**Slave Spirituals: Dehumanizing effects of slavery on both the slaves and the slave owners.**

**Background:** Slave songs and spirituals continue to influence American music. Their words also constitute a significant American literary tradition.

African-American spirituals constitute one of the largest surviving bodies of American folksong and are probably the best known. They are principally associated with the African-American churches of the Deep South. Mid-19th-century reports indicate that the tunes were sung in unison and abounded in ‘slides from one note to another and turns and cadences not in articulated notes’. There is disagreement as to whether there are significant African elements in the songs and whether they were the innovation of black slaves or adaptations of white sources. African-American spirituals were first brought to an international audience from 1871 by the Jubilee Singers of Fisk University, Nashville, Tennessee.

The African-American spiritual, characterized by syncopation, polyrhythmic structure, and the pentatonic scale of five whole tones, is, above all, a deeply emotional song. The words are most often related to biblical passages, but the predominant effect is of patient, profound melancholy. The spiritual is directly related to the sorrow songs that were the source material of the blues and jazz; a number of more joyous spirituals influenced the content of gospel songs.

**Directions:** Read the Excerpts from Chapter II of *Narrative of the Life of Frederick Douglass: An American Slave. And* Lyrics of 2 spirituals: "Wade in the Water" and "Follow the Drinking Gourd, then discuss and answer with your group the following questions:

1. Why does Douglass believe that hearing the slaves “sing most exultingly” of going to the Great House Farm “would do more to impress some minds with the horrible character of slavery, than the reading of whole volumes of philosophy on the subject could do”?
2. Why is Douglass convinced that hearing the songs sung by slaves reveals “the soul-killing effects of slavery,” even though the songs contain expressions of “the highest joy” as well as “the deepest sadness”?
3. Why is Douglass able to understand “the deep meaning of those rude and apparently incoherent songs” only after he is no longer a slave himself?
4. Why do these songs, and not the events he recounts, give Douglass his “first glimmering conception of the dehumanizing character of slavery”?

**Task: In a one- to two-page, respond to all discussion the questions above.**

“The slaves selected to go to the Great House Farm, for the monthly allowance for themselves and their fellow-slaves, were peculiarly enthusiastic. While on their way, they would make the dense old woods, for miles around, reverberate with their wild songs, revealing at once the highest joy and the deepest sadness. They would compose and sing as they went along, consulting neither time nor tune. The thought that came up, came out--if not in the word, in the sound;--and as frequently in the one as in the other. They would sometimes sing the most pathetic sentiment in the most rapturous tone, and the most rapturous sentiment in the most pathetic tone. Into all of their songs they would manage to weave something of the Great House Farm. Especially would they do this, when leaving home. They would then sing most exultingly the following words:--

"I am going away to the Great House Farm!

O, yea! O, yea! O!"

This they would sing, as a chorus, to words which to many would seem unmeaning jargon, but which, nevertheless, were full of meaning to themselves. I have sometimes thought that the mere hearing of those songs would do more to impress some minds with the horrible character of slavery, than the reading of whole volumes of philosophy on the subject could do.

I did not, when a slave, understand the deep meaning of those rude and apparently incoherent songs. I was myself within the circle; so that I neither saw nor heard as those without might see and hear.

They told a tale of woe which was then altogether beyond my feeble comprehension; they were tones loud, long, and deep; they breathed the prayer and complaint of souls boiling over with the bitterest anguish. Every tone was a testimony against slavery, and a prayer to God for deliverance from chains. The hearing of those wild notes always depressed my spirit, and filled me with ineffable sadness. I have frequently found myself in tears while hearing them. The mere recurrence to those songs, even now, afflicts me; and while I am writing these lines, an expression of feeling has already found its way down my cheek. To those songs I trace my first glimmering conception of the dehumanizing character of slavery. I can never get rid of that conception. Those songs still follow me, to deepen my hatred of slavery, and quicken my sympathies for my brethren in bonds. If any one wishes to be impressed with the soul-killing effects of slavery, let him go to Colonel Lloyd's plantation, and, on allowance-day, place himself in the deep pine woods, and there let him, in silence, analyze the sounds that shall pass through the chambers of his soul,--and if he is not thus impressed, it will only be because "there is no flesh in his obdurate heart."

I have often been utterly astonished, since I came to the north, to find persons who could speak of the singing, among slaves, as evidence of their contentment and happiness. It is impossible to conceive of a greater mistake. Slaves sing most when they are most unhappy. The songs of the slave represent the sorrows of his heart; and he is relieved by them, only as an aching heart is relieved by its tears. At least, such is my experience. I have often sung to drown my sorrow, but seldom to express my happiness. Crying for joy, and singing for joy, were alike uncommon to me while in the jaws of slavery. The singing of a man cast away upon a desolate island might be as appropriately considered as evidence of contentment and happiness, as the singing of a slave; the songs of the one and of the other are prompted by the same emotion.” -- *Narrative of the Life of Frederick Douglass: An American Slave.*

**African American Spirituals – “Wade in the Water” and “Follow the Drinking Gourd”**

(Chorus)

Wade in the water. Wade in the water, children. Wade in the water.

God's gonna trouble the water.

Well, who are these children all dressed in red? God's a-gonna trouble the water Must be the children that Moses led God's a-gonna trouble the water.

(Chorus)

Who's that young girl dressed in white Wade in the Water Must be the Children of Israelites God's gonna trouble the Water.

(Chorus)

Jordan's water is chilly and cold. God's gonna trouble the water. It chills the body, but not the soul. God's gonna trouble the water.

Chorus

If you get there before I do. God's gonna trouble the water. Tell all of my friends I'm coming too. God's gonna trouble the water.

To try and de-code this song now is difficult. First, we don’t know what the code is but it must have been quite sophisticated if it was to fool the “Massa” and the bounty hunters. The second problem is that there is no guarantee that these are indeed the original lyrics. Slave songs were passed on by word of mouth, not written down. There may well have been several other variants before we arrived at the gospel version we see here. Nonetheless, there are still enough references for us to say it was originally about escape. The very title of ‘Wade in the Water’ is advice to the runaways on how to avoid being tracked by bloodhounds. The reference to ‘Jordan’ could well be the Promised Land, in this case Canada where slavery did not exist. ‘It chills my body, but not my soul’ is reference to the physical discomforts that the journey will take, but at the same time is trying to bolster the spirits. ‘Now if you should get there before I do’ and ‘Tell my friends that I’m a comin’ too’ are much more obvious allusions to a journey. <http://www.localdial.com/users/jsyedu133/Soulreview/Understandingpages/coded.htm>)

***Follow the Drinking Gourd***

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Is a reference to ‘the big dipper’ a constellation very close to the North Star itself. The North Star can be very difficult to recognize, but ‘The Big Dipper’ is easily identifiable, looking like a massive drinking gourd, and a clear indication of a northerly direction. The series of routes and safe houses, which were often run by Quakers, was known as “The Underground Railway.” By 1861 there were about 500 abolitionists, helping slaves find this invisible network of pathways, safe houses and signals.

A full interpretation of the song was posted in the *Detroit News*, February 25, 1997.

When the sun comes up and the first quail calls, follow the drinking gourd.

For the old man is a-waiting to carry you to freedom,

If you follow the drinking gourd. With the beginning of winter on Dec. 21, the sun starts climbing higher in the sky each day. And in winter, the call of migratory quail echoes across southern fields. So the song advised slaves to escape in winter and head north toward the Big Dipper -- code name, drinking gourd. A guide will be waiting at the end of the line.

The riverbank makes a very good road. The dead trees show you the way, Left foot, peg foot, travelling on Follow the drinking gourd.

This verse directs fugitives to the Tombigbee River, where special markings on fallen trees will show they're on the correct northerly course. Travelling under cover of darkness, slaves could find their way along a river even on nights too overcast for the Big Dipper's stars to shine through. The Tombigbee River, which empties into Alabama's Mobile Bay on the Gulf of Mexico, originates in northeast Mississippi.

The river ends between two hills. Follow the drinking gourd. There's another river on the other side, when the Tombigbee ends, the runaways who had memorized the song knew to walk north over a hill until they came to another river, the Tennessee, then to go north on it as well. Where the great big river meets the little river, Follow the drinking gourd. For the old man is a-waiting for to carry you to freedom, If you follow the drinking gourd.

The song ends by instructing slaves that at the end of the Tennessee River they must cross over to the north side of the big Ohio River, where someone from the Underground Railroad would ensure their passage to the first of a string of safe houses reaching all the way to Canada. (http://www.localdial.com/users/jsyedu133/Soulreview/Understandingpages/coded.htm)