

Frederick douglass and historical contingency



**ASSIGN
BUSTER**

From the moment his master forbade him to learn to read, Frederick Douglass, a writer and former slave, realized that literacy was the “ pathway from slavery to freedom” (Douglass 77). He seemed to be talking about his own escape from slavery, but it is possible that he was referencing the emancipation of all Southern blacks, because his purpose in writing had always been, above all, to gain support for the abolitionist movement and turn public opinion against slavery. Soon after escaping to the North, he began to use his illegally learned ability to write speeches, articles, and his *Narrative of the Life of Frederick Douglass, an American Slave*. Douglass understood the importance of history and its influence on present actions, and understood that those who can best shape the meaning of history and current events can best influence these actions. With this in mind, he used these writings to attempt to shape public opinion on slavery. However, he wrote during an unstable and ever changing time in America’s history, so to better respond to changes and shape interpretations, he had to make changes in his arguments and rhetorical styles. Writing his *Narrative* before the civil war, Douglass’ purpose was simply to sway public opinion against slavery, whereas the articles he wrote during the war have more specific calls to action. His *Narrative* makes heavy use of emotional appeals to manipulate the reader’s sympathy and empathy, and ethos to establish his credibility, while his Civil War writings focus more on logical arguments to support his specific claims and pathos to strengthen the arguments.

Before the South seceded and the Civil War came, it was unknown if slavery would ever end. Southern slave owners wanted the institution of slavery to appear as a benevolent system, that they were good masters who provided

for their slaves. In his Narrative, Douglass reveals the ugly and violent truths about slavery that he witnessed or experienced, making heavy use of emotional appeals to influence the thoughts of his white audience. His purpose in writing this book was to convince readers to oppose slavery, using these appeals to make them sympathize or empathize with slaves as fellow humans. Throughout the narrative, he piles on example after example of the horrific mistreatment faced by slaves, hoping that the readers' emotional responses would cause them to strongly oppose slavery. He hopes that getting more people to oppose it would help lead to faster abolition. He begins immediately, with a mild example, starting the second sentence with the statement " I have no accurate knowledge of my age" (49). He goes on to say that he has never met a slave who knew his own birthday. Though this may seem insignificant, he tells readers that " The white children could tell their ages" and that he " could not tell why [he] ought to be deprived of the same privilege" (49), showing that knowledge of one's age and birthday are things that people in the North would have taken for granted. The absence of such a small yet value laden thing would have come as a shock to readers. He shows that from even a young age he felt dehumanized by slavery, and by comparing the races, tries to get white readers to empathize with the dehumanization he felt by considering how they would feel about not knowing their birthdays or ages.

From there, the emotional appeals only intensify. In the next chapter, he describes the few belongings allotted to the slaves. According to Douglass, " Their yearly clothing consisted of two coarse linen shirts, one pair of linen trousers... one jacket, one pair of trousers for winter, made of coarse negro

cloth, one pair of stockings, and one pair of shoes; the whole of which could not have cost more than seven dollars" (56). In describing the low quality and small quantity of the only clothing they could get in a year, he makes sure to mention the estimated price so that free white readers can compare the sum with how much they spend on clothing. As they obviously spend much more than that, Douglass wants them to feel guilt. The readers would hopefully feel worse about themselves and because of this, more strongly sympathize with the slaves. His inclusion of the detail that "Children from seven to ten years old, of both sexes, almost naked, might be seen at all seasons of the year" (56) when their clothes became unusable is also to shock the audience, horrifying them with this unfair treatment of children and again drawing sympathy from the audience.

The most extreme examples of his emotional appeals deal with the physical abuse of slaves. Rather than trying to make the audience empathize with the physical pain, he instead describes the scenes in detail to make them feel the horror he felt when watching this pain inflicted on others. In the first chapter he mentions what happened to his Aunt Hester when she disobeyed their master's orders. The master "took her into the kitchen, and stripped her from neck to waist, leaving her... entirely naked" and proceeded to whip her, "and soon the warm, red blood (amid heart-rending shrieks from her, and horrid oaths from him) came dripping to the floor" (54). He later gives several examples of beatings and whippings that he endured, but it would be unreasonable to ask his free audience to relate to these situations that have no equivalent in their lives. Rather, he relays this memory of watching his aunt being abused in vivid and graphic detail so the audience can imagine

the scene and watch it along with him, hoping that while they feel sympathy for the aunt, they also empathize with the “terrified and horror-stricken” (54) feelings he experienced while watching as a child. Douglass includes all of these appeals to the readers’ sympathy to make readers feel worse for the slaves with each example. In this way, he uses pathos to try to achieve the purpose of his Narrative, turning people against slavery.

However, Douglass wrote the Narrative at a time of intense prejudice in America, even in the free North. Blacks, especially former slaves, were not expected to be able to write or speak as well as he could. Because of this, many people were doubtful that his work was authentic and this made it difficult for him to achieve the purpose of his narrative. He was forced to use ethos frequently, to establish his credibility and therefore increase the effectiveness of his work in convincing people to agree with him. To explain why he, as a former slave, is able to write well, he gives the story of how he started learning how to write, and why he continued learning. After he began to serve a new family, his mistress, Mrs. Auld, “commenced to teach [him] the A, B, C. After [he] had learned this, she assisted [him] in learning to spell words of three or four letters” (76). When his master discovered this, he forbade his wife to teach him any further. At this moment, Douglass realized why whites did not want blacks to be literate. “I now understood what had been to me a most perplexing difficulty – to wit, the white man’s power to enslave the black man... 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” (77). He makes sure to emphasize how important he considers the ability to read and write to

alleviate the skepticism of some of his readers. He hopes that, seeing his powerful drive to learn, they would understand why he is able to write so well and stop questioning the authenticity of his work. When the readers are not preoccupied with doubting his text, they would read it with a more open mind would be more susceptible to his emotional appeals. In this way, Douglass uses ethos, appealing to the authenticity of his character, to advance the purpose of his work.

The texts that Douglass writes during the Civil War are not focused on his experiences as a slave, but are based around proving arguments. Because of this, he does not need to rely on ethos in these texts as he did in the Narrative. These writings, unlike his Narrative, have clear purposes and specific calls to action. Now that the South had seceded and the North was fighting to make them rejoin the Union, there seemed to be a chance to end slavery. While in the Narrative Douglass relates his experiences to elicit sympathy, he no longer sees a need to simply convince people to oppose slavery. During the war, he instead makes specific arguments about current events and believes that following these arguments could lead to the end of war, the end of slavery, and better treatment for free blacks. To defend these points, he makes much more extensive use of logical rhetoric, but still uses pathos to make these logical arguments more effective. However, the pathos is used more forcefully and to appeal to different emotions than before. In his article " Fighting Rebels With Only One Hand," his main purpose is clear: African Americans should be allowed to fight for the Union army. He supports his claim with logical arguments, but to make his speech more effective he continues to make use of pathos. Comparing the country

to a burning building, he says that its owners “ are determined that the flames shall only be extinguished by Indo-Caucasian hands, and to have the building burnt rather than save it by means of any other. Such is the pride, the stupid prejudice and folly that rules the hour.” He then asks, “ Why does the Government reject the Negro? Is he not a man? Can he not [be a soldier] like any other?... We do believe that such soldiers, if allowed to take up arms in defence of the Government, and made to feel that they are hereafter to be recognized as persons having rights, would... in every way add to the national power.” Douglass makes a logical point that allowing blacks to fight would increase the strength of the North with a larger army, but he makes it in a very emotional manner. Rather than simply saying that allowing blacks to fight would turn the war in the North’s favor, ending the war more quickly, he emotionally charges his language, calling the prejudice “ stupid... folly” to ridicule those who oppose the right of blacks to be soldiers. His comparison of the country to a burning building captures the urgency of the situation. While his emotional appeals in his narrative were meant to gain sympathy from the reader to make them oppose slavery, the emotional appeals in his articles function to strengthen his logical arguments, to make his readers feel shame or to feel anger and convince them to agree with him. While he uses guilt in the Narrative as another way to elicit sympathy, he uses it here to influence people more directly into taking action or agreeing with him.

According to the historian David Blight in his article “ For Something Beyond the Battlefield”: Frederick Douglass and the Struggle for the Memory of the Civil War, “ Douglass seemed acutely aware that the post-war era might be ultimately controlled by those who could best shape the interpretations of

the war itself” (Blight 1159). After the war, Douglass struggled to shape interpretations of the war as a moral war of emancipation, hoping it would help the newly freed African American community. However, it was not only after the war that Douglass tried to get some control over the era by attempting to shape interpretations of current and past events. During the war itself, he used his articles to try to turn the war into such a moral conflict. Before the war, he tried to shape interpretations of the system of slavery, and to some degree, succeeded in turning people against slavery and helping the abolitionist movement. His purpose shifted with changing historical moment, and his argument styles shifted accordingly.

Works Cited

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