

Name \_\_\_\_\_

Date \_\_\_\_\_

The following passage is from an overseer (a slave manager) who offers his advice on managing slaves. Additionally, he offers justifications for the use of slave labor.

### *Managing Slaves, 1837*

When negroes are accustomed to an overseer [slave manager], and you dispense with the services of one, they *must* be exposed to a great deal of temptation, far more than they can resist. An education has not taught them the difference between right and wrong; at any rate, their ideas on the subject must be confused. What they learn of the moral code, is gathered from observation, and the example of others, their superiors. How can any person, who has no overseer, be at all hours with his negroes, when he is delivering his grain for example? Let him turn his back, and a cunning fellow will help himself to a bushel of corn or wheat, and he will never be informed upon by his fellow laborers, through ever so honest; for an informer, in their eyes, is held in greater detestation than the most notorious thief.

I admit that many overseers are vain, weak tyrants, “dressed in a little brief authority,” but probably a larger proportion of farmers of Virginia are indifferent cultivators of the soil. I regard an overseer as an indispensable agent, whose first qualities should be honesty and firmness, untied with forbearance and good temper. Sobriety is a *sine qua non*. A written agreement should be drawn up between the employer [plantation owner] and the employed [overseer], to be signed by both setting forth the terms, and mentioning the most important requisitions, which will occur to every one. An overseer’s wages should always be paid in money; for if you give him a part of the crops, your land will be worked to death, and never have a dozen loads of manure spread upon it. In addition to this, your views and his will frequently come into collision.

Your overseer should be treated with marked respect; for if you treat him contemptuously or familiarly, your authority and his are injured. He should not be allowed to strike a negro with his fist or a stick, nor ever to punish with severity; for it is not the severity, but certainty of punishment, that wins implicit obedience.

The subject before me turns my thoughts to the food, houses, and clothing of the negro. The master should ever bear in mind, that he is the guardian and protector of his slaves, who if well treated and used, are the happiest laboring class in the world.

Liberally and plentifully fed, warmly clad and housed, your negroes work harder and more willingly, will be more healthy, and their moral character be improved, for they will not be urged by a hungry longing for meat, to steal their masters’ hogs, sheep, and poultry, or to make predatory excursions upon his neighbors. Your negroes will breed much faster when well clothed, fed and housed; which fact, offers an inducement to those slave owners, whose hearts do not overflow with feelings of humanity.

The character of the negro is much underrated. It is like the plastic clay, which may be molded into agreeable or disagreeable figures, according to the skill of the molder. The man who

storms at, and curses his negroes, and who tells them they are a parcel of infernal rascals, not to be trusted, will surely make them just what he calls them; and so far from loving such master, they will hate him. Now, if you be not suspicious, and induce them to think, by slight trusts, that they are not unworthy of some confidence, you will make them honest, useful, and affectionate creatures.

Source: *Farmers' Register* 5 (September 1837): 301-302.

**Questions:**

**1. How do the slave owners and overseers justify owning the slaves? *Give at least 3 reasons.***

**2. How did the slave owners view the slaves? *Identify a quote in the passage that supports this view.***

Name \_\_\_\_\_

Date \_\_\_\_\_

The following passage is an excerpt from the autobiography of Frederick Douglass, a former slave who became an Abolitionist. The passage describes his experience as a slave, before he ran away to freedom.

### *Narrative of the Life of Frederick Douglass, 1845*

... Colonel Lloyd kept three to four hundred slaves on his home plantation and owned a large number more on the neighboring farms belonging to him. The names of the farms nearest to the home plantation were Wye Town and New Design ... This was a great business place. It was the seat of government for the whole twenty farms. All disputes among the overseers [slave managers] were settled here. If a slave was convicted of any high misdemeanor, became unmanageable, or evinced a determination to run away, he was brought immediately here, severely whipped, put on board the sloop, carried to Baltimore, and sold to Austin Woolfolk, or some other slave-trader, as a warning to the slaves remaining.

Here, too, the slaves of all the other farms received their monthly allowance of food, and their yearly clothing. The men and women slaves received, as their monthly allowance of food, eight pounds of pork, or its equivalent in fish, and one bushel of corn meal. Their yearly clothing consisted of two coarse linen shirts, one pair of linen trousers, like the shirts, one jacket, one pair of trousers for winter, made of coarse negro cloth, one pair of stockings, and one pair of shoes; the whole of which could not have cost more than seven dollars. The allowance of the slave children was given to their mothers, or to the old women having the care of them. The children unable to work in the field had neither shoes, stockings, jackets, nor trousers, given to them; their clothing consisted of two coarse linen shirts per year. When these failed them, they went naked until the next allowance day. Children from seven to ten years old, of both sexes, almost naked, might be seen at all seasons of the year.

There were not beds given the slaves, unless one coarse blanket be considered such, and none but the men and women had these. This, however, is not considered a very great privation. They find less difficulty from the want of beds, than from the want of time to sleep; for when their day's work in the field is done, the most of them having their washing, mending, and cooking to do, and having few or none of the ordinary facilities for doing either of these, very many of their sleeping hours are consumed in preparing for the field the coming day; and when this is done, old and young, male and female, married and single, drop down side by side; on one common bed, -the cold, damp floor, -each covering himself or herself with their miserable blankets; and here they sleep till they are summoned to the field by the driver's horn. At the sound of this, all must rise, and be off to the field. There must be no halting; every one must be at this or her post; and woe betides them who hear not this morning summons to the field; for if they are not awakened by the sense of hearing, they are by the sense of feeling: no age nor sex finds any favor. Mr. Severe, the overseer [slave manager], used to stand by the door of the quarter, armed with a large hickory stick and heavy cowskin [whip], ready to whip any one who was so unfortunate as not to hear, or, from any other cause, was prevented from being ready to start for the field at the sound of the horn.

Mr. Severe was rightly named: he was cruel man. I have seen him whip a woman, causing the blood to run half an hour at the time; and this, too, in the midst of her crying children, pleading for their mother's release. He seemed to take pleasure in manifesting his fiendish barbarity. Added to his cruelty, he was a profane swearer. It was enough to chill the blood and stiffen the hair of an ordinary man to hear him talk. Scarce a sentence escaped him but that was commenced or concluded by some horrid oath. The field was the place to witness his cruelty and profanity. His presence make it both the field of blood and of blasphemy. From the rising till the goings on of the sun, he was cursing, raving, cutting, and slashing among the slaves of the field, in the most frightful manner.

Source: *Narrative of the Life of Frederick Douglass*. Frederick Douglass, (1845): 25-27.

### **Questions:**

**1. What were the living conditions like for the slaves? *Describe their clothes and homes.***

**2. Describe the daily life of a slave. *List at least 3 things that slaves had to do during their day.***