

LESSON 11

from **Abraham Lincoln** (informational)
by James M. McPherson

With a desire for learning and an ambition for self-improvement, [Abraham] devoured every book he could borrow from the meager libraries of friends and neighbors. The King James Bible and *Pilgrims Progress* offered him **maxims** for life as well as a model for the poetic prose that characterized the best of his later writings. Thomas Lincoln [Abraham's father] neither encouraged nor understood his son's intellectual ambition; quite the **contrary**, he **chastised** Abraham's "lazy" preference for reading over working.

The teenaged Abraham's thinly veiled **disdain** for the life of a backwoods farmer doubtless irritated his father. Abraham in turn resented the **requirement** of law and custom that any wages he earned before he reached the age of twenty-one—by hiring out to neighbors to split rails, for example—must be turned over to his father. Abraham Lincoln's hatred of slavery, which denied to slaves the "fruits of their labor," may have been influenced by Thomas Lincoln's expropriation of Abraham's earnings. In any event, relations between Abraham and his father grew increasingly strained. . . .

In 1828 Lincoln and a friend took a flatboat loaded with farm produce down the Ohio and Mississippi rivers to New Orleans. He repeated the experience in 1831. These trips widened his horizons and, according to popular belief, shocked him with the sight of men and women being bought and sold in the slave markets of New Orleans. Recalling another trip on the Ohio River to Louisville, he wrote years later that "there were, on board, ten or a dozen slaves, shackled together with irons. That sight was a continual **torment** to me; and I see something like it every time I touch the Ohio, or any other slave-border."

Although Abraham came of age in 1830, he did not strike out on his own. Once more his father sold the farm and set forth to greener pastures, this time in central Illinois. After helping his father clear land, Abraham hired out to split rails for other farmers—and this time he kept his earnings. In the summer of 1831 he settled in New Salem, a village on the Sangamon River bluff about twenty miles northwest of Springfield.

Lincoln's six years in New Salem were a formative period. For a time he drifted from one job to another: store clerk, mill hand, partner in a general store that failed, postmaster, surveyor. His partner in the general store drank up all the profits and then died. Although Lincoln was required by law to repay only his half share of the debts left by the store's failure, he insisted on repaying all **creditors** in full. He wryly referred to this burden as his "national debt," but he also earned a valuable reputation as "honest Abe," a nickname that would stick.

Six feet four inches tall, with a lanky, rawboned look, unruly coarse black hair, large ears, a **gregarious** personality, and a **penchant** for telling humorous stories, Lincoln made many friends. Among them were Jack Armstrong and his gang of young toughs, "the Clary Grove boys." As the new kid in town with a reputation for physical strength, Lincoln had to prove his **mettle** in a wrestling match with Armstrong, who had previously beaten all challengers. Sources disagree on who won the match—apparently it was a draw—but Lincoln won the respect and loyalty of Armstrong and his friends despite his refusal to participate in their drinking and hell-raising.

Exercise 1: Context Clues

Read the passage above, paying special attention to the words in dark type. These are the Master Words you will study in this lesson. As you read, look for context clues in the sentences and paragraphs around each Master Word. Circle any words and phrases that give clues to the meaning of the Master Words.

Master Words

Place a check by words you feel you know; underline words you don't know.

chastise

creditor

gregarious

mettle

requirement

contrary

disdain

maxim

penchant

torment