Reading Guide for *Twelve Years a Slave*

We often discuss slavery without really understanding or appreciating what it is to be subject to the total control of another human being. The definition of slavery and most descriptions simply cannot do justice to what the experience must be like. My hope is that you will use this book as an opportunity to come to a deeper understanding of slavery from the perspective of the slave.

What makes Solomon’s experience so revealing and what makes this narrative unique is that he has all the sensibilities of a free man who is then enslaved and thus he is more attuned to what is lost by being enslaved than are those who were born into slavery and then freed. Pay careful attention to Northrup’s sense of what constitutes liberty and how it is lost to masters in the system of slavery. Be sensitive to how the environment around him is not his own and how that environment is sculpted in a way that actually contributes to his enslavement.

Also think about what mastery was. If you really want to understand slavery you need to think deeply about what the powers of slaveholders were also.

The entire landscape around the slave is controlled by the master. What slaves see and hear, their work, what they eat, and their family relationships are all under the control of the slaveholder. Distance works to the disadvantage of the slave; Northrup is taken greater and greater distances from New York and in the course of going deeper and deeper into the Cotton Kingdom the distance is dislocating. The farther he is from hope, family, people he can trust, and knowledge of his surroundings. The one place where there is the possibility of beginning escape is the woods but those same woods can be hunted with dogs. Northrup comments at one point about the baying of dogs. What is the significance of him hearing the baying of dogs?

Think of one part of your daily interaction with other people: looking at them and having them look at you. How was the experience of looking changed in slavery from Northrup’s perspective? For slaveholders, seeing is power. They are always watching the slaves from horseback, the main house, the edge of fields, looking, supervising, judging, deciding what will happen to the slaves next. From these fateful seeings they can decide to whip or rape the slaves. From the perspective of slaves looking is fraught with peril. Where do they look? Who do they look at? How do they look at them? How often do you look at people in your daily life and find that looking at them is fraught with uncertainty that might result in your being beaten or raped? Imagine that it is all the time. At one point Northrup says that he addresses his master with “*downcast eyes* (italics added) and uncovered head—in the attitude and language of a slave.” Who is the master? What master does Northrup mention who watching from the woods?

What about what slaves hear? Give examples of what Northrup hears while enslaved and speculate as to the impact of what he hears on his experience as a slave?

In the cotton economy, slaveholders made increasing efforts to mechanize slavery, dehumanizing slaves in the process with the intent to measure slaves by the amount of cotton they could pick and to reduce them to the mechanical tasks using their physical tools involved in cotton picking. The fields are organized into rows that facilitate working on cotton, being supervised, and having their output measured. In this light what does it mean to call a slave a “hand”? The hands of whom? How are slaves being thought of in terms of labor and ownership if they are hands? Think of this as a process by which human life is turned into cotton. Cotton grows and the people die. Pay careful attention to Northrup’s lengthy description of tending to cotton plants. Why does Northrup express such dread when going to the gin house at the end of a day in the fields?

Think about the place of food in your life. Imagine that you have no money to buy food with and that you are totally dependent upon another person for your sustenance. At most you have some minimal ability to grow a small quantity of vegetables in a backyard garden. What is the master using the food for? Only to provide calories to sustain the slaves as workers so that they can perform their labors? Why does Northrup give such a detailed description of a holiday banquet? Are these slaveholders growing their own food?

Slaveholders are also asserting control over the very sense of self of slaves and the nature of their interaction with other slaves. Ask yourself whether how the masters treat slaves is encouraging bonds of sharing and solidarity or is it furthering isolation? Look for instances where there are opportunities to share food or in which slaves might work in concert.

Slaveholders use the plantations and interactions already fraught with uncertainty as a venue to exploit the slaves sexually. Describe Epps on the edge of the field? What other examples of sexual exploitation are to be found in the book?

Think about the proper place of violence in your world. When should you become violent? When should you visit this violence on other people? How often in your world today do you encounter violent behavior? How violent is the world of slavery that we read about in *Twelve Years a Slave*? In what ways are the slaves punished? Punishment can be used for many purposes. Why are they punished? Why does Northrup go into such detail about his fight with Tibeats? What does this fight teach us about slavery? What words would you use to describe Northrup’s feelings in the fight with Tibeats?

What are the ways that slaves are dehumanized? How do masters attempt to break Solomon’s will?

In what ways do slaves respond to the dehumanization of slavery, to the stress of dehumanization, and to the impact of the exercise of power by the master?

Solomon describes the impact of slavery on Southern whites. What is it? It is in the section on the young Epps.

What is Solomon’s attitude toward slaveholders? Does he see distinctions between them? How can he describe Ford favorably? Is it possible to be a moral man in an immoral framework?

Is the environment at Ford’s plantation fundamentally one that is economic, social, or political? In other words, what is slavery fundamentally as a system? What difference does this make?

What are the roles of women and how are they treated differently than the men? Describe the fate of Eliza?

Who are his three masters during most of the time of his enslavement?

What does the notion of escape mean for slaves? Does it necessarily mean getting entirely out of slavery or are there other, lesser forms of escape that embody some kind of freedom? In what ways does Solomon find some space that is his own within the institution of slavery? Be specific.