

GEORGE MOSES HORTON: SLAVERY FROM A POET'S PERSPECTIVE

TEACHER TOOL 5: DISCUSSING "SLAVERY"

The following is "Slavery" by George Moses Horton. The poem was published in 1865 in Horton's *Naked Genius* collection.

"Slavery"

<p>Slavery, thou peace-disturbing thief, We can't but look with frowns on thee, Without the balm which gives relief, The balm of birthright—Liberty.</p> <p>Thy wing has been for ages furl'd, Thy vessel toss'd from wave to wave, By stormy winds 'mid billows hurl'd – Such is the fate of every slave.</p> <p>A loathsome burden we are to bear, Through sultry bogs we trudging go; Thy rusty chains we frown to wear, Without one inch of wealth to show.</p> <p>Our fathers from their native land Were dragged across the brackish deep, Bound fast together, hand in hand, O! did the God of nature sleep?</p> <p>When sadly thro' the almond grove The pirate dragged them o'er the sod, Devoid of pity and of love, They seemed as left without a God.</p> <p>Are we not men as well as they, Born to enjoy the good of earth, Brought in creation from the clay, To reap a blessing from our birth?</p> <p>Alas! how can such rebels thrive, Who take our lives and wealth away, Since all were placed on earth to live, And prosper by the light of day.</p> <p>The maledictions of our God, Pervade the dwindling world we see; He hurls the vengeance with his rod, And thunders, let the slave be free!</p>	<p>balm: comfort, ointment</p> <p>furl'd: like a sail rolled up</p> <p>'mid billows hurl'd: violently tossed among clouds</p> <p>loathsome: hated sultry bogs: hot, humid marshes</p> <p>brackish: salty water</p> <p>thro': through o'er the sod: over the ground</p> <p>reap: harvest</p> <p>prosper: thrive, make money</p> <p>maledictions: curses pervade: pass through</p>
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Refer to the poem "Slavery" on the previous page. The following are questions and notes to help you lead a discussion about this poem. Student Handout 2 contains the same questions as below for students to answer, but without the notes.

1. WHO is the speaker in the poem?

The speaker in the poem is an enslaved person. We know this because he writes of the "loathsome burden we are to bear" and the "rusty chains we frown to wear." Students will often identify the speaker of the poem as the author, but that is not always the case. Here, the speaker may be George Moses Horton describing his own feelings about being enslaved, but the speaker could be anyone who is enslaved.

2. WHY do you think George Moses Horton wrote this poem?

The speaker of the poem appears to have two specific goals—exposing the historical aspects of slavery and highlighting the wrenching personal experience of slavery. We are given the speaker's views about the unnatural and perverse nature of slavery, especially when we consider his belief that all people are "Born to enjoy the good of earth" and "to reap a blessing from our birth." The poem is a protest against slavery because the inhumane institution is a violation of his belief in the innate equality of all people.

3. WHAT messages or themes is the poem conveying?

The poem begins with an image of slavery as a "peace-disturbing thief," and there are abundant references to theft and money throughout the poem. The speaker wants us to understand the slave's feelings of being robbed—the theft of himself, the theft of his labor, and the theft of his wealth. Students may notice the repetition of "wealth" in this poem. The speaker says, "Thy rusty chains we frown to wear, / Without one inch of wealth to show." This may reflect Horton's personal frustration with not being able to accumulate enough capital to purchase his own freedom and his anger at always working for the material benefit of his owner rather than for himself. As an entrepreneur, and because his owner allowed him to hire his own time, Horton was acutely aware of how much of his hard-earned money he had to pay his owner for the privilege of living and working independently. The speaker asks, "Alas! how can such rebels thrive, / Who take our lives and wealth away." It may be helpful to ask students what Horton means by using the word "rebels" to describe slaveholders. What are they rebels against? Against humanity, against nature? He cannot understand how those who steal both life and wealth from the people they enslave can prosper. It violates the natural order where all human beings enjoy the "balm of birthright—Liberty." The speaker's indictment of those involved in the slave trade begins when he calls them "pirates" who are "devoid of pity and of love" and finally "rebels." Students may recognize the use of "rebels" as referring to those who supported the Confederacy, which might be an interesting point to discuss. However, within the context of the poem, there is only a hint of such an interpretation. In terms of the speaker's personal feelings, we understand from the beginning of the poem that to be enslaved is to be tossed on the ocean of life, with no certainty or control of one's own destiny. When he says, "They seemed as left without a God," the speaker is noting that those who were brought from Africa in chains were stripped of everything, their family, their culture, their humanity, and even of the protection of God. Students will note the repetition of "dragged" in the poem as those who were enslaved were dragged first "across the brackish deep" of the Atlantic Ocean and

then dragged "o'er the sod," over both sea and land. It is clear that the speaker finds the actions of slavers and slave owners morally repugnant. In his view, even Heaven demands an end to slavery, for as the poem closes, a vengeful God curses slavery "And thunders, let the slave be free!"

4. WHAT aspects of African American history are specifically referenced in the poem?

Horton records how Africans were kidnapped "from their native land" against their will. He refers to the Middle Passage (the middle leg, across the Atlantic Ocean, of a triangular journey from England to Africa, Africa to America, and finally back from America to England) when he writes, "Our fathers from their native land / Were dragged across the brackish deep." In the holds of the slave ships, they were "Bound fast together, hand in hand." The poem is reminiscent of nineteenth-century abolitionist rhetoric, especially that of David Walker, who asks in his *Appeal*, the same question Horton asks in this poem, "Are we not men as well as they...?" Even though it is in the form of a question, Walker is really making a statement here of absolute equality. The logic of Horton's argument in this poem—of his belief that "all were placed on earth to live, / And prosper by the light of day"—recalls the powerful rhetoric not only of David Walker but also of many other abolitionists of the era.

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