

The power and paradox of literacy



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A Narrative of the Life of Frederick Douglass: The Power and Paradox of Literacy

The “ Narrative of the Life of Frederick Douglass” has been regarded by many as one of the most influential slave narratives in American history. This colorful autobiography has and will forever situate Douglass at the forefront of the American abolitionist movement.

Many scholars involved in the study of African American history, including James Matlack, a writer for the Atlanta Review of Race and Culture, assert that the effectiveness of Douglass’s narrative rests upon his superior technique in sharing his experience and relating them to the general American population (Matlack 15). In this short narrative Douglass wonderfully exploits several themes that soon become the foundation to his anti-slavery ideology. One of the most important themes Douglass creates within his narrative is the power that literacy and education have upon fellow African American slaves yearning for liberation. Uniquely however, as Douglass recognizes that this pathway to freedom depends upon one’s ability to learn and acquire knowledge through literacy, it becomes a theme with paradoxical meaning. It becomes apparent to Douglass that as a result of his ability to read and to write, he now more fully understands the true disparities and atrocities of slavery. Douglass states, “ It [literacy] has opened my eyes to the horrible pit, but offered no ladder upon which to get out” (Douglass 68). This paradoxical element regarding literacy and freedom creates an interesting psychological exploration of Douglass’s life, along with the lives of other African Americans who struggled to obtain their freedom from the oppressive bands of slavery.

Throughout his autobiography, Douglass often lapses into assertions that the condition of slavery and literacy are incompatible for slaves. Throughout the text, Douglass points out these inconsistencies as he constantly wavers between his intense desire to become more educated through achieving literacy, and wanting to give up hope entirely. For Douglass, finally being able to read and understand more fully the implications of slavery, at times, served to make him more miserable as he came to comprehend the hopelessness of the situation for himself and other slaves. To make matters more complex, acquiring his literacy was a constant battle since he had to remain secretive since it was “unlawful and unsafe to teach a slave to read” (Douglass 63). With the sense that the world was against him in his pursuit to learn, Douglass seemed to suffer extraordinarily as a result of the advancement of his education and literacy. In Chapter six of Douglass's autobiography, the scene opens with a display of literary instruction as the young Douglass begins his quest for literacy and education through the instruction of his mistress Sophia Auld. As Ms.

Auld proceeds with her instruction, her husband Mr. Auld abruptly interrupts her. Mr. Auld warns his wife that it is “unlawful as well as unsafe to teach a slave to read.” He is later quoted in saying that, “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” (Douglass 63). Auld's passionate efforts to deny access to literacy provide Douglass with a profound insight as to literacy's power in the eyes of his slave master.

Although this scene of instruction is cut short, its effects live on in the mind and heart of Douglass; he has seen enough to understand that the source of

the white man's power stems from his inability to read. Douglass understood from that moment on, the pathway to freedom was through literacy. But while Douglass's words seem to provide clear evidence of this tradition of linking literacy with freedom in slave narratives, it is important to remember that these are supposedly the thoughts of a pre-literate slave as represented by a highly literate ex-slave. In contrast to the thesis of this essay, Houston Baker, a Professor at Vanderbilt University and an American scholar who specializes in African American literature designates, as a character within the narrative " Douglass argues most forcefully for literacy as the pathway to freedom before he is actually literate; before he has any personal experience with reading and writing; before he has even acquired the skills" (qtd in Sisco). Baker also points out that Douglass is attracted to only an abstract ideal of literacy before he has any familiarity with its actual practice (qtd in Sundquist). Only until Douglass has acquired the skills and begins reading, his attitude is pulled by contradictory impulses. He is no longer sure literacy leads to freedom but instead feels that his ability to read is a " curse" as well as a " blessing.

" For example, when Douglass attempts to use his literacy to escape, by writing passes for himself and his friends, he is literally jailed, even further imprisoned by his belief that literacy alone can provide a pathway to freedom. Yet while Baker argues that the pre-literate Douglass' understanding of the power of literacy was primitive and its potentially devastating effects remained unexamined until after his acquisition of literacy; Martha Cutter, professor of ethnic literature at Kent University argues that Douglass was in fact aware of the effects that were created by

education and literacy before he became literate. Her argument supporting the thesis of this essay stem from the fact that Douglass, even as a slave was able to relate and become accustomed to the white, Christian ideology. She points out that Douglass had an atypical life as a slave and was presented with several opportunities to associate with individuals belonging to the Caucasian race other than his masters. (Cutter 212). Douglass made friends with several of the white boys in Baltimore, lived in close quarters with his master's family, and as an adult, was exposed to the white mans ideals as he worked in the shipyard with other white employees. Supporting the thesis of this essay, Douglass's personal accounts additionally seem to account for his foreknown knowledge of the many paradoxes of literacy, including its capacity to simultaneously empower and imprison, to " bless" and to " curse.

" Ironically, at the very same moment that Douglass's position in the " horrible pit" " enables" him to understand his enslaved condition, he states, " it gives no remedy to his pain" (Douglass 68). The experience of reading provides Douglass with the language to argue on an intellectual and moral basis against slavery, but those arguments for a time, are useless in freeing him from his own horrible reality. At this moment, Douglass realizes that ironically, literacy has only further enslaved him, has come to " torment [his] soul to unutterable anguish" by providing him with terrifying knowledge of his condition but not physical freedom. (Douglass 68). Douglass's experience of reading fulfilled Auld's promise that learning to read and write, " would make [the slave] discontented and unhappy" (Douglass 64). Douglass

explains that once he learned to read " freedom now appeared to disappear no more forever. It was heard in every sound, and seen in every thing.

It was ever present to torment me with a sense of my wretched condition ... I often found myself regretting my own existence, and wishing myself dead" (Douglass 69). It is this array of shifting possibilities for literacy that seems to remain unacknowledged in our histories and theories of the African American and cultural literacy. Much that has been written about literacy and its role in the slave narrative seems intent on arguing in the terms of Auld's binary oppositions, claiming that literacy either does or doesn't represent freedom. Research seems to qualify literacy discussions to a particular time and place, since the meaning and ideology of literacy shift among cultures.

However, Martha Cutter, professor of ethnic literature at Kent University, asserts that Douglass's narrative tells us that for the slave, so many opposing ideologies and cultures of literacy existed simultaneously in antebellum America, that it is virtually impossible to permanently sort them out in any meaningful way (Cutter 218). At the very moment one makes the claim that literacy leads to freedom for the slave, evidence of literacy's paradoxical role in the further enslavement of blacks becomes obvious, as Douglass's experiences repeatedly show us. Cutter demonstrates in her research that Douglass's response to this multiplicity of meanings is to constantly shift his perspective on literacy; " to mesh into the variety of expressed viewpoints, to maneuver his point of view both inside and outside the circle of southern culture, and to literally and metaphorically acquire his literacy from a hidden position in the margins where he takes advantage of literacy's paradoxical potentials (Cutter 219). Progressively, throughout his <https://assignbuster.com/the-power-and-paradox-of-literacy/>

narrative, one of the most important insights I believe Douglass reveals is that the binary oppositions of literacy set up by the culture of slavery are both, in a sense, true and false simultaneously. The acquisition of literacy within the African American culture among slaves in antebellum America will perpetually be considered historically as one of their few portals to freedom. The experiences lived and recorded by Frederick Douglass provide only few, yet wonderful examples regarding the true power and paradox of literacy and education among African American slaves. Douglass's ability to read and write were instrumental in placing him at the forefront of the abolitionist movement, and his legacy will forever be remembered in American history in large part because of his literacy.

It must not be overlooked however; the paradoxical elements that were and continue to be applicable even today regarding literacy and education. The old adage that "knowledge is power" remains to be true in every sense of the word; yet, one must be willing and prepared to accept the consequences when tasting what to many historically was, and for some, even still remains a forbidden fruit. Works Cited Cutter, Martha J. "Dismantling the Master's House." 211-215. Muse. Harold B.

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