

Margaret Garner: Defying the Fugitive Slave Act

By Levi Coffin
1880

Levi Coffin (1798-1877) was an American abolitionist who was an active leader in the Underground Railroad in Indiana and Ohio. In this text, Coffin tells the story of the fugitive slave Margaret Garner. Her story inspired the novel Beloved by Nobel Prize winner Toni Morrison. As you read, take notes on how Coffin describes the events that unfold in the text and how he characterizes Margaret Garner.

[1] Perhaps no case that came under my notice, while engaged in aiding fugitive slaves, attracted more attention and aroused deeper interest and sympathy than the case of Margaret Garner, the slave mother, who killed her child rather than see it taken back to slavery. This happened in the latter part of January, 1856. The Ohio River was frozen over at the time, and the opportunity thus offered for escaping to a free State was embraced by a number of slaves living in Kentucky, several miles back from the river. A party of 17, belonging to different masters in the same neighborhood, made arrangements to escape together. There was snow on the ground and the roads were smooth, so the plan of going to the river on a sled naturally suggested itself. The time fixed for their flight was Sabbath night,¹ and having managed to get a large sled and two good horses, belonging to one of their masters, the party of 17 crowded into the sled and started on their hazardous journey in the latter part of the night. They drove the horses at full speed, and at daylight reached the river below Covington, opposite Western Row. They left the sled and horses here, and as quickly as possible crossed the river on foot. It was now broad daylight, and people were beginning to pass about the streets, and the fugitives divided their company that they might not attract so much notice.



"Family of African American slaves on Smith's Plantation Beaufort South Carolina" by Timothy H. O'Sullivan is in the public domain.

An old slave man named Simon, and his wife Mary, together with their son Robert and his wife Margaret Garner and four children, made their way to the house of a colored² man named Kite, who had formerly lived in their neighborhood and had been purchased from slavery by his father, Joe Kite. They had to make several inquiries in order to find Kite's house, which was below Mill Creek, in the lower part of the city. This afterward led to their

1. a day of religious observance and abstinence from work
2. "Colored" is an outdated and offensive term used to describe people of color. In the context of this text, it is not used offensively, rather to distinguish that the man was not white.

discovery; they had been seen by a number of persons on their way to Kite's, and were easily traced by pursuers. The other nine fugitives were more fortunate. They made their way up town and found friends who conducted them to safe hiding-places, where they remained until night. They were then put on the Underground Railroad,³ and went safely through to Canada.

Kite felt alarmed for the safety of the party that had arrived at his house, and as soon as breakfast was over, he came to my store, at the corner of Sixth and Elm Streets, to ask counsel regarding them. I told him that they were in a very unsafe place and must be removed at once. I directed him how to conduct them from his house to the outskirts of the city, up Mill Creek, to a settlement of colored people in the western part of the city, where fugitives were often harbored.⁴ I would make arrangements to forward them northward, that night, on the Underground Railroad. Kite returned to his house at once, according to my directions, but he was too late; in a few minutes after his return, the house was surrounded by pursuers — the masters of the fugitives, with officers and a posse⁵ of men. The door and windows were barred, and those inside refused to give admittance. The fugitives were determined to fight, and to die, rather than to be taken back to slavery. Margaret, the mother of the four children, declared that she would kill herself and her children before she would return to bondage. The slave men were armed and fought bravely. The window was first battered down with a stick of wood, and one of the deputy marshals attempted to enter, but a pistol shot from within made a flesh wound on his arm and caused him to abandon the attempt. The pursuers then battered down the door with some timber and rushed in. The husband of Margaret fired several shots, and wounded one of the officers, but was soon overpowered and dragged out of the house. At this moment, Margaret Garner, seeing that their hopes of freedom were vain seized a butcher knife that lay on the table, and with one stroke cut the throat of her little daughter, whom she probably loved the best. She then attempted to take the life of the other children and to kill herself, but she was overpowered and hampered⁶ before she could complete her desperate work. The whole party was then arrested and lodged in jail.

The trial lasted two weeks, drawing crowds to the court-room every day. Colonel Chambers, of this city, and two lawyers from Covington — Wall and Tinnell — appeared for the claimants,⁷ and Messrs.⁸ Jolliffe and Getchell for the slaves. The counsel for the defense brought witnesses to prove that the fugitives had been permitted to visit the city at various times previously. It was claimed that Margaret Garner had been brought here by her owners a number of years before, to act as nurse girl, and according to the law which liberated slaves who were brought into free States by the consent of their masters, she had been free from that time, and her children, all of whom had been born since then — following the condition of the mother — were likewise free.

[5] The Commissioner decided that a voluntary return to slavery, after a visit to a free State, re-attached the conditions of slavery, and that the fugitives were legally slaves at the time of their escape.

[...]

Jolliffe said that in the final argument of the case he intended not only to allege,⁹ but to demonstrate,

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3. a network of houses and other places that abolitionists used to help slaves escape to freedom
 4. **Harbor** (*verb*) to give a home or shelter to
 5. a body of men, typically armed, summoned by a sheriff to enforce the law
 6. **Hamper** (*verb*) to hinder or prevent the movement or progress of something
 7. a person making a claim, especially in a lawsuit
 8. used as a title to refer formally to more than one man simultaneously

conclusively, to the Court, that the Fugitive Slave law was unconstitutional, and as part and parcel¹⁰ of that argument he wished to show the effects of carrying it out. It had driven a frantic mother to murder her own child rather than see it carried back to the seething hell of American slavery. This law was of such an order that its execution required human hearts to be wrung and human blood to be spilt.

"The Constitution," said he, "expressly declared that Congress should pass no law prescribing any form of religion or preventing the free exercise thereof. If Congress could not pass any law requiring you to worship God, still less could they pass one requiring you to carry fuel to hell." These ringing words called forth applause from all parts of the court-room. Jolliffe said: "It is for the Court to decide whether the Fugitive Slave law overrides the law of Ohio to such an extent that it cannot arrest a fugitive slave even for a crime of murder."

The fugitives were finally indicted¹¹ for murder, but we will see that this amounted to nothing.

[...]

The case seemed to stir every heart that was alive to the emotions of humanity. The interest manifested by all classes was not so much for the legal principles involved, as for the mute instincts that mold every human heart — the undying love of freedom that is planted in every breast — the resolve to die rather than submit to a life of degradation¹² and bondage.

[10] A number of people, who were deeply interested in the fugitives, visited them in prison and conversed with them. Old Simon, his wife Mary, and their son Robert, while expressing their longing for freedom, said that they should not attempt to kill themselves if they were returned to slavery. Their trust in God seemed to have survived all the wrong and cruelty inflicted upon them by man, and though they felt often like crying bitterly, "How long, O Lord, how long?" they still trusted and endured. But Margaret seemed to have a different nature; she could see nothing but woe for herself and her children. Who can fathom the depths of her heart as she brooded over the wrongs and insults that had been heaped upon her all her life? Who can wonder if her faith staggered when she saw her efforts to gain freedom frustrated, when she saw the gloom of her old life close around her again, without any hope of deliverance? Those who came to speak words of comfort and cheer felt them die upon their lips, when they looked into her face, and marked its expression of settled despair. Her sorrow was beyond the reach of any words of encouragement and consolation, and can be realized in all its fullness only by those who have tasted of a cup equally bitter.

[...]

But in spite of touching appeals, of eloquent pleadings, the Commissioner remanded¹³ the fugitives back to slavery. He said that it was not a question of feeling to be decided by the chance current of his sympathies; the law of Kentucky and of the United States made it a question of property.

[...]

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9. **Allege** (*verb*) to claim or assert that someone has done something illegal or wrong
 10. a fragment or portion
 11. to charge with a crime
 12. **Degradation** (*noun*) the act of treating someone or something poorly and without respect
 13. to send back

Margaret was lost, in what Jolliffe called, "the seething hell of American slavery." It was reported that on her way down the river she sprang from the boat into the water with her babe in her arms; that when she rose she was seized by some of the boat hands and rescued, but that her child was drowned.

Text-Dependent Questions

Directions: For the following questions, choose the best answer or respond in complete sentences.

1. PART A: Which of the following identifies the central idea of the text?
 - A. Garner killed her child due to a momentary lapse in judgement driven by the stress of the standoff at Kite's house.
 - B. Few people were sympathetic for Garner's situation and horrified by her decision to kill her own child.
 - C. Garner's anguish and desperation exemplified the inhumanity of slavery, but her suffering did not sway the outcome of her court case.
 - D. Garner's situation and decision to kill her own child were used as evidence to argue that slaves were less rational than their white owners.

2. PART B: Which section from the text best supports the answer to Part A?
 - A. "She then attempted to take the life of the other children and to kill herself, but she was overpowered and hampered before she could complete her desperate work." (Paragraph 3)
 - B. "The interest manifested by all classes was not so much for the legal principles involved, as for the mute instincts that mold every human heart" (Paragraph 9)
 - C. "Those who came to speak words of comfort and cheer felt them die upon their lips, when they looked into her face, and marked its expression of settled despair." (Paragraph 10)
 - D. "He said that it was not a question of feeling to be decided by the chance current of his sympathies; the law of Kentucky and of the United States made it a question of property." (Paragraph 11)

3. PART A: How does Coffin portray Garner's decision to kill her daughter?
 - A. Coffin depicts Garner as unable to make a clear choice as a result of distress.
 - B. Coffin demonstrates that Garner should not be held accountable for her actions.
 - C. Coffin emphasizes Garner's actions come from love for her daughter
 - D. Coffin affirms that death is a worse fate than slavery for Garner's children.

4. PART B: which detail from the text best supports the answer to Part A?
 - A. "Margaret Garner, seeing that their hopes of freedom were vain seized a butcher knife that lay on the table, and with one stroke cut the throat of her little daughter, whom she probably loved the best." (Paragraph 3)
 - B. "She then attempted to take the life of the other children and to kill herself, but she was overpowered and hampered before she could complete her desperate work." (Paragraph 3)
 - C. "Margaret seemed to have a different nature; she could see nothing but woe for herself and her children." (Paragraph 10)
 - D. "Her sorrow was beyond the reach of any words of encouragement and consolation, and can be realized in all its fullness only by those who have tasted of a cup equally bitter." (Paragraph 10)

5. How does Coffin's status as an abolitionist affect his portrayal of Garner's story and his overall purpose in the text?
