



## Frederick Douglass: A Narrative of the Life of Frederick Douglass

(1845 - 1892)

- Jacob Zumoff

Genre: Autobiography (literary). Country: United States.

The *Narrative of the Life of Frederick Douglass, An American Slave, Written By Himself* must be seen within the context of its times. When Douglass' first autobiography (of three) was published in 1845, slavery was still legally enshrined in practice and law in the American South. John C. Calhoun, the foremost intellectual defender of slavery, was still alive, and the U.S. was preparing to invade Mexico, in part to obtain more land for the expansion of slavery. The American Civil War still had yet to resolve the issue of slavery once and for all. Therefore, the *Narrative's* anti-slavery perspective, which is today taken for granted, was very much a contentious issue in 1845. Douglass' *Narrative*, besides telling his life's story, was also a political pamphlet, aimed at furthering the abolitionist struggle against slavery, the same struggle that Douglass would spend much of his adult life aiding.

As its name implies, the *Narrative* describes the life of Douglass from his childhood in rural Maryland, and his experiences with slavery, up through his successful escape to the North. Reading the *Narrative* one is confronted by the emphasis that this book is, in fact, as its subtitle indicates, "written by himself." Two prominent white abolitionists, William Lloyd Garrison and Wendell Phillips affirm (in Garrison's words) that "Mr. Douglass has very properly chosen to write his own Narrative, in his own style, and according the best of his ability, rather than to employ someone else" (7). On one hand, this affirmation was directed at those white racists who refused to believe that a former slave was capable of writing so eloquently, or that Douglass had never been a slave. For example, one letter-writer to a favourable review in the abolitionist *Liberator* (12 December 1845) insisted that the *Narrative* was "a bucket of falsehoods, from beginning to end" and that Douglass (whom the letter-writer had claimed to know in Maryland) "not capable of writing the Narrative." Of course such racists were unlikely to be swayed by Garrison's seal of approval, but the introductions also served as a sort of letter of presentation for Douglass amongst white abolitionist audiences as well.

The first chapter of the *Narrative* presents many of the elements that Douglass employs throughout the pamphlet to construct an argument against slavery. The first paragraph bluntly states:

I have no accurate knowledge of my age, never having seen any authentic record containing it. By far the larger part of the slaves know as little of their ages as horses know of theirs, and it is the wish of most masters within my knowledge to keep their slaves thus ignorant. I do not remember to have ever met a slave who could tell of his birthday (19).

After thus depriving himself of an age, Douglass then eliminates a family:

The opinion was also whispered that my master was my father; but of the correctness of this opinion, I know nothing; the means of knowing(1) was withheld from me. My mother and I were separated when I was but an infant—before I knew her as my mother. It is a common custom, in the part of Maryland from which I ran away, to part children from their mothers at a very early age (20).

Before the reader even reaches the third page of the *Narrative*, Douglass has both generalized his own experience into common experiences for all slaves (even though he stresses later on that his experience, if anything, was milder than that of many slaves further South) and shown how, from a slave's birth onwards, slavery strips him of all humanity and reduces him to the level of an animal.

The chapter goes on to describe Douglass' (who, as a slave, was known as Frederick Bailey) childhood as a slave on the plantation of Capitan Anthony Auld. Anthony Auld, according to Douglass, "was not a humane slaveholder" but "a cruel man, hardened by a long life of slaveholding" who found pleasure in torturing slaves (22). Thus, within the first several pages, Douglass introduces the themes of brutality, dehumanization, instability and the misery of slavery.

When he was eight years old, he was transferred to the house of Anthony Auld's brother, Hugh Auld and his wife Sophia Auld in Baltimore. His experience in Baltimore is key both to his own life and to the anti-slavery argument of the *Narrative*. Upon arriving in Baltimore, Douglass tells us, he is amazed to find a mistress such as Sophia Auld, "a woman of the kindest heart and finest feelings", who, never having been a slave owner before, has not assimilated the base mores of a slave society (46). Douglass explains how she begins to teach him to read. This is perhaps the most important part of the book. On the one hand, it calls forth a vitriolic reaction by Hugh Auld, who declares that education destroys a slave's value and forbids his wife to continue teaching Douglass. Sophia Auld quickly is corrupted by slavery, her "angelic face gave place to that of a demon" (46). Incredibly, given his depiction of slavery, Douglass writes that "Slavery proved as injurious to her as it did to me" (50). The dehumanizing effects of slavery as a system, on both black slaves and white slaveholders, is illustrated by Douglass, in an attempt to convince a white audience of the evil of slavery beyond its cruelty towards slaves.

This incident also awakens in Douglass an awareness of the power of the word, and its potential for use as a weapon against slavery. For the rest of his life Douglass would use words in this battle, first learning to read and write illegally, then training other slaves to do the same, using his literacy in attempted escapes, and, as free man, using writing and oratory to fight slavery, including this very *Narrative*. For about seven years Douglass lived in Baltimore, first minding the Aulds' son, and then learning the rudiments of carpentry (Hugh Auld was a ship carpenter.) However, upon Anthony Auld's death, Douglass and the other slaves were to be divided, along with other property, amongst the heirs. Again, Douglass uses his own history to illustrate the precarious nature of slave life, where things as basic as where one lived were controlled by the slave holders. Douglass was given to Thomas Auld, Anthony's son-in-law, in St. Michael's, Maryland. Thomas Auld, according to the *Narrative*, "was a mean man", even by the standards of slavery. He was one of the rare slaveholders who were "destitute of every element character commanding respect" (64). For example, he regularly deprived his slaves of sufficient food. At the same time, he was a very devout Methodist who was able to quote chapter and verse from the Bible to justify torturing slaves.

It was while at Thomas Auld's farm that the *Narrative* and Douglass' life reach another key turning point: his experience with Edward Covey, who "had acquired a very high reputation for breaking young slaves", much in the same way a cowboy would break steers. Through a skilful combination of violence and treachery—Covey's nickname was the "Snake" because he would sneak up on slaves to ensure that they were working—within six

months, Douglass recounts in the *Narrative*:

Mr. Covey succeeded in breaking me. I was broken in body, soul, and spirit. My natural elasticity was crushed, my intellect languished, the disposition to read departed, the cheerful spark that lingered about my eye died; the dark night of slavery closed in upon me; and behold, a man transformed into a brute!  
(73)

Again, an incident in Douglass' life is used skilfully to indict the entire system of slavery. Yet Douglass illustrates that even when forced into this beast-like state, slaves have within themselves the ability to struggle for their own betterment. Covey continued pushing Douglass until one day, he pushed too hard: unable to continue at the pace Covey ordered, Douglass resisted, and ran away. Douglass returns to Covey but, when Covey attempts to punish him, Douglass again resists, physically. With the help of the other slaves, who do nothing to subdue him, Douglass succeeds in regaining his manhood and forces Covey to stand down. The lessons learnt in his early years would mark Douglass' life thenceforth: a mastery of language and an understanding of the necessity of confrontation, and not just moral appeals, to end the slave system.

In early 1834, after having lived with Covey for a year, Douglass found himself in the service of William Freeland. Within the context of slavery, if Covey and Thomas Auld represented the most brutal type of slave master, then Freeland was the least brutal. While he was with Freeland Douglass helped organize an illicit Sunday school where he helped teach slaves to leave. In 1835, despite his mild treatment at the hands of Freeland, Douglass and other fellow slaves planned to escape to the North; only a last minute betrayal foiled the plan. After being implicated in the attempt, Douglass was again sent to work in Baltimore, where he was trained as a ship caulker. Here he confronted racism at the hands of free white workers, who feared that skilled slaves like himself would be used to replace them. At one worksite, he was beaten and driven off.

Nonetheless, as an urban, skilled slave, Douglass had a relatively privileged life compared to many rural plantation slaves. Still, in spite of—or perhaps, because of—this relative good fortune, Douglass began to resent being a slave even more.

I have observed this in my experience of slavery,—that whenever my condition was improved, instead of increasing my contentment, it only increased my desire to be free, and set me to thinking of plans to gain my freedom. I have found that, to make a contented slave, it is necessary to make a thoughtless one. It is necessary to darken his moral and mental vision, and, as far as possible, to annihilate the power of reason. He must be made 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 (101-2).

The remaining portion of the *Narrative* concerns Douglass' escape to freedom in the autumn of 1838. Given that slavery was still very much the law of the land—in only a few years after the *Narrative* was published, Congress would, through the Fugitive Slave Acts, force Northern states to assist capturing escaped slaves, and in the Supreme Court's infamous Dred Scott decision would declare that slavery was legal in all states and that blacks had “no rights which the white man was bound to respect”—Douglass' reticence about how he escaped is understandable. Douglass briefly described his life in the North, and the *Narrative* culminates in Douglass' becoming involved in the abolitionist movement.

Douglass' *Narrative*, more than 160 years after its publication, retains both its historic and its literary value. Read as a historic document, the *Narrative* offers a view into not only the experiences of a slave, but also his thoughts about those experiences. It also is one of the most powerful pieces of abolitionist propaganda, and was immediately recognized as such.

There are several elements that Douglass employed in the *Narrative* to make it effective. First, he portrays the

evils of slavery as *systematic*, not as the fault of this or that evil master. As quoted above, Douglass insisted that his desire for freedom increased, not due to mistreatment, but to better treatment. In doing so, Douglass proves false the myth of the “benign slaveholder”, who eschews the worst excesses of his kind and, in fact, treats his slaves well. It is not that such masters did not exist, Douglass implies in the *Narrative*, but that it is slavery as a system that is evil and it cannot be reformed or improved. Further, the instability inherent in slavery means that a slave could be suddenly forced from a relatively good master like Hugh Auld to a tyrant like Thomas Auld; or, vice-versa, from a dictator like Covey to a much better Freeland.

To prove this, Douglass uses several examples of what he calls the “dehumanizing character of slavery” and its affects both, obviously, on the slaves, but also more subtly on the slave owners themselves. The violence, which Douglass shows is an integral part of slavery, is only the most brutal form of this. The *ideology* of slavery, in which a man is not only treated like a “brute” but accepts that he is, in fact, an animal is much more pernicious.

But Douglass, perhaps keeping his white audience in mind, illustrates how slavery corrupts white society as well. In the early Victorian era, the family was very important. Douglass shows that slavery is fundamentally anti-family. Throughout the book, slaves are denied the basic protection of family: children are conceived without marriage; lovers are unable to live together; children are separated from their parents and the elderly are literally left to die alone. White families are also undermined by slavery. What value is family, Douglass asks, when a man’s son can also be his slave? Or when slave owners such as Covey use female slaves as “breeders”? As Douglass writes:

If the lineal descendants of Ham are alone to scripturally enslaved, it is certain that slavery at the south must soon become unscriptural; for thousands are ushered into the world, annually, who, like myself, owe their existence to white fathers, and those fathers most frequently their own masters (22).

A more direct example of the corrupting influence of slavery upon white society is the transformation of Sophie Auld. She enters the *Narrative* pure as (white) snow, having never “mastered” slaves before. However, upon making the mistake of starting to teach Douglass to read, she becomes more aware of what is expected from her as a slave owner, and metamorphoses appropriately. Thomas Auld, too, Douglass informs us, had begun life without slaves, and became an example of the worst type of slaveholder. White society, Douglass implies, is in danger of such corruption at a broader level if slavery is allowed to exist.

Douglass drives home this point even further with his discussion on religion. Several of the worst slaveholders were also very devout Christians. Capitan Anthony Auld, Douglass tells us, converted to Methodism at a camp-meeting:

If it had any effect on his character, [conversion] made him more cruel and hateful in all his ways; for I believe him to have been a much worse man after his conversion than before. Prior to his conversion, he relied upon his own depravity to shield and sustain him in his savage barbarity; but after his conversion, he found religious sanction and support for his slave-holding cruelty (65).

Covey, the brutal “breaker” of slaves, was also devout: “Added to the natural good qualities of Mr. Covey, he was a professor of religion—a pious soul—and a member and a class-leader of the Methodist church.” At the same time that slaveholders professed tremendous religious feelings, the slave system they supported was based on very un-Christian realities: adultery, deception, theft and violence. A basic tenet of Protestantism since the Lutheran Reformation—that each believer had to directly manage his faith through reading the bible himself—was prevented by slaveholders who so feared literate slaves that they broke up Sabbath study groups.

I assert most unhesitatingly, that the religion of the south is a mere covering for the most horrid

crimes,—a justifier of the most appalling barbarity,—a sanctifier of the most hateful frauds,—and a dark shelter under, which the darkest, foulest, grossest, and most infernal deeds of the slaveholders find the strongest protection (84).

In an appendix to the *Narrative*, Douglass makes clear that he saw a difference between slaveholders' Christianity and "the Christianity of Christ" (118). He pointed out the fact that under slavery:

We have men-stealers for ministers, women-whippers for missionaries, and cradle-plunderers for church members. The man who wields the blood-clotted cow-skin during the week fills the pulpit on Sunday, and claims to be a minister for the meek and lowly Jesus (118-19).

Through these examples of the systematic evil of slavery, the *Narrative* was keeping with the uncompromising abolitionist views of William Lloyd Garrison, with whom Douglass was then allied. Neither gradual emancipation, nor compromises and reform would banish the evil of slavery from American life.

Finally, the *Narrative* represented for Douglass a way to reassert his humanity. The *Narrative* depicts how slavery robbed slaves of their humanity. Several times he compared slaves to animals. He recalls that "I have often wished myself a beast. I preferred the condition of the meanest reptile to my own." Upon the death of his master, he described how the estate was valued:

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 chain of being, and were all subjected to the same narrow examination (57-58).

The *Narrative* itself allowed Douglass to reclaim his rightful place as a human, and not animal. First, the act of writing it gave him control over the telling of his own life, as well as the power to fashion the images of his former masters. Bravely, Douglass named names and places so that his history would be seen as real: this also was risky, since it also made Douglass more likely to be arrested as a fugitive slave. (In fact, upon publishing the *Narrative*, Douglass took an extended tour of the British Isles, meeting with British and Irish abolitionists and social reformers, who raised £150 for him to purchase his liberty from his old master. Douglass only returned to the U.S. in 1847). Further, Douglass' activism in the abolitionist movement was a way of gaining back the control over his own life that slavery had stolen from him.

Douglass's *Narrative* is still widely read for its realistic, and thus horrifying, depiction of the slave system which for centuries was central to American society. His other writings, however, still have relevance due to the continued oppression of black people in the United States. Unlike many writers, Douglass is important not only for his contribution to American letters, but his flesh-and-blood political struggles.

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