

*Uh...Frederick Douglass...huh, huh: He's a Champion of Literacy...and He's Like, a Hero for the Negro People...huh, huh*¹

Imagine a rose growing from a slab of concrete. The rose miraculously and unexpectedly takes root and begins to grow skyward, maturing and reaching toward the sun, despite the hindrance. Eventually, the rose flowers and blossoms. The mindful few who stop to admire the rose, celebrate its tenacity and its will to reach the sun. The rose growing from concrete, although yoked with an overwhelming challenge, overcomes the confines of the concrete, survives from seed to stem, and ultimately thrives in its accepted environment. Frederick Douglass lived as a rose which grew from concrete.

Even before the birth (or the infancy) of the United States of America, the emigrating colonists utilized slave labor, exploiting those of African descent. Following his birth in 1818, Douglass lived and struggled as a slave for an estimated twenty years. In September, 1838, Douglass traveled northward and arrived in New York City, thus earning his freedom. But before accomplishing this journey from captivity to freedom, Douglass learned to read and write. More profound than his successful escape, Douglass became literate, capable, and educated (notwithstanding the laws restricting the education of slaves).

During this period of almost-unmentionable human cruelty, Frederick Douglass overcame and became a champion of literacy; he became the living embodiment of freedom through literacy. In short, Douglass became a free man—free from ignorance *and* free from slavery—because he became a literate man. Literacy freed his soul, and growing as a rose from concrete, Douglass became a hero for the Negro people.

¹ The author assumed the role of Butt-Head, Mike Judge's iconic, television character, in writing the title and subtitles throughout this treatise. Unlike Douglass, Butt-Head cannot be labeled as "literate," "capable," or "educated."

Uh...the Literate Slave...Butt-Munch

Early in his life, while still a slave, Douglass was sent to live with and serve Mr. and Mrs. Auld. Douglass remembers, “[Mrs. Auld] very kindly commenced to teach me the A, B, C. After I had learned this, she assisted me in learning to spell words of three or four letters” (2086).

Knowing the alphabet and small words, Douglass began his gradual progression toward literacy. Douglass continues, “Just at this point of my progress, Mr. Auld found out what was going on, and at once forbade Mrs. Auld to instruct me further, telling her, among other things, that it was unlawful, as well as unsafe, to teach a slave to read” (2068).

The lessons ceased, yet Douglass had begun reaching for literacy and for freedom.

Douglass recollects, “[Mr. Auld said,] ‘Learning would spoil the best nigger in the world...if you teach a nigger how to read, there would be no keeping him...It would make him discontented and unhappy’” (2086).

Clearly, Mr. Auld understood that a slave will only remain such if he or she remains illiterate and uneducated. Mr. Auld understood that education led to freedom and freedom led to understanding. To deny literacy was to deny freedom. Douglass was persistent; he continued learning letters and words.

Ship-yard carpenters and local boys helped Douglass memorize and write the letters of the alphabet. He recollects, “I soon learned the names of [the] letters...After [this], when I met with any boy who I knew could write, I would tell him I could write as well as he...During this time, my copy-book was the board fence, brick wall, and pavement; my pen and ink was a lump of chalk” (2090-2091).

Consequently, Douglass taught himself how to write; he then began using a Webster's Spelling Book whereupon he began to master the skills of spelling, reading, and writing. Douglass, no longer an intellectual slave, had become literate and closer to freedom, growing as a rose from concrete.

Mr. Auld had unwittingly prophesied the status of this learned slave. Now literate, Douglass became increasingly dissatisfied with his life. He reveals, "I often found myself regretting my own existence and wishing myself dead" (2089).

Other instances confirm that after becoming literate, Douglass longed for freedom more so than before his learning. Having tasted freedom from ignorance, Douglass desired freedom from slavery.

Douglass was especially interested in words deriving from the word "abolition." Not knowing its meaning, Douglass recalls, "[The word] was always used in such connections as to make it an interesting word to me" (2090).

Unbeknownst to his masters or his overseers, Douglass would one day become the nation's most famous and influential Negro abolitionist. For Douglass, the word "abolition" would become a mark of distinction and defiance.

Uh...the Literate Fugitive...or Something

Literacy allowed Douglass the ability and the opportunity to seek his own employment and earn his own money. This money, however earned, was routinely given to his master. Douglass recalls, "Whenever my condition was improved, instead of its increasing my contentment, it only increased my desire to be free, and set me to thinking of plans to gain my freedom" (2116).

His literacy, his employment, and his increased earnings had elevated Douglass above his peers. Despite his literacy, Douglass was required to surrender every cent unto his master and this fueled his desire to escape.

Douglass thought more and more about an escape. Douglass recollects, “In the early part of the year 1838, I became quite restless. I could see no reason why I should, at the end of each week, pour the reward of my toil in the purse of my master” (2117).

Douglass was earning one dollar and fifty cents per day and this money was unjustly surrendered to his master. Douglass continues, “[My master] was satisfied with nothing less than the last cent. He would, however, when I made him six dollars, sometimes give me six cents, to encourage me. It had the opposite effect” (2117).

Douglass had learned the numbers; he recognized the absurdity of retaining one cent for each submitted dollar. Douglass watched his master steal the earnings of his livelihood; this injustice was the final insult.

Like Mr. Auld, Master Hugh sought to extinguish the growing intellect of a literate slave.² Douglass explains, “Indeed, [my master] advised me to complete thoughtfulness of the future, and taught me to depend solely upon him for happiness.... [Nevertheless,] I continued to think about the injustice of my enslavement and the means of escape” (2118).

Literacy had awakened his intellect; Douglass “continued to think” while his master attempted to extinguish his thinking. By September of 1838, Douglass, like the hindered rose, tenaciously reached toward freedom. Douglass escaped; he flowered and blossomed.

² Slave owners, slave masters, and overseers obviously recognized the danger in the education of slaves. To keep their slaves ignorant was to keep them enslaved emotionally and psychologically. Again, to deny literacy was to deny freedom.

Uh...the Abolitionist...huh, huh

After gaining his freedom and mastering the English language, Douglass took up his pen and wholeheartedly composed his autobiography, the *Narrative of the Life of Frederick Douglass, An American Slave, Written by Himself*. The story that followed was an account proving that his literacy had led to his freedom.

John Niven, historian and author of *The Coming of the Civil War*, writes:

His first speeches, which were based on his own experience as a slave, were so vivid that they deeply moved his audience, even those who did not profess abolitionism. Indeed, some skeptics among those who listened to his accounts doubted their accuracy, prompting Douglass to publish a book in 1845 describing his experiences in detail and giving specific names, dates, and places. [His book] became a popular work that sold 30,000 copies within the first five years of publication...So candid were many of Douglass's comments that he feared he would be returned to slavery. (39)

The *Narrative of the Life of Frederick Douglass* was an outspoken and unflinching chronicle of abuse and bloodshed. Above all, the narrative was a tale of hope, based entirely on the experiences of an escaped slave.

From the preface of his work, we read, "Mr. DOUGLASS has very properly chosen to write his own Narrative, in his own style, and according to the best of his ability, rather than employ someone else. It is, therefore, entirely his own production" (2067).

Remarkably, Frederick Douglass composed his own narrative, in his own words, without employing another. The fact that Douglass completed “his own narrative, in his own style,” is particularly remarkable when the student of history considers the year in which he published the account.

By 1845, contentions concerning slavery had begun to profoundly threaten and destroy the possibility of a continued, peaceful future in the so-called “United States.” Ideological passions and staunch political views had already divided the anti-slavery northerners and pro-slavery southerners. These divisions had halted national decision-making and legislative processes in the Congress and in the Senate.³ The War Between the States was approaching.

Considering slavery and politics during the 1840s, James M. McPherson, a prominent Civil War historian and author of *Ordeal by Fire*, explains, “Slavery was the main issue in national politics in 1844 [until] the outbreak of the Civil War” (57).

The word “slavery” was on the tip of every northern and southern tongue while Douglass was writing and preparing to publish. And knowing the significance of his subject matter, Douglass fearlessly published his autobiography during this time.

August Meier, a professor and literary critic specializing in historical studies on the Negro, writes, “The most distinguished Negro in the nineteenth century was Frederick Douglass. His fame rests chiefly upon his work as a brilliant anti-slavery orator and author” (143).

Meier concludes, “In the latter part of the century, Douglass was a symbol rather than a man of broad influence” (147). For Douglass, fame and influence were the results of his earned intellectual abilities as an orator and author.

³ Many historians, such as McPherson, argue that politics was the primary cause of the Civil War. Political indecision, not slavery, caused the Civil War.

Concerning the *Narrative of the Life of Frederick Douglass*, author and literary critic, Benjamin Quarles, writes, “[His narrative was] not ghost-written like so many autobiographies by former slaves...the narrative impelled the reader to turn the page. Storytelling in tone, it was absorbing in its sensitive descriptions of places and persons, including the sharply etched portrait of a hero” (6).⁴

The narrative, complete with fascinating and revealing details, challenged and provoked its readers.

In this time of national division, Douglass became a hero among the abolitionists. Before publicizing his story, Douglass had met William Lloyd Garrison, the publisher of the abolitionist journal *The Liberator*.⁵ Upon meeting Douglass, Garrison observed a literate, self-liberated, black fugitive—a walking, talking triumph over slavery. Garrison recognized Douglass as an eloquent eye-witness against the evils of slavery. Douglass, along with his autobiography, was a profound spokesperson for the abolitionist movement.

Uh...a Con...clu...err, uh...an Ending? Yeah...huh, huh

Predating the ratification of the Thirteenth Amendment to the United States Constitution or the authorization of the Emancipation Proclamation, Frederick Douglass removed the shackles of ignorance and enslavement and became a champion of literacy. He not only became literate, but he inspired others to follow his triumph. As stated earlier, Douglass became the living embodiment of freedom through literacy. He became a free man because he became a literate

⁴ Although the narrative “sharply etched [the] portrait of a hero,” Douglass is never proud or boastful; in fact, his words are honest and without guile.

⁵ For Douglass, *The Liberator* was a reading staple.

man. Moreover, Douglass became a hero for the Negro people (and many others). For Douglass, the ability to read and write granted intellectual freedom, and eventually, literal freedom. For Douglass, literacy was the key to his freedom. Had Douglass failed to learn letters and words, he most likely would not have gained his freedoms.

Perhaps a citation from *The New Testament*—which served to instruct and liberate Douglass—will best summarize the foregoing treatise. From the Testimony of John, the beloved Apostle, we read the following promise, given unto all who believe on Jesus Christ. Said the Eternal Liberator: “If ye continue in my word, then are ye my Disciples indeed; and ye shall know the truth, and the truth shall make you free” (John 8:31-32).

In this context, Christ referred to His word, meaning the doctrines and principles of His Gospel, as “the truth.” The Gospel of Truth, restored and disseminated by the ordained, legitimate servants of God, spiritually instructs and liberates the captives. Like the restored Gospel, literacy is the key to both intellectual and spiritual freedom.

Works Cited

- Douglass, Frederick. "Narrative of the Life of Frederick Douglass, An American Slave, Written by Himself." *The Norton Anthology of American Literature, Seventh Edition, Volume A, Beginnings to 1820*. New York, New York: W. W. Norton and Company, Inc., 2007.
- McPherson, James M. *Ordeal by Fire: The Civil War and Reconstruction, Third Edition*. New York, New York: McGraw Hill, 2001
- Meier, August. "Frederick Douglass's Vision for America: A Case Study in Nineteenth Century Negro Protest." New York, New York: Harper and Row Publishers, 1967.
- Niven, John. *The Coming of the Civil War, 1837-1861*. Wheeling, Illinois: Harlan Davidson, Inc., 1990.
- Quarles, Benjamin. "Great Lives Observed: Frederick Douglas." Englewood Cliffs, New Jersey: Prentice Hall, Inc., 1968.
- The Holy Bible, Containing the Old and New Testaments, The Authorized King James Version*. Salt Lake City, Utah: The Church of Jesus Christ of Latter-day Saints, 1979.