12 Years a Slave Guiding Questions

Synopsis:
Northup's book is a personal narrative about slavery, but at the same time, he provides us with information about several groups of people with whom he had contact: southern whites, free blacks, and northern whites (indirectly). In a larger sense, Northup's autobiographical work adds another dimension to our understanding of the differences between the North and the South that contributed to the outbreak of the Civil War.

Remember that Northup was a slave for twelve years. Had he written about every experience that he had as a slave, this book would be thousands of pages long. Therefore, he included only those things that were central to his story and that he believed to be significant in terms of conveying an understanding of slavery and of life in the North.

Directions:
Below are questions that can guide your reading and understanding of 12 Years a Slave by Solomon Northup. These questions are not comprehensive, but should rather be used to illuminate on-going themes throughout the book. Within each answer, be sure to provide an adequate description, which should include quotes, analysis, textual evidence, etc. Be sure that your answers are thoughtful, use elaboration and evidence, and prove that you carefully analyzed the text. You can either answer these questions below or on a separate sheet of paper. Please answer in complete sentences. It is suggested that you preview the questions prior to reading and write down page numbers as reference as you answer each question. This portion of the assignment is due on the first day of school.

Introduction (pages ix-xxiv)
1. Do the editors believe Solomon Northup's story to be true? What evidence do they offer?

2. Do the editors believe that Northup provided an accurate picture of slavery (at least as he saw it)?

Twelve Years a Slave: Narrative of Solomon Northup
1. Where did Northup live in the North?

2. What were some of the “blessings of liberty” enjoyed by Northup before he left Saratoga with his eventual betrayers?
3. In what year was he captured and sold into slavery?

4. Who did Northup write his account for? Who did he expect would read his story?

5. Northup begins his journey with Brown and Hamilton feeling “happy as [he] had ever been” and ends the journey to New Orleans with his “cup of sorrow … full to overflowing.” During this time, what circumstances have most oppressed his spirit?

6. Northup questions the role of Brown and Hamilton in planning his kidnapping. What circumstantial evidence suggests that they were guilty of this crime?

7. In what ways does Northup’s faith in God provide him consolation?

8. Northup tells the stories of two other black men who are kidnapped and sold into slavery, Robert and Arthur. What are the parallels to Northup’s own situation? What happens to each of these men? Why does Northup include these stories in his narrative?

9. On several occasions Northup felt compelled to defend his basic humanity. Why do you suppose he felt a need to do this?
10. What can we learn about slavery from the story of Eliza?

11. In Chapter V, Northup is given the name Platt. What is in a name? Why is it a common practice to rename slaves after their owners?

12. Why is Northup afraid to disclose his status as a free man? What does he realize might happen to him?

13. Northup was sold into slavery in Louisiana. What kind of work did slaves in Louisiana perform? What did they grow?

14. What kind of treatment did slaves in Louisiana receive (food, clothing, shelter, physical abuse, sexual exploitation)?

15. Describe Northup's attitudes towards the various slave owners he encountered in Louisiana. Did he see them all the same way or did he make distinctions?
16. Northup writes generally about the impact of slavery on southern whites, and also writes about young master Epps. What does he wish his readers to learn about the impact of slavery on southern whites?

17. Did the slaves Northup encountered in Louisiana have any notion of freedom?

18. What kinds of difficulties lay in the path of a slave who wished to flee to freedom?

19. Did the slaves Northup met in Louisiana resist or rebel?

20. In several places, Northup writes about slave drivers. Who were they? What did they do? Why did they do it?

21. What roles do music and dance play in the lives of the slaves?

22. What are the duties of the overseer and of the driver? How are they motivated to fulfill these duties?

23. What forms of resistance do the slaves utilize on Epps’ plantation and throughout the region?
24. What falsehoods does Northup employ to protect himself?

25. Compare Bass's attitudes on slavery with those of Epps. In one sense, these men may be viewed as representative of northern and southern opinions. Did the two have anything in common?

26. Do you see any contradiction in Epps' (southern) attitudes towards slaves? Explain.

27. In Louisiana, did non-slave owning whites have any stake in the slave system? What role did they play in maintaining slavery?

28. Do you find Northup to be very sensitive to, or sympathetic with, slave culture? Why or why not?

29. In the end of his narrative, Northup worries that he may have presented to the reader “too prominently the bright side of the picture” of slavery. Do you agree with that?

30. In many cases, Northup's observations have an application that goes beyond his understanding of his twelve years as a slave, or even of slavery itself. He tells us about the human condition. Be alert to this level of interpretation. What can we learn about some of the following subjects:

   a. How people respond to extreme stress and dehumanization in situations of little control?
b. The strength of the human spirit?

c. Racism and prejudice?

d. The impact of power on those who wield it and those who are subject to it.

e. The ability to inflict cruelty and inhumanity and the concomitant ability to rationalize their use. (Look-up concomitant and rationalize in the dictionary.)

Sources:
http://www.iupui.edu/~history/classes/2000/spring/studyquest3.htm