

GEORGE FITZHUGH

George Fitzhugh (1806–1881) was a Virginia lawyer and plantation owner who became well-known for his defense of slavery through his writings, including *Sociology of the South, or the Failure of Free Society* (1854) and *Cannibals All! or Slaves without Masters*. Fitzhugh openly criticized the principles of the Declaration of Independence in his proslavery arguments. In the selection that follows, "The Proslavery Defense," taken from *Sociology of the South*, Fitzhugh claims that the Preamble of the Declaration of Independence was "verbose, false, newborn, and unmeaning" and that its principles cannot be used to argue against the institution of slavery.

"We hold these truths to be self-evident, that all men are created equal; that they are endowed by their Creator with certain inalienable rights, that among them, are life, liberty, and the pursuit of happiness; that to secure these rights governments are instituted among men, deriving their just powers from the consent of the governed; that whenever any form of government becomes destructive of these ends it is the right of the people to alter or abolish it, and to institute a new government, laying its foundation on such principles, and organizing its powers in such form, as to them shall seem most likely to effect their safety and happiness."

It is, we believe, conceded on all hands, that men are not born physically, morally, or intellectually equal,—some are males, some females, some from birth, large, strong and healthy, others weak, small and sickly—some are naturally amiable, others prone to all kinds of wickedness—some brave, others timid. Their natural inequalities beget inequalities of rights. The weak in mind or body require guidance, support and protection; they must obey and work for those who protect and guide them—they have a natural right to guardians, committees, teachers or masters. Nature has made them slaves; all that law and government can do, is to regulate, modify and mitigate their slavery. In the absence of legally instituted slavery, their condition would be worse under that natural slavery of the weak to the strong, the foolish to the wise and cunning. The wise and virtuous, the brave, the strong in mind and body, are by nature born to command and protect, and law but follows nature in making them rulers, legislators, judges, captains, husbands, guardians, committees and masters. The naturally depraved class, those born prone to crime, are our brethren too; they are entitled to education, to religious instruction, to all the means and appliances proper to correct their evil propensities, and all their ailments; they have a right to be sent to the penitentiary,—for there, if they do

to be relied on in matters of morals or government. We may fairly conclude, that liberty is alienable, that there is a natural right to alien it, first, because the laws and institutions of all countries have recognized and regulated its alienation; and secondly, because we cannot conceive of a civilized society, in which there were no wives, no wards, no apprentices, no sailors and no soldiers; and none of these could there be in a country that practically carried out the doctrine, that liberty is inalienable.

Discussion Questions

1. Fitzhugh makes a large leap in logic from the statement that men and women are created "some from birth, large, strong, and healthy, others weak, small and sickly . . ." to the statement that "their natural inequalities beget inequalities of rights." Fitzhugh tries to give examples to justify his reasoning. Discuss in groups how successful he is in this attempt. How well does his argument apply to the justification of slavery? How would his reasoning affect the lives of different individuals in your class? Which of you would have rights and which would not?
2. Review Jefferson's speech, "Policy of Civilization and Assimilation" and Jackson's speech, "Message to Congress," both in Chapter 2. What similarities in reasoning do you find between Fitzhugh's discussion of inequality of mankind and Jackson and Jefferson's justifications for the treatment of Native Americans?

Writing Suggestions

1. Write a personal response to Fitzhugh, letting your feelings and emotions rule your writing. Let your tone emerge freely, and respond to all of his major assertions about "alienable" rights and the necessity for slavery.
2. Review your answers to the first discussion question for this selection. Then write an analysis of Fitzhugh's attempt to justify slavery. Express your opinion of his logic, his use of analogies, his assumptions, and his conclusions. How does he take his audience into consideration? How would his audience be likely to react to his arguments? How well does his analogy apply to the justification of slavery? Do you think an audience of his time would have found his evidence convincing or not? Why? Quote from both the Declaration of Independence and Fitzhugh's writing as you compose your essay.