

Modern Critical

INTERPRETATIONS

Edited and with an Introduction by HAROLD BLOOM

Frederick Douglass's
**Narrative of the Life
of Frederick Douglass**



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Frederick Douglass

Edited and with an introduction by

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Editor's Note

This book brings together a representative selection of the best modern critical interpretations of the *Narrative of the Life of Frederick Douglass, an American Slave, Written by Himself* (1845). The critical essays are reprinted here in the chronological sequence of their original publication. I am grateful to Caroline Rebecca Rogers and Henry Finder for their assistance in editing this volume.

My introduction centers upon the role of Southern erotic sadism in the psychic economy of slaveholding, as depicted by Douglass. Albert E. Stone begins the chronological sequence of criticism with his early tribute to the *Narrative* as a precursor to such major black autobiographies as *Black Boy* and *I Know Why the Caged Bird Sings*. H. Bruce Franklin explores the function of animal imagery in representing the brutalizing effects of slavery on both its victims and perpetrators.

The artistic representation of black identity is the subject of Robert B. Stepto, who outlines the structure of the *Narrative* as one of three phases of slave narrative. Douglass's first chapter, in a reading by Henry Louis Gates, Jr., is explored as an instance of the pattern of binary oppositions, as set forth by Levi-Strauss, with Douglass himself mediating and reversing the structuring polarities of the slavocracy.

Robert G. O'Meally examines the relation of the *Narrative* to the Afro-American sermon, while Houston A. Baker, Jr. essentially sees Douglass transforming slave experience into an "autobiographical act" through an uncritical acceptance of the liberating function of literacy itself. In Annette Niemtzow's analysis, the slave narrative is also seen as a step towards freedom, yet a step only, impeded by the cage of an imposed form.

Ann Kibbey, in an advanced rhetorical exegesis of the *Narrative*,

shrewdly concludes that the “linguistic virtuosity of the slave who survived must have been impressive.” Arguing against the consensus, John Sekora maintains that the work should be viewed not as autobiography at all but rather as “the first, comprehensive personal history of American slavery.” This book ends with William L. Andrews’s vision of Douglass as “the country’s black Jeremiah,” working to bring on the Civil War.

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Introduction

A rereading of the *Narrative of the Life of Frederick Douglass* gives the impression that the book could have been called *A Slave Is Being Beaten*. The *Narrative* is clearly Douglass's best writing, though wildly uneven, and has considerable force as a fragment of autobiography. Setting aside moral and historical considerations, the book's chief strength is its frightening insight into the erotic psychology of slaveholding, which it exposes as not being wholly unlike the sexual motivations for running a death camp. The peculiar institution of the American South is revealed as a grand version of the economic problem of sadism, or the vicissitudes of the Southern drive. Douglass's poignant account of his relation to his mother is at once the most eloquent paragraph in the *Narrative* and the deliberate introduction to the theme of white sadism that will unify the work:

I never saw my mother, to know her as such, more than four or five times in my life; and each of these times was very short in duration, and at night. She was hired by a Mr. Stewart, who lived about twelve miles from my home. She made her journeys to see me in the night, travelling the whole distance on foot, after the performance of her day's work. She was a field hand, and a whipping is the penalty of not being in the field at sunrise, unless a slave has special permission from his or her master to the contrary—a permission which they seldom get, and one that gives to him the proud name of being a kind master. I do not recollect of ever seeing my mother by the light of day. She was with me in the night. She would lie down with me, and get me to sleep, but long before I waked she was gone. Very little communication ever took place be-

tween us. Death soon ended what little we could have while she lived, and with it her hardships and suffering. She died when I was about seven years old, on one of my master's farms, near Lee's Mill. I was not allowed to be present during her illness, at her death, or burial. She was gone long before I knew any thing about it. 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.

"She was with me in the night," but whipped if not in the field at dawn. Douglass's white father, perhaps his master, is even more an absence, except as a universal image of guilt and sorrow, master and father coming together as a composite image of the American Inferno:

Called thus suddenly away, she left me without the slightest intimation of who my father was. The whisper that my master was my father, may or may not be true; and, true or false, it is of but little consequence to my purpose whilst the fact remains, in all its glaring odiousness, that slaveholders have ordained, and by law established, that the children of slave women shall in all cases follow the condition of their mothers; and this is done too obviously to administer to their own lusts, and make a gratification of their wicked desires profitable as well as pleasurable; for by this cunning arrangement, the slaveholder, in cases not a few, sustains to his slaves the double relation of master and father.

I know of such cases; and it is worthy of remark that such slaves invariably suffer greater hardships, and have more to contend with, than others. They are, in the first place, a constant offence to their mistress. She is ever disposed to find fault with them; they can seldom do any thing to please her; she is never better pleased than when she sees them under the lash, especially when she suspects her husband of showing to his mulatto children favors which he withholds from his black slaves. The master is frequently compelled to sell this class of his slaves, out of deference to the feelings of his white wife; and, cruel as the

deed may strike any one to be, for a man to sell his own children to human flesh-mongers, it is often the dictate of humanity for him to do so; for, unless he does this, he must not only whip them himself, but must stand by and see one white son tie up his brother, of but few shades darker complexion than himself, and ply the gory lash to his naked back; and if he lisp one word of disapproval, it is set down to his parental partiality, and only makes a bad matter worse, both for himself and the slave whom he would protect and defend.

Douglass's rhetoric, though a touch uncontrolled, has just enough irony to qualify as authentic literary language, particularly whenever the issue is Southern Protestantism, then a most peculiar variety of Christianity. The memorable personages in the *Narrative* are those great Protestants of the lash: Plummer, Severe, Gore, Lanman, Bondly, Auld, and Covey, a sevenfold whose very names are suggestive of Dickensian villains. These seven reverberate in the reader's recollection as being worthy of the defendants' dock at Nuremberg or Jerusalem. The *Narrative* is a catalog of the victims of atrocities, from Douglass's Aunt Hester, whose master "would whip her to make her scream, and whip her to make her hush," through Demby, whose "mangled body sank out of sight, and blood and brains marked the water where he had stood," on to Douglass's wife's cousin, a girl of fifteen, beaten to death by Mrs. Hicks for falling asleep while baby-sitting. As this litany of horrors goes on, the almost numbed reader comes to see that Douglass's tone is remarkably temperate for someone whose childhood memories begin with the trauma of his aunt's shrieks of pain: "It was the blood-stained gate, the entrance to the hell of slavery, through which I was about to pass."

Skepticism arises when readers wonder at the economic losses sustained by slaveholders by the mutilation and even extinction of so much valuable property. Douglass, constantly and grimly aware of the slaveholders' balance between the erotic pleasures of sadism, and the commercial displeasures consequent upon acute gratification, is shrewdly persuasive at depicting how business virtue yields to the perversions of the psyche. His psychological insight is most frightening in his account of the decline of Sophie Auld, initially "a woman of the kindest heart and finest feelings." Upon marrying into

slave-owning, Mrs. Auld soon enough becomes a demon, poisoned by “irresponsible power.” She joins those who, in the parodistic verses that end the *Narrative*, “lay up treasures in the sky, /By making switch and cowskin fly.”

Freud held very complex and subtle theories as to the origins of sadism, and his final speculations upon the relation of sadism to the death drive, beyond the pleasure principle, seem to me the least convincing of his speculations in this dark area. But the *Narrative* is very late Freudian in its vision of the deathliness of the masters. Still, the earlier Freudian explanations of sadism are also served by Douglass’s unflinching rendition of the terrors that he himself had witnessed. Severe, Gore, Covey and the other real versions of Simon Legree lash away in order to introject the image of the father, earthly and heavenly, source of all authority and righteous dealing:

I find, since reading over the foregoing Narrative that I have, in several instances, spoken in such a tone and manner, respecting religion, as may possibly lead those unacquainted with my religious views to suppose me an opponent of all religion. To remove the liability of such misapprehension, I deem it proper to append the following brief explanation. What I have said respecting and against religion, I mean strictly to apply to the *slaveholding religion* of this land, and with no possible reference to Christianity proper; for, between the Christianity of this land, and the Christianity of Christ, I recognize the widest possible difference—so wide, that to receive the one as good, pure, and holy, is of necessity to reject the other as bad, corrupt, and wicked. To be the friend of the one, is of necessity to be the enemy of the other. I love the pure, peaceable, and impartial Christianity of Christ: I therefore hate the corrupt, slaveholding, women-whipping, cradle-plundering, partial and hypocritical Christianity of this land. Indeed, I can see no reason, but the most deceitful one, for calling the religion of this land Christianity. I look upon it as the climax of all misnomers, the boldest of all frauds, and the grossest of all libels. Never was there a clearer case of “stealing the livery of the court of heaven to serve the devil in.” I am filled with unutterable loathing when I contemplate the religious pomp and show, together with the horrible inconsistencies, which every

where surround me. We have men-stealers for ministers, women-whippers for missionaries, and cradle-plunderers for church members. The man who wields the blood-clotted cowskin during the week fills the pulpit on Sunday, and claims to be a minister of the meek and lowly Jesus. The man who robs me of my earnings at the end of each week meets me as a class-leader on Sunday morning, to show me the way of life, and the path of salvation. He who sells my sister, for purposes of prostitution, stands forth as the pious advocate of purity. He who proclaims it a religious duty to read the Bible denies me the right of learning to read the name of the God who made me. He who is the religious advocate of marriage robs whole millions of its sacred influence, and leaves them to the ravages of wholesale pollution. The warm defender of the sacredness of the family relation is the same that scatters whole families,—sundering husbands and wives, parents and children, sisters and brothers,—leaving the hut vacant, and the hearth desolate. We see the thief preaching against theft, and the adulterer against adultery. We have men sold to build churches, women sold to support the gospel, and babies sold to purchase Bibles for the *poor heathen! all for the glory of God and the good of souls!* The slave auctioneer's bell and the church-going bell chime in with each other, and the bitter cries of the heart-broken slave are drowned in the religious shouts of his pious master. Revivals of religion and revivals in the slave-trade go hand in hand together. The slave prison and the church stand near each other. The clanking of fetters and the rattling of chains in the prison, and the pious psalm and solemn prayer in the church, may be heard at the same time. The dealers in the bodies and souls of men erect their stand in the presence of the pulpit, and they mutually help each other. The dealer gives his blood-stained gold to support the pulpit, and the pulpit, in return, covers his infernal business with the garb of Christianity. Here we have religion and robbery the allies of each other—devils dressed in angels' robes, and hell presenting the semblance of paradise.

We have our contemporary instances of Douglass's quiet and strong sentence: "Revivals of religion and revivals in the slave-trade

go hand in hand together.” Our current Frederick Douglass is James Baldwin, and his essays provide adumbrations of Douglass’s emphasis. The psychic introjection of the image of the father requires a blood-sacrifice, and such ritual still goes on among us. Melanie Klein grimly observes that: “The early stages of the Oedipus conflict are dominated by sadism.” Her general conclusion as to our universal “sadistic appropriation and exploration of the mother’s body and of the outside world” is amply supported by Douglass’s epic *Narrative*, with its procession of suffering substituting for the Southern mother’s body.

Identity and Art in Frederick Douglass's *Narrative*

Albert E. Stone

"America has the mournful honor of adding a new department to the literature of civilization—the autobiographies of escaped slaves." This announcement by the Reverend Ephraim Peabody, a New Bradford minister and abolitionist, appeared in the *Christian Examiner and Religious Miscellany* for July 1849, prefacing a long discussion of five slave narratives which had been published during the preceding four years. The personal histories were those of Henry Watson, Lewis and Milton Clarke, William Wells Brown, Josiah Henson, and Frederick Douglass. "We place these volumes without hesitation among the most remarkable productions of the age—" Peabody continued, "remarkable as being pictures of slavery by the slave, remarkable as disclosing under a new light the mixed elements of American civilization, and not less remarkable as a vivid exhibition of the force and working of the native love of freedom in the individual mind." This appreciation of the emotional power and cultural significance of slave narratives was indeed prophetic. Though successors have widened his frame of reference and modified some of his genteel judgments, Ephraim Peabody remains one of the first white critics to pay serious attention to a new form of autobiography in America. Some years later in 1863, one of the new black writers he had discussed became himself an annalist of the Negro. In *The Black Man: His Antecedents, His Genius, and His Achievements* William

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Wells Brown cited these narratives as the first black voices in American literature. Moreover, like Peabody, Brown singled out Frederick Douglass as the master of this new literature. "The narrative of his life, published in 1845, gave a new impetus to the black man's literature," he wrote. "All other stories of fugitive slaves faded away before the beautifully written, highly descriptive, and thrilling memoir of Frederick Douglass." Peabody and Brown announce early what history has since confirmed: the *Narrative of Frederick Douglass, an American Slave, Written by Himself* is at once an important cultural document and an unusual work of autobiographical art.

By 1849 the slave narrative had already become one of the more popular forms of political literature in the North. Peabody reinforced but did not create Douglass's fame. The *Narrative* had already gone through seven editions and Benjamin Quarles has estimated that by 1850 it had sold some 30,000 copies here and in the British Isles. Brown's narrative had sold 8,000 copies by 1849 and Henson's *Life* was soon to become even more famous—and notorious—as a result of the publicity linking him as "the original Uncle Tom" to Harriet Beecher Stowe's best-seller; within Henson's lifetime the three versions of his autobiography would sell 100,000 copies. Well before the appearance of *Uncle Tom's Cabin*, thousands of American, Canadian, and British readers had already formed impressions of chattel slavery in the Southern states by reading these personal histories as they appeared in magazines, in twenty-five-cent pamphlets, and in books costing a dollar or a dollar and a half. As Charles H. Nichols points out in *Many Thousand Gone*, the definitive history of the slave narrative, these were the first American autobiographies widely read by a popular audience—and for some of the same reasons which have made *The Autobiography of Malcolm X* a best-seller today.

Since the slave narrative flourished in close connection to the abolition movement and appeared (and declined) chiefly in the three decades before the Civil War, the modern reader tends to be concerned, as Nichols is, with the historical context of these books—their composition and publication, their reception and impact, their claims to historical truth or accuracy. Douglass and his fellow fugitives did indeed create an important literature of protest and propaganda. But to assert this is also to recognize that historicity cannot be divorced from other considerations equally important in assessing the permanent cultural value of these works—consideration of liter-

ary style and rhetorical strategy, of psychological revelation and motivation. As autobiographies, the *Narrative* and other similar works occupy the territory between history and art, biography and fiction, memory and imagination. When the ex-slave asked the question (or was urged to do so by a white sponsor or collaborator) which all autobiographers ask: "Why am I writing the story of my life?" the immediate answer was plain: to describe the experience of being a chattel and then *not* being one so vividly that the white reader would be moved to destroy the oppressive institution. To this end, the most effective means was to create a convincing impression of historical veracity and verisimilitude. Thus the editor of Douglass's second autobiography, *My Bondage and My Freedom*, declared: "the reader's attention is not invited to a work of art, but to a work of FACTS. There is not a fictitious name or place in the whole volume . . . ; every transaction therein described actually transpired." Telling the unvarnished truth about verifiable experience and re-creating thereby the self in relation to time, history and change, is an aim of all authentic memoirs, but one which had a particular value for the writer and editor of slave narratives.

Yet all history is, as J. H. Hexter has shown, a deliberate artistic creation. Slave narratives like Douglass's exhibit a variety of literary devices for recording a past, persuading belief, and motivating action. Capitalizing FACTS above is one simple instance of such a rhetorical tactic. Other techniques were devised for the strategy of "sticking to the facts," for in recording the bare details of life as a slave—including the pathos and tragedy of slave auctions and family separations, and drama and excitement of escape to freedom—the writer could hardly avoid the appearance of fiction or the atmosphere of melodrama. Thus the line between autobiography and fiction became a fine one, as is suggested not only by the title of Josiah Henson's second autobiography, *Truth Stranger Than Fiction* (1858), but also by the early appearance of actual romances or pseudohistories like Richard Hildreth's *The Slave: or Memoirs of Archy Moore* (1836). The later novels of Mrs. Stowe and William Wells Brown derived much of their force from the reader's realization that actual life histories existed to authenticate what the novelist had imagined.

If historical truth could have an effect stronger and stranger than fiction, one way to achieve this effect was not to explore the whole system of slavery but instead to exploit the natural focus of autobiography upon private experience and the single self. This, too,

provided a fiction-like perspective. How the individual slave became a man in the act of escape was both plot and moral of the slave narrative. In this respect Douglass's *Narrative* is the exemplary work in the genre. By forging a portrait of himself, rather than simply writing history or abolitionist propaganda, Douglass reveals himself a true autobiographer. He also distinguishes his achievement from that of other ex-slave writers like Harriet Jacobs, author of *Incidents in the Life of a Slave Girl* (1861) and Charles Ball, author of *Fifty Years in Chains* (1837). Harriet Jacobs, with assistance from Lydia Maria Child, dramatizes the experience of slavery by means of fictional names, dialogue, sentimental language, and a melodramatic plot of fear, seduction, and flight; hers is personal history under the influence of sentimental romance. Ball's account, on the other hand, reads more like history than autobiography, for its tone and perspective draw attention away from the narrator and his developing identity, toward the generalized facts of life under the brutalizing institution. More successfully than either of these, Douglass saw and exploited the crucial difference between autobiography and its allied forms, history and fiction. As I shall seek to demonstrate, he would have agreed with modern critics of autobiography like F. R. Hart who emphasize the distinctive aim of autobiography. Hart observes that "in understanding fiction one seeks an imaginative grasp of another's meaning; in understanding personal history one seeks an imaginative comprehension of another's historic identity. 'Meaning' and 'identity' are not the same kind of reality and do not make the same demands." Identity through history and art, self as the container of meaning—in these terms, I would argue, lies a proper understanding of Frederick Douglass's *Narrative*.

Though later readers have followed Peabody and Brown in accepting the preeminence of this slave narrative, nevertheless the true artistry of the *Narrative* has yet to be fully analyzed and appreciated. This is surprising in light of Douglass's fame as a public figure, which has been recorded in several biographies. Among the critics and literary scholars who have contributed to a richer realization of Douglass's achievements as writer are Vernon Loggins, Benjamin Brawley, Arna Bontemps, Charles H. Nichols, Benjamin Quarles, Jean F. Yellin, and Houston A. Baker, Jr. Each has illuminated certain aspects of the *Narrative*; none, however, has exhausted its deceptive richness of language, style, and structure. A typical recent discussion is Jean Fagan Yellin's in *The Intricate Knot*. It is, she affirms, "a classic