



### **Background Information:**

Olaudah Equiano, or, Gustavus Vassa, the African. According to his famous autobiography, written in 1789, Olaudah Equiano (c.1745-1797) was born in what is now Nigeria. Kidnapped and sold into slavery in childhood, he was taken as a slave to the New World. As a slave to a captain in the Royal Navy, and later to a Quaker merchant, he eventually earned the price of his own freedom by careful trading and saving. As a seaman, he traveled the world, including the Mediterranean, the Caribbean, the Atlantic and the Arctic, the latter in an abortive attempt to reach the North Pole. Coming to London, he became involved in the movement to abolish the slave trade, an involvement which led him to write and publish *The Interesting Narrative of the Life of Olaudah Equiano, or Gustavus Vassa the African* (1789) a strongly abolitionist autobiography. The book became a bestseller and, as well as furthering the anti-slavery cause, made Equiano a wealthy man.

### **The Middle Passage**

This extract, taken from Chapter Two of the *Interesting Narrative*, describes some of the young Equiano's experiences on board a slave ship in the 'Middle Passage': the journey between Africa and the New World. Equiano's passage is between West Africa and the Caribbean island of Barbados, at that time a common voyage as the British plantation island was among the most easterly of the Caribbean islands.

### **Excerpt**

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, thus falling victims to the improvident avarice, as I may call it, of their purchasers.

This wretched situation was again aggravated by the galling of the chains, now become insupportable; and the filth of the necessary tubs, into which the children often fell, and were almost suffocated. 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. In this situation I expected every hour to share the fate of my companions, some 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. Often did I think many of the inhabitants of the deep much happier than myself; I envied them the

freedom they enjoyed, and as often wished I could change my condition for theirs. Every circumstance I met with served only to render my state more painful, and heighten my apprehensions, and my opinion of the cruelty of the whites.

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 the 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 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 a 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 soon have done the same, if they had not been prevented by the ship's crew, who were instantly alarmed. Those of us that were the most active were, in a moment, put down under the deck; and there was such a noise and confusion amongst the people of the ship as I never heard before, to stop her, and get the boat to go out after the slaves. However, two of the wretches were drowned, but they got the other, and afterwards flogged him unmercifully, for thus attempting to prefer death to slavery.

In this manner we continued to undergo more hardships than I can now relate; hardships which are inseparable from this accursed trade. - Many a time we were near suffocation, from the want of fresh air, which we were often without for whole days together. This, and the stench of the necessary tubs, carried off many.

### **Guided Reading Questions**

**Respond to the following in 1 or more complete sentences:**

1. Why does he say they were put under deck at the beginning of the voyage?
2. Why was it dangerous to stay in the hold of the ship for a long period of time?
3. Why was Equiano kept on deck for much of the voyage?
4. What does he wish for to put an end to his miseries?
5. What happened to a couple of the imprisoned Africans when they were caught stealing some of the fish?
6. What did the two men that were chained together next to him do instead of continue on their voyage?
7. Who prevented more imprisoned Africans from jumping into the sea?
8. How long did they sometimes go without any fresh air?
9. What do you think the "necessary tubs" were?
10. What is the main idea of this excerpt? Why was it written? How effective was the author in making his point?