

PREVIEWING

NONFICTION

from *The Interesting Narrative of the Life of Olaudah Equiano*

Olaudah Equiano (ō-lou'də ɛk'wē-ān'ō)

PERSONAL CONNECTION

From the 1500s to the 1800s, millions of Africans were seized from their homelands and brought to the Americas on slave ships. What do you imagine it felt like to be on a slave ship? On what sources—books, movies, magazine articles—do you base your ideas and images of slave ships? Write down your speculations in your notebook.

HISTORICAL CONNECTION

The expansion of European colonies in North and South America led to the growth of the transatlantic slave trade. Large plantations needed great numbers of workers to produce sugar, tobacco, and cotton for sale in Europe. Following a triangular route, traders carried manufactured goods (such as cloth and guns) from Europe to Africa, slaves from Africa to the Americas, and raw materials from the Americas to Europe.

Historians estimate that between 10 million and 20 million Africans were enslaved to work in the Americas. During the Middle Passage, the horrific two-month voyage from Africa to the West Indies, millions of enslaved Africans died from the effects of overcrowding, bad food, harsh treatment, disease, and despair. Chained in the dark, airless holds of slave ships, the Africans lay packed side by side. They were allowed on deck only briefly. Olaudah Equiano was one of those who survived the Middle Passage. This book was one of the earliest American **slave narratives**, or autobiographical accounts of slavery. In the following excerpts, he tells what happened when as a child he was shipped to the island of Barbados in the West Indies.

READING CONNECTION

Noting Sensory Details Descriptive details in pieces of writing help readers to imagine and understand characters' experiences. In this selection, sensory details—ones that appeal to the five senses—bring to life Olaudah Equiano's first encounter with white men and his ordeal aboard a slave ship. As you read, or after you finish reading, use a chart similar to the one below to note the sensory details of his experience.



Sensory Details

Hearing:	shrieks of the women
Sight:	
Taste:	
Smell:	
Touch:	

from

The INTERESTING
NARRATIVE of the
Life of OLAUDAH
EQUIANO
OLAUDAH EQUIANO

When Olaudah Equiano was eleven years old, he and his sister were kidnapped while the adults in his village were working in the fields. After being forced to travel for several days, Equiano and his sister were separated. For the next six or seven months, Equiano was sold to several African masters in different countries. He was eventually taken to the west coast of Africa and carried aboard a slave ship bound for the West Indies.

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 immediately handled, and tossed up to see if I were sound, by some of the crew; and I was now persuaded that I had gotten into a world of bad spirits, and that they were going to kill me. Their complexions, too, differing so much from ours, their long hair, and the language they spoke (which was very different from any I had ever heard), united to confirm me in this belief. Indeed, such were the horrors of my views and fears at the moment, that, if ten thousand worlds had been my own, I would have

freely parted with them all to have exchanged my condition with that of the meanest slave in my own country. When I looked round the ship too, and saw a large furnace of copper boiling, and a multitude of black people of every description chained together, every one of their countenances expressing dejection and sorrow, I no longer doubted of my fate; and, quite overpowered with horror and anguish, I fell motionless on the deck and fainted. When I recovered a little, I found some black people about me, who I believed were some of those who had brought me on board, and had been receiving their pay; they talked to me in order to cheer me, but all in vain. I asked them if we were not to be eaten by those white men with horrible looks, red faces, and long hair. They told me I was not, and one of the crew brought me a small portion of spirituous liquor in a wine glass; but, being afraid of him, I would not take it out of his hand. One of the blacks, therefore, took it from him and gave it to me, and I took a little down my palate, which, instead of reviving me, as they thought it would, threw me into the greatest consternation at the strange feeling it produced, having never tasted any such liquor before. Soon after this, the blacks who brought me on board went off, and left me abandoned to despair.

WORDS
TO
KNOW

anguish (äng'gwísh) *n.* agonizing physical or mental pain
consternation (kǒn'stēr-nā'shən) *n.* a state of paralyzing dismay; fear

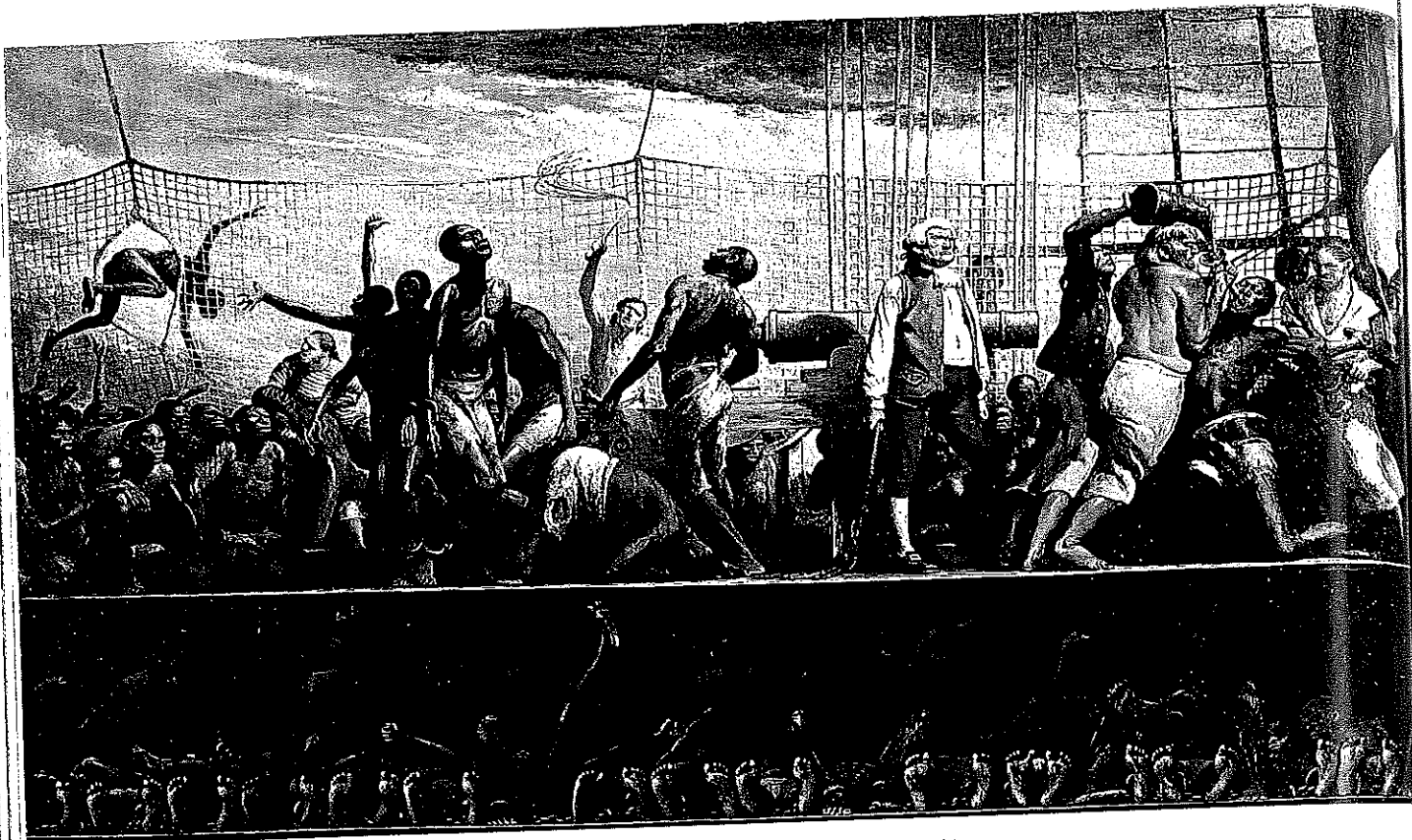
I now saw myself deprived of all chance of returning to my native country, or even the least glimpse of hope of gaining the shore, which I now considered as friendly; and I even wished for my former slavery in preference to my present situation, which was filled with horrors of every kind, still heightened by my ignorance of what I was to undergo. I was not long suffered to indulge my grief; 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 anything. 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 laid me across, I think, the windlass,¹ and tied my feet, while the other flogged² me severely. I had never experienced anything of this kind before, and, although not being used to the water, I naturally feared that element the first time I saw it, yet, nevertheless, could I have got over the nettings,³ I would have jumped over the side, but I could not; and besides, the crew used to watch us very closely who were not chained down to the decks, lest we should leap into the water; and I have seen some of these poor African prisoners most severely cut, for attempting to do so, and hourly whipped for not eating. This indeed was often the case with myself. In a little time after, amongst the poor chained men, I found some of my own nation, which in a small degree gave ease to my mind. I inquired of these what was to be done with us? They gave me to understand, we were to be carried to these white people's country to work for them. I then was a little revived, and thought, if it were no worse than working, my situation was not so desperate; but still I feared I should be put to death, the white people looked and acted, as I thought, in so

savage a manner; for I had never seen among any people such instances of brutal cruelty; and this not only shown towards us blacks, but also to some of the whites themselves. One white man in particular I saw, when we were permitted to be on deck, flogged so unmercifully with a large rope near the foremast,⁴ that he died in consequence of it; and they tossed him over the side as they would have done a brute. This made me fear these people the more; and I expected nothing less than to be treated in the same manner. I could not help expressing my fears and apprehensions to some of my countrymen; I asked them if these people had no country, but lived in this hollow place (the ship)? They told me they did not, but came from a distant one. "Then," said I, "how comes it in all our country we never heard of them?" They told me because they lived so very far off. I then asked where were their women? had they any like themselves? I was told they had. "And why," said I, "do we not see them?" They answered, because they were left behind. I asked how the vessel could go? They told me they could not tell; but that there was cloth put upon the masts by the help of the ropes I saw, and then the vessel went on; and the white men had some spell or magic they put in the water when they liked, in order to stop the vessel. I was exceedingly amazed at this account, and really thought they were spirits. I therefore wished much to be from amongst them, for I expected they would sacrifice me; but my wishes were vain—for we were so quartered that it was impossible for any of us to make our escape. . . .

1. **windlass** (wɪndˈlɑːs): a device for raising and lowering a ship's anchor.
2. **flogged**: beat severely with a whip or rod.
3. **nettings**: networks of small ropes on the sides of a ship used for various purposes, such as to prevent boarding or to stow sails. On slave ships, the nettings helped keep slaves from jumping overboard.
4. **foremast** (fɔːrˈmɑːst): the mast (tall pole that supports sails and rigging) nearest the forward end of a sailing ship.

WORDS
TO
KNOW

stench (stɛnʃ) *n.* a strong, foul odor
apprehension (əpˈrɪ-hɛnˈʃən) *n.* a suspicion of future evil; dread



Detail of *The Slave Ship* (1956), Robert Riggs, N.A. Courtesy of Les Mansfield, Cincinnati, Ohio.

At last, when the ship we were in, had got in all her cargo, they made ready with many fearful noises, and we were all put under deck, so that we could not see how they managed the vessel. But this disappointment was the least of my sorrow. The stench of the hold while we were on the coast was so intolerably loathsome, that it was dangerous to remain there for any time, and some of us had been permitted to stay on the deck for the fresh air; but now that the whole ship's cargo were confined together, it became absolutely pestilential. The closeness of the place, and the heat of the climate, added to the number in the ship, which was so crowded that each had scarcely room to turn himself, almost suffocated us. This produced copious perspirations, so that

the air soon became unfit for respiration, from a variety of loathsome smells, and brought on a sickness among the slaves, of which many died. . . . This wretched situation was again aggravated by the galling⁵ of the chains. . . . The shrieks of the women, and the groans of the dying, rendered the whole a scene of horror almost inconceivable. Happily perhaps, for myself, I was soon reduced so low here that it was thought necessary to keep me almost always on deck; and from my extreme youth I was not put in fetters.⁶ In this situation I expected every hour to share the fate of my companions, some

5. galling (gŏ'lĭng): causing skin sores by rubbing.

6. fetters: chains or shackles for the ankles.

WORDS pestilential (pĕs'tĕ-lĕn'shel) *adj.* deadly; poisonous
 TO copious (kŏ'pĕ-əs) *adj.* in large amounts; abundant
 KNOW wretched (rĕch'ĭd) *adj.* miserable

of whom were almost daily brought upon deck at the point of death, which I began to hope would soon put an end to my miseries. . . .

One day they 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 some as well as we could, but in vain; and some of my countrymen, being pressed by hunger, took an opportunity, when they thought no one saw them, of trying to get a little privately; but they

were discovered, and the attempt procured them some very severe floggings. 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. . . .

During the rest of his voyage to the West Indies, Equiano continued to endure hardships. After the ship anchored on the coast of Barbados, Equiano and the other enslaved Africans were brought ashore and herded in a slave merchant's yard to be sold.

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 parcel⁷ they like best. The noise and clamor with which this is attended, and the eagerness visible in the countenances of the buyers, serve not a little to increase the apprehension of terrified Africans, who may well be supposed to consider them as the ministers of that destruction to which they think themselves devoted. In this manner, without scruple, are relations and friends separated, most of them never to see each other again. I remember, in the vessel in which I was brought

over, in the men's apartment, there were several brothers, who, in the sale, were sold in different lots; and it was very moving on this occasion, to see and hear their cries at parting. 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 men should do unto you? Is it not enough that we are torn from our country and friends, to toil for your luxury and lust of gain? Must every tender feeling be likewise sacrificed to your avarice? Are the dearest friends and relations now rendered more dear by their separation from their kindred, still to be parted from each other, and thus prevented from cheering the gloom of slavery, with the small comfort of being together, and mingling their sufferings and sorrows? Why are parents to lose their children, brothers their sisters, or husbands their wives? Surely, this is a new refinement in cruelty, which . . . thus aggravates distress, and adds fresh horrors even to the wretchedness of slavery. ❖

7. parcel: group of enslaved Africans offered for sale.

WORDS **countenance** (koun'tā-nəns) *n.* the face, especially as an indicator of emotion
TO **nominal** (nŏm'ə-nəl) *adj.* in name but not in reality
KNOW **avarice** (āv'ə-rĭs) *n.* greed