



## Frederick Douglass (1818-1895)

Jacob Zumoff

Autobiographer; Revolutionary, Activist; Rhetorician/ Orator; Lecturer; Proprietor (of publishing house).  
Active 1841-1895 in United States; England; Haiti; Ireland, Republic of (Eire); Scotland

Frederick Augustus Washington Bailey was born in Talbot County, in the Eastern Shore of Maryland. As a young child, he was separated from his mother, Harriet Bailey, a slave and raised by his grandmother on a small farm in rural Maryland. He never knew for sure when his birthday was, nor the identity of his father. In his *Narrative*, published in 1845, he speculates that his father was also his master. When Douglass was about eight years old, his master, Colonel Lloyd Auld, died and he moved to Baltimore, where he was the servant of Hugh and Sophia Auld for the next seven years or so. This separation, first from his parents, and then from his grandmother when he was introduced to a life of slavery, was a defining moment in his development, as well as his understanding of the brutal and unnatural nature of slavery.

Mrs. Auld, who was unaccustomed to the norms and mores of slavery, began to teach Douglass how to read. Although her more experienced husband soon forbade Douglass to continue his lessons, Douglass' intellect had been awakened, and over the next several years he managed to get various white boys to help him learn. At the age of twelve, he read his first book, a popular school reader, *The Columbian Orator*. This was an anthology of readings, which included a dialogue between a slave and his master, as well as a speech about Catholic emancipation in Britain. "The more I read," he later wrote in his *Narrative*, "the more I was lead to abhor and detest my enslavers." Reading not only awakened a desire to be free, but also an appreciation of the power of the written word.

From then on, although Douglass would remain a slave for almost a decade, he never accepted this status. After returning the Eastern Shore when he was aged about 15 years, he was sent by his master to an infamously brutal overseer, Edward Covey, who specialised in "breaking" slaves, much as one would break an animal – reducing them to resigned field hands through constant violence and abuse. Douglass, however, refused to be broken, and physically confronted Covey. Immediately, this (and the refusal of his fellow slaves to help Covey subdue Douglass) caused Covey to back down; more importantly, it illustrated the power of confronting slavery, including through physical force. The lessons learnt in 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 rural Maryland, Douglass experienced and witnessed the brutality inherent in the slave system, which he eloquently described in his *Narrative*. However, even when he returned to Baltimore and lived a relatively comfortable life as a skilled, urban slave, he still detested his position as somebody else's property. In 1836, he

attempted to escape, and failed because the plan was betrayed. In 1838, however, Douglass finally was able to escape to the North. In New York City, with the assistance of David Ruggles, he began his life as a free man: he changed his surname to Douglass and he married Anna Murphy, a free black woman whom he had met in Baltimore. From New York – which Douglass felt was too unsafe for a runaway slave – Douglass moved to New Bedford, Massachusetts.

In New Bedford, Douglass continued to improve his education, reading abolitionist papers and attending abolitionist meetings. He was especially influenced by radical abolitionist William Lloyd Garrison. In 1841, Douglass began speaking at abolitionist platforms. His eloquence and his experience served to illustrate the brutality of the slave system. Douglass would, until the end of the Civil War several decades later, dedicate himself full-time to the cause of abolition, first as a lecturer, and later also as a writer, editor and organiser.

Although Douglass' originally became famous for his anti-slavery speeches, it is through the written word that his reputation survives to this day. With the encouragement of Garrison, Douglass decided to tell his story. The result, *Narrative in the Life of Frederick Douglass an American Slave, Written by Himself* (1845) still stands as one of the classics of American letters, not only for its significant historical interest but also for its literary strength. The *Narrative* was not the first slave narrative, nor the first book to detail the brutality of slavery. The life that Douglass described was also not the worst that slaves endured, but this only serves to underline the inherent cruelty of slavery. Its description of Douglass' upbringing and life, up until his escape, is still vivid more than a century later. Starting with the fact that Douglass knew neither his birthday nor his father, the *Narrative* describes not only the violence inherent in slavery such as the episode with Mr. Covey, but also his discovery of his own humanity through the medium of education and his increasing inability to remain a slave, culminating in his decision to escape slavery. The *Narrative* also emphasizes the inherent inhumanity, corruption and hypocrisy of slavery. It is a system in which fathers enslave their own sons, in which Christianity is used to justify slavery, in which the slave owners themselves become corrupted and spoilt by the system. Thus, for example, is the case of Mrs. Auld, the wife of Douglass' owner in Baltimore. When Douglass first met her, she was “a woman of the kindest heart and finest feelings” who had no experience with slavery. Thus, as the *Narrative* describes, she began to teach Douglass to read until discovered by her who argues – correctly, as it turns out – that a literate slave is ruined as a slave. “Slavery proved as injurious to her as it did to me,” Douglass wrote: “under its influence, the tender heart became stone, and the lamblike disposition gave way to one of tiger-like fierceness.” Douglass' emphasis on the metamorphosis of his mistress and the slave system's destruction of the humanity of slave and master alike, and not just on the brutality of slavery, reflects both his literary skills and the prejudices of his white audience. It also serves to show that it is vital to abolish slavery as a social system rather than seek to moderate or change to behaviour of individual slave owners.

The strength of Douglass' writing is best viewed in the context of the continued existence of slavery in the United States. As a runaway slave, Douglass was subject to being captured and returned to slavery, and since Douglass had provided the names and locations of his former masters, his danger was that much greater. Therefore, upon publishing the *Narrative*, Douglass toured the British Isles, meeting with British and Irish abolitionists and social reformers. (The British Empire had abolished slavery in 1833: see entry on [Abolitionism](#).) During his successful trip, English supporters raised £150 for him to buy his freedom from his old master; although controversial, this allowed Douglass to legally be free for the first time.

Upon his return to the U.S. in 1847, Douglass focused again lecturing against slavery. However, he soon developed differences with Garrison which led to his forming his own organisation. Garrison was a stalwart of the moral suasionist wing of Abolitionism. He argued that slavery must be immediately abolished, and not gradually replaced; he also held that Abolitionists should not involve themselves in political action because the U.S. Constitution was a pro-slavery document. Douglass at first had agreed with Garrison, and had collaborated with Garrison's newspaper *The Liberator* and had toured with Garrison (often facing intense hostility from

racist mobs, as well as the privations inherent in a cross-country tour in the nineteenth century). However, although Douglass's opposition to slavery remained just as radical as before, he came to believe that the U.S. Constitution could, in fact, be used to oppose slavery. Another reason for the break was that Garrison had opposed Douglass' ambitions to publish his own anti-slavery newspaper. Douglass would never deny the debt he owed to Garrison, but the two would remain political opponents for decades. The main difference between Douglass and Garrison's abolitionism, however, is that while Garrison saw abolitionism mainly as a moral crusade, Douglass saw it as a political movement to defeat the slavery system. For the next decade and a half, Douglass actively organised against slavery. In addition, he participated in the "underground railroad", helping slaves escape slavery in the South by moving to Canada.

In this sense, Douglass' meeting with abolitionist John Brown in 1847 was key to his transformation. Brown, although also guided by a profound Calvinist worldview, foresaw, unlike many in the abolitionist movement, the necessity of concrete actions to attack the slave system. He told Douglass that moral reasoning with slave-owners was impossible and that "they would never be induced to give up their slaves, until they felt a big stick about their heads". For the next ten years Brown would carry out this plan, first in the "Bleeding Kansas" battles against pro-slavery forces in that territory, and, later, more famously, in an ill-fated raid on the U.S. arsenal at Harpers Ferry in 1859.

Before that raid – which Brown had foresaw as the first step to a final battle to purge the United States of the institution of slavery – Brown met with Douglass in order to secure his support. Douglass opposed the raid, not because he thought its use of violence was immoral, but because he thought the raid was "a perfect steel trap" and doomed to fail. Although Douglass believed that the raid would not succeed, he did not oppose its underlying analysis of the necessity of a war against slavery. After the failure of Brown's raid, and Brown's subsequent hanging in Virginia, Douglass was indicted in Virginia for inciting insurrection, and briefly fled to Canada.

The [Civil War](#), which began in 1861, represented what both Douglass and Brown had foreseen: a battle between slavery and freedom. As Douglass argued in 1882, "if John Brown did not end the war that ended slavery, he did at least begin the war that ended slavery." However, from the perspective of the North and its president, Abraham Lincoln, the war was fought merely to reunite the states. Douglass, while supporting the war, organised to transform it into a war against slavery, a veritable social revolution. Key to this was his advocacy of using black soldiers in the battle against the Southern Confederacy. This, he felt, would not only help the North win the war, but also ensure that the freedom they would win by their blood would not be denied them at the end of the war. With the Emancipation Proclamation in January 1863 – which signalled Lincoln's intention to abolish the slavery should the North win – and the organising of the black 54<sup>th</sup> Massachusetts regiment that March, Douglass' efforts bore fruit. "Liberty won by white men would lose half its luster", he wrote in his editorial "Men of Color, To Arms!" (March 1863), "I urge you to fly to arms, and smite with death the power that would bury the government and your liberty in the same hopeless grave." He helped to recruit free blacks, including two of his sons, to fight in the Massachusetts 54<sup>th</sup>. In this sense, then, the War represented the fruition of the abolitionist struggle that he and Brown had carried out for decades.

Douglass believed that without political and civil rights for the freedman, emancipation from slavery would be hollow. The decade after the Civil War, Reconstruction, marked a high point in the status of blacks in the United States, as blacks in the South struggled for rights, and for the only time thus far in the history of the U.S., the federal government felt compelled to make black rights a part of its policy. Nonetheless, the situation of the freedman, and blacks in general, left much to be desired in the period after the Civil War, and Douglass argued that blacks had to struggle to gain and protect their rights. Douglass became an active supporter of the Republican Party, and campaigned for Republican candidates amongst blacks. At the same time, Douglass actively supported the burgeoning women's rights movement. For decades, Douglass has fought for women's rights, and had attended the seminal Seneca Falls convention in 1848 which issued a Declaration of Sentiments,

modelled on the Declaration of Independence, which had stated that “all men and women are created equal.” However, after the Civil War, the feminist and black rights movements began to diverge over the granting of suffrage to blacks; many women opposed the fifteenth amendment because it still excluded women (black as well as white) from voting rights. Douglass insisted that, although he continued supporting women's suffrage, black male suffrage was an “urgent necessity” and he supported the amendment. This precipitated his break from his long-time allies in the feminist movement, such as Elizabeth Cady Stanton and Susan B. Anthony.

The period after the 1876 election, when the Democrats agreed to not contest the election of Rutherford B. Hayes in exchange for the removal of federal troops from the Southern States, was marked by a retreat from the gains of Reconstruction, and a worsening of the status of blacks as their Republican allies increasingly turned their attention to industrialization in the North. Despite this, Douglass continued to urge support for the Republicans, fearing the return to national power of the Democrats. He held a number of official posts in Washington, including as the Marshal of the District of Columbia in 1877 and the Recorder of Deeds for the city in 1881. In 1889, Douglass was appointed the U.S. Minister to Haiti. The symbolism of this move was strong, since Haiti had, through its own revolution, abolished slavery long before the U.S. had done so.

Throughout this period, Douglass combined his literary efforts with his political goals. In addition to his editorial activities and his lecturing tours, his most prominent literary output was the various versions of his memoirs. In addition to his more famous *Narrative*, published in 1845, he also wrote *My Bondage and My Freedom* (1855) and *The Life and Times of Frederick Douglass* (1881). In 1895 Douglass died, only a year before the infamous *Plessy vs. Ferguson* decision legalised racial segregation and demonstrated the necessity of continued struggle for black rights in the post-Reconstruction period.

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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