
Darwin and slavery



Activity 2: The language of slavery
Subject: English
2 x 50 Minutes

Suggested preparation

Presentation:
[Darwin and slavery](#)

What do I need?

[Letter 206](#) Charles Darwin to Catherine Darwin, 22 May - 14 July 1833
[Extracts from Darwin's Journal of researches](#)
[Letter questions](#)
['Language of slavery' word list](#)

During the *Beagle* voyage, Darwin wrote about his encounters with slavery in his letters and journal. Learn about his views then create a poem or other piece of creative writing, using your understanding of the vocabulary of the transatlantic slave trade.

What do I do?

1. Read Darwin's *Journal of Researches* extract and letter to his sister Catherine, and answer the letters questions.
2. Discuss the meaning of a selection of words on the 'Language of slavery' word list.
3. Individually, compose a poem or short piece of creative writing that makes use of the language that you have discussed and explored. You can write from the perspective of a person from that time or from a modern perspective.

Letter 206: Charles Darwin to Catherine Darwin, 22 May
1833

Maldonado. Rio Plata
May 22d. 1833

My dear Catherine

... I have watched how steadily the general feeling, as shown at elections, has been rising against Slavery.— What a proud thing for England, if she is the first European nation which utterly abolishes it.— I was told before leaving England, that after living in Slave countries: all my opinions would be altered; the only alteration I am aware of is forming a much higher estimate of the Negro's character.— it is impossible to see a negro & not feel kindly towards him; such cheerful, open honest expressions & such fine muscular bodies; I never saw any of the diminutive Portuguese with their murderous countenances, without almost wishing for Brazil to follow the example of Hayti; & considering the enormous healthy looking black population, it will be wonderful if at some future day it does not take place.

— There is at Rio, a man (I know not his titles) who has large salary to prevent (I believe) the landing of slaves: he lives at Botofogo, & yet that was the bay, where during my residence the greater number of smuggled slaves were landed.— Some of the Anti-Slavery people ought to question about his office: it was the subject of conversation at Rio amongst some of the lower English.—...

Charles Darwin



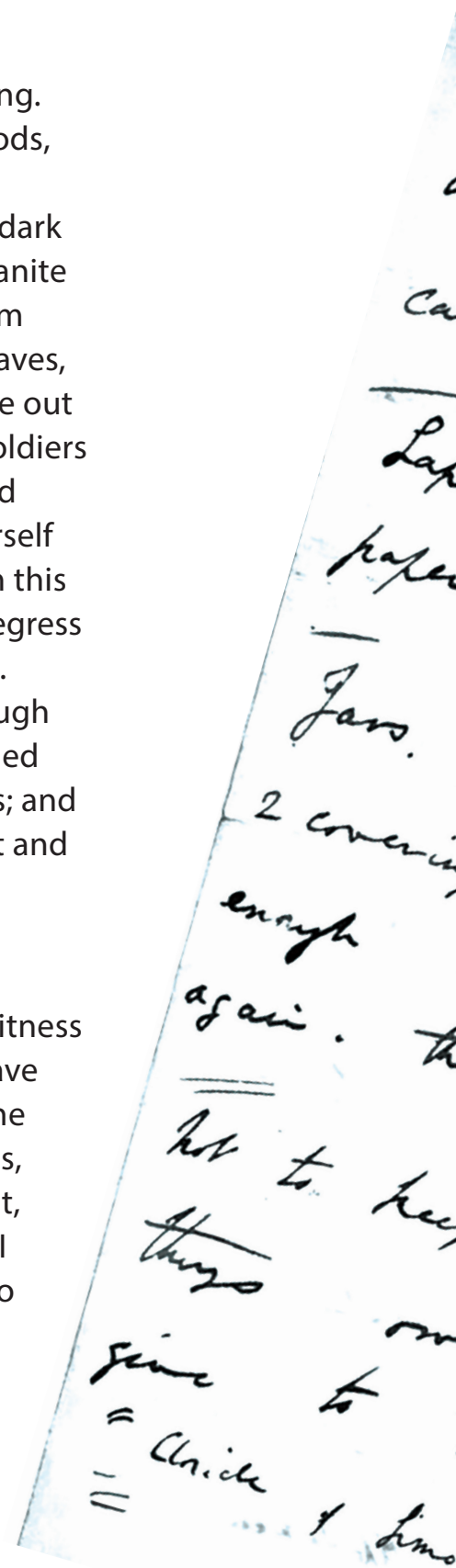
Journal of researches extracts

April 8th 1832. Rio de Janeiro, Brazil

Our party amounted to seven. The first stage was very interesting. The day was powerfully hot, and as we passed through the woods, every thing was motionless, excepting the large and brilliant butterflies, which lazily fluttered about.... ..As it was growing dark we passed under one of the massive, bare, and steep hills of granite which are so common in this country. This spot is notorious from having been, for a long time, the residence of some runaway slaves, who, by cultivating a little ground near the top, contrived to eke out a subsistence. At length they were discovered, and a party of soldiers being sent, the whole were seized with the exception of one old woman, who, sooner than again be led into slavery, dashed herself to pieces from the summit of the mountain. In a Roman matron this would have been called the noble love of freedom: in a poor negress it is mere brutal obstinacy. We continued riding for some hours. For the few last miles the road was intricate, and it passed through a desert waste of marshes and lagoons. The scene by the dimmed light of the moon was most desolate. A few fireflies flitted by us; and the solitary snipe, as it rose, uttered its plaintive cry. The distant and sullen roar of the sea scarcely broke the stillness of the night.

April 14th 1832. Rio de Janeiro, Brazil

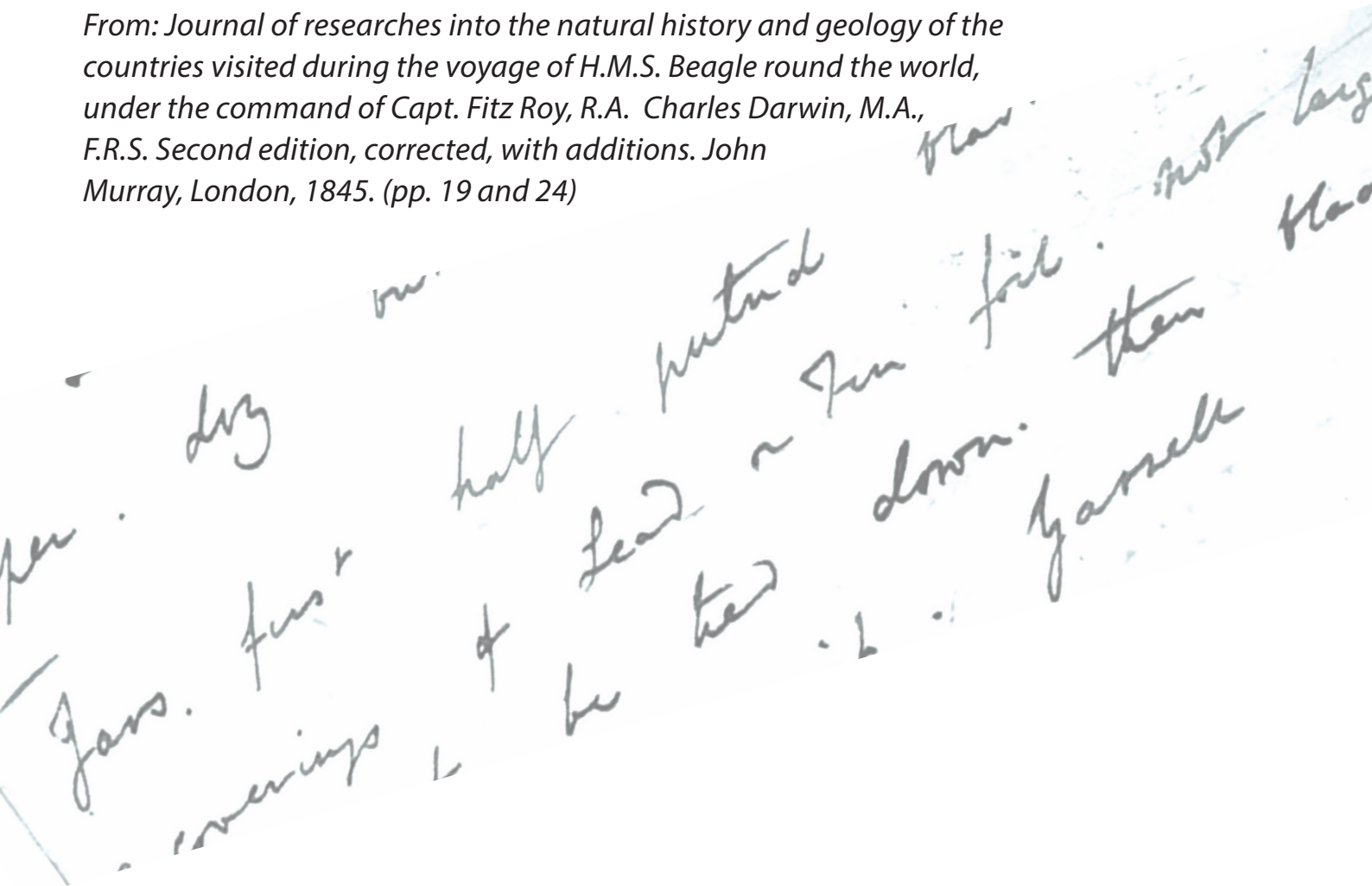
...While staying at this estate, I was very nearly being an eye-witness to one of those atrocious acts which can only take place in a slave country. Owing to a quarrel and a law-suit, the owner was on the point of taking all the women and children from the male slaves, and selling them separately at the public auction at Rio. Interest, and not any feeling of compassion, prevented this act. Indeed, I do not believe the inhumanity of separating thirty families, who had lived together for many years, even occurred to the owner. Yet I will pledge myself, that in humanity and good feeling he was superior to the common run of men. It may be said there exists no limit to the blindness of interest and selfish habit. I



Journal of researches extracts

may mention one very trifling anecdote, which at the time struck me more forcibly than any story of cruelty. I was crossing a ferry with a negro, who was uncommonly stupid. In endeavouring to make him understand, I talked loud, and made signs, in doing which I passed my hand near his face. He, I suppose, thought I was in a passion, and was going to strike him; for instantly, with a frightened look and half-shut eyes, he dropped his hands. I shall never forget my feelings of surprise, disgust, and shame, at seeing a great powerful man afraid even to ward off a blow, directed, as he thought, at his face. This man had been trained to a degradation lower than the slavery of the most helpless animal.

From: Journal of researches into the natural history and geology of the countries visited during the voyage of H.M.S. Beagle round the world, under the command of Capt. Fitz Roy, R.A. Charles Darwin, M.A., F.R.S. Second edition, corrected, with additions. John Murray, London, 1845. (pp. 19 and 24)



Letter questions:

1. Summarise the two experiences with slavery that Darwin describes in the *Journal of Researches* extracts from 1832.
2. Paying attention to Darwin's language in the journal extracts, what do you think that he feels about these two encounters?
3. Choose a sentence from Darwin's extracts which most vividly reveals his feelings about slavery?
4. In the letter to his sister Catherine from 1833, Darwin says that he was told he would change his view of slavery when he visited 'slave countries'. What do you think were the *expected* changes and why?
5. How has Darwin's view about slavery changed *in reality*? Thinking back to the journal extracts, why do you think his views have changed in this way?
6. What kind of language does Darwin use to talk about other races and peoples in his letter? What does this language tell us about Darwin himself and the society that he lived in at this time?

Word list: Discuss the meaning of the following words in the context of slavery

Abolition	Compensation	Quaker
Affluence	Diaspora	Racism
Americas	Discriminate	Rebellion
Apprentice	Europe	Repression
Apprenticeship	Enslavement	Resistance
Anti-slavery	Freedom	Return passage
Branded	Free man / woman	Shackles
Brutality	Homeward passage	Slave
Boycott	Middle passage	Slave colony
British Empire	New world	Steward
Campaigning	Negro / negress	Transatlantic
Cargo	Overseer	Triangular trade
Caribbean	Plantation	Venture
Child labour	Prejudice	