

Chapter 2

The Slave Trade

Suggested Student Exercises

1. Describe conditions on the slave ship.
2. Slave owners excused the slave trade as follows:

Slaves were taken from backward and primitive Africa and brought to a more advanced country. We admit there may have been some suffering. But can you blame slave traders for buying Africans when they were sold to them by other Africans? Besides, slaves were brought to a more advanced country where they would be better off.

Find facts from this chapter and the first that answers every sentence in the argument.

Gustavus Vassa is Captured

Vassa continues his story in his own words:

One day I was left alone at home with only my sister. All the others had gone out to work. Suddenly, two men and a woman got over the walls around our house and captured us both. They stuffed rags into our mouth and rushed us off into the woods before we could cry for help. Here they tied our hands and carried us until night. The next day, they made us walk for the whole day. Thus we continued to travel, sometimes on land and sometimes by water. We passed through many different countries and several nations.

At the end of six or seven months after I was kidnapped, I arrived at the sea coast.

The first object that greeted my eyes when I arrived at the coast, was the sea and a slave ship. The ship was waiting for cargo. Imagine my terror when I was carried aboard the ship. I was handled and tossed to see if I was healthy. I was certain that I had entered a world of bad spirits who would kill me.

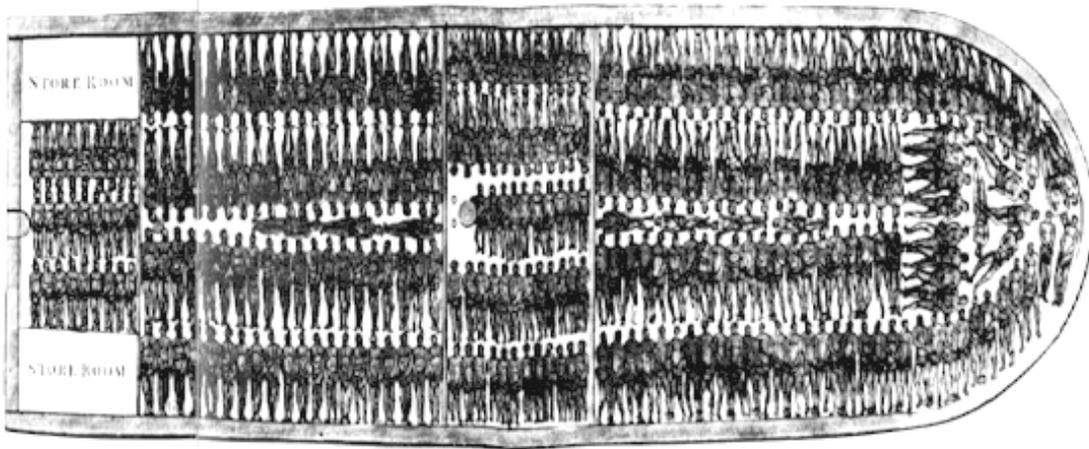
I looked around the ship and saw many black people with their faces full of sorrow. I fainted from fear and fell on the deck. When I awoke, I found some black people around me. They talked to me to cheer me up, but could not.

QuickTime™ and a
Photo - JPEG decompressor
are needed to see this picture.

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Soon after this, the blacks who brought me on board went off and left me. I now thought that I would never return to my own country. I soon was put down under the decks and there smelled the worst odors I have ever smelled. I became so sick and low, that I was not able to eat. Nor did I have the slightest desire to taste anything. I now wished that my life would end. Soon, two white men offered me something to eat. I refused, and was flogged, until I finally agreed to eat something.



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I later saw some of the slaves badly cut and whipped every hour for either trying to jump overboard or not eat. This often was done to me. The white people acted in such a savage manner, that I thought I would be put to death any minute. They were not only cruel to us blacks, but also to other whites. I saw one sailor beaten so badly that he died as a result. They threw him over the side as if he had been an animal.

The smell in the ship's hold, while we were on the coast, was so bad that it was dangerous to stay there. Some of us had been allowed to stay on the deck. Now the whole ship's cargo was forced into the hold. It was unbearable. We were crowded so close together that we hardly had room to turn around. It was so hot, that the air became unfit for breathing. This brought on sickness among the slaves. Many died. The chaffing of the chains made things worse. Women shrieked, and dying men groaned. I was brought to such a condition that they took me on deck. Here I was able to recover, but expected that I would die any moment. Every day, others were brought up on deck who already were dead.

One day two of my countrymen who were chained together jumped into the sea. Immediately, another man, followed his example. I would have followed, but was held back by the ship's crew. The boats were quickly lowered and the crew chased these slaves. They saved one from drowning and then almost beat him to death. That was the punishment for preferring death to slavery.

Landing in the Barbados

⁵ The slave ship *Brookes*, Wilberforce House, Kingston upon Hull City Museums and Art Galleries, UK

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A great shout went out when we finally sighted shore. When we pulled in, many merchants and planters came on board. They were there to look us over. Later, we were herded in the merchant's yards. On a signal, the buyers rushed into the yards. They chose which human flesh they wish to buy. In this way families and friends are separated often for ever. I remember there were several brothers who were sold to different people. I can still hear their cries at parting.⁶

A Ship's Doctor Describes the Slave Ships

The slave ships lie a mile below the town in Bonny River off the coast of Guinea. Sometimes fifteen sails meet here together. Scarce a day passes without some Negroes being purchased and carried on board.

The wretched Negroes are immediately fastened together. two and two, by handcuffs on their wrists and by irons riveted on their legs. They are then sent down between the decks and placed in a space partitioned off for that purpose. They are frequently stowed so close as to admit of no other position than lying on their sides. Nor will the height between decks allow them to stand.

The diet of the Negroes while on board, consists chiefly of horsebeans boiled to the consistence of pulp.

Upon the Negroes refusing to take food, I have seen coals of fire, glowing hot, put on a shovel and placed so near their lips as to scorch and burn them. I have also been credibly informed that a certain captain in the slave trade, poured melted lead on such of his Negroes as stubbornly refused their food.

On board some ships, the common sailors are allowed to have intercourse with such of the black women whose consent they can procure. The officers are permitted to indulge their passions among them at pleasure.

The hardships suffered by the Negroes during the passage are scarcely to be conceived. The exclusion of fresh air is the most intolerable. Whenever the sea is rough and the rain heavy it becomes necessary to shut every means by which air is admitted. The Negroes rooms very soon grow intolerably hot. The confined air produces fevers and fluxes which carry off great numbers of them. The floor of their rooms can be so covered with blood and mucus that it resembles a slaughter house. Last week by only continuing among them for about a quarter of an hour, I was so overcome with the heat, stench, and foul air that I nearly fainted: and it was only with assistance that I could get on deck...

One evening while the ship lay in Bonny River, one of the Negroes forced his way through the network on the left side of the vessel, jumped overboard and was devoured by the sharks. Circumstances of this kind are very frequent.

Very few of the Negroes can bear the loss of their liberty and the hardships they endure.⁷

⁶ Oladuah Equiano, *The Interesting Narrative in the Life of Oladuah Equiano, or Gustavas Vasa, the African*, Dublin, 1791). pp. 46-53.

⁷ Martin Duberman, *In White America*, The New American Library, New York, 1965, pp. 21-22.

The Slave Trade Attacked

The main source of the slave trade is the wars which take place in Africa. The English and other Europeans have been charged with causing them. That some would do it, if they could, I doubt not. But I do not think they have the opportunity. Nor is it necessary they should. Thousands in England, wish for war, because they make money from it.

Human nature is much the same in every place. The Negroes in Africa are no better then we are. If they wish for European goods, may they then not wish to buy them from a ship? Of course, they must wish for slaves to take to market. If they don't have slaves, and think themselves strong enough to invade their neighbors, they may wish for war. And if we wish for war, how easy it is to find excuses for making war. This has been done in Europe for thousands of years.

I believe that most of the wars in Africa would stop, if Europeans stopped tempting Africans by offering goods for slaves.

I do not have enough information to be certain, but I would guess that 100,000 slaves are exported each year from all parts of Africa. Half of these are sent in British ships.

At least an equal number are killed in war as are sent into slavery. Most of these wars are probably started to sell prisoners. What a terrible amount of blood, therefore, is crying against the nations of Europe in the slave trade. What bloody hands, we Englishmen have.⁸

The Slave Trade is Still Operating

Slave ships no longer bring hundreds of innocent victims to the New World from Africa. That horror ended in the 19th century. But the trade in human flesh is not dead by a long shot, as chronicled in the following article which appeared in the *Sydney (Australia) Morning Herald*:

Between 1.5 million and 2 million children are bought and sold every year into lives of sexual and physical exploitation. Tens of millions more are held in bonded labour, working long hours as domestic servants, farm workers and in factories to repay family debts.

"Whether it is Bangladeshi toddlers trafficked into the United Arab Emirates or Chinese children smuggled into Los Angeles by snakehead criminal gangs, there is a lucrative trade in human beings," a spokesman for the American Anti-Slavery Group, Mr. Jesse Sage, said recently. "Our global economy creates demand for cheap goods and there is no cheaper labour than slave labour."

The United Nations says that trafficking people across borders is now the fastest growing arm of international organized crime, and worth up to \$18 billion a year.

The traffickers are preying mostly on women and children, the most vulnerable victims of economic despair, luring them with promises of jobs and education and then selling them into lives of degradation and servitude as prostitutes or domestic servants.

⁸ John Newton, *The Journal of a Slave Trader*, London, 1962, pp. 108-9

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"This is a truly global problem," says a report on forced labour issued last week by the International Labour Organisation (ILO). "Most countries of the world are 'sending countries', 'transit countries' or 'receiving countries', or a combination of all these."

Although no precise figures can be placed on the global slave trade because of its clandestine nature, international authorities agree that the dimension of the problem is staggering - and getting worse.⁹

⁹ *Sydney Morning Herald*, June 4, 2001: