

LITERATURE – 2A

Solomon has been a **slave** for many years on Mr Epps' **plantation**. Here he describes the slaves' traditional Christmas celebrations.

START THINKING ...

1 Work in pairs. Discuss the questions.

- Which special occasions do you celebrate?
- How do you celebrate them?
- Talk about the best / worst celebration you've been to.

TWELVE YEARS A SLAVE (1853) Solomon Northup

The only rest from a slave's constant hard work comes at Christmas. Master Epps allowed us three days off. Other slave masters allow four, five or six days according to their **generosity**. It is the only time of the year that slaves look forward to with interest or pleasure. They are glad when night comes not only because it brings them a few hours repose, but also because it brings them one day nearer Christmas. The young and the old welcome it with equal **delight**. It is a time of **feasting**, dancing and music – the carnival season for slaves. These are the only days they can enjoy a little **restricted** liberty, and they really enjoy it.

It is the custom for one master to give a Christmas supper and to invite the slaves from neighbouring plantations to join the festivity. Usually three to five hundred people come together and they dress up in their best clothes: they wash their coats, clean their shoes and if they're lucky enough to **possess** a hat, they wear it, but people without a hat or shoes are just as welcome. As a general thing, women wear scarves on their heads, but if their mistress has given them one of her old hats or a bright red **ribbon**, this is the occasion to wear it. Red is definitely the favourite colour among the slave women I know.

There is a table outside loaded with a variety of different meat and mountains of vegetables. There are roast chickens, ducks and turkeys as well as biscuits and cakes with peach jam and all sorts of different pies. Only slaves who have lived for years on their small rations of **corn meal** can appreciate a supper like this. Males sit on one side of the table and females on the other and friends try to sit opposite or next to each other. There are happy, smiling faces around the table and there's lots of fun and laughter.



After the supper, the Christmas dance begins. My business on these days is to play the violin. Africans are a music-loving people and many of my companions can sing or play the banjo. At the risk of being immodest, I was the musical star of the neighbourhood. My master often received requests for me to play my violin at a ball or festival. I always came back with some money in my pocket from the people who enjoyed my music.

My beloved violin helped me survive those twelve long years as a slave. It introduced me to great houses and saved me from many days' work in the fields. With the money I earned, I bought a few little luxuries for myself, like a pair of shoes or some **tobacco**. It took me away from a cruel master to places of happiness and fun. My violin was my best friend – making loud, joyful music when I was happy and soft, melodious consolation when I was sad. On Sundays, when I had an hour or two of leisure, I used to sit under a tree by the river bank and play my favourite tunes. My violin was why I always got the loudest welcome at the Christmas dance. The Christmas dance! If you want to see true happiness, go down to Louisiana and see the slaves dancing in the starlight of a Christmas night!

Glossary

slave someone who is owned by someone else and has to work for them

plantation a large farm, especially in a hot part of the world, on which a particular type of crop is grown

generosity the quality of being generous

delight happiness and excited pleasure

feast eat a large meal, especially to celebrate something special

restrict to limit something

possess to have or own something

ribbon a long, thin piece of cloth that is used for decoration

corn meal rough, yellow flour made from maize, used to make bread, tortillas, etc.

tobacco dried leaves that are inside cigarettes

2 **▶▶2A.1** Read the text and listen.

3 Read the text again. Answer the questions.

- 1 Why was Christmas an important time for the slaves?
- 2 How is the Christmas party for the slaves organised?
- 3 What do the slaves wear to the party?
- 4 How does the Christmas feast compare to the slaves' normal food?
- 5 Why is Solomon the most popular guest at celebrations?
- 6 Why is Solomon's violin important to him?

4 **READ BETWEEN THE LINES** Answer the questions. Give reasons and examples from the text.

- 1 What are the lives of the slaves like?
- 2 What sort of master do you think Master Epps is?
- 3 Why do you think Solomon says his violin was his best friend?

5 **VOCABULARY** Complete the sentences with the correct words from the glossary in the correct form.

- 1 The number of farms in the USA where _____ is grown has decreased from half a million in the 1950s to fewer than 10,000.
- 2 _____ are no longer just a fashion accessory for young girls; they are also worn to show support for good causes.
- 3 In 1860, 89% of black people in the USA were _____.
- 4 In 1850, owners of 125 plantations in the USA _____ more than 250 slaves each.
- 5 Slave owners _____ their slaves' free time.
- 6 Slave owners weren't known for their _____. Slaves had limited diets and were often hungry.

6 Underline five words in the text that are new to you. Look them up in a dictionary and then write each of them in a sentence.

7 **ROLE PLAY** Work in pairs. Student A is Sarah, another slave, Student B is Solomon. Read the beginning of the the dialogue and then continue with your own ideas.

SARAH When you are free, what will you do?
 SOLOMAN I just want to see my family. I'll be happy when I see my wife and children again.
 ...

8 **LISTENING** **▶▶2A.2** Listen to the next part of the story where Solomon is rescued from slavery. Complete the sentences.

- 1 'I am looking for Solomon Northup – he's an _____ of mine.'
- 2 'Do you _____ man over there?'
- 3 'Wait a moment. Have you got _____, Platt?'
- 4 'Solomon', he said, 'I'm _____ see you.'

9 **▶▶2A.2** Listen again. Put the events in the correct order.

- A Mr Bass told Henry Northup where Solomon was.
- B Henry Northup and the sheriff went to Louisiana.
- C Mr Bass wrote a letter for Solomon in August.
- D Henry Northup found Solomon.
- E Mr Bass saw Solomon at Christmas.

WRITING Describing a scene10 **WRITING** Imagine the scene when Solomon is reunited with his family. Describe the scene from Solomon's point of view. Write 150–200 words.

- Physical surroundings: where does the scene take place?
- People: who is present? What do the people look like?
- Feelings: how does the main character feel?
- Dialogue: what do the characters say to each other?

THINK MEMOIRS

A memoir is a type of autobiography. It is a collection of memories of a time in the writer's life.

An autobiography looks at the writer's whole life; a memoir often deals with a particular period. Memoirs are usually written in the first person – the writer telling the story of an important true event in his/her life or his/her experiences during an important historical event.

Some examples of memoirs include *If This is a Man* by Primo Levi, *The Diary of Anne Frank* and *Homage to Catalonia* by George Orwell.

11 Which of the memoirs in the list do you know? What are they about? Research each memoir to find out about who the writer was, when they wrote their memoir, the historical event they described and their experiences.