



0. The Beating of Patsey, the Slave - Story Preface

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10. Solomon Northup Goes Home

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In his book, *12 Years a Slave*, Solomon Northup describes a time when Edwin Epps (plantation owner and cruel "master") orders Northup (then known by his slave name, "Platt") to flog Patsey (a slave on the Epps plantation). When Platt tells his "master" he can inflict no further punishment, Epps continues to whip Patsey himself. This drawing, illustrating that event, appears in Northup's book between pages 256 and 257. [Image online](#), courtesy "Documenting the American South," via University Library, University of North Carolina at Chapel Hill.

Getting himself more and more upset, after his slave returned from the Shaw plantation (where she'd been given a piece of soap), the infuriated Epps ordered Solomon to whip Patsey. It was an experience Northup would regret:

Then turning to me, he ordered four stakes to be driven into the ground, pointing with the toe of his boot to the places where he wanted them. When the stakes were driven down, he ordered her to be stripped of every article of dress. Ropes were then brought, and the naked girl was laid upon her face, her wrists and feet each tied firmly to a stake.

Stepping to the piazza, he took down a heavy whip, and placing it in my hands, commanded me to lash her. Unpleasant as it was, I was compelled to obey him. Nowhere that day, on the face of the whole earth, I venture to say, was there such a demoniac exhibition witnessed as then ensued. (12 Years a Slave, page 139 of an online version of Northup's book.)

Mrs. Epps approvingly watched the whipping:

Mistress Epps stood on the piazza among her children, gazing on the scene with an air of heartless satisfaction. The slaves were huddled together at a little distance, their countenances indicating the sorrow of their hearts. Poor Patsey prayed piteously for mercy, but her prayers were vain. Epps ground his teeth, and stamped upon the ground, screaming at me, like a mad fiend, to strike harder.

"Strike harder, or your turn will come next, you scoundrel," he yelled.

"Oh, mercy, massa!—oh! have mercy, do. Oh, God! pity me," Patsey exclaimed continually, struggling fruitlessly, and the flesh quivering at every stroke. (12 Years a Slave, pages 139 and following of an online version of Northup's book.)

Heartless, Epps ordered Northup to keep whipping the girl, but Solomon would no-longer do Epps' bidding:

When I had struck her as many as thirty times, I stopped, and turned round toward Epps, hoping he was satisfied; but with bitter oaths and threats, he ordered me to continue. I inflicted ten or fifteen blows more. By this time her back was covered with long welts, intersecting each other like net work.

Epps was yet furious and savage as ever, demanding if she would like to go to Shaw's again, and swearing he would flog her until she wished she was in h--l.

Sickened by his own actions in whipping Patsey, as Edwin Epps had ordered him to do, Solomon Northup defied his "master" and dropped the whip:

Throwing down the whip, I declared I could punish her no more. He ordered me to go on, threatening me with a severer flogging than she had received, in case of refusal. My heart revolted at the inhuman scene, and risking the consequences, I absolutely refused to raise the whip.

He then seized it himself, and applied it with ten-fold greater force than I had. The painful cries and shrieks of the tortured Patsey, mingling with the loud and angry curses of Epps, loaded the air. She was terribly lacerated—I may say, without exaggeration, literally flayed. The lash was wet with blood, which flowed down her sides and dropped upon the ground.

At length she ceased struggling. Her head sank listlessly on the ground. Her screams and supplications gradually decreased and died away into a low moan. She no longer writhed and shrank beneath the lash when it bit out small pieces of her flesh. I thought that she was dying! (12 Years a Slave, pages 139 and following of an online version of Northup's book.)

Epps raised his young son to follow in his own footsteps.

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

<http://www.awesomestories.com/asset/AcademicAlignment/The-Beating-of-Patsey-the-Slave-12-Years-a-Slave>

See Learning Tasks for this story online at:

<http://www.awesomestories.com/asset/AcademicActivities/The-Beating-of-Patsey-the-Slave-12-Years-a-Slave>

Questions 2 Ponder

How Do We Resolve Moral Dilemmas?

In 12 Years a Slave, Solomon Northup is faced with a moral dilemma when Edwin Epps, “the master,” orders him to whip Patsey. Had he refused, Solomon would also have been viciously beaten.

Should Northup have whipped Patsey, as he describes, or should he have refused (thereby risking very severe consequences to himself)? Explain your answer.

Did America's form of chattel slavery allow Epps to beat Patsey on a whim? Why, or why not? Do such laws encourage this type of violence?

If you (like Solomon) were ordered to harm someone, risking severe personal consequences if you refused to inflict that harm, what options would you have to avoid carrying-out the order?

Media Stream



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