

Activity 2. Slave Drivers: Examining Evidence Assessment

Name: _____

Date: _____

Teacher: _____

Class: _____

Write a brief expository essay that addresses these questions about Northup’s behavior in his role as slave driver in the scenario below excerpted from Northup’s narrative:

- A. How did Northup try to act morally in this scenario and what were the results of his efforts to do the right thing?
- B. Discuss the power hierarchy of Mr. Epps, Mrs. Epps, Solomon Northup and Patsey and analyze how Northup attempted to influence Mrs. Epps so Patsey wouldn’t be beaten, but ultimately was complicit in beating her.
- C. How does Northup explain why he beat Patsey? At what point should Northup have refused/ resisted Epps? What do you think the outcome would have been if he ceased beating her earlier?
- D. Draw inferences from the analysis of the text about how institution of slavery undermined moral behavior.

Scenario: Excerpted and Abridged from Solomon Northup’s narrative:

Edwin Epps was obsessed with Patsey, a young enslaved woman, who was also Epps’ most productive field hand. He repeatedly raped her, but because she was Epps’ property, Patsey was powerless to stop Epps violation of her. Mrs. Epps blamed Patsey for her husband’s behavior and retaliated with violence against the innocent enslaved youth. As slave driver, Solomon Northup was enlisted in her vendetta against Patsey.

... It has been seen that the jealousy and hatred of Mistress Epps made the daily life of her young and agile slave [Patsey] completely miserable. I am happy in the belief that on numerous occasions I was the means of averting punishment from the inoffensive girl. In Epps’ absence the mistress often ordered me to whip her without the remotest provocation. I would refuse, saying that I feared my master’s displeasure, and several times ventured to remonstrate with her against the treatment Patsey received. I endeavored to impress her with the truth that the latter was not responsible for the acts of which she complained, but that she being a slave, and subject entirely to her master’s will, he alone was answerable.

One Sunday when the slaves were washing their clothes Patsey was missing. She had gone to a neighboring plantation to get a bar of soap refused her by Mistress Epps. Master Epps accused her of visiting the master of the neighboring plantation who was a notorious womanizer—, which Patsey unequivocally denied. Upon her return, Patsey’s unrequested “outing” outraged Epps and he demanded that Northup beat her. Northup explains:

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... Then turning to me, he ordered four stakes to be driven into the ground, pointing with the toe of his boot to the places where he wanted them. When the stakes were driven down, he ordered her to be stripped of every article of dress. Ropes were then brought, and the naked girl was laid upon her face, her wrists and feet each tied firmly to a stake. Stepping to the piazza, he took down a heavy whip, and placing it in my hands, commanded me to lash her. Unpleasant as it was, I was compelled to obey him. Nowhere that day, on the face of the whole earth, I venture to say, was there such a demoniac exhibition witnessed as then ensued. ... The slaves were huddled together at a little distance, their countenances indicating the sorrow of their hearts. Poor Patsey prayed piteously for mercy, but her prayers were vain. Epps ground his teeth, and stamped upon the ground, screaming at me, like a mad fiend, to strike *harder*.

“Strike harder, or *your* turn will come next, you scoundrel,” he yelled.

“Oh, mercy, massa!—oh! have mercy, *do*. Oh, God! pity me,” Patsey exclaimed continually, struggling fruitlessly, and the flesh quivering at every stroke.

When I had struck her as many as thirty times, I stopped, and turned round toward Epps, hoping he was satisfied; but with bitter oaths and threats, he ordered me to continue. I inflicted ten or fifteen blows more. By this time her back was covered with long welts, intersecting each other like network. Epps was yet furious and savage as ever, demanding if she would like to go to Shaw’s again, and swearing he would flog her until she wished she was in h--l. Throwing down the whip, I declared I could punish her no more. He ordered me to go on, threatening me with a severer flogging than she had received, in case of refusal. My heart revolted at the inhuman scene, and risking the consequences, I absolutely refused to raise the whip. He then seized it himself, and applied it with ten-fold greater force than I had. The painful cries and shrieks of the tortured Patsey, mingling with the loud and angry curses of Epps, loaded the air. She was terribly lacerated—I may say, without exaggeration, literally flayed. The lash was wet with blood, which flowed down her sides and dropped upon the ground. At length she ceased struggling. Her head sank listlessly on the ground. Her screams and supplications gradually decreased and died away into a low moan. She no longer writhed and shrank beneath the lash when it bit out small pieces of her flesh. I thought that she was dying!

Finally, he ceased whipping from mere exhaustion, and ordered Phebe to bring a bucket of salt and water. After washing her thoroughly with this, I was told to take her to her cabin. Untying the ropes, I raised her in my arms. She was unable to stand, and as her head rested on my shoulder, she repeated many times, in a faint voice scarcely perceptible, “Oh, Platt—oh, Platt!” but nothing further. Her dress was replaced, but it clung to her back, and was soon stiff with blood. We laid her on some boards in the hut, where she remained a long time, with eyes closed and groaning in agony. At night, Phebe applied melted tallow to her wounds, and so far as we were able, all endeavored to assist and console her. Day after day she lay in her cabin upon her face, the sores preventing her resting in any other position.