

# ENG 182 Final Paper

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## 1 Introduction

Slavery is a painful and complex chapter in human history. One of the most effective tactics used to maintain their system of oppression was to set up an educative system to teach slaves how to be good slaves. Despite these efforts, slaves found ways to educate themselves and resist their oppressors. This paper aims to explore how slaves were educated to become slaves, the ways in which they fought back against this oppressive system and the ongoing implications of their struggles for contemporary society.

## 2 School of Slavery

Slavery is not natural, which means that it requires a special curriculum of maintaining the current state of slavery. The curriculum is designed to make slaves believe that they are born to be slaves and that they should not fight back. This curriculum mainly includes two parts: one to convince them as subhuman, and the other to promote their ignorance.

### 2.1 Subhumanity

The first part of the curriculum is to convince slaves that they are born as slaves. In the autobiography by Frederick Douglass, slaves are not allowed to know his birthday (Matlack 1979, p. 1). Any inquiry about birthday will result in serious punishment. By depriving the privilege of knowing birthdays, slaves are deprived of the ability to know their growth as a human. This treatment is effective in making them feel that they are animals in the house, as animals are also not “allowed” to know their birthday.

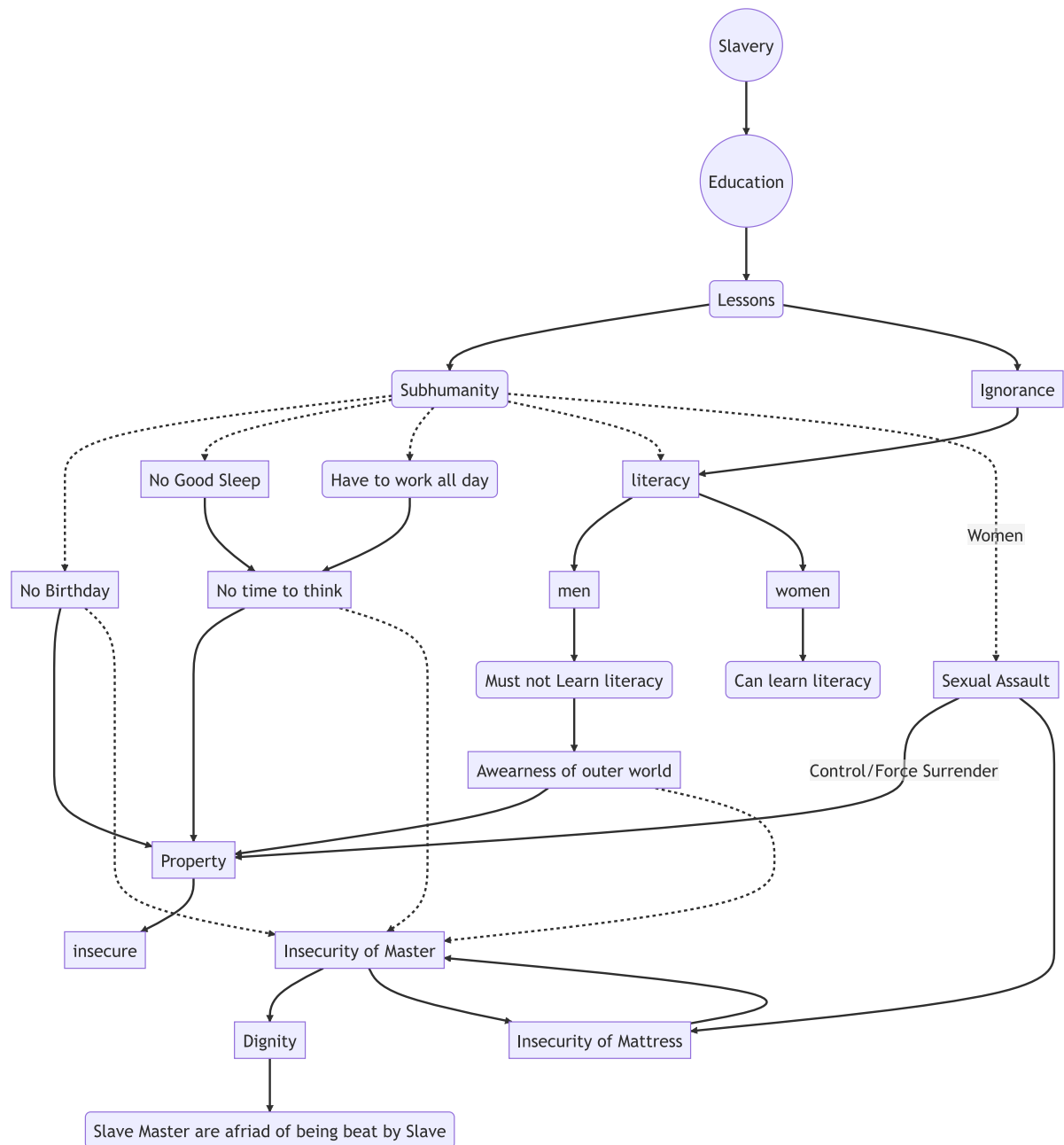


Figure 1: Schooling for Slavery

Further, whenever slaves are born, they must be separated from their mothers for a couple of years. Therefore, slaves are being deprived of the privilege of having a family. For example, Douglass are having very little memory of his mother (Matlack 1979, p. 2). Even though Douglass's mom tried her best to get in touch with Douglass, spending the whole night walking miles to see him, Douglass is not able to have a beloved impression from his mom.

Further, when his mother is sick and finally dies, Douglass is not allowed to present, or even know the information (Matlack 1979, p. 3).

This lesson has a special variant for female slaves. The ability to perform sexual assault provided the slaveholder with an effective weapon to convince female slaves that they are their property. As an example, Dr. Flint has performed various sexual abuse on the young Linda, polluting her young mind with the unclean image, where “only a vile monster can think of” (Jacobs 2022, p. 39). Dr. Flint consistently asserts that Linda is his property, and she is forced to live under the same roof as Dr. Flint, and also bear with his suffocative surveillance. All this creates a deep impression on Linda that she is a property of Dr. Flint.

## 2.2 Ignorance

Simply teaching slaves that they are subhuman is not enough. It is also important to teach them that this is the life that they can achieve, and they already achieve a very good life. This is the second part of the curriculum, which is to promote the ignorance of the slaves.

The one and most important thing about teaching slaves about ignorance is to deprive them of their potential of learning literacy. As an old saying, the more we learn, the more we find that we don't know. By depriving the potential of learning literacy, slaves will not be able to learn about the outer world, which means they will be satisfied by their current environment. In other words, they are being ignorant about their living environment.

In particular, one of the most implicit but effective methods of teaching slaves ignorance is to bind their master's greatness to their dignity. This is greatly demonstrated in the *Great House Farm*. Slaves who have a chance to go to work on the *Great House Farm*, even though with minimal extra privilege, will sing songs to celebrate that they are going to work for the

*Great House Farm* (Matlack 1979, p. 10). The *Great House Farm* is associated with greatness in slaves' minds. Furthermore, the greatness of masters is associated with the greatness of slaves. For example, "Colonel Lloyd's slaves contending that he was the richest, and Mr. Jepson's slaves that he was the smartest" (Matlack 1979, p. 16-17). According to Douglass, slaves "seemed to think that the greatness of their masters was transferable to themselves" (Matlack 1979, p. 17). This is very effective in controlling slaves, as they will both be ignorant and would like to work harder to make their master greater. The claim will be revisited in Section 4.

### 2.3 Insecurity of Slaveholders

It is also worth noting this schooling also emphasizes the insecurity of slaveholders. Slaves are not natural for humans, which is why it requires special schooling. However, the education of slaves also triggers fear and anxiety among slaveholders. They realized that educated slaves might question their authority, rebel against their oppressors, and demand their freedom. Slaveholders believed that slavery was a natural and necessary institution, and they went to great lengths to justify their actions and maintain their power. The idea that slaves could be educated and become more than just property challenged this belief and threatened their way of life.

For example, Mr. Auld said "A n\*\*\*\*\*r should know nothing but to obey his master—to do as he is told to do. Learning would spoil the best n\*\*\*\*\*r in the world" (Matlack 1979, p. 29). If slaves are naturally slaves, then why would education be such a threat? The answer is that slaves were not naturally inferior or subservient, but were made to believe so through a system of oppression and dehumanization.

While the system of slavery places an immense burden on the enslaved, it also creates significant challenges for the slaveholder. In the upcoming Section 3.2, several examples will be explored that demonstrate how slaves were able to use the insecurity of their masters to fight back against their oppression.

### 3 Revolt

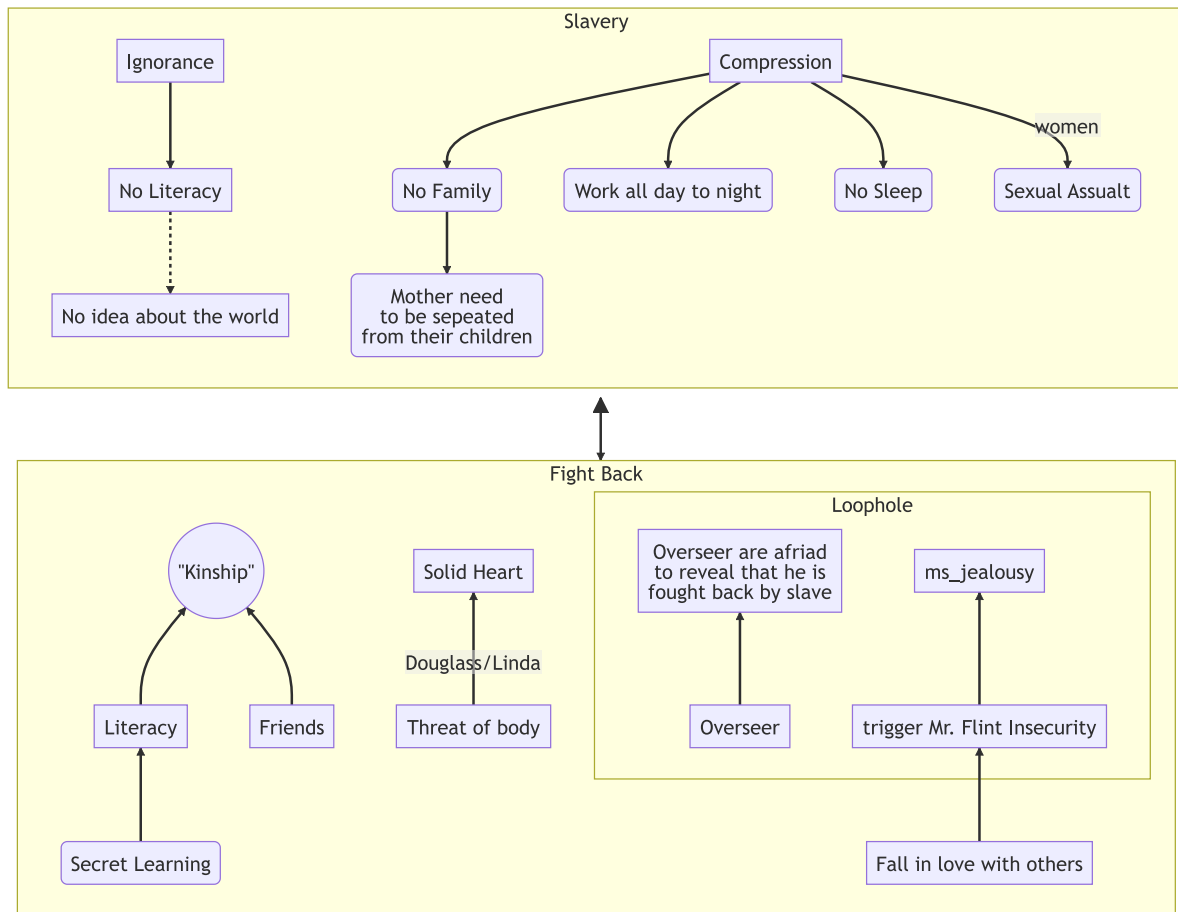


Figure 2: Slaves Revolt Strategies

#### 3.1 War against Ignorance

The first thing slaves have to do in order to revolt is to resolve their ignorance. Slaves can never be free without understanding what freedom means. They will be satisfied with their current life, and will not have the motivation to fight back. For example, Douglass discussed the example that slaves are celebrating that they are able to work in the Great House

Farm, even though it does not provide many privileges. This is because they are ignorant about the outside world, but mainly because they have no way of understanding the outside world. Therefore, the first thing slaves have to do is to resolve their ignorance, and the most effective way to do this is by learning literacy.

There are several examples of how slaves are trying to learn literacy, even though they are not allowed to do so. After Mrs. Auld teaches Douglass the alphabet, Mr. Auld forbids her from teaching him any further. However, Douglass is not giving up. He is trying to learn literacy by himself. He learns reading and writing by talking to poor white children (Matlack 1979, p. 34). After he learned literacy, he is also trying to teach other slaves to learn literacy. He is also trying to organize a meeting for slaves to learn literacy (Matlack 1979, p. 70). This is a very important step for slaves to revolt, as they are able to understand the outside world, and also understand that they are not born as slaves. Linda also learns literacy herself, which resolves her ignorance about the outside world.

Many enslaved individuals sought education as a means of resisting oppression, despite being forbidden to learn. Frederick Douglass is a notable example of this, as he was taught the alphabet by Mrs. Auld but was forbidden by Mr. Auld from continuing his education. However, Douglass persevered and taught himself to read and write by speaking with poor white children (Matlack 1979, p. 34). He even taught other slaves and organized meetings to help them learn (Matlack 1979, p. 70). Literacy was incredibly important for enslaved people, as it allowed them to comprehend the world outside of slavery and to recognize their inherent worth. Linda's pursuit of literacy also allowed her to resist her enslavement and communicate with others. The transformative power of education for the oppressed cannot be overstated.

### 3.2 Fight by loophole

Another strategy that is very effective for slaves to fight back is by exploiting the insecurity of slaveholders. Slaveholders are very insecure about their slaves, as they are afraid that slaves will rebel against them. For example, after being treated cruelly by Mr. Covey, Douglass decides to fight back. This really triggers the insecurity of Mr. Covey, as he is afraid of being viewed as a weak overseer. “Mr. Covey enjoyed the most unbounded reputation for being a first-rate overseer and negrobearer” (Matlack 1979, p. 63). Mr. Covey is really afraid of losing his reputation, and therefore he is not able to reveal that Douglass is fighting back, as it will reveal his weakness.

Similarly, Linda decides to have children with Mr. Sand and wants to marry Mr. Sand to reject Dr. Flint’s sexual abuse and advance. This is strategic as a fight toward the control of Dr. Flint, even though Linda is not really falling in love with Mr. Sand but only thinks he is a good man. Linda is really exploiting the insecurity of Dr. Flint, as he is afraid of losing his control over Linda.

### 3.3 Family and Community

Even though most slaves are deprived of family. For example, Douglass is not allowed to contact his mother when he was very young, and can only have contact with his mother. However, this deprivation of family formulates the slave community to forfeit a new kinship with their community. Further, the cruel life gives slaves a more solid heart. The most noticeable example is how Linda is able to get help from her friends and neighbors. Even though Linda is separated from her mother very early, her grandma has provided her with enormous help. Further, her friends provide various help to her when she wants to marry the

men she loves, and eventually help her escape from Dr. Flint. The support and assistance provided by friends and family were crucial in helping slaves to resist their oppressors and assert their own agency. Their world is full of darkness, but their friends really reveal to them a light of the beauty of the world.

## **4 Implication**

The schooling nature of slavery is very instructive toward how we should understand the current life. This section will mainly talk about how the idea of slavery is implicit in four parts: Education, Collectivism and Obedience, and Industrial Complex.

### **4.1 Education**

#### **4.1.1 Ignorance**

The education system of China is in an awkward state. On the one hand, the Chinese population is still ranked 1st around the world, and education is highly valued. On the other hand, The education resource is highly limited and distributed unbalanced. Therefore, high-level education resource is highly competitive, and students must work super hard to be successful.

Therefore, to succeed in such an environment, students are forced to be perfect at problem-solving. When I was young, my grandparent always tell me to study hard so that I can get into a good university. Everything can stay aside for my study. According to my roommate, students are only required to be good at their studies. If they have good academic standing, they can do everything without being complained about harshly, but on the contrary, without good academic standing, everything can be wrong for preventing students to study



well. The whole education system is teaching students to try their best to be perfect at problem-solving, and this is the only thing needed to be successful.

If we compare it with slavery history, we can see a very similar phenomenon for slaves. Slaves are forbidden to learn literacy, which may distract them from being good slaves. They are only required to be good at their work, and everything else is not allowed. This is very similar to the current education system in China, as students are only required to be good at their academic performance, and everything else is not allowed (in extreme cases).

To convince you further, I will use an example from Douglass's "Narrative of the Life of Frederick Douglass, an American Slave" to illustrate the similarity between the ignorance of slaves and students that has deeply touched me. In the "Great House Farm" chapter, Douglass portrays how slaves' dignity is bound to their master's greatness. He notes that Colonel Lloyd's slaves believed he was the richest, while Mr. Jepson's slaves thought he was the smartest (p.16-17). Similarly, students from Vanke Meisha Academy, my high school, may believe that they have better facilities than some other international schools in Shenzhen, while students from other schools may think their schools have a long history and better teachers. Moreover, university comparisons are even more common than high school ones. For instance, my roommate used to actively argue, even online, that the University of Wisconsin-Madison is better than the University of California-Davis. Similarly, a friend once jokingly argued that he would have a much better future than me because he had been admitted to UCB. From time to time, I have seen discussions on whether Harvard is better than Yale or whether MIT is better than Stanford. Although some of these discussions may provide useful advice for students to choose their schools, a significant portion of them

resembles how slaves fought with each other to convince others that their master was better.

Douglass wrote that slaves “seemed to think that the greatness of their masters was transferable to themselves,” and students sometimes seem to think that the greatness of their school can be transferred to themselves without any effort (p. 17).

## 4.2 Collectivism and Obedience

Another interesting idea that correspond to slavery is *Collectivism*. This is in particular more common in China compared to the US is the idea of collectivism. Students are expected to have a strong sense of collective honors, where their honors are highly correlated with the honors of the class. They are expected to be honored when their class is awarded some prize, and they are expected to feel bad when their class is not performing well.

Similarly, Chinese students are forced (mostly) to be trained as soldiers every time they are entering a new school. This training is short, but the focus is on collectivism. They are trained to obey every command from their drill master. Most of the time the training is very boring, where students are only required to stand under the sunshine for several half hours, or they are trained to marching soldiers. Noticeably, if one or some of the students are not performing well, it is possible that the whole class is punished to train again and again.

The analogy from slavery is slightly different, where slaves are not required to have a strong sense of collective honor, but they are required to obey their master. However, both slavery and collectivism are trying to eliminate the personality of the individual, so that there will not be any individualism.

On the other hand, under the influence of Confucianism, students may be forbidden to ask questions. They are not allowed to ask questions beyond the scope of the courses. Further,

sometimes they are not allowed to question the mistake of their teachers but are required to learn whatever teachers are saying. We can see a very analogous example from Douglass that slaves are not allowed to ask about their birthday or understand why they are not allowed to know their birthday (Matlack 1979, p. 2). This is a pessimistic nature of Chinese education, where students are not allowed to question the authority, and they are required to obey the authority. Fortunately, this is not always the case, and in particular, I am lucky enough to avoid being taught this way. However, as noticed before, the unbalanced distribution of education resources reveals that this is still a common phenomenon in places where education is not so well-developed.

### **4.3 Industrial Complex**

People can hardly imagine what society will look like without prisons, people in China can hardly imagine what will happen without the Gaokao (entry examination for college) and mandatory education system. The last part of this essay is going to talk about the Industrial Complex of Education. According to Davis, the prison industrial complex refers to the interconnection between the criminal justice system and the private prison industry. This is very analogous to why Chinese education contains so many problems but is hardly resolved. Probably the original goal of the education system is to train people and select the great candidate for the rare high-level education resource, or at least, students' score. However, just like the prisons, the industrial complex drives the education system in another direction, where profits are maximized.

Similar to "For private business prison labor is like a pot of gold", students are a pot of gold for teachers (Davis 2011, p. 84). The most analogous and outstanding example is after-

school tutoring. While the original goal of after-school tutoring might have been to help students who need extra time to study or to catch up on material, similar to the various medical experiments during the post-WWII period that Davis mentioned in “Are Prisons Obsolete?” (p. 88-89), it has become a profitable venture for teachers. Sometimes, in order to maximize profits, teachers might force students to attend tutoring or treat them badly in class if they don’t attend. Sometimes, teachers may intentionally provide low-quality instruction in the classroom to encourage students to attend tutoring sessions. For example, my roommate told me that when he was in junior high school, his teacher taught all the material during the tutoring section, which allows him to teach superfast in the ordinary classroom. This left my roommate feeling completely lost in class. He says that his father came to listen once and is surprised by the speed of their teacher’s instruction, and then he was forced to attend the tutoring, which turns out to be effective. Some other friends share with me that their teachers would share the problems appearing on upcoming exams, making parents believe that the tutoring was very effective. Luckily, similar to the medical experiment in prisons, after-school tutoring is officially banned for every school in China, but it is still common under the table.

## Bibliography

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