The Interesting Narrative of the Life of Olaudah Equiano by Olaudah Equiano

English III
American Narrative Tradition

• One of four traditional types of early American narratives

• Slave Narratives – an autobiographical account of the life of an enslaved person

• These narratives supported the abolitionist cause by revealing the horrors of slavery.
Literary Focus

• **historical narrative** – an account of a significant event in history
The slave ship arrived in Barbados. Olaudah had survived the Middle Passage.

No one bought Olaudah in Barbados. He went on another ship to an English Colony in Virginia.

A British Navy officer, Michael Henry Pascal, bought Olaudah and was his master for 7 years. He brought him to England.

When in England, Olaudah learned to read and write. Olaudah also learned to speak English.

Later, Olaudah traveled all around the world with Lt. Pascal.

Lt. Pascal promised to give Olaudah his freedom, but he never did. In 1763, Lt. Pascal sold Olaudah to a new master, Mr. King.

Olaudah made himself very useful to Mr. King and learned more about commerce and trade.
In 1766, Olaudah bought his freedom and worked in the trade business. He lived in England and became an abolitionist. He lectured against the cruelty of British slave owners. He spoke out against the English slave trade. He worked to resettle freed slaves in Sierre Leone. Olaudah published a narrative about his life in 1789. His narrative was a great influence on the abolition of slavery in England and in the United States. Olaudah Equiano died in 1797. In 1807, Great Britain abolished slavery.
• Olaudah was intelligent, quickly learned English, studied to read and write and learn about the laws and business of his enslavers
• Olaudah converted to Christianity which may have influenced how he told his story and who became his friends and supporters
Reading Focus

• **inference** – an educated guess based on what you already know and what you learn from reading a text.

  – Look beyond what the author states directly.
  – Think about what is hinted, or implied.
Historical Narrative

• How could this narrative differ from an article written for a history textbook?

It is written in the first person and is something that actually happened to the author.
Why might Equiano and the other prisoners be whipped for refusing to eat?

They were considered property. If a captive died of starvation, the slave traders lost money because they could not sell him or her.
• Why might Equiano imagine that the slave traders have no country of their own?

*He thinks the traders live on the ship.*
Why might Equiano call the ship “the hollow place”? What does this tell you about Equiano’s understanding of what is happening to him?

*He has never seen a ship and does not know what one is. He is not quite sure what is happening to him.*
Reading Focus
Making Inferences

• Why might Equiano believe that his captors are spirits rather than human beings?

They seem like spirits to him because of the “magic” they worked by making the boat move.
Literary Focus
Historical Narrative

• Why do you think Equiano included the detail that, “The strangers also shook hands with us black people”?

He wants to show that the strangers were kinder to them than the crew members were.
Reading Focus
Making Inferences

• What might Equiano mean when he says that he envies “the inhabitants of the deep”?

The deceased “inhabitants of the deep” were free from the bonds and limitations of slavery, unlike the slaves on the ship.
Literary Focus
Historical Narrative

• Why might the crew not want the slaves to see how they managed the ship? How does this detail add to your understanding of the way slave traders viewed slaves?

*It was in their interest to keep the slaves ignorant so that they would be scared of the sailors and afraid to mutiny.*
What could you guess might be the conditions aboard an eighteenth-century slave ship:

*Conditions were crowded and filthy, with unclean air leading to the death of slaves. Cruelty reigned, and the slaves were hungry and scared.*
Equiano writes, “We were all pent up together like so many sheep in a fold without regard to sex or age.” What does this comparison reveal about people’s perspectives toward Africans at the time?

*It reveals that the slavers believed that the Africans were no better than animals and treated them the same as animals.*
Equiano became an abolitionist. What do you think Equiano is trying to convince his readers to believe or do through his narrative?

*He wants to persuade readers that slavery and the slave trade are unnecessarily cruel and contrary to the teachings of their religion.*
Olaudah’s principal reason for writing his narrative was to evoke compassion for the miseries suffered by Africans in the slave trade.

An English abolitionist said that Olaudah’s book was, “More use to the Cause [Abolition] than half the people of the country.”

Olaudah said he hoped his book would, “Promote the interests of humanity.”
Olaudah Equiano had no choice in his life as a slave; however, he took advantage of every opportunity to enhance his life and make himself useful. In fact, he learned a new language, reading and writing, English law, and trade and commerce. He became a self-educated man. With his education and his desire for freedom, Olaudah overcame his enslavement by buying his freedom. He gained power over his own life and destiny. Now he was able to live the life he chose. His choice was to work hard to abolish the practiced that allowed for humans to enslave each other. In doing so, he wrote his narrative and convinced many that slavery was inhuman. His abolition work influenced not just Great Britain which abolished slavery in 1807, but also influenced the growing abolitionist movement in the United States. Because Olaudah was intelligent, educated, hardworking and diligent, he was well-respected and people listened to him.