captivity was in the British Empire.

CONVERSION, PROVIDENCE, AND GOD'S WILL

When Equiano first begins to learn about Christianity from the Miss Guerins in England, he is intrigued but also ambivalent. After all, he has described a thriving belief system with which he grew up in his home village. Equiano does come to be baptized himself not long afterwards, but it is only over time that he comes to grapple with spiritual questions on a more profound level and to fully embrace an identity as a Christian. Following his first trips to England after being baptized, Equiano begins to relate some of the Christian teachings he's learned to the events of his own life—for example, when Pascal betrays him and sells him to the cruel Captain James Doran, Equiano begins to wonder if God is punishing him for his sins. Throughout the narrative, Equiano's desire to make his own choices and control his own life comes into tension with his growing belief that Providence is in charge of human activity and that he therefore must accept what happens to him as God's will. While his belief in Providence can at times aid Equiano in his struggles against hardship and cruelty, it also can be seen as making him more passive in his own attempts to create change. For example, Equiano reflects at one point that, whether he ends up being freed or remaining in captivity, his entire life is a question of God's will—either way, it's nothing that his own desire can change. Equiano never explicitly settles on a conclusion to this question, although the novel does imply that it's possible both to believe in God's ultimate power over human affairs and to work towards what one believes is God's will on earth.

It is only after a near death experience on a sea journey near the North Pole that Equiano fully commits to embarking on a spiritual journey, reading the Bible, studying Christian doctrines, and struggling to come to terms with his faith. Then, while working on a ship traveling to Spain, he experiences a moment of epiphany in which he no longer feels anxious or uncertain about his position within God's plan. Equiano's conversion firmly places his narrative within a genre of spiritual autobiographies that was quite popular at the time, in which identity is achieved in part through a miraculous, sudden revelation of faith. From the moment of his rebirth on, he's fully established as a converted Christian, eager to work to fulfill God's plan on earth even as he acknowledges that there's much about the universe and about eternal truths that he will never know: he's content to simply trust in his faith.

COMMERCE AND TRADE

Equiano lived during a period of time that saw the rise of both capitalism and imperialism, in which a chain of supply and demand was established—increasingly worldwide, as the British Empire is expanding. This cycle of trade was most powerfully represented by the Triangular Trade, in which raw materials from the American and West Indian colonies were sent to imperial nations like England, manufactured goods from the imperial nations were traded to Africa, and slaves were sent from Africa to the colonies. Rather than wealth being limited to the aristocracy, who inherited it from generation to generation, this trade meant that wealth was now increasingly able to be accumulated by enterprising, entrepreneurial people (mostly men) who were willing to participate in a global capitalist process, one that had both great risk and potentially great

rewards. When Equiano is first sold into slavery, he becomes property within this global system of trade. Indeed, one of the most shocking stories he relates about the barbarous cruelty of his captors, and the treatment of slaves as mere property, is that some of the slavers once chained a group of slaves together and threw them overboard to drown, just so that they could collect insurance on them.

In some ways, Equiano fights against this characterization of himself and other slaves as property, but it's important to understand that, ultimately, he *doesn't* question the commercial system that underlies slavery. Indeed, Equiano himself comes to participate in this commercial system, and his development as a man of commerce is part of the way he forges his own identity and earns respect. Unlike other popular slave narratives of the time, there is no dramatic escape and flight to freedom that takes place in Equiano's narrative. Instead, as he accompanies different masters on various journeys, he begins to understand the logic behind the system of buying and selling in which his masters participate. Ultimately, Equiano buys his own freedom, working within the system rather than outside of it in order to manipulate it to his own ends. Subsequently, Equiano describes himself as far more like some of the white men sailing around the world than the slaves who are bought and sold. He learns the skills needed to, for instance, invest in crops in the West Indies and resell them at a profit later on, and he also uses his sailing skills to work on the same slaver ships that earlier had carried him from Africa into slavery in the Americas.

By explaining how successful he was in participating in such a system, Equiano does make the case for the possibility that former slaves can succeed in the new, capitalist, industrializing society. And yet that very success is almost impossibly complicated. Ironically and tragically, his success in the world of global trade means participating in and tacitly accepting the validity of the same system that initially enslaved and subjugated Equiano and so many countless other Africans.

SELFHOOD

As Equiano relates the story of his life and his travels between Africa, England, and the British Empire, he tells a story of the development of his self—the forging of his individual identity—which proves vital to the broader political purpose of his story. Equiano, who seeks to convince readers of the inhumanity of the slave trade, must first convince readers that he, a former slave, is fully human. The very act of relating his development over time—his joys, sorrows, and the lessons he learns—allows Equiano to make the case that he has an interior self, just like his mostly white readers, and that he too is a human being who can reason and feel as deeply as anyone else. By emphasizing the development of his sense of self over time, and insisting on the humanity of all black people, Equiano hopes to persuade his readers that slavery is an inhumane practice that deals not with inanimate pieces of property, but with people not altogether different from white Englishmen.

SYMBOLS

Symbols appear in **teal text** throughout the Summary and Analysis sections of this LitChart.

THE BIBLE

Before he learns to read and write, Equiano notices his master Pascal and his friend Dick Baker studying the Bible together. Unacquainted with the Bible (and with books in general), Equiano thinks that the men are speaking to it, and that the book is answering. His frustrations with being unable to "talk to" books himself are symbolic of Equiano's fervent desire to learn what he thinks of as the wisdom and knowledge of Europeans, even though these are the people who have cruelly enslaved him and who continue to subjugate him. The Bible, then, as the most prominent book among the Europeans, represents the mysteries of the new culture to which Equiano has been introduced, mysteries that he longs to unlock by learning to read and write himself.

But the Bible is also a book of a particular kind, one that serves as the central document of Christianity—the religion that Equiano essentially equates with European civilization. In some ways, in fact, the moral teachings that Equiano does begin to access in the Bible allow him to make a connection between European culture and his own, as he remarks to Daniel Queen that it seems his own country's teachings are reproduced in the Bible. The Bible is vital to Equiano's own spiritual development as a Christian, but it is also crucial that he is inducted into a specific kind of Christianity, the Protestant Church of England, which emphasized an individual's ability to access spiritual truth by reading the Bible (rather than through the intermediary role of a priest). In that sense Equiano's relationship to the Bible can also be mapped onto his education more broadly, as the Bible allows him to begin to think for himself and decide what he believes. This is fitting for an autobiography that is concerned with the development of a rational subject who is both indebted to Providence and a maker of his own destiny.

CERTIFICATE OF GOOD BEHAVIOR

Although Equiano's narrative is mostly written from his own perspective, he also reproduces citations from other people to justify and cement his own authority. One way Equiano calls on the authority of others is through the transcription of the certificates of good behavior he received from Mr. King and from Dr. Irving. These

certificates are highly important in Equiano's own life, because they are letters of recommendation that allow him to attain good employment elsewhere. As a black man, even eventually a free one, Equiano has seen how little others trust him and how fragile his freedom is. Through testimony from others, he knows he can hope to combat the stereotypes of black people as being deceitful, lazy, or inferior to whites. By transcribing these certificates verbatim in his own narrative, Equiano hopes to convince his readers of his trustworthiness, not just as a sailor, but as a human being recounting the story of his life.

In a world in which the testimony of whites is worth far more than that of blacks, Equiano is strategic in bolstering his own narrative with the words of others whom he knows have a better chance of being taken seriously. These certificates thus represent a confirmation of Equiano's status as a successful commercial subject, and they also lend him credibility in his argument about the evils of slavery, an argument for which he hopes to marshal all evidence possible in order to drive his case home. At the same time, the fact that Equiano feels the need to include the certificates to bolster his own case signifies just how much society is stacked against black people: despite his accomplishments in overcoming an escaping his enslavement by whites, he *still* needs the good word of whites to make the world take him seriously.

QUOTES

Note: all page numbers for the quotes below refer to the Dover Publications edition of *The Life of Olaudah Equiano* published in 2000.

Chapter 1 Quotes

❝ In regard to complexion, ideas of beauty are wholly relative. I remember while in Africa to have seen three negro children, who were tawny, and another quite white, who were universally regarded as deformed by myself and the natives in general, as far as related to their complexions.

Related Characters: Olaudah Equiano (Gustavus Vassa) (speaker)

Related Themes:

Page Number: 15

Explanation and Analysis

Equiano is in the midst of relating some of the characteristics and customs of the village in modern-day Nigeria where he was born. He is hoping to acquaint his largely European readers with the richness of his home culture, but he's also eager to insist on the relativity of certain cultural judgments that his readers might take for granted. Prevailing stereotypes in England at the time held that darker-skinned people were both intellectually and morally inferior to white people, but also that they were less physically attractive (all these racist ideas helped to perpetuate the institution of slavery). Here, then, Equiano challenges such stereotypes by inverting them, showing how in the culture of his home, it was lighter-skinned people who were considered less beautiful and even "deformed." In some ways, such a reversal doesn't do much to expose the basic problems with assigning beauty to one race over another. Equiano, though, is working within a certain set of assumptions and norms, and he finds it most helpful not to challenge such hierarchies entirely but rather to show how they are culturally contingent and relative.

❝ When they come among Europeans, they are ignorant of their language, religion, manners, and customs. Are any pains made to teach them these? Are they treated as men? Does not slavery itself depress the mind, and extinguish all its fire, and every noble sentiment? But above all, what advantages do not a refined people possess over those who are rude and uncultivated! Let the polished and haughty European recollect that his ancestors were once like the Africans, uncivilized and even barbarous. Did Nature make them inferior to their sons? and should they too have been made slaves? Every rational mind answers, "No."

Related Characters: Olaudah Equiano (Gustavus Vassa) (speaker)

Related Themes:

Page Number: 21-22

Explanation and Analysis

Here Equiano continues to interrogate the assumptions on which the entire international slave trade rests, assumptions that do not just argue for slavery based on economic or commercial benefits, but also based on judgments about the very nature of those enslaved. Nonetheless, Equiano does accept one major assumption himself: that on a spectrum from "barbarity" to "civilization," Europeans are more civilized than those of African descent. Without challenging that prejudice, Equiano does insist that his reader ask why this is the case.

Many people at the time would have believed that the unequal conditions of black and white people were the result of the innate inferiority of Africans. But Equiano

shows that the cultural differences between Europe and Africa stem from social conditions, not from innate inequality. For one, slaves came to Europe, the Caribbean, or the Americas with a different language and set of customs than their masters, and in their entirely new society they would never be told what the new traditions and norms are; obviously the adjustment would be difficult. Furthermore, the very institution of slavery is dehumanizing, dividing people into masters and slaves and then punishing the slaves for not "succeeding" according to the standards of civilized English society. Equiano's argument is based on the idea that there is a linear trajectory towards culture and civilization, and that Africans simply need to be given the time and space to "catch up." While this argument presupposes the superiority of European culture, it also allows Equiano to make a powerful case for the common humanity between Africans and Europeans and for ending any institution that breaks down those common bonds rather than building them up.

Chapter 2 Quotes

❝ To that Heaven, which protects the weak from the strong, I commit the care of your innocence and virtues, if they have not already received their full reward, and if your youth and delicacy have not long since fallen victims to the violence of the African trader, the pestilential stench of a Guinea ship, the seasoning in the European colonies, or the lash and lust of a brutal and unrelenting overseer.

Related Characters: Olaudah Equiano (Gustavus Vassa) (speaker), Equiano's sister

Related Themes:

Page Number: 28

Explanation and Analysis

Here, Equiano has been torn away from his sister for the final time. In this direct address to his absent sister (a literary trope known as "apostrophe"), he imagines the horrors that may have befallen her, his imaginings aided by the suffering that he himself has undergone at the hands of slave traders and overseers. His rhetorical flourishes are meant to touch his readers by appealing to eighteenth-century ideas about sentimentality and the importance of feeling—ideas that were often gendered, as women were thought to be especially sensitive to appeals to the heart, as well as particularly delicate and vulnerable to harsh treatment. Equiano will go on to expose the brutal treatment of slaves in general, and to argue for the way in which the institution dehumanizes all people, but here he makes a personal appeal based on his love for his sister. While he seems to hope that she has not been the victim of violence, rape, foul conditions, etc., he also seems to know that she likely has experienced all of these things.

❝ I now wished for the last friend, death, to relieve me; but soon, to my grief, two of the white men offered me eatables; and, on my refusing to eat, one of them held me fast by the hands, and laid me across, I think, the windlass, and tied my feet, while the other flogged me severely. I had never experienced any thing of this kind before, and although, not being used to the water, I naturally feared that element the first time I saw it, yet nevertheless, could I have got over the nettings, I would have jumped over the side, but I could not; and besides the crew used to watch us very closely, who were not chained down to the decks, lest we should leap into the water. I have seen some of these African prisoners most severely cut for attempting to do so, and hourly whipped for not eating.

Related Characters: Olaudah Equiano (Gustavus Vassa) (speaker)

Related Themes:

Page Number: 32

Explanation and Analysis

Equiano has arrived at the African coast, where he has witnessed for the first time the slave ships that will carry him across the Atlantic. After being forced under the deck with its noxious smells, cramped living quarters, and conditions of sickness and disease, Equiano begins to actually hope for death, going so far as to plan how he would kill himself. Equiano has, of course, been enslaved before by other Africans, but the conditions here are shocking, far worse than anything he's seen or experienced before, precisely because European slavery is based on assumptions of innate racial inferiority that provide a justification for inhumane treatment. And even the one act that would seem humane—trying to get Equiano to eat in order to keep him alive—is shown here to be part and parcel with barbarity. Because the traders do not consider the slaves as fully human but rather as goods or property, it's in the traders' interest to keep the slaves alive so that they can make a profit once they sell the slaves in the West Indies. Forcing Equiano to eat, then, is part of the same dehumanizing behavior that leads traders to chain him, whip him, and subject him to conditions so barbaric that Equiano

prefers death.

Chapter 3 Quotes

❝ I had often seen my master and Dick employed in reading; and I had a great curiosity to talk to the books, as I thought they did; and so to learn how all things had a beginning. For that purpose I have often taken up a book, and talked to it, and then put my ears to it, when alone, in hopes it would answer me; and I have been very much concerned when I found it remained silent

Related Characters: Olaudah Equiano (Gustavus Vassa) (speaker), Michael Henry Pascal, Richard (Dick) Baker

Related Themes:

Page Number: 42

Explanation and Analysis

During the journey from Virginia to England, Equiano is for the first time treated less brutally and inhumanely than he had been before (even though he's still, of course, unfree). In part because of this, and in part because of his budding friendship with Dick, Equiano begins to warm to the white people and to their culture and customs that had initially so frightened him. Here Equiano describes watching Pascal and Dick reading together, but he describes it using the technique of defamiliarization, in which objects and situations that seem normal or obvious to a reader are described in a new or different way in order to make them seem strange and unfamiliar.

Unable to read or write himself, Equiano uses his skills of logic and rational thinking in order to hypothesize about what "reading" entails. In part, his description of his conclusion is meant to underline just how much Equiano has learned and how far he's come since his days as a slave. This is meant to imply that all black people are capable of education and improvement, something he emphasizes throughout his narrative. And yet while his conclusion about the talking books might seem odd to us, and would have seemed so to the readers of his narrative, there is also a way in which his conclusion is precisely correct: we do talk to each other across time and space via the written word, even if we don't always think of it literally. Equiano thus brings a new insight to an activity so often taken for granted.

Chapter 4 Quotes

❝ I not only felt myself quite easy with these new countrymen, but relished their society and manners. I no longer looked upon them as spirits, but as men superior to us; and therefore I had the stronger desire to resemble them, to imbibe their spirit, and imitate their manners. I therefore embraced every occasion of improvement; and every new thing that I observed I treasured up in my memory.

Related Characters: Olaudah Equiano (Gustavus Vassa) (speaker)

Related Themes:

Page Number: 51

Explanation and Analysis

Equiano has spent a good deal of time, by this point, among Europeans, and thus he has been able to lose the terror that he initially (and for good reason) had felt around Europeans, He has also learned that some white people are far crueler, and some kinder, than others. One possible response that Equiano might have to his continued status as a slave among Englishmen is to rebel against everything they represent. But Equiano chooses another path: seeking to learn and imitate as much as he can about English culture.

By claiming that Europeans are in many ways "superior" to Africans, Equiano is helping to reinforce a stereotype about racial superiority that worked to justify slavery and the slave trade. At the same time, it's important to keep in mind that Equiano, who has shown himself to be clever and quick-witted, also knows how to act strategically. By saying that he agrees with European "superiority"—and by showing through his own narrative that it is indeed possible for an "inferior" African to learn all the customs, manners, and culture of Europe—he can refute another major justification for slavery, the idea that slaves cannot change or "improve." Equiano prioritizes challenging this justification particularly because, torn from his own culture and home at such a young age, his best chance of surviving and thriving is to work within the logic of his new life.

❝ He taught me to shave, and dress hair a little, and also to read in the Bible, explaining many passages to me, which I did not comprehend. I was wonderfully surprised to see the laws and rules of my own country written almost exactly here; a circumstance which, I believe, tended to impress our manners and customs more deeply on my memory.

Related Characters: Olaudah Equiano (Gustavus Vassa) (speaker), Daniel Queen

Related Themes:

Related Symbols:

Page Number: 63

Explanation and Analysis

Equiano has befriended Daniel Queen on board another ship. Like Dick Baker, or the Miss Guerins, Queen seems relatively less prejudiced than many other white people in Equiano's life. Learning to dress hair will be useful to Equiano later on in the book when he chooses hairdressing as his official trade, but more significant to him is the opportunity he has to learn to read, and particularly to read the Bible. At other points in the book Equiano emphasizes the difference between England and his home village, stressing his own desire to change and to learn European customs. Here, though, what is striking to him is that the values in the Bible are not foreign to him, but are espoused by his own people as well. This similarity will undoubtedly encourage Equiano to continue to learn more about Christianity, and to grow confident that Christianity does speak the truth, because to him there's such a universal element to Christian teachings. It will also become tragically ironic to Equiano that, despite such resemblances in moral and ethical teachings, so many so-called Christians fail to live up to their professed values.

Chapter 5 Quotes

❝ At the sight of this land of bondage, a fresh horror ran through all my frame, and chilled me to the heart. My former slavery now rose in dreadful review to my mind, and displayed nothing but misery, stripes, and chains; and in the first paroxysm of my grief, I called upon God's thunder, and his avenging power, to direct the stroke of death to me, rather than permit to become a slave, and to be sold from lord to lord.

Related Characters: Olaudah Equiano (Gustavus Vassa) (speaker)

Related Themes:

Page Number: 69

Explanation and Analysis

Equiano has been betrayed by his former master Pascal and sold to James Doran. Their ship has just reached Montserrat, where Equiano is immediately reminded of the severe suffering he underwent while captive between the African coast and Barbados. Equiano has been a slave all the while, of course, but he is clear that being a personal slave to a master like Pascal (despite this man's cruel betrayal of his trust) did not expose Equiano to the same kind of cruel and inhumane treatment that is prevalent in the West Indies. By using all the rhetorical skills at his disposal, Equiano mounts, here, a powerful case against slavery as an institution that refuses to acknowledge slaves' very humanity and natural rights as individuals. Echoing Equiano's previous description of preferring to throw himself over the ship deck and drown rather than continue in the brutal conditions aboard, Equiano's insistence here that slavery is worse than death underlines for his readers just how terrible it really is. It also flies in the face of arguments by anti-abolitionists that slaves somehow prefer to remain in bondage.

❝ Another negro-man was half hanged, and then burnt, for attempting to poison a cruel overseer. Thus, by repeated cruelties, are the wretched first urged to despair, and then murdered, because they still retain so much of human nature about them as to wish to put an end to their misery, and to retaliate on their tyrants!

Related Characters: Olaudah Equiano (Gustavus Vassa) (speaker)

Related Themes:

Page Number: 75

Explanation and Analysis

Throughout this chapter, Equiano pauses in recounting the story of his own life in order to relate a number of instances of incredibly cruel and violent treatment of slaves in Montserrat. He lingers over these examples in large part because most English people probably would never spend much time thinking about the sources of their sugar, cotton clothing, and other goods, since the origins of these goods seemed so distant. Equiano knows that it's easier not to care about cruelty when it remains abstract, so he focuses on the specific and shocking features of captivity.

He also, here, seeks to explain, if not justify, violence by slaves toward whites. This type of violence was another justification that many anti-abolitionists used to argue for the continuation of slavery. Of course, Equiano argues, those who are subjected to constant cruel treatment will

one day rise up against their masters—indeed, "human nature" makes it inevitable (yet another argument for the slaves' humanity against those who would continue to consider them as less than human). The solution is not to treat slaves even more brutally, Equiano argues, but to create a world free of "cruel overseers" entirely.

❝ For I will not suppose that the dealers in slaves are born worse than other man. No; it is the fatality of this mistaken avarice, that it corrupts the milk of human kindness and turns it to gall. And, had the pursuits of those men been different, they might have been as generous, as tender-hearted, and just, as they are unfeeling, rapacious, and cruel. Surely this traffic cannot be good, which spreads like a pestilence, and taints what it touches! Which violates that first natural right of mankind, equality; and independency; and gives one man a dominion over his fellows which God could never intend! For it raises the owner to a state as far above man as it depresses the slave below it; and, with the presumption of human pride, sets distinction between them, immeasurable in extent, and endless in duration!

Related Characters: Olaudah Equiano (Gustavus Vassa) (speaker)

Related Themes:

Page Number: 80

Explanation and Analysis

After detailing so many of the abuses suffered by slaves at the hands of their owners and dealers, Equiano makes a move here that seems surprising: he insists that slave traders and masters are not naturally evil, but are made so by their involvement in the slave trade. In fact, this argument is part of Equiano's broader world view and philosophy, one that states that people are not born a certain way and destined to remain so their entire life, but instead are able to change and improve over time. Earlier, Equiano has made this argument in order to make the case for Africans' ability to be involved in the moral and intellectual life of a place like England, despite their origin in a place with a different culture and set of customs. But Equiano is also consistent in his beliefs: if he thinks that Africans can improve and adapt, then he rationally applies this view of moral improvement to all humans.

Equiano's argument here also has to do with the effects of slavery not just on the slaves, but on anyone involved with the trade. Slavery dehumanizes black people, but it also dehumanizes whites by creating artificial distinctions between people who should be considered equal under God, and justifying behavior that should be unjustifiable. By positing a counterfactual about how the slave traders could have been more moral and good-hearted people if they had been involved in another profession, Equiano argues that all is not lost. Abolishing the slave trade will lead to moral improvement for all humanity, not just the slaves themselves.

Chapter 6 Quotes

❝ As we sailed to different islands, I laid this money out in various things occasionally, and it used to turn to very good account, especially when we went to Guadaloupe, Grenada, and the rest of the French islands. Thus was I going all about the islands upwards of four years, and ever trading as I went, during which I experienced many instances of ill-usage, and have seen many injuries done to other negroes in our dealings with whites.

Related Characters: Olaudah Equiano (Gustavus Vassa) (speaker)

Related Themes:

Page Number: 85

Explanation and Analysis

Equiano is still a slave, still bound to obey his master's will and limited in terms of his own freedom of movement, but in Montserrat his master's and captain's strong commercial bent makes them more willing to allow Equiano to participate in international commerce, as well. Equiano has just described how, beginning with barely a few pence, he's managed to grow his income and join in a thriving international system of trade—one that, of course, includes slaves as some of its most valuable goods. As with other cultural customs and traditions, Equiano has shown himself to be an adept observer and eager learner, choosing not to scorn the culture of his masters, but rather (and more pragmatically) to turn it to his own advantage.

Nonetheless, as the last phrase of the quotation makes clear, Equiano still suffers from unequal treatment that threatens to prevent him from fully becoming an independent man of commerce who is self-sufficient and able to make a fortune for himself by relying on his own cleverness. This was a powerful trope in English culture at the time—that merchants, if clever enough, could be rich and independent—but Equiano's experience shows that it was also, in large part, a myth. The supposed power and

freedom of the market only served those against whom other merchants weren't prejudiced—the "ill usage" Equiano experienced thus undermines such assumptions.

❝ However, as I was from early years a predestinarian, I thought whatever fate had determined must ever come to pass; and therefore, if ever it were my lot to be freed, nothing could prevent me, although I should at present see no means or hope to obtain my freedom; on the other hand, if it were my fate not to be freed, I never should be so; and all my endeavours for that purpose would be fruitless.

Related Characters: Olaudah Equiano (Gustavus Vassa) (speaker)

Related Themes:

Page Number: 87

Explanation and Analysis

Equiano is troubled by the notion that he may never be freed, even as he is getting a taste of what that would mean, since he has relatively more freedom of movement as he travels around the world by ship. He explains how he attempts to comply with fate by describing his "predestinarian" beliefs; that is, Equiano believes that everyone's fate is already laid out before birth, and that humans don't have the ability to change their destiny. This is a particular belief of Anglican Christianity, to which Equiano converts, and is related to the idea that God has chosen the elect and the damned in advance (that is, those who will go to Heaven and whose who will not). By noting that he believed this from "early years," though, Equiano emphasizes once again the resemblance he found (thanks in part to reading the Bible with Daniel Queen) between many Christian beliefs and those of his home country.

In some ways, the idea of predestination might seem to lead to desperation and hopelessness for Equiano, since, if he's destined to remain in captivity all his life, there's nothing he can do about it. But Equiano seems to draw hope rather than despair from such beliefs, as they help him to remain calm and steadfast, knowing that some things may be out of his control. Nonetheless, here and elsewhere in the narrative, there is something of a tension between this insistence on predestination and Equiano's drive to improve and change his own circumstances.

Chapter 7 Quotes

❝ Heavens! Who could do justice to my feelings at this moment? Not conquering heroes themselves, in the midst of a triumph—Not the tender mother who has just regained her long-lost infant, and presses it to her heart—Not the weary, hungry mariner, at the sight of the desired friendly port—Not the lover, when he once more embraces his beloved mistress, after she has been ravished from his arms!

Related Characters: Olaudah Equiano (Gustavus Vassa) (speaker)

Related Themes:

Page Number: 101

Explanation and Analysis

Equiano has just attained his freedom, after many years of captivity under many different masters. Here, in an outpouring of rhetorical exclamations, he makes a series of comparisons that are meant to underline just how powerful the feeling of liberty is for someone who hasn't experienced it since being a child. Knowing his readers will, for the most part, be unfamiliar with such a feeling, Equiano compares his sentiments with people and situations that his readers might recognize better: the mother who has lost and regained her child, for instance, or a traveler reaching home again. These comparisons make it clear that freedom is not something simply added to a former slave's life—it is something that he or she possesses naturally, like a home or a child, but which has been taken away. Equiano's manumission is thus a restoration of freedom, which as Equiano argues is the natural right of all humans, making it that much more powerful as a result.

Chapter 8 Quotes

❝ I could not help thinking, that, if any of these people had been lost, God would charge me with their lives; which, perhaps, was one cause of my labouring so hard for their preservation; and indeed every one of them afterwards seemed so sensible of the service I had rendered them, that while we were on the key I was a kind of chieftain amongst them.

Related Characters: Olaudah Equiano (Gustavus Vassa) (speaker)

Related Themes:

Page Number: 112

Explanation and Analysis

Equiano is on a ship bound for North America that is carrying slaves below deck (just as he himself was brought from the western African Coast to Barbados and then Virginia below deck) when a storm threatens all their lives. Now, Equiano is a free man, employed for wages aboard this ship. For much of the narrative, Equiano does not go into detail about the tragic paradox of the fact that, having escaped from slavery himself, he is now playing a direct role in the continuation of the slave trade (though while he never explicitly exposes this paradox, neither does he justify or seek to excuse his actions). Here, though, Equiano's implicit acknowledgement of his own role in the slave trade is joined to his growing sense of religious conviction. He feels that his responsibility for the slaves below deck is beyond a simple responsibility for their commercial value: he's also responsible for their souls. In such a way, Equiano only obliquely addresses the question of how commerce (something he's embraced in order to make it on his own) and the slave trade are indelibly linked; instead he focuses on the responsibility of all humans to each other. Both commercial and spiritual arguments, interestingly, would be employed among abolitionists in the years during and after the publication of this narrative.

Chapter 9 Quotes

Montserrat, 26th of the Seventh Month, 1767.
The bearer hereof, GUSTAVUS VASSA, was my slave for upwards of three years, during which he has always behaved himself well, and discharged his duty with honest and assiduity.
ROBERT KING.
To all whom this may concern.

Related Characters: Mr. Robert King (speaker), Olaudah Equiano (Gustavus Vassa)

Related Themes:

Related Symbols:

Page Number: 122

Explanation and Analysis

Equiano has been a so-called freeman for some time now, and yet he has agreed to continue working for his former master, Robert King, as a wage laborer instead of as a slave. Finally Equiano manages to secure King's consent to allow Equiano to return to England. King writes a certificate of good behavior, a kind of letter of recommendation, that Equiano will be able to use in seeking employment abroad. In a time in which international commerce meant that many people did travel and work all around the world (but without the modern technology that would make international communication just as simple) it was essential to have written documents vouching for a person's character and allowing him or her to draw on past experiences and expertise for new positions in new places.

It's also particularly telling that Equiano does not just describe the certificate, but rather he transcribes it word for word in his narrative. He is well-aware of the stereotypes that many white people have about the untrustworthiness and bad character of slaves and of black people in general. Much of his narrative is devoted to refuting such harmful prejudices, but, in addition, Equiano wants to make certain that his own readers trust what he is saying and consider him reliable and honest. The certificate that King writes is thus meant to vouch for Equiano to future employers, but also to Equiano's readers.

Chapter 10 Quotes

In this deep consternation the Lord was pleased to break in upon my soul with his bright beams of heavenly light; and in an instant, as it were, removing the veil, and letting light into a dark place.

Related Characters: Olaudah Equiano (Gustavus Vassa) (speaker)

Related Themes:

Page Number: 144

Explanation and Analysis

Equiano has described, throughout this chapter, how his years-long process of becoming a Christian led to one particularly intense period of soul-searching and spiritual confusion. Questions concerning the immortality of the soul and the possibility of going to heaven after one's death have preoccupied Equiano, especially because he's had trouble imagining how he ever will find answers to such monumental questions. At this moment, though, he experiences a total epiphany—what is often called a "rebirth" (hence the term "born-again Christians, for instance)—in which it seems to him that he has brief but powerful access to God and his very self is transformed. Over the centuries, many people have described such conversion experiences, and in the eighteenth century in particular spiritual autobiographies became popular. These generally had a structure describing the person's life of sin,

search for salvation, and sudden "rebirth." Equiano's narrative is in many ways indebted to this genre: indeed, part of his purpose in recounting his own self-development is to relate how he became what he thinks of as a true Christian, not just a free man and commercial merchant. For Equiano, none of these strands of his identity is more or less important than another—they all fit together and serve his purpose in exposing his character and underlining his humanity.

Chapter 11 Quotes

❝ At last he asked me, --"How comes it that all the white men on board, who can read and write, observe the sun and know all things, yet swear, lie, and get drunk, only excepting yourself?"

Related Characters: The Musquito Prince George (speaker), Olaudah Equiano (Gustavus Vassa)

Related Themes:

Page Number: 156

Explanation and Analysis

On Dr. Irving's ship to Jamaica and the Musquito Shore, Equiano has been attempting to convert the native men on board, and particularly this man, the prince, who has shown himself to be more open to learning about Christianity than the others. But—like Equiano himself—this man is a careful observer of the people around him, and he immediately notices the disconnect between the teachings in the Bible and the behavior of those on the ship around him. Such hypocrisy had, at an earlier time, devastated Equiano and almost led to his loss of faith. Since his conversion experience, however, Equiano has come to accept such a contrast as part of living in a sinful world.

What the Prince's declaration also underlines, of course, is the fact that Equiano—a convert, and a black man—is far holier and espouses the virtues of Christianity far better than the white men. This fact is meant as a harsh critique of those who would think of Africans, slaves, and indigenous people in general as "savages," instead suggesting that the true ethical hierarchy might be the other way around. And if Equiano has embraced Christian teachings enough to reflect them in his own actions better than the English themselves, this is only a further argument in favor of other black people being given the opportunity to learn and "improve" themselves, as well.

❝ Thus I hung, without any crime committed, and without judge or jury, merely because I was a freeman, and could not, by the law, get any redress from a white person in those parts of the world.

Related Characters: Olaudah Equiano (Gustavus Vassa) (speaker), Hughes

Related Themes:

Page Number: 162

Explanation and Analysis

Equiano has found a ship, captained by a man named Hughes, where he can work on the way to Jamaica (since he's left Dr. Irving's service). But when Equiano wants to leave this ship for another ship—which, as a free person, he has a legal right to do—Hughes grows enraged and prevents him from leaving, eventually having him tied up and trapped on the ship. Here Equiano addresses the injustice, both legal and moral, of his situation. The law is meant to protect its citizens from harm, and yet, in this part of the world it blocks black people, regardless of whether they are free, from bringing suit against any white people. This means that not only is the law useless in this case, but it actually enforces unjust treatment for certain people while outlawing it for others. Indeed, it is *because* Equiano is a free black man that Hughes is so angry at his behavior: for Hughes, black people, free or enslaved, are all less than human and thus undeserving of equality, and so Hughes punishes Equiano precisely because Equiano seeks to exercise his freedom, and the law blocks Equiano from being able to respond. Put another way: it is because Equiano is a free black man that he now finds himself deprived of that very freedom. Equiano stresses the particular tragedy of this paradox in that the law, in this case, punishes people not for what they do but for who they are. For someone who has struggled his entire life to act strategically and intelligently in order to survive and even become successful, this aspect of the law is particularly cruel and frustrating.

I now learned that after I had left the estate which I managed for this gentleman on the Musquito shore, during which the slaves were well fed and comfortable, a white overseer had supplied my place: this man, through inhumanity and ill-judged avarice, beat and cut the poor slaves most unmercifully; and the consequence was, that every one got into a large Puriogua canoe, and endeavored to escape; but, not knowing where to go, or how to manage the canoe, they were all drowned; in consequence of white the Doctor's plantation was left uncultivated, and he was now returning to Jamaica to purchase more slaves and stock it again.

Related Characters: Olaudah Equiano (Gustavus Vassa) (speaker), Dr. Charles Irving

Related Themes:

Page Number: 167

Explanation and Analysis

Equiano has been attempting to get back to England, having left Dr. Irving's plantation confident that he set a good example by being a more benevolent overseer than the cruel ones he remembers from the time of his own captivity. Now, though, he learns that his example was for nothing, since he was replaced by an overseer who treated the slaves cruelly and inhumanely. Throughout the narrative, there has been a tension between Equiano's ultimate goal, the abolition of slavery, and the fact that, in order to become successful (and, indeed, to become the kind of person who can publish a best-selling anti-slavery memoir), he has been involved in the slave trade himself. Here, he seems to have justified his behavior by being kinder to the slaves, even though elsewhere he's argued that there is no way to get around the fundamental injustice of captivity.

This anecdote is also another of Equiano's explanations for the behavior of slaves who revolt. They are not ungrateful, dangerous, or naturally violent; they are simply responding to an unbearable situation, and their actions should thus be taken as signs that the system itself is broken. Dr. Irving has obviously not learned this lesson—he's returning to buy more slaves, simply replenishing his property instead of restructuring his operation. In such a landscape, it's implied, the best (and perhaps only) possibility of effecting real change is on a society-wide legal basis, starting in Parliament, rather than relying on individuals to change their actions.

Chapter 12 Quotes

I hope to have the satisfaction of seeing the renovation of liberty and justice, resting on the British government, to vindicate the honour of our common nature. These are concerns which do not, perhaps, belong to any particular office: but to speak more seriously, to every man of sentiment actions like these are the just and sure foundation of future fame; a reversion, though remote, is coveted by some noble minds as a substantial good. It is upon these grounds that I hope and expect the attention of gentlemen in power.

Related Characters: Olaudah Equiano (Gustavus Vassa) (speaker)

Related Themes:

Page Number: 177

Explanation and Analysis

As Equiano concludes his narrative, he turns back to the way he began: less in the mode of memoir and spiritual autobiography than in the mode of rhetoric and argument. He has hoped that the story of his life—as well as the very fact that he has ben able to recount it in a powerful way—will convince his readers of the evils of slavery. Here he insists again that his nature and that of white British people are not separate but are "common." This nature is shared because, as he argues, liberty and justice are not limited to only one race of people, but are the foundational rights of all humans.

On one hand, Equiano has made a number of arguments that are legal in nature against the slave trade: one of his particular tasks is to convince Parliament to actually change the law. But he also hopes to change people's hearts and minds in general, and so he emphasizes the extent to which the question of slavery isn't *solely* a legal question but also a moral one, one that's relevant to everyone. Anyone, then, who reads his work (not just the "gentlemen in power" to whom he directly addresses his narrative) should be able to read the work with interest and be affected by it, perhaps even inspired to work against slavery as well.

Population, the bowels, and surface of Africa, abound in valuable and useful returns; the hidden treasures of centuries will be brought to light and into circulation. Industry, enterprise, and mining, will have their full scope, proportionably as they civilize. In a word, it lays open an endless field of commerce to the British manufacturers and merchant adventurers. The manufacturing interest and the general interests are synonymous. The Abolition of slavery would be in reality an universal good.

Related Characters: Olaudah Equiano (Gustavus Vassa) (speaker)

Related Themes:   

Page Number: 179

Explanation and Analysis

Equiano's arguments against slavery balance the legal and moral questions at stake. Here, though, he also brings in something that has been considered a more or less unchallenged positive force throughout the narrative: wealth, commerce, and international trade. Equiano has made it to his current position in large part because he learned the rules and strategies of a growing international system of commerce so well. Indeed, even while he was a slave he reenacted a much longer history of trade, beginning with one small coin and eventually enriching himself through a thriving system. In some ways, Equiano's participation in this system has seemed paradoxical, both because he's actually helped to carry slaves on ships himself, and because his identity as a Christian might seem at odds with his insistence on wealth as a force for good.

Equiano never explicitly discusses such questions, but this avoidance may itself be part of his broader strategy in studying, adopting, and mastering the customs of his masters in order to outplay them at their own game. In addition, he knows his audience, for whom the attractiveness of international commerce is taken for granted. By claiming that abolishing slavery is not just morally or legally beneficial, but commercially attractive as well, Equiano thus makes a powerful argument against the slave trade. Nonetheless, he depicts a possible future in which Europe has not at all withdrawn from Africa, but rather continues to meddle in its affairs, though this time through a system based on wage labor and consumption rather than on slavery.

SUMMARY AND ANALYSIS

The color-coded icons under each analysis entry make it easy to track where the themes occur most prominently throughout the work. Each icon corresponds to one of the themes explained in the Themes section of this LitChart.

DEDICATION

Olaudah Equiano, also known as Gustavus Vassa, dedicates his book to the Lords of Parliament in England, stating that the purpose of his book is to provoke feelings of compassion for his countrymen who have been beaten down by the horrors of the slave trade. While Equiano too suffered, he now is grateful to have gained knowledge of Christianity and of the nation of Britain.

Equiano emphasizes his own trajectory from unlettered African to Christian British citizen, and he stresses that the opportunities made available to him shouldn't be barred to other people who look like him and come from his country.

Equiano states his hope that the fact that someone like him is speaking for such a cause will excuse any literary weaknesses on his part, since he is an "unlettered African." He urges his readers to consider abolition when the question arises in parliament.

Instead of writing a political tract or rhetorical speech, Equiano believes that a memoir is best suited to convincing readers of his own humanity.

PREFACE

The preface, anonymously written for the 1814 edition of the book, lists the names of subscribers to the book's first edition, that is, those who had paid in advance to be fund its publication. Since the book's story was true, it sparked readers' compassion more than an address in government would have done. Many other people, though, tried to cast doubt on Equiano's character, arguing that he was born in the West Indies, not in Africa.

By 1814, the slave trade has been abolished in England—in great part thanks to Equiano's narrative, which has by now been published in a number of editions and languages. But this preface also points to a debate about the legitimacy of Equiano's identity, and by extension the legitimacy of his arguments.

The preface also notes that some people objected to Equiano's Calvinist religion, and others argued that his opinions should be discounted because, as an African, he would simply parrot the opinions of others. Yet another objection is that it's written too well and therefore Equiano must have had some help. After dismissing these claims, the preface writer expresses a wish that Equiano had lived to see the bill for the abolition of the slave trade get passed in March 1807—a bill that Equiano helped to bring about.

The preface lists these objections in order to refute and dismiss them, implying that Equiano's narrative itself successfully preempts such criticisms. In addition, the fact that the book helped to trigger the abolition of the slave trade is yet more proof of its power over many readers and even over national politics.

CHAPTER 1

Equiano acknowledges the difficulty of escaping the charge of vanity for writing a memoir, a genre usually dealing in remarkable events. He, however, is an obscure person not known to the public. If he were a European, he might think that he's suffered greatly, but compared to his fellow Africans he feels that Providence has actually been relatively kind to him. But he insists that he doesn't seek praise: he's writing to promote the interests of humanity.

Equiano's modesty stems in part from his self-conscious identity as a Christian; but such demurrals were common for autobiographies at the time, a way for authors to preempt criticism of their work. For Equiano, though, there's another clear motive—the "interests of humanity" that include the slave trade.

Equiano describes the kingdoms of Africa in Guinea, where the slave trade takes place. Within the kingdom of Benin is an inland province named Essaka, where he was born in 1745. As a child he remained ignorant of white men and Europeans. His father was an elder, an "Embrenche" or judge, given a mark of honor consisting of cutting the skin from the forehead to the eyebrows: Equiano, too, was destined to receive it.

After his initial message to the reader, Equiano begins his autobiography in earnest, beginning with his birth. He knows that European readers will mostly be ignorant of African customs and culture, and he takes on the role of cultural messenger between Africa and Europe.

In the village, adultery was punishable by slavery or death: one time the judges were about to sentence a woman to death, Equiano recalls, but she was spared because she had an infant child. Usually marriages were arranged by parents, who organized a feast and tied a cotton string around the woman's waist. The cotton string was worn only by married women, who were considered to be their husband's property. Land, slaves, cattle, and other materials were given as dowry by friends on both sides: the celebrations ended with music and dancing.

Equiano begins a long set of descriptions of the culture and customs of the place he came from. He insists on strong—even harsh—moral precepts, which would seem familiar to a British audience for whom adultery was also a grave sin. The marriage ceremony, too, would have seemed simultaneously foreign and familiar.

Indeed, public dances with music were a common way to celebrate battle victories or holidays. People dressed simply; men and women both wore muslin or calico dyed blue, the preferred color. While they were skilled at cooking, they refrained from overly luxurious meals, focusing on bullocks, goats, and poultry, with several vegetables. Cleanliness was indispensable before eating, and liquor was limited to palm wine.

One of the major distinguishing features of this society is its lack of luxury—something that Equiano will be able to contrast with the decadence and debauchery he sees among white Europeans. The society he depicts, though, is one that's not unsophisticated and pre-civilized, but rather complex in its own way.

Buildings also lacked ornament, made of dried red earth. The master of each village lived in the middle of the village, with apartments for his wives on each side. The homes of slaves and their families one-story homes with thatched reed roofs, were scattered throughout. Everyone was a skilled enough architect to construct such a home. Given that nature provided most of what was needed, there were few manufactured goods other than calico, earthware, and objects of war. Money was mostly unnecessary, though there were coins, and also markets, where Equiano often went with his mother. Slaves—who were usually prisoners of war or else convicted criminals—were sometimes sold at the markets.

This is the first time Equiano refers to slavery explicitly in his narrative, but it's not the enslavement of Africans by white Europeans; instead, he nonchalantly refers to the slavery within his own African community. Indeed, slavery as such had been around for as long as civilization had, all around the world. Equiano thus doesn't idealize his home culture, even while he emphasizes the way in which African slavery was small-scale and part of a particular context.

Equiano describes the rich, bountiful land with its corn, pineapples, spices, and honey: agriculture was the major means of employment. All contributed to the common good: there were no beggars, and most people were intelligent, hardy, and active. There was no deformity amongst them; indeed, he remembers having seen some lighter-skinned children as a child whose complexions he considered deformed.

While remaining largely objective, Equiano does seem to exhibit some nostalgia for his home. He also stresses, here, the cultural relativism of beauty. While Europeans often were prejudiced against Africans' appearance, he shows how such opinions are culturally contingent.

The common land was where people would go to till their crops, but they also often brought weapons, since the common land was where war took place. War was usually meant to gain prisoners or goods, and it was a common means of obtaining slaves in Africa. Equiano describes the guns and swords used in such battles. Once he climbed a tree to witness a battle and saw a great deal of fighting before his people won and took the enemy chief prisoner; they later sentenced him to death and divided the spoils among the warriors. Equiano's people kept other prisoners as slaves, but didn't treat them like slaves are treated in the West Indies: the slaves were almost entirely assimilated into the community, except that they weren't allowed to eat with free-born people. Indeed, some of the slaves had slaves of their own.

Slavery in the way Equiano sketches it out here is part of an intercultural context of war and politics. This certainly doesn't make it free from suffering and brutality, but it does distinguish this kind of slavery from the established, institutionalized triangle trade between Europe, Africa, and the Americas, which increasingly came to be based on race and condemned all descendants of slaves to slavery as well. Equiano doesn't hide the existence of slavery among his own people, but does emphasize these differences.

Equiano's village believed in one creator of the universe, who lives in the sun and smokes a pipe (their own favorite indulgence). He can't remember having ever heard of eternity, though some believed in the transmigration of souls, so that some would give offerings of food to departed friends or family before eating. He would go with his mother, to whom he was quite close, to make such offerings at her mother's tomb, though the darkness and gloominess of the scene frightened him. When the sun crossed the horizon line the village would make a great celebration, as well as offerings of fruit or animals.

Now Equiano shifts to describing the religion of his people, which, in some ways, he's able to relate to Christianity (there is one creator of the universe). But in addition to sketching a certain cosmology (that is, an understanding of the universe on the part of a certain culture), Equiano also uses this description as an opportunity to paint a humanizing picture of his relationship to his mother.

Equiano compares the villagers' customs of circumcision and naming children for some event, past or foretold, to Jewish customs. His own name means "fortunate," or "favored," or "well spoken" and "with a loud voice." Their curse words were mostly benign, and they were remarkable for their cleanliness and purification rites (also like the Jews). Priests calculated the time, foretold events, and served as doctors, healing wounds and countering poisoning. Indeed, the people were always careful about poison, and they held snakes as ominous (though also as potentially good omens).

Having lived in England for a number of years, and well-acquainted with the cultural traditions and knowledge of his readers, Equiano is able to make comparisons that would be relatable to this readership. Again, this is not an idealized portrait of a simple, pastoral people, but rather one that underlines the vibrant cultural life, as well as the traditions particular to this people, of which Europeans would be largely ignorant.

Concluding his sketch, Equiano suggests that there is a great analogy between his own country's customs and those of the Jews before reaching the land of Promise in the pastoral state of Genesis. He refers to a scholar, Dr. Gill, who has traced the ancestry of Africans to Abraham. Equiano adds that, like the Jews, his people's government was led by chiefs, wise men, and elders, and it also relied upon the law of retaliation.

In England, the Jews were relatively more assimilated than elsewhere in Europe, but they also were discriminated against. They preserved their own traditions—even while also sharing a common religious heritage with the Christian majority—thus proving a useful comparison for Equiano.

Equiano adds that he'll leave the question of the different skin color between Eboan Africans and modern Jews to more learned men than himself. but he does cite Dr. Mitchell's example of the Spaniards, who, since inhabiting the warmer parts of the Americas, have turned as dark as the native Indians. He hopes such an example might work against racism, since the minds of the Spaniards couldn't have changed because of their complexions. He argues that the "apparent inferiority" of Africans can much more persuasively be linked to their situation—since they are initially ignorant of Europeans' customs and language—rather than to true difference. Further oppressed by the burden of slavery, they are not treated as men. Equiano urges Europeans to remember that their ancestors were once as uncivilized as Africans, but that there's no reason those ancestors should have been made slaves. He tells them that, if they look around the world and think of themselves as superior, they should recall a **Bible** passage stating that God made all nations of men "of one blood."

In one way, the comparison to the Jews allows Equiano to propose a common ancestry for his people, the Jews, and the Christians (the Jews and Christians being tied by Abraham). Here, though, he moves from speculating about such genealogies to making a forceful case against prejudice based on skin color. While we know today that an individual's race can't change from the sun, the idea that it could was a powerful argument against the link between skin color and mental ability. Equiano adds to this argument a broader historical point about cultural change: even as he does seem to accept the "superiority" of European culture, he argues for a common history for all humans, regardless of race.

CHAPTER 2

Equiano asks to be excused for laying out in such detail the customs of his native country: he still looks upon those memories with pleasure. He continues that he was the youngest son, and thus his mother's favorite. But his happiness ended at the age of eleven. While adults were working in the fields, children often drew together to guard against kidnappers who would sometimes come. One day Equiano saw, from up in a tree, his neighbors being seized by one of them, but he blew an alarm and the children were saved.

Equiano may be excusing his descriptions as a mere indulgence, but they also played a vital role in fleshing out Equiano's history and character by lingering over his childhood and his people's customs. This relatively peaceful state, however, is always also threatened by intruders from outside the group.


One day, though, while Equiano was home with his sister, two men and a woman snuck into their home and seized them, tying their hands and carrying them through the woods. For several days they kept to the woods, and Equiano hoped to be saved, but when he saw others and cried out, his and his sister's hands and mouths were bound. His only comfort was being with his sister, but although they begged the captors to keep them together, they were soon separated.

Suddenly, Equiano's childhood is brought to a halt by the kidnapping that will irrevocably change his life. The painful separation that he experiences from his sister will turn out to be a typical experience among slaves; it's one of the most inhuman and agonizing elements of slavery that Equiano will linger over in describing the trade.


After many days, Equiano changed masters and was delivered to a chieftain with two wives, who spoke his same language and treated him rather well. He was there a month, and was sometimes trusted to wander out of the house, so he attempted to figure out where he was and how he might escape to his home.

Still within the African interior, Equiano begins to adjust to his new life, while still yearning to return home and refusing to give up his natural desire for freedom and independence.


One day, however, while Equiano was helping an elderly female slave to take care of the chickens, he tossed a pebble at one of the chickens and accidentally killed it. The old woman became enraged and said she'd make sure he'd be beaten. Frightened, he ran into the bushes and hid: soon the whole village was enlisted to hunt for him, but they didn't find him. As night fell, he began to fear he'd die in the woods, and that he might be bitten by a snake. He crept back into his master's kitchen and lay down, wishing for death. When the woman awoke, she was shocked (she'd thought he'd escaped home), and, mollified, she asked the master to be kind to him.

While Equiano's character can often seem mature throughout this narrative, it's important to remember that, for much of the tale, he is not even a teenager. He is subject to the natural fears and worries of a child and he's prone to acting impetuously and not strategically or in his best interests. But here, the compassion of the old woman—a sentiment Equiano will go on to prize—is what enables him to escape more severe punishment.

After the master's daughter died, the master went mad, and Equiano was sold again, carried again for many days through many woods and deserts. As he was brought through Africa, he picked up several different languages, which were more similar to each other than European ones. After a long time, he was shocked to find himself brought to a house where he encountered his sister. They embraced and wept, and the captors were moved: indeed, Equiano notes that he was never ill treated by them more than being tied up so he wouldn't run away. These captors allowed them to be together for a time, but soon enough his sister was sold again.

Equiano's European readers (as well as modern-day readers) may well have had only a vague idea about the specific inner workings of the slave trade, which was a vast apparatus that covered land and sea and dealt with millions of people over the course of centuries. Equiano balances an account of its complexity with an emphasis on the strange coincidences that could also be a part of being traded across such distances.


Equiano, too, was sold again, this time brought to a beautiful, fertile town called Tinmah. He first encountered sugar-cane here and was sold for 172 shells of it to a merchant, before being sold to a wealthy widow who had a son around Equiano's age. She allowed Equiano to eat with her son, which surprised him; he was treated so well that he sometimes forgot he was a slave. He was there for two months, and was beginning to reconcile himself to his situation when one morning—his companion still asleep—he was stolen away yet again. It was as if at the moment of greatest happiness, fortune deemed it necessary to usher in yet more sorrow and violence.

Equiano certainly suffers by being traded and sold from place to place and master to master, but he also exhibits here the natural curiosity and powers of observation that will become ever more evident in this character. Indeed, Equiano is always eager to learn about the details of a place's commercial activity and the customs of its people; he also is remarkably able to adapt himself to new situations, such as with the widow and her son.


Equiano then came to a land that, for the first time, had far different customs than his own: they didn't circumcise their sons, they ate without washing their hands, and they used European cross bows. They sometimes wanted to adorn Equiano as they did themselves, but he refused. He came to the banks of a huge river, which astonished him, and he was put into a canoe to paddle until night. At the end of six or seven months, he finally came to the coast.

For the first time, Equiano recognizes that he may have to encounter, and perhaps adapt to, cultures that are far more different from his than he is used to. Equiano is saved from having to adapt to these specific customs by being traded and sent away yet again, this time completing the journey across the interior.

Upon arriving, the first thing Equiano noticed was the sea holding a slave ship, waiting for cargo. He was handled by the crew to see if he was strong and healthy. The long hair, strange language, and light skin of these men convinced Equiano that they were going to kill him, and he longed to become the lowest slave in his own country. Seeing a furnace burning on the ship, and black people chained around it, he was convinced that he was going to be killed and he fainted.

While Equiano's enslavement has been, until this point, relatively haphazard, he now enters into the thriving, established industry of the international triangle trade. Equiano's description of the white traders defamiliarizes them, showing how they could seem strange and even scary to others.

Upon awakening, Equiano asked some of the black people now gathered around him if they were going to be eaten by the white men, and they tried to reassure him, giving him liquor to restore his spirits. Having never tasted liquor before, the drink only shocked Equiano more.

Though this fear might seem silly to white readers, Equiano insists on his fear in order to show just how barbarous the white slave traders were to him and other slaves.

Equiano was moved under the decks, where noxious smells assaulted him and made him too sick to eat. When he refused food, two white men whipped him. He would have jumped over the ship to kill himself, but he was chained, so he could not: indeed, he'd seen other Africans being flogged mercilessly for trying to jump.

While Equiano has suffered before, his experience on the slave ship exceeds anything he's experienced before, leading him even to prefer death to continuing to live in such a way.

Equiano found some people from his own country, who explained to him that they were being carried to the white people's land to work for them. But, given the savage, brutal nature of the captors, he still feared being killed and eaten. He asked if these white men lived in the ship, and, if not, why he'd never heard of them: they live far off, he was told. On asking how the ship moved, they said they didn't know. The white men put cloth on the masts, and they had some magical means of stopping the ship when they wanted. Equiano was convinced the white men were spirits who would sacrifice him.

Europeans at the time often referred to Africans as brutal and savage: here, Equiano reverses this language, revealing how such a description refers far more adequately to white slave traders than to the Africans they enslaved. Now well aware of how ships work, Equiano emphasizes his fears as a child in order to show just how strange, different, and terrifying such novelties were to him.

On deck one day, Equiano saw another ship nearby, and he was convinced it was stopped by magic. The white men seemed happy to see the people on the ship, and Equiano and the other slaves were transferred to the new ship and put under deck. Altogether, the stench was overpowering, and they were crammed together almost to the point of suffocating. Many people grew sick, and the women's shrieks and the groans of the dying filled the air. Equiano began to envy those who did die. One day the captors had caught a great deal of fish. After the captors ate, they did not give the leftovers to the captives: instead, they threw the rest back into the sea.

In some ways, Equiano wants to stress how much he has learned and grown (at the time of writing, he'd become an expert at sailing, for example) in order to show how capable of improvement a former slave can be. But at the same time, his belief in the ship's "magic" helps us to see how what we think of as normal civilization can be strange and different to someone from a different culture, just as any foreign culture can seem mysterious and hidden.

Another day, two captives who were chained together somehow managed to jump into the sea, followed by one other, who was sick and thus unchained. Alarmed, the crew immediately put everyone on deck back below and they managed to snatch back the third man: they flogged him mercilessly for preferring death to slavery.

Again, the circumstances aboard slave ships are so brutal and dehumanizing that one could easily prefer death. It's in the traders' interest, meanwhile, to keep their "property" alive even while treating them cruelly.

This voyage was also Equiano's first experience of flying fishes, as well as of the quadrant, which astonished him, persuading him once more of his captors' magical abilities.

Again, Equiano's suffering coexists with his natural curiosity and his fascination with the world around him.

Finally they arrived at the island of Barbados, where merchants and planters came aboard to examine the slaves. The slaves were told they were going to be taken to work for the white people, together with others from their native countries. They were led to the merchant's yard and enclosed like sheep. Equiano marveled at the multi-story brick homes and people on horseback.

Barbados is the second stop on the triangle trade between Africa, the Americas, and Europe. Equiano recounts how the slaves are treated as animals more than as human beings, and he continues to both fear and marvel at the new things, such as horses, that he's never witnessed before.

After several days came the market sale. Family and friends were separated cruelly. Equiano marvels that these so-called Christians failed so immensely at the golden rule of treating one's neighbor like oneself. Wresting one's loved ones away from each other is, he argues, the height of cruelty.

Like Equiano's separation from his sister, these separations underline the way in which the slave trade thoughtlessly disturbs the powerful bonds of love and family.

CHAPTER 3

Equiano stayed several weeks on the island before being shipped off for North America. In Virginia, he worked on a plantation for a few weeks until, his companions sold and dispersed, he was alone and had no one he could understand. One day, grieving and desiring death, he was sent to the estate master's house to fan him. There he saw a female slave loaded with an iron muzzle so that she couldn't speak or eat. While he fanned the gentleman, he looked about the room and saw a clock hanging on the chimney. He was afraid at its noise and thought it might tell the master if Equiano did something wrong. Then he saw a portrait that seemed to look at him and he was even more frightened, thinking it might be a spirit that the white men kept after their death. Here Equiano was called Jacob, while aboard the ship he'd been called Michael.

Equiano moves on to another stop in the triangular trade: laboring on an American plantation (while the slave traders pick up raw materials to bring back to England to be processed). Here he is introduced to yet more examples of the inhumane treatment of slaves, here in the form of painful physical bondage. As with the ship masts or the quadrant, the clock and portrait serve to emphasize how foreign this culture was to Equiano, and how much he has learned between this time and the time of writing his narrative.

Then, Equiano says, God smiled on him. One day the captain of a merchant ship, Michael Henry Pascal, arrived on business to the master's (Mr. Campbell's) house. He liked the look of Equiano and bought him for between 30 and 40 pounds, as a gift to his friends in England. Equiano was taken to the ship, where he was treated much more kindly: he started to think that perhaps not all white people were equally cruel. Though he didn't know what would happen to him, he had begun to pick up a little English, and some aboard said that he was being carried back to his own country. This would prove false, but at the time it made him happy.

Equiano often has a precise recollection of the amount for which certain goods are sold. Slaves were considered goods, and by noting the price for which Pascal bought him, Equiano signals the absurdity of affixing the value of a human at thirty to forty pounds. Nonetheless, Equiano is shown to be discerning and generous, willing to judge white people based on their behavior rather than lumping them all together (as so many whites have done to Africans).

Pascal named Equiano "Gustavus Vassa." While Equiano said he'd prefer to be called Jacob, Pascal refused, and Equiano was whipped repeatedly until he agreed to respond to the name. During the journey, the crew often joked that they'd kill and eat Equiano, though Equiano believed them to be serious.

Under threat of force, Pascal attempts to change and control who Equiano is by changing is name. Ironically, though, Gustavus Vassa was a Swedish king who led a war of liberation against Denmark in the 1500s—making it an appropriate name, then, for Equiano who works for his own and, later, other slaves' liberation throughout his life.

One young boy aboard—Richard Baker, an American who'd gotten a good education—was kind to Equiano and they became inseparable. Baker had slaves himself, but he grew close to Equiano and they often suffered together and embraced during frightening moments aboard ship. Their friendship continued until Baker's death in 1759, which Equiano continues to lament, remarking on the fact that a 15-year-old had a mind free of prejudice towards an ignorant stranger and slave like himself.

Here, as in other cases, the narrator writing down his memoirs intrudes in order to jump ahead to later events: the effect here is to amplify the tragic tone, given that Equiano's first earnest friendship with a white person would end so soon. Equiano also recognizes how difficult it is for someone in a culture that judges blacks as inferior to go against such prejudice.

One night a man was lost overboard, and, amid the cries, Equiano again feared he'd be killed. The next day they saw large fishes, grampuses, which Equiano believed were rulers of the sea. Just then the wind died away, and he assumed the fish had caused this. Dick (Richard) told Equiano that these creatures would eat anyone, alarming him even more, but the captain laughed at Equiano's fears.

In this section, Equiano's continued fears and sufferings are juxtaposed closely, even abruptly, with examples of his curiosity and desire to learn more about everything around him. Indeed, Equiano's narrative is proof that intense suffering and the life beyond it can coexist.

After 13 weeks they caught sight of land and reached Falmouth, where the captain got provisions for a feast. It was spring 1757 and Equiano was nearly twelve: he found the pavement and buildings in Falmouth remarkable, as well as the snow, which fell the next day. He asked a sailor what the use of snow was, and the sailor said that snow was made by the great God in the heavens, though Equiano didn't understand.

Now Equiano reaches the final leg of the triangular trade that makes up the international slave trade: it's in Europe that the raw materials from the West Indies are converted into finished products to be brought back to Africa. Equiano's curiosity and desire to learn stands out here, too.

Equiano went to church, though he failed to understand what it meant. Dick began to instruct Equiano, and Equiano started to become impressed at the white people's wisdom, as well as at the fact that they didn't sell each other, as his own people did. But Equiano was also shocked that white people didn't make offerings or wash their hands before eating; he also found the women's slenderness less attractive. He often saw Pascal and Dick reading and wanted to "talk to the books" in order to discover the origin of the world, which is what he thought they were doing. He often talked to a book himself, and was frustrated at its silence.

Rather than shunning the culture of those who have enslaved him, Equiano is fascinated by it. At the same time, though, he possesses a clear capacity for judgment and critical thinking by comparing Africa with England. The anecdote about books emphasizes Equiano's relative ignorance at this stage, but books that "talk" can also be read as a metaphor for his own process of education and self-development.

Pascal and Equiano lodged at a gentleman's house where there was a daughter, about the age of seven, who was fond of Equiano. Then they departed again for Guernsey, home to one of the ship's owners, a merchant, Nicholas Doberry. There, he and Dick were left for several months with the family of one of the ship's mates. There was another little daughter who also liked Equiano, and Equiano noticed that his face didn't become rosy like hers when he washed it; he was ashamed he couldn't make it so. The mother, though, was kind to him and taught him as though he were her own child.

Equiano isn't in charge of his own movements here—he's as unfree as he was in Barbados or Virginia, though his life has become better. His narrative fleshes out the lived experience of slavery by lingering over details that would be alternately familiar and foreign to readers: details that would help them understand Equiano to be someone relatable, and someone who should be considered a human being.

Several months later Pascal sent for Equiano and Dick and they sailed to England. At first Equiano was amazed by the quantity of men and guns, but soon his constant astonishment began to ease, as did his grief, especially since there were other boys on board. They traveled to Holland, Scotland, and other places, and often played on deck: the men sometimes had the boys fight for several shillings. Equiano also learned more about seamanship and was even taught to fire the guns. One night they encountered a French-built ship ashore and were preparing to battle when the ship lifted English colors. A bit disappointed, Equiano returned to Portsmouth without seeing any battles.

As a young boy, Equiano is impressed at the novelties around him, and easily adaptable to new situations. Here, the descriptions of his time playing with other boys helps to flesh out a characterization of him as a child, like any other, who enjoys playing and is impressed by battles. This makes him seem distant from being a black slave or laboring worker.


Equiano arrived in London to lodge with a relative of Pascal and his two amiable sisters, the Miss Guerins. Equiano grew ill, first with chilblains and then with the pox, but he soon recovered. Afterwards, he went with Pascal to Holland to carry the late Duke of Cumberland to England. During this time, Equiano saw one young sailor cursing wickedly. While cursing, some dirt particles fell into the sailor's left eye, and within a week he lost it—Equiano considered this a judgment from God.

Unaccustomed to the new climate of England, Equiano, like many other Africans brought to Europe, falls ill. This was a "property" cost that traders took for granted. This is also one of the first times Equiano uses a story from his own experience to begin to make a case for the role of Providence in all human affairs.


Pascal was appointed a lieutenant on board the Royal George, so Equiano joined him, but they left behind Dick, whom he was never to see again. Equiano marveled at the enormous size of the ship and its many stalls for goods. Soon, Pascal was appointed to another ship that was preparing for an expedition to America. After being blown to Tenerife by winds, they continued on and arrived at St. George in Halifax, and then at Cape Breton in summer 1758. They were supposed to attack at Louisburgh as part of the French and Indian War.

Much of Equiano's life in captivity consists of painful separations. He takes solace from his difficult situation in the relationships he develops with others, and yet those relationships remain fragile, subject to the whims of his masters. Here, too, Equiano joins the wars currently going on between the French (allied with Native Americans) and the English.

The land forces laid siege to the town, while the fleet pursued the French in the harbor, setting some of their ships afire. Finally Louisburgh was taken, and the navy officers entered the harbor in triumph. Some admirals left for England, but one night those who remained caught sight of a French fleet. Each ship prepared for a fight, and the Englishmen pursued the French fleet all night, though they never caught up to it.

The French and Indian War, also known as the Seven Years' War (1754-1763), was a part of a broader global war between Imperial England and France (the costs of the war in the American colonies helped to spur the American Revolution). Equiano eventually is involved in battles of this war all around the world, not just in the Atlantic. That, as a slave, he is caught up in battles to help one enslaving imperial nation versus another enslaving imperial nation is ironic, to say the least. ..

CHAPTER 4

Equiano was now accustomed to his new life, especially given the kind treatment by Pascal, which allowed his fear to ebb. Equiano's English got much better, and he considered the white men's society and manners to be superior to his own, so he strove to improve himself. He had long wanted to learn to read and write but he had never had the chance. When he returned to London, however, the Miss Guerins sent him to school

With growing familiarity, Equiano ceases to fear that he'll be eaten or killed; instead—and understandably, given his curiosity and adaptability—he is drawn towards the culture of his captors. His designation of it as "superior" should be understood in the context of the opportunities now open to him.

The Miss Guerins told Equiano that he could only go to Heaven if he were baptized, which made him uneasy, since he had a vague understanding of what that meant. He shared this with one of the sisters, and she told him she'd insist to Pascal that Equiano be baptized. In February 1759, then, he was baptized in Westminster.

Having learned about Christianity, and eager to participate in the new customs around him, Equiano joins the Christian religion. It's a complex moment that shows the tension between forced colonization and free agency.

Equiano accompanied the Miss Guerins all throughout London, though sometimes he stayed by Westminster Bridge with Pascal. There, he played outside with other boys, and once he nearly drowned when he fell from a small boat into the Thames (he was saved by a passing boatman).

Short anecdotes like this point to Equiano's insecurity, lacking a true parent figure, but they are also examples meant to flesh out his life as a precocious boy prone to troublemaking like any other.

Soon the ship Namur was again ready to go to sea, and Equiano was sorry to leave his schoolmaster and the sisters, who had taught him to read and instructed him in religion. In spring 1759 they sailed for Gibraltar, where Equiano went ashore and, as he often did, related to a few people the story of his kidnaping and separation from his sister. Here, a man told him he knew his sister, but on being led to her, Equiano saw that she was a black woman from another country.

Equiano may find it relatively easy to assimilate to English life (and he has adapted to this life well), but ultimately his time and decisions are not his own—they are subject to the will of his master, Pascal, even if Pascal isn't cruel like the slave sailors. The international aspect of the slave trade also emerges from this anecdote.

Meanwhile the ship Preston came to Gibraltar from the Levant, and Pascal told Equiano he might see Dick again. But Equiano learned from the Preston's crew that his companion was dead; Equiano was given some of Dick's belongings as a memorial. In Gibraltar he saw strange things, too, such as a soldier hanging by the heels.

The friendships that Equiano has forged while a slave have been strong, but also fragile and subject to both the dangers of seafaring and the pain of separation.

They continued up the Mediterranean to Barcelona, which proved charming to Equiano. They then went to Toulon to intercept a fleet of French battleships and there was an impressive battle: two French ships were sunk, though their sailors mostly survived. They sailed back to Gibraltar where, one night, there was a rumor of a French fleet approaching. They hastily prepared the ship and set off after the fleet, chasing it all day before finally managing to fire at the commander. This started a battle, and Equiano was stunned by the loud guns. After what seemed like an eternity, they triumphed over the French, taking three ships captive, while the others fled, though they eventually managed to set fire to a few of them. During this next battle, Equiano saw a number of his companions blown to pieces, and Pascal was wounded, but Equiano took solace in recognizing that even his own death would be part of God's plan.

Another genre that could categorize Equiano's narrative is the travel memoir, which grew in popularity in the eighteenth century due to the increased possibilities for travel and international exchange (often related to the slave trade). But while Equiano pays attention to the sights as a kind of early tourist, his travels are also more than sightseeing: here he participates again in a skirmish related to the battles between England and France. Equiano positions himself firmly on the English side, as he risks his life for the country. This helps to account for some of his growing attachment and sense of belonging to the nation.

After the battles, Pascal and Equiano moved from their ship to another, the Aetna fire-ship, where Equiano was well-treated and had time to work on his reading and writing. The King died around this time, which prevented their next expedition and meant that they were stationed at the isle of Wight until the beginning of 1761. Equiano found the island quite delightful, and, while he was there, a young black slave was thrilled to see another of his countrymen, and ran to Equiano to embrace him. Although Equiano was initially unnerved, they became friends and saw each other often until he left.

Again, Equiano emphasizes the way in which national interests come to press closely on his own experiences. Rather than shunning England as a result of his captivity, he finds greater power in embracing the world of his masters and working within it as best he can. This anecdote also underlines the alienation of being dark-skinned in a place where that is rare.

During this time, Equiano began to see everything marvelous or extraordinary as proof of Providence. John Mondle, a rather immoral seaman, was an example of this. One night Mondle awoke so afraid that he couldn't remain in his cabin: he'd been warned by St. Peter in a dream to repent. One of his shipmates laughed at him, but Mondle vowed to stop drinking liquor and to begin to read Scripture. Despite this, he was still agitated: at seven a.m. a cry was raised that the ship was about to be dashed by another, a forty-gun ship called the Lynne. Mondle raced up to the deck, and just then the ship rammed into theirs, hitting the middle of Mondle's cabin. Had he not been disturbed by Providence, Equiano concluded, Mondle surely would have died. Though all feared their ship would sink, the crew managed to save it, keeping it afloat until it arrived at Belleisle to be repaired.

Equiano has learned about Providence—that is, the work of God intervening in human affairs—through the Miss Guerins, who encouraged him to be baptized. Providence is a helpful and useful framework for him to make sense of the world around him, a world in which people often only narrowly escape from death or danger. Naturally bright and curious, Equiano seeks out reasons to account for extraordinary events (just like the reasons masts push ships onward or why a quadrant works) and he finds Providence to be a compelling answer.

This anecdote reminds Equiano of another, at Plymouth in 1758 when, one night, a woman nursing a child fell from the upper deck into the hold. Though all assumed she'd die, she wasn't hurt—nor was Equiano when the same happened to him. Equiano saw the hand of God in such affairs.

Again, moments of danger and near brushes with death lead Equiano to seek an explanatory framework for such events, pushing him further towards the Christian faith.

After repairing the ship, the crew prepared to embark, but they were prevented by the arrival of more French ships. Their own lieutenant was killed in the ensuing battle. Equiano was ordered ashore to acquire the materials necessary for a siege, so he witnessed the battle from afar. But cannons soon began to be shot in his direction, so he ran away, sneaking along the seashore. He happened to come across a horse, which he couldn't make go faster than a slow trot. Then he encountered another Englishman, who helped him by whipping the horse so severely that the horse raced away—Equiano was amazed that he wasn't hurt.

Equiano is not on the ship himself for the frightening battle, but he too faces danger while he's ashore looking for materials. Much of the narrative has been (and will continue to be) composed of brief episodes and anecdotes, as Equiano relies upon the popular genre of the adventure tale (related to the travel narrative) that concerns itself with a strong protagonist fighting against hostile elements.

Equiano's crew besieged the citadel until it surrendered in June and they took the island. Equiano witnessed many battles over the next months. The next year, the ship was sent to Guernsey, where Equiano happily spent time with his old hostess and her daughter, before continuing on to Portsmouth and then to London, where they learned they'd be paid. Equiano, like the others, was thrilled to hear this, thinking he might finally be able to complete his education.

The battles between England and France continue, and Equiano, though subjugated by English traders, ironically comes to play a vital role in defending England's national interests from its own imperial enemy. At the same time, Equiano is aware that his best chances for freedom and independence lie in education.

While still aboard, a sailor named Daniel Queen grew attached to Equiano. Queen taught Equiano to shave and to dress hair, and he explained **Bible** passages to Equiano, during which Equiano realized that the laws of his own country were to be found almost exactly written in the Bible. He would often tell Queen of this resemblance, and he began to be known as the "black Christian." Sometimes he was even called by Queen's name. Equiano loved Queen like a father, and, when Queen said he would instruct Equiano in his business, Equiano began to hope that Pascal—who, after all, treated him kindly and seemed concerned about his moral education—might finally free him.

Equiano has already shown an interest in the commonalities between Jews and Africans. Here he's not thinking about how one group might descend from another. Instead he's inspired by such resemblances, which seem to suggest that Africans too have access to the universal salvation that Christianity claims for everyone, and which he now believes in. This is a powerful way that Equiano seeks to reconcile his two cultures and traditions.

In December the ship arrived in London. As it sailed into port, Pascal suddenly forced Equiano into a barge, saying he had to prevent Equiano from escaping. Stunned, Equiano asked if he could get his books and clothes, but Pascal said that Equiano couldn't leave his sight. Equiano said he was free—that Pascal couldn't by law treat him like this—but Equiano's words enraged Pascal even more. Pascal steered to a ship heading to the West Indies, under Captain James Doran. After Doran and Pascal deliberated, Doran announced to Equiano that Equiano was now his slave. Equiano countered that he could not be sold: though his master did buy him, he has served Pascal for many years while Pascal has taken his wages. Besides, now that he's baptized no one has a right to sell him—he's heard a lawyer say so. Doran said Equiano spoke too much English, and if he kept at it Doran would find other ways to silence him.

Pascal's sudden betrayal is terrifying and shocking to Equiano, who had begun to believe that it might be possible to be freed by a master who treated him better than many white masters. Here, though, Pascal's kindness turns out only to mask an even greater cruelty: knowing he has far greater power than Equiano, and that he stands to benefit personally from selling Equiano away, he loses any humanitarian streak he may have had. Equiano mounts a powerful case for himself by basing his arguments on the very laws and traditions of England, but to no avail.

Pascal took away Equiano's coat, leaving him with only the nine guineas – a type of coin – he'd managed to save over the years. After watching Pascal go back to the barge he threw himself onto the deck, distraught.

Usually so at ease with language, Equiano, at this point, is so betrayed and frustrated that language itself fails him.

CHAPTER 5

Equiano wondered if this, a new slavery, might be God's punishment for his sins. He recalled swearing rashly at one point, berating himself for his weakness, and asking God to forgive him. After weeping and grieving for a time, he grew calmer, thinking this was God's way to teach him wisdom and resignation.

Although Equiano does condemn Pascal, he also finds it necessary to look at his own actions; he's potentially mollified by the fact that Pascal's betrayal was God's will.

While the ship was anchored at Portsmouth, Equiano tried any way he could to make his way back to shore; once he even paid someone to fetch him a boat, but the man left with the money and never returned. Some of his old shipmates did come to see him off at Portsmouth, bringing him oranges and other tokens. On the 30th of December, when they set sail, Equiano was devastated at his prisoner status, and he reproached his fate, wishing he'd never been born. Here, Equiano intrudes on the narrative to reproduce a poem, "The Dying Negro," originally published in 1773. Then he recalls that, once he grew calm, he renewed his desire to come to terms with his fate.

Knowing that what awaits him in the West Indies can only be comparable to the brutality that Equiano experienced when he was first enslaved, he tries everything he can to escape. His desperation and devastation as described here are also meant to explain the actions of slaves more broadly, whether they deal with enslavement through resignation or, conversely, by attempting to run away or to rebel.

In February they arrived in Montserrat, where Equiano grew horrified at the sight of this land of slavery, which reminded him of his former bondage. He was made to help unload the ship, and two of the sailors robbed him of all his money and ran away. Now used to England's weather, Equiano suffered in the West-Indian heat and in the violent surf.

The very land of Montserrat is traumatizing to Equiano, as the West Indies in general represent one key part of the international slave trade. It's also traumatizing because he has come to forge a home for himself in England, and now, once again, he has been ripped away.

One day Doran sent for Equiano, who arrived to find Doran along with a Quaker merchant, Mr. Robert King. Doran said he'd like to keep Equiano if he were to stay in the West Indies, but he couldn't take Equiano to London, for surely he'd run away. In tears, Equiano begged him to be taken to England, but Doran told Equiano that he'd found the best master on the island. Mr. King said he'd bought Equiano on account of his good behavior, and was heading back home to Philadelphia, where he would enroll Equiano in school. Equiano left the ship, which sailed the next day, leaving him grieving. But he soon found that Mr. King was indeed kind and charitable, treating his slaves well rather than beating them.

Doran has sensed Equiano's frustration and desperation, and for him those feelings are problematic, not because Equiano is a human who suffers, but because the possibility for his escape represents a risk to the economic investment that Doran has made in his piece of "property." Nonetheless, it does seem that this Quaker (a religious group known at the time for its abolitionist views) might be a means of Equiano's eventual liberation.

Mr. King was a merchant responsible for a number of ships transporting rum, sugar, and other goods between the West Indies and Philadelphia. Because Equiano was well-trained as a seaman, he was given 10-15 pence per day to live on. The other slaves were typically given 6-9 pence and they were often lent out to other plantation owners, who would at times beat them when they asked to be paid.

Though King is kind to Equiano, he continues to participate in the slave trade himself, enriching himself off the labor of others. Equiano is writing his narrative against such benevolent maintenance of the status quo, though in his own life he's found it necessary to work within an unjust system.

Equiano knew a countryman here who was so frugal and saved so much money that he had a white man, unbeknownst to his master, buy him a boat. One day, when the governor needed a boat for a personal task, he seized the man's boat and wouldn't pay him anything. Upon complaining to his master, the slave was berated. Equiano only felt some vindication when he learned that the governor died in the King's Bench in England, not long afterward, in poverty.

This is one of a number of anecdotes that Equiano will go on to relate about the slave trade in the West Indies, tales that are meant to point out to an English and international audience just how unjust the relations between whites and blacks are, and how much power white people have over other human beings.

Mr. King, though, often tried to intercede and prevent slaves from being whipped. Once Equiano was let out to work on a ship, whose captain refused to feed him: Mr. King found out and removed Equiano from the position. King would often send Equiano on errands to different plantations, where he saw first-hand how cruelly many of the slaves were mistreated; he felt grateful then for the relative kindness of his master. Equiano argues that the West Indies provide proof of black men's skills in a number of complex employments, from masonry to fishing to carpentry—if black people are really so ignorant and useless, he asks, why use them as slave labor at all? These inconsistencies riddle the arguments against abolition, he argues.

Equiano is always eager to point out King's exceptional status among slave owners; implicit all the while is the contradiction between King's benevolence and his continued participation in the slave trade himself. Equiano does, though, signal another contradiction in white people's thinking: that black people are both incompetent and inferior, but also vital to the functioning of plantations, such that the abolition of slavery would lead to economic devastation. These two positions are incompatible.

Equiano often witnessed cruelties committed against slaves in the West Indies, as well as on board Mr. King's ships, but he remained powerless to do anything. White men would rape female slaves, some even less than ten years old, and in Montserrat a black man was staked to the ground and had his ears cut off, bit by bit, because he was connected to a white woman, a prostitute.

Equiano turns to two shocking examples of the cruelty of slavery. Because so many white people consider slaves as less than human—an assumption encoded into the law itself—they can get away with treating slaves violently and with total impunity.

One man told Equiano that he had sold 41,000 negroes and had once cut off a slave's leg for running away. Equiano asked how he, as a Christian, could answer to God, and the man said this was mere policy, not religion. Another black man was half hanged and then burnt for trying to poison a vicious overseer. Equiano exclaims that the wretched are treated like brutes, pregnant women are refused care, and when they're finally given over to despair, they are murdered.

Equiano exposes once again the contradictions between the moral beliefs that Europeans purport to hold and their treatment of slaves. They can only justify these actions by considering black people as less than human. Because of this, revolt and violence on slaves' part can hardly be surprising, he argues.

Equiano adds that he did know more benevolent slave owners in the West Indies who kept their slaves looking healthy and who didn't overwork them or treat them cruelly. Equiano himself would go on to manage such an estate, where the slaves were cheerful and healthy. For the opposite cases, he argues, it's no wonder that 20,000 new slaves are needed every year to fill the places of the dead. In Barbados, home to 80,000 slaves, 1,000 die every year, requiring continual shipments of new slaves from Africa..

Equiano is walking a careful balance between arguing that there are insoluble contradictions to the slave trade, and acknowledging that there are different levels of inhumanity. This strategy that allows him to push for abolition while simultaneously being a proponent of more humane treatment within the system.

In Montserrat Equiano knew a black man who managed to escape by hiding aboard a ship bound for London, but he was discovered and delivered back to his master, who pinned him to the ground and then dropped sealing wax all over his back. On islands like St. Kitt's, it was common for slaves to be branded with their master's initials and have their necks hung with heavy iron hooks. It's not surprising, then, that such treatment drove so many slaves to despair and suicide.

Many of these anecdotes are told in acute, uncomfortable, and even disturbing detail. But this level of detail is a vital element of the narrative, because it prevents readers from continuing to shut their eyes to the realities of the slave trade by thinking human beings can't possibly be as treated so horrifically.

Equiano relates that exhausted field slaves would try to steal a few moments of rest while gathering grasses to bring to market to sell; white people would sometimes take the grass from them at market without paying. He also many of them treat female slaves in particular violently (though Equiano doesn't go into details about whether this was sexual or other violence). He asks how one can expect God's judgment *not* to be brought down on the islands, by a God who insists on the sacred duties to the poor, blind, captive, and broken-hearted. Once, a man bought some pigs and chickens from Equiano aboard their ship, and then returned a day later to demand his money back. When Equiano refused, he swore he'd kill Equiano and take his money. The man was about to strike when a British seaman, not "debauched" by the West Indian climate, stepped in to prevent the assault.

Equiano makes the plight of slavery more vivid and relatable to his readers by talking about slaves not as property (like the slave traders do), but as human beings subject to exhaustion and able to be creative and strategic within the bounds of their dire circumstances. Equiano also continues to stress the contradiction in the fact that Europeans preach the Christian gospel to the "barbarian" Africans, and then fail to treat them as the Bible says all should be treated.

Equiano quotes an act of the Assembly of Barbados, stating that if a black person, having been punished for escape or crime against his master, is wounded or killed, no fine shall be paid; but if anyone kills a black man of his own will, he must pay 15 pounds sterling. Equiano condemns this act as unjust and barbarous, worse than the customs and morality of a Hottentot.

Slavery is not just a moral matter; inequality is also encoded into the legal structure of places like Barbados. Equiano switches the stereotypical terms of 'civilized' and 'savage' by calling an African tribe more civilized than English culture.

Equiano also relates an account, told to him by an abolitionist, of a French planter the abolitionist knew in Martinique. The planter showed the abolitionist many mulattoes laboring away in his fields, and announced that they were all his children. These lives are worth no more than fifteen pounds sterling, Equiano writes, arguing that the slave trade is only made possible by breaking down virtue and burying all sentiments. Equiano's own heart has often been seized by witnessing violent, painful separations of husbands from wives or children from their parents, none of whom will ever see each other again.

Much of the power of Equiano's narrative stems from the fact that it is a first-person testimony of what he has witnessed and experienced, but he also uses his narrative as a means of recording a wide variety of non-personal experiences associated with the slave trade. "Virtue" was a key Enlightenment-era attribute in European society, and Equiano uses it now against Europeans themselves.

Once, a Creole man, who worked as a servant in Montserrat, told Equiano that his sole leisure was to go fishing, but that his employer always took the fish away. In a fair world, his employer would be the person he'd appeal to for justice: but in his situation, he could only appeal to God. Equiano encouraged him in this, saying that there was no possibility of retribution on earth, so he should seek it in heaven.

It is not only slaves that are subject to cruelty and violence; any person darker-skinned than the European colonizers is subject to injustice. Equiano's turn to Christianity can be see here, in part, as resulting from his resignation to the lack of justice available on earth.

Equiano argues that cruel treatment was not confined to a few places, but was common across the world. He can't imagine that slave traders are born worse than others: it must be the pursuit of slavery itself that corrupts them. This practice violates equality, mankind's first natural right, by giving one man mastery over another. In enslaving men, Equiano states, one deprives them of their virtue and forces them to live in a state of war. Owners claim that the slaves aren't faithful, just as they subjugate them cruelly and then argue that they're incapable of learning. Such arguments are shameful for men of reason. If slaves were only treated as men, there would be no cause to fear rebellion; they would be faithful, intelligent, and peaceful.

If such cruelty had been limited to a certain place or set of places, one could argue that these were aberrations and that slavery could continue simply by weeding out the worst examples of it. By stressing that such treatment is ubiquitous, Equiano shows how the very system itself, including the logic of inequality by which it structures society, is flawed. He powerfully uses the very kind of reason so prized in Enlightenment England to refute the logical arguments of those who seek to maintain the institution.

CHAPTER 6

Equiano could never list all the examples of oppression and cruelty that he witnessed in the West Indies, common as they are. Now he describes another kind of sight he witnessed, a curiosity called Brimstone-hill, from which one could see steam arising from naturally boiling ponds, all of different colors. Equiano had taken some potatoes there, thrown them into a pond, and within a few minutes they were boiled (though too sulfurous to eat). Another night, he was shaken awake, feeling like the house was besieged by spirits. Later, he was told it was an earthquake.

Even while Equiano is eager to recount all the examples of systematic oppression that he has experienced in the West Indies, he also never loses his curiosity and sense of wonder that embodies the way he sees the world. This is another contradiction of the slave trade for Equiano: it's at once devastating and oppressive, but it's also the means by which Equiano develops his own sense of self and of the world.

Towards the end of 1763 Providence was again kind to Equiano. One of King's ships was captained by an Englishman Thomas Farmer, whose sailors tended to get drunk and run away from the ship. Farmer took a liking to Equiano, and finally convinced King to allow Equiano to be hired by Farmer. Equiano became the most useful sailor, but King would still not permit Equiano to leave harbor with the ship. Finally, he ceded. Equiano was delighted to become a sailor again, thinking he might make a little money and perhaps even have the chance to escape. That, though, proved impossible, as he was rarely out of Farmer's sight, though the captain did treat him relatively well.

By this time, Equiano has developed a great deal of expertise as a sailor, and he has also acquired a reputation for being trustworthy and reliable. Sailing for Equiano is appealing because there are chances for him to make money himself and take advantage of the commercial prospects of the other ship merchants. Though he acknowledges being treated fairly well, this is never enough for Equiano, who still yearns for freedom.

Equiano decided to try his luck in commerce, beginning with the three-pence that was all he owned. He bought a glass tumbler with it in St. Eustatia, and sold it in Montserrat for six-pence. Little by little he continued, and, in barely six weeks, he had made what felt like a fortune. He did this for four years, always remaining acutely aware of the unfair treatment given to black merchants.

Having witnessed the ways in which white people amass huge fortunes thanks to the triangular trade of slaves, raw goods, and finished products (and knowing his chances for freedom are still low) Equiano decides to work within the system for now to benefit from it as much as he can.

Once, in Santa Cruz, Equiano and another black man both went ashore to try to sell their fruits when they were met by two white men who seized their bags. At first the men seemed to be joking, but then they began to swear and make threats. Equiano and his friend showed them their ship, saying they came from Montserrat, but now the white men saw that they were strangers as well as slaves. The men took up sticks to begin to beat them, and Equiano ran away, losing all of his fortune. He and the other black man went to the fort's commanding officer, but this man, too, threatened to beat the two men. Finally, they returned to the white men and begged for their fruits back: others in the house finally agreed to give back two of the three bags. In spite of all of this, they got a good price for the fruits at market, a favorable sign from Providence.

Like the other ship merchants, Equiano is attracted by the mobility and chances for attaining a fortune that sailing invites. But this anecdote reveals that the rules and opportunities for commercial activity in this world are far different for slaves and for black men than they are for white men. Commerce and trade do rely on a certain level of trust, and trust is what Equiano simply cannot expect or hope for when there is such systematized inequality between the races. Nonetheless, Equiano remains optimistic and committed to making his fortune despite all challenges.

At St. Kitt's, Farmer lent Equiano some money to buy a **Bible**, which he'd been without since being forced out of the Aetna. There, too, a strange occurrence happened. A white man wanted to marry a free black woman, but as this was not allowed in the church, so they performed the ceremony on a ship before returning to Montserrat.

This anecdote implies a reason for Equiano's continued fascination with the sea: it's a place where the normal rules and entrenched inequalities of society—such as the prohibition on marriage between a black and white person—don't apply.

Equiano's mind was continually, at this time, plagued by the thoughts of freedom, and by the realization that it would be best to be freed honestly. Being a "predestinarian," he thought that he couldn't know whether it was his fate to be freed or to be not, so he prayed anxiously to God, while also doing all he could to procure his freedom. He continued to save all the money he made in order to buy his liberty.

A predestinarian is someone who believes that God has decreed everyone's fate in advance, and that it is impossible for people to change their destinies. All he can do, then, is hope that God has decreed that he will, indeed, be liberated at some point.

Several times during this period, Equiano, who never learned to swim, was close to being drowned. Equiano began to wish fervently that the long-awaited trip to Philadelphia might take place. Also during this time, a clever young mulatto, Joseph Clipson, who had a free woman for his wife, was taken by a Bermudan captain, who came on board and said Clipson wasn't free and that he had orders to bring Clipson back to Bermuda. Clipson was incredulous, but soon the captain's men grabbed him and, despite his certificate of being born free in St. Kitt's, he was taken by force from the ship and carried away.

During his time in the West Indies, it seems that Providence is no longer smiling kindly on Equiano. Knowing that Philadelphia is the center of Quaker religion and the abolitionist movement, he yearns to leave this place where a free man is in constant danger of being delivered back into slavery because of the color of his skin.

Equiano also saw examples of free men he knew in America being deprived of their liberty and sold back into bondage. He began to think that the lives of free blacks might be just as cruel, perhaps even worse, than that of slaves, for they had no possibility of retribution for crimes against them, and their liberty was constantly insecure. He asks now whether it's altogether surprising that mildly treated slaves might prefer such a state to a "mockery" of freedom.

Until now, Equiano has thought of freedom as an unquestionable good, the end of his own narrative arc (indeed, many slave narratives of the time did end with the slave attaining freedom). But once he attains it, freedom turns out to be far more fragile than Equiano originally believed.

Equiano was determined to gain his freedom and return to England. He decided it would be useful to learn as much about navigation as possible so that he might escape if mistreated, and he hired the shipmate to teach him for 24 dollars (for which Farmer later rebuked the mate, because it was too high a sum).

Understanding, now, the insecurities associated even with freedom, Equiano decides to act strategically, learning navigation in order to better his chances for attaining, and keeping, his liberty.

In Guadeloupe, they encountered a merchant ship desperate for sailors to go to France. Though Equiano thought he might be able to get to Europe that way, he decided that "honesty is the best policy," so he did not leave his master. The captain, who was sympathetic towards Equiano, began to teach him navigation,, though others disapproved of teaching a black man.

Although escape has been tempting to Equiano before, his increasingly strong religion gives him moral precepts that dissuade him from slipping away in secrecy. Racial inequality is shown here to be tied to assumptions about intellectual inferiority.

In late 1764 King bought a large ship, the Prudence, and Farmer and Equiano carried a load of slaves to Georgia and Charles Town. Although white men tried to cheat Equiano in those places, he resolved to be patient and trust in God's will.

Religion is a means for Equiano to persist through difficult circumstances and to prevent himself from slipping into despair.

In early 1765, Equiano began to prepare the ship for a voyage to Philadelphia, working hard in the hopes of eventually buying his freedom. One Sunday, though, King sent for Equiano, who arrived to find King telling Farmer that Equiano surely planned to run away in Philadelphia and that King must sell Equiano at once. Equiano objected, saying that if it was God's will that he be freed it would happen, and in the contrary case would not. He appealed to the captain, asking if he ever saw Equiano make a move to escape, and the captain confirmed that he hadn't, saying that the shipmate had probably accused Equiano of disloyalty because Equiano had told the captain of provisions the mate had stolen from the ship. His master, now convinced, said he would encourage Equiano's commercial activities, crediting him with a few supplies so that he might begin to amass money to buy his freedom for forty pounds. Delighted, Equiano thanked him.

Just like Doran, King is initially suspicious of Equiano's trustworthiness. In part, this is due to Equiano's own determination and eagerness to learn all he can in order to gain his freedom legally. But the problem of escape was a chronic one for slave traders, which challenges the disingenuous stereotype so often put forward by slavery proponents, that slaves were perfectly happy under their masters. Equiano, though, thinks quickly and strategically in order to save himself. His arguments pay off, and now Equiano is officially permitted to begin participating in commerce in order to slowly work his way to freedom.

Equiano felt overwhelmed with gratitude. The ship set sail for Philadelphia. Upon arrival Equiano was easily able to sell his goods and make some money. While there, he heard of a wise woman named Mrs. Davis, a fortune teller. At first he was skeptical, thinking Providence would not be revealed to mere mortals. But then he saw her in a dream and resolved to see her. She told him remarkable things, including that he would not be a slave much longer, but his life would be in danger twice in eighteen months.

Equiano's gratitude can be difficult for a modern reader to understand, given how small of a gesture this kindness is within the vast apparatus of slavery, but for him this feeling is also related to his religiosity—even if, as this story shows, his belief system is still evolving and open to new possibilities.

After leaving Philadelphia the ship went to Montserrat, taking slaves on board for St. Eustatia and then Georgia. Overworked, Equiano caught fever in Georgia and came close to dying: he prayed for God to spare him, vowing to be a better person if he was healed. After almost two weeks he recovered, and the ship set sail again for Montserrat. Soon, though, his promises faded, and he began to shirk his duties of piety once again.

Again, Equiano's beliefs, such as his commitment to predestinarianism, are not always consistent. Here, he does think that his destiny might change if he shows himself to be faithful enough to God. Equiano is also honest about his sins and inability to live up to his promises to God.

The ship left Montserrat again laden with slaves and arrived at Charles Town, where white men bought Equiano's goods but failed to pay a fair price. One man in particular refused to pay for the rum he bought. Frustrated, Equiano pursued him until he finally paid, though in some copper dollars that proved worthless: when Equiano tried to use them, he barely escaped a flogging for using counterfeit coin.

Now Equiano, who continues to be a slave himself, is also benefiting from being borne on ships bearing other slaves to and from colonial outposts. This tragic irony remains largely unremarked in the narrative, but fits into Equiano's drive to work within his limited circumstances.

The ship continued to Georgia. One evening, Equiano was sitting in a yard with some slaves when their master, a cruel man named Dr. Perkins, entered drunk and, with another white man, began to beat Equiano with his fists until he was close to dead. He lay still for hours, stunned and bleeding, and in the morning he was taken to jail. His captain began to make inquiries and finally found Equiano; the captain wept at the sight of him. He got Equiano out of jail and sent for both doctors and lawyers: the latter said that they could do nothing for Equiano, as he was a black man.

Equiano does, thanks to Farmer, have greater freedom of movement and of association than other slaves on plantations; nonetheless, this relationship between himself and Farmer does little to protect Equiano when he's off the ship. The lawyers' claims of powerlessness only further underline the ways in which black people in general, not just slaves, are blocked from full legal recognition.

Equiano began to heal slowly and painfully, feeling additionally upset by Farmer's anxieties. Farmer nursed him back to health, and in about a month they set sail once again for Montserrat.

Equiano remains loyal. He believes in the trust needed for commercial trade, even though others have betrayed that trust against him.

CHAPTER 7

In early 1766 King bought another ship, the Nancy, which was stocked for a trip to Philadelphia. The ship was the largest Equiano had ever seen, so he filled it with as much of his own merchandise as he could. On this trip he saw whales for the first time. In Philadelphia he sold his goods mostly to the Quakers, who were the most honest-seeming to him.

Equiano continues to be fascinated by the new sights that he sees traveling all around the world on the ships. This voyage is also important to Equiano because, as he attempts to amass enough money to buy his freedom, he can be more certain of honesty in Philadelphia.

One Sunday morning Equiano passed a meeting-house and saw, through an open door, a tall woman saying something he couldn't understand; then he came to another church packed with people. He asked around and learned that the Reverend George Whitfield, whom he'd often heard of, was preaching. He crammed inside and saw the preacher earnestly pronouncing and sweating like Equiano had in Montserrat: Equiano was impressed and struck by such exertion, and he understood the contrast to the relatively thin audiences in other churches.

Equiano also continues to be curious about other kinds of religious traditions. His own spirituality and religious trajectory has been mostly personal, apart from the intercession of the Miss Guerins; here he is impressed by how fervent the congregations are, thanks to the powerful rhetoric of the preacher.

Back in Montserrat, Equiano thought he might be able to purchase his freedom, but King ordered the ship back to St. Eustatia and Georgia. Resigned to fate, Equiano submitted. In St. Eustatia they took on more slaves and proceeded to Georgia, but Equiano was eager to get back to Montserrat to buy his freedom.

King may be kinder than other masters, but ultimately his priority is economic: for him the slave trade is a business meant to make money for him and his shareholders.

While in Georgia, Farmer met with a wealthy silversmith who had traveled with him years before. The silversmith took ill and began to remind the captain of a promise he'd made to him earlier, that he'd bequeath some of his fortune to Farmer. The captain promised to give Equiano ten pounds of the man's property when he died, since Equiano too had helped nurse him. Since this was above and beyond what Equiano needed to buy his freedom, he put out eight pounds of his own money to buy fine clothes for his freedom. However, when the man died they opened his trunk to find nothing more than a dollar and a half, barely enough to pay for the coffin.

For someone like Equiano, who, as a slave separated by force from the rest of his family, has no chance of acquiring wealth through inheritance as many white people in English society do, the captain's offer is a remarkable opportunity for him to begin to work his way into this society. Such a drama of inheritance was common for English people at the time, as the contents of a relative's will could remain a mystery until after his or her death, but the stakes are higher for Equiano.

They arrived safely in Montserrat, where Equiano was now in possession of 47 pounds. He went one morning to meet King and Farmer with the money in his hand. But when Equiano reminded his master of the promise he'd made, King began to recoil, asking in shock where Equiano had got the money. Farmer said he'd attained it honestly and industriously. King said he didn't think Equiano would manage it so soon, but he agreed to take the money and he sent Equiano to the Register Office to draw up his manumission.

Even without the extra funds Equiano thought he might obtain from the silversmith, it turns out that he's been successful enough to amass more than the necessary amount (40 pounds) to buy his freedom. King's benevolence is obviously limited—he clearly didn't think Equiano was intelligent and strategic enough to do this—but he does grudgingly keep his promise.

Equiano had tears in his eyes as he thanked the two men, and his thoughts turned to the 126th Psalm, about glorifying God in one's heart. Reflecting on that moment, he compares his feelings to those of conquering heroes, mothers recovering a long-lost infant, a lover, and a weary mariner returning to port: the sentiments of these people could not equal his own. The man at the office congratulated Equiano and said he'd draw up the document at half price. Before that night Equiano, a slave that morning, had become his own master: it was the happiest day of his life.

In this moment, Equiano rises to rhetorical heights—perhaps influenced by the powerful rhetoric of the preacher he saw in Philadelphia—as he makes a number of comparisons between his own euphoria and that of these examples. Equiano uses rhetoric in order to try to convey to his readers just how formidable the feeling of freedom is for someone who's never had it.

Equiano was given a new name, "Freeman," the most desirable he could ask for. His fine blue clothes began to make an impression, even on the ladies who had formerly been aloof, but he still hoped to return to London. King and Farmer, though, expressed hope that he'd stay with their ships. Struggling between desire and duty, Equiano finally agreed to remain employed with them at 36 shillings a month. He hoped to return to England the next year and see Pascal again, imagining that Pascal might be pleased to see him free rather than enslaved.

Equiano recognizes that, while the certificate ensuring his freedom is vital and potent, it's not enough in a society that has such entrenched inequality between black and white people—a society in which external signs like clothing are important markers of social status and shorthand for the way people should be treated. While Equiano may not agree with such inequality, he understands how it works.

Equiano embarked for St. Eustatia and Georgia again on the Nancy; this time they had to deal with a number of alligators on the river, which frightened him. In Georgia, a merchant, Mr. Read, had a slave who began to insult Equiano. Eventually Equiano lost his temper and beat the slave. The next day Mr. Read came to the ship and ordered Equiano ashore so that he might be whipped throughout the town for beating his slave. Equiano refused, and Mr. Read left, swearing that he'd bring all the town constables to the ship—a threat Equiano feared could prove true, as he'd seen free blacks treated in such a way before.

Equiano continues to balance his own personal history with anecdotes about different natural wonders he comes across, including animals native to different parts of the world. Such anecdotes are juxtaposed with far more sobering elements of the narrative, in which Equiano's status as a free man doesn't prevent him from being treated like a slave.

Indeed, Equiano knew of a free black carpenter who was jailed for asking for his wages, and subsequently exiled from Georgia on a false accusation of intending to set his employer's house afire. Equiano determined to physically resist anyone who tried to lay hands on him, preferring to die a free man than submit to punishment like a slave. Farmer encouraged him to hide, since Mr. Read was known to be spiteful, and after first refusing, Equiano agreed to hide outside town. After he left, the constables did search the ship and they continued to pursue Equiano for days. Finally Farmer told Mr. Read that Equiano's absence was hurting his business; Mr. Read said that Equiano could go to hell, but he wouldn't bother Farmer any more.

Equiano has learned about the plight of other free black people, whose legal status similarly didn't exempt them from cruel and unjust treatment. Freedom, to Equiano, is existentially important to him—so much so that he prefers to die free than to be enslaved again, even if freedom has turned out to be less than the unqualified good he once imagined it to be.

Equiano returned aboard and they prepared to carry cattle to the West Indies. Equiano had gotten permission to carry two cows for his own profit, as well, but at the last minute Farmer said there was no room. Upset, Equiano threatened to leave the ship, but after the captain cajoled him and promised to make things up to him in the West Indies, Equiano agreed to stay. Soon after, one of the bulls, coming aboard, rammed the captain so hard that he never recovered. To make amends, Farmer pressed Equiano to take turkeys instead, and, while skeptical about their hardiness, Equiano agreed, surprised at the captain's insistence.

Farmer, too, is relatively kind and fair towards Equiano, but he is ultimately concerned with his bottom line, rather than what's best for Equiano. Although it's not stated explicitly, this is another one of those cases in which it seems, within a belief system like Equiano's, that Providence intervenes in order to correct un-Christian behavior among humans.

Not long into the voyage, storms began to beset the ship, and after a week several of the cattle died. Farmer, the mate, and others grew ill, such that Equiano was left almost alone in charge. Approaching death, Farmer called for Equiano and asked if he'd ever done Equiano any harm. As Equiano was saying no, Farmer died. Equiano was deeply affected by the death, remaining attached to the captain for his generosity and help in attaining his freedom.

Farmer has remained Equiano's master from his captivity into his freedom—a clear example of the way in which even being freed doesn't entirely do away with a black person's captivity—but Equiano draws on his religious beliefs in order to feel gratitude and generosity rather than bitterness towards him.

The mate, now in charge, was unable to prevent the other cattle from dying, but Equiano's turkeys thrived: he ended up benefiting from not taking the cattle. 10 days later, under Equiano's supervision, the ship reached Montserrat, and Equiano began to be called "captain," which flattered his vanity.

After Farmer's death, Equiano proves himself much more of a successful captain than the mate—another example of his ability to refute, through his own life, stereotypes about black people's inferiority.

CHAPTER 8

More than ever Equiano wanted to return to England, but in response to Mr. King's entreaties, he resolved to go on another voyage to Georgia, since the mate was still ill. Under a new captain, William Phillips, they took slaves and set sail. Three nights in a row Equiano dreamed of a shipwreck in which he saved all on board; one of these evenings, when he was tired at the pump, he had cursed at the task. On the third night the navigator pointed out a grampus to Equiano, who realized that it was actually a rock. Equiano told Philips, who seemed unperturbed, but as the ship approached Equiano became alarmed and lost his patience: he finally got the captain above deck, but it was too late: the ship struck the rocks.

Although a free man, Equiano remains dependent on being hired by someone whom he can trust to pay him fairly and to treat him kindly. During this voyage, though, Equiano slips from his attempts to be holy, which include refraining from taking God's name in vain. The rest of this anecdote is, Equiano suggests, Providence's way of intervening as a warning to those who fail to be properly spiritual and reverent towards God.

Suddenly, as the ship was dashed on all sides, Equiano felt that the wrath of God was at hand: he vowed that, if saved, he'd never swear again. With a small shred of hope that God would save them, he began frantically to think what might be done. Phillips ordered the hatches nailed down over the hold, where the slaves were kept: knowing they'd be killed, Equiano thought God would charge him with these people's deaths. He fainted, and when he awoke everyone was preparing to nail the hatches. Equiano, unable to hold back his emotion, said that it was the captain who should be drowned for his failure to navigate. He managed to stop the others from nailing the hatches, and they all resolved to stay aboard until daylight to decide what to do.

Although he is a predestinarian—which one might think could lead him to be passive in the face of what he thinks is God's will—Equiano cannot stop himself from using his ability to think quickly in a crisis and his instincts towards self-preservation that have saved him in the past. As a former slave himself, Equiano feels particularly implicated in the lives of the slaves aboard (though he is partly responsible for transporting them): to him they are humans, not property.

While the others began to drink in despair, Equiano started to mend certain parts of the ship. Finally the swells subsided and, as day broke, they saw an island a few miles off, but reefs prevented the boat from docking. They had to begin to load supplies and men onto a small boat, toiling all day until they'd made enough trips back and forth to bring all safe to shore.

Equiano and the others on the ship barely escape being killed, and here the narrative again takes on characteristics of the classic eighteenth-century adventure story, this one with the added plotline of the relationship between former and current slaves.

Equiano's thoughts returned to his dream, which had now come true, and he concluded that if anyone had died, God would have held Equiano responsible for their lives (perhaps why he'd worked so hard to save the slaves). The crew learned that this island was one of the Bahamas. They caught sight of flamingoes, which they first worried were cannibals; there were also turtles and fish throughout.

For Equiano, dreams are a powerful way of making sense of and drawing meaning from his life, a way to interpret God's word. Equiano also acknowledges here more than elsewhere his own role in perpetuating slavery.

Equiano and the others made tents for shelter and began to wonder how they might leave the place. They decided to repair the boat, now in sorry shape, and set out in search of a ship or inhabited island. After 11 days, Phillips, Equiano, and five others set off with meager provisions. On the second day they reached Abbico, the largest of the Bahamas. By this time they were exhausted and had run out of water, and they couldn't find water or people on the island all night. The next day they set off again but couldn't find a single ship, though they did manage to find water on another key. Increasingly resigned to their fate, they began to despair when suddenly the captain cried that he saw a sail.

In a time of crisis, Phillips relies heavily on Equiano as a bright, quick-witted person who can help him and the others aboard survive. This is yet another example of how wrong-headed it is to create a hierarchy of intelligence and legal status based on race. Nonetheless, in this dramatic account, it seems quite possible that all those in the shipwreck, slaves and freemen, blacks and whites, might die at the hands of cold, unfriendly nature.

The group set off in haste and reached the ship, whose the captain, a Welshman, thought at first that they might be pirates. But they managed to communicate their situation, and they found that this group, too, was recovering from a shipwreck of their whaling vessel and was now heading to New Providence.

Once again, at least within Equiano's framework of making sense of the world, Providence intervenes in the form of another ship headed in about the same direction as Phillips's ship.

They returned to the key, picking up those they'd left behind, and continued for New Providence. On the way they were beset by another gale and they had to cut down the mast. Everyone aboard began to call on God to save them, and indeed the wind soon lulled long enough for two men to swim to an anchor buoy at some distance. All watched in terror as they made their way, but they reached the buoy and managed to haul the ship to safety. In two days the wind and storms had ceased, and they reached New Providence after three long, terrifying weeks.

Equiano is as skilled as any sailor given his many years at sea, but he recognizes the ways in which sailing can be treacherous for anyone, no matter how experienced, because of the larger laws of nature (or Providence) that remain indifferent to human desires. This adventure, though, just like Equiano's others, ends in relief and success rather than in tragedy.

In New Providence they were treated well. One merchant offered free passage for four of them to Georgia if they helped work the ship. Upon learning they were going first to Jamaica, though, Equiano declined, waited until Phillips hired a ship to take himself and some of the slaves to Georgia, and went with them. They immediately hit a storm and had to go back, but after a week they made it to Georgia at last.

For Equiano, West Indies locations like Jamaica are still tied to barbaric treatment of slaves and being there would risk injustice towards himself, even as a free man. As a result, he strategically decides to avoid it as long as he can, even if that means waiting longer to make it to Georgia.

Equiano went to lodge at a friend's house, a black man named Mosa. That night, while they were drinking, patrolmen entered and, after asking for some punch and limes, ordered Equiano to the watch-house: all black man who had a light in their homes after nine were to be fined or flogged. Equiano told them he was a free man, but they paid no attention, and seeing that nothing else would satisfy them he went to the watch-house for the night. The next morning he asked why he must be flogged. Equiano told them that if there were a law that protected freed blacks, he'd use it against them. Enraged, the patrolmen were about to lay hands on Equiano when of them convinced the others to stand down.

As a free man, Equiano thinks that he has the right to do what he wishes. This instance reminds him that this isn't always the case for a free black man. Still, Equiano has enough fluency with reading, writing, and the law that he knows his own rights (though they may not always be respected): clearly, the patrolmen are unnerved by this knowledge, realizing that they cannot perhaps get away with what they can with other free blacks and slaves.

Another day, Equiano was a little outside Savannah when he was beset by two white men, one of whom immediately said that this was the man he'd been looking for. Recognizing the trick, Equiano ordered them not to come any closer to him. One paused, and the other said that Equiano's English was too good: after Equiano continued berating them, they reluctantly left.

White people can rely on racism, systemic injustice, and inequality in order to accuse any black man of being "the one" and forcing him into slavery. Here, though, Equiano's education saves him once again from danger.

Eventually Equiano found a place on a ship bound for the French island Martinico (Martinique). Before he left, a black woman whose child had just died asked Equiano to perform its burial service, as no white person would. Though he told her he wasn't a parson, she wouldn't stop asking him, so finally he performed the service before he set sail.

Equiano agrees to serve in the role of a parson because of his powerful religious beliefs, but this anecdote is also a somber reminder of the ways in which even religious people often thought of black people (even black children) as less than human.

CHAPTER 9

Equiano vowed never to return to Georgia, given the way he was treated there. He enjoyed Martinique, and he noticed that the slaves were treated better there. He wanted to go to Montserrat to say goodbye to Mr. King before returning to England with the July fleet, a periodic summer journey from Montserrat to England, but he was delayed because he had lent Phillips some money, which Phillips now refused to pay back. Throughout this area no black man's testimony was admitted against a white person, so Equiano had no way to recover the money. He continued to argue with Phillips, and their relationship deteriorated.

Although Equiano had avoided Jamaica because he feared the way he'd be treated there, it turns out that Georgia has been even worse. He finally prepares to make his way back to England, but once again he is stymied by his lack of rights and opportunities as a black man. Even as a free man, Phillips can refuse to pay him without fearing retribution.

Finally, that summer, Equiano got his money and he arrived in St. Kitt's on July 19th. He wanted to take the next ship to Montserrat, but the captain refused to take him until he "advertised" himself, that is, gave notice he was leaving. This was something required of a slave, and it felt enormously degrading to Equiano. At the last minute, Equiano encountered a gentleman he knew from Montserrat, who interceded in his favor with the captain. They set sail and after six months he saw his friends and Mr. King once again. King expressed sorrow that Equiano was leaving for London, and he asked Equiano to stay; in awhile, he said, Equiano could have land and slaves himself. Equiano thanked King but declined, and asked him for a **certificate of his behavior** in his service, which King was happy to give. After expressing his sincere gratitude, Equiano prepared to leave on the 26th, bidding a happy farewell to Montserrat with its torturous treatment of prisoners, offenses against women, and stormy surf.

Part of the restriction placed on slaves is the inability to move around freely; slaves had to account for their location at all times. Having clawed his way into liberty himself by following the rules and the logic of the slave owners' society, Equiano is eager to distance himself from any kind of association with his former bondage. Equiano has also learned that, given such entrenched racism and prejudice, it can often be in his best interest to rely on the help of white people, even if he has grown independent and self-sufficient himself. The certificate of good behavior he obtains is a similarly pragmatic achievement in a society that values the word of white people more than black people.

After seven weeks they arrived in London, where Equiano was stunned to immediately receive his wages. He went in search of the Miss Guerins, whom he regaled with tales of his travels, including the sorry role of their cousin, Pascal, who had betrayed Equiano and sold him to Doran. For his part, Pascal was taken aback when Equiano encountered him in London. However, Pascal seemed not at all repentant, and when Equiano accused him of treating him wrongly, Pascal turned and walked away. Equiano met Pascal once more at Miss Guerin's house, where he asked for the prize money: Pascal refused to give it, daring Equiano to bring a lawsuit against him.

Equiano has grown so used to unequal treatment that being treated fairly comes as a shock to him. His relationship to the family that includes the Miss Guerins and Pascal is ambivalent: he continues to be loyal to the women and grateful for their role in his education, but their cousin continues to treat him poorly.

The Miss Guerins were curious to know what Equiano wanted to do in life, and he asked if they might know someone who could teach him a trade. They helped place him with a hair dresser in Coventry Court, where he spent close to six months learning how to dress hair. Equiano enjoyed it, and was happy not to be idle. In February 1768 Equiano was hired by Dr. Charles Irving, a kind master who allowed him to attend school in the evenings. But the wages were so small that Equiano decided to go to sea again for a time to make more money. Wanting to see Turkey for the first time, he met a man hiring a ship to go there, which was in need of a man who could dress hair: Equiano got the job.

Daniel Queen had taught Equiano to dress hair years earlier, and now Equiano's strategic insistence on becoming independent and making a living for himself has paid off. As a free man, influenced by the culture around him, Equiano has embraced the values of commercial European society, including the high value it places on wealth attained through self-sufficient labor and trade. Equiano fits into this framework as an upwardly-mobile man of commerce.

On a ship called the Delaware, they sailed first to France and Italy, and then to Smyrna, an ancient Turkish city rich in food and with a population generally kind to black people. Equiano was surprised to very rarely see women, and when he did they were covered head to toe with a veil. He also noticed that Greeks were kept in servitude to Turks, like blacks elsewhere were to whites.

For Equiano, voyages by sea are a chance for him to see the world and to make money. He has been sensitive to cultural difference ever since he was forcibly thrust from one culture into another: here he recognizes the different ways inequality can take shape.

After returning from Turkey to England, the group went to Portugal for Carnival, where Equiano saw a number of remarkable sights. They sailed afterwards to the Mediterranean, where Equiano was impressed by Genoa and Naples. In Italy, they happened to see an eruption of Mount Vesuvius—ashes fell on their deck—and they soon left for Smyrna again. In Smyrna, the plague broke out, so they didn't load any more goods until it had passed. On the way back to England a cook overset the pan and accidentally started a fire, but they managed to put it out without too much trouble.

These pages again take on some of the tone and structure of a travel narrative, as Equiano relates the sights and sounds of the foreign places he visits, interspersed with interesting anecdotes. This chronicle, however, serves less the interest of describing such places and more to imply how much these experiences came to forge Equiano's own identity.

In 1771 Equiano returned in another ship to the West Indies. There, a white man bought some of his goods but refused to pay him, threatening him instead. Equiano complained to a justice of the peace, but found that, as a black man, he had no recourse. However, this white man was also indebted to three white sailors, so together Equiano and the sailors went to the man's house and threatened him. The man finally offered a paltry sum, which they accepted.

As soon as Equiano returns to the West Indies, he is subject once again to degrading injustice; here, though, as elsewhere, Equiano knows that it may be in his best interest to work within a prejudiced system in order to survive as best he can. He does this by allying with white sailors.

A month later they returned to England, but Equiano still felt eager to see the world, so he left again for Jamaica, where he found the blacks desperately subjugated. He saw some black men who were employed in flogging others, and he witnessed many cruel punishments. There, too, Equiano struggled to get payment from a white man for his goods. Upon his next return to England, he was sick of the sea so he worked for Dr. Irving, his old master, for at time.

Throughout his narrative, Equiano has noted internal differences within the slave trade, even as he's sought to insist that conditions of enslavement are degrading throughout the world. Sometimes Equiano emphasizes the importance of universal abolition, and at other times he emphasizes working within the system.

In May 1773, though, Equiano decided to travel again and he was hired as part of an expedition to seek a passage to India through the North Pole. Equiano was given a small room on the ship and one night while writing in his journal his candle lit a thread of tow lying nearby. Equiano was in the midst of flames and he was at the very edge of death when the others managed to put out the fire.

As a sailor throughout the world, Equiano has been in dangerous situations and has more than once come quite close to death. This variety of experience has in part led to his embrace of Christianity and of Providence in order to make sense of it.

On the ship Equiano began to use an apparatus invented by Dr. Irving to make saltwater fresh. On June 28th they arrived in Greenland, where the sun never set, and the weather grew frigid. Throughout this time they killed bears and other animals, including sea horses. By August, however, Equiano's ship and its partner were nearly shut in by two huge sheets of ice, and they were in danger of being squeezed to pieces. The sailors sawed into some of the ice around them; at one point Equiano nearly fell in and drowned.

The expedition is meant to try to find a more efficient and productive trade route between England and India, but what the seamen assumed would be a commercial venture has now turned into one that is imperiling their lives. This is a classic example of nature (or what Equiano would call Providence) paying little heed to humans' desires.

The sailors knew themselves to be constantly in danger of perishing, and Equiano spent a great deal of time thinking about eternity and fearing death. Even former blasphemers now began to call on God for help. Finally, after 11 days of being trapped by the ice, the wind shifted course, the weather grew milder, and the ice began to break on its own. The ship slowly made its way back into the open sea and away from the most desolate area of the world. Their Arctic voyage ended after four months; they had reached further north than any other sailors, but they had also proved the near impossibility of finding a northern passage to India.

The shift from a story of commerce and trade to one of existential dread can be mapped onto Equiano's own trajectory, as he both embraces the goals of commercial success and wealth, and worries about the state of his soul and the potential punishment by God for his sins. For now, Equiano is still struggling to find a way to reconcile these two aspects of his identity and wondering if they are compatible.

CHAPTER 10

Back in London, Equiano began to reflect on his near brush with death and on the necessity of acknowledging the grace of God. He left the service of Dr. Irving and spent a great deal of time thinking about the salvation of the soul and how he might become a better Christian. He wandered around various churches, from Quaker to Roman Catholic to Jewish temples, but he still felt ill at ease, as he failed to get a satisfactory answer from anyone about how to gain eternal life. He saw no one around him who kept all the ten commandments, and he felt that the Turks were in fact much more righteous than those calling themselves Christian; he decided to return to Turkey.

Equiano's introduction to Christianity was originally linked to his difficult and painful attempts to establish a new life and gain new meaning for himself in a strange, foreign landscape. Now, though, he finally begins to grapple at length with many of the questions that have arisen more implicitly throughout the narrative, including the hypocrisy between Christians' apparent beliefs and their actions towards other people.

In early 1774, Equiano found a captain bound for Smyrna and he recommended a black man, John Annis, to join on as cook. Annis had formerly been a servant of a man named Mr. Kirkpatrick who lived in St. Kitt's. Though Annis left Kirkpatrick's plantation with his agreement, at one point on the way to Smyrna the former master learned that Annis was on board and took him away by force. Equiano tried to regain his friend's liberty, but failed: he later learned that when Annis arrived at St. Kitt's, he was whipped brutally and put into irons.

This is another example of the ways in which being a free person is often not enough if one is black, as well. Equiano does have more power than slaves, for instance, but it is frustrating to him how little power he does have to assist a friend in a time of need, given the established legal inequalities between the races.

Equiano was suffering himself during this time, worrying about his own sins. His only comfort was reading the **Bible**, especially the verse that reads "there is no new thing under the sun." But he began to blaspheme again and he continued to wish for death, though instead he received terrifying visions at night. He prayed to be introduced to any holy person who might show him the light. One day, as he was wandering through Smyrna, he was directed to a house occupied by an old former sailor. This man was confident in God's love, and Equiano eagerly began to question him. The man gave Equiano some things to read, and invited him to his chapel that evening for a feast.

Although Equiano profoundly desires to remain a Christian and to find a way to repent for his sins on earth, he begins to feel as though death is the only means of escape from such torture (even though he believes that he may well be destined for hell after death). It is perhaps fitting that it is in a non-Western place (Turkey) that Equiano embarks on an intentional spiritual journey (rather than in England, where spiritual hypocrisy is so evident to him).

That evening, Equiano was surprised to see many ministers but no eating and drinking. Some speakers began to relate their experiences of God's providence and mercy. Amazed and admiring, Equiano desired to be as content and grateful as them; he'd never seen this kind of Christian fellowship, which ended with a simple meal together.

Equiano had been impressed by the majesty of the Christian churches in England, but now, concerned with what he sees as misguided values, he is cheered to see that it is not necessarily Christianity that's at fault. This passage shows that Christianity can look quite different than its English incarnations.

Equiano returned home and was newly shocked to hear God's name taken in vain so often at his lodgings. He vowed to put an end to playing cards and indulging in empty joking and swearing. He returned to see his new acquaintance Mr. C— the next day, and received from him a book called "The Conversion of an Indian." He found it fascinating and continued to study and learn for two months.

Surrounded by people who may be nominal Christians, but who don't seem worried about the fate of their soul, Equiano decides that part of his cultivation of self will involve surrounding himself with other kinds of people, people whose priorities are more aligned with his own.

Then Equiano heard of a man who died fully assured of going to heaven. Equiano asked how, and learned that if he didn't experience rebirth and forgiveness of sins before he died, he wouldn't enter heaven. Equiano was concerned, especially because he knew he only kept eight out of ten commandments, but a clerk in the chapel told him that only Christ could keep all the commandments: the sins of the chosen were already atoned for and forgiven during their life, and only by experiencing this could Equiano be saved. Equiano was upset and confused to hear that the clerk claimed that he too was certain of reaching heaven. Equiano didn't know whether to keep believing in salvation by works or faith only, but he couldn't figure out how one could know his sins were forgiven in life. At the chapel, Equiano spoke with a reverend who recommended that Equiano simply continue to read the scriptures, go to church, and pray to God.

Much of Equiano's concerns regarding religion and spirituality are worries about the next life—whether Equiano, who has suffered so much on earth, could possibly know if he will have to suffer again or not after he dies. Equiano also struggles to understand the meaning of Christian commandments given the belief in both human frailty and predestination. If humans cannot possibly keep all the commandments, and if they are either chosen or barred from heaven from the time of their birth, what difference does it make to be holy and act righteously? Neither Equiano nor this reverend seems to have an answer.

Equiano was hired again for a ship to Cadiz in Spain, and was upset to hear God's name often taken in vain. He also struggled to understand how he couldn't be saved by good works: he was seized by confusion and wanted to die. Indeed, he nearly once threw himself off the ship, but he remembered the **Bible**'s injunction against suicide. Then he decided he'd rather beg on land than spend time with such men at sea, but the captain refused to discharge him. He did get many chances to read the scriptures on the way.

Equiano had embraced the idea of doing good works as a means to secure salvation, but now he is grappling with the thought that if he is destined to go to hell (or to heaven), it may not matter how he acts on earth. The fact that the Bible on which he so relies also bars him from suicide, the most drastic means of ending his struggles, seems to trap him.

One evening, while reading the **Bible**, Equiano began to think that he had indeed lived a good life, but still wondered whether this was enough to reach salvation. Suddenly, the light of God broke in on him and Equiano saw a vision of Jesus crucified on the cross, bearing the sins of all. He recognized that he was born again, and sensed the sweetness of the word of God. He recognized that God's hand had invisibly guided and protected him, even at his darkest moments. He instantly stopped fearing death and hell, but wept at the thought that God would save a sinner like him.

Throughout his struggle with faith, Equiano has seemed to assume that he could reason his way into the truth. This conversion scene—part of a broader genre of narratives of sin and conversion at the time—changes the logic entirely: rational arguments no longer seem to matter as they're replaced by a vivid, multisensory experience that sweeps away all Equiano's prior concerns.

On the ship, few people believed Equiano's story, and he longed to be in London among more like-minded people. His only comfort was the **Bible**: in these pages of the narrative Equiano cites a number of Bible verses to help explain his state and situation. The ship returned to London a month afterwards.

Although Equiano feels that his life has changed irrevocably, that his very self has been altered, he's still trapped in an environment where he feels misunderstood.

Equiano was still puzzled about a certain **Bible** verse, so he went to see a famous reverend preach at Blackfriars church, where he happened to be preaching on that very text: Equiano left reassured about the difference between human works and the elect, that the latter was entirely up to God's will. He returned to the chapel, where his friends were delighted at the change in him. Here Equiano transcribes a poem about his conversion: it begins with the dangers of his youth, his enslavement, and his desires for death. The poem recounts his dejection and despair as he wandered over the seas, and finally the moment of light when he felt spiritually reborn.

Equiano still thinks about faith and good works, but this intellectual question fails to touch his newfound contentment and feelings of faith and rebirth. His spiritual epiphany allows him to understand his entire life as a trajectory from darkness into light; this trajectory is not just one of knowledge, education, or wealth, but also of the identity as a Christian that he now feels he was always working towards.

CHAPTER 11

In March 1775 Equiano left again for Cadiz. The trip was smooth sailing until they reached the bay, where the ship struck against a rock. Most people began to weep and shout, but Equiano didn't fear death. Many other ships soon came to their aid and helped bring the ship ashore. They continued on to Malaga, where Equiano remarked on the fine cathedral, but was shocked at the customs of bullbaiting on Sundays. He engaged in conversation with a priest in which each tried to convert the other to his own church. This priest thought it improper that regular people should read the **Bible**, but Equiano vehemently disagreed. The priest also said Equiano should go to a Spanish university: he might even become a black Pope, like Pope Benedict. Though tempted, Equiano thought it would be hypocritical to accept.

Many times in the past, Equiano has been on the verge of death on a ship, but now he no longer fears what may happen to him because he is free of the fear that a dangerous circumstance is punishment for his own sins. As he travels around, he is newly aware of whatever he encounters that has to do with Christianity. He also engages with the differences between Catholicism, the religion of Spain, and the Protestantism of the Church of England. Historically a great difference between the two was whether the church discouraged or encouraged regular people's reading of the Bible.

The ship continued to Cadiz and then returned to England. The winds were against them and the captain often swore and took God's name in vain. One day a young passenger rebuked the captain for it, and Equiano seconded him: the captain remained silent. Soon enough, though, Providence looked kindly on them: Equiano spotted a small boat with eleven half-drowned men who had abandoned their ship. Upon being rescued, they thanked God, and Equiano was touched. The captain remarked that God had given him a means of repenting.

Equiano is eager for others to gain spiritual understanding of the kind that he has, but he's also aware that as a black man, he must be far more careful with what he says than a white person. Nonetheless, the captain does seem to have had a change of heart in that he becomes more interested in doing good and in looking for signs of Providence.

That November, Dr. Irving bought a large ship with the plan of cultivating a plantation in Jamaica and in the Musquito Shore, and he wanted Equiano to go with him. Equiano accepted, hoping to be able to convert some of the natives. Equiano met four Musquito Indian chiefs who would be returning to their home; although they'd been baptized, they hadn't been to church since, so Equiano accompanied them to church before sailing. During the trip Equiano instructed the Musquito Prince George in Christianity, and he seemed enthusiastic. At the end of the trip, some sailors began to mock Prince George for his conversion. While Prince George refused to join their side, he also no longer wanted to spend time with Equiano. Prince George asked Equiano why the white men who can read and write and "know all things" still swear, lie, and get drunk. Equiano said that they failed to fear God, but Prince George remained sad and depressed.

Although Equiano's initial baptism was not entirely his own idea (indeed, it only took place because of the violent imperialism of the slave trade that he is now agitating against), he does now believe it useful to convert other "natives.". For Equiano, this is not really a paradox or contradiction because what is at stake is not earthly wealth but eternal salvation. Nevertheless, the Indian chief whom he tries to convert does recognize much of the same hypocrisy that Equiano has understood in the past; the difference is perhaps that Equiano thinks such hypocrisy doesn't challenge the very basis of the religion.

In mid-January they arrived in Jamaica, where Equiano took the Musquito Prince George to church. He also accompanied Irving to purchase some slaves for the plantation, choosing men from his own country. In February they sailed from Jamaica to the Musquito Shore, where they took leave of the Indians, whom they never saw again. They chose a spot near a riverbank with rich soil while sending the ship on to trade in the north, though the ship was stolen by a Spanish guarda costa. Nonetheless, they stayed in the place, preparing the plantation.

Although Equiano has spent a great deal of time with Prince George, ultimately he leaves him without knowing whether his arguments have had any effect. In a strange twist, Equiano, having once been a slave on a plantation, is now working on it as a potential founder and owner. What could seem like hypocrisy is, in the narrative, meant as a sign of how far he's come.

The Indians often came to trade with them. Equiano noticed that the husbands never had more than two wives, and the men and women ate separately. They had simple manners and never swore. Equiano never saw them worship, but most Europeans didn't worship either.

Equiano continues to be sensitive to cultural differences, and open to the possibility that there can be difference and variety without innate superiority and inferiority of cultures.

The Indian Governor came to trade with them too, but he and his compatriots were loud and unruly. That night they got drunk and the governor struck one of the friendlier chiefs and stole his hat. Irving fled, leaving Equiano alone with the group. Equiano remembered a passage from a life of Columbus he'd read and he began to threaten them all with the wrath of God in heaven, pointing upward and at his **Bible**. They were stunned and frightened, and peace immediately ensued.

In another strange anecdote, Equiano draws a lesson from Columbus, the prototypical colonizer, whose voyages unleashed centuries of exploration, slavery, and imperialism. But Equiano has striven to become a part of this culture rather than fight against it. His very use of the Columbus story signals the fallacy of Europeans' arguments about African inferiority.

Equiano observed the natives making a potent alcoholic drink out of roasted and fermented pineapples, a task that involved many men, women, and children. They also ate tortoises and alligators. He and Dr. Irving were invited to a feast, where they observed ritual killing of alligators.

Rather than condemn different cultures and traditions as bizarre and wrong, Equiano observes them and is fascinated by their particularities. He enjoys being able to participate in local customs.

The rainy season was very heavy that year, and Equiano, who thought this was God's punishment for working on Sundays, longed to return to England. In mid-June he found the courage to ask leave of Irving, who finally consented and gave him a **certificate of good behavior**, which Equiano transcribes in his narrative. The slaves from his country were sorry to see him leave, since he always treated them well. He left and found a ship heading from the Musquito shore to Jamaica. That night, Hughes, one of its owners, asked him to keep sailing with this ship: when Equiano refused, he swore and angrily asked how Equiano became free. As Hughes continued to rage, Equiano said he'd never seen such sinfulness among the Turks, who weren't even Christians. Now enraged, Hughes said he'd never let Equiano leave. He had his men tie Equiano and hoist him up, where he hung all night. He begged some slaves to let him down, which they did, though they were whipped for doing so later.

Equiano's certificate of good behavior will enable him to obtain decent employment back in England, and it's significant that Equiano doesn't just tell about the certificate but he actually transcribes it in his narrative itself. In a society that continues to place more trust in the words of white people than in black people, Equiano works within that system of racial prejudice in order to ensure that he can survive and even thrive since he has the backing of white people. The next anecdote only underlines, though, how fragile Equiano's independence and strategic manipulation of racism can be.

The next morning, after the sailors had lifted the anchor, they finally released Equiano, who asked an acquaintance to intercede. The acquaintance obtained a canoe for Equiano to slip out in while the captain was below deck, and Equiano barely escaped. He went straight to the other owner to tell him of what had happened, and this man apologized and treated him kindly. Equiano continued to an admiral who was staying with the Musquito Indians; the admiral sent five Indians to accompany Equiano back to another ship headed for Jamaica.

Equiano, by this point, has spent enough time in seamanship all around the world that he has a network of friends and acquaintances upon whom he can rely. Still, although the captain apologizes, Equiano doesn't get any kind of legal, institutionalized redress for what has happened to him. He can only move forward and try to prevent it from happening again.

Equiano was forced, on this ship, to participate in hard labor like cutting mahogany wood. One day they met a smaller ship commanded by John Baker, who offered to take Equiano to Jamaica immediately. Equiano agreed, but couldn't get the captain to let him go. Finally, though, he managed to sneak into the other ship. Nonetheless, Baker had lied, and they now headed to Cartagena. Baker treated Equiano cruelly.

Reeling from one instance of unjust racialized treatment, Equiano attempts to escape from his situation only to find new complications plaguing him and reminding him of the situation of enslavement and captivity that he thought he'd escaped.

The ship sailed past many uninhabited islands, where Equiano cut down coconut trees. He had been a whole day without food when he prayed to God for relief. Immediately, he saw a large fish that had jumped onto the deck: he gave thanks to God. Another time Baker was in a temper and began to strike Equiano. Baker threatened to blow up the ship with his gunpowder, so Equiano grabbed an ax and put himself in between the man and the gunpowder. He prayed for relief until the captain's anger started to subside.

In other situations aboard other ships, Equiano has been more of a partner to his different captains, even if some of them have treated him unjustly as well. Now, though, Equiano finds himself entirely on his own, forced to do whatever he can to survive against a cruel and even erratic overseer.

The next day they passed another ship headed for Jamaica that happened to be carrying Dr. Irving,, but Baker wouldn't allow Equiano to leave. Equiano learned that the plantation he'd left had hired a white overseer who was inhumane and cruel to the slaves. They all had attempted to escape in canoes but every one of them drowned, so Dr. Irving was returning to Jamaica to buy more slaves. Upon landing, Baker refused to pay Equiano his wages, and, even with Dr. Irving's help, no magistrate agreed to help Equiano. Another time Equiano accompanied a black tailor to a man who owed him money, and the man tried to beat him. Equiano wanted to get off the island as soon as possible, and finally he found a ship bound for England. He later learned that Dr. Irving had died not long after from eating poisoned fish. Upon arriving in Plymouth he went to London, thanking God for his mercy.

Equiano had believed that, although he himself wasn't in a position to get rid of slavery, he could set a better example by treating his own slaves more kindly. Now, though, the narrative highlights the fact that the very nature of slavery means that cruelty and inhumanity are always possible, if not inevitable. It seems that Equiano had been correct to decide that he would avoid Jamaica if at all possible: between cruel slavery, Equiano's own captivity aboard ships, and his inability to be treated fairly as a merchant, he is eager to return to England.

CHAPTER 12

Since 1777, Equiano notes, his life has been more regular: he asks his reader to have patience as he draws to a conclusion. He was rather disgusted with his unfair treatment while sailing, so vowed not to return to it for a time. In London he saw one remarkable occurrence: a light-skinned black woman had married a white man, and their sons were mulattoes and had fine light hair.

While Equiano is glad to be back in a place where he (now) feels himself at home, the anecdote he relates suggests that he continues to think through the implications of racial difference in an unequal society, wondering if black identity might be mutable through generations.

In 1777 Equiano was employed as a servant by Governor Macnamara. Equiano often asked other servants to join in prayer, though he was mocked for it. Then Macnamara told him he might have some success as a missionary to Africa. At first Equiano was wary, given his treatment during his last voyage to Jamaica. But Macnamara said he'd apply to the Bishop of London to get Equiano ordained, to which Equiano agreed. Equiano reproduces the letter of application written from "Gustavus Vassa" to the Bishop of London, accompanied by two letters of reference. But the Bishop declined to ordain him.

Even in England, where Equiano feels more at home than he did in Jamaica, his newfound identity as a pious, reborn Christian makes him somewhat of a pariah among the other people of his class. Still, Equiano is beginning to take on a new identity as a leader and as a potential intermediary between England and Africa.

In 1783 Equiano visited Wales and saw a coal-pit, but while he was there the coals fell in and he nearly lost his life. The next spring he decided to go to sea again, and he set sail for New York. The ship returned to London in 1785 and then shipped off again for Philadelphia; during this voyage the crew slammed into another ship, but managed to repair the ship in time to make it safely to America. Equiano was glad to see the Quakers, who treated the Africans so much better than other white men. He attended a Quaker wedding and marveled at its powerful simplicity.

Although Equiano has begun to settle down more and more, he cannot bring himself to entirely end his world travels, and he continues to embark on voyages throughout the Atlantic. Equiano is also gratified to learn more about the Quakers, who seem, like the Christians he met in Turkey, to share Equiano's values.

After another trip to and from London and Philadelphia, Equiano learned that the British government had decided to send some Africans back to their native land, which he found an excellent plan. Equiano was chosen to be in charge, and while he first objected, saying that he would have to oppose any slave dealers he found on the way, he finally agreed to take the job. During his preparation for the voyage, he was struck by the corruption: already paid-for supplies disappeared, for instance, and many of the men lacked basic necessities or bedding. He informed the Commissioners of the Navy of these affairs, but to no avail. They undertook the voyage but arrived at Sierra Leone just at the start of the rains, meaning that they couldn't establish themselves in farming. This expedition, he concludes, was theoretically sound, but was mismanaged.

Equiano is eager to be part of a mission that seems to have the best interests of Africans at heart (unlike so many commercial and political activities undertaken by British government), but the voyage is in many ways doomed from the start. This is, in part, due to the ways in which the trip's organizers are so eager to use it for their own advantage. As a result of incompetence, corruption, and pure apathy regarding the destinies of the people involved, the mission fails. Equiano, though, concludes that in different circumstances, it may well be a good idea to send Africans back to their home.

Since then, Equiano states, he's attempted to help the cause of his countrymen. He hopes that the British government will restore liberty and justice to the slaves, and he asks that God give the British senators the light and liberty necessary to make such a decision. He argues that, without the inhuman slave trade, a system of commerce could be adopted in Africa so as to increase demand for British goods and promote assimilation to British manners and customs. Abolishing slavery would be thus a universal good.

The failed voyage has another effect, acquainting Equiano better with the situations of those of his "countrymen" who have not, like him, been able to establish themselves as self-sufficient commercial subjects in a society that values both independence and trade. Equiano uses his knowledge of such values in order to argue for abolition.

Equiano argues that torture, murder, and other barbarities are performed against the slaves with impunity. It's in the interest of all to abolish slavery, except those engaged in manufacturing chains, handcuffs, muzzles, and other instruments of torture. But if each African were to spend five pounds a head per year, the potential for wealth would be enormous.

While Equiano does insist on the humanitarian arguments against slavery, he also knows his audience and thus he recognizes that morality is not enough: he has to appeal to the potential for former slaves to participate in a burgeoning international economy instead.

In May 1791 Equiano sailed to Dublin and traveled around Ireland. After returning to London, he learned that editions of his Narrative had been published in Holland, Germany, and New York. In April of that year, he married a woman named Susannah Cullen in Cambridgeshire. He concludes that while he isn't so vain as to think there's merit in his narrative, he hopes people will consider that it was written by someone unwilling to adorn truth with imaginative coloring. If any incident seems uninteresting, his excuse is that it made an impression on his own mind, and affected his conduct. He has learned to look for the hand of God in all affairs, even the most trifling.

As he concludes, Equiano underlines the significance of the very fact that his writing is not "imaginative" or even interesting, precisely because he is eager to insist on its authenticity. He also highlights the ways in which every experience, no matter how unexciting, worked to make him into the person he has become, a person whose very character, he hopes, will be another argument against the perpetuation of the slave trade.

HOW TO CITE

To cite this LitChart:

MLA

Baena, Victoria. "*The Life of Olaudah Equiano*." *LitCharts*. LitCharts LLC, 7 Apr 2017. Web. 21 Apr 2020.

CHICAGO MANUAL

Baena, Victoria. "*The Life of Olaudah Equiano*." LitCharts LLC, April 7, 2017. Retrieved April 21, 2020. https://www.litcharts.com/lit/the-life-of-olaudah-equiano.

To cite any of the quotes from *The Life of Olaudah Equiano* covered in the Quotes section of this LitChart:

MLA

Equiano, Olaudah. The Life of Olaudah Equiano. Dover Publications. 2000.

CHICAGO MANUAL

Equiano, Olaudah. The Life of Olaudah Equiano. New York: Dover Publications. 2000.