

# Read Like This, Too—Finding Central Ideas and Details in a Literary Nonfiction Text

## Learn It – Chains and Darkness Excerpt

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### Directions:

Review the annotations below, made on an excerpt from Solomon Northup's *Twelve Years a Slave*, Chapter 2, pages 38-39, "Chains and Darkness," 1859.

Comments about what the author is saying are on the left side of the paper and attempts to dig deeper are on the right side. Underlined words and phrases illustrate details to help find the central idea of the passage.

The use of the word “insensible” is an interesting detail. I think it fits here because he is without his normal “sense” and can’t figure out what is happening to him.

He uses very descriptive words: painful, lonely, robbed, unfortunate, desolate, oppressed, and bitterly. Careful word choice and details provide me with a vivid picture of his desperation.

In this section of the text Mr. Northup is trying to show us the desperation and terror he felt when he was suddenly no longer in control of his own life, and he didn’t really know what was happening. He provides details that make his fear and uncertainty come alive for the reader. All of these details help me identify the central idea of the passage.

From the moment I was insensible. How long I remained in that condition – whether only that night, or many days and nights – I do not know; but when consciousness returned, I found myself alone, in utter darkness and in chains.

The pain in my head had subsided in a measure, but I was very faint and weak. I was sitting upon a low bench, made of rough boards, and without coat or hat. I was handcuffed. Around my ankles also were a pair of heavy fetters. One end of a chain was fastened to a large ring in the floor, the other to the fetters on my ankles. I tried in vain to stand upon my feet. Waking from such a painful trance, it was some time before I could collect my thoughts. Where was I? What was the meaning of these chains? Where were Brown and Hamilton? What had I done to deserve imprisonment in such a dungeon? I could not comprehend. There was a blank of some indefinite period, preceding my awakening in that lonely place, the events of which the utmost stretch of memory was unable to recall. I listened intently for some sign or sound of life, but nothing broke the oppressive silence, save the clinking of my chains, whenever I chanced to move. I spoke aloud, but the sound of my voice startled me. I felt of my pockets, so far as the fetters would allow—far enough, indeed, to ascertain that I had not only been robbed of liberty, but that my money and free papers were also gone! Then did the idea begin to break upon my mind, at first dim and confused, that I had been kidnapped. But that I thought was incredible. There must have been some misapprehension—some unfortunate mistake. It could not be that a free citizen of New-York, who had wronged no man, nor violated any law, should be dealt with thus inhumanly. The more I contemplated my situation, however, the more I became confirmed in my suspicions. It was a desolate thought, indeed. I felt there was no trust or mercy in unfeeling man; and commending myself to the God of the oppressed, bowed my head upon my fettered hands, and wept most bitterly.

I think because we have all experienced feelings of confusion, loneliness and pain, we know that this is a true story. We can really empathize with Mr. Northup even though we were not enslaved. He was really skillful in drawing us into his plight. He makes me want to keep reading.

I think his free papers being gone put him into a really bad predicament. I can’t imagine not having the freedom to come and go as I please. Enslaving others for our own profit is morally wrong. It’s something I would not be able to do to another human being!