Abstract

Frederick Douglass (1818-1895) is one of the most famous African-American to escape slavery in the nineteenth century. He is also considered to be among the most influential African-American leaders of the time. He was an author, activist and lecturer. During his lifetime, Douglass wrote three autobiographies, *Narrative of the Life of Frederick Douglass: An American Slave* (1845), *My Bondage and My Freedom* (1855), and *Life and Times of Frederick Douglass* (1881), each book becoming longer and more detailed than the others published before it.

As Frederick Douglass is such a remarkable man, it is no surprise that he made a direct link between education and freedom. When the writer compares his two autobiographies, she sees a clear difference in detail in his latter due to maturity and a willingness to acknowledge others in his life. The education that he gained led him to freedom, which he was then able to call truly his in 1846. After this freedom was gained, he gained his maturity.

The first part of this essay will briefly introduce Frederick Douglass’ life as well as the books and journals he published after his escape from slavery. It will also present information on education and the learning process that might be expected among slaves from the 1700s until after the American Civil War (1861-1865). It will then consider Douglass’ opinion on education and how it leads slaves on to the pathway of freedom. In addition, it will also draw from his first two autobiographies mentioned above, looking at details added by Douglass in *My Bondage and My Freedom*. The details looked at will be regarding conversations that are not in the *Narrative*, but added due to his maturity and his acknowledgement of others in his enslaved life. Furthermore, it will inspect the corrections made by Douglass and instances where he admits mistakes, ignorance or arrogance in his second autobiography. Lastly, it will look and compare Douglass’ growth as a character and maturity when discussing his education, first attempt and second successful attempt at escaping slavery.
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Introduction

Frederick Douglass is one of the most famous African-American’s to escape slavery in the nineteenth century. He wrote three autobiographies about his time in slavery, *Narrative of the Life of Frederick Douglass: An American Slave* (1845), *My Bondage and My Freedom* (1855), and *Life and Times of Frederick Douglass* (1881), each one different and more detailed than the other. He believed that education would get him far in life, in slavery as well as outside of it. In his autobiographies, he shows a strong opinion on education and how it connected to the path to freedom for enslaved African-American’s. Douglass often mentions details in his second autobiography that are not mentioned in his first narrative. These details that he left out in his first autobiography could be considered to be mistakes and/or ignorance in a certain situation. He later adds, corrects and admits these details in his second autobiography. As well as this, in his second narrative, Douglass adds conversations between himself and others in his enslaved life that were not mentioned in his first autobiography, which is a sign of him giving the people during his life of slavery more acknowledgement and understanding than before. Education resulted in the freedom that Douglass gained the year after he published his first narrative. It gave him an opportunity to live in an American society, which led him to the maturity that is demonstrated in his second autobiography.

Frederick Douglass was an extraordinary man and his most powerful and lasting legacies were his autobiographies, which inspired and furthered the abolitionist cause in the US and abroad. His first two autobiographies are without a doubt the most prevailing and lasting interest. Education was essential to any man wanting to be free and independent, according to Douglass, and this essay will examine his first two autobiographies for his account of his own realization of the importance of education and his determination to circumvent efforts to hinder his pursuit of both education and freedom. In order to put Douglass’ view to the test, the two autobiographies are briefly compared in order to determine to what extent freedom made when it came to the difference in Douglass’ own writing. *Narrative of the Life of Frederick Douglass, an American Slave*, came out in 1845 when he was a wanted runaway slave, but *My Bondage and My Freedom* came out ten years later, in 1855, after he had enjoyed years of freedom and engagement with American society. Essentially, the two accounts cover the same time and events but some significant differences indicate his growth of character. For historical context, I
will provide a brief outline of Douglass’ life and writings, the books and journals he has written as well as an overview of education for slaves before, during and after the Civil War. It will then present and discuss the opinion Douglass had on education as well as how he believed it connected to the path of freedom. It will also discuss his maturity and growth of character during his learning process, as well as during his attempt and successful attempt at escaping slavery. Lastly, it will discuss the acknowledgement that Douglass gives to the people during his enslaved life.
Who was Frederick Douglass?

Frederick Douglass is considered to be the most influential African-American leader of the nineteenth century. He was known for his want of a multiracial United States of America that would offer justice and equal rights for all. Many declare him to be the first African-American to publicly acknowledge being a wanted slave. He was an American author, activist and lecturer.

Frederick Douglass was born Frederick Augustus Washington Bailey in what is generally thought to be the year 1818, although Douglass recalls himself in *My Bondage and My Freedom* that he thinks the year in which he was born was 1817. He was born a slave in Talbot Country Maryland on the Holme Hill Farm. Although he did not know for certain whom his father was, Douglass says in his autobiographies that he heard rumors that his father was the man who owned his mother. His mother was Harriet Bailey, a woman he barely knew as she was a slave on another plantation. She died when he was a young boy and he did not meet her often (“Frederick” 1170-71). Douglass lived his first years with his grandmother and grandfather, until he came of age to work in the fields, which was around the age of six (O’Meally). He was sent between Baltimore and St. Michaels throughout his life in slavery (“Frederick” 1170-74).

Douglass escaped slavery in 1838, after a failed attempt in 1836, and took on the name Frederick Douglass to disguise himself, as he was a wanted man. The surname he took from a poem written by Sir Walter Scott in 1810, *Lady of the Lake*. On arriving in New York, he married Anna Murray, a free black woman that he had met in Baltimore and together they had five children: Rosetta, Lewis, Frederick, Charles and Annie. After they had married, they went to Massachusetts as it was not safe for them to live in New York due to Douglass being, in the eyes of the law, a fugitive slave. In 1839 Douglass became a preacher in the African Methodist Episcopal Zion Church in Massachusetts. For many years, Douglass fought alongside the abolitionist William Lloyd Garrison, whom he met in Massachusetts, but broke with him in 1851 due to their difference on views on Anti-Slavery. Douglass believed that the constitution was an antislavery document and “saw the value in steadily working toward the goals of antislavery, and that defended the strategic use of black violence as a response to the violence of slavery” (“Frederick” 1172).

In 1845 to 1846, Douglass left for England on a speaking tour for his newly published autobiography, *Narrative of the Life of Frederick Douglass, an American Slave*. As well as
advocating his book, he toured in England for fear of being caught and returned to his “owner”. After he published his autobiography, he was sought after by men who caught runaway slaves (slave catchers). In 1846, British acquaintances of his who believed that slavery should be abolished paid $711 US dollars for his freedom, which would be the equivalent of over $22,000 US dollars today (“Historical Currency Conversions”; “Frederick” 1170-74).

After having achieved freedom, Douglass and his family moved to New York where he began his publication of newspapers, writing his second autobiography My Bondage and My Freedom, and writing and giving speeches. When the Civil War broke out, Douglass became an advocate for allowing free black men to serve in the Union. He often met with President Abraham Lincoln and discussed with him the unfair treatment and unequal pay of the free black men fighting in the Union. After the war, he became a major figure in the Republican Party and protested discrimination against minority groups, including women. In 1874, Douglass became president of the Freedman’s Savings and Trust Company. In 1877, he was appointed US Marshall for the District of Columbia and from 1888 until 1891 he was the Consul General to Haiti. He married Helen Pitts in 1884, after his first wife’s death in 1882. Frederick Douglass died in his home in 1895 of a heart attack. Upon learning of his death, the American nation was struck with grief and many black schools closed for a day in honor of him (“Frederick” 1170-74; Merriman; O’Meally).

Books and Journals by Douglass

Frederick Douglass published three autobiographies: Narrative of the Life of Frederick Douglass, an American Slave1 published in 1845, My Bondage and My Freedom, which was published in 1855 and his last autobiography, which was published in 1881, Life and Times of Frederick Douglass. He also wrote and published the novel The Heroic Slave in 1852. When Narrative of the Life of Frederick Douglass was published, it became a best seller at the time, and helped Douglass build his identity as a campaigner for equality and freedom for all. When My Bondage and My Freedom was published, it was also broadly read and in its first two years of being on the market, it sold 18,000 copies. His third autobiography, Life and Times of

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1 In this essay, the book Narrative of the Life of Frederick Douglass, will be referred to as Narrative.
Frederick Douglass did not do as well as the first two, only selling a few hundred copies (“Frederick” 1172-74).

To many people’s dismay, after touring in the United Kingdom, Douglass edited and started three African-American newspapers between 1847 and 1863 (J. Smith 23). The names of the newspapers were the Douglass’ Monthly, North Star and Frederick Douglass’ Paper. He then edited a fourth newspaper, the New National Era from 1870 to 1873. Douglass was an advocate for equal rights and wrote speeches for his abolitionist cause. Among the many speeches that Douglass wrote for his cause, the names of few of his most meaningful ones are: “The Nature of Slavery” and “The Inhumanity of Slavery” from 1850. “What to the Slave is the Fourth of July?”, “This Fourth of July is yours, not mine. You may rejoice, I must mourn” and “The Internal Slave Trade” which were all written in 1852 (“Frederick” 1170-74; Merriman).
1. Education for a Slave?

Throughout time, there were not many enslaved men and women who managed to become literate. It was a difficult and trying process for those who attempted, as it would in the majority of cases, need to be done in secret so that the slave owners would not become aware of this activity. In many cases, although attempts to learn to read and write by slaves were tried, they often went for nothing, as their owners would become alert of their attempts and not allow it any longer. If these men and women were lucky, they would merely be told to not continue their efforts, although in most cases, this is not what happened. In Virginia, Louisiana, Mississippi, Alabama, Georgia, North Carolina, and South Carolina, laws were passed from the 1700s onwards, into the nineteenth century, that banned the education of slaves and free African-American men and women and that made it illegal for anyone, white or colored, to teach them reading, writing or any other kind of education. If they did, the punishment for the slaves would be extreme, they could receive twenty or more strikes, be beaten, imprisoned or put to death. The men and women being far too frightened to continue, would then halt their efforts to learn and continue life without becoming literate (Stroud; Williams 7-29)

Most slave owners objected to the education of slaves. This was because they believed that if the slaves were to become educated they would reject their owner’s authority and unwanted change would then proceed in result. If slaves were literate they would most likely rebel, due to the fact that they would become critical of their status in society as they would no longer be unaware and would see how many abolitionists there were. This they could see by reading about their efforts in abolishing slavery in books and newspapers. Along with not wanting enslaved men and women reading newspapers and novels, they did not want slaves to read the Bible, as it states that no man should own another. The white masters believed that if slaves were to become literate, it would do them more harm than good, as there would be nothing that they could do about their status in society. They only wanted their slaves to know trades and possibly arithmetic if it served them well (Williams 7-29).

Before the Civil War, enslaved men, women and children who were determined to learn were very creative when it came to finding ways to study. For instance, young black children and some adults would try to enlist the help of young white children outside who were playing away from their parents or other adults, as they did not know that helping black people was in most
states, illegal. Some of the children who were living on the streets of the cities, simply did not care that it was illegal and helped the slaves anyway. Many slaves wishing to learn to read would bribe the children with food or gifts in exchange for the lessons and some would exchange trade lessons to the children or adolescents teaching them. When discussing this, Heather Andrea Williams mentions Frederick Douglass as an example in her book, *Self-Taught: African American Education in Slavery in and Freedom*, saying that he used bread for trade. Some enslaved children would be fortunate enough to have the wife of their master take it upon herself to teach them, being inspired by faith. Slaves who did not own spelling or writing books, would become very resourceful when it came to finding surfaces to write on. They would use all that they could gather. Some would cut down dried wood and use it, or use fences and many would simply write in the dirt (Williams 20). After learning to read, either from the wives of their masters or the boys on the street, many slaves that had become literate would take it upon themselves to teach other slaves in an attempt to educate them about their position in society and the injustice of it all. In most of these attempts to educate others, the slaves would meet at night and/or on Sundays while their masters where away to come together and learn. Sundays were the best days for slaves to meet, as it was most often that their owners would not be at home, the owners would either be at church or spending the day with friends and family. As enslaved men and women would meet on these days, it became troublesome for their owners, as many of them did not know how to manage these get-togethers when they were away from home. In the late 1700’s in South Carolina, armed men would ride on horseback throughout the day to be on the lookout for large number of slaves gathering together (Williams 7-29).

During the Civil War, there were literate enslaved men who escaped from their owners and enlisted in the Union army. Many of these men became teachers during the war, and taught the men in their regiments, which usually only consisted of African-Americans. Many of the literate men became “penmen” (Williams 47) for the soldiers; that is, they would write letters for them that they could then send home to their families. Thousands of African-American soldiers became literate during the war, as there was an “educational movement” (Williams 46) amongst the black regiments. They believed that by combining education and military experience, it would give them a good opportunity to make a living after the war. Williams describes the reading and writing boom that occurred amongst the African-American soldiers in her book. She states that they used what useful knowledge they gained from their enslavement. A part of this
knowledge was a skill she calls “self-help”. This very important skill assisted their learning process during the war. As an example, this would be seen put to use when only two or three men in a regiment could read. The whole regiment would gather around these men who knew how to read, and listen to them read or give lessons. After learning what they could, they would then pass on their knowledge to others (Williams 45-66).

It was the free black men and women who began the educational movement in the south while the Civil War was still being fought. Many of these men and women faced brutal attacks from the people of the south due to the fear of change. It was the African-American regiments in the Union army that became adamant in teaching and donating money, as well as time and labor to build schools for the black community of the south. No official schools had been built in southern states amongst free communities before the war. The fact that the war was bringing educational changes to the black community caused great fear in the south and brought even more conflict between northern and southern blacks and whites (Williams 45-66).

After the Civil War, there was great enthusiasm to attend school amongst the now free, African-American community. They focused on building schools and teaching children and adults. The community believed that literacy was of urgent importance since they would be living in a literate society as free people. Many of the literate escaped slaves who had enlisted in the Union army became teachers in these local communities after the war. African-Americans petitioned to have education as a civil right and once schools were opened all over the United States of America, they demanded better conditions for their schools. Although many schools were now open, the state of the schools was often poor, as they did not receive as much funding as schools for white children. It is clear that there were always some in the African-American community who understood the importance of literacy throughout time, but after the war that thought grew (Williams 67-79).

1.1 What Education Meant to Douglass

In Frederick Douglass’ autobiographies, he puts great emphasis on knowledge and its importance. He recalls understanding the significance of intelligence from a young age, even without knowing what it truly meant.
When discussing learning to read and write, Douglass is clear that he knew that not many in his community, or of his race, had been so fortunate to learn these skills. This was especially true in Tuckahoe, as slaves there would not have been able to learn how to read. Douglass was therefore fortunate to have lived in Baltimore for seven years from around the age of seven or eight, as it gave him this magnificent opportunity. When learning how to write, he would tell the boys in his neighborhood in Baltimore that he could write better than them, which then resulted in a competition. He would read and copy the letters that he had “been so fortunate as to learn” (Narrative 52; My Bondage and My Freedom 171). However, Douglass did not see reading as just an ability, but also as a skill to “’read’ the people, places, situations, and expressive forms around him with deeper and deeper understanding” (O’Meally xx).

As mentioned above, there was little to no opportunity for slaves to learn to read and write in Tuckahoe due to the fact that teaching slaves was illegal. When speaking of his mother, he tells the readers that after her death he learned that she did know how to read and that she was the only slave in Tuckahoe that knew how to do so. He does not know how she learned this skill, for he states that it is “the last place in the world where she would be apt to find facilities for learning” (My Bondage and My Freedom 58). He states that the fact that she leaned this is remarkable and extraordinary and therefore, he admires her and tells the readers that he is quite willing, and even happy, to attribute any love of letters I possess, and for which I have got – despite of prejudices – only too much credit … to the native genius of my sable, unprotected, and uncultivated mother – a woman, who belonged to a race whose mental endowments it is, at present, fashionable to hold in disparagement and contempt (My Bondage and My Freedom 58)

Though they were not literate, slaves were wise, for they had knowledge that was different then the abilities to read and write, for there are different forms of knowledge. This can be seen for instance when Douglass tells the readers of how slaves do not know how old they are or what year it is, because if they would ask their owners for this information, it would be considered “evidence of impatience, and even of impudent curiosity” (My Bondage and My Freedom 35). Instead of having access to this knowledge, which most people take for granted, slave mothers would measure the age of their children by seasons. Douglass also shows examples of different knowledge when discussing his grandmother, who was considered to be a very wise woman. She knew much about nursing, fishing, and planting, so much so, that people from all over Tuckahoe and surrounding counties would come and ask her for her advice on these skills. The importance
of community is also very significant for Douglass, for amongst slaves, they had an oral tradition in their community, which is in some way, how Douglass recalls his life in his autobiographies. It is not only important to learn how to read and write, but to gain the knowledge of the American community and life.

In Douglass’ autobiographies, he tells the readers of what slaves were expected to know or not know, and how to act. They were expected not to ask any questions regarding life, family, work, or the decisions made by their owners. They were banned from all family ties, for slave owners believed that by doing this they “obliterated” it from “the mind and heart of the slave” (*My Bondage and My Freedom* 37-8). They were not supposed to have any opinion on how they were treated by their masters. This was made clear by slave owners, some sending spies to ask the slaves about their treatment. Douglass shows us what the slave owners expected the knowledge of the slaves to be in Hugh Auld’s speech to his wife, “A nigger should know nothing but to obey his master – to do as he is told to do” (*Narrative* 43). Due to this attitude and the danger of spies, Douglass says that it “established among the slaves the maxim, that a still tongue makes a wise head” (*Narrative* 32).

1.2 The Connection between Education and Freedom

It is clear when one reads both of Douglass’ autobiographies that he believes that education has a direct connection to freedom. It is clear that “literacy enabled and empowered blacks to gain freedom from, and control over, the ruling culture that enslaved them … [and] … sought to exclude and dominate illiterate blacks” (Royer 363). Many slave owners saw the link between education and freedom; they feared that it would help the enslaved women and men to claim their rights and that once these men and women became literate, they would use this skill to challenge the social structure of slavery. They would then shift their desire for literacy to the desire for freedom (Williams 45-50). Nicole Smith notes in her article *The Incompatibility of Education and Slavery in The Narrative of the Life of Frederick Douglass* that by banning the education of enslaved men and women, the ruling class was “implicitly admitting that through education lay some kind of freedom, some way of circumventing their otherwise absolute power.”
Frederick Douglass believed that education and slavery did not go together because, when enslaved, people could not put into use the education that they acquired because they did not have a free body, nor a free mind. He also states that he believes that others, like Sophia Auld, believed this, for after her husband put a stop to their reading lessons, she soon showed him that she believed that “education and slavery are incompatible with each other” (*My Bondage and My Freedom* 154).

From an early age, Douglass said that he realized that he wanted to be free. He shows this when his lessons with Sophia Auld, when he was a young boy living in Baltimore, came to a halt due to her husband, Hugh Auld becoming aware of it. This is a significant moment in Douglass’ life. Hugh Auld told Sophia that educating Douglass, or any slave, would do him no good for it “would forever unfit him to be a slave” as well as “make him [Douglass] discontented and unhappy” (*Narrative* 43). Douglass tells the readers that unbeknown to Hugh Auld, this was the moment that he realized that withholding education was “the white man’s power to enslave the black man” (*Narrative* 44) and that it unleashed a feeling of rebellion and a knowledge that education was the key to freedom. Mr. Auld’s ban fueled Douglass even more to become literate, and he managed to do so over the seven years that he lived with the Aulds.

Douglass states in the *Narrative* and *My Bondage and My Freedom* that his will to gain knowledge was in fact a curse on him, like Hugh stated. He knew that slavery was wrong and envied the slaves that had not gained the knowledge he had through education. He became a “victim of his newly acquired literacy” (Royer 367). Douglass refers to him gaining his knowledge of slavery in the *Narrative* as “It had given me a view of my wretched condition, without the remedy. It opened my eyes to the horrible pit, but to no ladder upon which to get out” (49).

In Douglass’ autobiographies, he tells the readers of how he first learned the meaning of the word abolitionist. He had heard Hugh Auld and his friend speaking about it in their home and recalls that he knew that this was something that slave owners were against, but that it would be something slaves would agree with. He realized the meaning of the word when reading a newspaper, the *Baltimore American*, for his earlier attempt at figuring out what it meant from a dictionary did him no good. Thus, his education helped him realize that not only did he find the treatment of himself and fellow slaves to be unfair, but others believed this to be true as well (*My Bondage and My Freedom* 163-67). By learning the meaning of this word, and learning how to
read and write, Douglass is “acting to transform the dehumanizing structure of the dominate culture” (Royer 369).

When discussing how being literate helped the slave community become aware of their status and drove many to freedom, Williams mentions Frederick Douglass as an example in her book. She discusses how he might have thought as a child that just by reading, it would somehow make him free. She says that it was in fact, not that, but, “the content of the reading material that transformed his life” (24) and that “Rather than introducing the idea of freedom, reading, it seems, reinforced an existing desire and expanded his conception of the possible” (27).

Douglass’ education helped him during his attempted escape as well as his second successful escape. For instance, when writing “protections” (Narrative 87) for the group of men that he was going to escape with in 1836. In these protections, he wrote that they had all been given authorization by their owners to visit family in Baltimore during Easter. It also helped him when it came to knowledge of how to escape and form a plan. Their self-help (see chapter 1) also came into use when knowing to follow the North Star, as well as which way to travel would be best. It is clear through Douglass’ autobiographies as well as in other sources that he and others believe that education is connected to freedom.
2. Growth of Character

When looking at books that Douglass used when learning how to write, there are many things that he admits to the readers in his second autobiography, *My Bondage and My Freedom*, that he did not write about in his first, the *Narrative*. This is a sign of him having grown and matured since he wrote his first autobiography as well as having become truly free from slavery in 1846. While telling the readers of his efforts to learn to write with books, there are many things he admits. He remarks using the *Webster’s Spelling Book*, when telling the readers of this in the *Narrative*, he says that it was an effort to learn more letters then he knew already. On the other hand, when mentioning this in *My Bondage and My Freedom*, he admits that using the spelling book was also an effort to improve his handwriting. Douglass also remarks using old spelling books from his master’s son, Thomas. When mentioning this in the *Narrative*, he simply states that he did so and in the end, learned how to write. However, in *My Bondage and My Freedom*, Douglass admits to the readers that when he was doing this, it was difficult for him, as he needed to write in an identical manner to Thomas so that he would not be caught. He confesses as well, that this was very difficult for him, as Thomas wrote very well and it was hard to write as well as him.

When Douglas had been living with the Aulds in Baltimore for seven years, he had managed to learn how to read and write and it is clear through the texts in the books that he intended to teach other slaves the same skills. He taught as many enslaved women and men to write as he could while being enslaved himself. When telling the readers about the schools that he taught in during these years, there are many statements that he makes in the *Narrative*, which he corrects in *My Bondage and My Freedom*, for instance when he mentions a Sabbath school in St. Michael’s when he lived with Thomas Auld. A young white man, by the name of Mr. Wilson, founded the school. In the *Narrative*, Douglass mentions that the group only managed to meet three times, before men “came upon us with sticks and other missiles, drove us off, and forbade us to meet again” (61). On the other hand, in *My Bondage and My Freedom*, Douglass corrects this statement, telling the readers that the school only managed to meet twice before the men came and put a stop to it. After living with Covey, a man Douglass was sent to live with for a year, to break him of his rebellious behavior, he was sent to live with a man by the name of Mr. Freeland, in St. Michael’s, where he also opened a Sabbath school. In the *Narrative*, Douglass
tells the readers that a group of men that he had been teaching wanted him to open a Sabbath school for slaves. In *My Bondage and My Freedom*, Douglass corrects this, stating that he himself “wanted a Sabbath school, in which to exercise my gifts, and to impart the little knowledge of letter which I possessed, to my brother slaves” (264). When telling the readers of the number of people in the school, Douglass states in the *Narrative* that the class was over forty people, but in his second autobiography, he tells the readers that at one point it was this many people, though usually the group was between twenty to thirty.

Douglass’ continued teaching of his fellow slaves shows a sign of thinking of himself as invulnerable, since slaves who were caught gathering together in large groups could expect to suffer the consequences, as mentioned above. There is another detail that Douglass does not mention in the *Narrative* when it comes to him teaching other individuals, as well as learning to write himself, that he adds in his second autobiography. When Douglass was living in Baltimore, he tells the readers of a black man by the name of Lawson. He calls this man Uncle Lawson and admits to becoming very fond of him. Lawson was teaching Douglass about God, in exchange for reading lessons, for they both lacked in these departments.

### 2.1 Arrogance in Attempts at Escaping Slavery

When Douglass discusses his failed attempt and second successful attempt at escaping from slavery in the *Narrative* and *My Bondage and My Freedom*, there is a clear sign of maturity in his second, for in his first, he writes in a naïve, invulnerable and arrogant way. In *My Bondage and My Freedom*, Douglass admits his mistakes, unlike in his first autobiography, for instance, when telling the readers of the moment that he, along with a group of friends, decided to escape. In *My Bondage and My Freedom*, Douglass tells the readers that after the decision was made, he looked back and realized that there were many things and actions that they should not have done. He mentions the example of how they would sing and exclaim, “Almost as triumphant in their tone as if we had reached a land of freedom and safety” (278) and how he was sure that his master knew of their attempt because of it. Cruz states in his article, *Historicizing the American Cultural Turn*, “owners and overseers were not oblivious to the fact that slaves double-coded their songs” (312). What he meant by double coding is that; their songs could be interpreted in
different ways depending on who was listening. There is no mention of their singing in triumph in the *Narrative*.

When telling the readers of the group’s escape plan, Douglass admits to not knowing certain things in his second autobiography that he appears to know in his first. This can be seen when he discusses where the group intended to go after their escape. In the *Narrative*, he tells the readers that they knew of the state New York, but did not wish to go there for fear of being caught and sent back. In *My Bondage and My Freedom*, he confesses that they in fact, “really did not, at the time, know that there was a state of New York” (282), but then he says that nonetheless, he thinks back and knows that they would not wish to go there for the same reasons that he states in his first autobiography. He tells the readers in the *Narrative* that they were planning to reach Maryland, but again admitting not knowing much of the north in his second autobiography, where he says that they were simply going to walk until they reached a free state. This is also seen when discussing the length that the group would need to row on the Chesapeake Bay. In the *Narrative*, he states that it was between seventy or eighty miles, but in *My Bondage and My Freedom*, he states that it was only seventy. Douglass also admits his mistakes again in his second autobiography, when telling the readers that there were in fact objections in the group to the plan that he had arranged, for they knew as well as him, that there were many things that could have gone wrong. This is again, not mentioned in the *Narrative*.

When discussing his successful attempt to escape slavery, Douglass admits his arrogance in his second autobiography. When telling the readers of his determination to work on his own time, in order to bring in enough money to pay for his escape in his first autobiography, he expresses his dedication to working night or day and how he managed to do so after an agreement had been settled between himself and Hugh Auld. On the other hand, in *My Bondage and My Freedom*, Douglass admits his arrogance, stating that he now knows that it was a very difficult determination on his hand, as there were things that could go wrong for him. He mentions that the skill that he worked with could usually only to be done when the weather was agreeable and that he was very lucky that it held through, as well as the fact that he was fortunate to not become sick during the months he worked.

After a misunderstanding between the two men, Hugh banned him from finding his own work. In both books, he tells the readers that due to his anger, he stayed at home the following week in defiance and was determined to fight Hugh if he should lay a hand on him, for he was so
angry. In the *Narrative*, Douglass shows no regret of this behavior, but in *My Bondage and My Freedom*, he tells the readers that, “As I look back to this behavior of mine, I scarcely know what possessed me, thus to trifle with those who had such unlimited to bless or blast me” (331). Brewton says in his article, “*Bold defiance took its place*” – “*Respect*” and Self-Making in *Narrative of the Life of Frederick Douglass, an American Slave*, that in the *Narrative*, there is a clear indication of Douglass wanting respect and becoming offended and that he thinks that, “strength and toughness are essential to his status” (705-715). Douglass admits in his second autobiography that he was happy that it did not come to that as he realizes now that, “in my conduct toward him, in this instance, there was more folly than wisdom” (*My Bondage and My Freedom* 331).

In his second biography, Douglass admits to the readers when he was frightened, taking away the invulnerable image that he portrays himself as in the *Narrative*. This is seen when retelling the events of his first attempt to escape with the group. In both autobiographies, Douglass tells the readers that Sandy, a man that was going to attempt to escape with the rest of the group, decided in the end that he was not going to attempt to escape with them. In the *Narrative*, he simply states that despite this, he “still encouraged us” (86), but in *My Bondage and My Freedom*, he tells the readers the reason why Sandy decided not to run away with them. The reason was, that Sandy had a nightmare about their escape, which discouraged him. Later in the book, Douglass admits to being frightened by the nightmare, for it sounded so real to him. He also admits to being frightened when discussing how the men that caught the group before they escaped, came to the house. In the *Narrative*, when the men come to the house, he says that, he “was not yet certain as to what the matter was” (88), in *My Bondage and My Freedom* on the other hand, he claims that he knew that “It is all over with us. We are surely betrayed” (290) and that he needed to compose himself for he was so frightened that the men had figured out their plan.

### 2.2 People in his Enslaved Life

When Douglass recalls the people he encountered during his learning process in his enslaved life, there is a clear difference between his first autobiography and his second. He gives others
more acknowledgements in his second and a more detailed rendition of the conversations they have.

We can see more acknowledgements for instance, in his conversations with Hugh Auld’s wife. In *My Bondage and My Freedom*, he often gives her more acknowledgement than in the *Narrative*, for instance, when describing how she began to teach him when he was a young boy. In the *Narrative*, Douglass does not go into detail about how she started teaching him to read, only stating that she “very kindly” (43) started teaching him, as if it was her idea. In *My Bondage and My Freedom*, on the other hand, Douglass explains how he heard her read the Bible out loud when her husband was not home and how it peaked his curiosity about reading and how he then wanted to learn. He remarks that he plainly asked her to teach him to read; for she was so kind that he was not frightened to ask. Her kindness is also seen in his second autobiography, when his learning with her comes to a halt due to Hugh Auld’s interference. In the *Narrative*, Douglass does not mention how the information came to Hugh’s attention, but in *My Bondage and My Freedom*, he tells the readers that she was so proud of Douglass and of herself, for their lessons were going so well and Douglass was a quick learner, that Sophia told Hugh herself. Throughout *My Bondage and My Freedom*, he also often mentions that Sophia Auld was a kind woman and that it was not her character that was in question, but the fact that she had slaves, stating, “Nature had made us friends; slavery made us enemies” (126). As well as giving Sophia Auld acknowledgement, Douglass also thanks her husband Hugh, in a highly ironic way, in *My Bondage and My Freedom* for his education, for he says that if it were not for them, her teaching and his explanation of why it must stop, he would have possibly “grown up in ignorance” (147) like others in slavery did.

Douglass also uses kinder wording in his second autobiography when it comes to his recollections of other characters. For instance, when discussing the young white boys who would teach him to read and write. In the *Narrative*, when explaining how he would give the boys bread, he calls them “hungry little urchins” (48) but in *My Bondage and My Freedom*, he calls them “my hungry little comrades” (155) and explains that not all the boys wanted the bread in trade for teaching him. Many of them simply enjoyed helping him, thus, he gives them more acknowledgement.

Douglass also tells the readers of a man by the name of Mr. Wilson. In *My Bondage and My Freedom*, Douglass says that Mr. Wilson asked him to help him teach the other students of
the school as Douglass already knew how to read and write. He does not mention this in the *Narrative*, simply stating that the group wanted to learn the New Testament and only managed to meet three times. When discussing fellow slaves by the names of Henry and John, that he met while living with Mr. Freeland, Douglass gives their comprehension more acknowledgement in his second autobiography, stating that they were “remarkably bright and intelligent” (264), but simply states in the *Narrative* that they were “quite bright” (82). It is clear through these examples mentioned, that Douglass shows much greater generosity in his acknowledgements of the people in his life during enslavement in his second autobiography. He gives them a better and truer show of character, whether it be his mistress and master, the young boys on the street, his teachers, or his fellow slaves.

2.3 Giving Credit to Those Who Helped

When looking at conversations in *My Bondage and My Freedom* between Douglass and people that were in his life and those that came into his life when he was attempting to escape, he gives the people more acknowledgement, a more accurate telling of the moments and conversations between them, as well as adding conversations that were not in the *Narrative*. This can be seen when he tells the readers of a conversation between himself and a couple of Irishmen on a dock in Baltimore. The Irishmen asked Douglass whether he was a slave and Douglass acknowledges in his second autobiography, how affected they were when he told them that he was. He tells the readers that they had very strong opinions on slavery and they, “expressed deep sympathy with me, and the most decided hatred of slavery” (*My Bondage and My Freedom* 170). It can also be seen during the groups arrest after their failed attempt to escape. A man in their group by the name of Henry, resisted arrest by fighting back the men, though the officers managed to overpower him in the end. Douglass admits to admiring Henry for his resistance, for he and another man, did not. As well as giving these men acknowledgement, Douglass gives Hugh acknowledgement as well, when telling the readers of their agreement regarding Douglass working. In the *Narrative*, he simply states that Hugh contemplated his request and then agreed. In *My Bondage and My Freedom* on the other hand, he tells the readers that Hugh took time to contemplate this request and admires the time he took, calling it “mature” (328).
Douglass gives a more accurate relating when discussing a fellow slave Sandy, in his second autobiography, which could be considered negative in some light. For instance, he gives a different grammatical response from Sandy when the men discuss realizing that they had been betrayed in 1836. In the *Narrative*, Sandy’s reply is, “Well, that thought has this moment struck me” (88), on the other hand, Douglass says in *My Bondage and My Freedom*, that his reply is, “Man, dat is strange; but I feel just as you do” (289). Simultaneously to this, he tells the readers in the *Narrative*, that once in jail, the group was in agreement in regard to who it was that betrayed him, but in *My Bondage and My Freedom*, he tells the readers that though unwilling to believe it, they knew that it was Sandy that had betrayed them to the officers.

In the *Narrative*, there are many conversations completely left out, which could cause the readers to feel compassion towards characters in his biographies, which Douglass adds to his second narrative. For instance, when telling the readers of Master Thomas and his first attempted escape. When the group was arrested, Douglass tells the readers that master Thomas had told them there was evidence against the group that showed they had attempted to run away, which would result in them being hanged. However, once Douglass answers him, telling him that that could not be, for nothing had been done, he tells the readers that Thomas believed him and did not press charges. Once leaving Douglass in jail for a week, he tells the readers that Thomas promised to emancipate him at twenty-five, if he would learn a trade and keep out of mischief (*My Bondage and My Freedom* 303).

After learning a trade and deciding to attempt a second escape in Baltimore in 1838, Douglass tells the readers that he asked a man who ran a shipyard, Mr. Butler, if he could work with him. He gives the man more acknowledgement when he tells the readers that Mr. Butler valued Douglass’ work and had made him foreman on earlier occasions. As well as leaving this conversation out of the *Narrative*, Douglass also leaves out a conversation between himself and the cook on Mr. Freeland’s farm that could harm his character in the *Narrative*. The cook Mary, blamed Douglass for the whole plan that the group had conducted, saying that two men from the group, John and Henry, would never do such a thing and that he was a bad influence.
Conclusion

Frederick Douglass was a man remarkable for connecting knowledge, education, and freedom. His two autobiographies, *Narrative of the Life of Frederick Douglass, An American Slave* and *My Bondage and My Freedom*, other than being key works of African-American non-fiction, show a substantial increase of maturity over time, as well as the latter acknowledging other people in his life. Douglass and his family clearly stood out of the social standard of slaves of the nineteenth century. His mother’s ability to read, as well as his grandmother’s knowledge, and his education and escaping, are remarkable for the time. The writer’s central idea that links everything together is that Douglass and others believe that education led slaves on the path to freedom. When he published his first autobiography, it had been ten years since his escape and he was still not completely free and the Civil War had still not begun. The year after he published his book his freedom was bought and he thus truly became free. By becoming a free African-American it led him to maturity, which then resulted in him willing to admit his mistakes and giving acknowledgement to the people that surrounded him during his enslaved life. This was demonstrated by discussing education for slaves before and after the civil war, what education meant to Douglass himself and how he believed that education led people onto the path to freedom. Then how this freedom led him to maturity, which was demonstrated by pointing out his corrections, add-ons, and his admitting to mistakes when it comes to his attempts at escaping slavery and his giving acknowledgement to those that were around him.

When looking at what education meant to Frederick Douglass, it is very clear that he believed that education was a great power to behold. Though slaves were meant to be kept in the dark when it came to reading and writing, it is apparent that he believes that knowledge does not only include reading and writing, but other skills as well. This can be seen when he discusses his grandmother and her knowledge of nursing, planting, and fishing, as well as telling the years and ages of people by the seasons.

Douglass’ belief in a connection between education, knowledge and freedom is very clear in his two autobiographies. Literacy empowered slaves and helped them gain their understanding of freedom and challenge the social standard. Not only did they gain the skills, but they also gained the skill of being able to use their own mind. By becoming educated, it would enable slaves to be happy, as they would not have the freedom to express their knowledge, so this fueled
their want for freedom. He believed that by keeping slaves in the dark mentally, owners were maintaining their power over them.

By becoming a free African-American after his freedom had been bought, it led him to maturity. It gave him the possibility to admit his mistakes, correct himself, and give acknowledgement to others in his enslaved life. In his second autobiography, he adds, admits and corrects statements that he made in his first narrative. This can be seen when discussing his education and escape. When he mentions the schools that he taught, he corrects himself on how often they met, the number of pupils he had, and who started them. It is also apparent when he admits to the readers that his group and he made many ignorant mistakes in the weeks following up to his escape of slavery. For instance, when they continued to sing out in triumph, as if already free. He also admits his ignorance in how he did not know about the northern states, for in the *Narrative*, he tells the readers that he does. As well as this, when telling the readers of the misunderstanding that took place between himself and Hugh Auld, and how he was prepared to fight him, he tells the readers in his second autobiography that looking back, he sees his arrogance and how it would have been the wrong thing to do.

Many of the conversations left out in Douglass’ first autobiography are details that would help the character image of the person he was trying to put in a negative light. For instance, as mentioned above in chapter 2.2, there was a conversation between Master Thomas and Douglass after Douglass’ first attempt to escape. His master promised to emancipate him at the age of twenty-five, which at the time, would have been considered to be very thoughtful and rare on his master’s part. Though it is clear that by doing this, Douglass is giving these people more acknowledgement and understanding in his second autobiography, as the readers can see, Douglass put himself in their shoes. It is also clear in his first autobiography, that he wanted the slaves around him to sound more sophisticated than they were at the time, for instance in Sandy’s answer when they got the feeling that they had been caught.

Frederick Douglass is a remarkable figure, both during his lifetime and today. Through his works he shows the readers that although life might be extremely difficult, there is always a way to better yourself and thus, make life better.
Works Cited


