

The Interesting Narrative of the Life of Olaudah Equiano

Olaudah Equiano was born in West Africa and sold into slavery to another village. He was later captured and sold to European slave dealers. His name was changed to Gustavus Vasa. Equiano was taken to the West Indies. He was later sold to a merchant who sent him up and down the coast of America selling goods. During this time he made some money for himself and saved it until he could buy his freedom. He wrote an autobiography, *The Interesting Narrative of the Life of Olaudah Equiano or Gustavus Vasa, Written by Himself*, published in London in 1793. It became a best-seller in England and America. The following readings are taken from Equiano's autobiography.

Reading 1

Equiano had been captured and sold to European slave traders. He was taken to the coast where he was loaded onto a slave ship.

[Primary Source]

The first object which saluted my eyes when I arrived on the coast, was the sea, and a slave ship, which was then riding at anchor, and waiting for its cargo. These filled me with astonishment, which was soon converted into terror, when I was carried on board....

...I was soon put down under the decks, and there I received such a salutation in my nostrils as I had never experienced in my life: so that, with the loathsomeness of the stench, and crying together, I became so sick and low that I was not able to eat, nor had I the least desire to taste any thing. I now wished for the last friend, death, to relieve me; but soon, to my grief, two of the white men offered me eatables; and, on my refusing to eat, one of them held me fast by the hands ... and tied my feet, while the other flogged me severely....

[Contemporary English]

The first thing I saw when I got to the coast was a large sea and a slave ship. It was anchored in the water and waiting to be loaded. This surprised me at first and then I was filled with terror when I was carried on board the ship.

I was soon taken below deck. The smell was terrible. I had never experienced anything in my life like this. It was horrible. People were gathered together and crying. I became so sick and sad that I was not able to eat. In fact, I had no desire to taste anything. I only wished that I would die so that I would escape this terrible place. Soon, to my sorrow, two white men offered me food. When I refused to eat, one of them tied my hands and feet. The other man brutally beat me.

Reading 2

Equiano describes what it was like to be on a slave ship during the Middle Passage.

[Primary Source]

One day [the crew] had taken a number of fishes; and when they had killed and satisfied themselves with as many as they thought fit, to our astonishment who were on deck, rather than give any of them to us to eat, as we expected, they tossed the remaining fish into the sea again, although we begged and prayed for...

One day, when we had a smooth sea and moderate wind, two of my wearied countrymen who were chained together, (I was near them at the time,) preferring death to such a life of misery, somehow made through the nettings and jumped into the sea: immediately, another quite dejected fellow, who, on account of his illness, was suffered to be out of irons, also followed their example; and I believe many more would very soon have done the same, if they had not been prevented by the ship's crew, who were instantly alarmed.

Those of us that were the most active, were in a moment put down under the deck, and there was such a noise and confusion amongst the people of the ship as I never heard before, to stop her, and get the boat out to go after the slaves. However, two of the wretches were drowned, but they got the other, and afterwards flogged him unmercifully, for

[Contemporary English]

One day the crew caught a number of fishes. When they had cooked them and ate all they wanted we thought they would give the leftovers to us. Those of us on deck were surprised when they tossed the left over fish into the sea. We were starving and begged and prayed for them to give some to us.

One day, when we had a smooth sea and a light blowing wind I was sitting near two of my countrymen that were chained together. Somehow these two men made it through the ship's netting and jumped into the sea. They would rather have died than live a life of such misery. Immediately, another sad fellow, who was not chained because he was sick, also jumped into the sea. I believe many more would also have jumped overboard if they had not been prevented by the ship's crew. The crew was very upset by what was happening.

Those of us that were the most active were immediately taken below deck. I had never seen or heard such confusion and shouting by the ship's crew before. They lowered the life boats and went after the men who had jumped overboard. However, two of the poor men drowned, but they got the other. After bringing him on

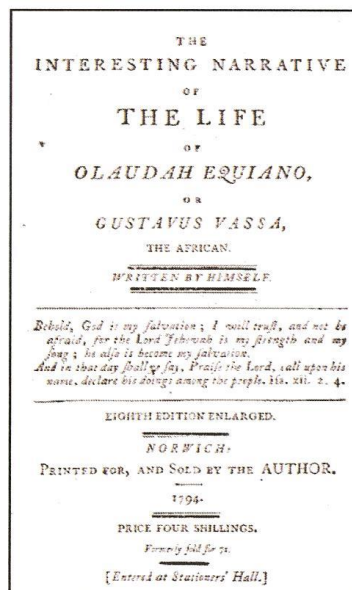
Reading 2
[continued]

[Primary Source]

thus attempting to prefer death to slavery. In this manner we continued to undergo more hardships than I can now relate, hardships which are inseparable from this accursed trade. Many a time we were near suffocation from the want of fresh air, which we were often without for whole days together...

[Contemporary English]

deck they beat him without mercy for attempting to die than remain a slave. In this manner we continued to undergo more hardships than I can now tell. These terrible things are part of this horrible slave trade. Many a time we were near suffocation because we had no fresh air. We were kept crowded below deck for days.



Title page,
"The Interesting Narrative of the Life of Olaudah Equiano, or Gustavus Vassa,
the African Olaudah Equiano" (1794)
Library of Congress Rare Book and Special Collections Division

Reading 3

Equiano describes the sale of slaves in Barbados.

[Primary Source]

At last, we came in sight of the island of Barbados, at which the whites on board gave a great shout.... We did not know what to think of this; but as the vessel drew nearer, we plainly saw the harbor...Bridgetown. Many merchants and planters now came on board..... They put us in separate parcels, and examined us attentively. They also made us jump, and pointed to the land, signifying we were to go there. We thought by this, we should be eaten by these ugly men, ...when soon after we were all put down under the deck again, there was much dread and trembling among us, and nothing but bitter cries to be heard all the night from these apprehensions, insomuch, that at last the white people got some old slaves from the land to pacify us. They told us we were not to be eaten, but to work, and were soon to go on land, where we should see many of our country people. This report eased us much. And sure enough, soon after we were landed, there came to us Africans of all languages. We were conducted immediately to the merchant's yard, where we were all pent up together, like so many

[Contemporary English]

At last, we came in sight of the island of Barbados. The whites on board the ship shouted with joy. We did not know what to think. As the ship got closer to land we could clearly see the harbor of Bridgetown. Many merchants and planters now came on board the ship. We were put in separate groups and carefully examined. They also made us jump up and down. Since we did not speak their language they pointed to the land to tell us we were to go there. We thought we were going to be eaten by these ugly men. When they put us below deck everyone was scared and trembling. Everyone was frightened and you could hear nothing except bitter cries all night long. The white people finally got some old slaves from Bridgetown to try to calm us. They told us we were not to be eaten, but to work. They said we would soon to go on land where we would see many of our country people. This helped us calm down. Sure enough, soon after we were landed, Africans speaking all different languages came to greet us. We were taken immediately to the merchant's yard, where we were all put in a pen, like so many sheep in a cage.

Reading 3
[continued]

[Primary Source]
sheep in a fold...

We were not many days in the merchant's custody, before we were sold after their usual manner, which is this: On a signal given, (as the beat of a drum) the buyers rush at once into the yard where the slaves are confined, and make choice of that parcel they like best. ...In this manner, without scruple, are relations and friends separated, most of them never to see each other again....

O, ye nominal Christians! might not an African ask you, "Learned you this from your God, who says unto you, 'Do unto all men as you would [have] men ... do unto you?'" ...Why are parents to lose their children, brothers their sisters, husbands their wives? Surely this is a new refinement in cruelty....

[Contemporary English]

We did not stay many days in the merchant's yard before we were sold after their usual way. The sale began with a signal like the beat of a drum. The buyers rush over into the yard where the slaves are held and choose the slave or slaves they like best. In this way, without a second thought, they separate relations and friends. Most are never to see one another again.

Oh, you so-called Christians, an African might ask you, "Did you learn this from your God, who says to you, 'Do unto all men as you would have them do unto you?'" ...Why are parents to lose their children, brothers their sisters, husbands their wives? Surely this is a new form of cruelty.



Olaudah Equiano
From the frontispiece of the book.