

CLOSE READING A

Letter from Jourdon Anderson: A Freedman Writes His Former Master

*Close reading is carefully and purposefully **rereading** a text. It's an encounter with the text in which we closely focus on what the author has to say, what the author's purpose is, what the words mean, and what the structure of the text tells us. Close reading ensures that we truly understand what we've read. At Facing History and Ourselves, we use this careful investigation of text to make connections to essential questions about history, human behavior, and ourselves. This protocol can be used to implement a close reading for select documents during the Reconstruction unit. Adapt the following procedure to best meet your goals and the needs of your students.*

FIRST READ: Read aloud. Either the teacher or an extremely fluent student can read the text aloud. Ask students to circle unfamiliar words as they listen. After the read-aloud, as students share these words with the class, decide which words to define immediately to limit confusion and which definitions you want students to uncover through careful reading.

SECOND READ: Individual read. Ask students to read silently to get a feel for the text. They can note specific words or phrases that jump out at them for any number of reasons: because they are interesting, familiar, strange, confusing, funny, troubling, difficult, etc. Share some of these as a class. Particular questions to ask students at this stage of the reading are:

- What can you already infer about the author of this text?
- How is the text structured?
- Does this structure make it easy or difficult to make meaning?
- Does this structure tell us anything about the author's style or purpose?

THIRD READ: Text-dependent questions. In small groups, have students read the text in chunks and answer a set of text-dependent questions. These questions are included with each close reading exemplar. Sample answers are provided to help guide the teacher. See the "Close Reading A: Student Handout" form for a student version of the document; see "Close Reading A: Teacher Guide" for the teacher's version.

FOURTH READ: Visual image. In small groups, have students create a visual image on paper that captures the essence of the text. You may also ask them to include three words or a sentence summary of each section of text. Groups can be assigned either the entire text or sections of text for this portion of the close reading.

FIFTH READ: Gallery read. Ask students to do a "gallery read" of the images that have been created.

TRANSITION TO DISCUSSION

At this point, we recommend organizing a class discussion so that students can make connections beyond the text. This discussion can be informal or can use the format of the “Socratic Seminar” or “Save the Last Word for Me” strategy.

DISCUSSION SUGGESTIONS

As mentioned earlier, this unit includes two writing prompts. Both prompts can be used to launch a discussion after a close reading. Examples include:

- To connect to the argumentative writing prompt (*Support, refute, or modify the statement: Laws are the most important factor in overcoming discrimination*):
 - What is the role of laws in creating a just democracy? How do you think Jourdon Anderson would answer that question? How do you answer that question? What else might we need to create a just democracy?
- To connect to the informative writing prompt: *Historian Eric Foner calls Reconstruction “America’s unfinished revolution.” What debates and dilemmas from the Reconstruction era remain unresolved? After researching informational texts on Reconstruction, write an essay in which you explain one debate that was central to this period that remained unresolved. Explain why the debate was significant to the history of Reconstruction. In your conclusion, discuss the legacy of the debate not being resolved.*
 - Ask students to consider connections between Anderson’s letter and contemporary issues surrounding membership and justice in American society today. What aspects of Anderson’s argument remain “unfinished” in the twenty-first century?
- To connect to more general Facing History and Ourselves themes:
 - What does it mean to be free? How does Anderson define freedom?
 - What can you infer about how Anderson is defining justice for freedpeople? How does that connect to how he might be viewing the universe of obligation of former slaveholders?
 - How would you describe the different “universes of obligation” of individuals, groups, institutions, and the government at this point in American history?
- It’s also possible to have students themselves create the questions for a discussion. To do this, you might guide students by asking them to find connections between the essential questions and the text or to write questions based on what resonates for them. They might choose to make connections to the author’s purpose, the structure of the text, the tone of the text, or the main messages of the text. Alternatively, they may want to make connections to issues related to the individual and society, to examples of discrimination, to the role of government in a democracy, and beyond.

Text of Anderson's Letter to His Former Master

Dayton, Ohio, August 7, 1865.

To my old Master, Colonel P. H. Anderson, Big Spring, Tennessee.

Sir:

I got your letter, and was glad to find that you had not forgotten Jourdon, and that you wanted me to come back and live with you again, promising to do better for me than anybody else can. I have often felt uneasy about you. I thought the Yankees would have hung you long before this, for harboring Rebs they found at your house. I suppose they never heard about your going to Colonel Martin's to kill the Union soldier that was left by his company in their stable. Although you shot at me twice before I left you, I did not want to hear of your being hurt, and am glad you are still living. It would do me good to go back to the dear old home again, and see Miss Mary and Miss Martha and Allen, Esther, Green, and Lee. Give my love to them all, and tell them I hope we will meet in the better world, if not in this. I would have gone back to see you all when I was working in the Nashville Hospital, but one of the neighbors told me that Henry intended to shoot me if he ever got a chance.

I want to know particularly what the good chance is you propose to give me. I am doing tolerably well here. I get \$25 a month, with victuals and clothing; have a comfortable home for Mandy (the folks call her Mrs. Anderson), and the children, Milly, Jane, and Grundy, go to school and are learning well. The teacher says Grundy has a head for a preacher.

Guided Close Reading
with Text-Dependent Questions

1. After reading the first paragraph, what can you infer based on the way the writer addresses the letter?

A good close reading starts with some “easy wins” for students, and this question should definitely elicit the response that “old” indicates that Colonel Anderson is Jourdan’s former master.

2. What evidence is there in the opening paragraph to support Jourdon’s claim that he has “often felt uneasy about” Colonel Anderson?

While Jourdon is glad that Anderson hasn’t forgotten about him and does not wish Anderson ill (indeed, he is genuinely surprised that Anderson wasn’t killed by Union soldiers for harboring rebels), he nonetheless expresses reluctance to return. That caution stems from the fact that the colonel shot him twice before he left, and he has heard word that he might be shot again by someone named Henry should he return.

3. In the first paragraph, what reasons does Jourdon offer to suggest that he might return to Big Spring? What clues are there that he might not return?

He still has many friends there that he would like to visit, and in fact he twice asks Colonel Anderson to give them his regards (once in the opening paragraph and once in the postscript). In asking the colonel to give his friends his love, he mentions that he hopes they will meet in the afterlife if they do not meet in the present—indicating some uncertainty regarding his return.

4. What information can you gather from the second paragraph about what happened to Jourdon after he left Colonel Anderson?

As Jourdon says, he is doing “tolerably well,” with a monthly salary as well as food and clothing. While we do not know how he is presently employed, he had been working previously at a hospital in an unknown capacity.

They go to Sunday school, and Mandy and me attend church regularly. We are kindly treated. Sometimes we overhear others saying, "Them colored people were slaves" down in Tennessee. The children feel hurt when they hear such remarks; but I tell them it was no disgrace in Tennessee to belong to Colonel Anderson. Many darkeys would have been proud, as I used to be, to call you master. Now if you will write and say what wages you will give me, I will be better able to decide whether it would be to my advantage to move back again.

As to my freedom, which you say I can have, there is nothing to be gained on that score, as I got my free papers in 1864 from the Provost-Marshal-General of the Department of Nashville. Mandy says she would be afraid to go back without some proof that you were disposed to treat us justly and kindly; and we have concluded to test your sincerity by asking you to send us our wages for the time we served you. This will make us forget and forgive old scores, and rely on your justice and friendship in the future. I served you faithfully for thirty-two years, and Mandy twenty years. At \$25 a month for me, and \$2 a week for Mandy, our earnings would amount to \$11,680. Add to this the interest for the time our wages have been kept back, and deduct what you paid for our clothing, and three doctor's visits to me, and pulling a tooth for Mandy, and the balance will show what we are in justice entitled to.

Guided Close Reading with Text-Dependent Questions

- 5. What do we learn about Jourdon's family in the second paragraph?**
Jourdon's family, consisting of his common-law wife, Mandy, and their three children, is well situated, and they live with him in a home of their own. The family goes to church, and the children participate in Sunday school as well as receiving regular schooling, with Jourdon's son receiving special praise from his teacher.
- 6. What other evidence is there of the importance Jourdon places on education?**
Jourdon ends his letter by inquiring about whether there are any schools for colored children nearby, indicating the importance of education to him by stating that "the great desire of my life" is to give not just his son an education but his daughters as well.
- 7. What feelings might Jourdon and his family have regarding their status as former slaves?**
Despite being treated "kindly" by those they associate with, the children are ashamed of their past. Their father tells them (by way of a backhanded compliment to the colonel) that there was "no disgrace" in having been the colonel's slave and that he was even proud of that fact.
- 8. Based on what Jourdon says at the beginning of the third paragraph, what can be inferred regarding what the colonel offered Jourdon in his letter to him?**
It can be deduced from Jourdon's remarks that the colonel "offered" Jourdon his freedom—an offer Jourdon quickly brushes aside here, noting that he has been free for a year already.
- 9. What is the sticking point regarding Jourdon's return to work for the colonel?**
While there are several issues that Jourdon raises over the course of the letter that require resolution (e.g., Henry's threat, what wages he will earn), for him the issue hinges on restitution for past work. If the colonel will not compensate Jourdon and his wife for the decades of work they performed, they can have "little faith" in his future promises to treat them well.

Text of Anderson's Letter to His Former Master

Please send the money by Adams Express, in care of V. Winters, Esq., Dayton, Ohio. If you fail to pay us for faithful labors in the past, we can have little faith in your promises in the future. We trust the good Maker has opened your eyes to the wrongs which you and your fathers have done to me and my fathers, in making us toil for you for generations without recompense. Here I draw my wages every Saturday night; but in Tennessee there was never any pay-day for the negroes any more than for the horses and cows. Surely there will be a day of reckoning for those who defraud the laborer of his hire.

In answering this letter, please state if there would be any safety for my Milly and Jane, who are now grown up, and both good-looking girls. You know how it was with poor Matilda and Catherine. I would rather stay here and starve and die, if it come to that, than have my girls brought to shame by the violence and wickedness of their young masters. You will also please state if there has been any schools opened for the colored children in your neighborhood. The great desire of my life now is to give my children an education, and have them form virtuous habits.

From your old servant,
Jourdon Anderson

P.S.— Say howdy to George Carter, and thank him for taking the pistol from you when you were shooting at me.

Guided Close Reading with Text-Dependent Questions

10. What clues are there in the passage as to the meaning of the word *recompense*?

In his letter to the colonel, Jourdon notes that it is wrong to “defraud the laborer of his hire,” or in other words that an injustice has been done in not rewarding the “toil of generations” with compensation in the form of lost wages. Recompense is therefore contextually defined in the letter as payment for one’s labor.

11. What explanation does Jourdon provide for feeling justified in asking his former master for lost wages from when he was a slave?

Jourdon bluntly states that God will hold those who held slaves in bondage accountable for their actions, and he “trusts” that “the good Maker has opened your eyes to the wrongs which you and your fathers have done to me and my fathers.” He offers a moral argument to justify his demand for payment.

12. What final worry does Jourdon raise in the last paragraph of the letter? What can you infer about the experience of female slaves prior to Reconstruction?

In keeping with the moral theme opened in the previous paragraph, Jourdon notes that his daughters are attractive and “you know how it was” with other girls—so bad that he would rather starve and die than “have my girls brought to shame by the violence and wickedness of their young masters.” The implication is that he is worried that upon returning, his daughters would be raped—like the women he names (presumably slaves) who were violated when held in involuntary servitude.

13. What hints are there in the letter that Jourdon now sees himself as the equal of his former master?

There are many indications of Jourdon’s evident pride in replying to his master on equal terms, from his demand for restitution for lost wages to something as simple as referring to both his master and himself now as “old,” whereas before, he explains, slaves were treated no differently from cattle. Students should be encouraged to explore the different tones that Jourdon might be using over the course of the letter (e.g., ironic, accusatory, matter-of-fact, casual).

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