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12 Years a Slave

Solomon Northup · *1853 · original English text*

Having been born a freeman, and for more than thirty years enjoyed the blessings of liberty in a free State—and having at the end of that time been kidnapped and sold into Slavery—Solomon Northup tells the twelve years that followed, until he was restored.

THE CENTRAL QUESTION

What becomes of a free man's name when he is kidnapped and sold, and how is a life restored after twelve years in which the law would not hear him?

"Having been born a freeman, and for more than thirty years enjoyed the blessings of liberty in a free State--and having at the end of that time been kidnapped and sold into Slavery"

The opening of the narrative

The hosted text is Solomon Northup's 1853 narrative, PG #45631, complete. The opening is exact, including the two hyphens in "State--and" in this typography. The book is a testimony of kidnapping, plantation labor, and a legal restoration; it is not a novel. For older students. The violence, the buying and selling of persons, and the profanation of family should be taught with gravity, not sensationalized, and not turned into a spectacle. Quote this page.

KEY CHARACTERS

Solomon Northup
The freeman kidnapped and sold, who tells the twelve years and the restoration.

the family in New York
The free household from which he is taken, and to which he returns.

the kidnappers and the traders
The men who steal a name and sell a person.

the people bound with him
The enslaved companions of the plantation years, persons in the testimony.

BORN A FREEMAN

> *"Having been born a freeman, and for more than thirty years enjoyed the blessings of liberty in a free State--and having at the end of that time been kidnapped and sold into Slavery"*
>
> The opening

Grades 9–12
Read the full text free at classicslaunch.org.

01
Born a Freeman
THE OPENING

He had been born a freeman and had enjoyed liberty in a free State for more than thirty years when he was kidnapped and sold. The book begins in that contrast.

- The opening is exact, including the typography of the dash.
- The free life in New York is the measure of what is taken.
- This is a testimony, not a novel.

> *"Having been born a freeman, and for more than thirty years enjoyed the blessings of liberty in a free State--and having at the end of that time been kidnapped and sold into Slavery"*
>
> The opening

02
A Kidnapping
THE EARLY CHAPTERS

A journey, a betrayal, and a waking in chains. The name and the papers of a free man do not travel with him.

- Teach the kidnapping with gravity, for older students; do not sensationalize it.
- The withheld name in the slave market is part of the crime.
- Cite this typography.

03
Twelve Years of Labor
THE PLANTATION YEARS

Louisiana, the daily work, the overseers, and the other enslaved people whose lives are bound with his. The middle of the book is not an adventure.

- The violence of the plantation must be taught with gravity, not as spectacle.
- The fellow sufferers are persons in the testimony, not background.
- For older students.

04
A Letter, and a Law
THE TURNING TOWARD RESCUE

A way of sending word, and the slow machinery of a free state's claim. Restoration, when it comes, is legal as well as personal.

- The rescue is not a romance; it is a legal act after years.
- Keep Northup's own sequence; do not import the later film as the text.
- The book is complete through the restoration.

05
A Restored Name
THE CLOSE

The hosted text is the complete 1853 narrative. It ends as a return, and as a public telling. Teach it as testimony.

- PG #45631, complete.
- For older students; a testimony of kidnapping and restoration.
- Quote stretches that appear in both the Gutenberg text and the site EPUB.

A Stolen Name · Bondage · A Testimony · A Legal Restoration · A Return

What to watch for as you read

GRADES 9–12

1. The hosted text is Solomon Northup's 1853 narrative, Project Gutenberg #45631, complete. The opening is exact, including the typography of the dash: "Having been born a freeman, and for more than thirty years enjoyed the blessings of liberty in a free State--and having at the end of that time been kidnapped and sold into Slavery."
2. A testimony, not a novel, for older students. Teach the kidnapping, the plantation violence, and the buying and selling of persons with gravity, not as spectacle, and not by importing a later film as the text.
3. Quote stretches that appear in both the Gutenberg text and the site EPUB.

Quotations are verbatim from the original English text, Project Gutenberg #45631, the public-domain text hosted at classicslaunch.org/works/twelve-years-a-slave/. Citations give book and chapter (or canto and line) so every line can be checked.