Narrative of the Life of Frederick Douglass, an American Slave, Written by Himself (Excerpt)

The plan which I adopted, and the one by which I	
was most successful, was that of making friends of	
all the little white boys whom I met in the street.	
As many of these as I could, I converted into	
teachers. With their kindly aid, obtained at	
different times and in different places, I finally	
succeeded in learning to read. When I was sent	
on errands, I always took my book with me, and	
by going one part of my errand quickly, I found	
time to get a lesson before my return. I used also	
to carry bread with me, enough of which was	
always in the house, and to which I was always	
welcome; for I was much better off in this regard	
than many of the poor white children in our	
neighborhood. This bread I used to bestow upon	
the hungry little urchins, who, in return, would	
give me that more valuable bread of knowledge. I	
am strongly tempted to give the names of two or	
three of those little boys, as a testimonial of the	
gratitude and affection I bear them; but prudence	
forbids;—not that it would injure me, but it might	
embarrass them; for it is almost an unpardonable	
offence to teach slaves to read in this Christian	
country. It is enough to say of the dear little	
fellows, that they lived on Philpot Street, very near	
Durgin and Bailey's ship-yard. I used to talk this	
matter of slavery over with them. I would	
sometimes say to them, I wished I could be as	
free as they would be when they got to be men.	
"You will be free as soon as you are twenty-one,	
but I am a slave for life! Have not I as good a right	
to be free as you have?" These words used to	
trouble them; they would express for me the	
liveliest sympathy, and console me with the hope	
that something would occur by which I might be	
free.	
I was now about twelve years old, and the thought	
of being a slave for life began to bear heavily upon	
my heart. Just about this time, I got hold of a book	

entitled "The Columbian Orator." Every

(Continued)

opportunity I got, I used to read this book. Among much of other interesting matter, I found in it a dialogue between a master and his slave. The slave was represented as having run away from his master three times. The dialogue represented the conversation which took place between them, when the slave was retaken the third time. In this dialogue, the whole argument in behalf of slavery was brought forward by the master, all of which was disposed of by the slave. The slave was made to say some very smart as well as impressive things in reply to his master—things which had the desired though unexpected effect; for the conversation resulted in the voluntary emancipation of the slave on the part of the master.

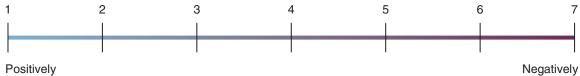
In the same book, I met with one of Sheridan's mighty speeches on and in behalf of Catholic emancipation. These were choice documents to me. I read them over and over again with unabated interest. They gave tongue to interesting thoughts of my own soul, which had frequently flashed through my mind, and died away for want of utterance. The moral which I gained from the dialogue was the power of truth over the conscience of even a slaveholder. What I got from Sheridan was a bold denunciation of slavery, and a powerful vindication of human rights. The reading of these documents enabled me to utter my thoughts, and to meet the arguments brought forward to sustain slavery; but while they relieved me of one difficulty, they brought on another even more painful than the one of which I was relieved. The more I read, the more I was led to abhor and detest my enslavers. I could regard them in no other light than a band of successful robbers, who had left their homes, and gone to Africa, and stolen us from our homes, and in a strange land reduced us to slavery. I loathed them as being the meanest as well as the most wicked of men. As I read and contemplated the subject, behold! that very discontentment which Master Hugh had predicted would follow my learning to read had already come, to torment and sting my soul to unutterable anguish. As I writhed under it, I would at times feel that learning to read had been a curse rather than a blessing. It had given me a view of my wretched condition, without the

remedy. It opened my eyes to the horrible pit, but	
to no ladder upon which to get out. In moments of	
agony, I envied my fellow-slaves for their stupidity.	
I have often wished myself a beast. I preferred the	
condition of the meanest reptile to my own.	
Anything, no matter what, to get rid of thinking! It	
was this everlasting thinking of my condition that	
tormented me. There was no getting rid of it. It	
was pressed upon me by every object within sight	
or hearing, animate or inanimate. The silver trump	
of freedom had roused my soul to eternal	
wakefulness. Freedom now appeared, to disappear	
no more forever. It was heard in every sound, and	
seen in everything. It was ever present to torment	
me with a sense of my wretched condition. I saw	
nothing without seeing it, I heard nothing without	
hearing it, and felt nothing without feeling it. It	
looked from every star, it smiled in every calm,	
breathed in every wind, and moved in every storm.	
Source: Narrative of the life of Frederick Douglass, an American slave, written by himself. Boston, MA: Anti-Slavery	

Questions for Group Discussion

Office, 1845. (1845)

1. How does Douglass view reading at the end of this piece?



2. How do you know? What makes you say so?