

# *The Role of Literacy in Douglass's Narrative of the Life of Frederick Douglass*

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**Abstract:** The slave narrative plays an active role in the abolition movement. Through an analysis of Douglass's *Narrative*, this paper aims to explore how Douglass verifies the evils of slavery and the non-inferiority of the slaves in his illustration of the significance of literacy for the slaves.

## 1. Introduction

The slave narrative plays an active role in the abolition movement and comprises a vital and unique source for U.S. history. Based on the model of "literacy-identity-freedom", it shows the protagonist's arduous journey to overcome captivity. These narratives not only tell us about African American history and literature, but also reveal the complexities of the interrelationship between white Americans and African-Americans in America during the 18<sup>th</sup> and 19<sup>th</sup> centuries. In his *Narrative of the Life of Frederick Douglass*, Douglass demonstrates some widespread tactics of the slave owners in controlling the black slaves, the most effective of which are, such as, dismantling any relationships of family and community, denying slaves' cognitive abilities and thus keeping them in the perpetual ignorance.

## 2. Psychological Isolation of Slaves

Douglass is forced to separate from his mother at an early age "to hinder the development of the child's affection toward its mother, and to blunt and destroy the natural affection of the mother for the child" (1890). Warnick explains that one characterization of slavery is "its negation of community, particularly its negation of family" because it is beneficial for the slave owners to "impose foreign values and lifestyles" (30). Johnson also claims that "every advance into enslaved society—every reliance on another, every child, friend, or lover, every social relation—held within it the threat of its own dissolution" (22). Obviously, Douglass manages to highlight the artificial severance of human blood kinship which, for him, is a metaphor of human culture, revealing the hysterical madness of the slave owners and the extreme inhumanity of the slavery.

Meanwhile, slave owners also forced slaves to remain in a position of being easily colonized by obstructing all the passageways that might help them acquire knowledge. For example, Douglass recognizes that he has "no accurate knowledge of [his] age" and "the larger part of the slaves know as little of their age as horses know of theirs", and later he realizes "it is the wish of most masters

within my knowledge to keep their slaves thus ignorant” (Douglass 1889). Douglass purposely juxtaposes “master”, “knowledge” and “human” with “slave”, “ignorance” and “animal”. Krista Walter agreeably holds a view that “mid-nineteenth-century slaveholders made it difficult for slaves to develop a sense of themselves as subjects in and of history, often merely by refusing to grant them access to information about their birth dates and paternal relationships” (233). Etienne Balibar and Emmanuel Wallerstein also support the thought with the demonstration: “having a sense of history is a central element in the socialization of individuals, in the maintenance of group solidarity, in the establishment of or challenge to social legitimation” (78). It is truly accepted that all of these critics confirms the absolute standing to the construction of “a sense of oneself” or “a sense of history” in the process of black’s pursuing of their freedom and identity.

### 3. Literacy as a Bridge to Slaves’ Selfhood

In the process of his self-development, Douglass adopts many strategies, but the most important one is undoubtedly to link the self with the slavery system by explaining the relationship between knowledge and freedom. Literacy is an essential path to overcome the state of captivity.

In Douglass’s view, his master Mr. Auld’s standpoint that the slaves’ literacy is dangerous and unfavorable for the slave owners and is what they fear most is just the secret of the long-term prevalence of slavery, and after his acquisition of this secret, his state of ignorance is unsealed. He finds out the essence of slavery and understands why his struggle has failed repeatedly. Although Mrs. Auld only teaches him “ABC”, she never knows that her student has learned more about a political system. This is not “learning” in the general sense, but a lifelong “enlightenment”. Hence when Douglass says he “understood the pathway from slavery to freedom” (1904), he actually means that he has come to the junction between the slavery system and the self. Learning enables Douglass to think about the most horrible situation of the slaves. As he narrates, “Learning to read had been a curse rather than a blessing. It had given me a view of my wretched condition, without the remedy(1907)”. The suffering of literacy sheds light on the obvious distinction of enlightenment and ignorance and makes him realize he is a man rather than “a beast”.

Even though some critics have voiced the unfavorable effects of literacy for the enslaved black community since “without letters, slaves fail to understand the full meaning of their domination” (3), there are more counterviews, I believe, to overwhelm the former. Gates affirms the absolute position of knowledge for human enlightenment: “Literacy of writing was the very commodity that separated animal from human being, slave from citizen, object from subject(25)”. At the same time, Stepto shares the opinion that “the primary pre-generic myth for Afro-America is the quest for freedom and literacy” (xv). Olney approves of the significance of literacy: “the social theme, the reality of slavery and the necessity of abolishing it, trifurcates on the personal level to become subthemes of literacy, identity, and freedom ... altogether interdependent and virtually indistinguishable as thematic strands” (53-54). Based on these theoretical supports and Douglass’s own interpretation, literacy can be safely conceived as a must in the empowerment of black slaves for their transformation of self-identity.

### 4. Conclusion

Literacy arms the slaves with the consciousness of their imprisoned state of mind and body; namely, the African-Americans are banished from the spiritual life, only to be the physical existence, which makes them totally irrelevant to the independent subjects in that “literacy, especially the ability to write, signified an establishment of the African’s human identity to the European world” (Cornelius 16). Hence, literacy provides a credible guarantee for the enrichment of blacks’ mind and liberation of their bodies in their realization of being full human beings. It is Douglass’s advocacy

that the African-Americans who attempt to resist the enslavement and discipline of their bodies must, first and foremost, enhance the literacy consciousness and shake off the slavery social relations in the south.

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