WINSLOW HOMER

A Visit from the Old Mistress, 1876
Arch has “taken freedom” and left us, so we have no
man-servant in the dining-room. Sidney, Garnett’s boy,
either ran away, or was captured in Virginia. To do Arch
justice, he didn’t go without asking father’s permission,
but it is a surprise that he, who was so devoted to “Marse
Fred,” should be the very first of the house servants to
go….I feel sorry for the poor negroes. They are not to
blame for taking freedom when it is brought to their very
doors and almost forced upon them. Anybody would do
the same, still when they go I can’t help feeling as if they
are deserting us for the enemy, and it seems humiliating
to be compelled to bargain and haggle with our own
servants about wages. I am really attached to father’s
negroes, and even when they leave us, as Alfred, Arch,
and Harrison have done, cannot help feeling interested
in their welfare and hoping they will find good places.

Suggested Questions
➤ Why do you think Eliza believes that freedom is
being “forced upon” her family’s former slaves? Which
lines in the passage support your answer?
➤ Does this reading change your interpretation of
Homer’s painting? Why or why not? What do the
artwork and reading tell us about the challenges black
and white Southerners faced in the post-war period?

Primary Source Connection
Pair this artwork with the excerpt below from The
War-Time Journal of a Georgia Girl, 1864–1865, by
Eliza Frances Andrews. Her journal, written from the
point of view of a former slave owner, recounts her
experiences of the end of the Civil War and the
beginning of Reconstruction in the state of Georgia.

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Guided Looking Questions for Students
➤ Describe the way the artist composed the scene.
How are the women presented to us?
➤ What do our observations of the women tell us
about their life circumstances? Consider body
language, clothing, and living quarters.
➤ In the final composition, Homer painted over the
flower in the mistress’s hand—seemingly a gesture of
friendship. Why do you think he made that choice?
How would the tone of the mistress’s greeting have
changed if he had left the flower?

Literary Connection
Pair this artwork with Jordan Anderson’s dictated
letter, excerpted below, to his former master, Colonel
P. H. Anderson, dated August 7, 1865. The letter, one
of the first published examples of direct and satiric
writing by an African American, appeared in a Dayton,
Ohio, newspaper that same month. Colonel Anderson
had written to his former slave Jordan, requesting that
he come back to work on his farm. Since his emancipa-
tion, Jordan and his family had moved to Dayton—a
city with a long-established free black community.

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Although the letter is a historic artifact, students should also analyze it as a piece of literature.

Sir: I got your letter, and was glad to find that you had not forgotten Jordan, 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 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 here call her Mrs. Anderson), — and the children — Milly, Jane and Grundy — go to school and are learning well…. 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.

Suggested Questions

➤ How does Jordan Anderson convey that he is not interested in Colonel Anderson’s offer?

➤ Compare Jordan’s description of life as a free man in Ohio to Homer’s depiction of free women in the South. What main differences can you infer from these verbal and visual descriptions?

To read the full text of extended quotes, visit:

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