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TAH Paper # 2
6/25/2010

Perspectives on Slavery through the Life and Works of Frederick Douglass

In the prologue to his book, *Generations of Captivity*, Ira Berlin suggests that “no one knew slavery better than the slave, and few had thought harder about what freedom could mean” (Berlin). To be sure, this applies to the life and the works of Frederick Douglass. Through Frederick Douglass, perhaps the most well-known run-away slave turned free citizen of the nineteenth century, we are given an incredible amount of first-hand or experiential knowledge about life for slaves in the antebellum South. Moreover, Douglass provides deep insight into the daily struggles for slaves to simply subsist while also presenting us with a case study in one man’s wish for a more meaningful and fruitful spiritual and intellectual life. From his autobiographical account of his life in slavery and subsequent escape to freedom in the North and through accounts of his advocacy for the abolition of slavery, we inherit a much more complete picture of the lived-experience of slaves, why slavery persisted for so long, and the political/constitutional arguments used to help bring this institution to an end. Taken as a whole, Douglass’ life is an educative tool by which we can learn about and attempt an understanding of the human/emotive side of slavery and the triumph of the spirit of one man and thus an entire ethnic group over the injustices and evils of their circumstances.

Issues of economics, power, psychology, politics, and culture are inevitably intertwined when discussing the issue of slavery. In the autobiographical account of his life in slavery, Frederick Douglass offers all of these above mentioned ways of looking at the life of a slave, but he does so on in a much more intimate manner. Far from being a simple explanation of slave-life on several different plantations and houses throughout Maryland, Douglass’ narrative invites

the reader to imagine what it would be like to grow up in world with few (if any) familial connections, always struggling against hunger and a lack of adequate clothing, while learning at a young-age the brutality and violence of the overseer and slave owner. From the beginning of his narrative, Douglass describes a lack of familial connections stating that “I know nothing (referring to his father and mother); the means of knowing was withheld from me...it is a common custom, in the part of Maryland from which I ran away, to part children from their mothers at a very early age” (Douglass). Douglass surmises that breaking children from their parents served to hinder affection. This practice may also have served to destroy connections between slaves, thus making them more dependent on their slave owners because of a lack of natural-connections or cohesiveness that would emerge from family groups. The first third of Douglass’ narrative is not only concerned with describing his lack of connection to his family, but also with describing the conditions in which slaves had to live and work.

In Chapter II of his narrative, Douglass details closely the food allowances and clothing provisions given to slaves. Slave children seemed most affected by a lack of proper nutrition and clothing. Douglass suggests that “the children unable to work in the field had neither shoes, stockings, jackets, nor trousers, given to them...children from seven to ten years old, of both sexes, almost naked, might be seen at all seasons of the year” (Douglass). Although Douglass does admit to being well-fed and clothed after being moved to Baltimore, throughout chapters IX and X, Douglass describes experiencing periodic hunger and suggests that to “not to give a slave enough to eat, is regarded as the most aggravated development of meanness even among slaveholders” (Douglass). Douglass admits that there is great variation in how much and what kind of food slaves are fed, suggesting also that slaves had to steal and beg for provisions when their owners did not provide enough. Here, Douglass’ recollections of how slaves were fed and

clothed also give the reader insight into the character and personality of the slave-owners themselves.

Douglass often uses words such as *mean, crude, cowardly, and cruel* to describe slave owners and overseers. Douglass provides invaluable information about these men and women in his descriptions of how they either treated them with relative kindness (as in his initial description of Mrs. Auld who taught him to read) or Captain Auld whom he described as “one destitute of every element commanding respect” (Douglass). Through these character descriptions, the reader not only becomes acquainted with the role of personality in history and its role in the institution of slavery, but also with the political and social climate of antebellum Maryland. Throughout the first ten chapters of his narrative, Douglass broadens the reader’s perspective to offer additional evidence/insight on how the murder of slaves was not considered a crime and how slaves that worked in the city and in the countryside differed in treatment and demeanor. Perhaps most interestingly, Douglass in his description of those slaves who were chosen to do errands at the *Great House Farm*, suggests that slaves vied for positions on the plantation which they believed accorded more power and respect, thus acting towards one another in much the same way that politicians battle for election to political office and for support among their constituents. Importantly, Douglass also describes what slavery does to the kind-hearted white person not inclined to cruelty towards another human being. Douglass suggests that slavery destroyed his once kind-hearted owner, Mrs. Auld, who had taught him to read and now realized “that education and slavery were incompatible with one another” (Douglass). By providing this character description, Douglass helps the reader to understand the personality differences between slaves and between slave-owners. Moreover, his in-depth analysis of the slaveholder’s personality provides the reader with a more concrete explanation of

how these personality differences led to fundamental variations in the lived experiences of slaves. Vital for our understanding of slavery and of Douglass' life is his quest for knowledge, especially for the ability to read and write.

Indeed, it was this zest for knowledge that would give a new meaning to Douglass' life and one that would help him escape bondage in the South. Douglass recounts in his narrative that knowledge and the ability to teach others how to read and write was his greatest pleasure. In recounting how he ran a Sunday school for his fellow slaves, Douglass states that "I taught them, because it was the delight of my soul to be doing something that looked like bettering the condition of my race" (Douglass). From this, the reader learns that slave owners discerned a connection between their slaves' ignorance and keeping them in a condition of servitude. Having been educated to read and write and then seeking to teach others, Douglass escaped a condition of ignorance and was able to use his knowledge to eventually win his physical freedom in the North. In addition to his commentary on the values of education to those seeking freedom, Douglass also provides a sharp criticism of religion.

Throughout his writing, Douglass also expresses a disdain for the form of Christianity used as proof by many southern slave owners that slavery was just. It is important to note that in the appendix to his autobiography, Douglass does not disdain Christianity as a whole; he is instead talking about what he calls the *slaveholding religion*. Douglass offers the reader a view of how religion was used to justify slaveholding calling Christianity throughout the South "a mere covering for the most horrid crimes—a justifier of the most appalling barbarity—a sanctifier of the most hateful frauds,—and a dark shelter under, which the darkest, foulest, grossest, and most infernal deeds of slaveholders find the strongest protection" (Douglass). He details the many instances in which slaveholders used text from the Christian Bible to justify the

deprivation that slaves suffered through even going so far as to assert that having a religious master was far worse than one which had no specific religious zeal. Here, Douglass offers additional insight into how slavery persisted as an institution throughout the South partly because it was defended on the basis of religious values. This is important for a modern understanding of slavery in so much that it helps the modern student of slavery identify the value system used to justify and continue this system of bondage. After escaping to freedom in the North, Douglass would use his talents and knowledge to repudiate these moral/religious claims and he would also actively enter into the political debate about the efficacy of slavery on both moral and constitutional grounds.

The political debate about the constitutionality of slavery grew steadily throughout the early nineteenth century. The debate involved differing interpretations of the Constitution as well as diverging opinions on what it means to be a citizen and what civil rights are protected under the supreme law of the land. Douglass' initial interpretation of the Constitution followed that of his one-time close friend and advocate, William Lloyd Garrison, who argued that the Constitution supported slavery. With references to the three-fifths clause, the Fugitive Slave clause, as well as the continuation of the external slave trade until 1808, Garrison and Douglass asserted that the Constitution did support slavery and was "supporting and perpetuating this monstrous system of injustice and blood" (Oakes The Radical and the Republican: Frederick Douglass, Abraham Lincoln, and the Triumph of Anti-Slavery Politics; Cohen). But Douglass quickly shifted his thoughts on the Constitutionality of slavery, aligning his view with that of Abraham Lincoln and others who supported the notion that the Constitution actually supported emancipation of slaves and the abolition of the institution of slavery itself.

Robert Cohen suggests that Douglass “saw the Constitution as having *noble purposes* which were *avowed in its preamble* who words about liberty rendered it an *instrument* that could be *wielded on behalf of emancipation* (italics added)” (Cohen). Cohen further recommends that Douglass changed his view on the Constitution’s support of slavery because he saw Garrison’s position on the politics of slavery as simply impractical to gaining wide and much needed support for the emancipation movement. This view of Douglass’ changing opinion is supported by his autobiographical narrative. Throughout the book, Douglass’ personality is revealed. Douglass’ appears as a reserved and careful thinker as well as actor. For example, in his ultimate decision to run away to the North he is always extremely practical, he knows in each situation when it is best to act and what actions will produce the most successful results. Therefore, this shift in Douglass’ opinion is understandable when viewed in terms of simple practicality.

Cohen and Oakes offer additional explanations for Douglass’ changing view of the Constitution’s support of slavery. Cohen suggests that Douglass changed his view on the Constitution’s support of slavery because he became more intellectually independent of Garrison, especially after Douglass sought refuge in England from his persecutors. Cohen offers further explanation for Douglass’ change in opinion when he suggests that “at least some aspects of the anti-slavery reading of the Constitution have a fair claim to historical validity, and their logic attracted him” (Cohen). Douglass (and Garrison as well) eventually adopted Abraham Lincoln’s view that the Constitution was neither completely for nor against slavery. Instead, they maintained that it was a confusing mixture of both. Although James Oakes contends that this view is rather weak, he too is compelled to agree with it and with Douglass’ argument that “by inserting the three-fifths clause, the founders had planted in the Constitution an incentive for the slave states to increase their representation in Congress by emancipating their slaves. There is

nothing in the actual text of the Constitution to justify any other reading” (Oakes "Frederick Douglass Changed My Mind About the Constitution"). Cohen and Oakes provide additional understanding of the constitutionality of slavery and give insight into this debate that predates the Civil War—the seminal event that would bring an end to the institution of slavery itself.

In the conclusion to his essay, Robert Cohen identifies the vital issue of personality in teaching about the life and works of Frederick Douglass. Indeed, Douglass’ narrative and his changing views on whether or not the Constitution actually supported slavery are a perfect case study in the role of character or personality in history. By using Douglass’ slave narrative, the teacher is not only able to use a source far more engaging for students than a textbook or other purely academic work, they are able to use a primary source to discuss larger issues surrounding slavery such as education, religion, familial ties, and the actual living conditions in which African Americans had to survive. If students are given the proper background knowledge and a working knowledge of the economic, political, and social history surrounding slavery in the United States, they will be equipped with enough prior knowledge to interpret Douglass’ slave narrative and to analyze it for what it can tell the modern student of US history about the lives of enslaved African Americans in the nineteenth century.

If I were teaching this narrative, I would focus the lesson/lessons on the role of personality in history. Douglass’ narrative is a rich repository of descriptions about slaves, slave-owners, and life in cities as well as the countryside. As has been described here, Douglass also discusses the power structure of the plantation as well as the role of religion and education in antebellum American life. Douglass’ narrative is packed full of descriptive language which can not only engage the reader, but can also illuminate their understanding of slavery from the slaves’ perspective. It is important here to make connections for students between this history

and how the history is being told. The teacher would highlight that perspective and draw similarities and differences between that and other types of sources the students have read concerning slavery. The teacher might divide the narrative up by chapters or multiple chapters, assigning them for reading that night. The students could be grouped by what chapters they were assigned and asked to not only summarize the chapter, but also to describe what the narrative tells them about the institution of slavery itself concentrating on those issues or overarching ideas described above. In devising this pair-share type of lesson, the students would teach each other about their particular section of the narrative and other students would be able to gain a more complete understanding of his narrative without having read the entire account.

By focusing on the narrative, the teacher begins to introduce their students to an understanding of the Frederick Douglass advocated for by Cohen: “a man in transit between two positions—willing to acknowledge the paradoxical nature of the Constitution” (Cohen). The teacher might pair this lesson with subsequent readings of those sections of the Constitution under question: the preamble, the three-fifths clause, Article I (section 9)-preserving the slave trade, and the Fugitive Slave clause. Students could be asked in an open class debate whether or not they believed that the Constitution supported slavery and why they think Douglass changed his opinion on the constitutionality of slavery. Close readings of all of these documents as well as the prior knowledge of Douglass’ life gleaned from having read and discussed his narrative would help students understand how important emancipation was to Douglass and others fighting for it throughout the North and the South. This lesson on whether or not the Constitution supported slavery as well as the life of Frederick Douglass would be an important stepping stone for students’ understanding of the emancipation of slaves through the Civil War. Most vitally, an understanding of this debate and Douglass’ life would help students realize why Barbara J.

Fields describes emancipation as an event so dramatic that it has no equal in American history and one which was so “clothed in the rhetoric of biblical prophecy and national identity that it was accompanied by a profound social revolution” (Barbara J. Fields). Indeed, the lessons learned here give rise to not only an understanding of this specific time frame in history, but also to a deeper understanding of what it means to struggle against insurmountable odds and great injustice, be empowered by education and ideas such as freedom, and to work to achieve liberty.

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