



SUNSHINE STATE STANDARDS

Literary Analysis

Benchmark LA.1112.2.2.2 Use information from the text to answer questions or to state the main idea or provide relevant details.

Benchmark LA.1112.2.2.4 Identify and analyze the characteristics of a variety of types of text (e.g., primary source historical documents).

NOTABLE QUOTE

“Every new thing that I observed I treasured up in my memory.”

FYI

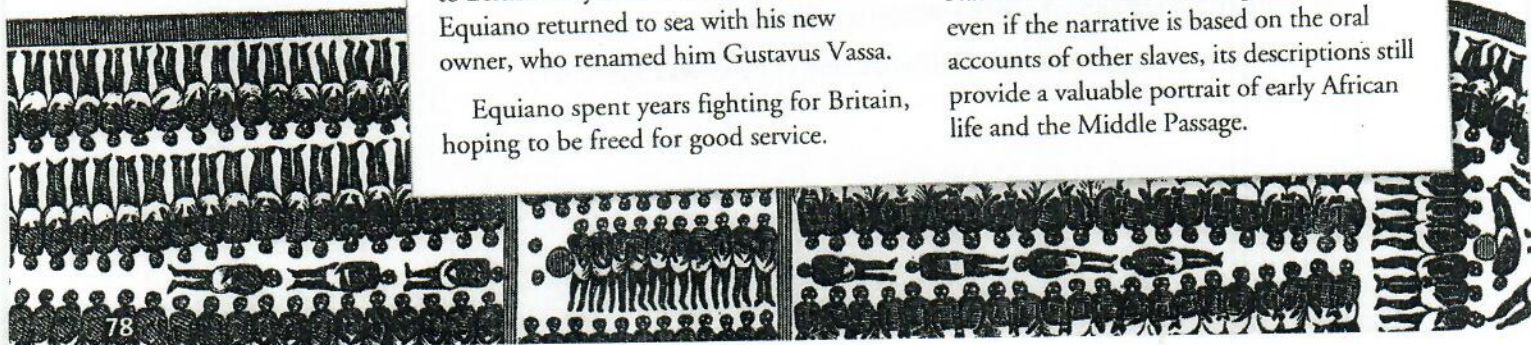
Did you know that Olaudah Equiano ...

- was a best-selling author in Britain?
- owned slaves in Central America?
- married an English woman and raised two daughters?
- died a wealthy man?

Author Online

For more on Olaudah Equiano, visit the Literature Center at ClassZone.com.

Diagram of the cargo hold of a fully loaded slave ship



from The Interesting Narrative of the Life of Olaudah Equiano

Slave Narrative by Olaudah Equiano



Olaudah Equiano

c. 1745–1797

Soldier, sailor, North Pole explorer—Olaudah Equiano led a remarkable life by the standards of any age. Writing as a former slave in the 1700s, Equiano left powerful testimony on the brutality of enslavement that became the model for a new genre, the slave narrative.

Ocean Crossings According to his autobiography, Equiano was born a chief's son in the Ibo (or Igbo) culture of present-day Nigeria. When he was 11, he was captured and sold as a slave to a series of African masters before making the miserable journey to the Americas known as the Middle Passage. Sold in the West Indies to British navy officer Michael Pascal, Equiano returned to sea with his new owner, who renamed him Gustavus Vassa.

Equiano spent years fighting for Britain, hoping to be freed for good service.

Instead, in 1762 he was sold again, to Quaker merchant Robert King, who trained him in business. In 1766, after 21 years as a slave, Equiano bought back his freedom, moved to London, and promptly launched his business career. But by 1773, he was at sea again, first on an expedition to find a northwest passage, and later traveling to Central America and Turkey.

Turning Points In the late 1770s, Equiano returned to London where he got involved in antislavery efforts and converted to Christianity. In 1789, as public debate over abolishing the slave trade began in Britain, Equiano wrote, self-published, and promoted his narrative. Equiano's life story exposed the cruelty of the slave trade and made him an important public figure. He died in 1797, just ten years before Britain abolished the slave trade.

Historians Look More Closely Equiano's narrative includes a wealth of specific details, most of which check out against other sources. But, in 1999, English professor Vincent Carretta uncovered two documents that suggested Equiano was not born in Africa: his baptismal record from England and a ship's passenger list, both of which identify Equiano's birthplace as South Carolina. Historians continue to debate the evidence and how, if at all, it changes the value of *The Interesting Narrative*. Carretta himself points out that even if the narrative is based on the oral accounts of other slaves, its descriptions still provide a valuable portrait of early African life and the Middle Passage.

● **LITERARY ANALYSIS: SLAVE NARRATIVE**

Few of us can imagine what slavery was really like. **Slave narratives**, the life stories of people who survived slavery, help us understand the grim realities of this experience.

Olaudah Equiano wrote *The Interesting Narrative* at a time when many Africans remembered their lives before enslavement. Like other 18th-century slave narratives, his work

- portrays the culture shock of a newly captured African
- focuses criticism on slave traders, not slave owners
- includes religious and moral appeals against slavery

As you read, note how the author develops these topics.

● **READING SKILL: ANALYZE DETAILS**

Equiano's readers had little contact with slavery. He chose powerful **descriptive details** to bring the experience to life.

The closeness of the place, and the heat of the climate, added to the number in the ship, which was so crowded that each had scarcely room to turn himself, almost suffocated us.

To reach his readers, Equiano uses

- **sensory details**, ones that appeal to the five senses
- descriptions of his own reactions
- **anecdotes**, brief stories that support his points

As you read, use a chart like the one shown to record effective examples of each kind of detail.

<i>Sensory Details</i>	<i>Reactions</i>	<i>Anecdotes</i>

▲ **VOCABULARY IN CONTEXT**

Equiano used the following words in his argument against slavery. Restate each phrase, using a different word or words for the boldfaced term.

1. **copious** amounts of rain, causing a flood
2. the **nominal** boss, but with no real authority
3. her **countenance** betraying her fear
4. cruel rulers acting without worry or **scruple**
5. to our **consternation**, revealed all our plans
6. deadly effects of **pestilential** beetles

*What does it mean
to be a SLAVE?*

KEY IDEA From the 1500s to the 1800s, millions of Africans were enslaved to work in the Americas. Their experiences have been documented in books and portrayed in films. What do you know about the realities of **slavery**?

TEST YOURSELF Decide whether each statement is true or false. Think about the facts or impressions that helped you choose your answer.

SLAVERY: Fact or Fiction

1. Slavery was a common practice in Africa.
 TRUE FALSE
2. No Africans participated willingly in the slave trade.
 TRUE FALSE
3. Most enslaved Africans were brought to North America.
 TRUE FALSE
4. Captured Africans were packed like cargo into slave ships.
 TRUE FALSE
5. Slave traders typically sold families as a single group.
 TRUE FALSE

THE INTERESTING NARRATIVE *of the Life of Olaudah Equiano*

OLAUDAH EQUIANO

BACKGROUND As European colonies in the Americas expanded, so did the slave trade. Slaves were captured in Africa, then taken by ship to the West Indies—a journey called the Middle Passage. For two months, Africans lay tightly chained in storage compartments with hardly enough air to breathe. Millions died from bad food, harsh treatment, disease, and despair. Olaudah Equiano is one of the few to describe this horrific journey.

When Olaudah Equiano was 11 years old, he and his sister were kidnapped while the adults in his village were working in the fields. After being forced to travel for several days, Equiano and his sister were separated. For the next six or seven months, Equiano was sold several times to African masters in different countries. He was eventually taken to the west coast of Africa and carried aboard a slave ship bound for the West Indies.

The first object which saluted my eyes when I arrived on the coast, was the sea, and a slave ship, which was then riding at anchor, and waiting for its cargo. These filled me with astonishment, which was soon converted into terror, when I was carried on board. I was immediately handled, and tossed up to see if I were sound, by some of the crew; and I was now persuaded that I had gotten into a world of bad spirits, and that they were going to kill me. Their complexions, too, differing so much from ours, their long hair, and the language they spoke (which was very different from any I had ever heard), united to confirm me in this belief. **A**

Indeed, such were the horrors of my views and fears at the moment, that, if ten thousand worlds had been my own, I would have freely parted with them all to

ANALYZE VISUALS

Describe the mood of this painting. What does the image reveal about the conditions on board a slave ship?

A SLAVE NARRATIVE

Note Equiano's use of **first-person point of view** in lines 1–8. In what ways might this description be startling to Equiano's mostly European audience?

Detail of *The Slave Ship* (1956), Robert Riggs.
N.A. Courtesy of Les Mansfield,
Cincinnati, Ohio.

have exchanged my condition with that of the meanest slave¹ in my own country. When I looked round the ship too, and saw a large furnace of copper boiling, and a multitude of black people of every description chained together, every one of their **countenances** expressing dejection and sorrow, I no longer doubted of my fate; and, quite overpowered with horror and anguish, I fell motionless on the deck and fainted. When I recovered a little, I found some black people about me, who I believed were some of those who had brought me on board, and had been receiving their pay; they talked to me in order to cheer me, but all in vain. I asked them if we were not to be eaten by those white men with horrible looks, red faces, and long hair. They told me I was not, and one of the crew brought me a small portion of spirituous liquor in a wine glass; but, being afraid of him, I would not take it out of his hand. One of the blacks, therefore, took it from him and gave it to me, and I took a little down my palate, which, instead of reviving me, as they thought it would, threw me into the greatest **consternation** at the strange feeling it produced, having never tasted any such liquor before. Soon after this, the blacks who brought me on board went off, and left me abandoned to despair. **B**

I now saw myself deprived of all chance of returning to my native country, or even the least glimpse of hope of gaining the shore, which I now considered as friendly; and I even wished for my former slavery in preference to my present situation, which was filled with horrors of every kind, still heightened by my ignorance of what I was to undergo. I was not long suffered to indulge my grief; I was soon put down under the decks, and there I received such a salutation in my nostrils as I had never experienced in my life; so that, with the loathsomeness of the stench, and crying together, I became so sick and low that I was not able to eat, nor had I the least desire to taste anything. 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,² and tied my feet, while the other flogged³ me severely. I had never experienced anything 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,⁴ 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; and I have seen some of these poor African prisoners most severely cut, for attempting to do so, and hourly whipped for not eating. This indeed was often the case with myself. In a little time after, amongst the poor chained men, I found some of my own nation, which in a small degree gave ease to my mind. I inquired of these what was to be done with us? They gave me to understand, we were to be carried to these white people's country to work for them. I then was a little revived, and thought, if it were no worse than working, my situation was not so desperate; but still I feared

countenance
(koun'tə-nəns) *n.*
appearance, especially the expression of the face

consternation
(kɒn'stər-nā'shən) *n.*
a state of paralyzing dismay; fear

B ANALYZE DETAILS
Reread lines 1–26. What details reinforce Equiano's impression that he has been captured by bad spirits?

1. **the meanest slave:** the poorest or most wretched slave.

2. **windlass** (wɪnd'ləs): a device for raising and lowering a ship's anchor.

3. **flogged:** beat with a whip or rod.

4. **nettings:** networks of small ropes on the sides of a ship that were used for various purposes, such as stowing sails. On slave ships, the nettings helped keep the slaves from jumping overboard.

I should be put to death, the white people looked and acted, as I thought, in so savage a manner; for I had never seen among any people such instances of brutal cruelty; and this not only shown towards us blacks, but also to some of the whites themselves. One white man in particular I saw, when we were permitted to be on deck, flogged so unmercifully with a large rope near the foremast,⁵ that he died in consequence of it; and they tossed him over the side as they would have done a brute. This made me fear these people the more; and I expected nothing less **C** than to be treated in the same manner. I could not help expressing my fears and apprehensions to some of my countrymen; I asked them if these people had no country, but lived in this hollow place (the ship)? They told me they did not, but came **60** from a distant one. “Then,” said I, “how comes it in all our country we never heard of them?” They told me because they lived so very far off. I then asked where were their women? had they any like themselves? I was told they had. “And why,” said I, “do we not see them?” They answered, because they were left behind. I asked how the vessel could go? They told me they could not tell; but that there was cloth put upon the masts by the help of the ropes I saw, and then the vessel went on; and the white men had some spell or magic they put in the water when they liked, in order to stop the vessel. I was exceedingly amazed at this account, and really thought they were spirits. I therefore wished much to be from amongst them, for I expected they **70** would sacrifice me; but my wishes were vain—for we were so quartered that it was impossible for any of us to make our escape. . . . **D**

At last, when the ship we were in, had got in all her cargo, they made ready with many fearful noises, and we were all put under deck, so that we could not see how they managed the vessel. But this disappointment was the least of my sorrow. The stench of the hold while we were on the coast was so intolerably loathsome, that it was dangerous to remain there for any time, and some of us had been permitted to stay on the deck for the fresh air; but now that the whole ship’s cargo were confined together, it became absolutely **pestilential**. The closeness of the place, and the heat of the climate, added to the number in the ship, which **80** was so crowded that each had scarcely room to turn himself, almost suffocated us. This produced **copious** perspirations, so that the air soon became unfit for respiration, from a variety of loathsome smells, and brought on a sickness among the slaves, of which many died. . . . This wretched situation was again aggravated by the galling⁶ of the chains. . . . The shrieks of the women, and the groans of the dying, rendered the whole a scene of horror almost inconceivable. Happily perhaps, for myself, I was soon reduced so low here that it was thought necessary to keep me almost always on deck; and from my extreme youth I was not put in fetters. In this situation I expected every hour to share the fate of my companions, some of whom were almost daily brought upon deck at the point of death, which I began **90** to hope would soon put an end to my miseries. . . . **E**

One day they had taken a number of fishes; and when they had killed and satisfied themselves with as many as they thought fit, to our astonishment who

5. **foremast** (fôr'măst): the mast (tall pole that supports sails and rigging) nearest the forward end of a sailing ship.

6. **galling**: rubbing or chafing, enough to produce sores.

C GRAMMAR AND STYLE

Reread lines 54–57. Note how Equiano uses **adverb clauses**, such as “when we were permitted to be on deck,” to modify verbs and adverbs in the sentence.

D SLAVE NARRATIVE

Look back at lines 48–52. What does Equiano’s reaction reveal about the way he regards slavery?

pestilential

(pēs'tə-lēn'shəl) *adj.* deadly; poisonous

copious (kō'pē-əs) *adj.* in large amounts; abundant

E ANALYZE DETAILS

What details in lines 75–85 does Equiano use to describe conditions below decks?

were on deck, rather than give any of them to us to eat, as we expected, they tossed the remaining fish into the sea again, although we begged and prayed for some as well as we could, but in vain; and some of my countrymen, being pressed by hunger, took an opportunity, when they thought no one saw them, of trying to get a little privately; but they were discovered, and the attempt procured them some very severe floggings. One day, when we had a smooth sea and moderate wind, two of my wearied countrymen who were chained together (I was near
100 them at the time), preferring death to such a life of misery, somehow made through the nettings and jumped into the sea; immediately, another quite dejected fellow, who, on account of his illness, was suffered to be out of irons, also followed their example; and I believe many more would very soon have done the same, if they had not been prevented by the ship's crew, who were instantly alarmed. . . .

During the rest of his voyage to the West Indies, Equiano continued to endure hardships. After the ship anchored on the coast of Barbados, Equiano and the other slaves were brought ashore and herded together in a slave merchant's yard to be sold.

We were not many days in the merchant's custody, before we were sold after their usual manner, which is this: On a signal given (as the beat of a drum), the buyers rush at once into the yard where the slaves are confined, and make choice of that parcel⁷ they like best. The noise and clamor with which this is attended, and the eagerness visible in the countenances of the buyers, serve not a little
110 to increase the apprehension of terrified Africans, who may well be supposed to consider them as the ministers of that destruction to which they think themselves devoted. In this manner, without **scruple**, are relations and friends separated, most of them never to see each other again. I remember, in the vessel in which I was brought over, in the men's apartment, there were several brothers, who, in the sale, were sold in different lots; and it was very moving on this occasion, to see and hear their cries at parting. O, ye **nominal** Christians! might not an African ask you—Learned you this from your God, who says unto you, Do unto all men as you would men should do unto you? Is it not enough that we are torn from our country and friends, to toil for your luxury and lust of gain? Must every tender
120 feeling be likewise sacrificed to your avarice? Are the dearest friends and relations now rendered more dear by their separation from their kindred, still to be parted from each other, and thus prevented from cheering the gloom of slavery, with the small comfort of being together, and mingling their sufferings and sorrows? Why are parents to lose their children, brothers their sisters, or husbands their wives? Surely, this is a new refinement in cruelty, which . . . thus aggravates distress, and adds fresh horrors even to the wretchedness of slavery. ☞ F

scruple (skrōō'pəl) *n.*
feeling of uneasiness or
guilt that keeps a person
from doing something

nominal (nŏm'ə-nəl) *adj.*
in name but not in reality

F **SLAVE NARRATIVE**
What point is Equiano
making in lines 116–118?
To what emotions is he
appealing?

7. **parcel**: a group of slaves offered for sale as one "package."

Comprehension

1. **Recall** Who has brought Equiano to the slave ship?
2. **Recall** What does Equiano think will happen to him when he is brought on board ship?
3. **Clarify** What does Equiano mean when he refers to “nominal Christians”?

Literary Analysis

4. **Analyze Descriptive Details** Review the chart you made while reading. Identify the details that had the strongest impact on you as a reader. Why were those details so effective?
5. **Make Inferences About Cultural Context** Equiano portrays himself as an African encountering Europeans for the very first time. By describing his shocked and confused responses to the men of this different culture, Equiano reveals clues about African beliefs and customs. In each example, what inferences can you make about the narrator’s cultural context?
 - his fears of white men (lines 18–20)
 - how he responds to fellow Africans (lines 20–23)
 - his questions about the ship (lines 59–68)
 - his reactions to cruelty around him (lines 50–57 and 91–95)
6. **Compare and Contrast** Like Cabeza de Vaca, Equiano describes a journey to the Americas. In what ways does his narrative resemble *La Relación*? Identify at least two similarities and two differences.
7. **Synthesize Information** Review your answers to the quiz about **slavery** that you took before reading Equiano’s narrative. What facts or details in his account most surprised you? Correct your quiz answers to reflect what you learned.
8. **Evaluate a Slave Narrative** Some historians have questioned whether Equiano’s narrative is authentic. Read the information on this debate in the author’s biography on page 78. Based on the issues raised, what you have learned about slave narratives, and your own reading, make an argument for or against the historical value of Equiano’s account. Support your answer with details.

Literary Criticism

9. **Biographical Context** In 1775, just 14 years before writing his life story, Equiano bought slaves to work on his Central American plantation. He explained his actions by saying he did what he could “to comfort the poor creatures, and render their condition easy.” Do you find this explanation consistent with the views of slavery put forth in *The Interesting Narrative*? Cite evidence from the text to support your answer.



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Literary Analysis
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