

The life, literature, and abolitionist influence of frederick douglass

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Frederick Douglass was supremely capable of making the most of any situation. From youth, he enthusiastically seized every opportunity in his path, later becoming one of the most prolific American writers of his time. Douglass saw slavery and freedom. Poverty and material wealth. He bore personal witness to the horrors of slavery as well as the American Civil War, even becoming a personal advisor of President Lincoln (“ Frederick Douglass” CD-ROM / “ Frederick Douglass” Encyclopedia / “ Frederick Douglass” Encyclopedia).

His autobiography instantly garnered him nationwide fame upon its publication, his prolific speeches and writings securing his place amongst some of the greatest American authors (“ Frederick Douglass” CD-ROM). In stark contrast to the latter portion of his life, Frederick Douglass entered the world into a very meager existence. Born into slavery, most likely in 1818, Frederick Augustus Washington Bailey was the son of a slave and an unidentified white man. The infant Douglass was ripped away from his mother at a very early age (“ Frederick Douglass” - Encyclopedia / “ Frederick Douglass” CD-ROM). Ending up being raised by his maternal grandmother on the estate of Captain Aaron Anthony in Tuckahoe, Maryland, the young Douglass “ enjoyed a relatively happy childhood until he was pressed into service on the plantation of Anthony’s employer, Edward Lloyd” (“ Frederick Douglass” CD-ROM).

Several years later, in 1825, Douglass’ owner had him transferred to Baltimore, Maryland, to work in the household of Hugh Auld. Whilst laboring in the service of his new master, Frederick Douglass was unintentionally provided with some pertinent insight into the system of slavery. Douglass <https://assignbuster.com/the-life-literature-and-abolitionist-influence-of-frederick-douglass/>

inadvertently overheard Auld admonishing his wife for teaching the boy Douglass the rudimentary basics of literacy. Later describing this experience as a “revelation”, Douglass quickly realized through this that breaking free from the metaphorical chains of illiteracy was the key to securing his liberation from the tangible bonds of his enslavement (“Frederick Douglass” CD-ROM). Immediately, Douglass endeavored to clandestinely educate himself, risking his personal welfare in the process. Despite all odds, Douglass was ultimately successful in this.

In order to learn, the young Douglass managed to secretly obtain copies of several print items, including Webster’s Spelling Book as well as The Columbian Orator, the latter, ironically enough, being a collection of writings on democratic themes of personal freedom and liberated individuality. Through these resources, Douglass was able to examine the ideas of numerous proponents of abolitionist principles, such as Charles James Fox and Richard Brinsley Sheridan (“Frederick Douglass” CD-ROM). In 1838, the fruits of Douglass’ toil proved to have not been in vain, when he succeeded in securing his escape from slavery and the racist South, seeking refuge in New York state immediately following his escape (“Frederick Douglass” CD-ROM). He changed his last name from Bailey to Douglass in order to avoid detection by his owner (“Frederick Douglass” Encyclopedia). Ironically enough, Douglass’ first public address as a free man was not prewritten as one might assume, but rather came in the form of an extemporaneous speech (“Frederick Douglass” CD-ROM).

In 1841, Douglass attended an anti-slavery conference in Nantucket, Massachusetts. While there, he was invited to describe his experiences as a slave and his feelings towards the institution (“ Frederick Douglass” Encyclopedia). His improvisatory dialogue so moved the audience that Douglass was invited by William Lloyd Garrison to become a lecturer for the Massachusetts Anti-Slavery Society, an offer which Douglass readily accepted (“ Frederick Douglass” CD-ROM). Four years after taking up this position, Douglass stepped down to write a detailed autobiographical account of his life as a slave. This he decided to write in response to skeptics who disbelieved that one with such eloquent and well-developed oratorical abilities could have ever been a slave. The resulting product, *Narrative of the Life of Frederic Douglass, An American Slave*, published in 1845, gained immediate widespread popularity after its publication (“ Frederick Douglass” Encyclopedia).

Unfortunately, due to his newfound notoriety, Douglass now was in great danger of being captured under fugitive slave laws and was forced to flee to Great Britain to avert this (“ Frederick Douglass” CD-ROM). Douglass later returned to the United States with enough money to legally purchase his freedom and then set out on a mission to have his voice heard once again. He made numerous speeches, the most famous of which was his “ Fourth of July Oration”, delivered (ironically enough) on the fifth of July 1882 in Rochester, New York. Despite the popularity of his new work, however, his best known writing still remained his 1845 autobiography (“ Frederick Douglass” CD-ROM). The environment in which Douglass lived and wrote was quite a tumultuous one.

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Less than twenty years after the publishing of his autobiography, the United States erupted into a vicious civil war. Remarkably, Douglass actually served as a military consultant to President Abraham Lincoln. After the victory of Union forces brought the bloody conflict to an end, Douglass continued his position as a public servant, this time in different roles; that of “assistant secretary of the Santo Domingo Commission”, as well as that of recorder of deeds and Marshall of Washington, D. C. Later in his life he also served as a consultant general to the nation of Haiti for the U. S.

government (“Frederick Douglass” Encyclopedia). Many other pertinent events also transpired during Douglass’ life, including Nat Turner’s Rebellion, which brought to light once again the important issue of slavery and its potential negative consequences for the racist whites (Lathbury 16-17). As we discussed, during the time that Douglass was writing and giving his numerous orations, the United States was in a period of great polarization and turmoil over the issues of slavery and long-held racial sentiments on both sides of the fence. Frederick Douglass, from a literary perspective, was a man caught between two worlds. During the period that Douglass composed the majority of his works, American literature was in the transitory phase between what are now referred to as the Romantic Period and the Realist Period. Douglass’ writings are unique in that they bear qualities of the types of literature that defined each distinct era.

While Douglass does employ the use of a very romanticized and optimistic view of the American Dream, he also never minces his words in order to soften the harsh realities of his experiences as a slave (Moss, Joyce, and

Wilson 236-241). This distinctive element of Douglass' published works was no doubt a contributing factor to his popularity, as it appealed to the romanticized sanguine outlooks of many readers while simultaneously imparting its root message without watering it down in the least. Frederick Douglass' magnum opus, *Narrative of the Life of Frederick Douglass, an American Slave*, is still a classic today. In it Douglass details his experiences as a slave in the south, explicitly elucidating his audience to the raw horrors of slavery and the recurrent abuses that he suffered during his time as a slave. Many excerpts from the autobiography, such as "The Battle with Mr. Covey", have gained a great deal of readership, especially amongst schoolchildren. Douglass' matter-of-fact diction and direct tone in the book have contributed immensely to making it the masterpiece that it is today (Thomason 236-267). Viewed in retrospect, the life and literature of Frederick Augustus Washington Douglass seem no less impressive and influential than they were in his day. Douglass was a driven and talented man who boldly defined the perverted social norms in the pro-slavery south. Through his actions, he witnessed a nation violently struggle against itself and then ultimately reunite under one flag.

The phoenix nation that Douglass witnessed rising from the ashes was a truly reborn country, with the black man no longer a captive or subjected to being the property of another. Douglass' prolific and poignant writings seamlessly married two distinct forms of American literature and paved the way for other influential civil rights leaders to come. He will never be forgotten in the annals of American literary history; remembered as a bold

pioneer, a virtuous humanitarian and civil rights activist, and a prolific writer ahead of his time, yet uniquely suited for it.