12 Years a Slave

INTRODUCTION

BRIEF BIOGRAPHY OF SOLOMON NORTHRUP

Solomon Northup was born in 1808 in Minerva, New York, where he grew up as a free man. His father, Mintus, was a slave but was freed following his master's death. As a free man, Solomon lived as a farmer, a violinist, a husband to Anne Hampton, and a father to their three children, Elizabeth, Margaret, and Alonzo. Solomon and Anne eventually moved to Saratoga Springs, where they both worked several jobs. In 1841, Solomon met two men who recruited Solomon to join their circus as a fiddle player. Solomon was in need of work, so he agreed and traveled with the men from New York to Washington D.C. The circus turned out to be a sham, and upon his arrival in Washington D.C., Solomon was kidnapped, drugged, beaten, and sold into slavery. He spent the next twelve years of his life enduring the horrors of slavery in Central Louisiana—an experience he later recorded in his memoir, *12 Years a Slave*. He was eventually freed from slavery with the help of two men: Samuel Bass, who was a Canadian carpenter visiting the plantation where Solomon was enslaved, and a lawyer named Henry B. Northup, who was a friend of Solomon and the grandnephew of the man who freed Solomon's father many years prior. Solomon was officially freed on January 4, 1853. That same year, with help from a writer named David Wilson, Solomon published his experiences in *12 Years a Slave*, which became a cornerstone text of the abolitionist movement. Solomon spent several years traveling for speaking engagements but later disappeared from the public eye, due to his work helping slaves escape to Canada via the Underground Railroad. Because he disappeared from the public eye, Solomon's date and place of death is unknown.

HISTORICAL CONTEXT

12 Years a Slave was written in the midst of the American Abolitionist Movement. Rooted in the North, this movement sought to abolish slavery and racism completely and immediately. A resurgence of Protestantism known as the Second Great Awakening brought renewed interest in morality and sin, consequently bolstering the Abolitionist Movement's claims that slavery was immoral. Between 1777 and 1804, slavery was abolished in the northern states, but slavery still had a firm grip on the South, as it was the economic foundation of eleven Southern states, be it through the production of cotton, sugar cane, or tobacco. *12 Years a Slave* was preceded by the Fugitive Slave Act of 1850, which declared that runaway slaves were not to be allowed a trial by jury, let alone the ability to testify on their own behalf. The Fugitive Slave act also meant that all escaped slaves must be returned to their masters, even if they had escaped to a free state. Although the Fugitive Slave Act inflicted penalties on those who aided a slave's escape, the act backfired in that it actually served to bolster Abolitionist sentiments, turning the people of the North further against slavery. Written in 1853, *12 Years a Slave* appeared on the cusp of the Supreme Court case *Dred Scott v. Sandford*, and the subsequent Dred Scott decision, in which the Supreme Court declared that no black person is considered a U.S. Citizen, regardless of whether they are free or enslaved, and regardless of whether they are state citizens. This decision, written by Chief Justice Roger Brooke Taney, meant that no black person could fight for their freedom in federal court. The publication of *12 Years a Slave* precedes the election of Abraham Lincoln in 1860, and the American Civil War, which began the following year and lasted until 1865.

RELATED LITERARY WORKS

12 Years a Slave is dedicated to Harriet Beecher Stowe, author of *Uncle Tom's Cabin*. The dedication reads, "To Harriet Beecher Stowe, whose name, throughout the world, is identified with the great reform: this narrative, affording another *Key to Uncle Tom's Cabin*, is respectfully dedicated." Stowe's *A Key to Uncle Tom's Cabin* was published in 1853 and outlined the accuracy of the depiction of slavery in her novel, *Uncle Tom's Cabin*, published the year prior. Published in 1852, just one year before *12 Years a Slave*, *Uncle Tom's Cabin* is a sentimental novel that highlights the terrible realities of slavery as well as the healing power of Christian love. *Uncle Tom's Cabin* was widely read, and was the second bestselling book of the nineteenth century—the first being the Bible. Although *Uncle Tom's Cabin* is not a slave narrative, it shares many thematic similarities with *12 Years a Slave*, including racism, Christianity, and empathy. *12 Years a Slave* is also similar in content to *The Narrative of Frederick Douglass*, published in 1845. In the narrative, slave-turned-Abolitionist Frederick Douglass recounts his difficult path from slavery to freedom. Douglass' narrative includes a similar strain of religious critique (directed at those who claim to be Christians while also being slave owners) to Northup's narrative. In addition, Douglass' book and Northup's book both center on the concept of truth, emphasizing that their stories and experiences are true for the sake of showing the readership the brutal reality of slavery. Harriet Jacobs' *Incidents in the Life of a Slave Girl*, published in 1861, also contains accounts of brutality, especially the sexual abuse of female slaves by their masters, similar to those Northup gives in his narrative, chronicling the experiences of his fellow slave, Patsey. Like *12 Years a Slave*, Jacobs' slave narrative is meant to show white Northerners the heart-wrenching reality of slavery

and does so by appealing to the reader's sense of empathy.

KEY FACTS

- **Full Title:** 12 Years a Slave
- **When Written:** 1853
- **Where Written:** New York
- **When Published:** 1853
- **Literary Period:** Abolitionist literature
- **Genre:** Slave narrative; memoir
- **Setting:** Central Louisiana (Red River region); New York; Washington D.C.
- **Climax:** Solomon befriends Bass and convinces him to send three letters on his behalf
- **Antagonist:** Solomon's cruel masters (James Burch, John Tibeats, and Edwin Epps)
- **Point of View:** First person

EXTRA CREDIT

On the Big Screen. *12 Years a Slave* was adapted into a film in 2013, which won three Academy Awards and was nominated for another six.

Page One. The original title page of *12 Years a Slave* gives a brief summary of the book. It reads, "Twelve Years a Slave Narrative of Solomon Northup, a Citizen of New York, Kidnapped in Washington City in 1841, and Rescued in 1853, from a Cotton Plantation Near the Red River, in Louisiana."

PLOT SUMMARY

The narrative opens with a promise from narrator and protagonist, Solomon Northup, that the following story will "not be uninteresting to the public." He tells the reader that the pages to come will detail his life as a free man of the North, his subsequent kidnapping, his twelve miserable years in slavery, and his eventual rescue.

Solomon Northup was born a free man in New York. The son of a liberated slave, Solomon grows up hearing of the atrocities of slavery but knowing freedom. To support his wife, Anne, and their three children, Elizabeth, Margaret, and Alonzo, Solomon works hard at several jobs, be it raft-making or fiddle-playing. He loves his family dearly and his a tender father and loyal husband.

One March morning in 1841, Solomon walks around the village in Saratoga Springs, New York, where he currently lives with his family. His wife and eldest daughter are twenty miles away at the coffee shop where his wife works as a cook, and his other two children are with their aunt. Brooding over how he can make a little extra money, Solomon runs into two dignified white men named Abram Hamilton and Merrill Brown, who have heard from one of Solomon's acquaintances about Solomon's talent on the violin. Hamilton and Brown explain their connection to a circus based in Washington D.C. and say that they're in New York for the sake of sightseeing. They planned to pay their travel expenses by putting on small shows in each place they visit but have had difficulty in finding a musician for their shows. They ask Solomon if he would consider traveling with them as their fiddle player to New York City—only a short trip—in exchange for daily wages and a bonus for each show they put on. Solomon hastily agrees. Due to the brevity of the trip, he decides not to write to Anne to tell her where he's going.

Hamilton, Brown, and Solomon depart for New York, first stopping in Albany to put on a show—the only show Solomon witnesses during his entire trip with them. The show is comprised of a series of bizarre circus acts, including ventriloquism and "frying pancakes in a hat." The turnout is meager, and the show barely generates any money. The next day, the trio arrives in New York City. They ask Solomon if he would consider traveling with them the rest of the way, to Washington D.C., to take part in their circus as their fiddle player. The circus is set to travel north, so Solomon will be able to return to New York shortly. With the promise of generous wages, Solomon agrees. Hamilton and Brown suggest that Solomon obtain **free papers** before the group travels south, and Solomon is surprised that such a formality would be necessary. The free papers end up being expensive—more than Solomon thinks they are worth—but he obtains them and places them in his pocket. Hamilton and Brown pay Solomon a hefty forty-three dollars, much higher than what Solomon expected to be paid, and apologize for the lack of shows they've put on.

The next day, the city buzzes with more excitement than normal, due to General Harrison's funeral. Solomon walks around New York, in awe of the sights, and is always accompanied by his new friends, Hamilton and Brown. Throughout the day, the men often stop at taverns for a drink. They drink moderately and are always polite enough to pour a little out for Solomon. Later that evening, Solomon gets violently ill, despite having practiced moderation in his drinking. With a pounding headache and unbearable nausea, Solomon retires to his hotel room to rest.

As the night progresses, Solomon grows increasingly ill and is barely conscious. He hears several men enter his room, but he can't discern who they are or if Hamilton and Brown are among them. The men tell him that he needs to see a doctor immediately, so he stumbles out of his hotel room and follows him into the street. He soon loses consciousness completely.

When Solomon awakens—possibly days later—he finds himself in **chains**, imprisoned in a small, dark room. He tries in vain to remember the events that led him to this prison, but he is

horrified to discover a large gap in his memory. With a sinking feeling in his stomach, he realizes that his free papers have been stolen from his pockets and that he has been kidnapped. He thinks the whole situation must be a terrible misunderstanding, considering he is a free man from New York, not a slave. Soon, a door opens, and Solomon is faced by the coarse-looking James Burch, an infamous slave dealer, and his assistant, Ebenezer Radburn. When Solomon tries to tell Burch that he's been wrongfully kidnapped and is actually a freeman, Burch procures a **whip** and beats Solomon severely. Solomon remains in the slave pen for two weeks, along with several other slaves, including a woman named Eliza and her two children, Randall and Emily, who have all been secretly sold into slavery by her master's son-in-law.

One night, Burch wakes up the slaves in the middle of the night and makes them march through the pitch-black Capitol. They board a steamboat, which soon docks in Richmond, Virginia, where the slaves are transferred to a slave pen belonging to Burch's good friend, Goodin. While at the pen, Solomon is handcuffed to a man named Robert, who turns out to also be a kidnapped freeman. Between their handcuffs and similar life stories, the two form a tight bond.

The slaves are later forced to board another steamboat, this time heading for New Orleans, where they will be auctioned off by Burch's business partner, Theophilus Freeman. On the boat, Solomon and Robert befriend a man named Arthur, who, like them, has also been kidnapped and torn from freedom. The three men conceive an escape plan but are never able to put it into action, as Robert falls deathly ill with the smallpox and soon dies. While on the boat, Solomon befriends a white sailor named Manning, who agrees to send a letter when the boat docks to Solomon's lawyer friend, Henry B. Northup. Once in New Orleans, Manning successfully mails the letter, and Solomon's friend Arthur is rescued by friends from home.

The slaves are taken to Freeman's slave pen and he prepares them to be sold. The slaves are bathed, dressed up, and taught to saunter back and forth as potential customers examine them. Solomon watches Eliza's family be torn apart, and his heart breaks at Eliza's overwhelming grief. Luckily, Solomon and Eliza are bought by a kindly, wealthy gentleman named William Ford, an esteemed Baptist preacher from the Red River region of Louisiana. Solomon, Eliza, and Ford travel to the Great Pine Woods to Ford's home. Ford proves to be a compassionate, gentle owner, and treats his slaves like his own children. He reads the Bible to them and teaches them to trust in God, who loves all children, free or enslaved.

Ford falls under financial strain, owing a lot of money to a carpenter named John Tibeats, who does carpentry work for Ford. Tibeats is widely disliked by white men and slaves and is known as being rude and disagreeable. With little choice, Ford sells Solomon to Tibeats. Since the price Tibeats pays for Solomon is greater than the debt that Ford owed Tibeats, Ford secures a four-hundred-dollar mortgage on Solomon.

Tibeats and Solomon travel thirty miles to a plantation Ford owns on Bayou Boeuf, overseen by a nice white man named Chapin. Although Solomon likes Chapin, he immediately hates new master, as Tibeats forces him to labor tirelessly and is never pleased with Solomon's work. On one occasion, Tibeats tries to whip Solomon for using the wrong nails (even though the overseer, Chapin, told Solomon to use the nails in question). Solomon tackles to the ground and whips his master, which sets in motion a near-deathly series of events. Chapin punishes Tibeats for nearly whipping Solomon over something as trivial as nails, and Tibeats rides off on horseback, only to appear later with two companions carrying whips and rope. Tibeats and the two men prepare to hang Solomon and tie him up so tightly that he can't move. When they slip the noose around Solomon's neck and begin to drag him toward a tree, Chapin runs out, pistol in each hand, and forces the men to leave the property.

Not long after this incident, Tibeats hires Solomon out to Ford's brother-in-law, Peter Tanner, who uses religion to scare his slaves into obeying him. Once Solomon is returned to Tibeats, Solomon's life is threatened once more when Tibeats tries to attack him with a hatchet. Solomon manages to run away but is quickly pursued by Tibeats on horseback and a pack of vicious dogs. Solomon swims through a dangerous swamp and throws the dogs off of his scent and eventually turns around, deciding to head to Ford's house.

Under Ford's protection, Solomon is able to rest for three days but is eventually returned to Tibeats, who soon sells Solomon to a man named Edwin Epps. Although Solomon is initially relieved to be under new ownership (and far away from Tibeats), he quickly discovers that Epps is much worse. Epps is a gruff, uneducated man who frequently overindulges in alcohol and cares only about profit. He is a violent master, as he makes all of his slaves live in constant fear and prides himself on his ability to "break" slaves. When he comes home drunk in the middle of the night, he often awakens his weary slaves and forces them to dance while Solomon plays the fiddle. If they dance too slowly, they are brutally whipped. One of Epps' slaves, a twenty-three-year-old girl named Patsey, receives particularly inhumane treatment. Epps frequently rapes Patsey, which eventually leads his wife, Mistress Epps, to passionately hate Patsey out of jealousy.

Epps hires Solomon out to harvest sugar cane, which coincides with the off-season for cotton. During this time, Solomon is also hired out to play the fiddle for other slave owners, and because of a Louisiana custom, Solomon is allowed to keep the money he makes while working on Sundays. Solomon also plays the fiddle at the much-anticipated Christmas feast each year, when Epps gives his slaves three days off.

During cotton-picking season, Solomon returns to work for Epps, where he is made a driver, given a whip and made to punish any slave who doesn't pick fast enough. However,

Solomon learns how to whip the slaves without actually touching them to spare them from the unnecessary violence.

Every day, Solomon watches for a chance to obtain paper so that he can write to his friends and family. After nine watchful years, Solomon finally obtains a single sheet of paper. He learns how to make his own ink and pen, which he uses to write a letter to an acquaintance whom he thinks can help rescue him. As a slave, Solomon has no means for sending the letter. However, when a poor white man named Armsby comes to Epps' plantation to work, Solomon seizes his chance to enlist the white man's help. Although Solomon is skeptical about if he can trust Armsby, Solomon asks him to send a letter on his behalf. Armsby agrees and vows not to tell Epps. Armsby promptly betrays Solomon the following morning, but Solomon manages to convince Epps that Armsby lied about the whole thing to make himself look good.

One day, Epps treats Patsey with more barbarity and cruelty than ever before. Convinced that Patsey is secretly visiting a whit man who lives nearby, Epps flies into a jealous rage. He ties Patsey's wrists and ankles to four stakes in the ground. Brandishing his thickest whip, Epps forces Solomon to beat Patsey. Against his will, Solomon administers forty lashes but refuses to do the innocent girl any further harm. Epps snatches the whip and tortures Patsey with even more forceful blows. He stops once Patsey is disfigured and nearly dead. From then on, Patsey's mental and physical health decline rapidly.

Epps hires a white contractor named Bass to undertake a new construction project, and Solomon is also ordered to help. Bass is a middle-aged Canadian man with strong anti-slavery opinions that make Epps laugh. Over time, Solomon and Bass develop a close friendship, meeting in the middle of the night to talk about Solomon's kidnapping and wishes to escape. Risking his safety for his new friend, Bass promises to write letters to Solomon's contacts in New York. He follows through on the promise, sending one to Judge Marvin, one to Solomon's friends Perry and Parker, and another to the Collector of Customs at New York. Several weeks go by without a reply, and Solomon feels dejected. Bass has to leave Epps' plantation for another job but promises to visit on the day before Christmas to deliver any news.

When Bass arrives once again on the day before Christmas, he tells Solomon that he has still not received a reply to any of the letters. However, he says that his contruction jobs will be completed in April, when he will then travel to New York himself to seek out Solomon's friends and family.

Solomon interjects in the narrative, flashing back to September, when Bass' letter reaches Perry and Parker. The two men send it on to Anne, who immediately seeks advice from longtime friend and lawyer, Henry B. Northup. Northup takes on Solomon's case and is eventually granted legal power by the Governor to find and release Solomon from slavery.

In December, Northup leaves for Louisiana. He arrives in the town where the letter was postmarked, Marksville, and teams up with a local lawyer named John Waddill. Although the author of the letter is unknown, Waddill thinks it may have been written by the only outspoken abolitionist he knows, a contractor named Bass who sometimes works in the Bayou Boeuf area. The men locate Bass, who tells them that Solomon, now called Platt, is a slave at Epps' cotton plantation. Just after midnight, Henry B. Northup and the local sheriff depart for Bayou Boeuf.

A few days after Christmas, Solomon is toiling in the cotton fields when he sees a carriage rumbling toward the property. A sheriff and another man step out and ask which slave is named Platt. Coming forward, Solomon is confused as to what the sheriff wants from him but is immediately overjoyed at the sight of his friend Northup. The sheriff and Northup settle Solomon's release with Epps, who is furious and threatens to kill whoever sent the letter to Perry and Parker. Solomon's release is finalized in court the following day, and Solomon departs with Northup.

The pair travel first to New Orleans and then to Washington D.C., where they file a complaint against Burch for selling Solomon into slavery despite him being free. In court, Burch is allowed to testify on his own behalf, and Solomon is not. Burch is quickly found innocent. He later files a complaint against Solomon, claiming that Solomon conspired with two white men (Hamilton and Brown) to defraud Burch. Solomon is arrested and brought to court, but Burch drops the charges in the middle of the case.

Finally, Solomon and Northup are able to return to New York, where Solomon reunites with his family. He reminds the reader that the narrative that he has just completed is entirely true and is an accurate depiction of slavery. Emphasizing his gratitude toward all those who helped free him, Solomon vows to live a quiet, humble life for his remaining years.

CHARACTERS

MAJOR CHARACTERS

Solomon Northup – Solomon Northup, the author and protagonist of the memoir, is born a free black man in New York, where, at the start of the story, he lives a pleasant life with his wife, Anne, and their three children, Elizabeth, Margaret, and Alonzo. He is known by the community as an excellent fiddle player, a family man, and a hard worker. These traits unknowingly lead him into a trap, when, needing a source of income to help his family, Solomon agrees to travel to Washington D.C. with two new acquaintances (Brown and Hamilton) to play the fiddle in their circus. The two men betray Solomon, selling him into slavery to James Burch. Solomon lives as a slave for twelve years for three different masters—first,

the kindhearted William Ford, then the violent John Tibeats, and finally, the exceedingly cruel and evil Edwin Epps. Solomon is known to his masters and fellow slaves as Platt, a name given to him by Burch. Solomon's talent as a fiddle player provides him a sense of comfort and solace during his years as a slave and enables him to make a little money by performing at other slave owners' social gatherings. He also distinguishes himself as a natural at harvesting sugar cane, and a skilled carpenter—a skill which eventually leads him to cross paths with the Canadian carpenter, Bass, who helps Solomon regain his freedom. Especially during Edwin Epp's violent, ten-year ownership, Solomon finds hope in God and the prospect of seeing his family again one day. This dream is fulfilled at the end of the book, when Solomon returns home to New York to find his wife and children alive and well.

Edwin Epps – Epps is Solomon's third and most inhumane master, whom Solomon serves for ten years. Epps is married to Mistress Epps, and the two have at least two children, although only one, Young Master Epps, appears in the narrative. A heavy set, coarse man with a love of drinking, Epps is cruel and malicious toward all his slaves, including Solomon (whom he knows as Platt), but reserves particularly brutal treatment to an elderly male slave named Abram and a young, pretty female slave named Patsey. Epps frequently rapes Patsey, making her the object of Mistress Epps' jealousy and hatred. Epps views his slaves as nothing more than animals who harvest his cotton so that he can make a profit—a dehumanizing view he passes down to his son.

Bass – Bass is a kind-hearted white carpenter from Canada who works on a construction project for Edwin Epps. This makes it possible for him to befriend Solomon, as Solomon has skills in carpentry, and the two work side by side. Bass and Solomon quickly form a tight-knight, secret friendship due to Bass' abolitionist spirit, outspoken opinions, and his deep empathy for the injustice of Solomon's situation. Bass is pivotal in securing Solomon's freedom, as he sends several risky letters to Solomon's contacts in New York, including Judge Marvin, Perry and Parker, and the Collector of Customs at New York. Bass, who has no family of his own, remains unblinkingly loyal and loving to Solomon and dedicates months of his life to helping him.

William Ford – Ford is Solomon's first master, as well as Solomon's only kind and compassionate master. Ford purchases Solomon (whom he knows only as Platt), along with a slave named Harry and another named Eliza, from slave dealer Theophilus Freeman. Ford is married to Mistress Ford, whom he treats with tenderness and love. A fatherly, devout Christian man, Ford treats his slaves like family, and his slaves consider him their father figure in return. Ford frequently acts as Solomon's protector even after Solomon is sold to the erratic, hard-to-please John Tibeats. Solomon deeply respects Ford and knows that he only owns slaves and is a proponent of slavery because of his environment—had he grown up in the North, Solomon believes that he would certainly be against slavery.

John Tibeats – Tibeats is the carpenter who buys Solomon from William Ford when Ford runs into financial troubles. A sharp contrast from the warm and tender Ford, Tibeats is a cruel and erratic master, frequently trying to harm or even kill Solomon despite the fact that Solomon is a hardworking and skillful craftsman. He eventually tries to hang Solomon, and almost succeeds, but he is stopped at gunpoint by an overseer named Chapin. Ultimately, Ford compels Tibeats sell Solomon, leading Tibeats to sell Solomon to the vicious Edwin Epps.

James Burch – Burch is a cruel slave dealer in Washington D.C. who oversees the Williams' Slave Pen with help from his assistant, Ebenezer Radburn. Burch imprisons Solomon, Eliza, Randall, Emily, Clemens Ray, John Williams, and several others in a basement. Burch (with his **whip**) is Solomon's first taste of the bitter reality of slavery, and he is the reason why Solomon keeps his identity as a kidnapped free man a secret for twelve years—as Burch threatens to kill Solomon if he ever speaks of his freedom. Burch transfers Solomon, Eliza, and her children to his business partner, Theophilus Freeman, in New Orleans to be auctioned off. Solomon later brings Burch to court, but Burch is found innocent with help from his two fake witnesses, Benjamin O. Shekels and Benjamin A. Thorn. Afterwards, Burch accuses Solomon of defrauding him, but drops the charges in the middle of the case.

Henry B. Northup – Henry B. Northup, a white lawyer, is a longtime acquaintance of Solomon and the grandnephew of the man who freed Solomon's father from slavery. He hears about Solomon's situation from Solomon's wife, Anne, after she catches wind of Solomon's predicament from longtime acquaintances William Perry and Cephas Parker, who in turn heard of Solomon's situation from Bass. Henry proves to be a faithful friend and skilled lawyer. He immediately takes on Solomon's case and travels to Louisiana to find Solomon—not an easy task, considering that Solomon is exclusively known as Platt. He eventually frees Solomon, represents him in three court cases, and leads him back to New York.

Patsey – Patsey is a twenty-three-year-old, beautiful slave girl belonging to Edwin Epps. She is raped by Epps regularly, making her the object of Mistress Epps' jealousy and hatred and thus the recipient of even more brutal treatment. Stuck between Edwin Epps and Mistress Epps, Patsey is constantly beaten and punished for one thing or another. She is known among the other slaves for her bright spirit and extraordinary talent picking cotton. She is eventually beaten nearly to death by Epps, after which she is never the same.

Mistress Epps – Mistress Epps is the wife of Edwin Epps, and the mother of at least two children (though the only one who appears in the narrative is Young Master Epps). Although she is

presented as being polite to the slaves (she even cries when Solomon is rescued because she'll miss his talent for the fiddle), Mistress Epps fosters a wicked hatred for Patsey due to jealousy, since Patsey is beautiful and is the helpless object of Edwin Epps' sexual abuse. For these reasons, Mistress Epps frequently convinces Epps to beat and **whip** the slave girl.

Theophilus Freeman – Theophilus Freeman is the cruel slave dealer in New Orleans who takes over Solomon, Eliza, and her children (among others) from his business partner, James Burch. He is inhumane and deeply insensitive, refusing to allow Eliza and her daughter, Emily, to stay together even though William Ford offers to buy them both. Freeman is wicked and greedy and knows he can make a higher profit on Emily when she's older.

Eliza Berry – Eliza, known to her owners as Dradey, is the mother of Randall and Emily. She was the slave-turned-mistress of a rich man who gave her a plush life and promised her eventual freedom. However, the man's estranged wife and daughter hated Eliza and secretly sold her to James Burch. Eliza is quickly separated from her children, as she is sold to William Ford, while Randall is sold to another master, and Emily is deemed "not for sale" by the cruel slave trader Theophilus Freeman. Eliza spends the remainder of her life stricken with grief, which later is the cause of her death.

Ebenezer Radburn – Radburn works with James Burch at the slave pen in Washington D.C., where Solomon first wakes up in **chains** after being drugged and kidnapped. Radburn's attempts at sympathy for Solomon are flimsy, though he reinforces to Solomon that it is safer to stay quiet about his identity as a kidnapped free man. He is later brought to court with Burch by Solomon but is deemed innocent.

Cephas Parker – Parker is one of Solomon's old friends from New York. He is one of the men that Bass writes to in an attempt to rescue Solomon from slavery and restore him to freedom. Parker and his business partner, William Perry, receive the letter and forward it on to Solomon's family, setting the ball in motion for Solomon's rescue.

Emily Berry – Emily is Eliza's young, beautiful daughter and Randall's sister. She is likely the daughter of Eliza's last owner. The cruel slave dealer, Theophilus Freeman, refuses to sell Emily, even when Ford offers to buy both Eliza and Emily for the sake of keeping them together. Eliza never sees her daughter again.

Arthur – Arthur is one of Solomon's first friends at the very beginning of his time as a slave. While on the slave ship, Arthur, Robert, and Solomon make a plan for their escape off the boat, but the plans are shattered by Robert's death and Arthur's later rescue in New Orleans by friends from home.

Lew Cheney – Lew Cheney is the slave from a neighboring plantation who organizes a rebellion only to betray every person involved in the movement. He is rewarded for turning in the group, while all the other slaves involved (including many innocent slaves) are hanged. According to Solomon, Cheney is still despised by all slaves in Louisiana.

MINOR CHARACTERS

Merrill Brown – Brown is one of the two men (along with Abram Hamilton) who convince Solomon to travel with them from New York to Washington D.C. to take part in their circus. Brown and Hamilton betray Solomon by drugging him, beating him, stealing his **free papers**, and selling him into slavery.

Abram Hamilton – Hamilton, with help from his accomplice, Brown, convinces Solomon to travel from New York to Washington D.C. to play fiddle in the circus with which the men are connected. Once in Washington D.C., Hamilton and Brown drug Solomon, steal his **free papers**, and sell him into slavery.

William Perry – Perry, an old friend of Solomon, is one of the men that Bass writes to in order to rescue Solomon from slavery. Perry and his business partner, Cephas Parker, are able to forward the letter on to Solomon's family, setting the ball in motion for Solomon's rescue.

Armsby – Armsby is an impoverished white man who works for Edwin Epps. Armsby proves himself untrustworthy and deceitful when Solomon asks Armsby mail a letter for him, and Armsby agrees, feigning secrecy. Armsby immediately betrays Solomon by telling Epps.

Chapin – Chapin is the kind overseer at Ford's Bayou Beouf plantation. He intervenes when John Tibeats and his accomplices try to hang Solomon.

John P. Waddill – Waddill is a Louisiana lawyer who helps his brother, Young Waddill, and Henry B. Northup find and rescue Solomon from slavery.

Young Waddill – Young Waddill, the brother of John P. Waddill, helps Henry B. Northup rescue Solomon from slavery.

Anne Northup – Anne is Solomon's wife and the mother to Elizabeth, Margaret, and Alonzo. She is a hard worker and known as an excellent cook.

Elizabeth Northup – Elizabeth is the eldest child of Anne and Solomon's three children. She is the sister of Margaret and Alonzo.

Margaret Northup – Margaret is the middle child of Anne and Solomon and later is the mother of Solomon Northup Staunton. She is the sister of Elizabeth and Alonzo.

Alonzo Northup – Alonzo is the son of Anne and Solomon, as well as the brother of Elizabeth and Margaret. Once he is old enough, he goes west in order to save enough money to purchase his father's freedom.

Young Master Epps / Epps' Son – Edwin Epps' son is between the ages of ten and twelve. His behavior is violent and inhumane, just like that of his father. He sees slaves as nothing

more than animals.

Randall Berry – Randall is Eliza Berry's young son and Emily's brother. He is quickly separated from the both of them but is too young to understand the gravity of his situation as a slave and his separation from his family. Eliza never sees him again.

Abram – Abram is one of Edwin Epps' slaves. At sixty years old, Abram is a sweet, aging man who acts like a father to the other slaves. Epps treats him and a slave girl named Patsey with particular violence.

John Manning – Manning is the empathetic sailor that befriends Solomon aboard the ship headed for New Orleans. He risks his safety to help Solomon write and send a letter to Henry B. Northup.

Peter Tanner – Tanner is William Ford's brother-in-law, whom John Tibeats hires Solomon out to. Like Ford, Tanner is a devout Christian, though he uses the Bible to support racism and scare his slaves.

Phebe – Phebe, also called Aunt Phebe, is one of the slaves that works in Edwin Epps' home. She is married to Wiley and is the mother of Edward, Bob, and Henry. Phebe is a chatty woman, known for being a gossip and eavesdropping as she works in the house.

Wiley – Wiley, one of Edwin Epps' slaves, is Phebe's husband and Edward's father. He is forty-eight years old and has a quiet, solemn temperament. Wiley tries to run away but is captured by white patrollers and returned to Epps three weeks later, earning Wiley violent punishment.

Robert – Robert is one of the slaves on the slave ship whom Solomon befriends. Robert, Solomon, and Arthur make a detailed plan for their escape off the ship, but the plan is never put into action because Robert falls sick with smallpox and dies.

Celeste – Celeste is a runaway slave from a plantation nearby that of Edwin Epps. She turns to Solomon for food, and he helps her stay alive for many months. She has fairer skin than her master.

Mistress Ford – Mistress Ford is William Ford's gentle, kind wife whom Solomon loves and respects.

Clemens Ray – One of the slaves Solomon meets while imprisoned in Williams' Slave Pen, overseen by James Burch.

Edward – The thirteen-year-old son of Wiley and Phebe who works in Edwin Epps' household serving Epps' children.

Bob – One of Edwin Epps' slaves and Phebe's twenty-year-old son from an earlier marriage.

Henry – One of Edwin Epps' slaves and Phebe's twenty-three-year-old son from an earlier marriage.

Harriet Shaw – A close friend of Patsey and the black wife of a dishonest white gambler.

Judge Marvin – One of the men to whom Bass writes a letter in an attempt to rescue Solomon from slavery.

Benjamin O. Shekels – A slave trader who acts as a false witness for Burch when Solomon brings Burch to court.

Benjamin A. Thorn – One of James Burch's false witness when Solomon brings Burch to court.

John Williams – One of the slaves that Solomon meets while in Williams' Slave Pen, overseen by James Burch.

Adam – A white man who works as a foreman for William Ford.

Judge Turner – A dignified man for whom Solomon briefly harvests sugar cane.

Mintus –Solomon's father, who was born a slave but earned his freedom when his master died.

Goodin – The slave trader in Richmond, Virginia, whose complexion is as dark as his slaves'.

Rachel – One of Chapin's slaves at Bayou Boeuf.

Eldret – The nice man that Solomon is hired out to by Tibeats to chop lumber.

Marshall – The murderous man who lives at a plantation near Epps, at one point challenging Epps to a duel. Marshall is well-respected for having killed another man, according to Solomon.

Solomon Northup Staunton – Margaret Northup's son and Anne and Solomon's grandson.

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.

RACISM AND SLAVERY

12 Years a Slave grapples with the racism that fuels slavery and Solomon Northup's suffering. The narrative illustrates how racism is an instrument for human wickedness—a justification for a slave owner to be unrelenting, cruel, and inhumane. *12 Years a Slave* clearly points out that racism is a learned behavior, not an inherent understanding that people are born with. The overarching purpose of *12 Years a Slave* is to reveal the heartbreaking realities of slavery for the sake of strengthening anti-slavery attitudes and furthering the Abolitionist Movement, so Northup's assertion that racism is manmade and a means for human brutality ties neatly into this purpose. Drawing upon his own Christian faith, he also highlights that racism, rooted in wickedness and human sin, is punishable by God. Since the Abolitionist Movement was strengthened by the Second Great Awakening—a Protestant revivalist movement that renewed Christians' commitment to turning away from sin and living godly lives—Northup's condemnation of racism as being a sin

punishable by God appeals to the moral compass of his Northern readers.

12 Years a Slave illustrates how racism is a vehicle for human wickedness. Solomon highlights that sometimes, racism doesn't even seem to be about skin color as much as its about slave owners feeling justified in their cruelty. Solomon and Bass make several references to slaves who look entirely white, or slave owners whose skin is as dark as their slaves. For example, when Solomon is initially being sold into slavery by slave dealer James Burch, he notices that one of the most famous slave dealers, Goodin, has "a complexion almost as dark as some of his own negros." Later, while serving the vicious Edwin Epps, Solomon meets a runaway slave named Celeste, who is "far whiter than her owner, or any of his offspring." Bass, the Canadian carpenter who eventually helps save Solomon, voices a similar sentiment, saying to Epps, "Talk about black skin, and black blood; why, how many slaves are there on this bayou as white as either of us? And what difference is there in the color of the soul? Pshaw! The whole system is absurd as it is cruel."

Though the racist system is absurd, it is the dominant worldview of Southern society at the time, and the evil it leads to is shown most clearly in the character of Epps. Epps uses his slaves as a means to satisfy his own craving for violence and sadistic entertainment. When Epps comes home drunk, he first breaks whatever he can find in his own house. "When satisfied with his amusement in the house," he turns his violence upon the slaves, forcing them to run around in the yard in the middle of the night to avoid the painful sting of his **whip** for the sake of his "brutal humor." Other times, the drunken Epps forces the slaves to get up in the middle of the night and dance to the quick tunes played on Solomon's fiddle. If the slaves dance too slowly (despite their crippling exhaustion), he whips them. Solomon spells out the dark irony in the situation, writing, "Bent with excessive toil…feeling rather as if we could cast ourselves upon the earth and weep, many a night in the house of Edwin Epps have his unhappy slaves been made to dance and laugh."

Besides being used to justify human barbarity, the books makes clear that racism is a learned behavior. Epps' ten-year-old son, Young Master Epps, mirrors how he sees his father treat the slaves. As a game, Epps' son pretends he's the overseer and rides out into the fields to brutally whip the slaves, "greatly to his father's delight." Because of his father's influence, Epps' son sees "the black man simply as an animal, differing in no respect from any other animal, save in the gift of speech and the possession of somewhat higher instincts, and therefore, the more valuable." Later, Epps himself echoes this understanding of slaves as animals. When Bass rhetorically asks Epps what the difference is between a white man and a black man (believing that there is none), Epps replies, "All the difference in the world…You might as well ask what the difference is between a white man and a baboon." Considering the impact Epps' beliefs and behavior have on his son, it's likely that Epps also learned his beliefs and behavior from his own father or other influential people in his life. Solomon also points out how his first master, the kindly William Ford, was victim to his environment as well: "The influences and associations that had always surrounded him, blinded him to the inherent wrong at the bottom of the system of Slavery…Looking though the same medium with his fathers before him, he saw things in the same light." Solomon notes that if he had been raised in a different environment, Ford would likely have an entirely different stance on slavery.

Asserting his own Christian faith, Solomon Northup highlights that because racism is a means for justifying sinfulness and is a learned behavior, racism is punishable by God. Adding a religious layer to his argument, Northup appeals to the Christian and moral underpinnings of the Abolitionist Movement and Second Great Awakening unfolding around his Northern readership. Watching a sweet slave girl named Patsey be brutally beaten by Epps, Solomon thinks to himself, "Thou devil, sooner or later, somewhere in the course of eternal justice, thou shalt answer for this sin!" Solomon aligns Epps with the devil, underscoring the extreme sinfulness in his racism and the eternal punishment that awaits him. Likewise, Bass, who is openly against slavery, tells Epps, "…you and men like you will have to answer for it. There's a sin, a fearful sin, resting on this nation, that will not go unpunished forever. There will be a reckoning yet…it's a coming as sure as the Lord is just." Although Epps writes off Bass's statement as Bass enjoying hearing himself talk and being argumentative, Bass is genuine in his assertion that racism is sinful and punishable by God.

The crux of *12 Years a Slave* is the racism that permeated the American South and fueled the brutal system of slavery. In his narrative, Solomon Northup reveals how such prejudice is manmade and used as a means to be cruel, consequently strengthening anti-slavery attitudes among his readership and adding fuel to the Abolitionist fire growing in the North. Asserting that racism is a sin punishable by God, Northup also approaches racism from a religious angle and appeals to the renewed interest in morality among Northern Protestants.

TRUTH AND JUSTICE

Although *12 Years a Slave* commends telling the truth, considering it a sign of integrity and strength, the book also explores the complexity involved in telling the truth in nineteenth-century America. Racism means that truth coming from a slave is deemed worthless, limiting a slave's ability to seek justice. Further, telling the truth can be dangerous or deadly for an innocent person in this toxic environment. In this case, Solomon Northup maintains, it is appropriate to lie for safety's sake. At the same time, the book is careful to point out that lying is still immoral when it's done by someone who is trying to cover up their crimes.

12 Years a Slave reveals that racism imposes limits on truth and justice. For example, John Tibeats, one of Solomon's several cruel masters, frequently tries to murder him, but Solomon knows, "Had he stabbed me to the heart in the presence of a hundred slaves, not one of them, by the laws of Louisiana, could have given evidence against him." Likewise, when Solomon is eventually freed and brings the slave dealer James Burch to court, Burch is allowed to testify as a witness on his own behalf, but Solomon is not given the same privilege. Burch is found innocent, and the court deems Solomon's evidence "inadmissible." Solomon points out that racism stood bluntly in the way of justice: "I was rejected solely on the ground that I was a colored man—the fact of my being a free citizen of New York not being disputed."

The narrative also highlights that in an unjust society, sometimes what is lawful is immoral, and vice versa. For an innocent person, telling the truth can be dangerous and even deadly. In these cases, lying or breaking the law is justified and doesn't reflect a moral lapse. Imprisoned in Burch's slave pen in Washington D.C., Solomon quickly learns that telling the truth of his status as a free man kidnapped into slavery only earns him harsher treatment: "But I would not be silent, and denounced the authors of my imprisonment…as unmitigated villains. Finding he could not quiet me, he flew into a towering passion." Since it's illegal to buy a slave who is actually a free man, Burch fears punishment and consequently beats Solomon more severely with every assertion of his identity as a free man from New York. Similarly, even though Solomon's first master, William Ford, is kind and gentle, Solomon knows "well enough the slightest knowledge of my real character would consign me at once to the remoter depths of Slavery," and that he would be sold on the other side of the border, "disposed of as the thief disposes of his stolen horse." Later, when Solomon serves a vicious, evil man named Edwin Epps, Solomon learns that telling the truth about anything—not just his identity as a kidnapped free man—can be dangerous: "It is not safe to contradict a master, even by the assertion of a truth."

However, the narrative asserts that it is immoral and unjust to lie in order to escape punishment for one's crimes. Solomon tells the story of a man named Lew Cheney, a slave from a neighboring plantation who organizes a revolution with the goal of fighting the opposition all the way until they reach the Mexican border. Realizing his plan is destined to fail, Lew turns in all of the people who were part of his organization—making himself look innocent. All people involved in the planned revolt, as well as many innocent people, are hanged. Solomon says that even at the time of his writing, Lew Cheney's "name is despised and execrated by all his race." Similarly, when Burch is deemed innocent in court, Burch tries to turn the charges around on Solomon, claiming that Solomon "conspired with the two white men to defraud him." When Solomon is consequently arrested and brought to court (with Henry B. Northup as his lawyer), Burch drops the charges, knowing they are baseless.

Solomon Northup's slave narrative shows the messy complexities of truth-telling for a slave in nineteenth-century America. In showing how difficult it is for an innocent slave to tell the truth and receive justice, Northup seeks to elicit empathy from the reader and turn them against slavery. Even in the narrative itself, Northup frequently interjects with direct addresses to the reader, declaring that all of the experiences laid out in the pages of *12 Years a Slave* are entirely accurate and truthful. By firmly declaring that all of his recollections are true, Northup helps the reader see *12 Years Slave* for what it is—an actual, firsthand account of the real-life horrors of slavery unfolding under the reader's nose.

FAMILY

12 Years a Slave centers on the twelve years of agony that author and protagonist Solomon Northup spent as a slave in Louisiana, completely cut off from his family. Although Solomon's family appears very little throughout the narrative, family plays a key role in Solomon's experiences. The narrative points out that the concept of family is broader than being related by blood or marriage. Instead, family encompasses those who show one another love, compassion, and loyalty, regardless of whether or not they are related. *12 Years a Slave* also shows how even the mere thought of family can be a source of comfort and hope in times of bitter pain and distress. Likewise, family can provide a sense of purpose and a reason to live.

In the book, family is more than marriage and blood relatives—it's the people who show each other unconditional love and loyalty. For example, the kindly carpenter named Bass has no family but forges a deep family-like connection with Solomon as the two spend many nights talking secretly. It's Bass's compassion and loyalty that lead to Solomon's freedom. Likewise, Henry B. Northup, the lawyer who is also instrumental in securing Solomon's freedom, proves himself a faithful friend by working on Solomon's case for many months and traveling all the way from New York to Louisiana to rescue Solomon. Though Henry and Solomon share the same last name, they aren't blood relatives—Henry is the grandnephew of the man who freed Solomon's father—but the loyalty and unconditional love Henry shows Solomon makes them practically family. In addition, William Ford, Solomon's first master, is so gentle, kindhearted, and empathetic, that his slaves speak of him like a father figure. For as long as he has the power to do so, Ford consistently shields Solomon from harm and treats him almost like a son.

The narrative illustrates how family, blood-related or otherwise, is a source of hope and comfort in times of sorrow. In the midst of his suffering as a slave, Solomon comforts himself by thinking of his kind, loving father who also endured

life as a slave but was freed upon his master's death: "How often since that time has the recollection of his paternal counsels occurred to me, while lying in a slave hut in the distant and sickly regions of Louisiana." Similarly, Solomon reveals to Bass that he is sustained by the thought of one day being reunited with his family: "Dwelling upon the unspeakable happiness it would be to clasp them to my heart once more before I died."

Family also provides a sense of purpose in one's life. Lamenting over his miserable life as a slave, Solomon questions, "Why had I not died in my young years—before God had given me children to love and live for?" Solomon's statement shows how his children added a whole new layer of purpose to his life—but also a new layer of pain, when that purpose is taken away. Likewise, Eliza, one of the slaves Solomon meets in Burch's slave pen, is permanently separated from her children with no hope of a reunion, and she consequently withers into a shell of a person and later passes away out of grief. In contrast, Bass, having established a close, familial relationship with Solomon, makes Solomon's release from slavery his life purpose: "without kith or kin to mourn for him, or to remember him…his life was of little value to himself, and henceforth should be devoted to the accomplishment of my liberty, and to an unceasing warfare against the accursed shame of Slavery."

Family is instrumental in *12 Years a Slave*, as it provides strength, comfort, and a reason to live. Solomon Northup's purpose in recording his experiences in *12 Years a Slave* is to reveal the horrors of slavery so that the readership will realize that slavery is unjust and repulsive and work to abolish it. One of the ways Northup achieves this is to gain the reader's empathy, which is a common technique used in slave narratives. By revealing his deep, tender connection to his family, Northup appeals to the reader's connection to their own family. Detailing the pain of being separated from one's family—like Eliza's grief-driven death after being separated from her children—Northup encourages the Northern reader to empathize deeply with slaves' misery and to ultimately realize that slaves are human beings with thoughts, feelings, and families.

CHRISTIANITY

Throughout *12 Years a Slave*, Solomon Northup asserts that God loves all of his people, regardless of race. The inherent equality among men in God's eyes means that Christianity is a source of comfort and strength for the slaves, as well as a way to understand their circumstances. *12 Years a Slave* also reveals the hypocritical underbelly of Christianity in the American South, showing the way that Christianity can be terribly manipulated into a means for justifying the rightness of slavery and racism.

The narrative asserts that the core of Christianity is a loving God who cares for all people, regardless of race. At the opening of his narrative, Solomon explains how his father taught him and his siblings "to place our trust and confidence in Him who regards the humblest as well as the highest of his creatures." Solomon's only kindly owner, William Ford, is a Christian man who teaches his slaves that God cares for all people: "He pointed upwards, and with benign and cheering words addressed us as his fellow-mortals, accountable, like himself, to the Maker of us all." Later, Bass, the kindly Canadian carpenter, asks Epps, "Now, in the sight of God, what is the difference, Epps, between a white man and a black one?" Through his rhetorical question, Bass attempts to show Epps that there is no difference in God's eyes. In contrast, Solomon attributes Edwin Epps' son's brutality and racism to what he's learned by observing his father, as well as his failure "to comprehend, that in the eye of the Almighty there is no distinction of color."

12 Years a Slave illustrates that religion can provide a sense of hope, strength, and understanding. When Solomon wakes up from being drugged and kidnapped, he realizes that he has been enslaved, and immediately turns to God: "I felt there was no trust or mercy in unfeeling man; and commending myself to the God of the oppressed, bowed my head…and wept most bitterly." Similarly, during the process of being officially sold to a slave owner, Solomon prays to God for strength: "To the Almighty Father of us all—the freeman and the slave—I poured forth the supplications of a broken spirit, imploring strength from on high to bear up against the burden of my troubles." In addition, Ford shows his slaves how religion provides a way to understand one's present life and the future, eternal life: "He sought to inculcate in our minds…dependence upon God—setting forth the rewards promised unto those who lead an upright and prayerful life…he spoke of the loving kindness of the Creator and of the life that is to come."

However, the narrative also points out that Christianity can be used to justify slavery and wickedness. For example, Ford's brother-in-law, Tanner, also reads the Bible to his slaves but uses it to impress upon them obedience to the slave owner. He dramatically reads the verse, "And that servant which knew his lord's will, and prepared not himself, neither did according to his will, shall be beaten with many stripes." Tanner's commentary on the verse is that slaves who "don't take care—that don't obey his lord—that's his master—…shall be beaten with many stripes." Tanner twists the teachings of Christianity to perpetuate slavery and justify the beating his slaves. Similarly, when Bass tries to explain to Epps that race makes no difference in God's eyes, Epps is adamant that it makes "All the difference in the world…You might as well ask what the difference is between a white man and a baboon." Bass tries instead to explain to Epps that the Declaration of Independences means that "all men [are] created free and equal," to which Epps responds that "all men" doesn't include slaves or monkeys—suggesting that he also sees the God of "all

men" as the God of all white men.

In *12 Years a Slave*, Solomon Northup asserts that God is a loving, caring God of all people, and that race plays no part in God's affections. Because of this, Northup frequently turns to his Christian faith as a source of strength or comfort in the midst of his suffering. In this way, Northup urges his reader to align themselves with God by abolishing racism and fostering equality, which is the core purpose of *12 Years a Slave*. Northup also draws attention to the ways that Christianity can be distorted for the sake of justifying slavery and racism. In doing so, Northup strengthens the moral sentiments of the Second Great Awakening, which was a Christian movement unfolding around the same time. Northup emphasizes, as the Second Great Awakening did, that slavery is immoral and does not align with Christianity and God's word.

THE POWER OF MUSIC

In *12 Years a Slave*, author and protagonist Solomon Northup highlights how his violin brought him brief but treasured moments of joy and comfort in the midst of otherwise-horrific situations. He even attributes his physical survival under his most brutal master, Edwin Epps, to his violin. However, Solomon also reveals how the scant joy in his life, music, was perverted by slave dealers and owners.

In the opening pages of his narrative, Solomon writes that the violin has brought him joy and comfort by "beguiling my own thoughts, for many hours, from the painful contemplation of my fate." During his most excruciating years of servitude, Solomon sees his violin as a faithful friend or family member who brings him comfort. Looking back on his years as a slave, Solomon writes, "I was indebted to my violin, my constant companion…and soother of my sorrows during years of servitude." Like a true friend, Solomon's violin celebrates with him in joyful times and comforts him in times of sorrow: "It was my companion—the friend of my bosom—triumphing loudly when I was joyful, and uttering its soft, melodious consolations when I was sad." When Solomon can't sleep in the middle of the night because of his misery, his violin "would sing…a song of peace," like a mother singing a lullaby to her distraught child. In addition, Solomon's harshest owner, Edwin Epps, occasionally rents Solomon out to other slave owners who need music for their parties. This arrangement allows Solomon "to witness scenes of jollity and mirth" from time to time.

Besides bringing happiness and comfort, music also has a practical purpose because it can aid in survival. During many of Solomon's years serving Epps, the slaves' food supply is infested with worms and deemed inedible. Solomon's violin, his "source of profit," is what keeps him alive by enabling him to purchase extra, non-contaminated food. In addition, Solomon writes that being able to play his violin at other slave owners' gatherings "relieved me of many days' labor in the field…and oftentimes led me away from the presence of a hard master."

However, like all good things, music can be perverted and used for evil. When Solomon is officially for sale and being examined by potential buyers, one of the slave dealers plays up Solomon's ability to play the violin so that the slave dealer will make a higher profit. Later, Epps uses Solomon's ability to play the violin as a source of torture for the other slaves and entertainment for himself. In the middle of the night, a drunken Epps forces the slaves to dance frantically to a "quick-stepping tune" that Solomon plays on the violin. If Solomon doesn't play fast enough or the other slaves don't dance fast enough, they are whipped.

In *12 Years a Slave*, Solomon Northup illustrates the key role that music played in his life as a slave, praising his violin for the way it brought him comfort, happiness, and survival. In outlining all of the ways that music comforted and helped him, Northup also makes himself more relatable to his white readership, as his deep appreciation of music as an art supports his overarching argument that black people are just as intelligent and human as white people. In addition, by revealing the way music was taken away from him or used to torture him, Northup draws on his readers' empathy and humanity in order to strengthen their condemnation of slavery and consequent commitment to the Abolitionist Movement.

SYMBOLS

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

FREE PAPERS

Lightweight and easy to steal, Solomon's free papers symbolize his identity as a free black man; like his freedom, they proved flimsy and easy to take from him. Solomon's arguments with the Washington D.C. slave dealer Burch reveal that Solomon's thirty years of life as a free man of New York mean little now that he is in **chains**. Solomon's claims to freedom hold no weight against the violently-reinforced power of white slave holders and slave traders, just as his papers held no weight, taken from his pockets and disposed of somewhere while he was drugged.

CHAINS

The chains in which Solomon finds himself restrained when he first wakes up after being drugged symbolize the near impossibility of escaping slavery. Just as chains are made up of several strong links that make the entire chain unbreakable, so the slave's life is made up of a complex suite of circumstances that make running away almost impossible, and the bonds of slavery seemingly unbreakable. The barriers facing a slave who hopes to escape are perhaps

nowhere clearer than in Solomon's one attempt at running away: as he flees Tibeats' murderous rage, Solomon is chased by vicious dogs and men until he reaches a deep and nearly impenetrable swamp (a roadblock for most slaves who are intentionally denied the opportunity to learn how to swim), and surrounded by alligators and poisonous snakes. Thus, Solomon shows that the chains of slavery are not just the literal chains made of iron, but also the complex and interlinked set of conditions that make escape so difficult.

WHIP

The whip that is used to control and punish the slaves symbolizes the dehumanization of black slaves by white slave owners. Throughout the narrative, slaves are frequently treated as beasts of burden, like workhorses—first, dressed up at a slave auction with potential buyers examining their limbs and looking in their mouths, then, forced to toil in the fields, spurred by the sharp, cracking whip. The whip is the ultimate symbol of the slaves' dehumanization, as its use on slaves implies that slaves are like livestock that can be bought, trained, and controlled by the threat—or use—of brutal physical violence.

QUOTES

Note: all page numbers for the quotes below refer to the Graymalkin Media edition of *12 Years a Slave* published in 2014.

Chapter 1 Quotes

"Thus far the history of my life presents nothing whatever unusual—nothing but the common hopes, and loves, and labors of an obscure colored man, making his humble progress in the world […] Now I had approached within the shadow of the cloud, into the thick darkness whereof I was soon to disappear, thenceforward to be hidden from the eyes of all my kindred, and shut out from the sweet light of liberty, for many a weary year.

Related Characters: Solomon Northup (speaker)

Related Themes:

Page Number: 9

Explanation and Analysis

In this passage, Solomon prepares the reader for his jarring transition from his happy and fulfilling thirty-year existence as a free man in New York to his miserable twelve years as a slave. He likens slavery and racism to a "thick," dark cloud that blots out liberty, which is an idea that pervades throughout the work. In addition, Solomon elicits empathy from his white, Northern readership by emphasizing that his life as a free man, just like theirs (presumably), was filled with love, hope, and hard work. Solomon stresses the injustice in being "shut out" from his freedom and family, inviting his readers to place themselves in Solomon's shoes and consider the overwhelming injustice of being torn from regular life. By establishing common ground with his readers early on in his narrative, Solomon immediately strengthens their convictions that slavery and racism are wrong and must be abolished—convictions which will only be intensified as the narrative unfolds.

Chapter 2 Quotes

"The idea struck me as a prudent one, though I think it would scarcely have occurred to me, had they not proposed it […] I must confess, that the papers were scarcely worth the cost of obtaining them—the apprehension of danger to my personal safety never having suggested itself to me in the remotest manner.

Related Characters: Solomon Northup (speaker), Merrill Brown, Abram Hamilton

Related Themes:

Related Symbols:

Page Number: 13

Explanation and Analysis

In this passage, Solomon is surprised by Hamilton and Brown's suggestion that he obtain free papers before traveling to Washington D.C., a slave state. This passage is reflective of Solomon's self-assuredness in his identity as a free man of the North. Having lived his entire life thus far (thirty years) as an ordinary citizen, a threat to his safety and well-being has never "suggested itself…in the remotest manner." His attitude about race and slavery is reflective of the social and political fabric of the North, which was the birthplace of the Abolitionist Movement and the Second Great Awakening. The former fostered strong anti-slavery and anti-racism sentiments among Northerners, while the latter established a newfound commitment to morality among Northern Protestants. (Although not all Northerners opposed slavery, and racism certainly still existed there as well.)

Solomon thinks the papers were worth less than he paid for

them—six shillings, or the modern-day equivalent of about thirty dollars. Besides thinking the free papers are too expensive, Solomon considers obtaining them to be a "prudent" idea, implying that he thinks Hamilton and Brown are being overly cautious, and that his free papers will be a last resort that will likely go unused. Solomon's attitude shows his naïve confidence in justice, which is soon challenged.

❝ Then did the idea begin to break upon my mind, at first dim and confused, that I had been kidnapped. There must have been some misapprehension—some unfortunate mistake. It could not be that a free citizen of New-York, who had wronged no man, nor violated any law, should be dealt with thus inhumanly [...] I felt there was no trust or mercy in unfeeling man.

Related Characters: Solomon Northup (speaker), James Burch, Merrill Brown, Abram Hamilton

Related Themes:

Related Symbols:

Page Number: 18

Explanation and Analysis

In this passage, Solomon awakens from being beaten, drugged, and sold by Brown and Hamilton to slave dealer James Burch. This passage illustrates a shift in Solomon's perception of justice and humanity. In the span of a few moments, Solomon goes from feeling "dim and confused" about how and why he has been kidnapped to realizing that there is "no trust or mercy" in mankind. Solomon introduces the idea that slavery and racism is a means for "unfeeling man" to be wicked and inhumane—a concept that is fleshed out with the later introduction of Edwin Epps.

In addition, this passage shows Solomon's newfound understanding of how racism blocks justice. Solomon is a free man with a spotless criminal record, so it makes no sense that he is in chains and has been robbed of his free papers. This moment forces the white reader in the North to picture how it would feel to be stripped of his or her freedom and be thrust behind bars for seemingly no reason at all. This passage also foreshadows the court case at the end of the narrative when Burch is allowed to testify on his own behalf, but Solomon is not permitted to do the same due to race.

Chapter 3 Quotes

❝ Though suspicions of Brown and Hamilton were not unfrequent, I could not reconcile myself to the idea that they were instrumental to my imprisonment. Surely they would seek me out—they would deliver me from thraldom. Alas! I had not then learned the measure "man's inhumanity to man," nor to what limitless extent of wickedness he will go for the love of gain.

Related Characters: Solomon Northup (speaker), James Burch, Merrill Brown, Abram Hamilton

Related Themes:

Related Symbols:

Page Number: 24

Explanation and Analysis

While still imprisoned in Washington D.C., Solomon ruminates over Hamilton and Brown's likely role in selling him into slavery. Solomon directly compares his slavery to thralldom, a Middle English word that describes the way poor peasants (serfs) labored under cruel, rich landowners and had no hope for attaining independence and climbing out of their poverty. Likewise, Solomon finds himself in chains, unable to escape from both the sturdy metal links and from the institution of slavery as a whole. He notes in hindsight that his slavery taught him of "man's inhumanity to man," which is an excerpt from Robert Burns' 1784 poem, "Man was Made to Mourn: A Dirge." The poem details the crippling effects of feudalism in sixteenth-century Scotland and paints death as a welcome end for suffering, impoverished peasants. By comparing his bondage to that of European serfs from Medieval to fairly modern times (at the time of his writing), Solomon shows how slavery is unjust across time and place and emphasizes that slavery is a cruel justification for "man's inhumanity to man."

Chapter 4 Quotes

❝ So we passed, hand-cuffed and in silence, through the streets of Washington—though the Capital of a nation, whose theory of government, we are told, rests on the foundation of man's inalienable right to life, LIBERTY, and the pursuit of happiness! Hail! Columbia, happy land indeed!

Related Characters: Solomon Northup (speaker), Ebenezer Radburn, James Burch

Related Themes:

Page Number: 31

Explanation and Analysis

In this passage, Burch and Radburn lead Solomon and the other slaves from the slave pen, through the Capital, and onto a steamboat in the middle of the night. This passage is loaded with sarcasm, which reveals the absurdity of Solomon being enslaved in the city that embodies the nation's supposed commitment to individual liberty. Solomon uses the phrase "we are told" to draw attention to the way that the nation's core values are not being put into practice—to Solomon and the other slaves, the ideas mapped out in the Declaration of Independence are just empty words. By sarcastically calling Washington D.C., the starting place of his enslavement, a "happy land indeed," Solomon underscores that slavery is incongruent with the idealized American theory of government. He references the song "Hail, Columbia," which used to be one of several American national anthems. A national anthem is meant to make the listener feel proud of their nationality and feel warm, affectionate feelings toward their country. Here, however, Solomon references the first line in "Hail, Columbia," which is, "Hail Columbia, happy land," and sarcastically adds the word "indeed" to show his disillusionment with the United States' supposed commitment to liberty and freedom.

Chapter 5 Quotes

❝ My cup of sorrow was full to overflowing. Then I lifted up my hands to God, and in the still watches of the night […] begged for mercy on the poor, forsaken captive. To the Almighty Father of us all—the freeman and the slave—I poured forth the supplications of a broken spirit, imploring strength from on high to bear up against the burden of my troubles […].

Related Characters: Solomon Northup (speaker), Theophilus Freeman

Related Themes:

Page Number: 48

Explanation and Analysis

Here, Solomon spends his first night in Freeman's slave pen in Richmond, Virginia, where he is going to be officially auctioned off. In this passage, Solomon draws upon Psalm 23:5, in which the poet's "cup overflows" with blessings from God, who is a Good Shepherd that takes care of his sheep. In contrast, Solomon's cup overflows with "sorrow" inflicted upon him by mankind. He, too, is treated like a sheep, but not in the tender, loving way seen in Psalm 23—instead in a rough, dehumanizing way.

Throughout the narrative, Solomon gleans comfort from his Christian faith and from thoughts of his family. Here, he does both, referring to God as a father figure who cares for all of his children. Emphasizing the equality of humans in God's eyes, Solomon appeals to the Second Great Awakening, a religious movement unfolding in the North at the time of his writing. The Second Great Awakening instilled a renewed concern for morality in Protestants, which tied neatly into the Abolitionist Movement. By stressing that God is "the Almighty Father of us all," including both "the freeman and the slave," Solomon shows his audience the immorality in God's children enslaving God's children.

Chapter 6 Quotes

❝ He would make us hold up our heads, walk briskly back and forth, while customers would feel of our hands and arms and bodies, turn us about, ask us what we could do, make us open our mouths and show our teeth, precisely as a jockey examines a horse which he is about to barter for or purchase.

Related Characters: Solomon Northup (speaker), Theophilus Freeman

Related Themes:

Page Number: 50

Explanation and Analysis

In this passage, Solomon details the way that Freeman forced his slaves to show off for potential buyers at the slave auction. This passage conflates slaves with race horses, which is a comparison made several times throughout the narrative. Like race horses, the slaves' physical conditions are examined meticulously. In a particularly dehumanizing moment, the buyers force the slaves to open their mouths and reveal their teeth. While examining a horse's teeth helps a potential buyer determine its age, as well as if the horse has any physical deformities, examining a slave's teeth has little purpose other than to be dehumanizing. This ties into the idea that slavery is a way for slave owners to justify their own cruel, sinful natures. In addition, the potential buyers are like jockeys who see race horses solely as a way to make a profit. The passage implies that just as race horses are pushed to their physical limits for profit, so too are slaves—an idea that is revisited with the later introduction of Edwin Epps.

Chapter 7 Quotes

❝ The influences and associations that had always surrounded him, blinded him to the inherent wrong at the bottom of the system of Slavery. He never doubted the moral right of one man holding another in subjection. Looking through the same medium with his fathers before him, he saw things in the same light. Brought up under other circumstances and influences, his notions would undoubtedly have been different.

Related Characters: Solomon Northup (speaker), William Ford

Related Themes:

Page Number: 58

Explanation and Analysis

In this passage, Solomon explains to the reader that his first master, William Ford, is the most morally upright man he knows, but that his immoral practice of owning slaves is reflective of his upbringing in the American South. Solomon emphasizes that it is nurture, not nature, that makes slave owners accept and perpetuate an institution built on enslaving other humans against their will. He implies that Ford's stance on slavery "would undoubtedly have been different" had he grown up in the North, surrounded by strong abolitionist attitudes. By pointing out the influence of friends, family, and environment in shaping one's moral compass, Solomon urges his white Northern readership to foster a community built on equality and acceptance, as those values will get passed down from generation to generation.

Chapter 8 Quotes

❝ He was my master, entitled by law to my flesh and blood, and to exercise over me such tyrannical control as his mean nature prompted; but there was no law that could prevent my looking upon him with intense contempt.

Related Characters: Solomon Northup (speaker), John Tibeats

Related Themes:

Page Number: 72

Explanation and Analysis

Here, Solomon notices that his cruel master, Tibeats, is in another one of his particularly sour moods, which usually means that Tibeats will take his anger out on Solomon through physical abuse. In this passage, Solomon shows his readers how slavery legally makes slaves helpless, even in the face of cruel, blood-thirsty masters. Solomon knows that Tibeats is going to try to kill him for no reason at all—which the law allows—and all Solomon can do is glare at his master "with intense contempt."

This passage also foreshadows a conversation between Epps and Bass later in the narrative, when Bass suggests that the law is flat out wrong for allowing one man to be entitled to another's "flesh and blood" and to "exercise…tyrannical control" over a fellow human. Bass's abolitionist attitude is exactly what Solomon seeks to foster among his white Northern readership.

Chapter 9 Quotes

❝ I must toil day after day, endure abuse and taunts and scoffs, sleep on the hard ground, live on the coarsest fare, and not only this, but live the slave of a blood-seeking wretch, of whom I must stand henceforth in continued fear and dread. […] I sighed for liberty; but the bondman's chain was round me, and could not be shaken off.

Related Characters: Solomon Northup (speaker), John Tibeats

Related Themes:

Related Symbols:

Page Number: 85

Explanation and Analysis

In this passage, Solomon voices his misery at having to serve his cruel master, Tibeats, even after Tibeats has tried (and almost succeeded) in murdering Solomon. He explains to the reader that "the bondman's chain" is suffocating and inescapable. The idea of chains points back to when Solomon first woke up after being kidnapped and found himself covered in chains, making it impossible to escape. Although Solomon is no longer physically in chains, the institution of slavery, the political climate of the American South, and Tibeats' cruelty render escape impossible. Solomon can only "sigh" for freedom, pining for something that can't happen.

This passage also presents a brief picture of Solomon's daily life to emphasize to the white Northern readership that slavery is barbaric and dehumanizing. Solomon's life as a slave is comfortless, marked by constant hard labor, physical

and verbal abuse, and crippling fear of a "blood-seeking wretch" of an owner. Solomon highlights how his enslavement is a justification for Tibeats to treat him wickedly.

Chapter 13 Quotes

Bent with excessive toil—actually suffering for a little refreshing rest, and feeling rather as if we could cast ourselves upon the earth and weep, many a night in the house of Edwin Epps have his unhappy slaves been made to dance and laugh.

Related Characters: Solomon Northup (speaker), Edwin Epps

Related Themes:

Related Symbols:

Page Number: 128

Explanation and Analysis

Here, Solomon explains the aftermath of Epps' drunken escapades in the slave quarters, where he forces the slaves to dance to music all night, spurred by the sharp sting of his whip. Solomon points out that forcing one's slaves to dance and laugh isn't as benign as it may sound. Epps perverts Solomon's musical talent by forcing him to play the fiddle to torture the slaves. Epps makes his slaves "dance and laugh" to entertain him as if they are circus performers—evoking Hamilton and Brown's offer for Solomon to join their circus, which ultimately led him into slavery. To Epps, the slaves are not human beings but are like puppets who can be made to dance. Solomon shows his readers how slavery is a vehicle for Epps' own sadistic tendencies and drunken desire for violent entertainment.

He could have stood unmoved and seen the tongues of his poor slaves torn out by the roots—he could have seen them burned to ashes over a slow fire, or gnawed to death by dogs, if it only brought him profit. Such a hard, cruel, unjust man is Edwin Epps.

Related Characters: Solomon Northup (speaker), Edwin Epps

Related Themes:

Page Number: 130

Explanation and Analysis

Solomon has just given the reader several real-life anecdotes illustrating Epps' cruelty, including when he forces his slaves to dance in the middle of the night. Although throughout the narrative, slaves are often treated as no more than animals (for example, Burch's barn-like slave pen, or potential buyers examining the slaves like race horses), Solomon underscores that Epps' treatment of his slaves is an entirely different level of cruel and dehumanizing. Solomon uses hypothetical situations (which are not entirely unlikely) to emphasize that Epps himself is wicked, heartless, and greedy, and that the institution of slavery allows him to act on these evil impulses without any negative repercussions. Solomon also uses gruesome detail, such as the possibility of the slaves' tongues being "torn out by the roots," in order to elicit strong feelings of disgust among his white Northern readership so that they will back the Abolitionist Movement and fight for an end to slavery.

[…] it had fallen to her lot to be the slave of a licentious master and a jealous mistress. She shrank before the lustful eye of one, and was in danger even of her life at the hands of the other, and in between the two, she was indeed accursed.

Related Characters: Solomon Northup (speaker), Patsey, Mistress Epps, Edwin Epps

Related Themes:

Page Number: 134

Explanation and Analysis

In this passage, Solomon highlights Patsey's precarious and dangerous situation as the object of Epps' lust and Mistress Epps' violent jealousy. This passage shows that Solomon is deeply empathetic to those around him. Though Solomon is not the one unwillingly wedged between the Eppses' marriage, he understands the emotional and physical pain that Patsey must endure on a daily basis. By describing the way Patsey always shrinks away from Epps' very look, Solomon firmly shows the reader that Patsey does not want to be on the receiving end of her master's lustfulness—Epps imposes himself upon her, and since Patsey is his property, she has no choice but to comply. Solomon emphasizes that Epps is cruel and inhumane for raping Patsey, and this behavior elicits misdirected anger from his wife. Although Mistress Epps should be angry at Epps himself for cheating

on her and raping another human being, Mistress Epps instead sets her wrath on Patsey by threatening her life. By illustrating the overwhelming cruelty and injustice with which Patsey is treated, Solomon strongly urges his reader to denounce slavery altogether.

Chapter 14 Quotes

The existence of Slavery in its most cruel form among them has a tendency to brutalize the humane and finer feelings of their nature. Daily witnesses of human suffering—listening to the agonizing screeches of the human slave—beholding him writhing beneath the merciless lash—bitten and torn by dogs—dying without attention, and buried without shroud or coffin—it cannot otherwise be expected, than that they should become brutified and reckless of human life.

Related Characters: Solomon Northup (speaker), Edwin Epps

Related Themes:

Related Symbols:

Page Number: 147

Explanation and Analysis

In this passage, Solomon has just explained the narrowly avoided duel between Epps and his friend Marshall—a situation Solomon attributes to slaveholders' desensitization to violence because of the institution of slavery. Solomon provides a brief but intense picture of slavery in his description of the "writhing" slaves whose "agonizing screeches" reveal the unfathomable extent of their suffering. Solomon doesn't name particular slaves or a specific master in this passage, implying that this scenario is a familiar one that stretches across all of the slave states. In the passage, Solomon underscores the humanity of slaves and inhumanity of slave owners by contrasting "the human slave" with "the merciless lash." The lash, or whip, stands in for the master himself, further underscoring the inhumanity of slave owners. While slavery is obviously worse for those being enslaved, here Solomon makes the more point that it is also dehumanizing for slave owners, as it drives them towards brutality and evil.

It is not the fault of the slaveholder that he is cruel, so much as it is the fault of the system under which he lives. He cannot withstand the influence of habit and associations that surround him. Taught from earliest childhood, by all that he sees and hears, that the rod is for the slave's back, he will not be apt to change his opinions in mature years.

Related Characters: Solomon Northup (speaker), William Ford, Young Master Epps / Epps' Son, Edwin Epps

Related Themes:

Page Number: 147

Explanation and Analysis

Solomon has just described the close encounter between Epps and his friend Marshall, and goes on explain to the reader why slave owners are so often violent and cruel. Solomon underscores that the institution of slavery is manmade, and that racism is a learned behavior. Cruel slave owners like Epps—and even kindly ones like Ford—don't stop to question the validity of enslaving another fellow human. A white Southerner is "taught from the earliest childhood, by all that he sees and hears" that slavery is normal—racism and acceptance of slavery aren't inherent to a child when they are born. This passage foreshadows a moment near the end of Solomon's narrative, when Epps' son rides out to the fields to whip the slaves as a game, which is behavior directly modeled after that of his father.

Chapter 15 Quotes

Alas! Had it not been for my beloved violin, I scarcely can conceive how I could have endured the long years of bondage. It [...] relieved me of many days' labor in the field [...] and oftentimes led me away from the presence of a hard master. [...] It was my companion—the friend of my bosom—triumphing loudly when I was joyful, and uttering its soft, melodious consolations when I was sad. Often [...] it would sing me a song of peace.

Related Characters: Solomon Northup (speaker)

Related Themes:

Page Number: 155

Explanation and Analysis

In this passage, Solomon diverges from writing about the annual Christmas feast, where he provided musical entertainment for his fellow slaves, to explain how his fiddle was pivotal in his survival of slavery. Solomon writes of his

fiddle as if it were a religious savior figure, combining two of the narrative's main themes, the power of music and Christianity. The passage seems to point to Psalm 23, likening Solomon's fiddle to God or Jesus. In Psalm 23: 1-4, God is a shepherd who tenderly cares for his sheep (humans). The verse states that God "leads me beside quiet waters, he refreshes my soul. He guides me along the right paths [...] Even though I walk through the darkest valley, I will fear no evil, for you are with me; your rod and your staff, they comfort me." God leads his sheep away from evil just as Solomon's fiddle led him away from Epps' wickedness. God is with his sheep even as they journey "through the darkest valley," just like Solomon's fiddle is with him during all twelve "long years of bondage." In addition, just as God gives his sheep peace and rest, so does Solomon's fiddle soothe him with "song[s] of peace."

Chapter 17 Quotes

❝ No man who has never been placed in such a situation, can comprehend the thousand obstacles thrown in the way of the flying slave. Every white man's hand is raised against him—the patrollers are watching for him—the hounds are ready to follow on his track—and the nature of the country is such as renders it impossible to pass through it with any safety.

Related Characters: Solomon Northup (speaker)

Related Themes:

Page Number: 173

Explanation and Analysis

Solomon has just explained Wiley's failed attempt at running away from Epps, and explains to the reader that he, too, had ambitions of running away during the ten years he belonged to Epps, but that it is nearly impossible for anyone to successfully escape the clutches of slavery. Solomon's explanation of all the elements working against a fugitive slave, including patrollers, hounds, and politics pertaining to travel, again shows that racism limits justice. Solomon implies, here and elsewhere, that all slaves are deserving of freedom—not just those who, like him, were torn from freedom and sold into slavery. Thus, running away from slavery is an attempt to find justice. However, in the American South, having dark skin means having to dodge several obstacles before attaining freedom and justice. Patrollers specifically look for people with dark skin, dogs are trained to track people with dark skin, and "the nature of the country" imposes strict travel guidelines on people with dark skin (for example, requiring slaves to carry passes from their master to leave their home plantation)—not to mention the swamps filled with alligators and snakes.

Chapter 18 Quotes

❝ It was the Sabbath of the Lord. The fields smiled in the warm sunlight—the birds chirped merrily amidst the foliage of the trees—peace and happiness seemed to reign everywhere, save in the bosoms of Epps and his panting victim and the silent witnesses around him. The tempestuous emotions that were raging there were little in harmony with the calm and quiet beauty of the day. I could look on Epps only with unutterable loathing and abhorrence, and thought within myself—"Thou devil, sooner or later, somewhere in the course of eternal justice, thou shalt answer for this sin!"

Related Characters: Solomon Northup (speaker), Patsey, Edwin Epps

Related Themes:

Related Symbols:

Page Number: 187

Explanation and Analysis

In this passage, Solomon describes the beautiful sunny day that is tarnished by the inhumane whipping that Epps administers to Patsey. By pointing out that it is "the Sabbath of the Lord," meaning Sunday, Solomon draws attention to the way that Epps maliciously distorts what should be a day of rest and spiritual thoughts and instead makes it a day of evil and human brutality. Solomon juxtaposes "the tempestuous emotions" spewing from Epps with the warmth, joy, and peace of the natural surroundings to emphasize that Epps is a cruel, inhumane man who uses slavery as an excuse to be sinful—and thus exists in opposition to God's will and the inherent goodness of his creation. Solomon silently likens Epps to a devil, emphasizing the extent of his wickedness. Solomon can't verbally reprimand Epps, since telling the truth would only put Solomon in grave danger alongside Patsey. Instead, Solomon can only think to himself that Epps' sins are punishable by God, and that one day, God (and Patsey) will have divine justice by making Epps "answer for this sin."

Chapter 19 Quotes

If they are baboons, or stand no higher in the scale of intelligence than such animals, you and men like you will have to answer for it. There's a sin, a fearful sin, resting on this nation, that will not go unpunished forever. There will be a reckoning yet—yes, Epps, there's a day coming that will burn as an oven. It may be sooner or it may be later, but it's a coming as sure as the Lord is just.

Related Characters: Bass (speaker), Solomon Northup , Edwin Epps

Related Themes:

Page Number: 194

Explanation and Analysis

In this passage, Bass argues with Epps about race and slavery as the men work on a construction project with help from Solomon. Bass highlights several points about race and slavery that resonate throughout the text. Firstly, Bass implies that racism is manmade. When Epps likens his slaves to "baboons," Bass points out that if the slaves seem unintelligent, it's only because Epps and other slave owners prohibit the slaves from learning (and furthermore, it would be sinful to treat even baboons in the sadistic way that Epps treats his slaves). Coming from a religious angle, Bass implies that Epps and other slave owners will be punished by God for being racist and perpetuating slavery. He uses the phrase "as sure as the Lord as just" as an exclamation, but he also points to the way that God stands for justice and consequently against humans enslaving other humans. Bass shows how slavery is an individual sin by telling Epps, "you and men like you will have to answer it." However, he also considers slavery a national sin, calling it "a fearful sin, resting on this nation, that will not go unpunished forever." Here, Epps takes a political angle, revealing his belief that the Abolitionist Movement will triumph. Epps predicts that "There will be a reckoning," referring to the Christian concept of a reckoning (the Last Judgment, which is when humans will be judged based on their faith and conduct on earth) while also foreshadowing the Civil War.

He spoke of himself in a somewhat mournful tone, as a lonely man, a wanderer about the world—that he was growing old, and must soon reach the end of his earthly journey, and lie down to his final rest without kith or kin to mourn for him, or to remember him—that his life was of little value to himself, and henceforth should be devoted to the accomplishment of my liberty, and to an unceasing warfare against the accursed shame of Slavery.

Related Characters: Bass (speaker), Solomon Northup

Related Themes:

Page Number: 199

Explanation and Analysis

Here, Bass has just agreed to write to Solomon's friends and family in New York so that Solomon will be restored to freedom. Bass's explanation of his lack of family and how "his life was of little value to himself" points to the way that family can provide a sense of purpose in life. Without family, Bass is "mournful" and "lonely," similar to how Eliza withered away after being permanently separated from her children. However, like Solomon, Bass understands that family isn't limited to blood relatives. Family can also be comprised of those who show one another loyalty, empathy, and love—all of which Bass and Solomon show to one another. Bass selflessly adopts Solomon's cause as if he were adopting Solomon as a family member.

Bass then serves as a role model for the white Northern reader who, like Bass, has the capacity to make a difference by fighting for justice and engaging in "an unceasing warfare against the accursed shame of Slavery." Even though helping Solomon and speaking out against slavery could potentially put Bass in a dangerous (or even fatal) situation, Bass is steadfast in his anti-slavery convictions and his loyalty to Solomon.

Chapter 21 Quotes

The secret was out—the mystery was unraveled. Through the thick, black cloud, amid whose dark and dismal shadows I had walked twelve years, broke the star that was to light me back to liberty.

Related Characters: Solomon Northup (speaker), Bass, Henry B. Northup

Related Themes:

Page Number: 219

Explanation and Analysis

Solomon has just explained how Henry B. Northup discovered Solomon's whereabouts by consulting with Bass. Solomon refers to slavery as a "thick, black cloud" that casts "dark and dismal shadows," drawing on the similar analogy he made in the closing of Chapter One. The cloud blocked Solomon from the light, just as racism blocked him from liberty—even though he was a free man, wrongfully

kidnapped and sold into slavery, Solomon's dark skin meant that he was trapped in slavery's grasp.

The single star that breaks through the clouds and leads Solomon to liberty is reminiscent of the single star that shone over Bethlehem, leading the shepherds to the stable where Christ has just been born (and consequently to eternal life and freedom from sin). Solomon again gestures to his Christian faith for sustaining him during his twelve-year enslavement, and attributes his release to God (and, of course, Henry B. Northup and Bass).

Chapter 22 Quotes

I was then offered as a witness, but, objection being made, the court decided my evidence inadmissible. It was rejected solely on the ground that I was a colored man—the fact of my being a free citizen of New-York not being disputed. [...] Burch himself was offered as a witness in his own behalf. It was contended by counsel for the people, that such testimony should not be allowed—that it was in contravention of every rule of evidence, and if permitted would defeat the ends of justice. His testimony, however, was received by the court!

Related Characters: Solomon Northup (speaker), James Burch, Henry B. Northup

Related Themes:

Page Number: 233

Explanation and Analysis

In this passage, Solomon recounts his experience in taking Burch to court for kidnapping him and selling him into slavery. The court is clearly racist and treats Solomon more like a slave than a free man, even though his true identity as "a free citizen of New-York" is not "disputed." Ironically, the court is concerned that allowing either man to testify on his own behalf "would defeat the ends of justice." By ultimately allowing Burch the privilege to testify as his own witness and not giving Solomon the same opportunity, the court "defeat[s] the ends of justice" in an even greater way, as they perpetuate racism and even defy logic. As is seen throughout the narrative, race and racism are fundamentally absurd and inflict limits on supposedly-objective justice, in this case barring Solomon from being able to tell the truth of his experiences. His inability to speak the truth about Burch in court ties into the underlying purpose of his narrative—to accurately record the people, places, and events of his twelve-year enslavement to give the reader a true depiction of the institution of slavery.

I have no comments to make upon the subject of Slavery. Those who read this book may form their own opinions of the "peculiar institution." What it may be in other States, I do not profess to know; what it is in the region of Red River, is truly and faithfully delineated in these pages. This is no fiction, no exaggeration. If I have failed in anything, it has been in presenting to the reader too prominently the bright side of the picture.

Related Characters: Solomon Northup (speaker)

Related Themes:

Page Number: 237

Explanation and Analysis

Solomon has just described his joyful (and tearful) reunion with his family, and now addresses the reader with comments on the narrative as a whole. In this passage, Solomon references a popular euphemism for slavery, the "peculiar institution." In this case, the word "peculiar" doesn't mean odd or strange. Instead, peculiar means something that is unique to a specific place, so slavery is a "peculiar institution" because it plays out in the American South. This phrase was a way of sugarcoating the reality of slavery, especially in legal settings. For white Northerners, referring to slavery as a "peculiar institution" was also a way to abdicate responsibility for slavery by considering it the South's problem and implying that slavery has no impact on the North. Although Solomon doesn't directly engage with the euphemism, the entire narrative leading up to this point shows that slavery is not so much a "peculiar institution" as it is a barbaric, sinful, cruel, inhumane, unjust, and dehumanizing institution. The entire narrative shows that slavery is not just the South's problem—it is everyone's problem.

In this passage, Solomon also refers back to his intention to provide an accurate depiction of slavery, which he stated in the narrative's opening. By showing how barbaric slavery truly is, Solomon is able to add fuel to the Abolitionist fire and urge his white Northern readers to fight for justice. In addition, since Solomon "truly and faithfully delineated" his experience as a slave in the Red River region of Louisiana, his slave narrative also functions as an important historical text that documents what religious, social, political, and legal aspects of life looked like for slaves in the mid-nineteenth century.

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.

CHAPTER 1

Solomon Northup begins with an address to the reader, noting that the following narrative will "not be uninteresting to the public." He explains that he was born a free man and lived as such for thirty years, when he was then kidnapped and sold into slavery. He remained a slave for twelve years and was rescued in January, 1853. Writing as a man restored to freedom, Solomon knows that people in the North are increasingly curious as to how slavery unfolds in the South, so his purpose in writing down his experiences is to provide a "candid and truthful statement of facts."

The opening of the narrative reveals that Solomon's goal isn't just to tell a story about his experience as a slave. His narrative also has a legal and political purpose, which is why it's important that it be a "candid and truthful statement of facts." Through his slave narrative, Solomon seeks to bolster his Northern audience's anti-slavery attitudes and testify against all those who obscured justice.

Solomon provides a brief genealogy. His ancestors on his father's side of the family were slaves in Rhode Island and belonged to the Northup family. Solomon's father, Mintus, was born into slavery but was freed upon the death of his master. Solomon notes that the lawyer Henry B. Northup, who eventually saved Solomon himself from slavery, is a relative of Mintus's former master.

Solomon immediately shows that family will play a key role in his narrative. Even though he and Henry B. Northup share the same last name, they're not blood relatives. Despite this, Solomon still considers him family.

Solomon remembers his father Mintus fondly for his "peaceful pursuits of agriculture," his commitment to providing his children with an above-average education, and the way he taught his children to be good people and rely on God, since God deeply cares for all His children. Even in the midst of Solomon's most miserable experiences as a slave, he always remembered his father's teachings.

Solomon asserts his Christian faith, which was instilled in him by his father. Family and religion commingle in Mintus's teaching that God loves all people, just as a father loves his children. Throughout the narrative, Solomon finds comfort and strength in God and his family.

Recounting the rest of his childhood, Solomon writes that when he wasn't working on the farm in Fort Edward, New York where his father worked or studying, he spent his time playing the violin. Playing the violin was "the ruling passion" of his childhood and later, as a slave, it was his source of comfort, happiness, and distraction from his suffering.

Solomon establishes himself as a musician with a deep appreciation for music as art. In this way, he finds common ground with his white Northern readership to show them that he is just as intelligent, sensitive, and talented as they might be.

Solomon briefly recounts his young adult life. He married a beautiful girl of mixed race named Anne in 1829. The pair spent their early years of marriage working several jobs in order to afford their own home. One of Solomon's jobs is raft-making, which later in his life (and later in the narrative) allows him to "render profitable services to a worthy master." During other seasons, Solomon works as a wood cutter, a farmer, and a fiddler, while Anne's reputation as an excellent cook earns her high wages at a coffee shop.

This passage reveals that Solomon is a master of all trades who learns quickly and enjoys working with his hands—traits that will be critical to his survival later in the narrative. Solomon's wide variety of jobs also illustrates his dedication to providing for his family, just as his father did for him.

Solomon and Anne move to Saratoga Springs in New York State in 1834, where Solomon works on the railroad and at the United States Hotel. During this time, Solomon forms a close relationship with two shop owners, Cephas Parker and William Perry. Solomon then interjects, noting that these two men later proved instrumental in his rescue from slavery. While working at the United States Hotel, Solomon meets several slaves visiting New York with their masters, and all of the slaves secretly confess to him that they long for freedom. Solomon encourages each and every slave he meets to keep a watchful eye for an opportunity to escape.

Although most people probably wouldn't forge a deep connection with their local shop owners, it's clear that Solomon treats everyone he meets almost like family. He is also steadfast in his anti-slavery convictions and belief in justice, shown by the way he encourages every slave he meets to escape as soon as they can.

Living in Saratoga Springs, Solomon and Anne live a humble life. They have three children, Elizabeth, Margaret, and Alonzo. Solomon writes that his children's voices "filled our house with gladness" and "were music in our ears." Solomon is a caring, tender father to his children.

Comparing his children's voices to music, Solomon shows that his children bring him comfort and joy just as his fiddle does. These memories of small moments, like hearing his children's voices in the house, give Solomon strength and purpose throughout the narrative.

Solomon writes that, thus far in his account of his life, everything has been normal, "nothing but the common hopes, loves, and labors of an obscure colored man, making his humble progress in the world." However, he warns the reader that what's to follow is dark and dreadful—like a cloud whose "thick darkness" would soon engulf him.

Once again, Solomon appeals to his white Northern audience by showing them how he is just like them—a hardworking family man who lives a life of love and hope. This is also the first appearance of the cloud, which represents the darkness and evil nature of slavery, blotting out light, joy, justice, and peace.

CHAPTER 2

One morning, in March of 1841, Solomon walks around the Saratoga Springs village, thinking of ways to make a little extra money. Anne is at work twenty miles away with Elizabeth, while Margaret and Alonzo are at their Aunt's house. As Solomon walks around the town, he comes across two men, Merrill Brown and Abram Hamilton, who claim to have heard of Solomon's extraordinary fiddle-playing abilities.

Even in his downtime and when his family is out of town, Solomon is still thinking of ways to better support his wife and children so that they can live their best possible lives. The extent of Solomon's talent on the fiddle is also alluded to, considering that two strangers know of his abilities.

Brown and Hamilton explain that they're affiliated with a circus based in Washington D.C. but are in New York to do some sightseeing. They tell Solomon that they're paying their travel expenses by putting on small shows along the way but have found it difficult to find a musician to accompany them. They ask Solomon to travel with them to New York City as their fiddle player in return for wages. Solomon quickly agrees. Since the whole trip will be short, he decides not to write to Anne about where he is going.

Since Solomon's family is out of town and he was serendipitously just thinking of how he can make a little extra money, Solomon agrees hastily to travel with the men and play fiddle for them. Solomon is quick to trust the strangers because it's his nature to treat everyone as family.

The three men travel by carriage to Albany, and Solomon takes part in that night's performance—the only performance that Hamilton and Brown put on during the entire time Solomon is with them. The show, which includes "causing invisible pigs to squeal" and "frying pancakes in a hat," is attended by a handful of people and pulls in very little money.

Hamilton and Brown's single performance is just a handful of random, bizarre tricks like making pig noises and pancakes, raising the question of whether the men really are from a circus or if they throw together whatever tricks they can manage just to make money.

The following day, the men depart from Albany and reach New York City. Hamilton and Brown urge Solomon to accompany them all the way to Washington D.C. to take part in their circus, which is going to travel north. Hamilton and Brown offer Solomon high wages (and many compliments), so Solomon accepts the offer.

Hamilton and Brown prove themselves amateur psychologists. Using the foot-in-door technique, the men convince Solomon to first travel with them to New York City before asking him the big request of traveling to Washington D.C.—further suggesting that they may not be entirely trustworthy.

The next morning, Hamilton and Brown tell Solomon to get his **free papers**, since the group will be traveling to Washington D.C., a slave state. Solomon thinks the papers are a waste of money, and wouldn't have thought to get the papers if his new friends hadn't suggested it. Upon retrieving the papers, Solomon places them in his pocket and returns with his new friends to the hotel.

Solomon's surprise over having to get free papers points back to the fact that he was born free and has lived as a free man in the North for thirty years. He thinks the papers are a waste of money, suggesting that he doesn't think they'll be necessary in the South, even though he's never been there.

The group arrives in Washington D.C. a few days later. Hamilton and Brown pay Solomon a generous forty-three dollars—more than their agreed-upon rate—claiming that they haven't put on as many shows during their travels as they intended but still wish to pay Solomon well for accompanying them. They also say that the following day is a big event in the city—General Harrison's funeral—so the circus will delay its travels northward by a day.

General Harrison (William Henry Harrison) was the ninth president of the United States. He died on April 4, 1841, the same year Solomon traveled to Washington D.C., affirming the validity of Solomon's story.

Solomon interjects, explaining to the reader that during this time, he believed that Hamilton and Brown were sincere in their kindness to him, and he trusted them entirely. Between their suggestion that Solomon obtain **free papers** and the "hundred other little acts" they did for him, Hamilton and Brown appeared as kindly friends committed to keeping Solomon safe and happy. Solomon writes that at the time, he had no idea the men were "subtle and inhuman monsters in the shape of men," capable of the "great wickedness" that was about to unfold.

In this passage, Solomon the author and narrator explains what Solomon the character doesn't yet know: that Hamilton and Brown are shady men who manage to conceal their bad intentions in befriending Solomon by showering him with generosity. Calling them "inhuman monsters" capable of "wickedness," Solomon introduces the idea that slavery brings out the worst in humanity.

Solomon is shown to his room at the back of the hotel. The following day, he watches General Harrison's funeral unfold in the company of Hamilton and Brown. Throughout the day, the men frequent several bars but drink with moderation and always pour out some alcohol for Solomon, who also drinks moderately and does not get drunk. That night, Solomon grows increasingly ill, plagued by nausea and a pounding migraine. Returning to his sleeping quarters, Solomon tries to sleep off his sickness.

This passage is brimming with small details that read like clues in a crime scene. First, Solomon's room is at the very back of the hotel, meaning that it's isolated and private, which will be important later. Secondly, Hamilton and Brown drink small amounts of alcohol all day, each time giving some to Solomon. Although Solomon doesn't become drunk, he grows violently ill, suggesting that Hamilton and Brown had several chances to slip a drug into Solomon's drink.

Sometime after midnight, Solomon hears several people enter his room. The people tell Solomon that he needs to see a doctor immediately, so he follows them out into the street but soon loses consciousness. In hindsight, Solomon cannot remember if Hamilton and Brown were among them. He tells the reader that his memory of the entire situation is now "altogether indefinite and vague, and like the memory of a painful dream."

Solomon has a hazy idea of what is happening and can't even discern people's faces, further strengthening the possibility that Hamilton and Brown drugged him. Since Solomon's room is on the ground floor and at the back of the hotel, he is easily and quickly ushered from the premises without anyone else seeing.

When Solomon wakes up, he finds himself imprisoned by **chains** in a small, dark room. He tries to remember how he arrived at this place and where Hamilton and Brown are, but he realizes that there is a huge gap in his memory. Feeling his pockets, Solomon realizes his **free papers** are gone and that he has been kidnapped. He thinks there must have been some mistake, considering he is a free citizen of New York with a clean criminal record. Solomon begins to weep and pray to God, realizing there is no "trust or mercy in unfeeling man."

The gap in Solomon's memory verifies that he was drugged. Robbed of his free papers, Solomon is also stripped of his identity as a free man of the North. Even though he lived as such for thirty years, his freedom is swiftly taken from him, just like his free papers that were easily snatched from his pocket. The chains are reflective of Solomon's new, inescapable reality of slavery.

CHAPTER 3

The next morning, a door opens, revealing two white men—the infamous, cruel slave dealer named James Burch, and his assistant, Ebenezer Radburn. Solomon notes that Burch's "whole appearance was sinister and repugnant." Solomon also notes in hindsight that at the time of his writing, both Burch and Radburn still live in Washington D.C.

Solomon makes a point of telling the reader that Burch and Radburn still live in Washington D.C., which points back to his political and legal purposes in detailing the real people, places, and facts of his kidnapping and enslavement.

With the door open, Solomon is able to get a better look at his surroundings, and he realizes that all of the doors are made of iron and the small windows are barred. Solomon likens it to a "farmer's barnyard" that was constructed so "the outside world could never see the human cattle that were herded there." Solomon explains to the reader that the exterior of the building looked like a quiet family home and sat "within plain sight" of the Capitol. He writes, "The voices of patriotic representatives boasting of freedom and equality, and the rattling of the poor slave's **chains**, almost commingled."

This passage contains the first of many comparisons between slaves and livestock. The slave pen is a cross between a prison and a barn, revealing that the slaves are treated as a cross between criminals and farm animals—not as human beings deserving of freedom. Solomon also underscores the extreme irony in the slave pen's proximity to the Capitol building.

Burch gruffly tells Solomon that he is now his slave and will be sent to New Orleans. Solomon declares that he is a free man from New York, but Burch denies this, claiming that Solomon came from Georgia. Solomon continues to assert his freedom and demands that Burch remove his **chains**. Burch screams at Solomon, calling him a liar "and every other profane and vulgar epithet that the most indecent fancy could conceive."

Solomon quickly learns that now that he is in slavery's grasp, there is no such thing as justice. In this situation, telling the truth about his identity only makes the situation more dangerous. Burch's violent reaction to Solomon's assertion of his freedom suggests that Burch knows that selling a free man into slavery has major repercussions, though he chooses to do so anyway.

Burch orders Radburn to retrieve the paddle and **whip**, and Burch proceeds to beat and whip Solomon severely, increasing the severity and power of his blows every time Solomon insists that he is free. With his flesh hanging off of his body, Solomon thinks that "A man with a particle of mercy in his soul would not have beaten even a dog so cruelly." Before departing, Burch threatens to kill Solomon if he ever tries to assert that he is free. An hour later, Radburn appears with water and a meager meal. Radburn tries to be kind to Solomon and tells him that keeping quiet about his identity as a free man will be much safer for him than telling the truth.

This passage details Solomon's first experience being whipped, which sticks with him throughout the entire narrative. Suffering under Burch's abuse, Solomon learns that telling the truth about his identity is dangerous and is not worth the subsequent punishment. Radburn echoes this later in a flimsy effort to be kind and compassionate to the very man he is imprisoning against his will. Burch beats Solomon so relentlessly, it is clear he is using racism and slavery as a means to act on his most brutal, violent impulses.

Solomon's wounds are so severe that he can't rest in any one position for more than a few moments. When he does manage to sleep, he dreams of his family. In his waking hours, he weeps and thinks about how his escape will come soon, deeming it impossible "that men could be so unjust as to detain me as a slave, when the truth of my case was known." He also thinks of his overwhelming suspicion that Hamilton and Brown are to blame for his newfound imprisonment.

Solomon gains comfort from dreaming about his family, who remain at the forefront of his mind throughout his entire enslavement. By detailing his suffering and the way he has been torn from his family, Solomon seeks to elicit empathy from his white readership enjoying freedom in the North.

After several days, Solomon is allowed "the liberty of the yard," where he meets three other slaves: Clemens Ray, John Williams, and a little boy named Randall. Clemens Ray tells Solomon that they are in Williams' Slave Pen and will be sent to New Orleans to be auctioned off. Meanwhile, Randall just cries for his mother, clearly "too young to realize his condition."

After enjoying thirty years of freedom in New York, Solomon is only given the "liberty" of being held in the backyard of the slave pen rather than inside his cell. Solomon and the other slaves are treated like farm animals, brought inside and outside at their owner's whim.

Solomon reaffirms to the reader that his goal is to "present a full and truthful statement" of his experiences and to accurately depict the institution of slavery. He asserts that "what I am about to say, if false, can be easily contradicted."

Solomon's comment to the reader regarding his narrative's validity reads like a legal statement—a reminder that Solomon's goal in recording his "full and truthful statement" of slavery is to support political and legal action against the practice.

During his two weeks in Williams' Slave Pen, Solomon meets Eliza, the mother of the young Randall whom Solomon had met previously, as well as a young, beautiful, light-complexioned girl named Emily. Eliza explains that she was the slave of a rich man in Washington D.C. named Elisha Berry. Elisha and his wife had separated, so he built a new house and invited Eliza to live with him, promising that she and her children would be freed upon his death. Eliza lived a happy, lavish life with him for nine years, much to the horror of Elisha's estranged wife and daughter. Eventually, Elisha's daughter married a man named Jacob Brooks, and somehow Eliza became Brooks' property rather than that of Elisha.

Eliza's situation blurred the line between slave and wife. Even though she lived like the pampered wife of a rich man for nine years, her status as a slave ultimately deemed her property, not a person, and so all her rights and privileges were only on loan.

Eliza recounts how Brooks (Elisha's daughter's husband) tricked her by telling her that she would be freed. When Brooks took her into town to secure **free papers**, he promptly sold Eliza and her children to James Burch. Listening to Eliza's story, Solomon is overcome with grief and empathy, declaring Eliza's story "enough to melt a heart of stone." Solomon then tells the reader that at the time of his writing, Eliza has died from "the burden of maternal sorrow."

Similar to Solomon's situation, Eliza was deceitfully sold to Burch, likely for financial gain. In both situations, free papers gave a false sense of confidence and safety—for Solomon, thinking that his free papers would keep him safe in Washington D.C., and for Eliza, thinking that she was going into town to obtain free papers. In both cases, free papers (or the promise of free papers) proved flimsy.

CHAPTER 4

One night, close to midnight, Burch and Radburn order the slaves to get up and follow them through the dark city. The slaves are handcuffed together as they are ordered to march "through the Capital of a nation, whose theory of government, we are told, rests on the foundation of man's inalienable right to life, LIBERTY, and the pursuit of happiness! Hail! Columbia, happy land, indeed!"

With heavy sarcasm, Solomon references the Declaration of Independence and the patriotic song, "Hail, Columbia," which both center on America's commitment to freedom and liberty. Through these references, Solomon shows how the institution of slavery is incongruent with a nation supposedly founded on freedom.

The group reaches a steamboat and is hurried aboard. Solomon is committed to keeping his spirits up and vows to himself to keep his past freedom a secret, knowing now that it will only earn him harsher treatment. Eventually, the slaves reach Richmond, Virginia, and are housed in a slave pen overseen by a notorious slave dealer named Goodin, whose skin is almost as dark as that of his slaves.

This passage contains the first of many instances of slave owners having skin as dark as their slaves or slaves having skin as white as their owners. Throughout the narrative, Solomon uses these instances to build on the idea that in many cases, racism doesn't have to do with skin color as much as it does with hatred and human wickedness.

Examining the slaves that Burch has brought, Goodin asks Solomon where he comes from. Solomon accidentally answers that he is from New York—much to Burch's horror—but quickly covers up his mistake. Regardless, Burch later threatens again to kill Solomon if he ever mentions his freedom. Solomon knows that Burch is fully aware of the repercussions of selling a free man into slavery.

Burch's reaction to Solomon almost letting it slip that he was a free man emphasizes that Burch is fully aware that Solomon was free, and knows that selling a free man into slavery is illegal and comes with a harsh punishment—but apparently the potential profit is worth the risk.

Solomon is handcuffed to a large man named Robert, who, like Solomon, was born free and was kidnapped and sold into slavery. The following morning, the slaves are forced to continue on their journey, save for Clemens Ray, whom Burch decides to take back to Washington D.C. Solomon tells the reader that although he never saw Clemens Ray again, he later found out that Ray escaped slavery and traveled to Saratoga to tell Solomon's family about his circumstances.

Robert's life story almost mirrors that of Solomon, revealing that kidnapping free black men—an evil practice by any standard—was not an uncommon way for white men to make money. This passage also contains the first instance of Solomon's family being notified of his enslavement—however, since Solomon is on a boat for New Orleans where he will be auctioned off to a slave owner in any Southern state, Solomon's family has no way to locate him.

Burch returns to Washington D.C. with Clemens Ray, while the rest of the slaves board a large ship that departs for New Orleans. Solomon interjects, saying that Burch will reappear by the end of the narrative, "not in the character of a man-whipping tyrant, but as an arrested, cringing criminal in a court of law, that failed to do him justice."

Solomon foreshadows the end of his narrative when he sees Burch in court. By illustrating Burch's swift descent from "man-whipping tyrant" to "cringing criminal," Solomon underscores that Burch is guilty of his inhuman crimes and shows remorse only when he is on the verge of being punished for them.

CHAPTER 5

The ship stops on the way to New Orleans, picking up four more slaves. Among them is a slave named Arthur. Like Solomon and Robert, Arthur is a free man with a family and was kidnapped and sold into slavery. When the ship departs again for New Orleans, the captain appoints Robert as his waiter and Solomon as the overseer of the cooking department. Solomon is also made to distribute food and water twice a day. At night, the slaves are "driven into the hold and securely fastened down."

Arthur's story of being kidnapped echoes that of Robert and Solomon, pushing the reader to recognize the widespread distortion of justice that permeates the nation. The slaves are once again compared to livestock, as they are "driven into the hold and securely fastened down" like horses or cattle being kept in the barn for the night.

A violent storm descends upon the ship, and many of the slaves wish that the "compassionate sea" would drown them, saving them from "the clutches of remorseless men." Solomon tells his reader not to judge him for any of his actions that follow in the narrative, writing: "Let not those who have never been placed in like circumstances, judge me harshly."

Solomon describes the potentially deadly sea as "compassionate" and the slave dealers and owners as "remorseless men," showing how the slaves wish to drown in the storm, believing that death is preferable to slavery.

One day, Arthur and Solomon talk at length about their families and their preference for death over slavery. They decide to formulate a plan for escape and let Robert in on their plans, not trusting anyone else. The plan is to conceal themselves under a small boat on the deck while all the other slaves are being sent down to the hold for the night. That night, Solomon tests out the plan on his own, and it works perfectly.

The men's plan is somewhat hazy. Although they plan to hide under a small boat on deck, it's unclear as it if they plan to use that boat to escape or if they plan to then launch an attack on the crew and gain control of the large ship. The men's plan shows their desperation for freedom and their willingness to put themselves in grave danger to escape slavery.

Solomon, Arthur, and Robert are never able to put their plan into action, as Robert catches smallpox and quickly dies. One day, when Solomon is looking particularly downcast, filled with grief over Robert's death, a kindly sailor named John Manning asks him what is wrong. Solomon senses from the man's tone that he is genuinely kind and trustworthy, so Solomon confides in him that he was free and kidnapped into slavery. Solomon requests that Manning steal a pen, ink, and paper so that Solomon can write to his friends or family.

Smallpox is a severely contagious disease that often appeared in large outbreaks (the disease was eradicated in the United States in 1972). Since slaves were given little access to doctors and medicine, the disease was often fatal. During his twelve-year enslavement, Solomon nearly dies from smallpox on two separate occasions.

The following night, Solomon hides under the small boat on the deck until the Manning's shift ends. Once the coast is clear, Solomon follows Manning into one of the rooms and quickly writes a letter to Henry B. Northup, explaining his situation. When the ship docks in New Orleans, Manning immediately sends the letter. Solomon notes that the letter did reach Henry B. Northup, but because Solomon was unable to provide details as to where he would end up after New Orleans, Northup couldn't yet do anything to help Solomon.

Although Solomon's escape plan with Robert and Arthur didn't pan out, Solomon now knows that he can hide under the small boat for other purposes. This passage also shows Solomon's first attempt at sending a letter to tell his family and friends of his circumstances—something he tries several times throughout the narrative.

As Solomon watches Manning depart into town to send the letter, he sees two men approaching the ship and yelling for Arthur. When Arthur sees them, he is overcome with joy, recognizing them as friends from home. The two men tell Arthur that his kidnappers have been arrested. After speaking with the captain, the men depart, taking the joyful Arthur with them. Without Arthur or Robert, Solomon feels painfully lonely and hopeless.

Even though Solomon and Arthur only knew each other for a short time, it is clear that they became close. Although Solomon is happy that his new friend has been restored to freedom, he now feels completely alone, stripped of the comfort and strength in community that he had with Arthur.

Later, other slave traders, including one named Theophilus Freeman, board the ship. Freeman takes over Burch's slaves, including Solomon, Eliza, a slave named Harry, and several others. He coarsely informs Solomon that he is now called Platt, a name chosen for him by Burch. Solomon, Eliza, and the other slaves are promptly taken to Freeman's slave pen, where they are met by at least fifty other slaves.

Solomon is given a new name, likely as an extra precaution to ensure that his true identity as a kidnapped free man is never exposed, and that his friends and family from home can't locate him by name. Solomon's new name is imposed upon him just as a master names an animal.

That night, Solomon replays the recent events in his mind, unable to come to terms with the fact that he been sold into slavery. Overcome by sadness, he prays ceaselessly to God, "the Almighty Father of us all—the freeman and the slave." He asks God to give him strength to face his suffering.

Solomon turns to God for strength in the midst of his suffering, showing the steadfastness of his Christian faith. Solomon draws upon his father's earlier teachings that God cares for all humans, regardless of race or status.

CHAPTER 6

The next morning, "The very amiable, pious-hearted" Freeman prepares his "animals" to be sold. After all of the slaves bathe, the men are given suits and hats, and the women are given dresses and handkerchiefs to tie up their hair. Freeman makes the slaves practice arranging themselves according to height and sex and also forces them to dance to the tune of a fiddle, played by one of Freeman's personal slaves. Solomon soon takes over on the fiddle, and Freeman is delighted by his musical talents.

As he often does throughout the narrative, Solomon uses sarcasm to draw attention to the inhumanity of slave traders and slave owners. Here, he calls Freeman "amiable" and "pious-hearted" to underscore that Freeman can act so inhumanely to slaves and still perhaps be seen as a good and ordinary man in white society. This society has normalized evil, so one can act evilly and still be seen as a good citizen.

The following day, potential buyers arrive to examine Freeman's "new lot." The customers feel the slaves' limbs, ask them about their abilities, and make the slaves open their mouths to reveal their teeth, "precisely as a jockey examines a horse which he is about to barter for or purchase." The customers also check the slaves' backs for scars.

Collectively, the slaves are considered a "new lot," making them more like products than people. Furthering their dehumanizing treatment, they are examined by potential buyers as if they were race horses. Buyers also check the slaves' backs for scars to see if the slave has a history of bad behavior—even though scars likely mean the slave has a history of barbaric owners.

Solomon watches Eliza and her children be separated. Randall is bought first, and the man who buys him can't afford to buy Eliza and Emily as well, despite Eliza's pleas and tears. As Randall is taken away, he says, "Don't cry, mama. I will be a good boy. Don't cry." Solomon tells the reader that he would have easily cried too if he had "dared."

Solomon appeals to his readers' empathy by showing them, in heartbreaking detail, how slave traders and buyers permanently separate families without so much as a second thought.

That night, many of the slaves come down with smallpox. Solomon, Eliza, Emily, and Harry grow so ill that they are taken to the hospital, where they remain for two weeks. When they are eventually returned to Freeman's slave pen, they are examined by a potential buyer named William Ford. He asks many of the slaves "if [they] thought [they] would like to live with him, and would be good boys if he would buy [them]." He purchases Solomon, Harry, and Eliza, and, upon learning that he would be separating Eliza from her daughter, Ford offers to buy Emily too. Freeman claims Emily is not for sale and will be worth more once she's older. Emily and Eliza cry and scream as they are separated, and Ford looks regretful.

William Ford is a sharp contrast from all of the other slave dealers and potential buyers that Solomon has encountered. Ford interacts with the slaves as if they are orphaned children that he is going to adopt. He also shows empathy by offering to buy Emily so that she won't be separated from her mother. Even though Emily has been lined up with the slaves the whole time, as if for sale, Freeman suddenly claims she is not for sale—clearly wanting Emily and her mother to be separated just for the sake of it.

Solomon tells the reader that Eliza never again saw her children. He says that her hope for freedom was shattered by her separation from her children, and now "she weepeth sore in the night, and tears are on her cheeks: all her friends have dealt treacherously with her: they have become her enemies."

Solomon references the Bible, quoting Lamentations 1:2 in his description of Eliza's overwhelming pain having lost her children. In Lamentations, the nation of Judah is betrayed by its allied nations, just as Eliza was betrayed by her original owner's son-in-law and sold into slavery.

CHAPTER 7

Solomon tells his reader that Ford is a Baptist preacher and is known for being kind and morally upright. Solomon asserts, "there never was a more kind, noble, candid, Christian man than William Ford," and attributes Ford's acceptance of slavery to his upbringing and environment. Solomon thinks Ford would have felt differently about slavery had he grown up somewhere else.

Ford is an example of how growing up in the slavery-ridden South can make a person immune to the injustice of one human enslaving another. Ford's environment and upbringing shaped his moral compass, so he doesn't even question the concept of having slaves, even though he is seemingly a moral man in other regards.

As Solomon travels with Ford and the other slaves to Ford's home in the Great Pine Woods, Solomon considers telling Ford about his kidnapping but ultimately decides not to, fearful that doing so would only send him further away from home. The group travels by boat and by train, with the last twelve miles of the journey made on foot, though Ford lets the slaves stop and rest whenever they'd like.

The impact of Solomon's first whipping—administered by Burch, angry at Solomon for asserting his freedom—is clear here, as Solomon is petrified of telling even the kindly William Ford of his true identity.

Eventually, the group comes upon Ford's household. The property is a "quiet, lonely, pleasant place" and is "a green spot in the wilderness." Eliza is still distressed by having been torn from her children, so Ford assures her that she won't need to work hard and can help inside the house. Solomon notices that Ford's slaves speak tenderly of Ford, "as a child would speak of his own father."

Just as Ford's home in the Great Pine Woods is a "green spot in the wilderness," Ford himself is the only bright spot in Solomon's twelve-year enslavement. Ford is sensitive and empathetic to Eliza's pain, reinforcing the way that he treats his slaves like family.

Ford takes it upon himself to read scripture to his slaves and teach them to treat one another with kindness. He also teaches them to trust in God, "setting forth the rewards promised unto those who lead an upright and prayerful life." Although other slave owners think Ford is too soft, Solomon points out that Ford "lost nothing by his kindness." His compassionate, gentle nature makes his slaves more loyal and motivated to work hard.

Like Solomon's own father did for him and his siblings when he was a child, Ford frequently gathers up the slaves to teach them about God and the Bible. Unlike some of the other slave owners that Solomon will meet, Ford doesn't use Christianity to justify slavery—he uses it to give his slaves hope and comfort. (Though he also doesn't use Christianity to condemn slavery, either.)

One day, while manufacturing lumber under the guidance of Ford's foreman, Adam, Solomon comes up with the idea of transporting the lumber on the stream rather than on land. Ford is delighted by the idea and allows Solomon to try it. "Extremely anxious to succeed," Solomon builds a raft to carry the lumber (as well as Adam and himself). The plan is a great success.

Back when he was free, Solomon took an odd job making rafts in order to support his family. At the beginning of the narrative, Solomon tells the reader that his raft-making experience would later allow him to help "a worthy master," which is clearly William Ford.

Solomon describes the Native Americans living in the Great Pine Forest, with whom he becomes acquainted on his frequent rafting trips. He describes the Native Americans as "a rude but harmless people" who "enjoyed their wild mode of life," believed in the Great Spirit, and drank whiskey.

Solomon is fascinated by Native American culture in the Red River region. Native Americans show up infrequently in Solomon's narrative, possibly because of the Indian Removal Act of 1830, which pushed Native Americans westward.

One day, Mistress Ford asks Ford for a loom so that the slaves can make cloth. Solomon asks to try his hand at making one, and the loom turns out beautifully. When a carpenter named John Tibeats comes to Ford's home to work on a construction project, Solomon is asked to help him due to his newfound talent in carpentry. Disliked by slaves and white men alike, Tibeats is rude and wrathful, which is a sharp contrast from the gentle Ford, who considered his slaves "his fellow-mortals, accountable, like himself, to the Maker of us all."

Solomon is eager to please Ford and Mistress Ford because of their kindness to him. While previously, Solomon worked with his hands and did odd jobs to support his family, he now uses his talents to help his kindly masters however he can, showing that he thinks of them as family. Once again, Solomon stresses that Ford doesn't use Christian teachings to put himself above his slaves.

Solomon thinks he would be happy serving Ford all his life if his family were there with him. He warns the reader that at this point in his narrative, "clouds were gathering in the horizon," preceding a "pitiless storm."

Solomon's relationship to Ford seems more like a worker to employer than a slave to a master, but it's important to remember that no matter how well he is treated, Solomon is no more free than he was under Burch. He is still considered property—just property being treated well instead of abused. The dark cloud from earlier in the narrative appears again, signaling that the relatively bright spot in Solomon's slavery—having a kindly master and living peacefully in the woods—is about to come to a close.

CHAPTER 8

Ford runs into financial troubles, partially due to having to pay Tibeats for all of his construction work, so in the winter of 1842, Ford sells Solomon to Tibeats. Tibeats pays more for Solomon than Ford's debt to Tibeats amounts to, which means that "Ford took a chattel mortgage of four hundred dollars." Solomon says this mortgage saved his life, as the following section of his narrative will explain.

A chattel mortgage is a mortgage on a moveable item of property—emphasizing that Solomon is legally considered to be property, regardless of the fact that Ford treats him like family. However, in this instance, being considered as property grants him some legal (and physical) protection.

Solomon accompanies his new master, Tibeats, to Ford's plantation on Bayou Boeuf, which is nearly thirty miles from Ford's home in the Great Pine Forest. Bayou Boeuf is a swampy stream riddled with alligators, "rendering it unsafe for swine, or unthinking slave children" to walk along its banks. Solomon runs into Eliza, who has withered away and "sunk beneath the weight of an excessive grief." Solomon can tell that Eliza has almost "reached the end of her weary road."

Solomon makes a casual reference to the swamp being too dangerous for "swine, or unthinking slave children," once again illustrating the dehumanizing attitude toward slaves in the South, which considers slaves to be more like livestock than humans. To counteract this attitude, Solomon humanizes Eliza by describing her heartbreak at losing her children—a moment that seeks to gain empathy from white readers in the North who would likely also buckle under the "weight of an excessive grief" after being torn from their family.

The Bayou Boeuf plantation is overseen by a kind white man named Chapin who dislikes Tibeats. Under Tibeats' ownership, Solomon is forced to work extremely hard. Even though he is never idle and performs his tasks dutifully, Tibeats is never satisfied and pelts Solomon with "abuse and stinging epithets."

An epithet is usually meant as a nickname that describes someone's characteristics, but it can also mean a kind of insult or abuse, as Tibeats clearly uses here.

One late night, Tibeats orders Solomon to wake up at the crack of dawn the next morning, retrieve nails from Chapin, and resume his carpentry work. Solomon wearily retires for the night and rises, as instructed, early the following morning. Solomon asks Chapin for nails, which Chapin procures, saying that if Tibeats prefers a different size of nail, Chapin will happily oblige, but that Solomon should use these particular nails in the meantime.

Even though Solomon is exhausted and despises his callous master, he still dutifully follows Tibeats' instructions, emphasizing that Solomon is deeply undeserving of the event that is about to unfold.

As Solomon works, he realizes that Tibeats is in an even more sour mood than normal. Solomon repeats to him what Chapin said about being able to find different nails if necessary. Tibeats lashes out at Solomon with a "flood of curses" and reaches for the **whip**. Feeling that he had dutifully done the work that Tibeats asked of him, Solomon angrily decides that he will not allow Tibeats to whip him. When Tibeats commands Solomon to take off his clothes to be beaten, Solomon replies, "I will *not*."

Solomon hasn't been whipped since he left Burch's possession, so he's startled at the sudden reintroduction of the whip. Tibeats is clearly erratic and impossible to please. It seems that he's actively looking for mistakes so that he can pin the blame on Solomon and punish him. Like many of the slave dealers and slave owners that Solomon comes in contact with throughout the narrative, Tibeats uses slavery as a means to indulge his own worst impulses.

Tibeats violently hurdles toward Solomon, but Solomon tackles him to the ground. With his foot on Tibeats' neck, Solomon begins to **whip** his master, despite Tibeats' screams for mercy. Solomon pauses, and notices Chapin's wife and a slave named Rachel watching him from out the window. He hears Chapin riding in from the fields, likely startled by Tibeats' cries. When Chapin appears, Solomon tells him that Tibeats wants to whip him for using the nails Chapin gave him. Tibeats sputters that the nails are too large, and Chapin firmly reprimands Tibeats. Angrily, Tibeats rides off on his horse. Chapin tells Solomon that Tibeats' mysterious errand likely means trouble, but that Solomon should not attempt to run away. Weeping, Solomon is overwhelmed with fear and remorse over his actions.

It seems that all of the cruelty that Solomon has endured thus far in his enslavement wells up in this moment, as Solomon gives Tibeats a taste of his own bitter medicine. This is likely Tibeats' first experience being whipped, so his screams are a reminder of the unfathomable pain and brutality of the whip, which is casually used on slaves throughout the entire narrative. This passage also contains a brief but sweet moment of justice when Chapin criticizes Tibeats for attempting to whip Solomon for no reason, ignoring (and secretly praising) the fact that Solomon has just brutally whipped Tibeats instead.

An hour later, Tibeats appears, riding up the bayou with two men carrying whips and rope. As Tibeats binds Solomon's wrists and ankles, one of the men threaten to break Solomon's skull and tear apart his limbs if he resists. Tibeats uses the rest of the rope to make a noose and slips it around Solomon's neck. Solomon grieves, knowing he is about to die and will never see his family again, "the sweet anticipation I had cherished with such fondness."

The moment of justice is short-lived and quickly reversed. Even though slave owners whip their slaves brutally without so much as a second thought, when Solomon turns this punishment around on Tibeats, Solomon is doomed to be hanged. With the noose around his neck, Solomon's thoughts are only on his family, showing how his family has been an enduring source of hope and comfort throughout his enslavement.

When Tibeats and his companions drag Solomon to their tree of choice, Chapin comes running, brandishing a pistol in each hand. He declares that Solomon has done nothing wrong, and that Tibeats "richly deserve[d] the flogging" that he received. Asserting his authority as overseer of the plantation, Chapin reminds Tibeats that Ford holds a mortgage on Solomon. Tibeats' companions quickly ride off, and are followed a few minutes later by a fearful, shaken Tibeats.

The importance of the chattel mortgage is made clear here—Tibeats can't legally kill Solomon because he is still considered to be Ford's property until the mortgage is paid off. This is the second time Chapin has risked his safety by standing up for Solomon, showing that he is a moral man who believes in justice. Like Ford, Chapin presumably doesn't realize the inherent injustice of slavery because he's been surrounded by it his whole life.

Chapin orders Rachel to run to the field and fetch one of the other slaves and the brown mule. When the slave arrives, Chapin tells him to ride as quickly as he can to Ford's home and tell him that Tibeats is trying to murder Platt (Solomon). 11000

By having one of the slaves ride several miles to fetch Ford, Chapin seems to anticipate that Tibeats will come back for revenge, possibly with more of his cold-blooded companions. However, Chapin still seems more concerned about Solomon's safety than his own.

CHAPTER 9

Solomon is left standing in the blazing hot afternoon sun with his limbs bound and the noose still looped around his neck. He is tied so tightly that he can't move into the shade. Chapin paces around anxiously, watching the road down which Tibeats departed, but he does not unbind Solomon. Solomon realizes that Chapin expects Tibeats to return shortly with even more backup, and that Chapin will have to risk his life to defend Solomon's. During the hottest part of the day, Rachel creeps out of the house to pour some water in Solomon's mouth.

Even though Solomon is baking in the hot sun and his skin is swelling around the tight confines of the ropes, Chapin strangely chooses to not unbind him. Chapin doesn't seem to have cruel intentions, though. Perhaps he wants Ford to see firsthand how Solomon has been treated, or maybe he is fearful of getting involved in the situation any further.

Much to Solomon's relief, Ford arrives and frees Solomon from the ropes. Moments later, Tibeats and his two companions also appear and argue with Ford and Chapin, though Solomon can't hear what they're saying. Tibeats and his companions soon ride off again, looking unhappy. Chapin tells Solomon to sleep in the main house for the night, thinking Tibeats may try to seek revenge in the middle of the night. Solomon knows that if Tibeats murdered him even with a hundred slaves as witnesses, none of those slaves would be able to provide evidence against him.

Once again, Chapin is intent on protecting Solomon, this time by letting him sleep in the main house instead of the slave quarters for extra security. Like Ford, Chapin views Solomon as a human being whose life is valuable—but still somehow deserving of slavery. Solomon explains to the reader how, in contrast, slaves aren't treated as humans in a court of law. The value of one white man's story, even if fabricated, outweighs a hundred slaves' evidence.

In the morning, Chapin warns Solomon to stay alert around his master, knowing Tibeats is likely to harm Solomon when he least expects it. When Tibeats returns, Solomon wonders in agony why he must serve a "blood-seeking wretch" and live a miserable life. He wishes he could have died before having children, when he had less to live for. He longs for freedom, but "the bondman's **chain** [...] could not be shaken off."

Even the mere thought of his children gives Solomon purpose and tenacity to make it through his enslavement alive. Solomon refers to the institution of slavery as "the bondman's chain," pointing back to when he found himself in chains after being drugged in Washington D.C. Although he is no longer trapped by physical chains, he is still immobilized by the heavy weight of the brutal system.

Tibeats hires Solomon out to Peter Tanner, Ford's brother-in-law, whom Solomon immediately dislikes. Although he reads the Bible to his slaves like Ford, Tanner has a very different approach to scripture. On one particular occasion, Tanner reads his slaves averse: "And that servant, which knew his lord's will, and prepared not himself, neither did according to his will, shall be beaten with many stripes." He tells his slaves that he is the lord the verse refers to, and that any of his slaves that disobey him will be whipped. Solomon also notes that Tanner often uses stocks to intimidate and control his slaves.

Tanner is the prime example of a slave owner who uses Christianity to justify and perpetuate slavery—he specifically quotes Luke 12:47 to scare his slaves into obeying him, even though the verse is about obeying God. In contrast, in the North, the simultaneous unfolding of the Second Great Awakening and the Abolitionist Movement meant that many people were using Christianity to prove that slavery was morally wrong and sinful before God.

CHAPTER 10

When Solomon's services are no longer needed at Tanner's plantation, he is returned to Tibeats. He knows that Tibeats will try to kill him at any given moment, so he always keeps one eye on his work and one eye on Tibeats. One day, when Chapin is gone, Tibeats tries to attack Solomon with a hatchet. Solomon knows that if he runs, Tibeats can easily aim for his back. Solomon writes, "I felt as if I had a serpent by the neck, watching the slightest relaxation of my grip, to coil itself round my body, crushing and stinging it to death."

Solomon compares Tibeats to an aggressive, deadly serpent, which feels reminiscent of Satan transforming into a serpent in the Garden of Eden to trick Eve into sinning. By conflating Tibeats with a serpent, Solomon gestures to the way that slavery—as well as those who perpetuate it—is inherently sinful.

In a moment of quick thinking, Solomon kicks Tibeats and snatches the hatchet from his hand. As the two grapple, Solomon thinks, "life is dear to every living thing; the worm that crawls upon the ground will struggle for it." Solomon nearly suffocates Tibeats, then tosses him aside and begins to run. Terrified and alone, Solomon runs to the far edge of the property and climbs a high fence, which allows him to see the entire plantation spread out before him. Soon, other slaves shout for Solomon to run, and Solomon sees that Tibeats and two other men, along with a pack of vicious dogs, are headed toward him.

Even though there have been times throughout the narrative when Solomon thinks he would rather die than be a slave, this moment shows that he is still filled with determination and grit.

Running toward the swamp, Solomon realizes that he's never heard of a single slave who escaped from Bayou Boeuf. As he runs, Solomon chokes out a prayer to God, asking for strength. Solomon reaches the Great Pacoudrie Swamp, whose waters erase Solomon's scent and confuse the dogs. The swamp consists of forty miles of dense swamplands, uninhabited by humans but teeming with alligators, bears, and poisonous snakes.

Solomon turns to God for strength even in the midst of a chaotic, dangerous situation, showing that he is steadfast in his Christian faith. Meanwhile, the swamp is an illustration of the impossibility of escape in Bayou Boeuf—trudging through the swamp seems even more dangerous than staying put with a barbaric master.

With the dogs no longer on his tracks, Solomon pushes through the swamp, striking the water with a step before each step to make sure he doesn't accidentally trample a poisonous snake or alligator. By midnight, the swamplands become nearly impenetrable, and Solomon is forced to turn back. He eventually makes it back to the beginning of the Great Pacoudrie Swamp, where he first shook the dogs off of his trail.

Solomon's description of the swamp serves two purposes. First, it shows the reader how slavery is nearly impossible to escape for slaves in Bayou Boeuf. Secondly, the detailed and accurate description of the landscape functions as evidence that Solomon's experiences are true—pointing back to his opening statement.

He decides to turn north-west, aiming for the Great Pine Forest, where Ford lives. Along the way, he runs into a white man at a small plantation. Solomon knows that because he doesn't have a pass, the white man will capture him and send him back to Tibeats. He also knows that he looks like a fugitive—his clothes are tattered, and his entire body is coated with mud. Assuming a false air of confidence, Solomon marches up to the white man and asks for directions to Ford's plantation.

The slave pass system was a means for surveillance that allowed fugitive slaves to be returned to their "rightful owners." Slaves could only travel outside of the bounds of their master's plantation with a pass—written permission from their owner, stating the date, who the slave was, and where they were going. Since slaves were usually not taught to read or write, there was little danger in slaves forging such passes.

The man, clearly frightened by Solomon (who looks more like an "infernal goblin" than a human), gives him directions and does not demand a pass. Solomon quickly departs, reaching Ford's home a few hours later. When he arrives, Solomon is in such a sorry state that Mistress Ford hardly recognizes him.

Just like a scared child runs to its father for safety and comfort, Solomon turns to Ford to protect him from Tibeats' wrath. The fact that Solomon looks like an "infernal goblin" underscores how he must endure inhumane treatment and conditions as a slave.

That evening, Ford listens sympathetically to Solomon's story about fleeing from Tibeats and traveling through the swamp. Ford feeds Solomon and sends him to the cabin to rest. As he sleeps, Solomon dreams of his children.

Once again, Ford acts like a father figure to Solomon by lending him a sympathetic ear, feeding him, and sending him to bed. Ford is the closest thing to family that Solomon has in his current waking life—he can only see his real family in his dreaming life.

CHAPTER 11

In the morning, Solomon tends to the garden to show his gratitude. Although Mistress Ford tells Solomon that he need not work and should continue to rest, Solomon still wants to help. For three days, he works in the garden, tending to the vines "which the gentle and generous hand of my protectress had taught to clamber along the walls."

Solomon also thinks of Mistress Ford as a mother figure, referring to her as a "protectress" who is "gentle and generous." Like a mother, Mistress Ford fusses over Solomon's physical condition and tries to get him to rest instead of work.

On the fourth morning, Ford and Solomon set off for Bayou Boeuf. Ford rides on horseback while Solomon walks alongside him, though Ford frequently tries to convince Solomon to trade places with him. As the men travel, Ford tells Solomon that surviving the swamp was a miracle from God, like Daniel surviving the lions' den. Ford also talks about the "vanity of earthly things" and the goodness of eternal life.

Like Mistress Ford trying to get Solomon to rest instead of work, Ford tries to persuade Solomon to ride on horseback rather than walk, showing that he cares for Solomon's physical health. Ford also wants to nurture Solomon's spiritual health. He tells Solomon the biblical story of when Daniel, the lead advisor to King Darius, was betrayed by the King's other advisors and eventually thrown into the lions' den. Daniel miraculously survived because of his steadfast faith and trust in God. Ford encourages Solomon to continue to find strength and hope in God, just like Daniel did.

As Ford and Solomon near Bayou Boeuf, they come across Tibeats on horseback, who turns around and rides alongside them. Ford chastises Tibeats for trying to attack his slave with a hatchet. He tells Tibeats that treating slaves with kindness is a far better way to earn loyalty and respect. Ford says Tibeats and Solomon can no longer live together, as Tibeats will only continue to try to murder Solomon. Ford declares that Tibeats must sell Solomon immediately.

This is the second time that Tibeats has been criticized by a fellow white man and slave owner for the way he treats Solomon (first Chapin, now Ford).

Tibeats briefly hires Solomon out to a man named Eldret. Solomon works long, hard hours chopping wood, but he is grateful to be working under Eldret rather than Tibeats. Eldret even promises that if Solomon works hard and faithfully, he will be able to visit Ford in the course of a few weeks. Right before Solomon is about to embark on that trip, Tibeats arrives and objects to it. Eldret is firm, stating that Solomon earned the opportunity to visit Ford and will be allowed to go. Tibeats begrudgingly writes Solomon a pass, which reads, "Platt has permission to go to Ford's plantation, on Bayou Boeuf, and return by Tuesday morning."

Tibeats is clearly cruel for the sake of being cruel. Even though Solomon is temporarily under Eldret's authority and Solomon has rightfully earned the chance to visit Ford, Tibeats still objects to the plan just to be malicious. The pass he writes shows what standard slave passes looked like at the time. The pass includes Solomon's slave name (Platt), his end destination, and when he is to return by.

As Solomon travels, many white men demand his pass. He tells the reader that for many white men, catching runaway slaves is a lucrative business. There are financial rewards for catching a fugitive, and if the fugitive is not reclaimed by his or her owner, the slave can be resold for a hefty profit. A man who undertakes this profession is called "a mean white."

In this passage, Solomon shows his white Northern readership how the institution of slavery is built on cruelty and greed. For these "mean whites," catching slaves is less about returning them to their owner and more about being able to resell them to make money.

Once at Ford's plantation, Solomon spends the evening catching up with the other slaves. He is shocked to see the way that Eliza has wasted away, as "grief [...] gnawed remorselessly at her heart, until her strength was gone." Solomon tells the reader that this was the last time he saw Eliza. Sometime after his visit, Eliza was sent to another owner but couldn't keep up with the work. One day, "the Angel of the Lord [...] gathering in his harvest of departing souls, had silently entered the cabin of the dying woman, and had taken her from thence. She was *free* at last!"

Hopeless about ever seeing her children again, Eliza loses all motivation to continue living. In contrast, Solomon's thoughts about his family throughout the novel make him feel tenacious and hopeful for the future. Solomon shows the reader how for Eliza, death is a welcome, gentle end to the bitterness and barbarity of slavery.

The next day, Solomon leaves the plantation early to return to Eldret's plantation. Along the way, Solomon runs into Tibeats, who tells him that he has been sold to a man at the next plantation, Edwin Epps. Tibeats brings Solomon to Epps' plantation, and Solomon is relieved to be under new ownership and rid of Tibeats.

Tibeats listens to Ford's earlier advice and sells Solomon instead of continuing to abuse him. It's unclear whether Tibeats knew of Epps' reputation as a cruel master before he sold Solomon to him, though it's possible that Tibeats purposefully tried to find a cruel master for Solomon just out of spite.

CHAPTER 12

Edwin Epps is a gruff, heavy-set man who is "fond of the bottle," and goes on drinking "sprees" that last two weeks at a time. When he is "in his cups," he is noisy, abrasive, and loves to make games of **whipping** his slaves. When he is sober, he is stoic and clever and whips his slaves when they don't work efficiently enough.

When Epps is drunk, he whips his slaves for pure entertainment, whereas when he's sober, he whips his slaves to make them work harder and faster. Epps' alcoholism means he has two cruel personalities instead of one, but the common thread is that Epps takes his own violent tendencies out on his slaves no matter what.

Epps' primary business is growing and harvesting cotton. Solomon explains to the reader the way cotton is grown, noting that it takes two mules, three slaves, a plow, and a harrow to plant a single row of cotton. Over the next few months, the cotton is hoed, and by August, picking season begins. Each slave picks about two hundred pounds of cotton each day, and they are punished if they don't meet their quota. Epps' best cotton-picker, Patsey, picks five hundred pounds of cotton per day.

By explaining the mundane details of how cotton is planted and harvested, Solomon underscores the truth of his narrative—that is, that he really was a slave for twelve years in Louisiana and can show his white Northern readership what slavery is truly like in the South.

Solomon explains that the entire cotton-picking process is based on fear. If a slave breaks a cotton branch (which is easy to do and often unavoidable), the slave is severely punished, since "The cotton will not bloom upon a broken branch." The slaves are given ten minutes during the work day to scarf down their lunch—a small morsel of cold bacon—and then continue working late into the night. At the end of the work day, every slave "approaches the gin-house with his basket of cotton but with fear." If the day's harvest weighs too little, the slave is punished. If the day's harvest weighs more than usual, the slave must pick that same amount for all the days to come.

Just as the cotton doesn't bloom when the branches are broken, neither can Epps' slaves work efficiently when they're treated inhumanely. With meager food and sleep, the slaves are clearly pushed to their physical limits. Epps also punishes his slaves for everything—including if they pick too little cotton or too much—which feels reminiscent of the way Tibeats was constantly looking for a reason (however flimsy) to punish Solomon.

Epps' slaves are given one element of choice in their day-to-day lives. Whether they want to grind their weekly portion of cornmeal all at once or a little bit each night is entirely their choice—"A very generous man was Master Epps," Solomon remarks. The slaves keep their weekly allowance of corn and bacon inside a gourd.

It's unclear why Epps gives only allows his slaves this one choice—perhaps it's more degrading to give his slaves one insignificant choice than none at all. Solomon sarcastically praises Epps for being so generous, implying that Epps is anything but.

Solomon also describes the slave accommodations at Epps' plantation. Each slave sleeps on a plank of wood for a bed, a "stick of wood" for a pillow, and a "coarse blanket." During the stormy season, rain seeps through the cabin, and the slaves sleep while soaking wet. When the slaves rise in the morning and leave their cabin, "the fears and labors of another day begin."

Epps seems to intentionally make the slaves' lives as uncomfortable as possible. The slaves live like farm animals (if not worse), forced to sleep on the wooden floor and be soaked by the rain.

Solomon describes Epps' cattle that inhabit the swamplands. The cattle are branded, and then herded toward the swamps, "to roam unrestricted within their almost limitless confines." Epps also has a garden, though its harvest only feeds the Epps family. By Autumn, "The grass withereth and the flower fadeth" in other parts of the country, but flowers bloom year-round at Bayou Boeuf.

Even though slaves are frequently compared to livestock throughout the text, it's clear that livestock live more peacefully and with more freedom than the slaves. Solomon references part of Isaiah 40:8 to describe the way that seasons affect crops in other parts of the world. The second part of the verse reads, "but the word of our God shall stand forever," pointing back to the way that Solomon's Christian faith is a source of strength and hope in the face of his miserable circumstances. At the same time, the ever-blooming garden of Bayou Boeuf is bitterly contrasted with the suffering of the slaves there.

CHAPTER 13

In the summer, Solomon comes down with the smallpox but is still forced to work and is punished when he lags. When it is clear that Solomon is nearing death, Epps begrudgingly calls for a doctor, not wanting to lose "an animal worth a thousand dollars." The doctor instructs Epps to feed Solomon barely enough food to keep him alive.

When he finally calls the doctor, Epps is motivated by money, not by actual care for Solomon's wellbeing—a sharp contrast from Ford and Mistress Ford.

When Solomon has partially recovered, Epps forces him to return to work and pick cotton for the first time. Solomon ends up being unfit to pick cotton. He is whipped for his meager harvest and is sent instead to chop wood. Other slaves who fail to meet their quota are also whipped. Solomon writes, "It is the literal, unvarnished truth, that the crack of the lash, and the shrieking of slaves, can be heard from dark till bedtime" on Epps' plantation, regardless of the season. Twenty-five lashes from the **whip** is "a mere brush," fifty lashes is standard punishment for breaking a cotton branch, and one hundred lashes is "severe," though sometimes the count increases to two hundred.

This passage serves as a reminder that Solomon's underlying purpose in recording his life story is to present his white Northern readers with an accurate depiction of slavery in the South. He also details Epps' punishment system to show that Epps is so barbaric that he considers twenty-five lashes to be just a slap on the wrist or "a mere brush." Solomon seeks to shock and horrify his readers with this "literal, unvarnished truth" so that their antislavery convictions will be strengthened.

Epps frequently stumbles home drunk in the middle of the night, returning from a shooting match in a nearby town called Holmesville. Upon arrival, Epps first breaks dishes and furniture in the house, and then wanders to his slaves' quarters in search of more amusement. Sometimes he hides in the dark yard to **whip** unsuspecting slaves when they pass his hiding place. Other times, he decides "there must be a merry-making," and forces his slaves to dance while Solomon plays the fiddle. Those who dance too slow are whipped. Sometimes Mistress Epps chastises Epps for this, but other times she laughs at "his uproarious pranks."

Epps makes cruel games out of harming his slaves, showing that barbarism infiltrates every corner of his life, work and leisure alike. This passage also contains one of the first characterizations of Mistress Epps. Although she sometimes scolds her husband for his behavior, she often laughs at Epps' "uproarious pranks," which reveals that she, too, uses slavery as a way to justify being cruel to another human.

Epps usually forces the slaves to "dance and laugh" until morning, rendering them so weary that all they want to do is crumple to the ground and weep. Despite being kept up so late with Epps' antics, the slaves are still required to begin their labor at the crack of dawn. On these mornings, Epps is crueler than usual.

Epps considers his slaves to be a source of entertainment, connecting back to when the slaves were auctioned off like race horses at Freeman's slave pen.

Solomon writes that Epps "is a man in whose heart the quality of kindness or of justice is not found." He has a "rough, rude energy," which amplifies his uneducated mind and greedy personality. Epps takes pride in his ability to "break" his slaves, "as a jockey boasts of his skill in managing a refractory horse." He sees his slaves not as human beings but as "live property" just like his horse and dog, only more expensive. Solomon knows that Epps could have unflinchingly watched his slaves' tongues ripped out and their bodies roasted over a fire and fed to the dogs, "if it only brought him profit." Solomon notes that, at the time of his writing, Epps still resides at Bayou Boeuf.

Furthering the comparison between slaves and race horses, Solomon depicts Epps as a jockey who forces his horses into submission. Epps dehumanizes his slaves by considering them "live property" like farm animals. However, Epps' "rough, rude energy," glaring insensitivity, and inhumanity actually make him *seem more like an animal than an intelligent human being.*

Epps' other slaves include Abram, a kindly, aging man who has lost his physical and mental strength; a quiet, middle-aged man named Wiley; his chatty wife, Phebe; her two adult sons from another marriage, Bob and Henry; Wiley and Phebe's thirteen-year-old son, Edward; and a twenty-three-year-old girl named Patsey. Patsey is incredibly gifted at many things, "and were it not that bondage had enshrouded her intellect in utter and everlasting darkness, [she] would have been chief among ten thousand of her people."

Solomon highlights how racism and slavery stunt Patsey's extraordinary potential. He suggests that enslaved people can be just as intelligent, powerful, and successful as their white masters, but that slavery blocks this from happening. By noting how slavery "enshrouded" Patsey's potential in darkness, Solomon gestures back to his analogy of the thick, dark cloud of slavery from the closing of chapter one.

Although Patsey has a joyful, lighthearted personality, she frequently weeps, suffering the constant punishment of a "licentious master and a jealous mistress." Epps frequently rapes Patsey, earning her even greater punishment from Mistress Epps, who loves to see Patsey suffer.

Epps and his wife punish Patsey for problems they create. Mistress Epps uses Patsey as a way to take out her anger at Epps for constantly cheating on her, underscoring the idea that racism and slavery are vehicles for human wickedness.

CHAPTER 14

One year, caterpillars destroy the cotton crop, so Solomon and several others are hired out to a man named Judge Turner to harvest sugar cane. Solomon immediately excels at harvesting sugar cane. Sugar-cane harvesting, like cotton picking, is a time-sensitive process, often requiring the slaves to also work on the Sabbath. However, it is customary in Louisiana for slaves to be allowed to keep whatever they make on Sundays. With this extra money, slaves are able to buy necessities and small luxuries. Solomon makes ten dollars in total by working on Sundays.

The small detail about the Louisiana custom that permits slaves to keep their Sunday earnings is one of many pieces of evidence that Solomon employs to prove to the reader that he truly was a slave in Louisiana for twelve years, and that he has the authority to depict slavery accurately in his narrative.

During this time, Solomon is also hired out to play the fiddle at a "grand party of whites," which earns him seventeen dollars. Solomon writes that during this point in his twelve-year enslavement, his violin was his "constant companion," "source of profit," and "soother of [...] sorrows." Solomon's fiddle-playing money makes him rich in the eyes of the other slaves. He finds great joy in planning what he'll spend his money on, be it shoes, a water pail, or a coat.

Solomon highlights that music has the power to bring joy and comfort even in the midst of severe suffering. Music also has a practical purpose, because it allows him to charm rich, white Southerners at the "grand party of whites" and likely make more money than he could by any other means as a slave.

Traveling through a small village on the way back to Epps' plantation, Solomon catches a glimpse of Tibeats and notices that he looks "seedy" and "out of repair." Solomon knows that "passion and poor whiskey...have ere laid him on the shelf."

Solomon's description of Tibeats implies that karma has finally caught up to him—his erratic, cruel nature has turned him from harsh slave owner to impoverished drunk.

When Solomon returns to Epps' plantation, he hears that Patsey has been subjected to crueler-than-usual punishment. Phebe tells Solomon that now, when Epps comes home drunk, he will whip Patsey severely, to Mistress Epps' delight, "for an offence of which he himself was the sole and irresistible cause." When sober, Epps usually doesn't agree to his wife's requests to beat Patsey.

Epps and his wife clearly enjoy hurting Patsey, once again illustrating how they use racism and slavery justify their wickedness. The offense in question is Epps' frequent sexual abuse of Patsey, which Epps himself should be getting punished for.

Solomon tells the reader that Mistress Epps is "possessed of the devil, jealousy," when it comes to Patsey, but that she has several good qualities. She is kind to all of the other slaves and feeds them well when Epps is out of town. She is also well educated and dignified.

Solomon outlines all of Mistress Epps' positive qualities, implying that she might have had a different outlook on slavery had she grown up in the North rather than the South.

That summer, the slaves' bacon supply is infested with worms, making it nearly inedible. The slaves' allowance of bacon is already barely enough to sustain life, so the slaves hunt for racoons and opossum in the swamps. Solomon also manages to construct a fish trap, which he describes in detail. The trap is a great success, allowing Solomon and his fellow slaves to always have fresh fish to eat.

Even when the slaves' meager food supply goes bad, Epps still doesn't give them more food, which seems to be yet another instance of him being cruel for the sake of it. Just as Solomon previously succeeded in making rafts and looms for Ford, Solomon also crafts an effective fish trap, showing his resourcefulness.

One day, a messenger comes running to the Epps plantation, exclaiming that someone was murdered at a nearby plantation belonging to a man named Marshall. Marshall had been negotiating with a man, but "difficulty had arisen" and "high words ensued," and Marshall killed the man. Marshall was never arrested, and his reputation didn't suffer—instead, he was more respected "from the fact that the blood of a fellow being was on his soul."

The man Marshall murders is most likely white, considering the two men were negotiating and possibly doing business. Marshall's murder of the other man is clearly not justified (mere "difficulty had arisen" in the midst of the negotiation, which sounds fairly minor), but he is ultimately revered by his peers for the bloodshed. Solomon criticizes the way that slave owners praise violence toward other humans.

Although Epps befriends Marshall to get on his good side, Marshall eventually turns on him too, challenging him to what would be a deadly duel. At the request of Mistress Epps, Epps declines. Solomon notes that, today, Epps and Marshall are intimate friends again. Reflecting on this situation, Solomon writes that the institution of slavery "has a tendency to brutalize the humane and finer feelings" of a white man. He notes that there are exceptions, like the gentle and empathetic Ford, but that most slave owners become "brutified and reckless of human life." Solomon asserts that a slaveholder's cruelty isn't his own fault as much as it is "the fault of the system under which he lives." Slaveholders are cruel because of the "influence of habit[s] and associations" in their environments and upbringings.

In attributing slaveholders' cruelty to "the system under which he lives," Solomon highlights that racism is a learned behavior. Slaveholders accept and perpetuate slavery and inhumanity because it comes to seem normal to them. Solomon points out that this is a vicious cycle, because perpetuating the barbaric institution of slavery only makes the slaveholder more "brutified and reckless of human life." Although slavery is obviously worse for those enslaved, here Solomon makes the point that it is also an evil system for slave-owners, driving them towards brutality.

Solomon points out that although there are kind masters, the institution of slavery is still undoubtedly "cruel, unjust, and barbarous." He says that many men "discourse flippantly from arm chairs of the pleasures of slave life." These men must experience firsthand the misery, brutality, fear, and bondage of a slave.

Solomon's narrative is meant to challenge the white Northern reader—who may be among those privileged men who "discourse flippantly…the pleasures of slave life" from the comfort of their arm chairs—to internalize the daily, lived barbarity of slavery.

CHAPTER 15

Since Solomon is skilled at harvesting sugar cane, Epps hires him out every season for the sake of his own profit. In great detail, Solomon explains how sugar cane is harvested.

Just like his earlier detailed description of how cotton is harvested, Solomon explains the process of harvesting sugar cane to show that his narrative is true, and his depiction of slavery accurate.

All year, Epps' slaves look forward to Christmas, when they are allotted three days off (though other owners give their slaves six). The three days provide the only moments of "a little restricted liberty" out of the entire year and include feasts, music, flirting, and dancing. Solomon likens it to "the carnival season with the children of bondage." Each year, the feast takes place at a different plantation, and all the neighboring slaves and slave owners are invited.

Once again, Epps is cruel to his slaves seemingly for no other reason than because he can be. He gives his slaves a meager three days off at Christmas (even though the norm at most plantations is twice that) because he seems to want to restrict the joy and limited freedom that comes with the holidays.

At these feasts, Solomon plays the fiddle. He tells the reader that during his twelve years of bondage, he was often hired to play the fiddle at slave owners' parties. This opportunity saved him from many tiresome days in the field toiling under Epps' **whip**. He writes that his fiddle was his closest friend, "triumphing loudly when I was joyful, and uttering its soft, melodious consolations when I was sad."

Solomon illustrates how music saved him in emotional and physical ways. His fiddle brings him emotional comfort and a sense of companionship while also giving him an excuse to not work in the fields on certain days, allowing him a brief measure of relief.

Oftentimes, there are marriages during the Christmas holidays, usually between slaves from neighboring plantations. Slaves can have as many husbands or wives as their owner allows, and are permitted to visit their spouses on Saturday nights if the journey is short enough.

Solomon shows how every aspect of a slave's life—including marriage and relationships—is dictated by their owner. Regardless, marriage seems to give slaves a greater sense of purpose, as it gives them the small comfort of having someone to visit on Saturday nights.


CHAPTER 16

Solomon explains to the reader that most plantations have an overseer who ensures the slaves are working efficiently. Overseers are armed with pistols, a knife, a **whip**, and dogs. Solomon says that "the requisite qualifications in an overseer are utter heartlessness, brutality, and cruelty." Besides an overseer, many plantations have drivers, which are slaves who, on top of their regular responsibilities, are given the task of whipping their fellow slaves for not working fast enough. If the driver fails to whip the other slaves enough, the driver himself is whipped.

The overseer is the embodiment of all of the evil qualities of slavery itself, including "heartlessness, brutality, and cruelty." The typical overseer is also armed with four different types of weaponry just to oversee the slaves' work in the fields, pointing to the way that racism serves as a justification for human brutality.

Epps enlists Solomon as a driver. Solomon knows that Epps is always watching and will know if Solomon doesn't use the **whip** as he is supposed to. To satisfy Epps' violence while protecting his fellow slaves, Solomon learns how to crack the whip without actually touching any of the slaves, "throwing the lash within a hair's breadth of the back, the ear, [or] the nose." The slaves scream in pretend pain at Solomon's painless lashes, and Epps is satisfied.

Unlike Epps, Solomon refuses to treat the slaves with violence for the sake of violence. Demonstrating his empathy toward his fellow slaves, Solomon manages to restore a little bit of justice (and again shows his resourcefulness) by coming up with a method that protects the slaves and appeases Epps.


One day, Epps arrives at the fields clearly intoxicated and motions for Patsey to follow him. Patsey begins to cry, "aware of his lewd intentions," and Solomon whispers for her to continue working. Enraged at Solomon for interfering, Epps grabs Solomon by his shirt and pulls out a pocket knife, prepared to cut Solomon's throat. Solomon manages to loosen himself out of Epps' grasp, and Epps chases him around the field, knife in hand.

Once again, Solomon demonstrates his empathy toward his fellow slaves by intervening in Epps' "lewd intentions" to rape Patsey. Solomon shows the reader the sinfulness and barbarity of slavery by detailing the way he was almost unjustly murdered for opposing his master's sexual abuse.


Mistress Epps watches the "half-serious, half-comical maneuvers" from the distance, and Solomon runs to her for protection and tells her what's going on. Epps, now mostly sober, "attempt[s] to look as innocent as a child." Mistress Epps screams at her husband, but he accuses Solomon of lying. Solomon is forced to stay silent, since "It is not safe to contradict a master, even by the assertion of a truth."

Epps' attempt to murder Solomon is "half-serious, half-comical," connecting back to when he forced his slaves to dance, spurred by his whip, to satiate his need for violent entertainment. Solomon also shows the reader the danger of telling the truth and standing up for morality in an unjust society such as the American South.


Solomon tells the reader that throughout his enslavement, he was constantly on the lookout for an opportunity to write to his friends and family. Nine years into Solomon's slavery, he finally obtains a single piece of paper when Mistress Epps sends Solomon into town to buy several things, including a stack of paper. Solomon steals a single sheet and hides it under the wooden plank that he sleeps on. After much experimentation, he also discovers how to make his own ink and pen. Solomon writes a lengthy letter to a longtime acquaintance, explaining where he is and asking to be rescued.

Solomon once again proves his resourcefulness, adding ink and pens to his repertoire of other items he has successfully made by hand, including rafts, looms, and fish traps. By emphasizing that it took nine full years before he was able to acquire a single sheet of paper, Solomon shows how slaves are unjustly and intentionally cut off from society and robbed of their ability to communicate with others (especially since most slaves were prohibited from learning to read or write at all).

Solomon secretly keeps the letter for a long time, until one day, he finally finds a potential opportunity to send it. A poor white man named Armsby comes to work at Epps' plantation among the slaves. Solomon tries to befriend him, and eventually asks Armsby if he would mail a letter for him in town. Unsure as to Armsby's trustworthiness, Solomon doesn't tell Armsby that the letter is already written or that he managed to find paper. Armsby agrees to send a letter for Solomon and promises to keep it a secret.

Racism and slavery both block Solomon from being able to send a letter on his own, which is why he must enlist help from a white man. Despite his skepticism regarding Armsby's trustworthiness, Solomon still asks him for help, showing Solomon's desperation at this point.

The next day, Solomon's suspicions are confirmed. Epps enters Solomon's cabin, whip in hand, and confronts him about the letter. Solomon pretends to be confused, asking Epps how he could possibly write a letter without ink and paper. Faking innocence, Solomon tells Epps that he doesn't even have friends to write to. Solomon shifts the blame onto Armsby, calling him a "lying, drunken fellow" who is merely trying to get the slaves in trouble so that Epps will hire him as overseer. Epps believes Solomon's story, and Armsby is removed from the plantation. With his hopes crushed, Solomon burns the letter in the fire.

This situation illustrates the way that racism limits truth and justice. Epps initially believed Armsby because he is white and assumed Solomon was guilty because he is black. Of course, Solomon did really ask Armsby to send a letter for him, but Epps' race-based judgment is flawed. This interaction foreshadows a moment at the end of the narrative, when Solomon is judged in court based solely on his skin color and is not given the opportunity to speak the truth because of it.

CHAPTER 17

One day, one of Solomon's fellow slaves, Wiley, sneaks out at night to visit a friend and returns home late. Without a pass, Wiley is captured by white patrollers and is forcibly returned to Epps, who beats him severely for many days. Wiley decides to run away and slips out in the night without telling his wife. Wiley is missing for three weeks. Just when the other slaves consider him dead, Wiley returns to Epps' plantation, having been caught by a white patroller. Epps subjects him to yet another "inhuman flogging," and Wiley never tries to escape again.

It seems that regardless of what Wiley does, Epps punishes him severely for it. Even escaping punishment eventually earns Wiley a more severe punishment. The subtext here is that Epps is intent on whipping his slaves no matter what they do, once again showing that he uses slavery to justify his own barbarity.

Every day, Solomon thinks of ways to escape, but the "thousand obstacles thrown in the way of the flying slave" render it impossible. Solomon does manage to make Epps' dogs afraid of him by whipping them at night while he hunts for racoons and opossum to eat. Solomon says many slaves are willing to run away and endure whatever later punishment comes upon them just to have a few days of rest.

Solomon knows that the racism that saturates the American South means it is almost impossible for him to run away and restore his own freedom.

Solomon meets a slave named Celeste who escaped from a cruel owner at a neighboring plantation. Celeste's skin is whiter than that of her owner, and Solomon thinks that a stranger would never guess that she is a slave. For most of the summer, she lives in the swamp near Epps' plantation, sustained by the small amounts of food that Solomon brings her. Eventually, she is too scared of the wild animals to stay any longer in the swamplands, so she returns to her master.

Solomon points out that Celeste's skin is lighter than that of her cruel owner, suggesting that sometimes racism and slavery don't seem to be about skin color as much as they are about human wickedness. The system itself is so arbitrary as to be almost ridiculous if it weren't the cause of so much suffering.

Solomon tells the reader that the year before he arrived in Louisiana, a large number of slaves in the Bayou Boeuf area planned a rebellion under the leadership of a slave named Lew Cheney. When Cheney realized that the rebellion was going to fail, he made himself look innocent by turning in all of his fellow slaves that were involved. Cheney was greatly rewarded by his master, and all of the other slaves involved in the rebellion—even innocent slaves who were merely suspected of being involved—were hanged. Solomon writes that Cheney is still alive but is deeply hated by every slave in the area.

Even though Solomon must frequently lie to stay safe during his enslavement (for example, lying about his identity and where he came from so that no one knows he was free), he is careful to point out that lying to cover up one's crimes and avoid punishment is immoral. By mentioning that Lew Cheney is still alive, Solomon gestures back to his goal of accurately recording all of the people, places, and events of his slavery to prove that his experiences really happened and to accurately depict the barbarity of slavery.

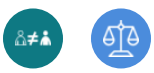
Even though Solomon knows that taking part in a rebellion is fruitless, he knows that one day, there will be "a terrible day of vengeance, when the master in his turn will cry in vain for mercy."

Solomon implies that slaveholders will one day face severe political and religious consequences and justice will be restored. The "terrible day of vengeance" suggests the Last Judgment when God judges Christians based off of their earthly conduct. This passage also foreshadows the Civil War, which is less of a "terrible day" and more of a terribly bloody four years.

CHAPTER 18

An old man named O'Niel calls on Epps and asks to buy Solomon—a conversation overheard by Phebe, and quickly relayed to Solomon. Solomon tells Phebe that he hopes O'Niel will buy him, but their conversation is overheard by Mistress Epps, and quickly relayed to Epps. Solomon tells the reader that "nothing will more violently enrage a master [...] than the intimation of one of his servants that he would like to leave him." For this reason, Epps mercilessly whips Solomon.

Once again, slavery is a means for Epps to be cruel toward other humans. Had Epps not known that Solomon wanted O'Niel to buy him, Epps may have gladly sold Solomon for the right price. It seems that Epps purposefully wants Solomon to be unhappy, echoing the time when Freeman refused to sell Eliza's daughter, Emily, just to ensure the family was separated.



Solomon writes that Epps' aging slave, Abram, is often the recipient of overwhelming cruelty. One day, Solomon returns to his cabin to find Abram lying in a puddle of blood. Abram says that he has been stabbed by their intoxicated master for making a small mistake while spreading cotton. The wound, though not fatal, had to be sewed up by Mistress Epps, who severely reprimanded her husband for his "inhumanity."

Abram is stabbed for making what should have been an inconsequential mistake, emphasizing that Epps uses the institution of slavery to justify his own violent impulses. It's interesting that Mistress Epps scolds her husband for his "inhumanity" when she is just as inhumane to Patsey (most clearly seen in the events that are about to unfold).

Solomon recounts the cruelest whipping that he ever saw, which was given to Patsey. Epps partakes in "an infernal jubilee over the girl's miseries," just like his jealous wife. On Sunday, while the slaves are washing their clothes, Epps calls for Patsey, but she is nowhere to be found. She turns up shortly, explaining that she was visiting her friend Harriet Shaw to get some soap, since Mistress Epps doesn't give her soap (though she gives it to all the other slaves). Thinking that Patsey instead went to see Harriet Shaw's white husband, Epps becomes jealous and angry.

Patsey is trapped in an unjust cycle of punishment. Epps and Mistress Epps' own behavior is always the reason for Patsey's punishment. Epps' frequent sexual abuse of Patsey makes Mistress Epps punish Patsey out of jealousy, even though it is Epps' fault. Similarly, Mistress Epps purposefully and spitefully doesn't give Patsey soap. When Patsey manages to get soap from a friend (who happens to have a white husband), Epps also punishes Patsey out of jealousy.

Epps orders Solomon to secure four stakes into the ground. He forces Patsey to strip and secures her face down by tying her wrists and feet to each stake with rope. Procuring a thick **whip**, Epps commands Solomon to whip Patsey, and Solomon is forced to oblige. Meanwhile, Mistress Epps "gazes" on the "demoniac exhibition" looking pleased and pitiless. After forty strikes, Solomon refuses to whip Patsey any further. Epps grabs the whip and applies it "with ten-fold greater force" than Solomon had.

Patsey is tied to the stakes by each hand and foot, evoking the image of Jesus being nailed to the cross in each hand and foot. Before being crucified, Jesus was whipped almost to death by the Romans, mirroring Patsey's inhumane whipping unwillingly administered by Solomon, then gleefully by Epps. This connection between Jesus and Patsey emphasizes that both were unjustly punished by wicked tormenters.

Solomon writes that the day Patsey was brutally beaten "was the Sabbath of the Lord. The fields smiled in the warm sunlight," and "peace and happiness seem[ed] to reign everywhere, save in the bosoms of Epps and his panting victim and the silent witnesses around him." Solomon can do nothing but think to himself that Epps is a devil who will one day be punished for this sin. After her brutal treatment, Patsey is never the same. She weeps constantly, screams for mercy in her sleep, and dreams of Heaven, which she believes is a place of pure rest.

Solomon shows that Epps' behavior is sinful and goes against God. Epps corrupts the "Sabbath of the Lord," which is supposed to be a holy day of rest and worship. Patsey has lived her whole life as a slave, so her understanding of the world and religion stems from what scarce teachings she's received from her owners or fellow slaves. She seems to have no understanding of Christian doctrine except for the idea of rest that underpins the Sabbath. Since she hasn't experienced rest in her earthly life, she assumes that Heaven must be pure rest. Even her limited understanding of Christianity provides her with hope.

Young Master Epps, Epps' ten- or twelve-year-old son, also treats the slaves with extreme cruelty. He enjoys "playing the overseer," a game in which he rides out into the fields just to whip the slaves. Solomon knows that Epps' son doesn't know that "in the eye of the Almighty there is no distinction of color." Much like his father, Young Master Epps views the slaves as nothing more than animals.

Young Master Epps' behavior shows that racism is learned from a young age—it is not an idea that humans are born with. It is normal for children to model what their parents say or do, and Young Master Epps does just that when he plays his cruel game. Solomon points out that racism is manmade behavior and is not condoned by God.


CHAPTER 19

In the summer of 1852, Epps begins a construction project on his land, aided by Solomon and a white Canadian contractor named Bass. A middle-aged bachelor with no other family, Bass wanders from state to state on his own whims. Bass is an outspoken man who enjoys arguing but has a certain pleasant manner that makes people not take offense to his opinions.

The detail that Bass is Canadian is important for understanding his opinions and role in the narrative. Slavery was abolished in Canada in 1834—nearly twenty years before Bass's arrival at Epps' plantation. This means that Bass likely grew up in an opposite environment to Epps. Instead of seeing and accepting slavery as normal for his whole life, Bass has witnessed slavery be abolished in his home country.

Bass frequently argues with Epps about slavery, declaring that the law "lies." He asks, "Is every thing right because the law allows it? Suppose they'd pass a law taking away your liberty and making you a slave?" This question elicits little more than laughter and jokes from Epps.

Bass criticizes the American government, explaining that even if injustice (like slavery) is legal, that doesn't mean that it is morally right. Bass attempts to instill Epps with empathy for his slaves, but in his characteristically coarse manner, Epps takes Bass's opinions as a joke.


Bass asks Epps what the difference is between a white man and a black man in God's eyes. Epps, finding the entire conversation comical, claims it makes "All the difference in the world," and is like comparing white men to monkeys. Trying a different approach, Bass asks, "Are all men created free and equal as the Declaration of Independence holds they are?" Epps answers that "all men" doesn't include black men or monkeys. Bass tells him that he knows many white men who are less sensible than monkeys. He also says that there are a large number of slaves on the Bayou who are as white as himself and Epps. Amused, Epps tells Bass that he likes to hear himself talk.

Epps' lifelong exposure to slavery and racism blinds him to the idea that all people are equal in God's eyes, reaffirming that racism is a learned behavior. Epps' racism is so deep rooted that he is unable to internalize Bass's points at all, instead interpreting Bass's comments as idle banter. Bass highlights the absurdity of racism, pointing out that many slaves look completely white. This moment gestures to Solomon's argument that sometimes slavery and racism seems to be less about skin color and more about having a justification for slave owners to be cruel and barbaric toward other humans.



Throughout the summer, Solomon works silently alongside Bass and is increasingly convinced of Bass's trustworthiness. One day, while the pair work alone, Solomon asks Bass where he came from. Bass tells him that he's from Canada, not expecting Solomon to know where that is. When Solomon rattles off several city names in Canada, claiming to have visited all of them, Bass knows that Solomon used to be a free man. He wants to know Solomon's life story, so the two men agree to meet in the middle of the night to talk.

By wanting to know more about Solomon's life story, Bass demonstrates his empathy and shows that his outspoken abolitionist opinions are not just empty words. Bass is the first person Solomon has divulged his true identity to since Manning, the kindhearted sailor that Solomon met on the way to New Orleans nearly twelve years prior. Solomon's silence in between that time shows that he understands the grave danger in telling the truth about his past.

That night, Solomon explains to Bass how he was kidnapped and sold into slavery. He begs Bass to write a letter to his friends and family so that they can rescue him or forward his **free papers**. Bass agrees to help, and the following night, the two meet again. Bass writes down the names and addresses of some of Solomon's contacts from New York, including Judge Marvin, William Perry, and Cephas Parker.

Almost mirroring the situation with Manning twelve years prior, Bass agrees to write and send a letter for Solomon even though it is extremely dangerous for the both of them. Even though it's legal for Bass to help restore a kidnapped slave to freedom, the dangerous (or deadly) repercussions would come in the form of Epps' wrath.

Solomon tells Bass that all he thinks about is the joy that will come when he is reunited with his family again. Bass tells Solomon that he is without a family of his own to care for him or remember him. He declares that he will dedicate his life to helping Solomon find justice. A few days later, Bass goes into town to write and send three letters—one to Judge Marvin, one to Perry and Parker, and a third to the Collector of Customs at New York.

Solomon's family has given him hope and purpose throughout his enslavement. In contrast, Bass feels purposeless without such family ties. However, since Bass and Solomon's friendship is built on loyalty, compassion, and love, the two men are becoming practically family—something Bass seems to recognize when he vows to dedicate his life to restoring Solomon to freedom.

When Bass returns to Epps' plantation, he tells Solomon that it will likely take six weeks to receive a reply from New York. Four weeks go by, and Solomon begins to feel hopeless. Bass promises to return to visit Solomon on the day before Christmas.

Bass shows his loyalty to Solomon and his antislavery convictions by promising to return to Epps' plantation at a later date, even though doing so may dangerously arouse Epps' suspicions.

CHAPTER 20

On the day before Christmas, Solomon is delighted to see that Bass has arrived at Epps' plantation. Bass tells Epps that he's in town briefly for business and was hoping to stay overnight at the Epps plantation. That night, Solomon senses that Bass won't be able to sneak out of the Epps' home to come meet him, so he decides to intercept Bass at dawn.

Once again, Bass shows his loyalty and commitment to justice, even though helping Solomon is risky for both parties. Also, the fact that Bass is visiting by himself on the day before Christmas reaffirms that he doesn't have a family, and that he's taken on Solomon as a makeshift one.

In the morning, Bass tells Solomon that he hasn't received a reply from any of the three letters he sent. Solomon is crushed, but Bass quickly tells him that he has several construction jobs lined up that will finish in April. At that time, he will use his newly earned money to travel to New York to find Solomon's contacts in person. Bass tells Solomon, "I am with you, life or death," and departs from Epps' plantation.

Bass's parting words, "I am with you, life or death," are reminiscent of marriage vows, gesturing to the way that Bass and Solomon have become like family. Helping Solomon gives Bass a sense of purpose—so much so that he's willing to spend his hard-earned money to travel to New York.

The next morning, the slaves leave for the annual Christmas feast, this time hosted by a young, gentle slaveowner named Mary McCoy, who is "an angel of kindness." Solomon points out to the reader that not all slave owners are cruel like Tibeats or Epps; although rare, slaveholders like Ford and Miss McCoy do exist.

By telling the reader about the kindly slave owners as well as the cruel and inhumane ones, Solomon paints a complex picture of slavery that details both the ups and the downs of his experiences.

After the Christmas festivities, Solomon and the other slaves return to work at Epps' plantation. One morning, Epps is particularly disagreeable and claims that the slaves are doing their work wrong. He leaves to get a **whip**, and Solomon notices two men approaching in a carriage. Solomon interjects in the narrative, telling the reader that he will briefly turn back the clock to August, "to follow Bass's letter on its long journey" and "to learn the effect it produced."

Epps seems to be looking for a reason to whip his slaves, illustrating his own cruel nature. He claims the slaves are doing their work incorrectly, but this is probably false, considering the fact that most slaves are forced to pick cotton every day during harvest season for their entire lives.

CHAPTER 21

Solomon writes that Bass sent the three letters, including one to Parker and Perry, on August 15, 1852. The letter to Parker and Perry arrives in early September, and the men immediately forward it to Anne. Upon receiving the letter, Anne brings it to Henry B. Northup to ask for his help. During his research, Northup discovers "an act providing for the recovery of free citizens from slavery," which requires the Governor to be involved in the process.

The act was passed on May 14, 1840, and was called "An act more effectually to protect the free citizens of this State [New York] from being kidnapped, or reduced to slavery." Solomon explains this act to the reader to show that kidnapping and injustice is extremely prevalent in the North and must be stopped. This act predates Solomon's situation by twelve years—almost exactly aligning with Solomon's years in slavery.

For Solomon's case to be accepted and aided by the Governor, Henry B. Northup must prove that Solomon is a free citizen of New York and that Solomon is being "wrongfully held in bondage." The Governor takes interest in the case and grants Northup the legal power to restore Solomon to freedom.

The Governor takes personal interest in Solomon's case, which shows empathy, and does everything in his power to help restore justice, which shows integrity. Solomon wants his white Northern readers to follow suit by doing everything they can to fight for justice for their fellow humans.

Henry B. Northup leaves New York in December. He first stops in Washington D.C., where he receives written support from a Senator who takes personal interest in restoring Solomon to freedom. Northup continues his journey to the Red River region of Louisiana, where he stops in the town called Marksville, where the letter to Parker and Perry was postmarked. There, he is aided by a local lawyer named John Waddill, who, "in common with others of like elevated character, looked upon the kidnapper with abhorrence."

Along with the Governor, the Washington D.C. Senator and John Waddill are presented as role models to the reader because they act on their anti-slavery convictions and are dedicated to justice. As a Southerner, Waddill may not oppose the institution of slavery entirely, but he does see the injustice in a free man being kidnapped and sold into slavery, which shows that he has "elevated character."

Since the letter made mention of Bayou Boeuf, Henry B. Northup and Waddill plan to begin their search there, though the area is expansive and home to several thousand slaves. Solomon interjects in the narrative, commenting that the task at hand was even more complicated than Northup and Waddill realized at the time, since Solomon was known exclusively to slaves and slave owners alike as Platt, not Solomon Northup.

It's clear that Burch's earlier renaming of Solomon was a way to cover his tracks, ensuring that Solomon's kidnapping is never tied to him and that Solomon is never found.

Waddill asks Henry B. Northup about Northern politics and tells Northup that he only knows one abolitionist in the area, a carpenter named Bass. Waddill "falls into a reflective mood" and asks his brother, Young Waddill, to find out where Bass worked the previous summer. When it's revealed that Bass worked on Bayou Boeuf during that time, Wadill is confident that Bass is the one who can help them find Solomon.

Waddill can only think of one abolitionist in the entire area, which provides a telling picture of Southern attitudes toward the Abolitionist Movement in the North, and the divisions that culminated in the Civil War.

After many inquiries pertaining to Bass's whereabouts, Young Waddill and Henry B. Northup find Bass and confront him about the letter. At first, Bass is standoffish, claiming the letter is none of their business. Northup quickly explains his intentions in finding Solomon, and Bass tells him to go to Epps' plantation and ask for a slave called Platt. Northup and Young Waddill first return to Marksville to make sure all of the legal requirements are in order.

Bass is initially cold to Young Waddill and Henry B. Northup, thinking that they have come to get revenge on him for helping Solomon. Bass's initial anxieties highlight that sending a letter on Solomon's behalf was risky, even if it was done for the sake of justice.

The documents are completed by midnight, but progress is paused until the following day. Meanwhile, Waddill finds out that there is a rumor floating around that he is after one of Epps' slaves. Knowing Epps will soon hear the rumor and get rid of Solomon, Waddill convinces the sheriff and judge to act immediately. With the judge's signature in hand, Henry B. Northup and the sheriff depart for Epps' plantation by carriage shortly after midnight.

Waddill, a lawyer, knows that Epps will try to block justice, implying that Epps may have a reputation for trying to evade the law. Meanwhile, the sheriff and the judge show a commitment to justice and use their power to uphold and restore it.

The carriage arrives at Epps' plantation right as Epps goes inside the house to find a **whip**. Henry B. Northup and the sheriff walk to the cotton fields, where the sheriff asks the slaves which one of them is Platt. When Solomon steps forward, the sheriff asks him if he knows the man accompanying him, gesturing to Henry B. Northup. Solomon is overwhelmed with joyful tears, knowing that he is finally being rescued.

Solomon's rescue comes right as he's about to be punished by Epps for no reason (in yet another moment of Epps using slavery to justify being barbaric), contrasting the justice of freedom with the injustice and cruelty of slavery.

The other slaves are shocked to discover that Solomon was a free man, since he painstakingly hid his true identity from them. Meanwhile, Henry B. Northup, the sheriff, and Solomon make their way to Epps' house to finalize Solomon's freedom. As they walk, Northup gently tells Solomon that his mother has since died, but that his wife and children are safe and healthy.

The slaves' surprise shows how well Solomon has concealed his true identity for twelve years in order to keep himself safe—a lesson Burch instilled in him. The sheriff and other Southerners working to rectify Solomon's situation don't seem to see the cognitive dissonance in their actions—if one black person is a human being with the accompanying rights as a U.S. citizen, then so are those others born into slavery the South. The status of humanity is inherent, not contingent on being north or south of an arbitrary border.

Henry B. Northup and the sheriff speak with Epps and read their legal documents proving Solomon's right to freedom. Enraged, Epps asks Solomon why he didn't tell him he was a free man. Solomon replies, "Master Epps, you did not take the trouble to ask me," and tells him that when he spoke of his freedom to Burch immediately after being kidnapped, he was "whipped almost to death for it."

Solomon's bold statement to Epps points to how Epps purchases slaves without caring if they were previously free—meaning that he doesn't care if the sale is illegal or morally wrong. By tying Burch into the conversation, Solomon points out how such unconcern is widespread in the South.

Epps demands to know who wrote the letter to Perry and Parker, and Solomon refuses to tell him. Epps vows to bring "bloody and savage vengeance" upon whomever wrote the letter. He also tells Henry B. Northup that if he had just an hour of advanced notice that Northup was coming, he would have hid Solomon out in the swamp so that he couldn't be found. Meanwhile, Mistress Epps says a tearful goodbye, regretful to be losing such a talented fiddle player. The following day, Epps appears in court at Marksville, and Solomon is officially freed.

Epps' violent threats to bring "bloody and savage vengeance" upon whoever wrote the letter gestures back to Solomon's earlier explanation to the reader as to how the institution of slavery makes slaveholders more barbaric. He admits, almost proudly, that he would have hid Solomon so that he wouldn't be free, once again showing the extent of his insensitivity and wickedness.

CHAPTER 22

Solomon and Henry B. Northup board a steamboat for New Orleans, and Solomon can't keep himself from dancing around the deck. When the pair arrive in New Orleans, Solomon points out several notable places, including Freeman's slave pen. The men run into Freeman himself, but Solomon avoids "renew[ing] acquaintance with him." Northup and Solomon hear that Freeman has become a "miserably […] broken-down, disreputable man."

Freeman transforms from powerful slave dealer to "miserably […] broken-down," mirroring the transformation that also happened to Tibeats. Both men's lifelong cruelty eventually destroy them.

After a long journey by train and another steamboat, Solomon and Henry B. Northup arrive in Washington D.C., where they immediately go to the police to file a complaint against Burch for selling Solomon into slavery. Burch is arrested but bailed out by his fellow slave dealer, Benjamin O. Shekels. Later, Shekels and another man named Benjamin A. Thorn act as witnesses in the trial, claiming that Solomon wanted to go South. Solomon is not allowed to testify, despite his proven status as a free man. Burch, however, is allowed to testify and is deemed innocent.

Burch lies to escape punishment for his crime, going so far as to hire two fake witnesses. The claim that Solomon wanted *to go South is absurd, but the court accepts this explanation simply because it came from white witnesses. It seems that the court is also avoiding the truth in order to avoid potential revenge from Burch and other slave dealers. The court also shows clear racism and obstruction of justice by allowing Burch to testify but not Solomon.*


Soon after, Burch tries to charge Solomon with "conspir[ing] with the two white men to defraud him." Solomon is arrested and brought to court with Henry B. Northup as his lawyer. In the middle of the court procession, Burch drops the charges. Solomon addresses the reader, stressing that he is innocent and in no way was involved in an attempt to defraud Burch.

Burch files a complaint against Solomon as revenge, even though Burch was just pronounced innocent. Like Epps, Burch's deep-set racism allows him to justify his wickedness.


Henry B. Northup and Solomon reach New York in late January. When Solomon enters his family's home, his daughter Margaret doesn't recognize him, since she was only seven years old when he was kidnapped. When Solomon reveals who he is, Margaret is overjoyed and introduces him to her own son, Solomon Northup Staunton. Elizabeth and Anne also come running, smothering Solomon with hugs and kisses. Solomon finds out that his son, Alonzo, has gone west to earn enough money to purchase his father's freedom.

The fact that Solomon's son, Alonzo, has gone all the way across the country to earn enough money to buy his father's freedom emphasizes the way that family provides a sense of purpose—just as Solomon's family gave him a sense of purpose and the tenacity to endure slavery for the past twelve years.

Addressing the reader, Solomon says that his story has come to a close. He reaffirms that everything he has written is true, stating, "If I have failed in anything, it has been in presenting to the reader too prominently the bright side of the picture." He vows to now live an "upright though lowly life" as a free man.

This passage refers back to when Solomon noted that many people, having never known slavery or the South, speak "flippantly" about the bright spots of slavery. Solomon challenges his reader to instead confront the fact that slavery is evil, inhumane, and unjust, and to use those antislavery convictions to fight for justice and strengthen the Abolitionist Movement.


HOW TO CITE

To cite this LitChart:

MLA

Weeks, Rachel. "*12 Years a Slave*." *LitCharts*. LitCharts LLC, 17 May 2018. Web. 21 Apr 2020.

CHICAGO MANUAL

Weeks, Rachel. "*12 Years a Slave*." LitCharts LLC, May 17, 2018. Retrieved April 21, 2020. https://www.litcharts.com/lit/12-years-a-slave.

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MLA

Northrup, Solomon. 12 Years a Slave. Graymalkin Media. 2014.

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Northrup, Solomon. 12 Years a Slave. New York: Graymalkin Media. 2014.