

Slavery paper: compare and contrast arguments about slavery using douglass autobi...

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Although slavery has been condemned as a crime against humanity, there was once a time when men and women were considered as less than animals and were made to work under the harshest circumstances. While treatment towards both the genders might have differed, the general attitude towards slaves was the same which was exhibited by those who were well off and had enough money to afford servants. The premise of this paper is to compare and contrast the arguments which have been given by Fredrick Douglas in his autobiography. Douglas was the son of a slave and saw very little of his mother. One can say that he was born into the atmosphere where people were treated differently and slaves had no rights, constitutional or otherwise. Douglas had recognized very early on that he was living the life of a slave and was thoroughly aware of his situation. This is much in contrast to some of the other writers who have written about slavery from their own experiences like Harriet Jacobs who was not even aware that she was a slave.

Douglas always strove to be free and he recognized patters in behavior that slaveholders exhibited to keep the slaves happy and in bondage of work.

One of the arguments that Douglas has presented in his autobiography is about the nature of holidays that the slaves are given once in a year.

Douglas views it as an opportunity that slaveholders use to let the slaves get some of the rebellion out. He says and argues that this allows them to keep the slaves manageable for the rest of the year. The slaveholders allow the slaves to drink as much as they want during these holidays and do not encourage them to rest or work on any personal project. By allowing them to get drunk they still keep the slaves under their power. Douglas has given his

own opinion, which is based on his own experiences, that if the slave holders would allow their slaves to rest or work industriously then they would get restless and would want to be set free. By keeping them inebriated they restrict their thinking and judgment and when the holidays get over the slaves come back to work without any rebellion.

This argument can be considered as valid because many writers have provided similar accounts of events where slave holders have made use of various means to keep the slaves engaged. Although at that time in history, there was no law or legal framework which could safeguard the interest of the slaves, it was common for slaves to try and run away from their masters in search of their freedom. Such practices were taken up by masters to discourage the slaves from running. If one considers their situation, then in a drunken state they would not be capable of either running away or of making a plan to that end. So, one can see that this argument presented by Douglas was fair and valid.

Douglas presented another argument in his book where he has written that when one considers the nature of the slave holders or the masters then there are two characteristics which one finds common among all - the first is that they are all hypocrites and the second is that they are extremely brutal. Accounts of brutality towards slaves have been common and almost every person who written about slavery or written accounts from memory has mentioned being hit or beaten up by their masters. This behavior stems from the misconception which was prevalent at that age and time. The masters considered themselves superior to the slaves because of their difference in social status and also because they considered that they owned the slaves,

which in a sense they did. The slaves in that age were treated worse than animals and since there was no law or legal framework which could protect them in any way, the masters thought that they could do with them as they deemed fit. Again, this argument which has been put forth by Douglas appears to be valid and is collaborated by various other accounts of slavery that one gets to read. The only exception to this argument is Freeland, who has been projected by Douglas as a fair and generous master who did not exhibit either of the qualities which have been mentioned by him.

Douglas has mentioned on more than one occasion that he continuously struggled to work against slavery and this struggle began when he was still a slave. He recounts in his autobiography that it was difficult for people, blacks and some other whites who were slaves, to recognize that what was being done to them was unjust. The behavior was unnatural and cruel and this was also an argument which has put forth against slavery more than once in his writings and in his speeches. Some people who supported slavery said that blacks and slaves were beasts and that they should not be treated as humans because they were below that. Douglas argued that blacks were rational human beings and should be accorded the same behavior and respect as is given to other people. He mocked such people for their hypocrisy and contradictions. He argued that these accusations were put forth by people to override their guilt in treating another person with brutality and that to ease their guilt they came up with such arguments. He gave the example that masters would encourage their slaves to take up Christianity but would then prohibit any gatherings of slave where they could practice their religion. There were special laws at that time which prohibited

free actions of the slaves.

Such accounts have also been provided by Jacobs who was a female slave and who also grew up in a family of slaves. Although her situation was slightly better off than that of Douglas, the accounts that she has provided also speak about the injustice that was accorded to slaves at that age.

Harriet Tubman, another slave who saw very tough days and who rescued many members of her family from slavery and bondage. She has also argued in her memoir that life as a slave was like living like animals. She ran away to freedom and raised her voice against female slavery. In the Federal Writers Project, more than 2000 people have shared their experiences about life as slave and they all present the same picture of brutal treatment and being considered as less than human, which are the arguments that Douglas has shared in his autobiography. This stands to reason that whatever has been shared by Douglas had some truth in it. It is also validated by other authors who faced the same kind of life and who ran away to ensure their freedom.

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