[*12 Years a Slave*](http://www.imdb.com/title/tt2024544/); Regency Enterprises, 2013; Directed by Steve McQueen; Starring Chiwetel Ejiofor, Michael Fassbender, and Lupita Nyong’o; Rated R; [Watch the trailer](https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=z02Ie8wKKRg).

Summary:

Many have called *12 Years a Slave* the greatest film about slavery ever made. Director Steve McQueen astonishingly shot the movie in less than 50 days during a Louisiana summer—and with a single camera. At the Oscars the film took home the awards for Best Picture, Supporting Actress, and Adapted Screenplay.

Solomon Northup is a free black man in the North who supports his wife and children with his work as a violinist. He is kidnapped by two white men and sold into slavery in the South, where he has multiple masters, from the more benevolent Ford to the sadistic Epps. He meets and befriends Patsey, a slave that is raped, whipped, and loved by Epps. Solomon’s efforts to escape all fail until he is able to deliver a letter to friends in the North. He returns to his wife and children twelve years after his departure. The film is based on the actual memoir and slave narrative by Solomon Northup, *Twelve Years a Slave* (1855).

Themes, Symbols, & Motifs:

* Survival. Solomon’s notion of survival—“I don't want to survive. I want to live.”—varies greatly from Alfre Woodard’s character Mistress Shaw, a white man’s common-law wife.
* Law. Brad Pitt’s character Bass questions whether that which is legal is also moral. “What is true and right is true and right for all. White and black alike.”
* Sin. After whipping Patsey, Epps shouts at Solomon, “There is no sin!  A man does as he pleases with his property.”
* Flesh. McQueen emphasizes the human body in the film, from the sexual encounter at the very beginning to the whipping and selling of flesh.
* Despair. Solomon constantly fights despair, refusing to give in, and rebukes both Eliza and Patsey for their indulgence in it.
* Candles. Multiple key points in the film feature candles as they are blown out.
* Paper. The antebellum South is controlled by paper: one’s free papers, written letters, and the pages of the Bible—all of which are prominent in the film.

Discussion Questions:

1. Compare and contrast Solomon’s two primary masters, Ford and Epps.
2. Assess the use of violence and nudity. Were these instances necessary, useful, gratuitous?
3. What scene is the most difficult to watch? Why?
4. Epps quotes Luke 12:47 to his slaves: “And that servant, which knew his lord's will, and prepared not himself, neither did according to his will, shall be beaten with many stripes.” How does he misinterpret this verse?
5. Why does Solomon destroy his violin?
6. In what ways does this film compare to *Schindler’s List*?
7. Why are the two longest shots—Solomon’s hanging and Patsey’s whipping—the longest shots?
8. The director Steve McQueen has said he based some of the film’s images on the paintings of Francisco Goya. Where is this apparent?