

Reading in the
"prison" of
oppression: frederick
douglass and
malcolm x



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Malcolm X and Fredrick Douglass both lived through social disadvantages and found the road to freedom. While Malcolm X faced seven years in prison in a literal sense, Douglass spent several years as a slave in his master's house, which makes his time in "prison" more metaphorical than literal, though slavery is a prison all the same. Prison, to take the concept broadly, is a place in which people are unable to exercise their civil right to freedom. For both Malcolm X and Douglass, such limitations on freedom impacted their life in ways that they never would have imagined. They might even argue that prison turned them into better, more influential people than they would have been had they not experienced such trials.

Douglass was born in 1818, and Malcolm X was born in 1925. Even though the two men were born one hundred seven years apart, they faced similar experiences and beliefs. Before prison, Malcolm X received a seventh grade level education. He knew how to read, but he wasn't literate enough to understand material that was put in front of him. It wasn't until prison that he learned what many words meant and how to write properly. The dictionary was a valuable asset for Malcolm X's literate growth.

For Douglass, the process of learning to read was a bit different. He was taught the alphabet by his mistress, but once his mistress adapted to the "southern" way of thinking that slaves should not be allowed to read, she ended his lessons and forbade him from reading anything ever again, but what she didn't realize was that it was too late. Douglass already knew the alphabet and was ambitious enough to discover the path to literacy by himself.

This ambition that Douglass carried was also a trait carried by Malcolm X. Malcolm X spent fifteen hours a day reading, and expanding his knowledge while in prison. Douglass couldn't get near as much time reading, but he spent every second he could find reading whatever was available. This included newspapers, Master Thomas's copybook, the dictionary, and the *Columbian Orator*.

Since reading was not allowed for slaves during Douglass's time, Douglass learned to be deceitful to his masters and to negotiate with the poor, white boys on the street in order to learn to read. Malcolm X learned to be deceitful to the guards after lights out, and to negotiate with the library in order to take more books back to his prison cell than were usually allowed to prisoners. In order to read until four in the morning, as Malcolm X says that he did, he had to pretend to be asleep whenever the guards would do their hourly checks throughout the night. Once the guards left, he would crawl back out of bed with his book and spread out onto the floor to continue reading late into the night. In a way, Douglass's masters represent the same authoritative figure as Malcolm X's guards while in prison, and the poor, white boys for Douglass represent the same figure of knowledge as the library for Malcolm X.

Both Malcolm X and Douglass practiced their handwriting by copying what they were reading. Malcolm X used up many tablets, provided by the prison, while copying from the dictionary. He says that, " Finally the dictionary's A section had filled a whole tablet-and I went on into the B's... It went a lot faster after so much practice helped me to pick up handwriting speed"

(Malcolm X 2). While Malcolm X copied out of the dictionary, into writing <https://assignbuster.com/reading-in-the-prison-of-oppression-frederick-douglass-and-malcolm-x/>

tablets to improve his handwriting, Douglass had more of a graffiti style of writing. Douglass did copy from his Master Thomas's copybook when his mistress would leave him to watch over the house, but when he was taught to write by the poor, white boys, he says, "... my copybook was the board fence, brick wall, and pavement; my pen and ink was a lump of chalk" (Douglass 105).

The difference between the materials used by Malcolm X and Douglass when learning to write shows the differences in the strictness of the prisons they lived in. Malcolm X lived in a prison where reading and writing wasn't only allowed, it was encouraged. This allowed him to spend more time reading and writing. It also allowed Malcolm X to have more freedom, so to say, than Douglass in expanding and developing his knowledge. Douglass wasn't allowed to read and write, so his prison was stricter than Malcolm X's prison. The graffiti writing style reinforces the fact that he was doing something that he shouldn't be doing, and it also showed that he had to sneak around his "guards" (masters) in order to learn to read and write. Douglass is like a scavenger, scrounging for literacy in any shape or form, while Malcolm X is more like a scholar, studying literacy of all genres.

Malcolm X talks about his experience reading about slavery. He says, " I will never forget how shocked I was when I began reading about slavery's total horror" (Malcolm X 4). While Malcolm X was reading about the horrors of slavery, Douglass had already lived through it. Malcolm X gives examples of some of the abolitionist movements he reads about, such as Nat Turner who led a slave rebellion in the south, while Douglass talks about how he didn't even understand what the word " abolition" meant. As a slave during the <https://assignbuster.com/reading-in-the-prison-of-oppression-frederick-douglass-and-malcolm-x/>

abolitionist time period, Douglas grasped a rough understanding of what the word "abolition" meant by listening in on the white men talking around him. By reading newspapers, Douglass learned that there were people up north that actually wanted to abolish slavery. What is ironic is that Douglass was one of the most prominent abolitionist leaders during his time period, and over a hundred years later, Malcolm X is reading about the abolitionist, not even realizing how similar he and Douglass actually are.

Even though Malcolm X and Douglass share many similarities, their experiences made them see reading in a completely different way. Malcolm X saw reading as a precious gift that he couldn't get enough of, while Douglass saw reading as a burden because he then knew how horrid the world around him actually was. Malcolm X cherished his books and the knowledge that came with them because he saw them as a source of freedom. He says, "Between... and my reading of books, months passed without my even thinking about being imprisoned. In fact, up to then, I never had been so truly free in my life" (Malcolm X 2). This view is quite different than that of Douglass.

Once Douglass knew how to read, he envied the other slaves who couldn't read because they were still naive to the world around them; however, his eyes were open to the world his masters were trying to prevent him from seeing. Douglass says, "... I would at times feel that learning to read had been a curse rather than a blessing... In moments of agony, I envied my fellow-slaves for their stupidity" (Douglass 103). He saw how horrible other slaves were being treated, and heard stories about how there were people up north that were fighting for slaves to be freed. Once he was exposed to <https://assignbuster.com/reading-in-the-prison-of-oppression-frederick-douglass-and-malcolm-x/>

the world around him, there was no going back. For this, he saw his literacy, in which he worked so hard to attain, to be a burden laid upon him, by his own hands, nonetheless.

Malcolm X would definitely argue that prison changed him for the better. He talks about his experience in prison as if it saved him. He says, " In fact, prison enabled me to study far more intensively than I would have if my life had gone differently and I had attended some college" (Malcolm X 6). He then goes on to talking about how college has too many distractions, and because he was in prison, he could spend up to fifteen hours a day reading and studying. For his part, Douglass definitely didn't appreciate his prison, but without it he never would have gained the education that he did. This education, later on in life, enabled him to impact so many lives as a leader of the abolitionist movement. Malcolm X and Douglass might have lived through two very different prisons, but because of these prisons, they learned critical skills that shaped them into the powerful leaders they came to be.