



HÁSKÓLI ÍSLANDS

Hugvísindasvið

Frederick Douglass

A Free Slave

Ritgerð til B.A. prófs

Árný Ösp Arnardóttir

Febrúar 2012

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Enska

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Árný Ösp Arnardóttir
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Abstract

Frederick Douglass (1818-1895) was born a slave; however, at an early age he decided to become a free man. Unlike many other slaves, Douglass set his mind on learning to read, convinced that education and knowledge would get him far in life. Lack of education and illiteracy were among the slaveholder's most important tools to maintain slavery and therefore it seemed important for Douglass to educate himself.

Douglass was a humanist and fought hard to ensure his people a better quality of life. Once he was free, Douglass became a dedicated spokesman for the abolition of slavery and in support of women's rights. He went across the country, and all over the world, to give speeches about his experience as a slave. He was unique in a way; he was well spoken and had a tremendous effect on people who listened to him.

Douglass published many, if not all, of his speeches.

In addition to his public speaking at meetings for increased human and civil rights, Douglass published papers and books. Of his books, three were autobiographies: *Narrative of the Life of Frederick Douglass: An American Slave, Written by Himself* (1845), *My Bondage and My Freedom* (1855), and *Life and Times of Frederick Douglass* (1881). Douglass did not only write autobiographies and articles but also a novella called *The Heroic Slave*, which was published in 1853. In December 1847 Douglass brought out the first issue of his newspaper, *The North Star*, which later became *Frederick Douglass's Weekly* and finally *Frederick Douglass's Monthly* (Gottesman, "Frederick Douglass" 2031). Douglass' books reveal his different interpretations of slavery, describing slavery precisely, as he experienced it and as he witnessed it.

This essay draws upon Douglass' second autobiography, *My Bondage and My Freedom*, as well as some of his speeches. It is divided into five chapters: the first four recount how the slaves were suppressed by the means of physical abuse, disruption of family ties, ignorance, and religion, showing Douglass' growing conviction that education and resistance were essential in the battle for freedom, which is the main concern of the last chapter.

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Introduction

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Physical Abuse

The life of a slave was not easy. They were treated badly: whipped, beaten, sometimes starved and even murdered. Slaves got very few clothes through the years, and these garments were especially not warm enough for winter. It included two tow linen shirts, one pair of trousers and a jacket of woolen for winter. They also got one pair of yarn stockings and one pair of shoes. According to Douglass, this entire apparel could not have cost more than eight dollars per year. However, children got even less. Since they did not work in the field they did not get shoes, stockings, jackets or trousers. They were only given two tow linen shirts per year, and if these failed to last the entire year, they ran around naked. Groups of five- to ten-year-old children might been seen running around naked, not only during the summer but also during the frosty winters (Douglass, *My Bondage* 101).

Their clothing allowance was not the worst part but sleeping arrangements were terrible as well. Slaves did not have beds to lie on and only a coarse blanket. These blankets were given to field hands and children got nothing. Adults just slept on the clay floor, scattered, covering themselves with that coarse blanket, and children stuck themselves in holes and corners somewhere in the sleeping quarter, often in the corner of a chimney and stuck their little feet in the ashes to keep them warm. Douglass remembered that his feet were so frostbitten that he had large cracks in the skin of his feet (Douglass, *My Bondage* 101-102).

The overseers were known for their cruelty. They were meaner than the master himself. In *My Bondage and My Freedom*, Douglass wrote about two overseers, Mr. Sevier and Austin Gore. Mr. Sevier was an overseer when Douglass was a child. Mr. Sevier was known to be very cruel.

One thing is certain, that when he was in health, it was enough to chill the blood, and to stiffen the hair of an ordinary man, to hear Mr. Sevier talk. Nature, or his cruel habits, had given to his face an expression of unusual savageness, even for a slavedriver. (Douglass *My Bondage* 95-96)

Douglass witnessed Mr. Sevier whipping a slave woman named Nelly. He was supposed to give her a “genteel flogging,” but when he overpowered her, he whipped her furiously. A “genteel flogging” was whipping without much strength or skill (Douglass, *My Bondage* 94).

The cruelty was not only limited to the plantation and the overseers. When Douglass was moved to Baltimore and had been there for some time, he witnessed a woman named Mrs. Hamilton abuse her slaves, two women named Henrietta and Mary. Mrs. Hamilton was very cruel and whipped them continuously. She used to sit in her rocking chair in the middle of the room with a cow-skin in her hand. Whenever the girls went pass her, she would hit them and order them to go faster. Then she would go on singing her hymns. Beside their beatings, they were almost kept starved. They did not get full meals at Mrs. Hamilton’s, but the neighbors sometimes gave them food. Mary’s head, neck and shoulders were cut to pieces. Even though Mrs. Hamilton’s treatment was condemned in Baltimore, no one interfered for it was her legal right to whip and mistreat her slaves (Douglass *My Bondage* 149-150).

Alan Gore was the next overseer after the death of Mr. Sevier. Alan Gore was even worse. A slave named Bill Denby offended Mr. Gore, so he whipped him. He got away and dove into a lake nearby. Mr. Gore ordered him out of the lake but he Denby refused. Denby’s refusal angered Mr. Gore so he took out his gun and fired, aiming at the young man’s face. His explanation of this incident was that if one slave disobeyed

him, others might take his lead and do the same. Nothing was done in the slave's defense. Austin Gore was not submitted to a judicial investigation. His word in court would have gone further than the testimony of ten thousand slaves, as Douglass points out (Douglass, *My Bondage*, 124).

In "A Simple Tale of American Slavery," a speech delivered in Ireland while Douglass was still on the run after his escape via the "underground railway" through Canada, he describes the constant physical abuse.

The slave is driven by the beating of the lash, and often,
immediately he is landed, is branded with the hot iron, often his
ears are cut and his teeth drawn, so as to mark him in case he
runs away, when he advertises him and so brings him back to
bondage. (Douglass, "A Simple")

Douglass also describes how a slave woman would be tied to a post and beaten while her husband and children watched. The husband would also be tied and beaten afterwards (Douglass, "A Simple").

In this same speech Douglass recalls his aunt Henny, who was crippled. Her hands had been burnt when she was an infant. His master had no use of her because she was unable to use her hands. He tied her and whipped her brutally. He would quote the passage of scripture while beating her:

That servant which knew his lord's will, and, prepared not
himself, neither did according to his will, shall be beaten with
many stripes. (Douglass, *My Bondage* 201)

Master Thomas would tie her up early in the morning and whip her before breakfast, leave her tied and go to his store. He would have dinner and then continue with the whipping. It seems as if he wanted to kill her or at least get her off his hands, since

there was no use of her. Douglass recalls when his master took his brother, put him on the ground and stamped on his face until it was covered in blood. At this time his brother was only a child, not much older than Douglass himself (Douglass, *Narrative of the Life* 49).

In *My Bondage and My Freedom*, Douglass writes about his first observed whipping. It was the whipping of a young woman named Esther. She possessed great beauty, but that was a curse to a slave woman. Young Douglass witnessed her punishment, which happened early in the morning before anyone had risen. He had probably been woken up by her cries. She was securely tied and her back and shoulders were naked to the bare waist (Douglass, *My Bondage* 87).

Behind her stood old master, with cow skin in hand, preparing his barbarous work with all manner of harsh, coarse, and tantalizing epithets. The screams of his victim were most piercing. He was cruelly deliberate, and protracted the torture, as one who was delighted with the scene. (Douglass, *My Bondage* 87)

Col. Lloyd drew the cow skin through his hand to be able to give the most painful blow. Each blow left a scream and blood. Poor Esther begged for mercy but it seems her cries and begging left him angrier. He left her with thirty to forty stripes. (Douglass *My Bondage* 87-88)

Douglass felt sorry for her, and as a child witnessing this horrid scene, he was stunned but could do nothing. This scene was, however, often to be repeated. But it was not only the colonel who had the “joy” of whipping the slaves. He had sons and sons-in-law who enjoyed it as well (Douglass *My Bondage* 113). These whippings did not only occur at the great house, but also at Col. Lloyd’s plantation, by the hand of the overseers.

Family Ties

According to James Olney, in an article where he examines and outlines the main features shared by slave narratives, these usually start with the narrator talking about his birthplace and birth date (153). However, it was very common that slaves did not know their birthday; they would estimate what year they were born and count from there. But they specified their place of birth. Douglass was born in Tuckahoe, Maryland, and he himself estimated that he was born around 1817. This date was later corrected and now we know that the accurate date is 1818 (Gottesman 2030). Slaves did not only have a vague idea of when they were born but they often also had an imprecise notion of who their parents were, as is noted by Olney (153).

There was not much family life for slaves. Slaves could court other slaves but there was no law for them to be able to get married. The slave had no right, and the master could decide whether he got married, and if so, then when, and how long the marriage lasted. Douglass comments on marriage in his speech “A Simple Tale of American Slavery”:

A man and his wife, so far as such relations can exist in slavery, for there are no legal marriages among slaves, yet I am happy to say that among the slaves is to be found the purest morality and the strongest fidelity, especially amongst those who look upon themselves in the character of man and wife -
(loud cheers). (Douglass, “A Simple ”)

However these marriages were not legally binding. If a husband and a wife were separated at the auction block, then they might never see each other again.

But husbands and wives were not the only ones who could be separated. Children were often taken from their mothers and that was the case with Douglass.

Douglass was raised by his grandmother his first seven years. He was not the only child raised by her, for there were many other children, the grandchildren of Betsey Bailey and Isaac Bailey. They had five daughters in all, and they took care of all their children. Douglass learned that the hut they lived in belonged to “Old Master” and until they grew big enough to live on the plantation, the children lived with their grandmother (Douglass, *My Bondage* 38-39). Douglass did not know his siblings for he had never seen them before he went to the plantation. He did not know what they were to him. The term “siblings” had no meaning. Slavery had made them strangers (Douglass, *My Bondage* 48). It was normal that families were separated, mothers gave birth to their children and left.

Douglass knew nothing of his father. All he knew was that it was possible that his father was a white man. People at the plantation whispered that his master was his father (Douglass, *My Bondage* 52). “There was a whisper, that my master was my father; yet it was only a whisper, and I cannot say that I ever gave it credence” (Douglass *My Bondage* 58).

But this was common among slaves. A slave master would force slave women into relationships or even rape them, and conceiving children. They did not acknowledge these children as their own; the children were just an addition to their “herd” of slaves. These children did not get a better chance even though their fathers might have been white. Their fate was determined by their mother’s. They earned their color and status by laws of slavery. One might think that this child would fare better in life but in fact it was quite the opposite (Douglass, *My Bondage* 58-59).

A man who will enslave his own blood, may not be safely relied on for magnanimity. Men do not love those who remind them of their sins - unless they have a mind to repent - and the mulatto child's face is a standing accusation against him who is master and father to the child. (Douglass *My Bondage* 59)

The mulatto child was a constant offense to the slaveholder's wife. She might have hated it effortlessly, and the master often sold his poor child to traffickers to save it from his wife's cruelty (Douglass, *My Bondage* 59).

Douglass had a vague recollection of his mother, however he was not attached to her and he did not remember seeing her in his grandmother's cabin. Douglass only remembered her visits to the plantation and mostly during the night. She worked for Mr. Stewart who lived twelve miles from Col. Lloyd's plantation (Douglass, *My Bondage* 53-54). Slave women did not get the day off to visit children, so she walked back and forth on those nights that she visited Douglass (Douglass, *My Bondage* 53-54).

Soon after Douglass moved to the plantation his mother died. He was not allowed to see her during her long illness. Slavery came between them in having a mother and son relationship. He was not very sad or regretful when hearing of his mother's death; she was a stranger to him. He was only eight or nine years old when she passed away (Douglass, *My Bondage* 57-60).

This was very common among slaves, there was little bond between blood relatives. Narrators sometimes had no account of their fathers, for they could have been white or black. It was different regarding mothers. Many raised their children, but others worked at a different plantation or were sold, so it was up to old women who did not have the strength to work anymore to raise these little children.

Douglass lived in Baltimore when his master died, at this point he realized now the slaveholder viewed them as property. He was sent to the plantation to be valued and included in the property. Men, women and children were viewed as livestock. Men were ranked like horses, women as cattle and children as swine. They held the same rank in social existence (Douglass, *My Bondage* 175).

Olney points out that there is one thing that is never left out in slave narratives, which are descriptions of the auction block. If a slaveholder died his property had to be divided between his children or be sold to other slaveholders. Families were separated for life at the auction block. This place was horrible to slaves who might have been married and had children. Mothers clung to their children, knowing that they would be taken away from them and getting the same treatment. They would be slaves for life, just like their parents (Olney 153).

In the appendix of *My Bondage and My Freedom*, Douglass included an article called *The Internal Slave Trade* where he speaks about the slave trade and its inhumanity. He describes how the poor slaves were driven to the market to be sold, like cattle.

You will see one of these human-flesh-jobbers, armed with pistol, whip and bowie-knife, driving a company of hundred men, women, and children, from the Potomac to the slave market at New Orleans. These wretched people are to be sold singly, or in lots, to suit purchasers. They are food for the cotton-field and the deadly sugar-mill. (Douglass, *My Bondage* 447)

He continues with descriptions of mothers holding their babies and crying, and the young girls crying because they were torn away from their mothers. When arriving at

the auction block, men were looked at like horses, and women's limbs exposed to the buyers. And once they were sold, they would probably never see each other again. This was the harsh reality of slavery (Douglass, *My Bondage* 447). And at this auction, friends, families and even husbands and wives could be separated for life. Children were taken from their mothers, and siblings were torn apart, never to see each other again

The auctioneer's block in Maryland is the place to witness the heartrending cruelties of slavery, not merely in the infliction of the lash on the back of the slave, but there you see the iron of slavery enter the soul of the slave. There you see the husband, torn from his wife, and the children torn from their parents.

(Douglass, "A Simple")

However, when slaveholders had purchased slaves they could do anything with them. Even use them for breeding. And that is what Covey, the negro breaker did.

Covey was not rich, and as soon as he could he bought a slave. The first form of wealth and propriety was the ownership of human property. He bought one slave as a breeder. This young woman named Caroline had to abandon herself and obey his orders. She gave birth to twins at the end of the year. This was an addition to his human stock. Covey had locked Caroline and Bill Smith, a hired help, together every night to make this happen. This is one of the revolting solutions to increase the stock (Douglass, *My Bondage* 218).

Ignorance

Many African American people believed that slavery was their purpose in life. They even believed that African American people were unable to participate in society and should be kept as workers for the white people. But it was not only their idea; slaveholders kept them ignorant to keep them as slaves and used passages from the Bible for their support (Douglass “American Slavery”; Douglass “I am”).

I saw that slaveholders would gladly made [sic] me believe that they were merely acting under the authority of God, in making a slave of me, and in making slaves of others; and I treated them as robbers and deceivers.

(Douglass, *My Bondage* 161)

Slaveholders kept their slaves ignorant and illiterate, for they believed that literacy would spoil a good, hardworking slave: “Ignorance is a high virtue in a human chattel; and as the master studies to keep the slave ignorant, the slave is cunning enough to make the master think he succeeds” (Douglass, *My Bondage* 81). The slaves even said and agreed with it: “where ignorance is bliss, ’tis folly to be wise” (Douglass, *My Bondage* 81).

As soon as they could read, slaves became useless to their masters. Slaves might question their master’s right to own slaves. Also, by keeping the slaves illiterate the masters controlled what was known about slavery. If slaves were illiterate, then they would not be able to write about the cruelties of slavery. Slaveholders were afraid that slaves who were literate would develop an identity. Slaves might start feel that they were unfit for slave duties (Douglass, *My Bondage* 146). Identity was freedom from slavery and also freedom from ignorance. These slaveholders might have kept basic

facts about their slaves quiet, their birthday and even their parental background. In Wilson J. Moses' essay "Writing Freely? Frederick Douglass and the Constraints of Racial Writing" he discusses the possibilities of Captain Aaron Anthony Auld as his father. He mentions that the captain often led Douglass by the hand, patted him on the head and speaking to him in caressing tones (Sundquist, *New Literary and Historical Essays*, 73), and even calling him his little Indian boy. This rumor was mentioned to him, but he never got to know the truth. Lucretia Auld, who might have been his half-sister, caressed him and pitied him. That might have suggested that there were some relations between them. But these are only speculations.

The slave was not allowed to read; in every state in American Union where slavery existed the law prohibited education among slaves. The punishment for teaching slaves was imprisonment, fine or death penalty. But there were instances where slaves learned to read, much to their master's dismay. Douglass also states that in the south, to educate a slave was to make him unhappy with his position as a slave, and also open to him a path to freedom (Douglass, *My Bondage* 432). It was also said that slaves were happy because they could be seen singing and dancing, and that their masters give them much to be merry about. That meant that chains and whips did not always crush their spirit (Douglass *My Bondage* 433).

The opponents of anti-slavery often said that people in Ireland had it much worse than slaves in America. Douglass disagreed; the Irish were poor but not bound in slavery (Douglass, *My Bondage* 433).

Slaves may have been said to be happy, but they had no liberty to speak. They had no voice, so people had to imagine their feelings. (Douglass, *My Bondage* 433)

If there were no other fact descriptive of slavery, than that
the slave is dumb, this alone would be sufficient to mark

the slave system as a grand aggregation of human errors.

(Douglass, *My Bondage* 434)

The American nation was guilty of enslaving three million people and as Douglass said: “There can be no peace to the wicked while slavery continues in the land

(Douglass, *My Bondage* 434).

Christianity and Slavery

Frederick Douglass had an irregular relationship with Christianity his entire life. He got acquainted with Christianity when Mrs. Auld read from the Bible. But Douglass was thirteen years old when he started thinking about the Almighty and wondered if he had ordained slavery, if so then he would not believe. Later in life he would come across religious colored people who believed that slavery was God's will, that they ought to wear these chains with humility and humbleness. He had no patience for these people and considered them weak to believe in such things (Douglass, *My Bondage* 159).

Douglass was even younger when he wondered why he was a slave. He was confused with why some people were slaves and others masters. He asked older children and their answer was this: "*God, up in the sky,*" made everybody; and that he made *white* people to be masters and mistresses, and *black* people to be slaves" (Douglass, *My Bondage* 89). This was a common belief among children. However, these answers were not good enough for Douglass, nor lessen his interest in the matter. He was also told that God knew what was best for him and what was best for everybody.

However, at that time the cholera was on its way, and he believed that God was angry with the white people. Because of their slaveholding malice he was judged the land. By that time he was seriously thinking about religion. He was thirteen years old when he felt the need of God both as a father and a protector. His religious nature was awakened by listening to a white Methodist preacher named Henson (Douglass, *My Bondage* 166).

Douglass discussed one characteristic greatly and that is Christianity in relation to slaveholders. It was common knowledge among slaves that Christian slaveholders

were often crueler than others. Olney points out that this was very common in slave narratives. They used the Bible to condone their methods of torture and even used Christianity to persuade the slaves that they were slaves by God's will. Douglass became optimistic when his master, Thomas Auld, took faith – or “Master Thomas,” as he invariably called him in the manner customary to slavery. However, he became more cruel and brutal after becoming a pious man. He believed that before Master Thomas converted he relied upon himself, but after conversion he found religious support for his cruelty. The Southern Church was also corrupt, and looked the other way or even condoned the brutality (Douglass, “I Am”). Douglass wrote a great deal about Christianity and the people involved with the church, by his own experience. He said;

Were I to be again reduced to the chains of slavery, next to the enslavement, I should regard being the slave of a religious master the greatest calamity that could befall me. For of all slaveholders, with whom I have ever met, religious slaveholders are the worst. (Douglass *Narrative* 117, qtd. in Gibson 89)

Douglass was also not the only slave to witness that religious slaveholders were the worst.

When he had been at St. Michael's for some time, he started thinking about running away. He was treated badly there. He was, however, more optimistic when Master Thomas took faith. Douglass believed that he would emancipate his slaves, but if he did not, then he would treat them better and feed them more generously. But he was very disappointed. Master Thomas did not change in any way. His conversion was not to change his relation towards men but towards God. Religion had changed Master

Thomas. It made him more cruel and hateful in his ways (Douglass, *My Bondage* 196-197).

Some slaveholders had confidence in the piety of their slaves but slaves rarely had confidence in the piety of their masters. Slaves believed that their masters would not go to heaven with their blood on their hands (Douglass, *My Bondage* 195).

The only evidence that slaveholders could give slaves of their acceptance of God was the emancipation of slaves. This would prove that a slaveholder was willing to give everything for God (Douglass, *My Bondage* 194). Even though Master Thomas got religious he stopped the Sabbath school Douglass and his pious friend Wilson set up. They started teaching young black children to read and write. But in short time a mob rushed in with Master Thomas, who demanded that they would never meet again for such purpose (Douglass, *My Bondage* 199-200).

The churches often condoned the treatment of slaves and even took part in it, as Douglass points out:

I have to inform you that the religion of the southern states, at this time, is the great supporter, the greater sanctioner of the bloody atrocities to which I have referred. (Deep sensation).

While America is printing tracts and Bibles; sending missionaries abroad to convert the heathen; expending her money in various ways for the promotion of the Gospel in foreign lands, the slave not only lies forgotten—uncared for, but is trampled under foot by the very churches of the land.

What have we in America? Why we have slavery made part of the religion of the land. Yes, the pulpit there stands up as the great defender of this cursed *institution*, as it is called.

Ministers of religion come forward, and torture the hallowed pages of inspired wisdom to sanction the bloody deed (Loud cries of “Shame!”) They stand forth as the foremost, the strongest defenders of this “institution.” (Douglass, “American Slavery”)

In this speech Douglass tells about men who were sold to build churches, women who were sold to support missionaries and children that were sold to buy Bibles and communion services for the churches (Douglass, “American Slavery”).

In another speech that Douglass gave, he confirms that preachers and ministers quote the Bible in support of slavery. His own master was a Methodist class leader and he beat and cut women with his whip. He quoted the Bible; “He that knoweth his master's will and doeth it not, shall be beaten with many stripes,” (Douglass, “I Am”) and continued to beat the woman. Preachers told slaves to obey their masters because God commands it, and their happiness depended on it.

The slaves usually worked from the crack of dawn till sundown. They worked in the field, with an overseer watching them. They were expected to sing when they worked, for a silent slave was not liked by the overseer. “*Make a noise*” and “*bear a hand*” is what they were usually told if silence occurred. Because of this there was constant singing in the field (Douglass, *My Bondage* 97). But the root of the problem was that slaves did not have any right in the justice system and they could be punished for anything. For instance, Douglass talks about punishment of slaves in his speech “I Am Here to Spread Light on American Slavery: An address Delivered in Cork, Ireland, on 14 October 1845”:

If more than seven slaves are found together in any road, without a white person—*twenty lashes* a piece. For visiting a

plantation without a written pass—*ten lashes*. For letting loose a boat from where it is made fast—*thirty nine lashes*; and for the second offence, shall have his ear cut off. For having an article for sale without a ticket from his master—*ten lashes*. For being on horseback without the written permission of his master—*twenty five lashes*. (Douglass, “I Am”)

Literacy, Rebellion and Freedom

The slave's quest for literacy is also quite common in slave narratives, according to Olney in his overview on slave narratives (153). But learning to read did not come easy. Slaveholders did not want their slaves to learn to read nor write. The slaveholders tried everything to stop their slaves from educating themselves. Some slaves were determined to learn to read, but others were too afraid to try. Illiteracy was very high among slaves. And if some knew how to read then there were serious consequences if they taught other slaves to read and write. Douglass was one of the lucky few who learned to read.

He had not reached ten years of age when he was sent to Baltimore to Mr. and Mrs. Hugh Auld. He was supposed to take care of their son Tommy, and in due time, Douglass would become his property. Mrs. Auld, his mistress, was a nice woman, and a very pious one. She read from the Bible every day and when Douglass heard her read from the Bible vocally, he asked her to teach him to read, he was very fortunate for without hesitation she agreed. Soon he knew the alphabet and his mistress was very proud. She was so proud that she told her husband about the progress. Mr. Auld was amazed that she was so obtuse to teach Douglass to read (Douglass, *My Bondage* 141-145). And at that moment he explained the truth about slavery:

Mr. Auld promptly forbade the continuance of her instruction; telling her, in the first place, that the thing itself was unlawful; that it was also unsafe, and could only lead to mischief. To use his own words, further, he said, "if you give a nigger an inch, he will take an ell;" "he should know nothing but the will of his master and learn to obey it." "Learning would spoil the best

nigger in the world;” “if you teach that nigger – speaking of myself – how to read the bible, there will be no keeping him;” “it would forever unfit him for the duties of a slave;” and “as to himself, learning would do him no good, but probably, a great deal of harm – making him disconsolate and unhappy.” “If you learn him now to read, he’ll want to know how to write; and, this accomplished, he’ll be running away with himself.”

(Douglass, *My Bondage* 145-146)

This response was Douglass’ first absolute antislavery lecture. This was also a new revelation to him, revealing a painful truth. At that moment he understood the pathway from slavery to freedom (Douglass, *My Bondage* 147).

Even though Mr. Auld was very smart he undervalued Douglass’ understanding. Mr. Auld wanted him to be a slave but Douglass had decided a long time ago to be free someday. He was very eager to learn and nothing stood in his way. He stayed in Baltimore for seven years, and during that time he learned to read and write.

Many slaves believed that the quest for freedom was through literacy, and perhaps they were right. And it was also believed among slaveholders that when a slave learned to read then he would be of no use. He was thirteen years old when he had succeeded in learning to read and write, and he read the *Free States*. That pamphlet only increased his burden, “I am a slave for life” (Douglass, *My Bondage* 156). He saw no end to his enslavement. But Douglass continued to educate himself. He bought a school book called the “Columbian Orator” (Douglass, *My Bondage* 157). From that book he chose speeches to read and read them over and over again until he fully understood them. But Douglass changed when he learned to read. The more he

read, the more he abhorred slavery, and his enslavers. He was no longer the happy boy he used to be. Knowledge had destroyed him, but he felt powerful after the read (Douglass, *My Bondage* 159-160).

But his new-found power and knowledge got him into trouble when he returned to the plantation, and for that he was sent to be disciplined by Covey, the Negro breaker. He was sent to be “broken.” Slaves were treated like animals that had to be “housebroken.” Douglass’ behavior was unacceptable so he was sent to one of the cruelest persons there was. This was an extremely hard time for Douglass. They worked in all kinds of weather. He was broken in body soul and spirit. He had the day off on Sundays. He spent those days under a tree. He became depressed, and sometimes thought about taking his life and Covey’s, but he was prevented by a combination of fear and hope (Douglass, *My Bondage*, 219).

Douglass’s worst experience was on the hottest August day. He was working under the burning sun when he collapsed. He was unable to stand up. Covey came rushing to him and ordered him to stand up and kicked him twice as he tried. When he was told that Douglass was ill and had a headache he gave him a blow on the head. Blood gushed from the wound (Douglass, *My Bondage* 223-225).

Douglass stood up and walked towards St. Michael’s. Covey rushed after him on his horse but Douglass hid in the woods. Master Thomas did nothing for him, not even after Douglas had told his story and begged for help but, and ordered him back to Covey since he belonged to him for the rest of the year. When Douglass returned on Sunday he met Covey and his wife dressed for church. He did not flog him for it was the day of Sabbath (Douglass, *My Bondage* 227-231). He respected the day more than the man (Douglass, *My Bondage* 240). But on Monday everything was normal; he was ordered to take care of the horses, and that time Covey snuck in the stable and grabbed

Douglass by the leg. But Douglass defended himself. He was unable to tie him up. They fought. Covey did not expect him to defend himself and fight. Covey called his cousin for help but Douglass gave him a blow so he was half bent with pain. He gave up and Douglass did not receive the flogging. From that day Covey never laid a finger on Douglass (Douglass, *My Bondage* 241-246). The law of Maryland said that if a slave resisted his master he could be hanged. The only plausible explanation is that Covey was ashamed that a boy of sixteen had mastered him (Douglass, *My Bondage* 248).

James Olney suggests that descriptions of failed attempts to escape are quite as important as the successful attempts in slave narratives (153). In *My Bondage and My Freedom* Douglass describes his first attempt for freedom, which happened in the beginning of 1836 when he started thinking about running away. At that time he lived with a slaveholder named Mr. Freeland. He had bought Douglass from Mr. Auld. Douglass had won over five men to go with him. These men were Henry and John Harris, Sandy Jenkins, Charles Roberts and Henry Bailey. They all wanted to be free but the thought of running away had not entered their mind until Douglass convinced them into going (Douglass, *My Bondage*, 279).

They met during the night and on Sundays to plan their escape, for there were many dangers on the way. Close to the borders of Free states were hired kidnappers. Just by reaching the Free states would not mean that they were safe, if they were captured they could be returned to slavery and be treated worse than before. Their destination was New York City (Douglass, *My Bondage* 279-282).

At every gate through which we had to pass, we saw a
watchman; at every ferry, a guard; on every bridge, a sentinel;

and in every wood, a patrol or slave-hunter. We were hemmed
in on every side. (Douglass, *My Bondage* 282).

Any white man was authorized to stop a colored man and examine him, and arrest him, if he pleased. They could be asked to show their free papers. In some cases these papers were appropriated and torn and freemen would be seized and sent back to slavery (Douglass, *My Bondage* 286). A week before their escape Douglass wrote for permission to visit Baltimore during the Easter holidays. They were not headed to Baltimore but to land east of North Point, where Douglass had seen the Philadelphia streamers go (Douglass, *My Bondage* 286).

They all went ahead with their plan, except Sandy. But during the week Douglass had a hunch that they were being betrayed. He then saw Mr. Freeland and Mr. Hamilton approach with two other white men and two colored men. Douglass, Henry, John and Charles were grabbed and taken to prison. After a long time in prison Master Thomas decided to send Douglass back to Baltimore to live with his brother. Master Thomas told him to learn a trade there and if he were to behave properly then he would emancipate him when he became twenty-five years old (Douglass, *My Bondage* 289-303).

Olney notes that in slave narratives there were not only descriptions of failed attempts, but also of the successful ones (153). Many slaves were able to escape slavery, although it was not easy. There were many dangers along the way; even when they reached the Free States, they were not safe. In these narratives there is often mention of Quakers who helped escaped slaves along the way, fed them and conversed with them, as Olney points out (153). However, during his journey Douglass did not meet these helpful people on his way even if many of them lived in New Bedford where he ended up living (Douglass, *My Bondage* 345).

Douglass lived in Baltimore at that time. He lived with Mr. Hugh Auld, Master Thomas' brother, who found him work. Douglass gave "Master Hugh" everything he earned but Mr. Auld sometimes showed ingratitude if the sum was not high enough. Douglass became angry with this situation so he started to plan his escape again. But he was kept at a close watch and very low "allowance" since the suspicion of him running away had not been removed (Douglass, *My Bondage* 325-326). Escaping slavery from Baltimore was very difficult. The railroad was watched carefully; even the free persons were almost excluded. They had to have *free papers*. The steamboats were equally watched. The best turnpikes leading north were overwhelmed with kidnappers, men who read the newspapers for runaway slaves and made their living by hunting down runaways (Douglass, *My Bondage* 325-326).

Douglass took his time thinking about his plan. He needed money, so he asked Master Thomas if he could solicit his own time. Master Thomas refused. He warned him, if he ran away then he would find him. Master Thomas also told him not to make plans for the future, for he would take care of him, if he behaved. Douglass did not give up. Two months after the first request, he asked Master Hugh, who granted him his wish, but with a few conditions. He would allow him all his time, but in return Douglass would have to pay him three dollars per week, to board and clothe himself and buy his own calking tools. Master Hugh got his money and he secured that Douglass would have difficulty collecting money to run away. Douglass worked night and day. He was able to put aside a small sum each week, for four months (Douglass, *My Bondage* 326-329).

During the week before he had made plans with friends to attend a camp meeting. By going he neglected to hand Master Hugh his pay and to ask for permission to go. On his return, he went straight to Master Hugh's house. He ordered him to move

back in and thus ended his partial freedom. Douglass decided to punish Master Hugh for taking his freedom. He did not look for work, and remained at home during the entire week. Master Hugh got angry as the week passed. He told Douglass that he would find him work. He was afraid of this threat so he now had three weeks to plan his escape. Next Monday morning he got up and sought work himself. He went to Mr. Butler's shipyard and obtained work. At the end of the first week he brought Master Hugh nine dollars (Douglass, *My Bondage*, 331). Master Hugh did not know about his plans, but after he went to the camp meeting and Douglass' responses to his questions awakened some suspicion that Douglass might be up to no good. So Douglass decided to remove suspicion by working steadily. Master Hugh thought that he was satisfied with his condition, but at that time he was planning his escape (Douglass, *My Bondage* 330-333).

But he did not go through the same excitement and anxiety as the first time. He knew that he had to get far north. If he failed for the second time he knew that he would be sent far south. He left on Monday morning, 3rd of September 1838 and arrived in New York in less than a week. His dreams were fulfilled; he was in a free state and walking on free ground (Douglass, *My Bondage* 333-334). Douglass had only been in New York for a few hours when he met a fugitive slave he knew. This fugitive was from Baltimore as well. He had changed his name from Jake to William Dixon. He told him New York was full of southerners, that some black people in the city could not be trusted and also that there were hired men on the lookout for fugitives; these men would betray them for a few dollars. Douglass had little money, but stayed away from ship yards. He knew that Master Hugh would start looking for him there (Douglass, *My Bondage* 337-338).

He was homeless, moneyless and had nothing to eat. He met a sailor whose name was Stewart. Douglass told him about his circumstances. He introduced him to Mr. Ruggles who was a secretary of New York Vigilance Committee, and a very active man in anti-slavery works. This man hid him for several days. In the meantime, Douglass sent Anna, his wife-to-be, a letter, informing her of his safe arrival. They were married by Reverend James W. C. Pennington. After discovering that Douglass was a chalker by trade, Mr. Ruggles sent him to New Bedford. When Douglass and his wife arrived in New Bedford, they met Mr. and Mrs. Nathan Johnson, who were in contact with Mr. Ruggles. The Johnsons were very helpful in setting up home for Mr. and Mrs. Douglass (Douglass, *My Bondage* 340-342).

Douglass does not tell in great detail about his escape or how he did it, only when he left and where he ended up. Following the escape slaves, were usually advised to take a new name. This was necessary so that slave traders and hunters would have more difficulty tracking them down. Douglass changed his name. His mother had given him the name Frederick Augustus Washington Bailey. In Maryland he was known as Frederick Bailey. Between Baltimore and New Bedford he had gone by several names. When he arrived in New Bedford his name had been Johnson, but he found out that the Johnson family was quite large. Douglass' host was reluctant to loan his name, so instead he found them another name. Johnson had been reading "*Lady of the Lake*" and gave him the name "*Douglass*" (Douglass, *My Bondage* 342-343). By taking a new name Douglass took on a new identity. With his new name he left the slave behind and became a free man.

According to Olney's overview, reflections on slavery were to be found at the end of most narratives and Douglass' story is no exception (153). In the appendix there is a lecture called "The Nature of Slavery," which he delivered in Rochester on 1

December 1850. The first twenty years of Douglass' life were spent in slavery. He grew up seeing the destructive aspects of the slave system, not as a spectator but as a participant. He shared with his comrades the terrible conditions they had to endure. And because of that, he feels that he can speak freely and most importantly, strongly (Douglass, *My Bondage* 429). He states as best as he can the social and legal connection of master and slave.

A master is one – to speak in the vocabulary of the southern states – who claims and exercises a right of property in the person of a fellow man. (Douglass *My Bondage* 429)

The master did this with the force of the law and the consent of the southern religion, and – moreover – this gave the master absolute power over the slave. He could do as he pleased with the slave, beat him even kill him. The slave was a human being without any rights: he was merely a chattel – a thing. “In law, the slave has no wife, no children, no country, and no home” (Douglass, *My Bondage* 429). “He can own nothing possess nothing, acquire nothing, but what must belong to another. To eat the fruit of his own toil, to clothe his person with the work of his own hands, is considered stealing.” The slave works for his master who sits at home in idle (Douglass, *My Bondage* 430).

Douglass points out that the slaveholder depends on his whip to discipline the slaves and to induce humility among other things. The whip was not the only thing he used, there was the chain, the gag, the thumbscrew, the pillory, the bowie-knife, the pistol and the blood hound (Douglass, *My Bondage* 430). Douglass notes that it did not matter if the slaveholder was a Christian or a worshipper of Mahomet, they were equally

cruel when it came to slavery. The physical cruelty was nothing compared to mental, moral and religious cruelty towards slaves. Douglass said that slaves were moral and intellectual beings (Douglass, *My Bondage* 430-431).

The first work of slavery is to mar and deface those characteristics of its victims which distinguished *men* from *things*, and *persons* from *property*. (Douglass, *My Bondage* 431)

This makes the slave a mere machine (Douglass, *My Bondage* 431).

Conclusion

Reading Frederick Douglass' *My Bondage and My Freedom*, a book based on the first hand experience of a slave, has been educational in many ways. It has been informing about the lives of slaves from birth till death, containing historical facts about the African American people who were forcibly brought to the United States. Frederick Douglass understood slavery very well, and he delivers that understanding to the reader. His descriptions of the life he led in captivity and his interpretations of the various aspects of slavery, both in his autobiography and in his speeches are so vivid that it stirs the reader's emotions.

The first chapter, on physical abuse, focusing on the treatment of African slaves, reveals that the cruelty was horrible. Slaves had to succumb to terrible violence from the overseers and the slaveholders who did not regard them as human beings but simply as working animals. Moreover, even though slaves were treated horribly nothing was done to punish the people who committed these heinous crimes.

Family ties were deliberately ruined by the slave system. The father was often unknown – sometimes unacknowledged because he was white. Slave children were often not cared for by their mothers, and if they were, the mother spent little time with them since they were on the plantation working. Douglass is a case in point: he was raised by his maternal grandparents, his mother had few opportunities to meet him since she was a plantation worker, and his father was unknown to him but may have been the white plantation owner. If there were families who had been so fortunate to stick together, the auction block would often separate them and they never saw each other again.

It is extremely interesting to see how the slaveholders used ignorance as a tool to keep slaves as their property. The slaveholders even tricked them into thinking that this was God's will and quoted scripture as their source. It was the slaveholder's belief that if slaves learned to read they were "ruined"; they might question the master's right to own them and treat them as he wanted. This might have been true, for as soon as Douglass could read and write his views on slavery changed dramatically. He abhorred slavery and did much reading on the subject and did everything in his power to escape.

Christianity and slavery do not go hand in hand, but at that time it did. Slaves were usually very pious, but it was common knowledge that most pious slaveholders were the worst ones. They used the Bible to condone their behavior and cruelty. The churches in the parts where Douglass lived as a young boy often took part in the slaveholding community. This fact was quite interesting because it demonstrates how corrupt the church was at the time.

Through his quest for literacy and freedom Douglass escaped slavery, both by his determination to make himself a free man and by his ability to read. He worked hard and in the end he became not only free, but also famous for his escape and his story. He shared with the world his story as a participant in slavery. This was also a big reason why the slaveholders tried to keep their slaves from learning to read and write: then, nothing would be published about the disgusting truths of slavery. But thankfully Douglass was able to share his experience, in not only three autobiographies, but in numerous speeches as well.

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