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TAA Essay 2

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A Window to the Soul of Mr. Frederick Douglass

The Narrative of the Life of Frederick Douglass, An American Slave, Written by Himself published in 1845 offers a personal account and direct look into the emotions of an enslaved man. In the early 1800s, North and South American States were divided by opposing beliefs about the morality of the slavery that was flourishing in the South. This narrative presents in first-person the life experiences as well as an escape to freedom of an African American man, Frederick Douglass, born into slavery in rural Maryland in 1818. The emotion in Douglass' writing demonstrates the mental toll that the deprivation of basic human rights takes on a person. The unruffled way Douglass writes about acts of immense brutality contrasted to his ecstasy of joy after the slightest act of goodness points to a severely brainwashed and altered state of mind of slaves. This is most closely observed by a technical analysis of the two different tones presented by Douglass through sentence structure and description by adjectives combined with a comparison of emotional responses by enslaved and free folks.

Frederick Douglass had an intriguing life story – one that ended more happily than that of many other slaves. He is unsure of his exact date of birth. His father is likely his white master, Captain Anthony, a clerk of a rich plantation owner. At the age of seven, Douglass is given to a relative of Captain Anthony, Hugh Auld, who lives in Baltimore. There, he enjoys a relatively freer life; Sophia Auld, the wife of Hugh, has never had slaves before, and therefore is surprisingly kind to Douglass at first. She begins to teach him to read, until her husband orders her to stop, arguing that educating slaves increases the chances of their betrayal. As Douglass

proceeds to learn to read and write on his own with any help he can find, he becomes conscious of the existence of the abolitionist movement. After the deaths of Captain Anthony and his remaining heirs, Douglass is moved through an assortment of other masters. After brutal years “confined in the galling chains of slavery” (Douglass 1184), Douglass is sent back to Baltimore to Hugh Auld to learn the trade of ship caulking. Douglass saves money from his job little by little and eventually, “on the third day of September, 1838, I [Douglass] left my [his] chains, and succeeded in reaching New York without the slightest interruption of any kind.” (1219). It is noteworthy that Douglass refrains from describing the details of his escape in order to protect the safety of future slaves who may attempt the journey. Douglass changes his name, marries a free woman, and finishes his life in Massachusetts where he becomes deeply involved with the abolitionist movement.

In the narrative, Douglass describes a number of horrid experiences he endured. He writes as if seemingly unfazed or, at the very least, accustomed to such brutalities. Any ordinary free man surely would have had a drastically different response. While certainly traumatized internally, Douglass recounts these emotionally harrowing stories in an almost journalistic form to intentionally emphasize how common such scenes were for slaves. When Douglass discusses the process of being sold/bought as a slave, one of the most obviously dehumanizing acts one could put a person through, Douglass writes,

We were all ranked together at the valuation. Men and women, old and young, married and single, were ranked with horses, sheep, and swine. There were horses and men, cattle and women, pigs and children, all holding the same rank in the scale of being, and were all subjected to the same narrow examination. Silvery-headed age and sprightly youth, maids and matrons, had to undergo the same indelicate inspection (1191).

The bland language and simple sentence structure indicate that Douglass is actively trying to sound undaunted by such doings to the readers. Douglass writes with single subjects and predicates and includes basic prepositional phrases such as “with horses, sheep, and swine” and “in the scale of being”. He repeatedly uses clauses with two nouns joined by the “and” conjunction. These phrases, “men and women, old and young, married and single” for example, add a repeated plainness to the writing which once again serves to suggest the normalcy of the slave auction. Although Douglass does write that “at this moment, I [he] saw more clearly than ever the brutalizing effects of slavery upon both slave and slaveholder” (1191), it is evident that he is showing much less emotion than any free man who would most likely rant about the unjustness of the slave trade if he were put in a similar situation.

Once again, Douglass shows to the readers a usual thick-skinned response when mentioning the death of his mother. Douglass explains that he “received the tidings of her death with much the same emotion I [he] should have probably felt at the death of a stranger” (1172). Most any person, regardless of the level of intimacy at the familial level, would feel saddened to a substantial degree by the death of a parent. Douglass writing that the death of his mother was just the same to him as the death of a stranger sheds light on the family disconnect that the life of a slave creates. Once again, Douglass’ writing is not necessarily a confession of his actual feelings but a demonstration of the emotional effects of enslavement. It is impossible to know to what degree Douglass may truly feel unfazed by the passing of his mother, but his way of presenting his feelings to his audience asserts that these emotions were common among slaves.

Finally, when describing how Douglass “felt when I [he] found myself [himself] in a free State” (1219), Douglass writes that he “felt like one who has escaped a den of hungry lions” (1219). Moving from one state to another, no free man, despite the reason for relocation, would

make such an analogy for their old life. Describing slavery as being trapped in a den of hungry lions strongly implies that there is a feeling of capture, great danger, and always a risk of death. Such a vivid metaphor plays to show the true mental and physical trauma Douglass and the other enslaved folks endured. Douglass also provides another less aggressive analogy for his state of mind. He writes, “I suppose I felt as one may imagine the unarmed mariner to feel when he is rescued by a friendly man-of-war from the pursuit of a pirate” (1219). This simile is hard to relate too, as is the lion analogy, yet it provides an almost familiar reference of loneliness and savior. The two comparisons that Douglass puts together for his feelings in a free state are quite bold on their own, but placed in the larger passage seem to come almost naturally, communicating to the readers that it is normal for him to include such descriptions of his ‘adventures’ as a slave. Positioned amidst a relatively straightforward discussion of life in a free state, Douglass places these two parallels to enliven the narrative and convey to the, assuming free, reader the injury caused by enslavement and the unimaginable life contrast between slaves and the free.

On a contrary note, it can be seen that Douglass shows a surplus of emotion in response to a kind deed or in a positive circumstance; he is overcome with happiness that would be baffling to a typical free man. Douglass says that he “was gladdened by the invaluable instruction which, by the merest accident, I [he] had gained” (1186). It can be assumed that Douglass intends to share his immense gratitude for being simply introduced to reading, an ability that most others, free people that is, would not think twice about. Douglass, smart enough to recognize the value of such a skill, in a “decided manner” (1186), set out to further his learning on his own. Furthermore, once Douglass was proficient enough in reading, he took it upon himself to spread his knowledge to other slaves. To Douglass, acknowledging that he could

be subjected to severe punishment, “it was the delight of my [his] soul to be doing something that looked like bettering the condition of my [his] race” (1207). Similarly, when referencing a newspaper Douglass subscribed to (in his newly free life), he says that he “read it from week to week with such feelings as it would be quite idle for me [him] to attempt to describe. The paper became my [his] meat and my [his] drink. My [his] soul was set all on fire” (1222). Saying something is one’s meat and drink is essentially saying that it is of utmost importance to one’s life, it keeps a person going, and keeps them alive. That is a bold statement to make and one that a typical person who has not been deprived of basic human rights would not consider saying about reading a newspaper.

The Narrative of the Life of Frederick Douglass is written throughout from Douglass’ first-person point of view. Had this not been the case, such analysis would not have been possible. The writing would have lacked the emotional intimacy necessary. The first-person perspective allows for conclusions to be drawn and extrapolations to be made from the personal feelings Douglass gives in his account in both his positive and negative experiences. It may seem surprising for a slavery narrative, but Douglass spends more time writing about pleasant experiences than the hardships he endured. It can be seen through the intensity of the writing that joyful times (especially those associated with reading) had a more lasting impression on Douglass than the burdensome ones. Specifically, Douglass writes that reading is the “delight of his soul” and his “meat and drink”; it sets his soul “all on fire” (1222). On the contrary, plainly written, with almost a sense of normalcy, Douglass compares his relationship with his family to that he would have with a stranger. It seems that a free person would have presented their feelings in the directly opposite manner. For example, soul “set on fire” could have been used in a powerfully negative connotation to describe the death of a loved one, while basic sentence

construction and language are features that could have been appropriate for the average northerner to implement when discussing an ordinary occurrence – like reading. From a purely textual analysis point of view, it is important to recognize that Douglass is a crafty and talented storyteller. He places a lot of attention in deciding how one must present their experiences to convey an accurate underlying tone to their readers. Frederick Douglass' life story, as recorded in the *Narrative of the Life of Frederick Douglass, An American Slave, Written by Himself*, is just one example of a slave's journey. From Douglass' account alone, powerful conclusions can be drawn for slavery, and its effects on humans as a whole. The life events of Douglass are an open window to his soul. What we see through this window are the scars and deformity that slavery bestows on the human. The specific experiences of Douglass, in conjunction with a thorough analysis of the narration of his thoughts and descriptive language, is inescapable evidence that enslavement reforms 'emotional standards' for people.

Works Cited:

Douglass, Frederick, *Narrative of the Life of Frederick Douglass, An American Slave, Written by Himself*, *The Norton Anthology of American Literature: 1820-1856*, edited by Levine, Robert, W.W. Norton & Company, Inc., 2017, 1163-1228