

# American way

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The present term paper will compare the life struggles of the two totally different American historical figures -Frederick Douglass(1818 - 1895) and Benjamin Franklin (1706 - 1790). Although they were dissimilar in regard to their social backgrounds and characters, both of them praised knowledge as the most valid source of power, and were perseverant in their strivings for self-education. Both successfully tried their hand in writing. The comparison of Douglass' and Franklin's lives will be supported by the quotes from their autobiographies.

Before proceeding to the analysis part, it makes sense to overview the contributions which each of the men made to the United States history. Frederick Augustus Washington Bailey, more widely known as Frederick Douglass, was born a slave. He managed to cast off that yoke only at the age of twenty when he arranged false identification papers to take a long journey from Maryland to New York. Upon joining various abolitionist organizations in Massachusetts, Douglass had been delivering lectures on anti-slavery across the Eastern and Midwestern states as well as across the ocean from 1841 till 1846.

In the late 1840s, he became active as a publisher. Acknowledging the Emancipation Proclamation (announced by President Lincoln in 1862) to be one of the most prominent documents in the American history since it declared the liberation of black slaves, the prominent abolitionist fought for granting equal rights to all American citizens regardless of sex and ethnicity. Benjamin Franklin acquired prominence as a writer, politician and scientist. Being born in a rather poor large family, he managed to make money on newspaper editing, printing, and commerce in Philadelphia.

Franklin founded the first public lending library, fire department, and political discussion club in the United States. He refined the theory of electricity and invented many important utensils and instruments (i. e. the lightning rod, bifocals, the iron furnace stove, a carriage odometer, etc. ). He grew popular as a politician and civic leader after publicly speaking against the Stamp Act. During the American Revolution, Franklin, the diplomat, managed to chaffer military and financial aid from France. In his later period of life he supported the ideas of abolitionism.

To return back to the comparison of Douglass' and Franklin's views on the importance of knowledge and education, both were never tired of improving their cognitive skills. Despite totally different social backgrounds, Douglass being a born slave, and Franklin, being the youngest son in the family of a tallow chandler of a British ancestry, were similarly deprived of the regular schooling. The wife of one of Douglass' masters, Sophia Auld, started teaching Frederick the alphabet and elementary spelling. The woman unintentionally broke the law which forbade educating slaves.

In his autobiography "Narrative of a Life," Douglass reconstructed the speech of Sophia's husband who raised his voice against literacy for slaves: If you give a nigger an inch, he will take an ell. A nigger should know nothing but to obey his master -- to do as he is told to do. Learning would SPOIL the best nigger in the world. Now ... if you teach that nigger ... how to read, there would be no keeping him. It would forever unfit him to be a slave. He would at once become unmanageable, and of no value to his master. As to himself, it could do him no good, but a great deal of harm. It would make him discontented and unhappy.

(Douglass 36) Although in a racist and humiliating form, the slave master emphasized the great role of knowledge and education for a human being. Having learnt to put letters into words, Frederick understood how right his master was concerning the importance of studies: It was a new and special revelation, explaining dark and mysterious things, with which my youthful understanding had struggled, but struggled in vain. I now understood what had been to me a most perplexing difficulty -- to wit, the white man's power to enslave the black man. It was a grand achievement, and I prized it highly.

From that moment, I understood the pathway from slavery to freedom. It was just what I wanted, and I got it at a time when I the least expected it.

(Douglass 36) These thoughts of the famous abolitionist prove that literacy could expand mental horizons of Afro-Americans so that they were able to trace inequity in social life of the United States in the early 19th century.

There colored people were degraded to the position of hard-laboring and powerless beasts. A talented boy had to continue his studies in secrecy, opposing to his masters' intention of " shutting [him] up in mental darkness" (Douglass 36).

Being sent on errands, Frederick used every opportunity to learn letters from the white poor boys in the neighborhoods. The young slave enjoyed reading because it " gave tongue to interesting thoughts of [his] own soul, which had frequently flashed through [his] mind, and died away for want of utterance" (Douglass 42). This happened when Frederick managed to read one of Sheridan's speeches which inspired him to think over the nature of truth and its impact on conscience. Possessing a sharp wit, Douglass learnt to write as he watched the ship carpenters marking timbers.

He also copied the Italics in Webster's Spelling Book and finally succeeded in producing the letters correctly without peeping into the copy-book. Frederick dared even to take the copy-books of his masters' son to practice in handwriting. One would admire the strong will and courage of the young slave who progressed in learning at the risk of being severely punished. Franklin's path of education started in a less secret way. His father hoped that his son would make a career of a clergyman and sent the boy to the grammar-school at the age of eight.

Benjamin showed a quick progress in learning so that he managed to jump from the first to the third class within one year. However, the senior Franklin found the cost of studying at that educational establishment too high and placed his son to another school where the latter succeeded in writing but failed in arithmetic. At ten Ben was taken home to assist his father in candle business. As Franklin recollected, he used to have "a thirst for knowledge" (14) and used every opportunity to expand his father's small library by buying new books. He mentioned Plutarch's "Lives," Defoe's "Essay on Projects," and Dr.

Mather's "Essays to do Good" as the books which influenced his mind in the earlier period. The boy continued his self-education when he was made a printer's apprentice. He borrowed books from booksellers' apprentices and used to read at nights so that he could return them the following morning. When a wealthy tradesman Adams by name invited Benjamin to his library, the boy showed interest in poetry and attempted to write his own ballads. In the autobiography Franklin called his earlier verses "wretched stuff" (15) and explained that he preferred to master his writing skills in prose.

Benjamin wrote a few letters to his friend to share some thoughts on women's abilities for study, and the senior Franklin happened to read those letters. He praised the son for "correct spelling and pointing" but criticized for the flaws regarding "elegance of expression, ... method and ... perspicuity" (Franklin 16). The younger Franklin decided to train himself by imitating the style of the Spectator magazine that focused on political and current events and by turning some tales into poems. Thus Benjamin made a progress in expanding his vocabulary and arranging his thoughts in the better structured phrases.

Finally the future 'Founding Father' of the United States became satisfied with the results of his efforts: By comparing my work afterwards with the original, I discovered many faults and amended them; but I sometimes had the pleasure of fancying that, in certain particulars of small import, I had been lucky enough to improve the method or the language, and this encouraged me to think I might possibly in time come to be a tolerable English writer, of which I was extremely ambitious. (Franklin 17) Around the same period Franklin studied arithmetic and navigation.

By attentively reading Xenophon's "Memorable Things of Socrates" he practiced in the Socratic method of conducting disputes and refined his grammar. Benjamin aimed at "expressing myself in terms of modest diffidence" (Franklin 18) in his writings so that the argumentation contained both pros and contras related to the main thesis. At that time the perspective political theorist and polemicist designed an original concept of a good and authentic manner of writing. In his autobiography, Franklin emphasized that knowledge brought power to an educated man.

Literate people could use their aptitude in eloquence and writing to persuade people into the things that would otherwise have been neglected or labeled as wrong. Since the scholar believed that “ the chief ends of conversation are to inform or to be informed, to please or to persuade”, he warned the men of letters against the whim of “ express[ing] [themselves] as firmly fix'd in [their] present opinions” in “ a positive and dogmatical manner” (Franklin 19). He suggested instead analyzing the issues under research in a critical and modest manner so that audiences were stimulated to think independently and freely without prejudices and cliches.

It should be noticed that despite different manners of acquiring knowledge, Douglass and Franklin learnt similar lessons from their earlier exercises in reading and writing. Douglass observed that in a course of studies he started contemplating about human rights and the abnormal distribution of power between the master and the slave. On the one hand, as the author recalled, reading was a blessing because it enabled him to get the better command of the train of thoughts.

On the other hand, however, it appeared to be a curse since it “ had given [him] a view of [his] wretched condition, without the remedy” and “ opened [his] eyes to the horrible pit, but to no ladder upon which to get out” (Douglass 42). It became evident to the boy that knowledge by itself could not ensure a person's happiness and well-being and had to be supplied by civic acts. In his turn, Franklin arrived at the strong conviction that “ truth, sincerity and integrity in dealings between man and man were of the utmost importance to the felicity of life” (58).

He had the enough independent mind to understand that ... certain actions might not be bad because they were forbidden by [Revelation], or good because it commanded them, yet probably these actions might be forbidden because they were bad for us, or commanded because they were beneficial to us, in their own natures, all the circumstances of things considered. (ibid. ) In other words, Franklin opposed the social structure as based on traditions and rigid rules which were imposed by the elite on the rest of citizens.

Later those thoughts made the author of “ Autobiography” to fight against any immorality or injustice caused by rich whites to people of another skin color. Douglass and Franklin displayed similar manners of life-long self-education and educating other people, although the results of those efforts for the each were different. Douglass became enough skillful in reading to teach other slaves to read the New Testament, and he was lucky to do that at a Sabbath school on Mr. Freeman’s plantation (the man who hired Douglass from his master).

Over forty slaves had been attending lessons for about half a year. Freeman did not object to Douglass’ initiative but other slave-owners hated the very idea of Afro-Americans “ behaving like intellectual, moral, and accountable beings” (Douglass 82). One Sunday a gang of whites attacked the pupils of the Sabbath school during their meeting and put a violent end to the enterprise. Franklin’s attempt to found a public subscription library ended more happily. In 1731, he and his colleagues from the Junto club created the Library Company of Philadelphia to engage people into reading.

They sold the so-called “ shares” to shareholders to buy books so that members borrowed them to their convenience. The goal Franklin et al.

pursued was very noble: These libraries have improved the general conversation of the Americans, made the common tradesmen and farmers as intelligent as most gentlemen from other countries, and perhaps have contributed in some degree to the stand so generally made throughout the colonies in defense of their privileges. (70) In a course of time, another three public libraries emerged, thus forming a strong educational network in the United States of the 18th century.

The foundation of the library provided Franklin with more opportunities to immerse into “ constant study, for which [he] set apart an hour or two each day, and thus repair'd in some degree the loss of the learned education” (79). As it is evident from researching Franklin’s autobiography, this prominent scholar possessed a skill of self-discipline and high self-organization. At the age of 27, this man of knowledge started learning French, Italian, and Spanish. He did it in a peculiar manner: one of Franklin’s friends often tempted him into playing chess, which game Benjamin was fond of.

The scholar agreed to do it on the following condition: ... the victor in every game should have a right to impose a task, either in parts of the grammar to be got by heart, or in translations, etc. , which tasks the vanquish'd was to perform upon honour, before our next meeting. As we play'd pretty equally, we thus beat one another into that language. (Franklin 99) His own linguistic experience gave Franklin the right to criticize the traditional approach to teaching foreign languages specifically and education in general.

I would ... offer it to the consideration of those who superintend the education of our youth, whether, since many of those who begin with the <https://assignbuster.com/american-way/>

Latin quit the same after spending some years without having made any great proficiency, and what they have learnt becomes almost useless, so that their time has been lost, it would not have been better to have begun with the French, proceeding to the Italian, etc. ; for, tho', after spending the same time, they should quit the study of languages and never arrive at the Latin, they would, however, have acquired another tongue or two, that, being in modern use, might be serviceable to them in common life.

(Franklin 100) As the abovementioned passage demonstrates, Franklin valued systematic education for its utility in everyday life. In his perception, knowledge was not only a collection of abstract truths about world order or human morals and ethics but also a very important tool in communication and career promotion. To summarize, education and knowledge were highly appraised by both Douglass and Franklin as it was evident from their writings. It is especially interesting that the men of the so different backgrounds arrived at the same conclusions despite living in different periods of the United States history.

Franklin was one of the brightest minds of the 18th century when the country liberated itself from the British rule, and the American nation proclaimed its independence. Douglass belonged to the next age when the United States society became segregated by race, sex, and the issue of origin. Franklin represented the most literate and progressively thinking members of the privileged class which exercised power over poorer classes and people of the races other than White Caucasian. Douglass was the son of the degraded and oppressed folk of Afro-Americans who were formally liberated only upon the end of the Civil War.

But, however different were the experiences of these two prominent figures of the United States history, both of them praised knowledge and education as efficient means of destroying inequality, ignorance, prejudice and rigidity of thinking. Both of them emphasized that education liberated the mind and soul from primitivism and barbarism. Both used every opportunity to acquire novel information that would widen their mental horizons and inspire other people to follow the path of knowledge.

Douglass " Narrative of a Life" and Franklin's " Autobiography" provide us with vivid and interesting-to-read examples of how human beings could refine themselves and society by being perseverant and enthusiastic in learning. Works Cited Douglass, Frederick. Narrative of the Life of Frederick Douglass: An American Slave. Charlottesville, Va. : University of Virginia Library, 1996. Franklin, Benjamin. The Autobiography of Benjamin Franklin. Charlottesville, Va. : University of Virginia Library, 1995.