**CORE106 Fall 2015**

**September 23, 2015**

**Notes**

**Frederick Douglass, *Narrative of the Life of Frederick Douglass, An American Slave***

**An instructor asks: "I don't usually do this, but the following sentence submitted by a student has me genuinely perplexed: 'Because many of the Africans who came to the colonies were poor and needed work, they were often forced into slavery.'"**

An important theme: a slave could be rented.

**THEME I: Contradictions**

One of the themes is the weight of contradictions. Devotion, yet brutal behavior.

Contradictions will eventually destroy institutions.

Douglass exercises control in the hymn.

(66)

Obviously, the breeding analogy with livestock is awful.

**Contradiction #1: Moralizing, brave talk about moral codes but no obvious need to apply morality to the slaves.**

We learn Covey has no moral obligation to slaves to, among other things, tell the truth. Interesting revelation about what happens when we consider moral obligations to break down completely, and reveals something about their nature. Does morality break down when the other party has no ability to retaliate?

**Contradiction #2:** **Slaves were valuable but not protected as assets.**  Protection would have signaled leverage to the slaves. The degree to which slaves were worked in all conditions. The reason is clear: elevating “value” would elevate slaves understanding of their own leverage. This becomes apparent once Douglass learns a trade and starts to suppose he should be fairly compensated for his newfound shipbuilding skill.

Notice the practice of renting slaves: a revelation of their true perceived value.

So…all the brutality and degradation, which seems to be exposed when Douglass calls Covey’s bluff.

**Contradiction #3: Devotion, yet brutal behavior in the name of religion**. The notion of the moral coil, that life was supposed to be an ordeal, as we await our final reward.

Interesting quote: “Mr. Freeland had many of the faults peculiar to slaveholders, such as being very passionate and fretful…” (76) Ultimately, as we discussed, creates a kind of oppression for masters.

Page 77 is an elaboration about religion.

Why does Douglass suppose that the most bible-thumping masters were the worst?

The exchange between Douglass and Covey on page 72-73 is a key passage.

Douglass’s theory: Covey did not want his reputation as a negro breaker compromised. Is this theory correct? (74)

**Contradiction #4: Money vs. Freedom**

**It seems like slaveowners can be motivated materially, but when push comes to shove, relinquishing slavery is even worse.**

Mr. Freeland was, for what it’s worth, “frank” and seemingly honest. (76)

C.11: Master Thomas tries to persuade Douglass to give up his desire for freedom (97)

Master Hugh overrides this and turns him into an employee.

**QUESTION: So why is slavery inherently worse than the arrangement of employment?**

**THEME 2: Self-mastery**

The Christmas story: notice the parallels to Socrates. “**A slave who would work during the holidays was considered by our masters as scarcely deserving them.”**

**Passage about page 73: masters conflate drunkenness with liberty in the minds of slaves.**

Passage where they disgust slaves with freedom by, e.g., “making drink molasses.”

Theme about happiness…that indulgence is the enemy of freedom.

Notice the symbolism of the root. (71).

Consider the insights on motivation: “His plan was to whip for the smallest offences to prevent the commission of larger ones.”

“Till I became my own master” (80). Extremely powerful and filled with meaning. Master in the sense of slavery but also master of himself, in the sense of self-mastery.

The importance of camaraderie is significant in the story of their attempted escape.

The analogy to Patrick Henry: death is better than hopeless bondage.

The weird turn after the escape fails…he ends up going back to Baltimore and working on shipbuilding.

He acquires skills but then learns to resent the man who saved him because he takes his earnings.

**Other observations:**

“staid” (p. 98) misspelling. Suggests how impressive Douglass's self-teaching really is.

Master Hugh reveals that it isn’t just about money: he didn’t realize he was risking his power (98)

He secures his freedom; ambivalent about it in some ways. (100)

Scene at New Bedford looks like the paragon of capitalism. (105)