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Labor and Working-Class Fiction

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Frederick Douglass writing *Narrative of the Life of Frederick Douglass, an American Slave* was an influential feat as it inspired countless other work from free slaves and African Americans that can derive similar emotions. Although he suffered a lot of tribulations and trauma in his life, Douglass had sparks of hope throughout his life and self-efficacy that helped him become a major influence during the civil rights movement. The kindness of other people's hearts and his own grit guided him to use his education for change. It led him to fight for his people and use his voice for concrete action. Douglass's hard hitting and authentic narrative is an important piece of working-class literature that gives the reader insight into how his class and race dictated how he was treated.

With the creation of racial ideologies, the importance of social construct increased, and preconceived notions were at the forefront of the public's minds. The Atlantic slave trade becoming a booming market combined with the need to build civilization from scratch led to the earliest creation of capitalism and an economic thrust into traditional outlooks. African Americans were at the bottom as they did not look like the settlers that colonized the land to begin with and people's skin color determined how much privilege they would have in their life. Values about gender, sex, and sexuality were also integral factors during early American colonization. Societal norms were based upon the standards that the patriarchy and male founders set.

From the early years of colonization, humans were categorized by their race and settlers grouped each person into their respective place in society because of their biological features. This idea formulated racism and forced each person to conform with one identity. African Americans were punished based on their race and laws were set against them as if they were the enemy. Held captive, they were forced into the working class and had to do whatever it took to

stay alive. “In entering the shipyard, my orders from Mr. Gardner were, to do whatever the carpenters commanded me to do. This was placing me at the beck and call of about seventy-five men. I was to regard all these as masters. Their word was to be my law. My situation was a most trying one.” (Douglass, 100) The role of lower-income African Americans in society was to serve the elite and to comply with masters in fear of getting punished, or even worse, killed.

Stereotypes and white supremacy also drove the lives of African Americans as people already had biased opinions on them and they faced unfair treatment. In addition to race playing a role in the class that they were born into, gender dictated how you were treated to an extent and what your purpose was in life. Women were meant for taking care of the household and birthing children that could continue their bloodline while men were tasked with being the head of household and being the money maker. Male slaves were expected to be out on the fields and farmland to do excruciating labor and slave owners used their bodies as machines. African Americans were called slurs and insulted constantly by being compared to wild animals because they were outsiders.

Frederick Douglass was born in Tuckahoe, Maryland to a black enslaved woman and a white father. The white privilege did not help in Douglass’s case because it is unknown whether his father was a slave owner, and he still must perform slave duties. Douglass had two masters but was under the control of many different bosses. He recounted vivid stories of each slave owner and their personalities which helped the reader envision his surroundings.

At the beginning of the 18th century, education was primarily offered to white males and slave owners used it as leverage to think of themselves as better for being entitled to that treatment. From his interaction with his mistress from his time with Master Hugh’s family, he states, “...education and slavery were incompatible with each other.” (Douglass, 52) Slaves were

used to being battered down and hope seemed impossible to muster up. Being educated as a slave was forbidden as slaveowners did not want their servants to have a mind of their own. In the eyes of slaveowners and colonizers, slaves were purely transactional workhorses at their disposal and did not deserve to be treated as more.

During a time of segregation and racism being a regular occurrence against African Americans, the odds were stacked against them. As Douglass states,

This kind heart had but a short time to remain such. The fatal poison of irresponsible power was already in her hands, and soon commenced its infernal work... Very soon after I went to live with Mr. and Mrs. Auld, she very kindly commenced to teach me the A.B.C.s. After I had learned this, she assisted me in learning to spell words of three or four letters. Just at this point of my progress, Mr. Auld found out what was going on, and at once forbade Mrs. Auld to instruct me further, telling her, among other things, that it was unlawful, as well as unsafe, to teach a slave to read. (48)

This was a documented instance where the white slave owners in power did not want to give up that sense of belonging to those that did not look like them. After being introduced to the idea of learning from Mrs. Auld, Douglass saw the evil associated with slavery and was determined to teach himself with the help of local boys. He learned about the existence of abolitionism and antislavery, garnering hope to escape to the North one day.

Douglass's advanced intelligence while as a slave led him to have more opportunities and better prepared to handle tasks thrown at him as he navigated the life he was born into. Being taught to read and write was a curse and a blessing that set him apart from the other slaves. There was a responsibility associated with being educated to utilize it because he was given this rare opportunity. He saw it as his chance to make a difference in the world and to enlighten his fellow

slaves in captivity on the reality of the situation. A downside to being informed was that it created a target on his back as being a slave that is educated was seen as a threat to slaveowners and to racist bigots that tried holding them at the bottom.

Now that Douglass was exposed to analytical thinking and deductive reasoning, it ignited a fire underneath him to fight back and take his identity back, becoming his own person. “Two issues that continually surface in Douglass's narrative are freedom and power.” (Mullane, 26) Discussing his journey to freedom, the reader notices power shifts as Douglass becomes more confident in himself and his survival instincts kick in. Greed and pride are a part of the seven deadly sins and are often exhibited by the slave owner as they are in a position of power. Generational wealth that is associated with deeply engraved racial upbringing gives those with money all the potential and capability to obtain more.

When they feel like no one is on their side, it's understandable that they would result in defying authority and the law. After several years of working under a master, Douglass concocts a plan of escaping with three fellow slaves that he bonded with. It was unfortunately thwarted when someone betrayed them by turning them in. Politics were twisted and legal systems were manipulated by the wealthy class in high positions of power to benefit their own. They were sent to slave prison which stood near a church. The topic of religion played an interesting part in Douglass's narrative as it was gently woven into the plot yet had big significance to Douglass. Christianity and having something to believe in helped give purpose to living and to continue in their tragic positions.

African Americans had to fight endlessly for their right to have a just trial which typically did not end up positively on the slave's defense due to external factors. Corrupt lawmakers and governing bodies plagued a system of justice with harmful intentions. They weaponized their

biased views to pass regulations that kept people of color under their control by any means possible and to preserve a patriarchal social system. African Americans were belittled because they threatened the colonizers egomaniacal dependency, and the men were especially used as scapegoats because of their supposed brute manners. Institutional racism and sexism were pervasive and entrenched into our society as white supremacy prevailed. Reading about Douglass's journey, it enacts the readers to think about slavery law, especially how that shaped racial biases influencing the law.

Encountering strained race relations while he worked in Baltimore's trade industry, the white workers were paid, and the slaves had to do free forced labor. To conform to what is expected of him, Douglass had to perform above other employees to have the best chances of surviving and receiving less attacks from management. Fearing that the African Americans will take their jobs, they resorted to aggressive tactics and Douglass was transferred. Learning the trade of caulking and working his way to the top, he saves enough up to escape and find freedom in New York. He creates a new identity and attempts to start a new life, free from abuse and sheds away the life he was born into.

As a free man, it took some adjustment as he did not have to live in fear of his life under the monitoring and supervision of a slave owner. Free African Americans lived in fear that something would bind them being someone else's property again. All they could do to have their voices heard was petitioning and writing stories about their journeys. Once freed, they needed support and training to become integral members of society again, but they were thrown out to the wolves. Vagrancy statutes were another way for lawmakers to criminalize freed slaves and to gain control over their every move. After the Revolution, citizenship was viewed on a spectrum of what their roles were in society and how they can contribute.

An important lesson from this topic is being aware that although they were classified as “free”, it was far from the freedom that patriotism boasts about today.

First-hand accounts from free slaves are rare, but there is always a possibility to recover and tell their stories as there were numerous slaves that could have been able to document their lives.

That is why education is important for everyone of all races to have a mind of their own and create their own opinions on matters at hand. After all that they have endured, slaves that were freed did not obtain the same rights as white men and were still ostracized for their skin color as racism continues to prevail.

The United States of America started with a man in charge that got people to work under him. The blunt force and aggression from the slave owners used on slaves carry the weight of xenophobia and chauvinism that was engrained into their culture. White slave owners felt a sense of pride in being American and believed that what they were doing was morally sturdy. They were convinced that they were God’s gift to the world as they became enamored in the white savior complex if they were to find compassion at some point of their time owning slaves.

The abuse of authority undermined the rights of lower-class citizens and enabled a capitalistic system. Considering everything that has been stated, The United States was established upon unfair principles that put people of color below white people and women were subordinates to men. Politics and the legal system correlate with reflected beliefs of gender and sexuality. A person’s race and gender indicated how they were treated in a political environment and how harsh of a penalization they received.

Douglass’s narrative of being self-written and an honest portrayal of his life opens the door for people whose voices are silenced. “...writer of a slave narrative finds himself in an irresolvably tight bind as a result of the very intention and premise of his narrative, which is to

give a picture of ‘slavery as it is.’” (Olney, 48) When Douglass was writing about his expedition mentally and physically, his tone and sense of self was very telling of where he was at in life and where he stood with his views.

Seemingly staying neutral and not too vulgar, Douglass wanted to appeal to target patrons that could help him advance the civil rights movement with whom he was an integral part of.

“However resentful of white paternalism, Douglass remained acutely aware of the audience for whom he was writing. Only the white majority had the numbers and power to make a difference on the issue of slavery.” (Matlack, 17) Carefully tailored to persuade white people and gain support for his cause, he wrote this first autobiography without any ill intention of insulting or offending them. This book being written by him speaks more volume than most because civilians do not have many factual opportunities to hear the full story of what slaves endured and are able to see first-hand accounts of what their life was like.

The standards that society pushes onto everyone, puts people in a box where they were judged based upon their gender, sex, and race. When slavery plagued the normality of life and shifted the morals of average civilians, equality did not exist and there seemed to be no hope for African Americans that were born into a system that was made to tyrannize them. The building blocks of basic human rights started around this time frame and Douglass was at the head when advocating for African American rights. People of color weren’t regarded as humans, but as objects to manipulate to the white colonizers. He advocates for reform and does not sugarcoat his heart wrenching experiences to support his claims and be vulnerable. He left a legacy of hope and laid the foundation of change for the oppressed.

Now knowing the background of Douglass and his journey as he struggles at the start of being a slave to becoming a free man, the reader can deduct effective reasoning that decides their



thoughts and standing. We can put ourselves in Douglass's place and sympathize with all that he endured in his life. After conducting research and using it to analyze Douglass's writing, there is no doubt that his skin color and class that he was born into dictated the trajectory of his life.

In conclusion, Frederick Douglass was a highly intelligent man that was born under the worst conditions due to the radicalization of segregation and biases influencing African Americans existence. His story tells his side of resilience and how he overcame obstacles that were beyond his control. Being given the opportunity to be at the same level academically as white people by Sophia Auld, it started a chain effect and gave Douglass a chance to be a voice for the silenced. Despite being African American and being born to an enslaved mother, Douglass was able to make a name for himself with his work ethic and unwavering spirit.

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