

More than just a story: first person narration



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For Frederick Douglass, his Narrative was more than just a powerful story that would go on to be incredibly famous and influential. Telling his story was a major contribution to the abolitionist campaign, therefore, conveying the disgusting realities of slavery was hugely important. Douglass needed to evoke the sort of emotions that would help the cause that was most important to him. As a fantastically eloquent writer with a heart-wrenching story of unbelievable tragedy, he was in just the position to have this effect. The way Douglass mindfully used language is impressive and it is obvious that every description within the Narrative was designed to have a specific effect. His deliberately nonchalant statements regarding tragedies and progressively more evocative descriptions of violence all contributed to his effort to win over the reader and communicate, to their full extent, the horrors of slavery.

The way Douglass opened the Narrative, communicating the slave's acceptance of horrible facts with his subdued language, is perfectly followed by bold proclamations challenging other truths of slavery. The actual words he used were powerful ones that not only showed his own intellect as a slave but persuaded his audience. These methods and many others achieved a desired effect on the reader. This is how Douglass was able to guide the reader to realize the horrific truths of slavery. Frederick Douglass began his Narrative matter-of-factly. If it were not for the weight of his words, chapter one would be a slow start. The first sentences describe depressing realities presented specifically to evoke particular emotions from the reader.

Douglass states that it was a “ common custom... to part children from their mothers at a very early age” (18) in such a way that the reader realizes how

much slaves, as children, accepted as fact. Douglass realized the value of slowly winning over the reader. His enormous range as a writer enabled him to evoke a wide variety of emotions, starting with sympathy. At the beginning of the Narrative Douglass simply provides the reader with information to form his or her own conclusions. He was aware of the shocking realization the reader would be having, seeing that all of the things he describes were normal. He knows how the reader will react but he does not act on that reaction until he was confident with his relationship with the reader.

Once that relationship gets established, Douglass aggressively challenges the treatment of slaves. For example, Douglass questions the religiousness of his former Master Thomas who let his slaves “nearly perish... with hunger” (58) and then would “pray that God would bless [him] in basket and store!” (58) the next morning. Although effective, Douglass saved these opinions for later, when he is convinced the reader sympathizes with him. Douglass sticks to writing matter-of-factly when informing the reader that he has “no accurate knowledge of [his] age” (21). Frederick Douglass, at the time of writing his Narrative, was aware of the inhumanity of not knowing one’s age but specifically presents it as a simple fact, anticipating the reaction of the reader.

For example, Douglass compared the chance of a slave knowing their own age to a “[horse] know[ing]... theirs” (19). By drawing this comparison between slaves and animals, Douglass shows the reader how slave masters regarded their slaves as subhuman. This comparison forced the reader to see the animalistic treatment of the slaves whom Douglass humanized,

making this realization unbearable. Douglass designed this paragraph to achieve this emotional response without spelling it out, because at this point in the Narrative he has allowed the reader see his point of view on their own so that he can build off of that understanding later.

When he wrote his Narrative, Douglass knew that he needed to connect with the reader. It was necessary to break down the walls between a free man and a slave to truly further the abolitionist movement. By communicating his own personal experiences and those of other slaves, Douglass established this connection between himself and the reader as the Narrative progresses. He was already confident that the reader was on his side, so he expanded on that by sharing emotion with the reader. He wanted the reader to recognize his consciousness of slavery, to know how he felt, and to feel the same way. When introducing Mr. Gore, the “cruel, obdurate” (33) overseer of the Great House Farm, Douglass provided a sickening example of his cruelty. He told the story of Mr. Gore “raising his musket to [the face of a slave]” (34) and killing him for disobeying orders.

In this example of Douglass’ writing, his language is chillingly descriptive. He vividly described the “mangled body [of the slave sinking] out of sight [and the] blood and brains [marking] the water where he stood” (35). Douglass clearly realized the reaction the reader would have to this story and by introducing Mr. Gore as cruel he made it nearly impossible for any reader to disagree with his position, solidifying a bond between himself and the reader that he would maintain for the rest of the Narrative with his language and purposeful descriptions.

Later in the novel, Douglass described the treatment of his grandmother after submissively serving her master for her entire life. He detailed her sentencing of a life alone in the woods, after she had become useless to her master, “ thus virtually turning her out to die!” (54). Douglass had taken another step here, he became more forthright and powerful, and fully acknowledged the firm grasp he had obtained on the reader. Instead of simply stating the truth, Douglass challenged his grandmother’s treatment and in doing so he asked the reader to join him. He asked the reader if a system that allowed his grandmother to suffer such a lonely, tragic fate was one that is worth fighting against.

Up until this point he had been stingy with his emotions, but as his story continued, Douglass gained more and more confidence with his relationship with the reader and he began to express his true feelings. His exclamatory remarks are followed by a poem by abolitionist John Whittier. The placement of such a poem is representative of Douglass’ lingual progression throughout the Narrative as it draws the reader’s attention to his knowledge and makes the reader associate himself more with Frederick Douglass. Douglass utilized many other aspects of language to establish this connection with the reader. Douglass’ use of first person narration is a seemingly obvious decision but it is also extremely effective.

The Narrative of the Life of Frederick Douglass is the first book he ever wrote. Douglass realized how influential an autobiographical, first person, depiction of slavery could be in terms of the abolitionist movement. He put a face to slaves across America, the most important challenge for abolitionists. He did so not only by narrating in first person, but also by telling relatable

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stories. For example, by talking about his grandmother and how her master saw “ she was of but little value” (53) and decided to send her into the wood, Douglass utilized the common threads between him and every other human. Douglass found the most relatable atrocities of slavery and presented them to the reader to ensure that the conditions of slavery were thoroughly understood.

The suffering of one’s family members is not only dreadful, but relatable, for urban workers, house wives, slaves, and even plantation owners. The emotional effect first person narration has in the Narrative is best seen when Douglass is contemplating his condition and escape. When concluding that he as to escape Douglass says “ I am left in the hottest hell of unending slavery... I will run away. I will not stand it.” (68). Nothing compares to the emotional weight of Douglass’ words. The first person narration of his Narrative allows for the cries of slaves to be heard honestly, from the source.

In the 1800’s reading Frederick Douglass’ Narrative was eye opening to many people because of how well written it was, given the author was a slave. This is another reason why first person narration was hugely important to the effect of Douglass’ Narrative. Douglass could have written a fictional, third person Narrative about the life of a slave with autobiographical elements, Douglass even went on to do just that, but he knew for his first book, nothing would be more effective than the full reality of his life, narrated in first person. Frederick Douglass’ effective use of language to connect with his readers and contribute to his cause is an example of how valuing the experiences of others is immeasurably important to society.

Frequently throughout history, humans have failed to understand one another, The Narrative of the Life of Frederick Douglass gives insight into how, in an extreme example, that can have a terrible effect. His Narrative is an example how how we can better understand one another. By breaking down the barriers between himself and his opposition, Frederick Douglass was able to create an understanding that had a huge contribution to the abolishment of slavery. Few are unaffected by stories of mistreated grandparents, or unbearable violence. Douglass was capable of understanding human emotion and how his reader would react to his words. That is how he is able to communicate his powerful message so effectively.