

Frederick Douglass: A Free Man

Frederick Douglass, a man of incredible intellect and unquenchable courage, will forever be known as one of America's greatest orators and a powerful influence for the abolition of slavery. His autobiography, "Narrative of the Life of Frederick Douglass, An American Slave," tells us of his quest to be free. Throughout this work we see Douglass' courageous spirit and how deep his determination was. But what inspired him to think this way? What made him so determined to gain something that so many around him determined was unattainable? Douglass answers this question in his narrative by stating that the moment he first tasted freedom was when he began to learn to read. After this he knew that no matter how much he suppressed his desires, he could never again go back to the person he was before. He found something that made him more than he was before, he found a way to be free.

Frederick Augustus Washington Bailey was born around 1818. Little is known about the exact dates of his early life due to the fact that slave holders did not allow their slaves access to this kind of information. He was born in Talbot County, Maryland. His mother, Harriet Bailey, was a slave and his father a slave holder. Douglass had little contact with his mother and even less with his father. However, he describe a memory of his mother in his narrative saying, "I do not recollect of ever seeing my mother by the light of day. She was with me in the night. She would lie down with me, and get me to sleep, but long before I waked she

was gone,”(Douglass,237). Douglass’ mother died when he was about seven years of age. He describes a distinct void of feeling because the slave holders had made it near to impossible for him to develop any kind of relationship with his mother.

Douglass soon learned a hard life had been laid on him, the doom of the slave life, and he found his masters to be cruel, cold and completely void of empathy for the slave. He witnessed many horrible things in his early years of life on a slave plantation, including the vicious whipping of his aunt by his master and the cold murder of a slave man for running from an overseer. However, Douglass’ life was about to change dramatically. At seven, he was sent to a relative of his master named Hugh Auld. Douglass met his new Mistress, Mrs. Auld, a woman whom Douglass describes as being, “proved to be all she appeared when I first met her at the door, a woman of the kindest heart and the finest feelings,”(Douglass,250) However, Mrs. Auld’s kindness towards Douglass soon led to great trouble with his master Mr. Auld. “Mrs. Auld soon began to teach him ‘the A,B,C’ and then words of three or four letters”(Hansberry,38). Upon hearing this, Mr. Auld went into an uproar telling his wife that if she taught Douglass how to read, “it would forever unfit him to be a slave. He would at once become unmanageable, and of no value to his master. As to himself, it could do him no good, but a great deal of harm. It would make him discontented and unhappy,”(Douglass 250). Hough Auld was right.

Learning to read would indeed make Frederick unfit for slavery. It would make him unmanageable and it would cause him to never again be content with the uneducated, unknowing life of a slave. At that moment, Frederick Douglass determined that he would learn to read no matter the cost and that this ability, the

ability to read, would be the first and most important step to becoming a free man.

After the incident with master Hugh Auld, Douglass pursued reading in any way that he could. He would find old spelling books that had belonged to the son of his master and would copy words in the left over spaces. In another common practice of his, he would challenge the neighborhood white boys by saying that he could write better than them. In the spelling competitions that would follow, Douglass would carefully memorize the words the other boys wrote. Most of his methods involved a great deal of secrecy for now even his beloved Mrs. Auld had turned cruel and, "Overnight, Douglass's mistress's 'cheerful eye' became cold and enraged as she snatched newspapers and books away from him," (Hansberry, 38). Still Douglass pursued his goal undaunted by the words or actions of his owners. By the end of his seven year stay with the Auld's, Douglass had learned to both read and write.

In 1833, Douglass was sent to the plantation of master Hugh's brother who was his official owner, Thomas. After having learned to read and write Douglass had become an unruly slave and no longer allowed his task masters to strike him without dealing them a blow in return. He had begun to form his identity by what he had learned and would not let others treat him as less than human. Thomas Auld was a merciless master, but even he found Douglass uncontrollable and had no desire to deal with the problem himself. So, he sent Douglass to a "slave breaker" to learn obedience and compliance. It did not work. Though at times Douglass was seriously discouraged, in the end he bested the slave breaker by holding on to his spirit and desire to be free. It was after a serious confrontation with this man, a

confrontation of which Douglass was the victor, that he resolved he must be released from the claws of slavery and escape was the only option.

Douglass made several attempts to escape after this. At first, they ended in Failure, but one day he finally made it. He had made his escape from Baltimore, having been sent back to Hugh Auld, and travelled by ferry and train to New York and then to New Bedford, Massachusetts. It was here that he married his first wife, Anne Murray, and took on the last name of Douglass. Finally, after years of hardship, he had made it. Frederick Douglass was free.

Douglass did not have much time to rest however. Though he was now free, he knew that countless others of his race were not. Opportunity soon approached when five months after his escape he came into contact with, "William Lloyd GARRISON's antislavery weekly, the *Liberator*," (Lewis, 249) and was soon involved in the Massachusetts Anti-Slavery Society. It was during this period that Douglass gained his reputation as a profound orator. He traveled through America and British Isles denouncing slavery and shocking people with the story of his life and firsthand experiences with the cruelty of slaveholders. While in England a group of close friends purchased his freedom and Douglass returned to America legally free. Soon the Civil War was upon America and Douglass now fought for the ability of his people to enlist. As the war progressed, Abraham Lincoln conversed with Douglass about the state of his people. He Continued to fight for their rights and for other underprivileged groups for the rest of his life. On February 20, 1895, he died a profound man, a man who had been a pivotal influence in the war on slavery. He died defying what others said of him. He died free, free at last.

It is quite obvious from his slave narrative that Frederick Douglass prized the ability to read and write tremendously. In fact, he proclaims that learning to read and write were the first steps toward his freedom. Douglass states in his autobiography that keeping this ability from the slaves was one of the slaveholders greatest injustices. After the incident that caused his master to ban him from learning to read, Douglass' desire for this power only grew. In fact, the very arguments that his master made against his learning proved to Douglass that reading was a skill to be highly prized and sought after. Douglass states this by saying, "From that moment, I understood the pathway from slavery to freedom...I was gladdened by the invaluable instruction which, by the merest accident, I had gained from my master. Though conscious of the difficulty of learning to read without a teacher, I set out with high hope , and a fixed purpose, at whatever the cost of trouble, to learn how to read,"(Douglass,251). He goes on to state all the abilities his master sought to keep from him he desired most or: "What he most dreaded, that I most desired. What he most loved, that I most hated. That which to him was a great evil, to be carefully shunned, was to me a great good, to be diligently sought,"(Douglass 251).

Douglass went to great lengths and risked much in learning to read. If ever he was caught reading he would have to deal with the ever growing rage of Mrs. Auld who had become vicious toward Douglass after the incident with his master. Douglass pitied Mrs. Auld saying in his latter life that he believed the same principles that enslaved the bodies of the slaves also enslaved the souls of their masters. But Douglass took whatever risk was needed to learn, whether it was

copying the names of ships at a port, challenging boys to writing contests or secretly practicing in writing books.

Why was reading so important to Douglass? Why did it evoke such transformation, first in his mind and then in his life? In his critical essay, "Learning to Write: The Narrative of Frederick Douglass," John Burt attempts to explain this by stating most

eloquently that in writing Douglass "found the means to see himself as himself rather than how his masters saw him,"(Burt 330). However, Douglass also described

his new knowledge as a curse. After learning to read he saw the slave holders for what they were saying, "I could regard them in no other light than a band of successful robbers, who had left their homes, and gone to Africa and stolen us from our homes, and in a strange land reduced us to slavery,"(Douglass 251-252). Worst of all, he now saw his life for what it was, a prison. He said that he could never again be happy as long as the manacles of slavery still clung to his wrists. Learning to read and write had opened his eyes but had also left him a daunting conundrum: now that he knew what freedom was, how could he attain it? In his agony, Douglass said at times he would envy the other slaves for their naivety on the subject, their lack of ability to comprehend their condition. His agony, his hatred of the injustice of slavery was, however, important. It fueled his spirit, caused him to take risks. So in the end, the same knowledge that had created his misery also became the source of his strength.

In his life as a free man, reading and writing enhanced Douglass' already

keen intellect and helped him to accomplish many things throughout his life. One of the most obvious of these accomplishments was writing his autobiography which he used in many of his speeches throughout the States and Europe. At one point, Douglass' eloquence of words actually became a problem for him, "The skill of Douglass' platform on tour began to raise doubts. He spoke too well. The sophisticated style and learned tone which he rapidly developed seemed out of character," (Matlack, 16). Douglass would quickly remedy these doubts however, he used his skill for writing to make accounts of his experiences as a slave including the major facts such as dates, places and specific names. His true power, however, was not his power to convince the minds of his audience, but to convince their hearts. Through his words, Douglass would make the people feel a portion of the grief, terror and anger he felt while a slave. It is for these reasons that he is considered one of America's greatest orators.

Douglass found an indispensable gift in reading and writing. In a culture that was doing all it could to reduce his people to little more than animals, Douglass found a means to create for himself an identity. It was then that he knew not only who he was but what he must do. So why was learning to read such a monumentally important event to Frederick Douglass. He used it as a tool to recreate himself as a man, a human being, with innate value and to create a life for himself.

Frederick Douglass used his abilities in remarkable ways. He used to save scores of slaves and offer them a chance at life. He used them to fight injustice, tyranny and the savage nature of a wicked system. Long after his death, Frederick

Douglass' legacy has lived on inspiring many with his eloquent words. So how should we regard Douglass? How should we, in the twenty-first century, regard the ideals of this wise man?

Looking at our society today, I believe that first, we should value the ability to read and write as Douglass did. For many today reading and writing are not privileges. They are not even rights. They have become burdens. I have found that one of the common threads that tie all learning institutions together is the tendency of students to complain about reading assignments. Too many do not read assignments, then wait until the night before it is due to throw together a paper that offers no literary insight, no technical skill and ultimately no care. This is what it has come to people do not care about these skills anymore. One of the greatest abilities a human being can own is treated as unimportant and furthermore as a burden.

One of the greatest crimes in our age is that society will support this notion. One need only turn on their television and find the nearest entertainment program. The comical one who is often most loved by the audience is often a person who is near to illiterate. Society also encourages this in young girls. If they are physically attractive then what else do they need? Why should they consider their future and contemplate what they will do when they are old and have lost their shallow advantage and now have no useful skills in life? To young men, some people groups teach, "what use do you have for learning when you know how to pull a trigger? What need do you have to earn things in life through hard work when you can just take it because you have a weapon?" The problem with relying on guns for power is

someone will always have a bigger gun. People need to realize that the greatest battles are not those fought in deserts or oceans or cities but those fought within the human mind. Douglass understood this. He used it to his advantage, not to manipulate people, but to rally them to his cause. He formed not pawns but allies, and he did it using nothing more than the words of his mouth and the ink of his pen. Douglass understood that the pen truly is mightier than the sword. A sword, in this sense representing physical power, will cause people to obey so long as you always have it. The pen, here meaning the ability to convince people through writing, will gain you true allies because they have come and offered themselves willingly. The human heart can be the most impervious structure known to mankind, but the power of words has silently broken into this fortress time and again.

This is how I believe we should look at Douglass and his work. We should respect him as a man who saw the power in reading and writing and pursued it no matter the cost in a most heroic quest. He used this power not for the sole benefit of himself but for those who had not attained what he had. He fought for those less fortunate than he. Ultimately with his writings, Douglass left for us a lesson: that no matter our circumstances, if we pursue skills such as these diligently and treasure them as the great devices that they are, then we can use them to truly change our world. And in the process they will inevitably change us as well.

Frederick Douglass was a man who was put through the fire but refused to succumb to it. The bonds of slavery turned brittle when set against his mind. The craftiness of the slaveholders only made it so that Douglass had to be craftier.

Though he escaped the torments of slavery, he courageously risked being dragged back in so that he might secure the freedom of his brethren. He chose the greatest instruments that he possessed to do this his mind and his pen. With his ink he triumphed over the whip of the taskmaster. Frederick Douglass proved that we can change our life if we would only pursue the knowledge of how to do so. To him this knowledge was learning to read and write and with these skills he helped to change a nation.

A legacy is what Frederick Douglass has left to us. In his narrative he reveals a story of torture and freedom, of anguish and elation, of despair and determination but ultimately, it is a story of victory. A story about a man who strove to attain a skill that he knew would change his life forever. However, even Douglass, with his intense intellect, could not have known how many lives he would change in his quest for knowledge, how many people he would set free from their bonds. Frederick Douglass: he lived a torturous life, he sought a sacred skill and he set himself free.

Works Cited

Douglass, Frederick. , "Narrative of the Life of Frederick Douglass, An American Slave." The Norton Anthology of World Literature. Ed. Martin Puchner. New York: Norton, 2012. Print.

Lewis, Ronald. "Frederick Douglass." Lexicon Universal Encyclopedia. 1983. Print.

Learning to Write: The Narrative of Frederick Douglass. John Burt.
Western Humanities Review 42.4 (Winter 1988): p330-344.
Rpt. in Nineteenth-Century Literature Criticism. Ed. Russel Whitaker. Vol.
141. Detroit: Gale, 2004. Word Count: 8004. From Literature Resource Center.

The Talented Tenth and Long-Headed Jazzers.
Lorraine Hansberry. Anne Cheney. Twayne's United States Authors Series 430. Boston:
Twayne, 1984. p35-54. Word Count: 8564.

The Autobiographies of Frederick Douglass
James Matlack
Phylon (1960-) , Vol. 40, No. 1 (1st Qtr., 1979), pp. 15-28
Published by: [Clark Atlanta University](http://www.clarkatlanta.edu/)
Article Stable URL: <http://www.jstor.org/stable/274419>