

# LITERATURE 2A

## TEACHER'S NOTES

**AUTHOR:** Solomon Northup  
**TITLE:** *Twelve Years a Slave* (Reading Chapter 15; listening Chapter 21)  
**THEMES:** Entertainment (unit 3), music (unit 5)  
**WRITING:** Describing a scene  
**THINK STYLE:** Memoirs

### ABOUT THE AUTHOR

Solomon Northup (1808–1863) was born in New York, USA. He wrote *Twelve Years a Slave* in 1853.

Solomon was an African American who was born a free man. He was a farmer and violinist who was kidnapped by slave traders and taken to Louisiana to work on a cotton plantation. He was unable to contact his family or friends for twelve years, but he was finally freed thanks to the help of Mr Bass, a visitor to his plantation. After his release, he fought for the abolition of slavery in the USA. *Uncle Tom's Cabin* by Harriet Beecher Stowe was a popular anti-slavery novel at the time and Northup wrote his book about his experience of being a slave to support the cause.

### INTRODUCTION

Ask students if they have heard of Solomon Northup or *Twelve Years a Slave*. They may have heard of the 2013 film which won an Oscar Award for Best Picture. Write any ideas on the board in note form. Use the information in the *About the author* box to provide an introduction. Depending on the class, it may be appropriate to use L1 at this stage.

### START THINKING ...

- 1 Draw students' attention to the film still at the top of the worksheet. They may be aware of the film starring Chiwetel Ejiofor, Brad Pitt and Benedict Cumberbatch. Elicit responses to the questions: *What can you see in the first picture?* (There is one black man, one black woman and one white man. The black woman is talking to the white man.) *Where do you think the scene is?* (the USA) *How do you think the woman feels?* (She looks sad, tired and desperate.) You could ask them what they know about slavery in the USA. Write their ideas on the board and come back to them at the end of the lesson. See if they can add any information after reading and listening to the texts.

Organise the class into pairs or small groups. Set a time limit of a few minutes for students to discuss the questions. Then ask students for their opinions. Elicit that celebrations often involve special food, music, dancing and time off work or school to spend with family.

- 2 Draw students' attention to the text above the film still which 'sets the scene' and clarify understanding. Play the audio. When students have read and listened to the text once, allow time to check unfamiliar words in the glossary.

### Optional extension

Ask some comprehension questions to check general understanding of the text.

- 3 Students read through the questions. Check for understanding and remind them to refer closely to the text to find the answers.

### Answers

1 It was the only time of the year that they had some free time and could enjoy themselves. 2 One of the masters in the area invites the slaves from all the plantations nearby to join him for supper. 3 They like to dress up for the party in their best clothes. They wear clean coats and shoes. If they have hats, they wear them. The women wear scarves, hats or ribbons. 4 The slaves normally only had small rations of corn meal to eat. 5 Because he plays the violin very well. 6 Because it has helped him survive the twelve years as a slave.

- 4 Students read the text again. Discuss the questions and answers with the class.

### Suggested answers

1 They worked very hard/had 3–6 days holiday a year/had a very poor diet/their owners sometimes gave them old things/they had a few hours free on Sundays. 2 Unkind – other masters were more generous. 3 He loved playing it; it gave him lots of good opportunities; he expressed how he was feeling by playing it.

### VOCABULARY

- 5 Read through the sentences one at a time to check comprehension of any unknown vocabulary. Working individually, students complete the sentences with the correct form of the words in the glossary. Ask individual students for answers.

### Answers

1 tobacco 2 Ribbons 3 slaves 4 possessed  
5 restricted 6 generosity

### Optional extension

Ask students which facts they find interesting or surprising and why. Point out that these facts all relate to slavery in the USA which only ended in 1865. Ask them to imagine what life would have been like for slaves in the USA at this time. Ask them to think about what life would have been like for the slaves when they were released from slavery.

- 6 Ask students to read the text again and to underline five more words that are new to them. Ask them to write the words in sentences. They then read their sentences in pairs and correct each other's mistakes.

### ROLE PLAY

- 7 Organise the class into pairs. Read the instruction and check that students understand what they are going to do. Ask two students to read the first part of the conversation. Brainstorm ideas and phrases on the board (*What are your plans for ...?, Will you be angry with ...?, I'll be happy when ...*). Set a time limit of 5–10 minutes. Monitor and offer support while students are preparing their role play. Students should write their scripts. Encourage as many students as possible to perform their role plays. Consider asking groups to perform to each other. The 'audience' groups can monitor language use and make corrections if necessary. This can also be done as a full-class exercise.

### LISTENING

- 8 Before listening, explain that students are going to hear an extract from the end of the book about how Solomon was freed from slavery. Play the recording twice. The first time, encourage students to listen without taking notes. The second time, they complete the sentences with one word in each gap.

#### Answers

- 1 old friend 2 recognise that 3 another name  
4 glad to

- 9 Students read through the questions. Encourage students to answer from memory. Play the recording again for students to complete their answers and to check.

#### Answers

- 1 C 2 E 3 A 4 B 5 D

#### AUDIOSCRIPT

'Mr Bass,' said Henry Northup, 'can I ask if you were in Louisiana last August?'

'Yes, sir. I was there in August,' replied Mr Bass.

'Did you write and post a letter for a slave?'

'Excuse me, sir, if I say that is none of your business,' answered Mr Bass, looking at Henry Northup.

'I'm sorry, perhaps I should explain. I'm looking for Solomon Northup – he's an old friend of mine. If you know him, can you tell me where he is? I promise that I will not tell anybody that you gave me this information.'

Mr Bass didn't speak for a long time. He looked at Henry Northup and thought very carefully. Finally he spoke: 'I have done nothing wrong. I am the man who wrote the letter. If you are trying to help Solomon become a free man again, I am happy to speak to you.'

'When did you last see him and where is he?' Henry Northup asked.

'I saw him at Christmas – that's exactly one week ago. He is a slave on the plantation of Mr Edwin Epps in Louisiana.'

Finally, the secret was out – the mystery of my disappearance – solved after twelve years! Now that Henry Northup knew where I was, he could come and free me. Mr Bass said he had met me on the plantation and that I had told him I was a free man. Before Henry Northup left, Mr Bass gave him a map of how to reach the plantation where I worked.

When Henry Northup and the sheriff arrived there, I was working in the fields. The sheriff walked up to one of the slaves and asked him:

'Is there a slave here called Platt?'

'There he is, over there,' answered the slave, pointing at me.

I looked up and wondered why this man wanted to see me. The sheriff walked towards me.

'Is your name Platt?' he asked.

'Yes, sir,' I replied.

'Do you recognise that man over there?'

I looked carefully at the man. 'Henry Northup!' I shouted. Finally, I understood. He had come to rescue me! I started walking towards him, but the sheriff stopped me.

'Wait a moment. Have you got another name, Platt?'

'Solomon Northup is my name, sir,' I replied.

'Have you got a family?' the sheriff asked.

'I had a wife and three children.' He asked me some more questions, but I couldn't wait to go and meet Henry Northup and I ran towards him. I took my old friend's hand, but I couldn't speak.

'Solomon,' he said, 'I'm glad to see you.'



### CRITICAL THINKING

Write the following on the board: *I had a wife and three children.* Ask students to identify who said this quote and what tense he uses. Tell them that they are going to think about the significance of this quote. Working individually, students write a reason why Solomon discusses his family in the past tense. When students have finished, ask them to work in small groups to compare their ideas. Then bring their arguments together on the board and discuss their ideas as a class. Then ask them to think about the difficulties that Solomon will encounter when he is free again.

#### Suggested answers

It's been so long since he saw them that he thinks they're dead./He doesn't think that he'll ever see them again so it is the same as them being dead./He sees his life now as being different to his old life. He is no longer the same person./He might think his wife has found a new husband and that his children won't remember him.

### WRITING: DESCRIBING A SCENE

- 10 Ask students to explain what makes a good description of a scene (adjectives to describe the environment, weather, buildings, people). Read through the *Writing skills box*. Ask students to explain *surroundings* and *present*. Students can write their description in class or for homework. Students then swap their descriptions with a partner. They read each other's work and highlight any mistakes. They assess whether the student has answered the question fully and whether they have included all of the information. They then return the description to

the original student who looks at the comments and redrafts their work. Ask some students to read their descriptions out loud to the class.

## THINK MEMOIRS

- 11** Read and check that students understand the meaning of *memoirs*. Ask them to explain the difference between an autobiography and a memoir in their own words. Students discuss why people might want to write their memoirs. Ask them to choose one of the authors and to answer the questions. You could split the class into small groups and give each one a different author and then ask them to present the results of their research to the class in the following lesson.

### Suggested answers

*If This is a Man* by Primo Levi, (1947), working for the Resistance in Italy, being imprisoned in Auschwitz, the liberation of the concentration camp.

*The Diary of Anne Frank*, (1947), a diary written by a young girl hiding from the Nazis in Holland.

*Homage to Catalonia* by George Orwell, (1938), his experiences of the Spanish Civil War.

### Additional reading or internet research topics

- The slave trade
- Slavery in the USA
- *Twelve Years a Slave* themes
- The life of Solomon Northup