

Bound by knowledge:
writing, knowledge,
and freedom in
ishmael reed's flight
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**ASSIGN
BUSTER**

The Narrative of the Life of Frederick Douglass follows the format of a traditional slave narrative, characterizing the plight faced by a slave and his or her quest for freedom. Ishmael Reed's Flight to Canada on the other hand, parodies traditional slave stories, and offers a more modernized view of slavery. Douglass's Narrative describes the development of one slave's journey to becoming educated and how it assists in his acquisition of freedom. In Flight to Canada, writing and knowledge is shown as both a catalyst for freedom as well as the cause for a lot of other problems for escapees. Though the texts are different, they both offer the idea that intellectual freedom is not equivalent to physical freedom, nor does one facilitate the acquisition of the other. By comparing the acquisition of knowledge, the ability to write, and the lives thereafter of the slaves who utilize these skills in both texts, one can see this point. At the age of only seven or eight, Douglass describes being taken from the plantation to the city of Baltimore. His new slave-owner, Sophia Auld, was at first very kind to him, being described as "a woman of the kindest heart and finest feelings" (Douglass 77). She soon began to teach Douglass his alphabet and how to spell small words. But this progress was soon brought to a halt. Hugh Auld, Sophia's husband, forbade her to teach Douglass saying that, "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" (78). This tactic served to keep slaves unaware of how lowly their situation really was. If a slave were to become educated, they would have been able to spot the flaws in the institution of slavery and become maddened by their predicament. Mr. Auld continues to say "...[becoming educated] would make him discontented and

unhappy” (78). Being aware of his situation would just serve to torture an educated slave. Prompting him to desire freedom, and escape from his current situation, “ if you give a nigger an inch, he will take an ell” (78). Douglass responds by saying that, “ The first step has been taken. [Ms. Auld], in teaching me the alphabet, had given me the inch, and no precaution could prevent me from taking the ell”(82). Douglass’s desire to become educated had already been sparked. His exposure to the material had inspired him to become educated. Mr. Auld’s warnings assisted in increasing Douglass’s longing to be educated as well. Douglass explains: I now understand what had been to me a most perplexing difficulty—to wit, the white man’s power to enslave the black man...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 least expected it. (78) Douglass’s relates the idea of being of no value to his master to being free. He sees this as an opportunity to get out of his current conditions. The fact that Mr. Auld protested Douglass’s education was also attractive. Douglass wanted to learn even more just in spite of Mr. Auld. He says, “...the argument which he so warmly urged, against my learning to read, only served to inspire me with a desire and determination to learn” (78). This desire is evident in the following chapters of his story. In hopes of becoming liberated from slavery, Douglass’s attempt to become educated becomes a very integral part of his life. Although he was in a setting that discouraged a slave’s education, Douglass becomes self-educated. In spite of the “...difficulty of learning without a teacher, [he] set out with high hope, and a fixed purpose, at whatever cost of trouble, to learn how to read” (78). His passion to learn is

evident as he thinks outside the box to find and utilize his resources to continue to educate his self. A main resource for his education becomes the boys in his neighborhood. Douglass figured out that if he could, “mak[e] friends of all the little white boys whom [he] met in the street,” that he could “convert them into teachers” (82). He establishes friendships with the boys by giving them bread and talking with them. He says that he, “[gave] this bread... [to] the hungry little urchins, who, in return, would give [him] that more valuable bread of knowledge” (83). Douglass also describes how he learns to write. Along with the aid of the boys in his neighborhood, he also learns how to write from looking at the passing boats. He notices that they would be marked with letters. He says, “I soon learned the names of these letters, and for what they were intended when placed upon a piece of timber in the ship-yard. I immediately commenced copying them, and in a short time was able to make the four letters named” (86). He puts his knowledge of these letters to work by using them to challenge the boys in his neighborhood to writing competitions. In having these challenges, he also learns new information. Douglass’s resourcefulness is exemplary of his desire to learn. When he had no way to be educated from anyone else, he seeks a solution. Though he finds a way to become educated, Douglass is still not free. After teaching himself how to read and write, Douglass stumbles upon the book *The Columbian Orator*, which outlines the arguments for and against slavery. It helped him gain the ability to justify a, “bold denunciation of slavery, and a powerful vindication of human rights. The reading of these documents enabled [him] to utter [his] thoughts, and to meet the arguments brought forward to sustain slavery” (84). Reading this

book raises Douglass's awareness about his situation and enables him to create concrete reasons why slavery should have been abolished. Reading this book, and becoming aware about these issues, Douglass begins to desire increasing amounts of information about slavery and abolition. He says: The more I read, the more I was led to abhor and detest my enslavers...As I read and contemplated the subject, behold! that very discontentment which Master Hugh had predicted would follow my learning to read had already come, to torment and sting my soul to unutterable anguish...I would at times feel that learning to read had been a curse rather than a blessing. It had given me a view of my wretched environment.

(84) Understanding his situation serves as a mixed blessing for Douglass. As Mr. Auld warned before, Douglass becomes tortured by his awareness of the institution of slavery. Though he is able to read, Douglass is still bound by slavery, both mentally and physically. Still desiring freedom, Douglass is taken back to a plantation. Here, he starts a Sabbath school, where he teaches fellow slaves how to read and write. He is able to share his knowledge in hopes of, "bettering the condition of [his] race" (121).

Although he was free to learn and, in one way or another, free to teach, Douglass yearned to be upon "free soil". He says that he "began to want to live upon free land...[he] was no longer content, therefore, to live with any other slaveholder" (123). His desire to be physically free was so strong that he would have "prefer[ed] death than hopeless bondage" (124). Douglass wanted to be free so much that he was willing to risk his life for it. This section of the narrative points out the contradiction of knowledge resulting in freedom. In the final pages of the Narrative, Douglass discusses his final

escape to freedom. He chooses to withhold the information regarding his escape for two main reasons. In reflecting on his escape, Douglass says:... were I to give a minute statement of all the facts it is not only possible, but quite probable, that others would thereby be involved in the most embarrassing difficulties...[and] such a statement would most undoubtedly induce greater vigilance on the part of slaveholders than has existed heretofore. (137) Douglass didn't want to deter the opportunity for other slaves to escape in the same manner as he did, and he also didn't want to embarrass the white people in the south that assisted him with his endeavor. Though he didn't tell what happened, one can piece the story together using knowledge about Douglass's attempt to escape. It is likely that he used his ability to write to make a "protection" for his safe escape and with the aid of people in the south, was able to escape. Ultimately, his quick wits and knowledge assisted him in his journey to freedom but he was not truly free. Being able to learn and teach did not satisfy Douglass until he was physically free. Even though he didn't release information regarding his escape with readers Douglass's Narrative, at the time of its publication served to offer a cry for abolitionism and sympathy for slaves. It is now read as a reflection of what people faced in the past. The autobiography offers an opportunity for students to reflect on how society has progressed. Unlike Douglass's decision to keep information regarding his escape unrevealed, Quickskill, a character in Ishmael Reed's Flight to Canada, writes a poem that does the opposite. In the poem, Quickskill discusses escaping from a plantation and the things he did in spite of his master. His escape is presented as a joke on his master. The poem is directed towards his slave-owner, Arthur Swille, and serves as a

metaphorical slap in the face. The tone of Quickskill's poem has an air of sarcasm. In detailing exactly how he outsmarts Swille, Quickskill says, " The Mistress Ms. Lady Gived me the combination/ To your safe, don't blame/ The feeble old soul, Cap'n/ I told her you needed some/ More money to shop with &/ You sent me from Charleston/ To get it" (5). By making comments like " don't blame/ The feeble old soul, Cap'n" and later saying that he " accept[s] money that he took] as a/ Down payment on [his] back/ Wages", it is clear how he incorporates sarcasm in his account of what he did. Writing this poem disproves the imposed idea that slaves were too dimwitted to escape and be knowledgeable about their surroundings. Quickskill not only points out Swille's lack of awareness and failure to realize what was going on right under his nose, but he also plays him as a fool with the revelation of his disregard to Swille's personal space during his various trips back to the plantation. In the text Quickskill says that he, " snuck back to the plantation 3 maybe 4 times...slept in [Swille's] bed...sampled [Swille's] Cellar...[and] had [his] prime/ Quadroon give [him]/ She-Bear" (4). Quickskill even goes as far as saying that he poisoned Swille's " Old Crow". The fact that a slave, who is supposed to be lowlier, both by status and intellectual ability, than Swille is capable of such trickery serves to be the most humiliating facet of the poem. Additional information that Quickskill has intruded Swille's personal space just adds to the humiliation. The poem allows for a sort of success for Quickskill. Having intellectual freedom and an escape from a place of oppression, one would think that Quickskill is free, but this is not the case. In his poem, Quickskill publishes information that identifies his location, steps in getting there, as well as his multiple trips back to the plantation that

he escapes from. Quickskill writes that he has, “ done [his] Liza Leap/ & [is] safe in the arms/ of Canada” (Reed 3). Despite the dangers of releasing such information, Quickskill identifies where he has gone. Quickskill’s escape to Canada is of notable significance in the story. He sees it as, “...heaven on earth. People of all races, classes, descriptions seemed to be there” (156). Canada embodies an acceptance of all races, a goal characteristic of all slavery escapees. In the end of the book, the character Uncle Robin reflects on what Canada really means in the story. He says that it may really just be a “ state of mind” (178). Interestingly, Robin says that freedom is also a state of mind. This poses the idea that freedom can be created despite adversity. Quickskill is able to write about his attempt to be free and have his own taste of Canada. Flight to Canada contributes to a minor success for Quickskill throughout the story, but it later catches up to him. He becomes a star because of the poem and publishing it allows him to live the celebrity life: drinking “ champagne/ compliments of the Cap’n/ Who announced that a/ Runaway Negro was on the/ Plane,” (3) becoming an idol for many slaves yearning to escape and later being welcomed to the white house by Lincoln. Though the poem allows for these luxuries, it soon attracts attention and allows Swille to find his location. The book says, “[Flight to Canada] had pointed to where [Quickskill]...[was] hiding. It was [his] bloodhound, this poem ‘ Flight to Canada’” (13). Two slave collectors sent by Swille find Quickskill because of the poem. Though Quickskill is quick-witted enough to devise a plan to get away from the slave collectors, he still does not have his freedom. Quickskill is forced to keep running after this. Flight Canada becomes more of a burden than it is a gift, because escapees from Swille’s

plantation have to live their lives afraid of getting recaptured while Swille is alive. Quickskill reflects on his status after the poem receives such high publicity. He realizes that though he has been treated as a celebrity, he is still considered a property. He discusses this with the slave collectors, saying " I am property. I am a thing" (64). Though he has published his poem and escaped to Canada, he is still considered a thing. While sick in Lincoln's bed Reed writes of Quickskill as he is an object adding to the argument that Quickskill is only property: It was sipping from a glass of wine...It is lying in the bed that matches the table. It is lying in the President's bed, just as in ' Flight to Canada' it bragged about lying in Swille's bed. (85)He is still considered property and less human though he has received so much attention. Quickskill offers a tone of restlessness and regret about writing Flight to Canada more than once in the book, saying that " writing always catches up with [him]" and that "[Flight to Canada] was more of a reading than a writing. Everything it said seems to have caught up with [him]" (7). This reflection offers a deeper look into the effects of how Flight to Canada affects Quickskill. He seems to be a bit down about how things turned out by later describing how, " the bad spirits who were in [him] left a long time ago. The devil who was catching up with [him] is slipping behind and losing ground. What a war it was" (7). Though Quickskill is allowed the luxury to throw his escape in his master's face, he still ends up living his life with the fear that people are out to return him to the plantation and he is still considered a slave. He is still bound by slavery though allowed intellectual freedom. Slave narratives often focus on how the acquisition of intellectual capital is directly linked to physical freedom. This is disproved in comparing

the treatment of writing and knowledge in the texts *The Narrative of the Life of Frederick Douglass* and Ishmael Reed's *Flight to Canada*. Though they are neither equivalent nor resulting in one another, the ability to read and write can be said to be a vehicle for freedom. Reading and writing serve to be great tools for both escapees in the texts, but in the end they do not result in physical freedom for either of the two. In reflecting on both stories, a modern student can see a correlation between the message being communicated in both. The stories both place an emphasis on the value of education. In the *Narrative*, Douglass describes his perseverance in becoming educated in the face of strong opposition and how it encouraged him to escape from his harsh environment. *Flight to Canada*, though offering the idea that writing can attract problems for people, places a value on education as well. Quickskill attracts a lot of attention to himself by publishing his poem, but despite this he is able to share his story with others and encourage self-reflection through his writings. Both characters are allowed the opportunity to share their stories and in doing so, are able to work in effort to disprove stereotypes that characterize slaves as illiterate and incapable of complex thinking. By reflecting on these ideas, the modern student is encouraged to think about his or her own life and the value of education though we are allowed both intellectual and physical freedom.