

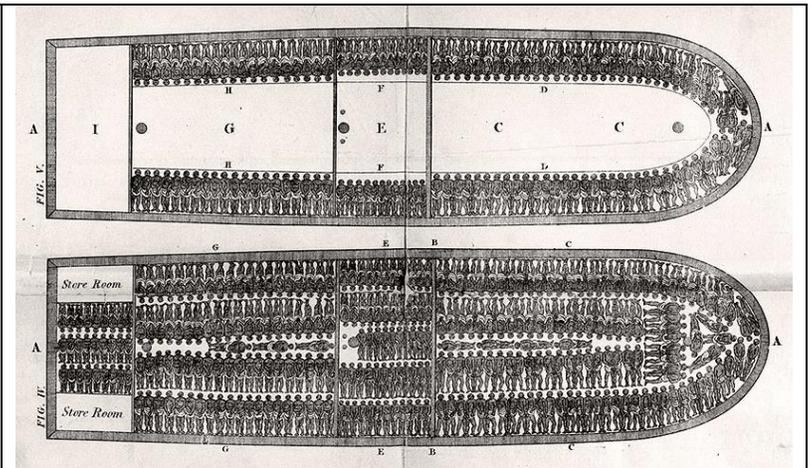
15.5 Olaudah Equiano Describes Being Sold into Slavery

Background: Olaudah Equiano was born in West Africa in the region near the Niger River in 1745, and was kidnapped and sold into slavery when he was eleven. While enslaved, he worked on a Virginia plantation as the servant for a British naval officer and for a Philadelphia merchant. After purchasing his freedom, he wrote his memoirs and became active in the anti-slavery movement. A selection from his memoir follows. The full text of *The Interesting Narrative of the Life of Olaudah Equiano, or Gustavus Vasa, Written by Himself* (London, 1789) is available at <http://docsouth.unc.edu> (accessed Feb. 12, 2019).

Questions

1. Who was Olaudah Equiano?
2. What was his reaction when he saw the slave ship?
3. What were conditions like on the slave ship?
4. What happened when he refused to eat?
5. In your opinion, why did people prefer to die than to remain on the ship?

Interior of the Liverpool slave ship
Brookes (1789)



A. The first object which assaulted my eyes when I arrived on the coast was the sea, and a slaveship, which was riding at anchor, and waiting for its cargo. These filled me with astonishment, which was soon converted into terror, which I am yet at a loss to describe . . . When I was carried on board I was immediately handled, and tossed up, to see if I were sound, by some of the crew; and I was now persuaded that I had got into a world of bad spirits, and that they were going to kill me . . .

B. I was soon put down under the decks, and there I received such a salutation in my nostrils as I had never experienced in my life; so that with the loathsomeness of the stench, and the crying together, I became so sick and low that I was not able to eat, nor had I the least desire to taste anything . . . but soon, to my grief, two of the white men offered me eatables; and on my refusing to eat, one of them held me fast by the hands...and tied my feet, while the other flogged me severely . . .

C. Amongst the poor chained men, I found some of my own nation, which in a small degree gave ease to my mind. I inquired of them what was to be done with us? They gave me to understand we were to be carried to these white people's country to work for them . . .

D. The closeness of the place, and the heat of the climate, added to the number in the ship, which was so crowded that each had scarcely room to turn himself, almost suffocated us . . . The shrieks of the women, and the groans of the dying, rendered the whole scene of horror almost inconceivable . . . I was soon reduced so low here that it was thought necessary to keep me almost always on deck . . .

E. One day, when we had a smooth sea, . . . two of my wearied countrymen, who were chained together, preferring death to such a life of misery, somehow made it through the nettings, and jumped into the sea; immediately another quite dejected fellow . . . also followed their example; and I believe many more would very soon have done the same, if they had not been prevented by the ship's crew, who were instantly alarmed . . . Two of the wretches were drowned, but they got the other, and afterwards flogged him unmercifully, for thus attempting to prefer death to slavery. In this manner we continued to undergo more hardships than I can now relate; hardships which are inseparable from this accursed trade.