



EARLY

AFRICAN-

AMERICAN

CLASSICS

Edited and with an Introduction  
by Anthony Appiah

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B A N T A M   C L A S S I C

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first published in 1845

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*The Autobiography of an Ex-Coloured Man* first published in 1912

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W.E.B. DU BOIS, author of *The Souls of Black Folk*, was born in 1868 in Massachusetts, educated at Fisk and Harvard universities, and taught at Wilberforce and Atlanta universities. A pioneer in sociology and historiography, he founded the Niagara Movement (1905), a forerunner of the NAACP (1909), and became the editor of the NAACP periodical *Crisis*. In 1961 he joined the Communist party and moved to Ghana, where he died in 1963.

FREDERICK DOUGLASS, author of *Narrative of the Life of Frederick Douglass, an American Slave*, was born in 1818 and grew up in Baltimore. He worked as a slave on a plantation before escaping, giving himself a new name, learning to write, and eventually lecturing with great success all over the North and in Britain, editing a newspaper, advising President Lincoln, and serving as a federal administrator and as U.S. minister and consul general to Haiti before his death in 1895.

HARRIET A. JACOBS, abolitionist, activist, feminist, and author of *Incidents in the Life of a Slave Girl: Written by Herself*, was born a slave in North Carolina around 1813. She was orphaned as a child, and when she was a teen had two children by a local white lawyer. In 1835 she faked an escape to the North, hiding in a nearby attic where she stayed for seven years until she went north in 1842. There she placed her daughter in a private school and her son in an apprenticeship as a printer, and published her famous account.

BOOKER T. WASHINGTON, author of *Up from Slavery*, was the greatest black educator of the nineteenth century. Born in 1856 in Virginia, he worked in the coal mines of West Virginia as a child. At sixteen, he went to the Hampton Institute in Virginia, where he worked his way through school as a janitor, and eventually returned as a teacher. In 1881 he founded Tuskegee Institute in Alabama, and became the most powerful black man in America, confidant of Carnegie and Rockefeller, and adviser to presidents until he died in 1915.

JAMES WELDON JOHNSON, author of *The Autobiography of an Ex-Coloured Man*, was born in Florida in 1871, graduated from Atlanta University in 1894, and became the first black to be admitted to the bar in Duval County, Florida. He had a successful second career as a songwriter in New York, as well as writing poetry and essays, serving as consul to Venezuela and Nicaragua and field secretary of the NAACP, editing a newspaper, and teaching literature at Fisk University until his death in a car accident in 1938.

# INTRODUCTION

ANTHONY APPIAH

THE "American Negro," W.E.B. Du Bois writes in the *Souls of Black Folk*,

ever feels his twoness—an American, a Negro; two souls, two thoughts, two unreconciled strivings. . . .

The history of the American Negro is the history of this strife,—this longing to attain self-conscious manhood, to merge his double self into a better and truer self. . . . He simply wishes to make it possible for a man to be both a Negro and an American. . . .

It is always important, then, to remember that African-American writing is American. The African-American classics gathered here—Frederick Douglass's 1845 *Narrative*, Harriet Jacobs's *Incidents in the Life of a Slave Girl*, Booker T. Washington's *Up from Slavery*, and James Weldon Johnson's *Autobiography of an Ex-Colored Man*—have an American literary and cultural context without which they cannot be understood. Indeed, as we shall see, the narratives of self-fashioning that make up this book are American in their broadest outlines and their minutest details. But it is, of course, crucial too to recall that they are the writings of black men and women. In this brief introduction, I should like to point to some of the major features of these four texts—some they share, some in

which they differ—and to the cultural and literary contexts, both American, in general, and African-American in particular, that helped to form them.

It is not too much to say that the popular literature of the Christian world, since the discovery of America, or, at least for the last two hundred years, has been anti-Negro.<sup>1</sup>

So wrote the West Indian black nationalist, Edward W. Blyden, in *Fraser's Magazine* in 1875; and we know all too well that a substantial part of the “anti-Negro” argument was that “Negro” men and women could not master those “sublimar” realms of literate culture and the arts that constituted the highest aspirations of a middle-class Christian culture. The “evidence” proffered for this proposition until the middle of the nineteenth century consisted in large part of the absence of any substantial body of writing by Africans and African-Americans: the few writings by black people of which most Euro-American thinkers were aware they dismissed as derivative or derisory.

Yet if we ask why so little published writing by African-Americans remains to us from before the middle of the nineteenth century, it cannot be out of place to remark that the great majority of black people in the New World until the Emancipation Proclamation were legally prohibited from learning to read and write. The literate slave who read defenses of slavery that assumed the incapacity of the Negro was thus in a double bind. He or she knew that writing—and particularly writing well—was the only effective way to refute this argument; but he or she also knew that writing was forbidden, often on pain—a pain the slave knew well—of the lash. The slaves-turned-writers—Douglass, Jacobs, even Washington—came to writing

with the recognition that the very fact of their writing was an act of rebellion, made more substantial by its being published. It is worth noting that the title pages of the two works that were published before emancipation carry the emphatic stipulation "written by himself," "written by herself."

The major goal of these authors was to speak for black Americans, to America and, in particular, to white America. Because these narratives were addressed to an America that did not believe in the ability of the Negro, the authors thought of themselves, not only as witnesses to the condition of black people, but as exemplars—living, breathing, and, above all, writing refutations of the slanders of racism. Even though Johnson's *Autobiography* is a personal narrative that begins after slavery—"I was born," the narrator says, "in a little town of Georgia a few years after the close of the Civil War"—its primary goal was similar, perhaps even more ambitious because of the time in which he was writing. Johnson set out to show how African-Americans could now achieve new heights. He demonstrated—though not merely through the act of writing, but also through the character of his protagonist, who is a fine classical pianist and composer—the fact that black people were indeed capable of the highest achievement; while, at the same time, exposing, like his literary predecessors, the pain of the victims of racism.

Because the argument for racial oppression—whether it was slavery or segregation—depended crucially on the claim that black people could not contribute to high culture, every work by an African-American writer, writing *as* an African-American, was bound to be seen as an argument against that racial oppression. It was not just the achievements of a Douglass or a Jacobs or a Washington, but the fact that they wrote for themselves that mattered.



This is why the question of authorship—whether these books were really written by the African-Americans who claimed to have written them—was so central to their reception at the time. That the events recounted in Douglass's *Narrative* and Washington's *Autobiography* are largely historical, those in Jacobs's account are lightly fictionalized to protect its author, and Johnson's is a work of fiction that does not correspond to the details of its author's life is, for these purposes, not the central issue.

To remark this common set of goals is by no means to deny what is distinctive in each of these narratives. Each protagonist is an exemplar in his or her own way; each offers a life with its own moral, and these various morals reflect the different times in which they were written and the different circumstances of their authors.

Because the intellectual incapacity of the Negro was supposed to show itself especially in the failures of African and African-American literary productivity, it was almost inevitable that the first African-American genre—the slave narrative—would be a form of autobiography. For autobiography aims above all to establish the existence of the author-protagonist as an autonomous agent, a person whose life is worthy of interest, whose experiences and choices matter to us as readers. The African-American writes him or herself into being, by claiming mastery of the privileged sphere of literary production.

Before the Civil War had ended what had come to be called the "peculiar institution," more than a hundred former slaves, men and women with a great variety of experiences and substantially differing literary talents, had written narratives recording their suffering as slaves. The slave narrative is a polemical genre; it makes no bones

about it. Its aim is to persuade the reader of the evils of slavery: and unless we recall the real urgency of this objective—unless we remember, for example, that the Fugitive Slave Law was passed by Congress as late as 1850—we cannot fully appreciate the language that the finest of the narratives, the language of Douglass and Jacobs, brings to its polemical task. And nowhere is that language more masterfully handled than in the *Narrative* of Frederick Douglass.

Frederick Douglass was already an unusual person by the time he published the *Narrative of the Life of Frederick Douglass, an American Slave* in 1845. He went on, of course, to be one of the most famous Americans of his age. But by 1845, he had already escaped from slavery, taken a new name, and begun to lecture, with great success, to large (usually white) antislavery audiences all over the North. Born Frederick Augustus Washington Bailey in February 1818 at Holm Hill Farm in Talbot County, Maryland, Douglass was the child of a slave mother whom he was barely allowed to know and a white father, whose identity he merely suspected. Raised, until the age of eight, by his grandmother on a plantation, he was transferred to the family of Mr. and Mrs. Thomas Auld in the city of Baltimore, where Mrs. Auld began, against the laws of the state, to teach him to read. Though Thomas Auld forbade her to continue—because, he said, it would make Douglass unfit for slavery—Douglass carried on by himself, gleaning what he could from white playmates in the streets of Baltimore, and watching “ship carpenters, after hewing, and getting a piece of timber ready for use, write on the timber the name of that part of the ship for which it was intended.”

At the age of sixteen, when his first master died, Douglass was returned to work as a field hand on a plantation, where

he was sent to a “slave-breaker,” because he was already displaying—in part as a result of the greater freedom he had experienced as an urban slave—the independence of spirit that was to lead him, finally, to escape from slavery. In one of the most powerful passages of his *Narrative*, Douglass describes how he finally resisted the beatings of Edward Covey, the slave-breaker: “You have seen how a man was made a slave,” he writes; “you shall see how a slave was made a man.”

When, after this episode, Douglass was returned to Baltimore, he was allowed to apprentice himself to a caulker in the shipyards, paying all of his wages to his master; but he also learned to write, apparently by copying the letters written by carpenters on timbers in the Baltimore shipyards.

When a piece of timber was intended for the larboard side, it would be marked thus—“L.” When a piece was for the starboard side, it would be marked thus—“S.” . . . I soon learned the names of these letters. . . . I immediately commenced copying them.

Finally, on September 3, 1838, Douglass escaped, using forged papers written for him by Anna Murray,<sup>2</sup> a free black woman, who became, almost at once, his first wife. Douglass settled in New Bedford, Massachusetts, where he was hospitably received by Mr. Nathan Johnson who chose for him his new name of Douglass. Racial prejudice prevented Douglass from plying his trade as a caulker, and he made a living as a laborer. Three years later, much influenced by William Lloyd Garrison’s antislavery weekly, *The Liberator*, Douglass attended a meeting of the Massachusetts Antislavery Society where he was asked to speak of his life as a slave.

We know that Douglass's account made a substantial impression, for the society took him on as a lecturer, paying him to travel the country speaking against slavery out of his experiences as a slave. The *Narrative* was, in essence, part of this antislavery work, but its publication allowed for the possibility that he would be recaptured and returned to his master. As a result, Douglass traveled to Britain to lecture against slavery, and there, too, he was extremely well received. While in England, British antislavery activists purchased Douglass from Auld: from then on, he was a free man, speaking and writing for his enslaved brothers and sisters.

Douglass went on to work as a lecturer, journalist, and editor, campaigning for the rights of blacks and women, publishing the *North Star* (which became *Frederick Douglass's Paper*) in Rochester, New York, from 1847 to 1860. During the Civil War, he worked as an adviser to President Lincoln, campaigning to recruit free blacks and former slaves to the Union Army: his own two sons signed up for black regiments in Massachusetts. Throughout reconstruction, Douglass campaigned for the extension of full civil rights to the freedmen, and he served Republican administrations as assistant secretary to the Santo Domingo Commission, in 1871; as marshal and, later, recorder of deeds to the District of Columbia, from 1877 to 1886; and finally as U.S. minister and consul general to Haiti, from 1889 to 1891. Douglass died in Washington in 1895.

Though Douglass revised and extended his life story twice more in his life, publishing *My Bondage and My Freedom* in 1855 and the *Life and Times of Frederick Douglass* in 1882, it is the *Narrative* that occupies a special place in

American and African-American letters. This is true in large part because of the power it derives from its extraordinary compression. In less than a hundred pages of vigorously eloquent English, Douglass both establishes the horrors of slavery and lays claim to his own life. The slave who was forbidden to write claims writing as his occupation regardless of his master and the law. Even the more extravagant passages, whose grandiloquence will strike some contemporary tastes as excessive—the apostrophe to the “beautiful vessels, robed in purest white” on the Chesapeake stands out here—have a rigor that demands respect. The opposition between the sailing ships, “loosed from [their] moorings, . . . free . . . freedom’s swift-winged angels” and Douglass “fast in chains, . . . a slave . . . confined in bands of iron” is more than a casual metaphor; it prepares the way for Douglass’s escape through the shipyard to literacy and freedom.

And sometimes, as here in a passage that places the suffering of his grandmother in the wider context of the anguish of slave motherhood, Douglass writes sentences that could hardly be improved:

The hearth is desolate. The unconscious children, who once sang and danced in her presence, are gone. She gropes her way in the darkness of age, for a drink of water. Instead of the voices of her children, she hears by day the moans of the dove, and by night the screams of the hideous owl. All is gloom.

If, in the end, there is one rhetorical feature above all that gives the *Narrative* its power, it is, surely, that it does not need to speak out against slavery: in recounting, in his own written words, the life of this singular slave, it made a case against slavery more powerful than a thousand appeals to

abstract principle. As a correspondent to the *National Anti-Slavery Standard* wrote (in discussing Harriet Jacobs's *Incidents* in 1861): "They are the strongest witnesses who leave the summings up to the judge, and the verdict to the jury."<sup>3</sup>

Where Douglass's *Narrative* had begun "I was born in Tuckahoe, near Hillsborough..." Harriet Jacobs starts *Incidents in the Life of a Slave Girl* (published sixteen years later in 1861) with a direct address to the reader: "Reader, be assured this narrative is no fiction." And this more personal mode, with its appeal to an acknowledged reader, reflects the fact that Harriet Jacobs's experiences are those of an African-American woman. For Jacobs's writing draws not only on the traditions of the slave narrative genre but also on the—then still largely white—traditions of the sentimental novel, which is, of course, the exemplary genre of nineteenth-century women's writing. And it is in this tradition that the book's opening is rooted. Jacobs writes at the end of her narrative (once more addressing the imagined reader):

Reader, my story ends with freedom; not in the usual way, with marriage.

But whereas this is, indeed, "the usual way" of the slave narrative (which must end with freedom), it *is* the usual ending of the sentimental novel. And it is to the mores of the sentimental novel and its readers that Jacobs addresses the passages in which she excuses herself for what she euphemistically refers to as her "headlong plunge" into unwed motherhood.

O virtuous reader! You never knew what it is to be a slave; to be entirely unprotected by law or custom; to have the laws reduce you to the condition of a chattel, entirely subject to the will of another. . . . I know I did wrong. . . . Still in looking back, calmly, on the events of my life, I feel that the slave woman ought not to be judged by the same standards as others.

What is clear in this passage, as in many others, is that *Incidents* is addressed to an audience of free, white women; and its language places the author, oddly, on the same side of the moral divide as these imagined readers, even as it describes an experience so radically different from theirs. In particular, whenever "Linda Brent" (as Jacobs called herself in the narrative) converses with a black person, her own voice remains that of a middle-class white speaker, while her interlocutor is trapped in the conventions of transcribing "Negro dialect." The result is sometimes, unintentionally, comical. Here is an exchange between Linda and Betty, the black woman servant of the white woman who first conceals Linda. Linda has just told her that another of the servants had been trying to get into the room where she has been concealed.

"Tut! tut! chile!" exclaimed Betty, "she ain't seen notin', nor hearn notin'. She only 'spects something. Dat's all. She wants to fine out who hab cut and make my gownd. But she won't nebber know. Dat's sartin. I'll get missis to fix her."

I reflected a moment, and said, "Betty, I must leave here tonight."

"Do as you tink best, poor chile," she replied. "I'se mighty 'fraid dat 'ere nigger vill pop on you some time."

If there is a black and a white voice in this exchange, the white voice is surely Linda's: and, bracketed by the energetic play of Betty's language, Linda sounds stilted, even prissy. What is explicitly true in Jacobs's narrative is implicitly true of Douglass's. The slave narrative is addressed to those who had it in their power to act against slavery: and they, of course, were white.

If *Incidents* does not always fully reconcile the conventions of slave narrative and sentimental novel, it surely reflects the tensions of trying to argue against slavery and the oppression of women at the same time. Indeed, the scholar Valerie Smith has suggested that we see the tensions in the narrative as exposing the inadequacies of each genre: of the (masculine) slave narrative as a medium for discussing women's rights, and of the (white) sentimental novel as a framework for addressing the specific condition of the black woman.<sup>4</sup> As Smith says: "Her story is not what is yielded up after one superimposes the story of (white) woman's experience over that of black (male) experience. Rather, her unique cultural experience requires her to question the assumptions of literary conventions."<sup>5</sup> If there is another central contrast between Jacobs's narrative and Douglass's, it is that for Douglass to be free is "to be a man." It is through an act of physical resistance—the fight with Covey—that Douglass begins his psychic escape from bondage. For Jacobs, on the other hand, freedom is, above all, freedom from sexual harassment, freedom to be a mother. While Douglass is preoccupied with his own liberation, which will enable him to struggle for the liberation of all slaves, Jacobs's concern is with her children. When she seeks to indict slavery, she often does it through expressions of concern for her young ones: "I would ten thousand times rather that my children should be the half-starved



paupers of Ireland than to be the most pampered among the slaves of America.”

Who, then, was the author of *Incidents*, the woman who called herself “Linda Brent,” the slave mother who struggled mightily so that her children could be free?

Harriet Jacobs, abolitionist, activist, and feminist, was born a slave in Edenton, North Carolina. Like most slaves, she had no precise record of her birth, but she was probably born in 1813.<sup>6</sup> Orphaned as a child, she was willed by her first mistress (who died when Jacobs was eleven) to Matilda Norcom, the three-year-old daughter of a neighboring doctor’s family. Dr. Norcom subjected her to persistent sexual harassment almost from the first, but she consistently resisted him. In her teens she had two children—a girl, Louisa Matilda, and a boy, Joseph—by a local white lawyer, and the protection of these children became her major preoccupation for much of the next two decades, eventually leading her to escape from slavery. In 1835, Jacobs was transferred from the house in Edenton to work at Auburn, one of Norcom’s plantations, because she continued to refuse his proposal that he set her up as his “mistress.” There she heard that he planned to move her children away from the house of her grandmother—a free woman, who plays an important role in *Incidents*—and decided that she must escape in order that they should not be subjected to plantation slavery.

In what is surely the most extraordinary episode in an extraordinary life, Jacobs then faked an escape to the North, disappearing, in fact, into an attic at her grandmother’s house. There she remained for nearly seven years, able to watch her children grow. She arranged that the children should both be bought by their father, and that