Frederick Douglass: An Intellectual Slave Narrative

Kathleen E. Dubs

1 Introduction

The years between 1703 and 1944 saw the appearance of more than six thousand accounts of life under the system of institutionalized slavery in the United States.[1] Taken as a whole, the works in this genre—and little more than one hundred exist as book-length narratives—share certain characteristics: the brutality of abuse, the subhuman conditions, the religious piety of the slaves and the attendant hypocrisy of the slaveholders, the various methods of survival, and the occasional account of a good master. As Houston A. Baker, Jr. has pointed out, they also represent "the narrator's ... heroic journey from slavery to freedom, and his subsequent dedication to abolitionist principles and goals."[2] Although many are sufficiently exciting to qualify as adventure stories (cf. *The Life of Olaudah Equiano*) and one (*Incidents in the Life of a Slave Girl*) rivals the drama of *The Diary of Anne Frank,* more often than not the accounts are not autobiographies as we know them: histories of inner growth and change, and reflections on experience, as well as iterations of the external events themselves. Published largely under the auspices of northern abolitionists, they served to rally public opinion against the evil of slavery and, therefore, provided example upon example of the brutality of slave life. One narrative, however, not only stands apart from (and above) the type, but also falls within the genre of autobiography as it is more traditionally considered: *The Life of Frederick Douglass.*

Many scholars think that Douglass shaped his narrative on the model of Equiano's, which Henry Louis Gates, Jr. suggests served as a "silent second text."[3] In support, Gates cites Equiano's "subtle rhetorical strategies such as the overlapping of the slave's arduous journey to freedom and his simultaneous journey from orality to literacy," and his

[1] Henry Louis Gates, Jr., Introduction, in *The Classic Slave Narratives*, ed. Henry Louis Gates, Jr. (New York: Mentor Books [Division of the Penguin Group]: 1987), p. ix.

[2] Houston A. Baker, Jr. ed. Narrative of the Life of Frederick Douglass, an American Slave (New York: Penguin Books: 1982), pp. 8–9.

[3] Gates, p. ix.

"strategies of self-presentation."[4] This may well be true. But the depth of self-awareness, the knowledge of human character, and the capacity to reflect move Douglass' narrative (and Douglass himself) away from Equiano, and above any other possible influence. The concern for interior rather than exterior activity prevails; and Douglass' method is often to use an incident as material for reflection, or as cause, so that he can comment on its effect. Only rarely is the "moral of the story" left to the reader to discern. A few examples will illustrate.

2 Traditional Aspects

Early on, Douglass characterizes one of his first masters, on one of his first residences, explaining that "as [he] received [his] first impressions of slavery on this plantation, [he would] give some description of it, and of slavery as it there existed."[5]

> Mr. Severe was rightly named: he was a cruel man. I have seen him whip a woman, causing the blood to run half an hour at the time; and this, too, in the midst of her crying children, pleading for their mother's release. He seemed to take pleasure in manifesting his fiendish barbarity. Added to his cruelty, he was a profane swearer. It was enough to chill the blood and stiffen the hair of an ordinary man to hear him talk. Scarce a sentence escaped him but that was commenced or concluded by some horrid oath. The field was the place to witness his cruelty and profanity. His presence made it both the field of blood and blasphemy. From the rising till the going down of the sun, he was cursing, raving, cutting, and slashing among the slaves of the field, in the most frightful manner. His career was short. He died very soon after I went to Colonel Lloyd's; and he died as he lived, uttering, with his dying groans, bitter curses and horrid oaths. His death was regarded by the slaves as the result of a merciful providence.
>
> Mr. Severe's place was filled by a Mr. Hopkins. He was a very different man. He was less cruel, less profane, and made less noise than Mr. Severe. His course was characterized by

[4] Gates, p. xiv.

[5] Frederick Douglass, *The Life of Frederick Douglass*, in Gates, *supra* (note 1), p. 259. The locations of subsequent quotations will be given parenthetically immediately following each quotation.

> no extraordinary demonstrations of cruelty. He whipped, but seemed to take no pleasure in it. He was called by the slaves a good overseer. (p. 261)

Even when Douglass is himself the subject of cruelty, his iteration is stoic. After two close escapes from accidental death, one of which resulted in the destruction of his master's wagon, Douglass is escorted back to the woods by his master.

> [Covey] then went to a large gumtree, and with his axe cut three large switches, and, after trimming them up neatly with his pocket-knife, he ordered me to take off my clothes. I made him no answer but stood with my clothes on. He repeated his order. I still made him no answer, nor did I move to strip myself. Upon this he rushed at me with the fierceness of a tiger, tore off my clothes, and lashed me till he had worn out his switches, cutting me so savagely as to leave the marks visible for a long time after. The whipping was the first of a number just like it, and for similar offences. (pp. 290–291)

The understatement here, and the irony of the "similar offences," focuses our attention on the incident, not the victim. It is the injustice of the beating as much as the beating itself which is important. Compare this description to that of Mary Prince, in her personal narrative.[6] As punishment for breaking a large earthen jar during a thunderstorm, Mary is whipped by her mistress, who ceases only from weakness of exertion. But that evening, she informs her husband of Mary's "disobedience" so that the husband not only whips Mary again, but promises to resume the beating in the morning, which he does, repeatedly, aided by occasional refreshment from his wife. And during one interval

> [w]hile my mistress went to bring him drink, there was a dreadful earthquake. Part of the roof fell down, and everything in the house went—clatter, clatter, clatter. Oh I thought the end of all things near at hand; and I was so sore with the flogging, that I scarcely cared whether I lived or died. The earth was groaning and shaking; everything tumbling about; and my mistress and the slaves were shrieking

[6] The narrative of the life of Mary Prince is also found in Gates, cited *supra*.

> and crying out, "The earthquake! the earthquake!" It was an awful day for us all.
>
> During the confusion I crawled away on my hands and knees, and laid myself down under the steps of the piazza, in front of the house. I was in a dreadful state—my body all blood and bruises, and I could not help moaning piteously. The other slaves, when they saw me, shook their heads and said, "Poor child! poor child!"—I lay there till morning, careless of what might happen, for life was very weak in me, and I wished more than ever to die. But when we are very young, death always seems a great way off, and it would not come that night to me.
>
> The next morning I was forced by my master to rise and go about my usual work, though my body and limbs were so stiff and sore, that I could not move without the greatest pain.—Nevertheless, even after all this severe punishment, I never heard the last of that jar; my mistress was always throwing it in my face. (p. 196)

Her purpose is clearly to present the brutality of the master and mistress and evoke pity for herself. It is difficult to imagine Douglass seeking such self-pity, or failing to find significance in the earthquake at that particular moment, for, later, when detailing the circumstances under which he is "sent" to Baltimore, he admits: "I have ever regarded it as the first plain manifestation of that kind providence which has ever since attended me, and marked my life with so many favours." (p. 273)

In both narratives we see the fury of the master over the loss of property vented on another piece of property—much as we kick the tire of a car or slam its doors when its engine won't start. But in Douglass' narrative it is the incident, the "similar offences" and their punishments, which arrests the reader, not the shrieks of the slave; it is the understatement of the "normality" of such behavior. Although it may seem that Douglass is stating the obvious, note the opportunity missed by Mary Prince.

In a later incident Douglass recounts the fatal penalty for trespassing, and the absence of penalty for its punishment.

> Colonel Lloyd's slaves were in the habit of spending a part of their nights and Sundays in fishing for oysters, and in this way made up the deficiency of their scanty allowance.

> An old man belonging to Colonel Lloyd, while thus engaged, happened to get beyond the limits of Colonel Lloyd's, and on the premises of Mr. Beal Bondly. At this trespass, Mr. Bondly took offence, and with his musket came down to the shore, and blew its deadly contents into the poor old man.
>
> Mr. Bondly came over to see Colonel Lloyd the next day, whether to pay for his property, or to justify himself in what he had done, I know not. At any rate, this whole fiendish transaction was soon hushed up. There was very little said about it at all, and nothing done. It was a common saying, even among little white boys, that it was worth a half-cent to kill a "nigger", and a half-cent to bury one. (p. 270)

But these are the clear examples of Douglass' adaptations of the formula; it is when he develops and advances the formula that his narrative most moves and provokes.

3 Unique Aspects

The first hint of his deeper awareness occurs in his comments upon the singing of the slaves, long used by slave-holders as proof of their happiness, of their joy in their work. In quoting specifically the chorus of a song about the Great House Farm, Douglass notes:

> This they would sing, as a chorus, to words which to many would seem unmeaning jargon, but which, nevertheless, were full of meaning to themselves. I have sometimes thought that the mere hearing of those songs would do more to impress some minds with the horrible character of slavery, than the reading of whole volumes of philosophy on the subject could do.
>
> I did not, when a slave, understand the deep meaning of those rude and apparently incoherent songs. I was myself within the circle; so that I neither saw nor heard as those without might see and hear. They told a tale of woe which was then altogether beyond my comprehension; ... To those songs I trace my first glimmering conception of the dehumanizing character of slavery.
>
> I have often been utterly astonished, since I came to the north, to find persons who could speak of the singing among slaves as evidence of their contentment and happiness; it is

> impossible to conceive of a greater mistake. Slaves sing most when they are most unhappy. (pp. 262–3)

The acknowledgement of ignorance, of growing self-awareness, the reflection of being inside "the circle" or out: these mark the narrative of Douglass. So, too, do his perceptions of what these events represent, not just what they are. For Douglass songs are expressions not of happiness, but of relief: "The songs of the slave represent the sorrows of his heart; and he is relieved by them, only as an aching heart is relieved by its tears. At least, such is my experience." (p. 263) And if we misunderstand, it is because we have not shared in that experience, have not been "inside the circle." But Douglass has, and here, as elsewhere, *the* black slave speaks for all slaves.

In other passages Douglass counters similar myths of slave life—for example, that slaves do not complain of their treatment. In reporting that the wealth of Colonel Lloyd was so vast that many of his own slaves often never saw him, he details a chance encounter between the Colonel and one of his slaves. When asked whether he was well treated, the slave replied in the negative. "What, does he work you too hard?" "Yes, sir." "Well, don't he give you enough to eat?" "Yes, sir, he gives me enough, such as it is." (p. 265) After this brief exchange, both go about their business. But within three weeks the slave, informed that he had displeased his master, was sold "down the river," to a Georgia trader, "a condition held by [all slaves] in the utmost horror and dread." (p. 282) Douglass concludes: "It is partly in consequence of such facts, that slaves, when inquired of as to their condition and the character of their masters, almost universally say they are contented, and that their masters are kind. ... They suppress the truth rather than take the consequences of telling it, and in so doing prove themselves a part of the human family." (p. 266) Who could quarrel with their response, or the conclusion Douglass skilfully draws: slaves not only learn to survive, they are human.

Another myth Douglass exposes, in his coolly analytical way, is that slaves lack human feeling, or, as Marie St.Clare repeats over and over again in *Uncle Tom's Cabin,* "They just don't feel things the way we do." At the beginning of his narrative, Douglass had reported that he and his mother had been separated when he was an infant, and that he never knew her as [his] mother." (p. 256) It was the practice of slave-holders to separate children from their mothers during infancy, return the mother

to whatever work she was doing as soon as possible, and place the infant with an old woman, useful for nothing else. Douglass does not know the purpose of this practice "unless it be to hinder the development of the child's natural affection towards its mother, and to blunt and destroy the natural affection of the mother for the child. This is the inevitable result." (p. 256) And yet Douglass' mother felt such strong natural affection for him that on four or five occasions she journeyed, on foot, about twelve miles (each way) to be with him. These visits occurred at night, after her work in the fields; and from each visit she returned early, to be in the field before sunrise to avoid being whipped. She put him to sleep, but left before he awoke. As he movingly admits:

> Very little communication ever took place between us. Death soon ended what little we could have while she lived, and with it her hardships and suffering. ... I was not allowed to be present during her illness, at her death, or burial. ... Never having enjoyed, to any considerable extent, her soothing presence, her tender and watchful care, I received the tidings of her death with much the same emotions I should have probably felt at the death of a stranger. (p. 256)

With this incident, Douglass accounts for the "fact" that slaves have no feelings for family. And he exposes, as he will again and again, the brutality at the heart of the system.

By far the most significant event in Douglass' life occurs in Baltimore—"[that] first plain manifestation of ... kind providence. ..." As do many other slaves in their narratives, Douglass expresses his desire to learn to read. And while under the tutelage of Mrs. Auld, he makes progress. But Mr. Auld, on learning of the schooling, forbade it, telling his wife, among other things, that it was unlawful to teach a slave to read, and that "learning would spoil the best nigger in the world. ... If you teach [a] nigger to read, there would be no keeping him. It would forever unfit him to be a slave. He would at once become unmanageable, and of no good to his master. As to himself, it could do him no good, but a great deal of harm. It would make him discontented and unhappy." (pp. 274–5) The effect of this pronouncement on Douglass is profound.

> These words sank deep into my heart, stirred up sentiments within that lay slumbering, and called into existence an

> entirely new train of thought. It was a new and special revelation, explaining dark and mysterious things, with which my youthful understanding had struggled, but struggled in vain. I now understood what had been to me a most perplexing difficulty—to wit, the white man's power to enslave the black man. It was a grand achievement, and I prized it highly. From that moment, I understood the pathway from slavery to freedom. It was just what I wanted and I got it at a time when I the least expected it. (p. 275)

And literacy did prove damaging to the young Douglass—who was at this point about twelve years old.

> The more I read, the more I was led to abhor and detest my enslavers. ... As I read and contemplated the subject, behold! that very discontent which Master Hugh had predicted would follow my learning to read had already come, to torment and sting my soul to unutterable anguish. As I writhed under it, I would at times feel that learning to read had been a curse rather than a blessing. (p. 279)

It is the institution of slavery which repels Douglass, not his specific condition. At this point he has not been brutally mistreated, whipped, starved, bred; relatively speaking his life has been "good." Even so, he admits: "I often found myself regretting my own existence, and wishing myself dead; and but for the hope of being free, I have no doubt but that I should have killed myself, or done something for which I should have been killed." (p. 279) Many slaves had understood literacy as a means to freedom: the ability to forge papers, to read posters, and so forth. But Douglass sees literacy in a much deeper sense: intellectual freedom, liberation of the spirit. In this, as in other instances, he demonstrates his understanding of slavery as an institution: how it holds the slave, how it robs him of his humanity—if he lets it. It is this extraordinary awareness which sets Douglass and his narrative apart.

The epiphany of his narrative occurs after the death of his master, Captain Anthony, when he is sent for, "to be valued with the other property. Here again [his] feelings rose up in detestation of slavery. [He] had now a new conception of [his] degraded condition." (p. 281) Not a human being; but a piece of property. "There were horses and men, cattle and women, pigs and children, all holding the same rank in the

scale of being, and ... all subjected to the same narrow examination. ... At this moment, I saw more clearly than ever the brutalizing effects of slavery upon both slave and slaveholder." (p. 282) This is Douglass' most profound insight into the evil essence of the insititution of slavery: that it reduces to the level of sub-humanity both the slave and the slave-holder. Here, exposed to full view, is the soul of slavery in all its naked ugliness.

And again, Mrs. Auld, innocent of slavery, was a kind woman, the good Christian woman who had wanted to teach him to read.

> But, alas! this kind heart had but a short time to remain such. The fatal poison of irresponsible power was already in her hands, and soon commenced its infernal work. That cheerful eye, under the influence of slavery, soon became red with rage; that voice, made all of sweet accord, changed to one of harsh and horrid discord; and that angelic face gave place to that of a demon. (p. 274)

> The slave is not unique in being robbed of his humanity, Douglass observed: "Slavery proved as injurious to her as it did to me." (p. 277)

Douglass' sense of self-awareness and the bestiality of slavery are expressed again, when he relates his last experience of being whipped.

Captain Auld, unable to handle Douglass—considering him ruined by city life—leases him for one year to Mr. Covey, who had the reputation of a "nigger-breaker." By his own testimony, he was unmanageable when he arrived. Usually, Douglass posits his own awkwardness as the excuse for being whipped; but on one occasion he is pushed, and whipped, beyond endurance. He runs off to his owner, a journey of seven miles which takes him about five hours, so bad is his condition. He arrives in a state of shock.

> From the crown of my head to my feet, I was covered with blood. My hair was all clotted with dust and blood; my shirt was stiff with blood. My legs and feet were torn in sundry places with briers and thorns, and were also covered with blood. I suppose I looked like a man who had escaped a den of wild beasts, and barely escaped them. In this state I appeared before my master, humbly entreating him to interpose his authority for my protection. (p. 296)

The master, on learning the facts, allows Douglass to stay the night. In the morning, assuring him he is in no mortal danger from Covey, "a good man," he orders him back, threatening him if he does not obey. When Douglass reaches Covey's cornfield, and sees Covey coming toward him with his cowskin, to give him another whipping, he runs into the cornfield, and escapes to the cabin of Sandy Jenkins, a slave whom Douglass knew, who lived there with his free wife.

Noting that his "behaviour was altogether unaccountable," (p. 296) Douglass once again asks advice. Jenkins tells him he must return, but gives him "a certain root" which he must always carry "on [his] right side, (which) would render it impossible for Mr. Covey or any other white man, to whip [him]." (p. 297) Curiously, when Douglass returns, Covey greets him "very kindly." But it is, after all, Sunday; and Covey, being a pious man, is on his way to church. It must be that, and not the root, Douglass believes. But on Monday the root receives a severe test.

In the early morning hours, in the barn about his chores, Douglass is lassoed by Covey, who attempts to tie him. At this moment, Douglass tells us, "from whence came the spirit I don't know—[but] I resolved to fight." (p. 298) Overcoming his initial shock, Covey calls to a hand—Hughes—who joins the fray. Incredibly, Douglass dispatches Hughes, and when Covey calls for help from Bill—another slave—Bill informs him that he had been hired out to work, not assist in whippings. So Douglass and Covey "were at it for nearly two hours." The conclusion of the matter is clear to all but Covey.

> Covey at length let me go, puffing and blowing at a great rate, saying that if I had not resisted, he would not have whipped me half so much. The truth was, that he had not whipped me at all. I considered him as getting entirely the worst end of the bargain; for he had drawn no blood from me, but I had from him. (p. 298)

Further, for the remainder of Douglass' service, Covey never lays a finger on him. Douglass is convinced it is because Covey knows that he will come off worse than before. But this battle marks more than the end of Douglass' whippings.

> This battle with Mr. Covey was the turning-point in my career as a slave. ... I felt as I never felt before. It was a

> glorious resurrection, from the tomb of slavery, to the heaven of freedom. ... I now resolved that, however long I might remain a slave in form, the day had passed forever when I could be a slave in fact. I did not hesitate to let it be known of me, that the white man who expected to succeed in whipping, must also succeed in killing me. (pp. 298–9)

And he was true to his word. Though he remained a slave for four more years, and had several fights, including one in which he was nearly killed by a gang of carpenters, he "was never whipped." (p. 299)

Once again we see that Douglass penetrates to the heart of slavery. It is not the conditions of slavery, it is the essence of slavery: being made subhuman, less than a man.

> I have found that, to make a contented slave, it is necessary to make him a thoughtless one. It is necessary to darken his moral and mental vision, and as far as possible, to annihilate the power of reason. He must be able to feel that slavery is right; and he can be brought to that only when he ceases to be a man. (p. 315)

Douglass also reveals keen insight into the methods slaveholders use to keep slaves "happy." As an example, he cites the Christmas holidays. The days between Christmas and New Year were holidays, and the slaves were not required to perform any physical labor. They spent the time as they chose: visiting relatives; making mats and baskets; hunting; ball-playing, fiddling, dancing, drinking whiskey. Douglass observes that the drinking of whiskey was the pass-time most approved by the masters. "It was deemed a disgrace not to get drunk at Christmas." (p. 299) Otherwise it was as though the generosity of the master were being refused, and the slave himself lacking sufficient industry to provide the wherewith-all for his recreation. More significantly, according to Douglass, these festivities were "among the most effective means in the hands of the slaveholder in keeping down the spirit of insurrection. Were the slaveholders at once to abandon this practice, ... it would lead to an immediate insurrection among the slaves." (p. 300)

Not only did these holiday revels serve as safety valves, they were

> part and parcel of the gross fraud, wrong, and inhumanity of slavery. They are professedly a custom established by the

> benevolence of the slaveholders; but ... it is the result of selfishness, and one of the grossest frauds committed upon the down-trodden slave. They do not give the slaves this time because they would not like to have their work during its continuance, but because they know it would be unsafe to deprive them of it. (p. 300)

Further,

> their object seems to be, to disgust their slaves with freedom, by plunging them into the lowest depths of dissipation. For instance, the slaveholders not only like to see the slave drink of his own accord, but will adopt various plans to make him drunk. ... So, when the holidays ended, we staggered up from the filth of our wallowing, took a long breath, and marched to the field,—feeling, upon the whole, rather glad to go, from what our master had deceived us into a belief was freedom, back to the arms of slavery. (p. 300)

Where other slave narrators present only the revels, Douglass provides keen analysis. His is more than a presentation of aspects of slave life; it is a critique of the institution itself and the fraud and deception upon which it is based.

4 Conclusion

Douglass' *Life* also includes his views on the effects of religion,

> If it had any effect on [Auld's] character, it made him more cruel and hateful in all his ways, for I believe him to have been a much worse man after his conversion than before. 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. (p. 287)

the account of his escape to freedom, characterizations of other slaves and slave practices, and some passages of melodrama and piety. The final facet of the appeal of Douglass' narrative is his insight into human character. His knowledge that slavery damages the slave-holder as well as the slave is clear. So too is his ability to read individual human beings.

His analysis of his relationship with Covey—the man with whom he successfully fought—is astute.

> Mr. Covey enjoyed the most unbounded reputation for being a first-rate overseer and negro-breaker. It was of considerable importance to him. That reputation was at stake: and had he sent me—a boy about sixteen years old—to the public whipping post, his reputation would have been lost; so, to save his reputation, he suffered me to go unpunished. (p. 299)

His analysis of his master, Captain Auld, who sent him to Covey, is similarly perceptive. The description also shows Douglass at his rhetorical best. Captain Auld was mean.

> And, like most other mean men, he lacked the ability to conceal his meanness. Captain Auld was not a born slaveholder. ... He came into possession of all his slaves by marriage; and of all men, adopted slaveholders are the worst. He was cruel, but cowardly. He commanded without firmness. In the enforcement of his rules, he was at times rigid, and at times lax. At times, he spoke to his slaves with the firmness of Napoleon and the fury of the demon; at other times, he might as well be mistaken for an inquirer who had lost his way. He did nothing of himself. He might have passed for a lion, but for his ears. In all things noble which he attempted, his own meanness shone most conspicuous. His airs, words, and actions, were the airs, words, and actions of slave-holders, and being assumed, were awkward enough. He was not even a good imitator. He possessed all the disposition to deceive, but wanted the power. Having no resources within himself, he was compelled to be the copyist of many, and being such, he was forever the victim of inconsistency and of consequence he was an object of contempt, and was held as such even by his slaves. (pp. 286–287) [1]

What a damning description; yet how convincing.

But to say that it is typical of the genre is to say that the *The Canterbury Tales* is typical of narrative poetry. Douglass, in relatively few pages, presents his life, his character, and a stinging indictment of the institution of slavery by countering the myths of slavery, penetrating the

essence of "the whole system of fraud and inhumanity," and revealing the weakness and corruption upon which it was based. It is a remarkable work.

More than the story of "how a man was made a slave; and ... how a slave was made a man," (p. 294) it is a story demonstrating incontrovertibly that slaves were indeed men, human beings, with feelings and moral values, and with intellects of great power. Douglass knew that he was living proof that the slave who learned to read and write was the first to run away.[7] But he also knew—and he was living proof—that running away was insufficient. So was simply telling the story of the escape and the horrors which led to it. Douglass was a black man, freed—or rather freeing himself—from the barbarity of an animalistic existence, destined to act as spokesman for humanity. His call for abolition was as much a plea for the slaveholder as for the slave. And it was a powerful call ignored at one's peril.

[7] Gates, p. ix.