**Characteristics of the Slave Narrative**

**To what extent does Frederick Douglass follow the “conventions” of the Slave Narrative? In what ways does he deviate from these conventions? Cite examples related to each narrative detail:**

1. a first sentence beginning, "I was born . . . ," then specifying a place but not a date of birth;

2. a sketchy account of parentage, often involving a white father;

3. description of a cruel master, mistress, or overseer, details of first observed whipping and numerous subsequent whippings, with women very frequently the victims;

4. an account of one extraordinarily strong, hardworking slave--often "pure African"--who, because there is no reason for it, refuses to be whipped;

5. record of the barriers raised against slave literacy and the overwhelming difficulties encountered in learning to read and write;

6. description of a "Christian" slaveholder (often of one such dying in terror) and the accompanying claim that "Christian" slaveholders are invariably worse than those professing no religion;

7. description of the amounts and kinds of food and clothing given to slaves, the work required of them, the pattern of a day, a week, a year;

8. account of a slave auction, of families being separated and destroyed, of distraught mothers clinging to their children as they are torn from them, of slave coffles being driven South;

9. descriptions of patrols, of failed attempt(s) to escape, of pursuit by men and dogs;

10. description of successful attempt(s) to escape, lying by during the day, travelling by night guided by the North Star, reception in a free state by Quakers who offer a lavish breakfast and much genial   
thee/thou conversation

11. taking of a new last name (frequently one suggested by a white abolitionist) to accord with new social identity as a free man, but retention of first name as a mark of continuity of individual identity;

12. reflections on slavery.

James Olney's "'I was born': Slave Narratives, Their Status as Autobiography and as Literature" and other essays in The Slave's Narrative, ed. Charles T. Davis and Henry Louis Gates, Jr. (New York, 1985).

**Frequent Pattern:**

From Frances Smith Foster, *Witnessing Slavery: The Development of Ante-bellum Slave Narratives,* [2d. ed., 1994]*:* "The plot of the nineteenth-century slave narrative is informed by the Judeo-Christian mythological structure on both the material and the spiritual levels.  The action moves from the idyllic life of a garden of Eden into the wilderness, the struggle for survival, the providential help, and the arrival into the Promised Land.  In addition, the plot of the slave narrative incorporates the parallel structure of birth into death and death into birth which also distinguishes the Judeo-Christian myth" (84).

"In the slave narrative the mythological pattern is realized in four chronological phases.  First comes the loss of innocence, which is objectified through the development of an awareness of what it means to be a slave.  This can be compared to the descent from perfection or mortification.  The mortification process includes purgation, for as the slave learns the meaning of slavery, he also tries to purge himself of those elements that would facilitate enslavement.  Second is the realization of alternatives to bondage and the formulation of a resolve to be free.  This decision begins the ascent to the ideal, or invigoration.  The resolution to quit slavery is, in effect, a climax to a conversion experience.  The third phase is the escape.  Whether it occurs between two sentences or forms the largest portion of the narrative, it is part of the struggle to overcome evil.  The interest at this point is in the details, the pitfalls and obstacles, the sufferings and moments of bravery encountered in the process of achieving freedom. Although the first attempt sometimes ends in capture, the outcome is never in doubt.  The narrative, after all, was written by a freeman.  The fourth phase is that of freedom obtained. It is the arrival at the City of God or the New Jerusalem and it corresponds to the jubilation period of ancient ritual" (85).

* Descent from state of innocence or peace into recognition of status (slavery)
* Progressive dehumanization at hands of masters and concomitant growth of self-reliance and decision-making, sometimes involving literacy
* A spiritual "bottoming-out"
* Resolve; for Douglass, the fight with Covey
* Flight and redemption

**Frequently Repeated Motifs**

* Exposes physical and emotional abuses of slavery: scenes of whipping, sexual abuse, starvation, especially of women or children
* Exposes (sometimes satirically) white owners' hypocrisy and inconstancy
* Describes repeated raising of narrator's expectations only to have them dashed by whites
* Describes quest for literacy
* Describes quest for freedom
* Includes vignettes of other character types and the experience of slavery: those who succeed and those who fail
* Makes overt appeals to imagined audience
* Details loss of significant family member(s) and the destruction of family ties