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Personhood and Tragic Testimony: How Frederick Douglass Shaped his Abolition Narrative in *My Bondage and My Freedom*

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Abstract

In 1855's My Bondage and My Freedom, Frederick Douglass refashions the experiences he first set down in his previous autobiography Narrative. It is the popularity and reception of the first text which encouraged Douglass to pen a revised version, aiming as it did more towards the educated white elite who favoured the cause of abolition, both within the shores of the United States and beyond. This paper will attempt to shed light on the episodes which Douglass highlights towards the cause of abolitionist slave narrative tradition, while also looking at the power of his personal testimony which broke down in detail the wide implications of the 'peculiar institution.' The duality of art and authenticity will be parsed to understand fully the consequences of Douglass's evolution as the 'Representative American man' in the backdrop of the struggle for emancipation, and the foregrounding of an ideology of equitable rights through the vessel of affirmative testimonials.
Keywords: autobiography, narration, enslavement, abolition, representation, dialectic.

Introduction

My Bondage and My Freedom (1855) is the second version of Frederick Douglass's three autobiographies, and one of the most highly-regarded texts in the genre of abolition slave narratives. Critics are divided as to the versality and efficacy of the best written text amongst *My Bondage* and the previous *Narrative of the Life of Frederick Douglass*. James Matlack holds the first version as the authoritative text due to a "superior technique with which Douglass told his tale." (15), whereas Eric Sundquist writes that the second version is marked by a prolificity of purpose that can be seen in the style of the rhetoric employed, especially in the "forceful invocation of republican principles and the rights of revolution" (1). Nevertheless, both agree that the impact of the wide-ranging success of both texts went far in helping create the image of the Representative man of letters which Douglass later fashioned for himself. Referring to the introduction written by James McCune Smith for *My Bondage*, Sundquist doubles down on the importance of character found in this particular version of Douglass's text, that aspect of characterization which singles it out as "an American book, for Americans, in the fullest sense of the idea." (Douglass). Douglass gained renown as a speaker and autobiographer, but it is in the contextualization of his experience as an enslaved person that his narration stands out amongst those of many other escaped slaves. Sundquist refers to the narratives of such as Moses Grandy, Moses Roper, Lunsford Lane, etc. as being popular at the time but somewhat

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limited in the treatment it gave to the enslaved experience (3). While these rather concentrated on the depravity meted out to slaves and the violence of slavery, Douglass's narrative may be said to hold an interplay of the moral and political crises of the time. In his material, carved as it was from the many speeches he gave at abolition gatherings throughout the North and later in his journey to England, one can find a constant struggle to articulate the lived truth of the slave's life,and how even the access to education was hardly enough to tear oneself successfully away from the shackles of bonded labour.

Many blacks spoke of the experience of enslavement, but few presented these in the sophisticated manner of rhetoric employed by Douglass. The "double consciousness" which W.E.B Du Bois was later to formulate in 1903 could be seen practiced in the daily questions Douglass put to himself, divided between his selfhood as both an American and a "Negro". Even after having escaped the tentacles of slavery, Douglass never considered his work unfinished. He was acutely aware of the responsibility residing in him and the power of his hold over audiences who flocked to his speeches in Rochester or in England. Always aware that he was at the mercy of the Fugitive Slave Act and other segregation laws of the time, Douglass yet managed successfully to shake off the "patronizing manipulation by white Abolitionists" (Matlack 17) who wanted to take care of the philosophizing of the facts. The assertion of self-independence which Douglass displayed with the decision to publish his own life history may be said to be the turning point in his life as an abolitionist. In order to understand the sophisticated literacy which Douglass displayed for a man with his background, this paper will do a close reading of *My Bondage and My Freedom* to interrogate certain episodes which left an indelible mark on Douglass and contributed to understanding the 'peculiar institution' more deeply. The aim will be to examine how Douglass combined art and authenticity in the representation of the black man as a man like any other in the United States, with a right to demand the rights which hold all people equal before the law.

The Fate of the Enslaved Feminine in Douglass' Boyhood

Douglass was born in the poor district of Tuckahoe in the state of Maryland in 1818, and his fondest remembrance of his childhood is the time spent in the company of his grandmother. Douglass details how his grandma was held in high esteem in the estate on which they lived, which belonged to one Colonel Lloyd. While detailing the scant belongings of his grandparents, Douglass comments at length on the large number of children in the family and how they did not belong to the grandmother, but rather were the children who had lost their parents to slavery's separation. The dehumanization resulting from long and endless prospects of separation disheartened not only the elderly, but also the children. It is a telling experience when he is introduced to other children of his age at the Lloyd plantation, children who are supposed to be his brothers and sisters, but with whom he feels no connection. Moreover, Douglass has his first taste of deceit/betrayal when he is left behind at the plantation by his grandma, something he had not believed possible despite the small rumours gaining ground. Douglass does not hold back from commenting on the plight of small children and the loneliness they feel on the first forced remove from their loved ones. He furthermore talks about the state of slave-mothers – mothers with children but without the right to a family. This episodic abandonment affects the narrator deeply.

Furthermore, the description of his mother shows his first acquaintance with books and reading – he compares her figure to that of a sketch in Prichard's Natural History of Man (Douglass 55).

Jenny Franchot, in her discussion of the female figures in Douglass's life, iterates the connection between slavery and black motherhood for the narrator (158-159). In choosing the portrait of a sketch in Prichard as a likelihood for his mother's profile, Douglass betrays a propensity to draw a parallel with a face "that deftly placed her at the origin of civilization and provided him with a royal ancestry" (159). For Douglass, the profile of his mother is also contrasted in his mind with the first atrocity he witnesses on the Lloyd estate – the whipping of Aunt Esther when she fails to pay heed to repeated warnings to cease all acquaintance with her lover. Franchot argues that bearing witness to a cruel and unjust punishment forces several truths on Douglass – a new meaning to the ontology of the self as slave (142). The laceration of Esther's back is a terrible metaphor for the enslaved slave-mother and all enslaved women, doubly breaking their backs under the combined weightage of endless servitude and female subservience. The figure of the whipped/flogged female is at the heart of the evils of slavery and another example of the "silenced figure of the slave mother forced to endure rape, concubinage, and the theft of her children." (Franchot 141). The experience of the child is wrapped under layers of further inhumane treatment, but one may argue that it plays a major part in the subjecthood-formation of Douglass in his later years, especially as he relies on his memory to remember and recall both the punitive action inflicted on Esther and the dismemberment of ties with his mother and grandmother. In fact, Douglass is afraid that a similar fate (as that of Esther) may soon await him.

To the whipping of Esther is also the added many similar yet discrete punishments meted out to one Nelly and Henny, by the overseer Sevier and by Master Thomas Auld, respectively. Douglass emphasizes the complete limitations on the slave-woman's body and spirit – no amount of resistance could go unpunished, but must be controlled by the white male master. The woman's body, as also seen in the case of Henny (who was physically disabled) is a site of acquisition, where the dialectic of white ownership and black bondage is played out with clockwork precision. Teresa Goddu offers a gothic reading of the performative quality of Esther's whipping by terming it "the southern gothic spectacle of slavery … It offers the reader the villain and the maiden but transposes their conventional associations: the black villain is white and the virginal, innocent maiden is a black slave" (Goddu 137). This scene is articulated in such a manner for the Northern antebellum readers so as to invite their voyeurism when identifying with the hidden figure of young Douglass. The gothic as spectacle is writ large on this scene where Goddu draws a parallel between the strikes or blows inflicted on Esther's body and the way this scene flinchingly affects the boy Douglass (137). The scene is both fascinating and repulsive, inviting all readers to be a part of the dematerializing spectatorship at play on a slave plantation. First Esther, then Nelly, then Henny, are all part of the gothic sensationalism which haunts the bodies of enslaved women. Douglass, recounting these experiences later on in his life first as stump-mic speaker and then an orator of great renown, masterfully weaves the power dynamic into a slave narrative to fully bring the unjust and degrading system to the notice of abolitionists worldwide.

Baltimore and the First Brush with the Spirit of Abolition

Douglass leaves for Baltimore, for the homestead of Hugh Auld and his wife Sophia, at the age of ten. He is overjoyed on leaving behind the horrors of the Lloyd plantation and his initial treatment at the hands of a kind mistress seem to somehow allay his fears of any further

mistreatment. He is more sensitive to good and ill-treatment, given the difference in disposition and chores at his new master's place. Douglass differentiates between thinking of a child as simply such and thinking of a child as chattel or personal property. This difference is a gradual awakening, as also noticed in the change in persona of Sophia. The reading of the Bible introduced the young narrator to the written word and soon enough he was "master of the alphabet" (Douglass). This serendipity is brought to a halt when Auld intervenes to declare it is unlawful to teach the word to a slave-child.

It is at this time that Douglass saves enough money to buy the influential volume The Columbian Orator. Douglass was deeply indebted to the influence of this volume, from which he acquired the knowledge of, amongst others, "one of Sheridan's mighty speeches, on the subject of Catholic Emancipation, Lord Chatham's speech on the American war, and speeches by the great William Pitt and by Fox" (Douglass 171). The acquisition of this oratory allowed Douglass an exposure to Enlightenment thoughts of rationalism, autonomy, and self-government. It may be argued that the effect of the Columbian Orator can be seen in the later speeches and journalistic output of Douglass that helped him connect immeasurably with his audience. But the most useful lesson learnt from this volume is the short dialogue between a bondsman and his slave, famously known as the master-slave dialectic. The slave in this episode has been recaptured and has a question-and-answer back-and-forth with his master. The slave mounts a spirited defence of his trying to run away from the captivity of his master and says that what to the white man is ingratitude, is liberty and a chance at equality to the enslaved black. "The master was vanquished at every turn in the argument; and seeing himself to be thus vanquished, he generously and meekly emancipates the slave, with his best wishes for his prosperity" (Douglass 170). It is important to note how this dialogue and its deep perusal by young Douglass made such an impression on him that he keeps returning to this discourse throughout the latter part of his life. It is especially significant in the mien adopted by Douglass against Covey the slave-breaker. In fact, one might very well argue that this short dialogue helped Douglass define and construct many of his speeches later on, that nothing he himself could have written of his personal experience could have bettered the efficacy of this dialogue. So important is liberty and a free will to Douglass that we indeed see him asserting his choice at a very young age, by resorting to subversiveness – when he has discussions with a group of white boys on the Baltimore streets about the nature of slavery and how certain people could easily take liberty for granted, while others died without ever having a whiff of it. By the end of his time at the Hugh Auld place, Douglass is much the wiser as to his rights, and the constant and devious denial of them by all white slave-masters. He shows his determination to thwart any and all attempts to keep him in ignorance, while duly acknowledging the help of Sophia in his initial pursuit of education – "believing, that but for my mistress, I might have grown up in ignorance" (Douglass 159).

Edward Covey and the Path to Personhood

When there is a re-allotment of all the slaves on the death of Col. Lloyd, Douglass finds it his fate to be handed over to the ownership of Thomas Auld, son-in-law to the old Colonel. Under the servitude of Thomas Auld, the narrator is at pains to point out the essential cruelty of his new master, masked anew in the garb of piety. We must remember that Douglass by this time is well-versed in the Bible, as also having been influenced by the preachings of a Methodist

minister. He is keenly aware of the difference between pretence of religiosity and the quality of true piety. The latter was completely missing in the manner and conduct of Thomas Auld, and this is routinely criticised in *My Bondage*. There is everything hollow about his profession of piety, which is ably proven in the manner of his treatment of Henny. It is also at this point that Nat Turner's uprising is quelled by the white slaveowners and all hopes that Douglass harboured of reaping the benefits of a newly started Sabbath school by one Wilson (at the house of a free colored man) are dashed by the intervention of T. Auld. A clear rift between the characters of young Douglass and that of his stubborn master is brought to the fore in the constant differences that kept cropping up betwixt the two – "many differences springing up between myself … owing to the clear perception I had of his character" (Douglass). It is at this crucial juncture that Auld decides to send his slave to work on the farm of Edward Covey, "a poor man, a farm renter" (Douglass 220). Covey's reputation preceded himself as that of a "negro-breaker" – the harshest taskmaster that could befall the fate of an enslaved person. Douglass takes pains to point to the economic immiseration in which Covey lived, a major reason for his brutality and inhumanity towards all those he considered lower than him on the social scale – namely, his slaves. Covey had a meanness to his character and a mien of control towards all his "property." Douglass's first offence (in the eyes of Covey) was the incident of the unmanageable oxen and the unfinished task. Covey subjected him to numerous floggings, finally making Douglass admit that his powers of endurance were fully stifled by this unthinking, unbending cruelty: "Mr. Covey succeeded in breaking me. I was broken in body, soul, and spirit … the dark night of slavery closed in upon me; and behold a man transformed into a brute!" (Douglass 237).

David Van Leer in his reading of the anxiety depicted in Douglass's Narrative zeroes in on the despairing aspect adumbrated in this section by the narrator. The fight with Covey, with whom Douglass spent near enough a year, is divided into two portions – the first where he is unable in body or spirit to resist or put up any semblance of a fight against the meanness of his owner, and the second which shows Douglass in a new light, after a failed escape attempt. Everything that led up to this particular moment in Douglass's life, his days at the Lloyd plantation followed by his time in Baltimore, is nearly bottled up and put away under the immense burden of his wretched condition under Covey's watch. At this point of time Douglass has lost hope in the word of God to deliver him from this unthinking evil and he simultaneously distrusts the zeal shown by slave-owners which is always misplaced. But the episode where he stands up to Covey, after he is returned to him by T. Auld and where the master-slave dialectic comes in handy (which he picked up in the Columbian Orator) is of prime import. By so resisting Covey's assault on his physicality, Van Leer argues that Douglass was successful in problematizing his moment of conversion (119-20). This moment of conversion is a reference to the meeting with one Sandy Jenkins, while returning to the Covey farm. "Sandy represents that authentic African experience to which Douglass himself is attracted despite a residual scepticism" (Van Leer 125). Sandy hands Douglass a herb – a root – endowed with magical powers which would fend off all attackers. This may be said to embody a different manner of thinking, drawing away from the Judeo-Christian belief system inherent in the praxis of the white world, instead leaning into the system of beliefs that may be traced to the heart of traditional black African thought (Van Leer 125). The virtues of this root are tested when Covey confronts Douglass, and when Douglass decides to stand up for himself – "I now forgot my roots, and remembered my pledge to stand up in my own defense." It may be argued that the belief newly generated in Douglass could owe something to the possession of the root given him by Sandy, because

the power of his Christian learnings had so far always failed him when it came to self-defence against the tyranny of his masters. Covey's failure to subjugate Douglass when he resists his beatings, when he in fact stops Covey from even so much as whipping him, marks a decisive turn in the formation of his manhood. The failure to punish a slave essentially emasculated the white slave-owner and empowers the slave to a reconstruction of his personal philosophy and a re-examination of his state of affairs. The "apostrophe to the moving multitude of ships" (Douglass 238) can now be completed – Douglass sets himself free of all ownership on his body and mind, and escapes to the shores of New York, there to write a new chapter in his life, one dedicated to the cause of the abolition of slavery.

The Representative Man's Fashioning

Douglass courted fame when he penned down his narrative for all posterity. Part of the reason for his wanting to write his own experience in his own words was so that he could escape the clutches of the Abolitionists, who would rather fashion his philosophy for him. As Matlack details, Douglass was always grateful for the help given him by the reformers and white sponsors (17), but it was time for him to outlive the limited role which they had envisioned for him. By penning his narrative and then going away to England to raise support there for the abolition of slavery, Douglass sidestepped the "obsessive preoccupation with his past life and freed himself for more ambitious work" (Matlack 17). This could definitely be read as a mark of defiance, and the reader will appreciate the quality of the defiance as opposed to the manner when he defended himself against a base slave-owner. The decision to start his own newspaper (North Star) against the advice of his original backer William Lloyd Garrison led to a famous rift amongst the two. Matlack argues that this break cements Douglass's fortitude and commitment in breaking the boundaries of what could only be called white paternalism, by so decisively taking a stance against his own supporters (18). Without resorting to any degree of emotional excess, "Douglass consistently shows slaveholders to be devious and dishonest. Amid so much deceit and self-deception, the narrator stands outs as one who can tell the truth" (Matlack 19).

In breaking with the Abolitionists, Douglass found the friendship of Gerrit Smith, who helped fund his ventures and also helped push Douglass to the forefront of the conversation in antislavery politics. John Stauffer contends that the man we know today as Frederick Douglass the abolitionist is someone who came to rewrite his own image while reforming his very nation (201). Douglass felt himself most at home as a public speaker, as can be seen in his effective and evocative manner of raising public support when he was discriminated against on a ship belonging to the Cunard line (Douglass 398, 425). Oratory came easy to him, and his Enlightenment education always held him in remarkable stead when drawing on his experiences for the public. Indeed, it is well-documented that his writing prowess in his narratives ran the risk of opening the charge of fraudulence against him – "People won't believe you ever were a slave, Frederick, if you keep on this way," Stephen Foster, a Garrisonian colleague told him" (qtd. in Stauffer 203). The precision and sophistication shown by Douglass in his narratives may be said to be an act of liberation in and by themselves. When discussing the reversals or turns in character and reflection shown by Douglass in the discussion of his early enslaved life, Stauffer writes that the rhetoric employed by the narrator is very much indicative of the influence of the Orator. The format of the text has much to do with its longstanding influence, divided as it is

into two sections dealing with Douglass' bondage and then his freedom. The book is a passage to liberation, I would argue, given how it acts as a compartment which transports Douglass from being in chains to showing the rest of the world the path to enlightened thought. The profundity detailed in the text – the gaining of knowledge, the mastering of the written word, the control over selfhood and the finding of courage when at the cusp of deep despair – all of this is a crucible of identity formation and "an attempt to grapple with the psychology of slavery" (Stauffer 207). The belief displayed by Douglass is therefore paramount in overcoming the dehumanization and acute alienation of slavery. The speeches given in England, the public exhortations to his old owner Thomas Auld are definitive tracts that comment on the direction of the American way of political and civil thought of that time period. It may be said that his writings continue to be of immense resonance to this day, and enjoin on all readers to return to the brunt of the problem – the monstrous nature of slavery as an institution that perniciously persisted for so long – if a solution (to the problem of race) and a comprehensive examination of the structure and stricture is attempted.

Conclusion

Frederick Douglass's life was both eventful and tragic, yet he carved a path to freedom which was cast in toil and labour on all sides. Having been born a slave, he was witness to many an unutterable wrong, yet he fought all vicissitudes with a temperament ranging from the philosophical to the sophisticated. His testimony of personhood formation in the crucible of slavery is a lesson for all posterity – how a man may make himself, may climb the rung to be a representative of his people and by association, all mankind. His personal record of his experiences, from the time he gained his freedom to the time he found immense celebrity, is always grounded in the basic facts of his early life as an enslaved property of a white racist class. His pursuit of knowledge against insurmountable odds displays an undaunted spirit, one who is determined to forge his own path in life. As Sundquist points out, much of the rhetoric employed in *My Bondage* "is embedded in his arguments about the slave's right of revolution" (11). He further writes that Douglass made it possible for the "literature of American slavery" to transplant "the language of oppression and liberation from the romantic and gothic traditions" (11) – into a new mode which identified the acquisition of literacy with the power to dictate terms and conditions, and concomitantly, with the power to raise oneself from the dungeons of human-inflicted darkness to an ideal of liberation. As the name suggests, *My Bondage and My Freedom* sets the stage for an equitable and essential discussion of the problems of race and servitude, foregrounding an ideology that concerned itself with the brutality of such a long period of history and the stain it left on countless souls. Douglass's persona is therefore the very bedrock of the "Representative American man," founded as it is on the "synecdoche of the black condition" (Stauffer 214), and in the process the text charts the rise to a much-needed doctrine of emancipation, sovereignty, and the quest of truth.

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