

Literacy in narrative of the life of frederick douglass

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Narrative of the Life of Frederick Douglass is significant since it is a first-hand account of the hardships of slavery. At the time that it was published, many people refused to believe that such a well-written book was the handiwork of a black man. This was because of the poor circumstances under which they were expected to survive. Douglass's narrative is important since it debunks many of the theories that had currency during the period of slavery and it also, makes clear the importance of literacy in the movement against slavery. The ability to read is continually held up as the magic wand that would enable African-Americans to lead lives of dignity and respect.

The instruction that Douglass received from the mistress of the household where he was a slave in the knowledge of the language is a turning point in his life. He is able to expand his horizon of knowledge through reading. As is the case with an education that was introduced in colonies by colonial powers, this education that Douglass receives makes him want to learn more. Moreover, the knowledge that he receives also awakens in him a thirst for freedom. It is the literacy that impels him to question the ways of the world and the organizing structures of southern society that believed in the inherent inferiority of African Americans. The people of these parts were characterized by an urge to retain the structures of slavery even after it had been abolished in the north. This was for economic reasons since the labor on the cotton plantations that sustained the economy of the old south was almost entirely black. The immense profitability of the plantations depended a great deal, on the almost free labor that was extracted from the black slaves who were also subjected to inhuman torture on the plantations. The need for documentation is what the production of the book stands for.

Documentation of the sufferings of the black slaves of America was necessary for a solution to the problem to be found out. This was, however, not in the best interests of the people who drew their livelihoods and their luxurious lifestyles by exploiting the poor slaves. This is the reason why Mr. Auld is always critical of the efforts that Mrs. Auld puts into helping the education of Frederick Douglass. He fears that Douglass too would attempt to escape to the north in search of his freedom. This betrays an understanding of the cruel and exploitative nature of the institution of slavery on the part of white landowners who employed black slaves under conditions that were extremely inhumane. When Mr. Auld denies Douglass permission to learn how to read, Douglass reflects, Whilst I was saddened by the thought of losing the aid of my kind mistress, I was gladdened by the invaluable instruction which, by the merest accident, I had gained from my master (Douglass, 45). The “invaluable instruction” of knowing the value of literacy and the associations of freedom that literacy carried changes the way in which Douglass looks at the manner in which he led his life. The knowledge sows in him the seeds of rebellion and makes him want to escape to the north. Behind this urge is the love for freedom which Douglass feels is a natural impulse on the part of any human being whose senses have not been deadened by the yoke of slavery for ages. This impulse leads him to crave for more knowledge regarding language. It is significant that most of the people who help him in his quest for knowledge do so out of a feeling of pity for him. These feelings of pity do not bother Douglass as long as he is able to read and understand new forms of knowledge. The knowledge that he then receives is put to the use of

liberation. Narratives that talk of the need for liberation are read by Douglass and this makes him realize the unjust nature of the organization of the society of the south where the people who worked the hardest, the blacks, were the section of the society which was marginalized the most.

Overseers according to the narrative of the book that Frederick Douglass writes, behave in a very cruel manner with black slaves. Douglass recounts events where cruel overseers find nothing wrong with murdering slaves who refuse to go to the overseers to receive a whipping. To attain a status higher than that of animals in society, the slaves had to attain literacy according to the sentiments that are expressed in the narrative of Douglass's work. The lack of this would transform a slave into a brute since there were no differences in their essential conditions of living. This idea is succinctly expressed in the following lines.

My natural elasticity was crushed, my intellect languished, the disposition to read departed, the cheerful spark that lingered about my eye died; the dark night of slavery closed in upon me, and behold a man transformed into a brute! (Douglass, 70)

The eloquence of the work written by Frederick Douglass proved to many that a black man or woman could write a work that could move the hearts of its readers too. Such propaganda would be necessary for abolition and it is only literacy and a means to employ it that would help the blacks gain freedom, according to Douglass.