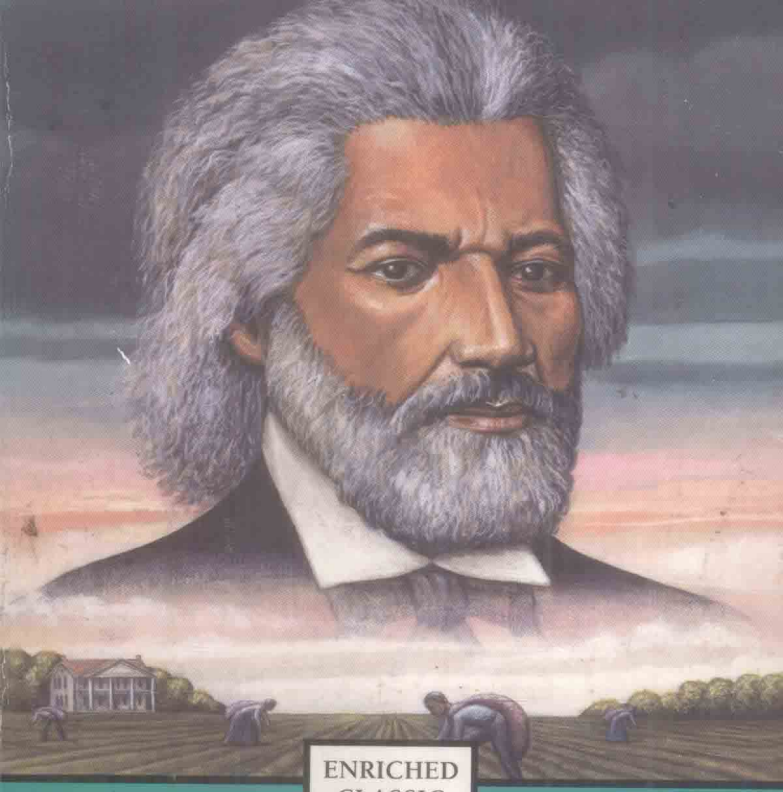


ENRICHED CLASSIC

RRATIVE OF THE LIFE REDERICK DOUGLASS

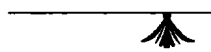
ERICAN SLAVE, WRITTEN BY HIMSELF

FREDERICK DOUGLASS

Includes detailed explanatory notes, an overview of key themes, and more

NARRATIVE OF THE LIFE OF FREDERICK DOUGLASS

AN AMERICAN SLAVE, WRITTEN BY HIMSELF



Frederick Douglass

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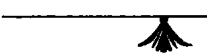
Introduction

Narrative of the Life of Frederick Douglass: Writing the Way to Freedom



As readers, we might expect the story of a life in slavery to be heartrending or frightening, to move us to tears, outrage, or action. Since we know the slave will escape to write the story of his life, we might also expect it to be suspenseful and exciting. Since it is a story of justice triumphing over evil, we might expect it to be morally uplifting. And most of all, we might hope to learn the inside story, the things that no one but a former slave could tell us. In all these hopes and expectations we would be very much like nineteenth-century readers, whose craving for these readerly thrills made slave narratives one of the most popular genres of their time. Frederick Douglass had already been thrilling audiences as a dazzling orator when he published his *Narrative,* and it did not disappoint his readers' expectations. But the *Narrative* also went beyond these expectations to surprise its readers

with elegant prose, rhetorical sophistication, and sharp wit. Moving within pages from scenes of frightening violence and deep pathos to coolly ironic satire, and then again to incisive psychological and political analysis, the *Narrative* is far more than the bare facts of Douglass' life. Douglass wrote not only to be a champion in the fight against slavery, but to claim his freedom as a writer, an intellectual, and an American.

The full title of Douglass' work—*Narrative of the Life of Frederick Douglass, an American Slave, Written by Himself*—reveals much about the difficulties Douglass faced as a writer, and about the genius with which he overcame them. This is no ordinary life story. It is the story of the author's mental and physical bondage. It is also the story of his escape—but barely. The 1845 publication of the *Narrative* flagrantly exposed Douglass as a fugitive, still subject to laws that made his forcible removal to the South perfectly legal. His uneasiness was great enough to prompt him to embark on a tour of Great Britain, where friends in England raised the $710.96 needed to buy his freedom. Douglass took the risk of publication, his title insists, as an American. The *Narrative* is not simply a piece of abolitionist propaganda: it is Douglass' address to the nation. To claim one could be both American *and* a slave in an era when not only slaves, but all nonwhite citizens (save some Native Americans) were denied citizenship, was a bold claim indeed.

The world and the United States have changed dramatically since Douglass first wrote the *Narrative*. In the fight for civil rights and citizenship, thousands upon thousands of men and women have struggled and sometimes triumphed over injustice. Yet the struggle against

racism, oppression, and systematic cruelty in America continues. The difficulty of claiming an identity—of knowing what it is to be American in the midst of this struggle—also continues. Fortunately, Douglass' *Narrative,* saved from the neglect that was the fate of so much early African-American literature, continues as well as a vibrant testimony to the past and a deeply resonant demonstration of the writer's power to craft a future.

The Life and Work of Frederick Douglass

If Frederick Douglass had been born into a world of privilege and educated at elite institutions, his life and career would have been remarkable. That he began his life as a slave makes it nothing short of miraculous. The facts of his early life in slavery are essentially as he reports them in the *Narrative.* Douglass was born sometime in February 1818 in Maryland to Harriet Bailey and an unknown white father rumored to be his master, Captain Anthony. He was raised by his grandmother, Betsey Bailey, one in a line of strong matriarchs. When Douglass was eight, his mother died and he was sent to live in Baltimore with Hugh and Sophia Auld. There he first learned the power of the written word, continuing his education on the sly after Hugh ordered Sophia to stop teaching him his letters lest it render him unfit for slavery. After conning "little white boys" into teaching him how to read, he obtained a copy of *The Columbian Orator* and began to study the rules of argument and speechmaking.

In 1833 he returned to his second master, Thomas Auld. After he caught Douglass teaching slaves to read, Auld rented Douglass out to "slave breaker" Edward Covey. Covey did not succeed in mastering Douglass,

and one year later, in 1835, he was hired out to William Freeland. While at Freeland's, Douglass organized a secret Sunday school, where he taught reading. He also organized an escape plan with several other men. When the plan failed, he was sent back to Baltimore, to Hugh Auld, to learn a trade in the shipyard. In the relative freedom of his life there, he began to attend meetings of a debating society of freedmen. Through one of the members, he met his future wife, a freedwoman named Anna Murray. The following year, 1838, he successfully escaped to New York by train, using the borrowed papers of a free black sailor. Soon after he arrived, Murray joined him and they were married.

Douglass and his wife set up housekeeping in New Bedford, Massachusetts. Their daughter Rosetta was born the following year in 1839, and their sons Lewis, Frederick, and Charles Redmond followed in 1840, 1842, and 1844. Daughter Annie, their final child, was born in 1849. During these years Douglass became a licensed preacher and joined the abolitionist movement. As he records in the *Narrative,* he came into his career and calling as an activist, orator, and writer when he stepped up to the lectern to give his first speech at a New Bedford abolitionist meeting in 1841. It was there that he caught the attention of the powerful abolitionist William Lloyd Garrison. Garrison was instrumental in launching Douglass' career. He encouraged him to speak and write on behalf of the abolitionist movement and wrote the Preface to the *Narrative.* However, Douglass soon found himself in disagreement with Garrison and other abolitionists on many matters. Perhaps the most important of these, as regards Douglass' future as a writer, was his struggle to control the subject matter and

presentation of his speeches. The abolitionists believed general audiences would find Douglass more convincing if he spoke solely about his experience as a slave, in the simple language expected of the uneducated. They hoped to use him as a living example of a slave. Douglass, on the other hand, wanted to argue for the political actions and reforms he had come to believe in as a result of his experience. He wished to be taken seriously as a thinker, writer, and speaker on his own merits, not simply because he had once been a slave.

It was partly out of his wish for more intellectual and political freedom that Douglass became a writer as well as an orator. The *Narrative* was published in 1845. He would later revise and expand the *Narrative* in two other autobiographies, *My Bondage, My Freedom* (1855) and *The Life and Times of Frederick Douglass* (1881). Two years after publishing the *Narrative*, against the protests of colleagues who felt he should focus his energies more narrowly, Douglass began publishing the abolitionist paper *North Star*, moving west to Rochester, New York, rather than compete with Garrison's paper, *The Liberator*. Later, in 1851, he would merge *North Star* with another abolitionist paper to form the influential *Frederick Douglass' Paper*. As its name indicates, Douglass was by then widely known and well respected. He had begun to take up other causes in addition to abolition, most notably women's rights. He had also become an active participant in the Underground Railroad. Meanwhile, during his long speaking tours, Anna Douglass took care of their children and worked in a shoe factory to raise the family income. Both parents suffered when their daughter Annie died in 1860.

As the Civil War loomed on the horizon, Douglass

found himself ever more deeply involved in national politics. When his friend and colleague John Brown raided Harper's Ferry, Douglass fled to Canada and England to escape arrest, even though he had not helped Brown in any way. During the war itself, he was called upon by the Lincoln administration to act as an adviser and to recruit soldiers for the Union. He did so, but fought throughout the war for equal treatment of black soldiers and for the full acceptance of blacks as voting citizens. The latter fight he won in 1870 with the ratification of the Fifteenth Amendment to the Constitution. By 1872 he was running for vice president of the United States on a third party ticket headed by women's rights leader Victoria C. Woodhull. In later years he held several positions in Washington, D.C., including president of the Freedman's Bank, before a final adventure in 1889 as U.S. minister and consul general to Haiti. His personal life kept pace with the revolutionary quality of his public life. After Anna Douglass' death in 1882, Douglass mourned for one year before scandalizing his family, friends, and enemies by marrying Helen Pitts, a white woman some twenty years his junior. They remained happily married until February 20, 1895, when, after speaking at a National Council of Women's meeting, Douglass returned home, suffered a heart attack, and died that afternoon.

Historical and Literary Contexts of *Narrative of the Life of Frederick Douglass*

Escape from Slavery

Douglass was typical of the majority of successful escaped slaves: young, healthy men who traveled alone.

The physical rigors and mental anguish of escaping cannot be overestimated. Only those who were strong and healthy were likely to survive their attempts to run away. In spite of this, hundreds of slaves, including families and groups of men and women, escaped from slavery each year. Though most slaves had to find their own way to freedom, some were helped by the Underground Railroad, a loose affiliation of safe houses and "conductors" who helped direct and protect fugitives along many branching routes from South to North. Members of the Underground Railroad used code language and objects such as quilts to communicate with slaves getting ready to flee. Though for the most part the Underground Railroad was only loosely organized, in the 1830s former slaves such as David Ruggles (whom Douglass mentions in the *Narrative*) collaborated with other abolitionists to form "vigilance committees" stationed throughout the North. One of the most famous conductors of the Underground Railroad was Harriet Tubman, who made over twenty successful trips to bring slaves to freedom, thereby earning the title of the "Moses of her people." Douglass himself became a conductor on the railroad several years after publishing the *Narrative*.

Some escaped slaves left the United States for Canada or England. Others, like Douglass, remained in the United States in free states where anti-slavery sympathies were strong, went to urban areas where they could live among communities of free blacks, or formed "freedman" communities in isolated places.

The Abolition Movement

Most of the members of the Underground Railroad were also active in the abolition movement, the campaign to abolish slavery in the United States. When Douglass joined the movement, New England was the center of anti-slavery sentiments and had been since the nation's inception. Vermont had banned slavery in 1777, Pennsylvania in 1780. The Northern states (whose southern border was the Mason-Dixon line) had abolished slavery in 1804. By the 1830s, however, economic interdependence and laws supporting the kidnapping and return of fugitive slaves (and, since slaves could not testify on their own behalf, free blacks as well) meant many people in the North could no longer pretend to be exempt from the moral wrongs of slavery. The movement was galvanized by the fiery radicalism of William Lloyd Garrison, whose abolitionist newspaper, *The Liberator,* began appearing in 1831 and quickly became a primary voice of the movement. Garrison was uncompromising in his call for the immediate abolition of slavery. He believed the Constitution was a pro-slavery document and condemned organized religion as irremediably implicated in slavery's propagation. His fierce energy and charismatic presence won Garrison many protégés, including Wendell Phillips, who gave up his law practice to devote himself to abolition after he watched Garrison face down a lynch mob enraged by his speech. The testimony of former slaves formed an important part of the abolitionists' evidence of the horrors of slavery. As their Prefaces to the *Narrative* make clear, Garrison and Phillips both admired Douglass, and actively recruited him to speak on

behalf of the abolition movement. Eventually, however, Garrison's radicalism proved divisive both within the movement and in his friendship with Douglass. Douglass came to disagree with Garrison about many important issues, and to rebel against the often condescending attitudes of white abolitionists toward former slaves.

Slave Narratives and Autobiography

Douglass' *Narrative* was one of many slave narratives published in the early to mid-nineteenth century. Read by some as important testimony to a moral wrong and by others as thrilling stories of suffering and triumph, the slave narrative was one of the best-selling genres in America and Europe. It was identifiable as a genre not simply through its content but through the fairly strict form imposed on the unique experiences of individual authors. Generally, slave narratives were supposed to give over the bulk of their story to the sufferings of their authors in slavery, and to end with their author's escape to freedom. In a few cases, when the tale of escape was particularly spectacular or arduous, the structure changed to accomodate the tale. The narratives were also supposed to be "true stories," but their veracity was often questioned, and not just by pro-slavery readers. It was illegal to teach slaves to read or write, and the horrors detailed by the narratives were often simply too much for white readers to believe. Too, their popularity meant writers and publishers with an eye for profit sometimes produced false narratives, often cobbled together from true stories. To promote the reader's credulity, authentic narratives were often presented in a

"white envelope": they contained Forewords and Afterwords written by white authors who vouched for the talent and honesty of the narrative's author.

Readers of Douglass' *Narrative* have pointed out that in addition to the traditional slave narrative form, Douglass was also influenced by the tradition of American autobiographies whose authors offer their lives as universal examples or models, such as Benjamin Franklin's autobiography. In spite of his sometimes contentious relationship with the Christian church, Douglass was also deeply influenced by his reading of scripture and religious literature and the *Narrative* can be read as a spiritual autobiography, the story of the author's suffering in his search for God's grace, and his eventual discovery of his vocation.

Chronology of Frederick Douglass' Life and Work

1818: Born February to Harriet Bailey and unknown father, rumored to be his master, Aaron Anthony.

1819–23: Raised by grandmother, Betsey Bailey, at Holme Hill.

1826: Harriet Bailey dies. Is sent to Baltimore to serve Hugh and Sophia Auld.

1827: Sophia Auld begins teaching Douglass to read but is stopped by Hugh Auld.

1829: Becomes shipyard assistant, secretly practices reading and writing.

1833: Returns to master Thomas Auld. Is caught teaching slaves to read.

1834: Auld rents Douglass out to "slave breaker" Edward Covey. Covey is unsuccessful.

1835: Hired out to William Freeland. Organizes secret Sunday school and teaches reading.

1836: Tries and fails to escape. Returns to Hugh Auld and works in shipyard.

1837: Meets future wife, freedwoman Anna Murray, through fellow debating club member.

1838: Successfully escapes to New York, changes name to Douglass, and marries Anna Murray. They move to New Bedford, Massachusetts.

1839: Daughter Rosetta is born. Discovers abolitionist movement and becomes licensed preacher.

1840: Son Lewis is born.

1841: Meets William Lloyd Garrison and other abolitionists.

1842: Son Frederick is born.

1844: Son Charles Redmond is born.

1845: Publishes *Narrative of the Life of Frederick Douglass,* leaves for speaking tour of Great Britain. Friends in England raise money to buy Douglass' freedom.

1847: Begins publishing abolitionist paper *North Star* in Rochester, New York.

1848: Speaks at Seneca Fall women's rights convention. Meets John Brown. Begins participating in Underground Railroad.

1849: Daughter Annie is born.

1851: Forms *Frederick Douglass' Paper.*

1855: Publishes *My Bondage and My Freedom.*

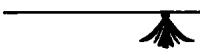
1859: Flees to Canada and England to escape association with John Brown's raid and insurrection. Begins publishing *Douglass' Monthly.*

1860: Daughter Annie dies.

1863–4: Recruits soldiers for Union during Civil War and fights for equal treatment of black soldiers.

1872: Runs for vice-president on the Equal Rights Party ticket.
1877: Appointed U.S. marshal of Washington, D.C.
1881: Publishes *The Life and Times of Frederick Douglass.*
1882: Wife Anna Murray Douglass, dies.
1884: Douglass marries white woman Helen Pitts, his former secretary.
1889: Appointed U.S. minister and consul general of Haiti.
1895: Dies suddenly of heart failure, February 20, after speaking at National Council of Women meeting that day.

Historical Context of *Narrative of the Life of Frederick Douglass*



1808: Congress outlaws importation of African slaves.
1830: Nat Turner leads slave revolt in Virginia.
1831: William Garrison begins publishing abolitionist newspaper, *The Liberator.*
1833: American Anti-Slavery Society founded; England outlaws slavery.
1846: Mexican War begins.
1848: Seneca Falls Woman's Rights Convention.
1849: Harriet Tubman successfully escapes slavery. Over the next twelve years she will help over 300 slaves escape to freedom.
1850: Compromise of 1850 adds new slave states to the country. Includes Fugitive Slave Act, requiring all citizens to refuse help to runaway slaves and assist in their return and denied fugitives right to trial.
1852: Harriet Beecher Stowe's blockbuster antislavery novel, *Uncle Tom's Cabin,* published. Its tremendous sales galvanize the abolition movement.