

0. Life as a Slave of Edwin Epps - Story Preface

1. Slave Pens in Washington

2. Platt's Journey to Slavery in Louisiana

3. Life as a Louisiana Slave

4. Life as the Slave of John Tibeats

5. Life as a Slave of Edwin Epps

6. The Beating of Patsey, the Slave

7. Platt Meets Bass

8. Bass Helps Platt (Solomon Northup)

9. A Plan for Freedom

10. Solomon Northup Goes Home

11. Not-Guilty Verdicts at Trial



In the film portrayal of *12 Years a Slave*, Edwin Epps (played by Michael Fassbender) is a cruel plantation owner who demands more of his slaves than they are able to produce. In this still shot, from the movie, we see Epps with Patsey (a hardworking slave played by Lupita Nyong'o) and Platt (Solomon Northup's slave name). Platt is portrayed by Chiwetel Ejiofor (known, among other things, for his award-winning performance as Shakespeare's *Othello*). Still-shot, copyright Fox Searchlight, all rights reserved. Image online, via Fox Searchlight, and provided here as fair use for educational purposes.

Surviving the swamp, Solomon learned important news when he next saw Tibeats. The man who had nearly killed his slave had sold him to a new owner called Edwin Epps.

Northup's life would now enter a different, not necessarily better, phase.

Edwin Epps was a large man. Northup describes him with these words:

At the time I came into his possession, Edwin Epps was fond of the bottle...a roystering, blustering, noisy fellow, whose chief delight was in dancing with his "n___," or lashing them about the yard with his long whip, just for the pleasure of hearing them screech and scream, as the great welts were planted on their backs.

When sober, he was silent, reserved and cunning, not beating us indiscriminately, as in his drunken moments, but sending the end of his rawhide to some tender spot of a lagging slave, with a sly dexterity particular to himself. (*12 Years a Slave*, at [page 162](#) of an online version of Solomon Northup's book.)

Epps wanted to get the most out of his "slaves." One of them, a girl called Patsey, was particularly hard-working. She could pick cotton at astonishing rates, and Epps liked her.

Mrs. Epps, however, despised Patsey and wanted her husband to beat the girl. When he refused, the Epps would quarrel with each other. When Epps was away, "the mistress" often asked Solomon to beat Patsey. He would refuse, with the excuse that he did not want to upset the "master."

There came a time, according to Solomon's narrative, when the "the green-eyed monster" also crept into the soul of Epps. When that happened, he joined his wife in making Patsey's life even more miserable than it already was.

Sometimes, just to seek consolation elsewhere, Patsey would visit her friend Harriet Shaw (whose husband owned a nearby plantation). Epps began to grow suspicious. Why was Patsey visiting the Shaws? Did his plantation-owning neighbor have eyes for her, too?



The Shaw (Harper) House
palmetto palms and ferns on the Bayou Boeuf is highly reminiscent of the Epps house as it was originally constructed. Chickens, ducks, hogs, cows, barns, and corn cribs are usually in immediate proximity to the main house. Cypress cisterns held rain water drained from shingled roofs.

One day, when Epps called-out for Patsey, she was nowhere to be found. She had gone to the Shaw plantation, with a specific request for something she did not have. Despite her hard work, picking cotton faster than anyone else, she was without soap:

"Missus don't give me soap to wash with, as she does the rest," said Patsey, "and you know why. I went over to Harriet's to get a piece," and saying this, she drew it forth from a pocket in her dress and exhibited it to him. "That's what I went to Shaw's for, Massa Epps," continued she; "the Lord knows that was all." (12 Years a Slave, at [page 165](#) of an online version of Northup's book.)

Epps did not (or would not) believe her.

Credits:

Photo inside the text depicts the plantation house of P.L. Shaw, a neighbor of Edwin Epps and the place where Patsey (the slave “owned” by Epps) went to get some body soap. The text notes that this house closely resembles the Epps house at the time of the Civil War. From "Backtracking Twelve Years a Slave, Solomon Northup Trail Guide," n.d, p. 11, vertical file. Online via Common-Pace.org; courtesy of the Ethel and Herman Midlo Center for New Orleans Studies, New Orleans, Louisiana.

See Alignments to State and Common Core standards for this story online at:

<http://www.awesomestories.com/asset/AcademicAlignment/Life-as-a-Slave-of-Edwin-Epps-12-Years-a-Slave>

See Learning Tasks for this story online at:

<http://www.awesomestories.com/asset/AcademicActivities/Life-as-a-Slave-of-Edwin-Epps-12-Years-a-Slave>

Questions 2 Ponder

Who Is the Green-Eyed Monster?

In 12 Years a Slave, Solomon Northup references “the green-eyed monster” when describing Edwin Epps.

What does he mean by that? Who is the “green-eyed monster?”

Why Were Slave Owners Intentionally Cruel?

In 12 Years a Slave, Patsey is a female slave who works harder and faster than anyone else.

Once, after she was off the Epps plantation for a short while, the hard-working, out-performing slave tells Edwin Epps that she visited the Shaw Plantation to get soap because "Missus" didn't give her any (although she gives soap to the other slaves).

Then Patsey adds: "...and you know why." What did Patsey mean with those words?

Why didn't Mrs. Epps give Patsey soap so she could clean-up after working so hard, picking cotton all day?

Media Stream



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Shaw Plantation - 12 Years a Slave

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