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Learning to be Free: The Importance of Education in Frederick Douglass' Narrative

In the Narrative of the Life of Fredrick Douglass, an American Slave, Written by Himself

Douglass writes about his experiences as a slave and his attempts to educate others, both white and black, about the nature of slavery, and its innate wrongness. Throughout his text, Douglass places a very high value on knowledge and education. It becomes obvious to the reader that very early on in his life these things come to be a symbol to him, a symbol of power and freedom. He writes that wit is the source of “the white man’s power to enslave the black man” and “the pathway from slavery to freedom” (29). This belief is seen throughout his text, both during his enslavement as well as after his escape from slavery. Ultimately, it is Douglass’ continual pursuit of knowledge that leads to his liberation from slavery. He then spends his life utilizing the education that he worked so hard to gain by writing books and giving speeches to educate and inspire others.

Douglass’ text begins with him sharing his lack of knowledge about his birth circumstances with his readers. Douglass’ mother would not divulge the name of his father, and his birth date was a mystery that plagued him into adulthood. He writes that “A want of information concerning my own [age] was a source of unhappiness of me even during childhood. The white children could tell their ages. I could not tell why I ought to be deprived of the same privilege” (Douglass 12). Whites purposefully imposed this lack of knowledge upon slave children as another way to keep them ignorant and submissive. Douglass claims that “By far the larger part of the slaves know as little of their ages as horses know of theirs . . . I do not remember ever having met a slave who could tell of his birthday” (Douglass 12). It is obvious

that Douglass understands that slave masters seek to withhold as much information from slaves as possible, in an attempt to keep them as witless as animals. He was never willing to conform to these expectations of ignorance held by his slave owners, however. Even after he is freed from slavery, Douglass still seeks to discover the exact date of his birth and the identity of his father.

One of Douglass' mistresses while he was enslaved was a kind white woman who at first, "did not seem to perceive that [he] sustained to her the relation of a mere chattel, and that for her to treat [him] as a human being was not only wrong, but dangerously so" (Douglass 31). During the time he spent living with her and her husband, he "learned the importance of knowledge – that it was the pathway to freedom" through her and her husband, Mr. Auld (Henkel). Mrs. Auld began to teach Douglass his ABC's and how to write a few short words, until her husband found out about it. Mr. Auld was furious when he caught her attempting to educate a young slave boy. He informed her that "[l]earning would *spoil* the best nigger in the world . . . if you teach that nigger how to read, there would be no keeping him. It would forever unfit him to be a slave. He would at once become unmanageable, and of no value to his master" (Douglass 29). This speech had the wanted effect of making Mrs. Auld see Douglass as a slave, as something less than human.

Unexpectedly, Mr. Auld's words had an even greater effect on Douglass. The things that Mr. Auld preached as being the evils of education for African American slaves were the exact things that Douglass desired in his life. He wanted to be 'unkeepable,' and unfit for slavery. He states that "From that moment, I understood the pathway from slavery to freedom" (Douglass 29). Education became his main goal, his stepping-stone to escaping from slavery. From that point in his life onwards, he devoted much of his time to learning how to read and write.

As a child, Douglass had an abundance of bread available to him, and he would "bestow

[it] upon the hungry little street urchins, who, in return, would give [him] that more valuable bread of knowledge” (Douglass 32). He learned to write by visiting shipyards and learning commonly used letters that were used in shipbuilding. He would then claim to know how to write words better than some of the poor white boys of his acquaintance, so that the boys would write down the correct spellings of words to prove him wrong. Through these means, Douglass eventually learned how to read and write. After that he was able to read books containing ideas about freedom and slavery, which then enforced his own thoughts on the injustices of slavery.

He writes that:

The reading of these documents enabled me to utter my thoughts, and to meet the arguments brought forward to sustain slavery; but while they relieved me of one difficulty, they brought on another even more painful one than the one of which I was relieved. The more I read, the more I abhorred my enslavers.

(Douglass 33)

It seems that the very thing that Mr. Auld feared would become of an educated slave did become of Douglass. The knowledge that he gained through reading made him even more discontent with his own situation in life. As a result of this, he began to formulate ideas of escaping to the north, where he would be able to live as a free man.

Douglass’ pursuit of education continued as he grew older. When he was living in St. Michael’s with his master, he participated in a Sabbath school run by a white man. It was meant to teach interested slaves how to read the New Testament. The slaves knew that they were doing something that could bring negative consequences upon them if their masters found out, but they, like Douglass, were willing to risk the possible repercussions in order to be educated.

Unfortunately, after three lessons “class-leaders, with many others, came upon [them] with sticks

and other missiles, drove [them] off, and forbade [them] to meet again” (Douglass 41). But even negative experiences such as this were not enough to keep Douglass from continuing to pursue his education, or from educating others as well. He eventually set up his own Sabbath school, with the aim of educating his fellow slaves in the surrounding areas who were interested in learning. Douglass himself recognizes that slavers who withhold knowledge from their slaves are attempting to keep them in a debased, docile state. He therefore rejoices in helping these slaves in learning to read and write, so that they may also realize the great injustices that slavery has imposed upon them.

Education had become the center of his life by that point, and a way for him to assert his independence. If he had given into his masters and stopped his attempts to learn and to educate others, he would have been regressing, admitting that slavery was not a bad thing, and that he and other African Americans deserved to be in bondage. Like the man in Plato’s cave metaphor, Douglass had seen the light of education and justice, and he was determined not only to never go back to living in complete darkness himself, but also to share his knowledge with others who were living in the same oppressed conditions that he had spent his life living in.

Douglass still sought to further his education as well as the education of others, once he had escaped from the bonds of slavery into a life of freedom in the northern states. As soon as Douglass was employed and making a comfortable income, he subscribed to the “Liberator,” an anti-slavery publication. He says that:

The paper became my eat and my drink. My soul was set all on fire. Its sympathy for my brethren in bonds – its scathing denunciations of slaveholders – its faithful exposures of slavery -- and its powerful attacks upon the upholders of the institution – sent a thrill through my soul, such as I had never felt before!

(Douglass 74)

Even after Douglass achieves his freedom, he still sees education as a source of power and enlightenment. He seeks to learn more about how others see slavery by reading the abolitionist newspaper, and eventually expresses his own ideas about the injustice of slavery through this same medium.

Douglass not only read anti-slavery materials, he also attended meetings devoted to this subject. At first he went just to listen to others unobtrusively; he had no intention of becoming an abolitionist orator himself. He writes “I seldom had much to say at the meetings, because what I wanted to say was said so much better by others” (Douglass 74). Eventually, however, he was compelled to speak at a slavery convention by William C. Coffin, a white man who authors one of the prefaces to Douglass’ Narrative. He writes that:

“It was a severe cross, and I took it up reluctantly. The truth was, I felt myself a slave, and the idea of speaking to white people weighed me down . . . From that time until now, I have been engaged in pleading the cause of my brethren . . .”

(Douglass 75)

The various speeches that Douglass made in his lifetime and his many writings all attempt to educate people about the negatives of slavery; he seeks to show them the ill effects that this institution has had on African Americans, as well as on white people. He does this so that people of every color can learn about the injustices of slavery. It seems that for him, learning is the first step toward changing something. So, he seeks to make everyone aware of the problems of slavery, and the fact that slavery is itself a problem, in hopes of eventually directing them towards outlawing it. He wants people to know that African Americans are not an inferior race, they are equal to whites, and therefore deserve equal treatment.

It seems that in writing his narrative, Douglass is taking back some of the power that his white masters stole from him over the years; he is engaging in a role-reversal of sorts. He is using the education that he gained in secret, against the will of his masters, to educate others and assert his own power over the white man. As Henkle writes, “in writing his Narrative Douglass took command of Auld by representing him, rather than remaining a passive voice represented by him.” Douglass is using his text to define himself, taking that power away from his former masters. In this way, the text “reveals how Douglass adapts his master’s ways in order to deny the master’s power” (Brewton).

He freely gives the names of the white men who have hindered his quest for freedom, showing that he is not afraid of them or of retribution. It is as if “Douglass’s pen . . . becomes his own whip, one which he uses to beat those most deserving of it, the supporters of slavery” (Henkle). In some ways, his Narrative puts him into the position of power, leaving the whites who support slavery at his mercy. He reveals the harshness of slavery, the inhumanity of it that they try to hide from the world. He also withholds information from them in the same way that they withheld information from him. Douglass does not describe exactly how he escaped from slavery, saying that doing so might produce greater vigilance on the part of slaveholders. He refrains from revealing information to white slaveholders that might help them in maintaining the status quo of slavery by alerting them where to look for runaway slaves, in the same way they withheld education and information from him that might have made him an unruly slave.

So, in writing his Narrative, Douglass is not only educating others about slavery, he is also asserting his own power and self-identity. He is showing that he is not the stereotypical slave, that he does not fit into the role that white southern men have cast him in against his will. He is thereby breaking the mold that others have imposed upon him and his fellow slaves, by

“[going] beyond literacy to become literary” (Henkle). Douglass not only wrote an autobiography about his escape from slavery, he wrote an impressive piece of literature that is still admired for its literary merit today, over a century after it was originally written.

Douglass’ Narrative shows how Douglass’ desire for knowledge became the vehicle, which eventually led him to his freedom from slavery. Even after he has escaped from the hold of his former white masters, he still centers his life around education and the task of educating others about the harsh realities of slavery. In doing this, he paved the way for other African American writers. Douglass has become a hero among African Americans, a man who possessed not only the intelligence required to recognize the injustice of slavery and reveal it to others, but also the courage to fight against society, thereby making life a little easier for those who would later follow in his footsteps.

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