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Resistance in Douglass’ Narrative

Throughout American history, there has been perhaps no greater injustice and hypocrisy inflicted upon human beings than the creation and implementation of slavery throughout the 18th and 19th centuries. The American literary canon has consistently pulled from America’s brutal regime of slavery, staunch in its denouncement of slavery, and the debasement of the black men and women who suffered under its wing. Among these works lies Douglass’ Narrative, an autobiographical account of Douglass’ experience complying with, and more importantly, resisting American slavery. *Narrative* is fundamentally a tale that details Douglass’ refusal to be labeled as anything less than a human being, and his intense struggle to break free from both the literal and mental shackles of slavery. His struggle and resistance are indicative of the sheer oppression of his overseers, but they also display for us the intellect, wit, and strength he levied against his masters and his dehumanization.

To understand Douglass’ emancipation, we must first understand that which bound him. Narrative begins with a brutal account of the treatment of his aunt under the hand of his first master, Captain Anthony. These visceral depictions of the violence and negligence directed towards slaves serve as their own natural indication of the horrors of slavery, but more than that, showcase how black slaves were controlled and dehumanized, treated more cruelly than even livestock. This dehumanization of slaves was indicative of their reduction from human to beast, and as Douglass says, “...it is the wish of most masters within my knowledge to keep their slaves thus ignorant.” (1, Douglass). To slaveowners, knowledge was equipped with both an ideological and tangible danger. To know was discouraged, not only because a slave would be exposed to the writings of abolitionists and anti-slavery media, but also because it would bring slaves closer to being “human”, breaking the perception of slaves as nonhuman property. Additionally, later in his account, he writes, “…if you teach [Douglass] how to read, there would be no keeping him. It would forever unfit him to be a slave” (33, Douglass). For slaves, knowledge was seen as directly detrimental to their behavior. It signified the manifestation of a concrete will – where there was knowledge, there was a course for action, and as we see later, where there is a will, a concrete course for action manifests as resistance. Any knowledge that slaves had was potential for rebellion, and white slaveowners were keenly conscientious of the dangers that widespread knowledge would pose amongst slave populations.

Douglass’ initial path to resistance was marked by the perhaps-naïve idealization of knowledge. His initial exposure to literacy was through Mrs. Auld, the wife of his master in Baltimore. She is presented as a kind and generous woman, “…preserved from the blighting and dehumanizing effects of slavery” (32, Douglass). From her, Douglass learns the basics of the alphabet and for the first time in his life, is placed in a position to understand what he calls “…the white man’s power to enslave the black man” (33, Douglass). After his master criticizes Mrs. Auld for her instruction of Douglass, he is confronted with the revelatory nature of knowledge. For Douglass, this gives form to an otherwise abstract method of escaping mental servitude, and it is with this the sparks of resistance are first ignited within his mind. In the following years with the Auld family, he undergoes a number of transformative experiences stemming from his newfound literacy. Through local schoolchildren and acquaintances, he is able to witness the lives of free men beyond the confines of the plantation. He gains new insights into the abolitionist movement through foreign sailors he works with in the docks, and he is able to witness the freedom of black men in the city.

Principal among these events, though, was his obtainment of a copy of a book titled “The Columbian Orator”. Douglass recounts a dialogue presented in the book, which ultimately results in the emancipation of a slave through words alone – a powerful but naïve message that Douglass supplements with one of Sheridan’s speeches on “Catholic emancipation”. Through the dialogue and the speech, Douglass is enraptured by the power of rhetoric, understanding that to become literate is to free himself from the cerebral shackles of slavery. Douglass reaffirms this himself, writing, “I have found that, to make a contented slave, it is necessary to make a thoughtless one. […] He must be able to detect no inconsistencies in slavery; he must be made to feel that slavery is right; and he can be brought to that only when he ceases to be a man” (Douglass *Narrative,* 99). His discovery of the importance of knowledge, however, is not yet enough to spur him into freedom. This only comes after his encounter with a new, particularly ruthless master, Edward Covey.

Covey is characterized as an antithesis to Douglass – where Douglass initially seeks to triumph in resistance through knowledge, Covey is intentionally sadistic and cruel towards his slaves, exercising control over them both through violence and the establishment of the fear of surveillance. His treatment of slaves is unlike the Aulds – those he owns are constantly hungry and subject to his whims, and they are worked to the bone regardless of the conditions of the fields. Under his control, Douglass laments, “…behold a man transformed into a brute!” (Douglass *Narrative*, 63). The spark of literacy and knowledge, and the urge for resistance with it, is gradually crushed underfoot by Covey’s merciless working of Douglass. His mental agility and literacy prove to be insufficient in escaping the brutality and control of Covey - he is still inevitably bound. The barbaric conditions that he experiences turn him into a “beast” at no fault of his own, and his transformation only serves to fulfill the perceptions of his masters in a vicious cycle that plays further and further into the dehumanization of slaves.

However, while under Covey, Douglass has two key transformative moments that, by his own words, “…form an epoch in [his] humble history.” (Douglass *Narrative*, 65). Douglass, sick from physical overexertion, is unable to do work one day and thus receives a thorough beating from Covey. He is injured so heavily that in making his way back to his master, Thomas Auld, he is covered in blood and “presented an appearance enough to affect any but a heart of iron.” (Douglass *Narrative*, 68). He is unceremoniously received by Auld and sent back to Covey the following morning, where he must at first hide from Covey to avoid further beatings. However, upon returning to work, he and Covey have a direct and violent confrontation where Douglass is uncharacteristically possessed by a spirited urge to fight back against Covey. In the ensuing fight, Douglass is able to overpower Covey, for the first time establishing physical dominance over his master. It is in this moment that the need for resistance is once again reignited within Douglass - as he describes it, “...you shall see how a slave was made a man. [...] [it] inspired me again with a determination to be free.” (Douglass *Narrative*, 66, 72). These moments are formative in building Douglass’ ideology of resistance as a way to preserve one’s humanity. Auld acknowledges his plight, but in a moment of great dissonance, still insists that Covey is a good man and that Douglass must be wrong because of the color of his skin. It is only when he fights and triumphs against Covey that he can earn a grudging acknowledgment of his humanity, with Covey too ashamed to report to the constables that he had been bested by a mere 16-year-old slave. It is from this moment on that Douglass is emboldened - while labeled a slave, “...the day had passed forever when I could be a slave in fact.” (Douglass *Narrative*, 73).

While Douglass doesn’t describe himself as getting into any further physical altercations with slave owners before his escape, he becomes bold enough to attempt escape twice, successfully escaping to the North his second time. In both cases, his literacy is essential in writing free passes for both himself and the slaves he attempts to bring with him. More importantly than that, his ethos of resistance, built through his time first under Auld and then under Covey, is fundamental in laying the groundwork for the path to emancipation for Douglass. Ultimately, as an account of his resistance, Douglass' *Narrative* exposes the atrocities of slavery, but also inspires a celebration of human resilience.