



**The following are questions about "The Slave's Complaint" and notes to help you lead a discussion about the poem.**

1. WHO is the speaker in the poem?

The speaker of the poem is an enslaved person. We know this because he writes, "Must I dwell in Slavery's night, / And all pleasure take its flight / Far beyond my feeble sight, / Forever?" Students will often identify the speaker of the poem as the author, but that is not always the case. Here, the speaker may be George Moses Horton describing his own feelings about being enslaved, but the speaker could be anyone who is enslaved. This question provides you with an opportunity to discuss the concept of "persona" and/or "voice" in poetry. Later, in discussing the speaker in Horton's acrostic poems, where he adopts the persona of the young suitor, this distinction will be more clear to the students.

2. WHY do you think he is writing this poem?

The poem is a meditation on slavery, and (as the title points out) it is the complaint of a slave. It begins with the speaker questioning his painful circumstances. He wonders if he will always be "cast aside, / On misfortune's rugged tide" and if his suffering will always be discounted or ridiculed. Slavery, to the speaker, is a kind of endless "night" where there is no "pleasure" or happiness that he can see ("my feeble sight"). The speaker questions if hope "must...grow dim" in the third stanza, noting that the loss of hope is of all circumstances the "Worst of all." However, in the fourth stanza the speaker finds a spark of hope in the "dreary maze" of slavery. He describes himself as a prisoner who is crippled, not only by the condition of slavery but also by "gross despair." In the final two stanzas, the speaker calls on heaven to guide him and give him strength to endure and to overcome the despair that threatens to overwhelm him. The poem gives the perspective of a slave on the sorrows and pains of slavery.

3. WHAT do you think the poem is saying?

The speaker's meditation on slavery begins in doubt, describing the emotional suffering that an enslaved person had to endure and fight against. Yet despite the horrors of slavery, the speaker is able to maintain hope for a better life and envision a time when he will "from servitude ascend." The speaker has faith that "Heaven" can provide "for all." Students may interpret the ending of the poem as a hope that when the speaker dies he will finally be free from slavery, but this can also be interpreted as his hope that his life as a slave is "transient" and his servitude will end one day. Students will notice the repeated refrain of "Forever" and the changing punctuation as an indication of the speaker's attitude about slavery. You may guide students to examine the use of question marks to identify the speaker's moments of doubt and despair, while his use of exclamation points indicates a sense of certainty. "The Slave's Complaint" is not about a single, specific problem or situation, like an evil master or poor living conditions. It is about the very condition of slavery itself and what it does to the spirit and innate humanity of an individual.

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