Olaudah Equiano was a man who went through many phases and changes in his lifetime. The essence of who he is lies in his origins, as well as in his trials throughout his life. His own personal descriptions from The Life of Olaudah Equiano or Gustavus Vassa, the African lay the groundwork for figuring out this particular person in history. His account of his life allows for a deeper interpretation of a changed man. The way in which he viewed his culture and background changed as a result of the situations of his life.

Equiano was born in 1745, in the province of Essaka, which was part of the kingdom of Benin (10). He believed his home area to be remote because he had “never heard of white men or Europeans….and our subjection to the king Benin was nominal” (10). He described it as an area ruled by elders, including his father, who were ornamented in particular ways. From these descriptions of his province, Equiano went straight to the descriptions of the province’s practices and culture, leading one to believe that his culture is tied to his identity as much as his nation.

The province’s elders were the judicial system, and they met to settle disputes. Equiano first described the punishment for a man who kidnapped a boy. In Essaka, the man was “condemned to make recompense by a man or woman slave” (11). This is a direct contrast to the situations that would later occur in his own life. The Europeans made no compensation to the village for kidnapping Equiano and other young people.

In the continuing section on Equiano’s culture, he seemed to be making contradiction to his experiences with the Europeans. Whether this is by purposeful writing or the irony of
his situations is for one’s own interpretation. He discussed marriage and adultery at length. Within his nation, marriage was a sacred institution, and the women were to be very modest and decent. He makes note later of his master’s mistresses, as well as the women in other nations that he passed through being much less modest than the women in his nation.

Beyond those beliefs, there was the attitude of the culture contradicted with the attitude that ensued in him following his abduction. He described his nation as “almost a nation of dancers, musicians, and poets,” (12) and wrote about the nation’s joyous celebrations for “every great event” (12). This picture is a sharp opposite to his report of the time soon after his kidnapping. He was “exceedingly miserable… and was constantly grieving and pining” (37). Other contrasts are provided as well. The buildings in Essaka were buildings of “convenience rather than ornament” (13), compared to the skyline of London and other European cities. Agriculture was their “chief employment” (15), which was very unlike the growing dependence on industry in Europe.

The first several chapters of The Life of Olaudah Equiano introduce Equiano as a strong African who was proud of his culture, family, and nation. The course of history charted throughout the book allows a reader to see the huge change slavery brought to this man. His first chapters were a history and a part of him he wanted to show and relay, even though he was no longer that person when he wrote those words. The story of that nation can never be lost, even though they lost many young people who lost part of that national identity to slavery. That part of the book is a cultural legacy left by Equiano. The question for the reader becomes: Was this cultural legacy left in Equiano’s life as well?

To answer this question, one must examine his account of the situations and events he endured. During the time period of Equiano’s youth, Europeans were kidnapping and
exporting Africans to be slaves. Cheap labor was needed for the rise of the Industrial Revolution and the development of Europe and North America. The Africans who were kidnapped endured many sufferings, as Equiano described. He was one such youth, abducted from his family and nation to live a life of servitude. He was placed on a slave ship where they were all “put under deck” where the smell was “intolerably loathsome” (33). He endured situations so horrible that he wrote that he began to “hope for death” (34). Hi wish for death was repeated several times, which magnifies the atrocities of his situations. Even though those atrocities were performed largely by Europeans, Equiano made a change that was visible in the book. He began to admire the Europeans, even as he despised their behaviors and their slavery.

He made a distinction between the good people and the bad people, as well as good and bad slavery. He had so much fear in the beginning of his slave journey, but Equiano blamed that fear on his own ignorance. He claimed to no longer fear them “as he began to know them” (51). The writing seems to say that Equiano blamed himself for the powerful fear he had felt. It was his fault and his ignorance, and this totally ignores the fact that fear was warranted from the cruelty displayed by the Europeans.

The writing makes it clear that he considered himself to be in the good type of slavery. He had masters who treated him well, and they even allowed others to teach him to read. Much of this education was about the “religion and the knowledge of God” (52). He was taught the European religion of Christianity, which was easy for him to comprehend because of his native belief in one god. However, European beliefs, values, customs, and culture were infused in him during the education process.
His book is really more than a story of his life. It is an account of his personal mental transformation. Much of the pride he had from his nation and culture was almost undetectable later in the book. He even wrote of his embarrassment, as he “began to be mortified at the difference in their complexions” (43) between himself and the Europeans. Being mortified about one’s self signifies very little self pride.

Equiano wanted to be more like the Europeans because the events of the time changed his mind set. Slavery was abundant in all of the places he visited. The Europeans treated him like he was of a lower class, which he related to because his nation treated slaves as a lower class as well. His nation was no usually cruel to the slaves, but slaves were not the same as free people. The lower status was one he knew. The book shows evidence that Equiano took on a slave mentality. This slave mentality grew on him, which could be seen as the chapters passed.

However, his pride slowly returned, as his master treated him more like a free man. Equiano was allowed to keep a little money, and he began to plot to buy his freedom. The possibility of rejoining the free world made the pride come back. His work ethic and determination, parts of his character developed from his African culture, finally allowed him to buy his freedom. The agreement from his master was like “a voice from heaven” (101), to Equiano. Following the section of the book where Equiano obtained his freedom, there is a paragraph on his celebration. It is not unlike the description of the joyous celebrations that were practiced by his home nation. It seemed to be a tribute to his home. His book continued the process of the regaining of his personal pride, as he shed the slave mentality. Equiano described some of his acts as a slavery abolitionist leader, including petitioning the Queen of England in 1788. (177).
Equiano’s book followed his personal pride from a fledgling pride for himself and his nation, to an ashamed slave, to a man who fought to regain his pride and freedom. However, his book also is a legacy. It is a legacy to his original culture, as his descriptions of the traditions and beliefs are forever on record. It is also a legacy of remembrance. It reminds one that slavery did more than injure individuals. Racism was spread, and personal prides and mentalities were changed. Europe and North America flourished, but Africa was stripped of its work force and resources. Families were torn apart, and some ideas of cultures were forever changed. Even after returning to his state of personal pride, Equiano did not have the same national pride as before. He still seemed to want to be European, even as he fought for an end to slavery. England became home to his mind, for when he returned he wrote he was “happy once more to tread upon English ground” (168). Slavery changed Olaudah Equiano in a personal sense, and people are still seeing the changes and affect it had on Africa, North America, and Europe.

For me, it was chilling and sickening to read a first hand account of the slave trade. I cannot imagine it being worse, yet I know it was since Equiano himself thought his experiences to be better than most endured. It is a sad history, although it was a history that brought the United States to its current place in the world. The United States would not have developed as rapidly or as well if there had been no slave trade. While I am grateful for the luxuries of the nation currently, the history to get here is a horrible one. The development of Europe and the United States was on account of the underdevelopment of Africa. I know that we cannot change the past, so I think the legacy of slavery is for the developed nations to look to the future. The future should include developed nations giving back to the continent that contributed so much to their development and wealth.