

# Narrative of the life of frederick douglass

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The years preceding the American Civil War were rife with tensions between the South and the North. The abolitionist movement was gaining popularity, and slaveholders were being increasingly criticised. A number of slaves who had managed to escape their masters were writing autobiographies, denouncing the treatment to which they were submitted. One of them was Frederick Douglass, who published the *Narrative of the Life of Frederick Douglass: An American Slave - Written by Himself* in May 1845, seven years after his escape to the North. The passage I will discuss in this essay is taken from Chapter IX.

In his *Narrative*, Frederick Douglass takes a look back on his life in slavery. He begins by writing about his birth and goes on to tell the reader about his life, in a chronological order. He writes mostly in the first person, and sometimes uses 'we': 'We seldom called him " master"... '. In Chapter IX, Douglass is approximately fifteen years old and is still held captive as a slave. Obviously, using 'they' would not have been correct: the group of slaves he is referring to included him. Douglass, even though he is now emancipated, does not distance himself from the slaves he once worked with. He uses 'we' as a solidarity marker.

As mentioned above, Douglass was not the only escaped slave writing an autobiography. Other slave narratives include the *Narrative of Henry Watson, a Fugitive Slave* (1848) and *The Life of Josiah Henson, Formerly a Slave, Now an Inhabitant of Canada* (1849) (Andrews 1986). This genre was ruled by conventions: it was believed that such autobiographies should be purely factual, and not contain any interpretations or mentions of feelings. John A. Collins, the general agent of the Massachusetts Anti-Slavery Society, <https://assignbuster.com/narrative-of-the-life-of-frederick-douglass/>

is reported to have said: " Give us the facts, we will take care of the philosophy" (Moses 1990: 66).

Douglass followed these conventions to an extent, as can be seen in the passage: he includes some facts, such the name of his master, and the date and place of his master's conversion. However, this passage also shows that he could not be entirely confined to these limits. It is filled with opinions ('he was an object of contempt'), assumptions ('Our want of reverence for him must have perplexed him greatly'), recollections of how he felt at the time ('I was disappointed in both these respects') and interpretations ('it made him more cruel and hateful in all his ways').

This affects how readers interpret what they read: it puts the facts in context, so that the readers not only learn the events of Douglass' life, but also how they should feel about them (Andrews 1986). This was typical of Douglass' style, which was encouraged by his sponsor, the abolitionist William Lloyd Garrison: " Mr. Douglass has very properly chosen to write his own Narrative, in his own style... rather than someone else's" (from Douglass 2001: 6). This does not mean that Douglass wrote completely freely, though: as Moses (1990) puts it, slave narratives are a form of propaganda.

Garrison's expectations, as well as those of other liberals and abolitionists, shaped Douglass' autobiography. Later in his life, Douglass decided to leave the Garrisonians behind to pursue his own goals and literary style. An issue that Douglass had to deal with is the one of credibility. People today would probably be more inclined to believe a biography if it was told by the protagonist himself, than if it was written by a third party. In the 1840s, the

situation was different. In the North, even though the abolitionist movement was gaining ground, there was some prejudice against free Blacks (Sundquist 1990).

It was important to try to avoid accusations of story fabrication. By giving details such as place names, dates and names of people, as he does in the extract, Douglass made his narrative more believable. Before he published his autobiography, Douglass spent some years being an orator for the abolitionist movement. He developed great rhetorical skills, something that set him apart from many other writers of slave narratives.

In the passage, Douglass writes many long and complicated sentences, some of which with a semi-colon, separating independent clauses, for example: Prior to his conversion, he relied upon his own depravity to shield and sustain him in his savage barbarity; but after his conversion, he found religious sanction and support for his slaveholding cruelty. ' In this sentence, Douglass uses a semi-colon to show opposition between two sentences. He shows the contrast between the past and the present, and the change in his master's beliefs and behaviour. This is a powerful literary tool. His vocabulary is remarkable as well: words like 'inconsistency', 'fretful' and 'perplexed', to name a few, are not found in everyday usage.

It can be hard to believe that somebody who spent most of his life in bondage could have such a way with words. Douglass knew this, and he is quoted as saying: 'my manner was such to create a suspicion that I was not a runaway slave, but some educated free negro... ' (Douglass 2001: xxii).

This is part of the reason why letters from Garrison and Phillips, establishing

his work as genuine, were included in his book. Douglass did not use complex words only because he could do so. In his narrative, he chooses a simpler style to describe events which occurred when he was younger and less educated.

As the younger version of himself ages and becomes more enlightened, he opts for an increasingly elaborate style. In the passage, Douglass is fifteen years old and aware of his slave status. He knows that instruction is the key to his liberty. The style in which the chapter is written reflects this. In the extract from Chapter IX, Douglass touches on a number of themes. One of them is the dehumanisation of slaves in the Southern states. Slaves are considered property, and they can be acquired through marriage, as Thomas Auld did. When he writes 'The luxury of having slaves of his own... , Douglass is revealing the way slaves were seen in pre-Civil War America.

Slaves were bought and sold, just like cattle at the market. Owning many slaves was a sign of wealth; having many people working for oneself was considered a luxury, by the slaveholder himself and people around him. The word 'slaveholder' has objectifying connotations: slaves are the only category of people which one is allowed to hold against their will. It is a word that dehumanises slaves. However, Douglass also tells of the slaves' powerful will, by recounting how the slaves refused to call Thomas Auld 'master'.

This shows that they were not completely submissive, and had not lost all their humanity. By calling Auld 'Captain Auld', they were making a conscious and intelligent choice. Choosing the term 'Captain' meant that he could not

complain about their lack of respect: after all, he is a captain. It is obvious that slaves are not inherently obedient: they adapt their behaviour to that of their masters. Douglass writes that Auld tried to copy other slaveholders, but was unsuccessful in doing so. According to him, Auld is 'a slaveholder without the ability to hold slaves'.

Both the slaves and Auld himself are aware of this fact, something which infuriates Auld and makes him try to manage the slaves by 'force, fear or fraud'. In other chapters, Douglass tells of other slaveholders, such as Captain Anthony and Edward Covey, who he describes as extremely cruel. They instill fear in their slaves, who only obey their masters because of fear of punishment. This is hardly a way to deal with human beings. As one could read on many anti-slavery emblems, is a slave 'not a man and a brother'? (Andrews 1986)

It seems like Auld's inability to manage the slaves and to gain their respect was mostly due to his inconsistency. I believe Douglass is making a point: managing people is much more complicated than managing cattle. It takes skills and experience, and should not be taken lightly. He is once again saying that slaves should be treated as people, not as animals. A more subtle theme Douglass brings up is the effect slavery has on slaveholders. He writes that Thomas Auld was 'compelled' to copy the behaviour of other slaveholders, because he had never owned slaves before.

It is possible that Auld was a good-hearted man before he owned any slaves, but the institution of slavery has made him vicious. People, slaves included, have certain expectations of slaveholders, something Douglass says himself:

'He wished to have us call him master, but lacked the firmness necessary to do so'. It seems like it would be impossible to be a kind, gentle slaveholder. In addition to this, having such power over other human beings would be enough to affect a person's personality in an adverse way.

A slaveholder could start out as a benevolent individual and end up as a hardened tyrant who thinks nothing of hitting fellow human beings. Sophia Auld, in Chapter VII, is a good example of this transformation. It is not only the slaves that are being dehumanised through slavery: their masters suffer the same fate. Finally, Douglass exposes a paradox: slaveholders using Christianity and the Bible to justify their behaviour towards their slaves. Auld went to a Methodist meeting in 1832. Douglass writes that he was hoping that Auld would come back from that meeting a changed man, and that he would perhaps emancipate his slaves.

It would have made sense, seeing as the Golden Rule of Christianity is 'do unto others as you wish them to do unto you'. However, he soon realised that people could use Christianity and the Bible to legitimise their deeds. Auld came back a changed man, but not in the way Douglass had hoped: he became more brutal than ever before, claiming that owning slaves was his God-given right. To emphasise the effect of the Church meeting on Thomas Auld, Douglass uses the words 'cruel', 'hateful', 'worse', 'depravity', 'barbarity' and 'cruelty', which all belong to the same lexical field.

The reader gets an impression of what kind of person Thomas Auld had become. By telling the story of Auld, Douglass shows the contrast that he believes exists between 'true' Christianity and 'false' Christianity. He explains

in more detail in the Appendix: 'I love the pure, peaceable, and impartial Christianity of Christ: I therefore hate the corrupt, slaveholding, women-whipping, cradle-plundering, partial and hypocritical Christianity of this land. (Douglass 2001: 81) The Churches in the South are funded by wealthy slaveholders. They are therefore unwilling to intervene in the matter of slavery, even if it goes completely against the core values of Christianity. Instead, they let worshippers use Bible verses such as 'Slaves be obedient to your masters... with fear and trembling, in sincerity of heart, as to Christ', from Ephesians 6: 5, to support their actions (Kirkland 1999: 261). Douglass believed in the good in people.

He felt that eventually, Americans would realise that these wretched morals were not the ones of the Church, and that the abolitionist movement would triumph (Kirkland 1999). He was right: slavery was abolished in the United States in 1865 (Library of Congress, 2006), and is now a thing of the past in the Western world. Douglass and Auld reunited in 1877. It was an emotional meeting, and Douglass told his old master: 'I did not run away from you, but from slavery. ' (Sundquist 1990: 13) In the institution of slavery, both slaves and slaveholders were held captive.