

Narrative of the life of fredrick douglass – an american slave report



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Douglass's book, *Narrative of the Life of Fredrick Douglass- An American Slave*, provides the best evidence about American slavery. In the book, Douglass gives vivid evidence that he was once a slave; a fact that was doubted by many critics due to his oration skills and impeccable language (Douglass 11). He also gives solid evidence of the inhumanity that was characteristic of this institution.

Douglass begins the book by giving a detailed description of his childhood life and the effects that slavery had on him as a child. He then goes on to give a detailed description of the brutality that was perpetrated against American slaves during his time as a slave. The book is filled with names, scenes and events which evidence its truthfulness. This paper is a description of the brutality that Douglas witnessed as a slave (Douglass 4).

American slavery was characterized with many acts of inhumanity. Slaves were denied their rights to literacy, severely beaten, overworked in farms, provided with poor living conditions, abused sexually, separated from their families, killed, tortured psychologically and emotionally, dehumanized, etc. Let us have a look at the evidence of these acts of inhumanity portrayed in Douglass's book.

The most portrayed act of inhumanity is the frequent beatings that were perpetrated on slaves. After Aunt Hester had gone out, she was severely beaten and caused to bleed profusely. All this was done because she was not there when the master "desired her presence" (Douglass 14).

This is an act of inhumanity because it appears that the slaves were "tethered" like livestock and were not free to attend their needs. Before the
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beating, she was stripped from her neck to the waist and then whipped severely. This can be seen as an indication that her master, Captain Anthony, was abusing her sexually. This claim is substantiated by the fact that Aunt Hester had gone out to see a male neighbor named Ned Roberts.

Captain Anthony was calling her a “ b - - - -b b - - - -h” (Douglass 14) as he whipped her. Captain Anthony got his name, presumably, from having sailed at Chesapeake Bay. Another evidence of beatings perpetrated on slaves is seen when Douglass is taken to the custody of Mr. Covey. He says that he was whipped every week until one day he collapsed while working in the farm. However, one day as Covey wanted to tie him for his weekly routine, Douglass protested and put up a fight. They fought for two hours until Douglass won the fight.

This can be seen as one of the things that encouraged Douglass to relentlessly fight against the institution of slavery. It is also the beginning of Douglass’s confidence in his manhood. This is because after the fight, he was never beaten again. Douglass also explains how his mother received frequent whippings for not being in the farm at sunrise since she travelled at night to see him (Douglass 12).

If a slave committed major misdemeanors, tried to escape or opposed the authority of the overseers in the farms, he/she was exposed to severe beatings before being sold. There is also a woman who was whipped in the presence of her children, who were crying begging the overseer to stop whipping their mother. The woman is said to have been whipped by Mr.

Severe in front of her children until her blood ran for almost thirty minutes (Douglas 17).

There is substantial evidence of psychological and emotional torture perpetrated on slaves by their masters. First of all, the separating of infants from their mothers before they were one year old amounts to emotional torture on both the mothers and their children. Douglass explains how his mother walked a distance of about twelve miles night after night to see him. This was after she was separated from him during his infancy (Douglass 12).

When his mother was sick and during her death, Douglass was not allowed to go and see her. Even when she died, he was not allowed to attend her burial. He says that his separation from his mother made him have no emotions for her such that her death hit him like the death of a stranger (Douglass 12). This is emotional torture perpetrated on Douglass. There is also the stated incidence in which a woman was whipped in front of her children (Douglass 17). This is emotional torture on the children.

An example of how slave-holders psychologically tortured their slaves is seen when Colonel Lloyd meets one of his slaves who speaks ill of him. After the incident, Colonel Lloyd postpones the punishment for this act until two weeks later. The delay of punishment can be seen as psychological torture on the slave (Douglass 34).

Although Douglass does not give much evidence about sexual abuse, the reader is left to make his/her conclusions about this issue. First of all, Douglass's father is said to be an unknown white man who is suspected to be

his master. The fact that his father is unknown is a clear indication that his mother was sexually abused during his conception.

This is also evidenced by the fact that his master was the chief suspect. Since masters were never good to their slaves. It is apparent that Douglass's mother was forced into having sex with the man who bore Douglass. Another evidence of sexual abuse perpetrated on slaves is seen when Aunt Hester is whipped. There was also the rule that children who were born by black women belonging to white fathers were to be regarded as slaves (Douglass 13).

This is enough evidence that the whites (masters) were sexually abusing slaves since for them to develop such a rule, there must have been several cases of children born by white men and black women. The rule is an indication that they had, kind of, legalized this behavior. It was also an evidence of the inhumanity that the masters had if they could send their own children to experience the woes of slavery.

The slaves were provided with very poor living conditions. After a very busy day with whippings, slaves had limited time for household chores and thus they lacked enough time to sleep. They all slept on cold floors covered with very poor blankets. Slaves were provided with clothes annually. This meant that when a slave missed clothes, he/she could stay with tatters for two years.

The clothes provided include two linen shirts, two linen trousers, one jacket, and another trouser for winter, a pair of shoes and stockings. Food was given on a monthly basis. Children of both sexes between the ages seven years

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and ten years were always naked. These were the characteristics of the “Great House Farm” (Douglass 17) which was the prestigious “workplace” of the slaves (Douglass 17). One wonders what the conditions of other lesser farms were.

There are many cases of dehumanization in Douglass’s book. First of all, the slaves were overworked in the field and they received severe beatings while working. The effect of this can be seen when Douglass was taken to Mr. Covey. He was overworked and whipped routinely until he lost consciousness while carrying out his duties in the field. Another evidence of dehumanization of slaves is seen when Douglass’s master dies. His death is followed by the inheritance of slaves along with livestock and other property (Douglass 16).

Other acts of inhumanity in the book include the jailing of Douglass and his friends after an attempted escape. Additionally, while Douglass was working as a Caulker in Baltimore, all his wages were given to his master, Auld. The slaves were also denied their rights to literacy.

However, Douglass beat the system and found his ways of attaining literacy. His literacy contributed greatly to his fight against slavery (Douglass 15). There is evidence that some slaves were killed for no apparent reason. This is evidenced in the description of the character of one of the overseers of Douglass’s master named Mr. Plummer. He is said to have been beheading women slaves (Douglass 13).

Many people doubted that Douglass was a slave due to his language skills but his book gave the proof that he was actually a slave. His description of

the events and the environments of American slavery is filled with a lot of evidence of truthfulness inform of names.

Among the names of places that are repeatedly mentioned in this book are the “ Great House Farm” (Douglass 17), the Chesapeake Bay, the Baltimore, etc. On the other hand, events that are highlighted in this book are all meant to show the suffering of the slaves. These events include the singing of the slaves, who worked in the “ Great House Farm” (Douglass 17) and events during which slaves were tortured or mistreated.

The latter include the whipping of Aunt Hester, the whipping of a woman in front of her kids, the collapsing of Douglass while working on the field and his subsequent fight with Mr. Covey, the whipping of Douglass’s mother in the morning after failing to make it to the farm by sunrise etc (Douglass 12-17). All these events are meant to show the brutality that was perpetrated against American slaves.

Douglass, Frederick. Narrative of the Life of Frederick Douglass-An American Slave. U. S: Yale University, 2001. Print.