

Openings Toward Freedom

Compare how two authors represent agency under enslavement.

CCSS.ELA-Literacy.W.11-12.9a "Apply grades 11-12 Reading standards to literature (e.g., "Demonstrate knowledge of eighteenth-, nineteenth- and early-twentieth-century foundational works of American literature..."

NAME _____

DATE _____

1 READ AND MARK _____ Read it twice

YOUR JOB In each excerpt, underline an action the narrator takes. Circle language showing a possibility or a restriction. Use these details to develop a comparison, rather than treating the excerpts as complete life stories.

Two Nineteenth-Century Narratives

- ① **Context.** Frederick Douglass and Harriet Jacobs wrote autobiographical narratives opposing slavery before the Civil War. Douglass's *Narrative of the Life of Frederick Douglass* appeared in 1845. In chapter VI, Hugh Auld stops his wife from teaching Douglass to read, arguing that literacy would make him unfit for enslavement. Jacobs's *Incidents in the Life of a Slave Girl* appeared in 1861 under the name Linda Brent. In chapter XXI, she hides in a cramped garret near her children to avoid her enslaver. The following short excerpts describe moments within much longer struggles; neither moment is a completed escape.
- ② **Source A: Douglass, chapter VI.** "From that moment, I understood the pathway from slavery to freedom. It was just what I wanted, and I got it at a time when I the least expected it. Whilst I was saddened by the thought of losing the aid of my kind mistress, I was gladdened by the invaluable instruction which, by the merest accident, I had gained from my master. Though conscious of the difficulty of learning without a teacher, I set out with high hope, and a fixed purpose, at whatever cost of trouble, to learn how to read."
- ③ **Source B: Jacobs, chapter XXI.** "I bored three rows of holes, one above another; then I bored out the interstices between. I thus succeeded in making one hole about an inch long and an inch broad. I sat by it till late into the night, to enjoy the little whiff of air that floated in. In the morning I watched for my children." Here, *bored* means drilled; *interstices* are the spaces between the holes. She uses a gimlet, a small hand tool, to make the opening.

2 ANSWER WITH EVIDENCE _____ Use the passage

- 1** How does Douglass's contrast between saddened and gladdened reveal a change in his understanding? Support your explanation with the excerpt and context.

- 2** How do the opening's measurements and the little whiff of air affect Jacobs's representation of agency? Use a precise detail.

- 3** Compare the pathway in Source A with the opening in Source B. What shared theme can these different details support?

- 4** Why would the claim that both narrators escape at these moments overstate the evidence? Identify a limitation in each excerpt.

3 YOUR TURN

Your own words

Write a 140-180-word comparison in three paragraphs: a shared theme and meaningful difference; evidence from both excerpts with reasoning; a qualified conclusion. Analyze how each author's language develops the theme. Identify sources by author and explain why neither excerpt establishes a completed escape.

Develop a supported comparison

Integrate short quotations or precise paraphrases. Connect the two texts rather than summarizing them separately. Leave blank lines between paragraphs.

This image shows a single page of white paper with horizontal blue or grey ruling lines. The lines are evenly spaced and run across the width of the page, leaving small margins at the top and bottom. There are no vertical margin lines, text, or other markings on the page.

PART 1 • READ AND MARK

In each excerpt, underline an action the narrator takes. Circle language showing a possibility or a restriction. Use these details to develop a comparison, rather than treating the excerpts as complete life stories. Accept any marking that follows this job and points at the right text.

PART 2 • ANSWERS

#	QUESTION	ANSWER
1	How does Douglass's contrast between saddened and gladdened reveal a change in his understanding? Support your explanation with the excerpt and context.	He loses his teacher, but Auld's opposition reveals why literacy threatens enslavement. What was intended to restrict him instead strengthens his determination to learn; he calls this accidental lesson invaluable.
2	How do the opening's measurements and the little whiff of air affect Jacobs's representation of agency? Use a precise detail.	She acts deliberately to create an opening, yet its inch-long, inch-wide size and little whiff of air show how restricted her relief remains. Her accomplishment is real without being physical freedom.
3	Compare the pathway in Source A with the opening in Source B. What shared theme can these different details support?	Both can support a theme of pursuing possibilities within severe restrictions. Douglass describes literacy as a figurative pathway toward freedom, while Jacobs makes a tiny physical opening for air and a view of her children.
4	Why would the claim that both narrators escape at these moments overstate the evidence? Identify a limitation in each excerpt.	Douglass still faces learning without a teacher; Jacobs still watches from concealment through a small hole. Each gains a possibility or limited relief, not an escape in the excerpt.

PART 3 · YOUR TURN (SAMPLE ANSWER)

Comparison: Douglass and Jacobs represent agency as the pursuit of possibilities within enslavement, but their openings differ in scale and purpose. Douglass imagines a future route through literacy, whereas Jacobs creates a small physical opening that offers immediate relief and contact with family.

Douglass's contrast between being saddened and gladdened turns the loss of instruction into a discovery: his enslaver's opposition helps him recognize the power of reading. The word pathway makes literacy seem like a route he can pursue, although learning without a teacher remains difficult. Jacobs's inch-long opening and little whiff of air make her achievement concrete but sharply limited. Her final action, watching for her children, connects the opening to a relationship rather than simply to physical comfort.

Both narrators act purposefully, yet neither excerpt depicts a completed escape. Their different language makes resistance visible without erasing constraint. Together, the passages suggest that a meaningful gain in agency can coexist with continuing confinement.

TEACHER ASSESSMENT NOTES

Require a supported comparative interpretation, not the exact model theme. Assess language, accurate evidence from each author, a meaningful similarity and difference, and the limits of the short excerpts. Require three paragraphs and 140-180 words. Do not equate agency with consent to enslavement or require students to role-play enslavement. Context is instructional synthesis; quoted excerpts are unabridged spans from public-domain originals, with outer quotation marks added. Sources: Douglass (1845), chapter VI, <https://www.gutenberg.org/files/23/23-h/23-h.htm>; Jacobs (1861), chapter XXI, <https://www.gutenberg.org/files/11030/11030-h/11030-h.htm>. Read-and-mark answers may identify purposeful learning or drilling/watching and language of hope, difficulty, smallness or confinement.