The Life and Writings of Frederick Douglass
Pace University: History 675

An Existence of Opportunity and Necessity: Frederick Douglass's Identity as a Black Man in 19th Century America

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April 30, 2019

Despite living, in many ways, similarly to any other American, Frederick Douglass was born into a unique life. He was a husband, father, worker, traveler, and many other roles that an average man might consider himself. But Douglass became more than just any other ordinary man. He was also a *speaker*, *writer*, *thinker*, and *dreamer*. As historians, many people have tried to identify Frederick Douglass for what he was, often labeling him as one *thing* or another, whether it be a patriot, a fugitive, a Southerner, an abolitionist, or any other number of titles, but this inevitably places Douglass in a box. Interestingly, Douglass even regarded himself as many of these titles throughout his life, evident in various writings one might observe. But what makes Douglass so interesting as a historical figure is that he was actually *all* of them at once. Douglass was so multifaceted because he *had* to be. He had too many obstacles, too many goals, too many allies, and too many adversaries throughout his life that he was forced to be the diverse, yet enthralling, character we know him to be today. His experiences as a black man in nineteenth century America drove this reality. But what might be most interesting about Frederick Douglass is that he could never be just one of the aforementioned roles without being another, and it was because of his position as an African American in the time that he lived that he had to take on different identities wherever he went.

As Dr. David Blight writes, "Douglass was thoroughly and beautifully human."[1] It was because of Douglass's experiences, which defined him both in trajectory of life and in character, that this was true. What Dr. Blight is telling us is that Douglass was just like any other man, with strengths and weaknesses, endearing qualities and faults. Blight writes, "Douglass was and is a hero…[yet,] he was also vain, arrogant at times, and hypersensitive to slights."[2] Blight wants

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[1] David Blight. *Frederick Douglass: Prophet of Freedom*. (New York: Simon & Schuster, Inc. 2018), xvi.
[2] Ibid.

his readers to understand that despite Douglass's larger-than-life persona as a figure in history, he still had to endure the same challenges of self-realization and achieving personal satisfaction as any other individual, regardless of race or color. He experienced love, discouragement, friendship, anger, achievement, and fear, among countless other emotions and feelings. He was courageous, yet prudent, and his job often required him to put his life on the line for others. He was as human as the next person while also demonstrating qualities that made him the hero that Dr. Blight describes. This multiplicity is displayed well in a letter written by a personal friend of Douglass, William A. White, published in William Lloyd Garrison's *The Liberator*, when White recounted, "Frederick Douglass who, at the time, was safe among friends, not seeing me, thought I was knocked down, and seizing a club, rushed into the crowd. His weapon was immediately snatched from him, and he finding he had attracted their anger against himself, fled for his life, and ten more of the mob followed…"[3] Throughout his life, Douglass was faced with hardship and triumph, thus eliciting various responses which shaped his identity. In this particular instance, Douglass asserted his bravery and selflessness because he knew he *had* to do so. If his friend was willing to fight for the improvement in the condition of African Americans to the point of potential death, Douglass *had* to be willing to do the same and to take on the role of both comrade and aggravant simultaneously. So, the question of how Frederick Douglass was "beautifully human," as Dr. Blight has asserted, is answered in his ability to react to the events throughout his life in the same way that others would: pragmatically, passionately, and in search of accountability and fairness.

[3] William A. White. "The Hundred Conventions." *Liberator* (October 13, 1843); reprinted in *Douglass in His Own Time: A Biographical Chronicle of His Life, Drawn from Recollections, Interviews, and Memoirs, by Family, Friends, and Associates*. ed. John Ernest (Iowa City: University of Iowa Press, 2014), 19.

Douglass evinced his own understanding of being human in his second autobiography, *My Bondage and My Freedom*, when he lamented the shift in behavior by Sophia Auld in response to her her husband's chastisement for teaching Douglass to read. He deliberated on his status as being both slave and human at once, citing that "I was *more* than that, and she felt me to be more than that. I could talk and sing ; I could laugh and weep ; I could reason and remember ; I could love and hate. I was human, and she, dear lady, knew and felt me to be so."[4] Douglass was telling us that what made him a human, his ability to *feel* and to carry out the same actions as a white person, transcended his label as chattel, and that deep down, even his master *knew* this. What is significant here is that Douglass came to this realization at such a young age *and* that he had begun to understand the differences in the way some people were compared to others simply based on their race. This might have been best displayed when he professed,

> "[a]s I grew older and more thoughtful, I was more and more filled with a sense of my wretchedness...There are thoughtful days in the lives of children—at least there were in mine—when they grapple with all the great, primary subject of knowledge, and reach, in a moment, conclusions which no subsequent experience can shake. I was just as well aware of the unjust, unnatural and murderous character of slavery, when nine years old, as I am now. Without any appeal to books, to laws, or to authorities of any kind, it was enough to accept God as a father, to regard slavery as a crime."[5]

Douglass showed his readers here that he did not need a formal education to understand his "predetermined" station in life and the contradictory realities that it entailed. He became an academic without going through academia, and it was because he was concurrently a curious child *and* a marginalized piece of property.

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[4] Frederick Douglass. *My Bondage and My Freedom*. (New York: Penguin Books, 2003), 113.
[5] Frederick Douglass. *My Bondage and My Freedom*. (New York: Penguin Books, 2003), 100.

Douglass did identify, however, that it was because of education that he was able to begin to question his status in society. Unsurprisingly, he became extremely introspective in this moment, identifying that "[k]nowledge had come ; light had penetrated the moral dungeon where I dwelt ; and, behold! there lay the bloody whip, for my back, and here was the iron chain ; and my good, *kind master*, he was the author of my situation. The revelation haunted me, stung me, and made me gloomy and miserable."[6] This was significant for a variety of reasons. Douglass had begun to understand the source of his hardship *and* could identify the feelings he associated with his situation. He was not only able to place blame for his experiences as an enslaved man, but to analyze the emotions that this reality elicited. He also understood that this was a moment of redemption. Douglass acknowledged that "[o]nce awakened by the silver trump of knowledge, my spirit was roused to eternal wakefulness. Liberty! the inestimable birthright of every man, had, for me, converted every object into an asserter of this great right."[7] Douglass's necessity to learn thus allowed him to make the leap toward humanness that he might have otherwise never experienced.

What is also interesting about Douglass was his understanding of the relationship between his "predetermined" status as a slave and *God*. The intermittent preacher continually used his role as a spiritual man to forge his identity, whether he did so intentionally or not. A demonstration of the intersectionality of Douglass's spirituality and his identity can best be seen in the motto of his newspaper, *The North Star*: "Right is of no sex; truth is of no color. God is the father of us all and we are all brethren." To Douglass, being human and a devotee to religion

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[6] Frederick Douglass. *My Bondage and My Freedom*. (New York: Penguin Books, 2003), 118.
[7] Ibid.

was enough to earn you the same rights as anyone else. Because this was true of his own life, he was therefore entitled to the same liberties of any man, regardless of race. Thus, he exhibited how reform and spirituality—moreover, the concepts of equality and divinity—all played into the development of his own self-understanding and his actions. Indeed, Douglass discussed both his awakening to spirituality and that he was forced to be an observer of his master at a religious camp early in his upbringing. This survives as testimony of why he developed such strong sentiments about religion and its relationship to slavery throughout his life. To Frederick Douglass, "[t]he highest evidence the slaveholder can give the slave of his acceptance with God, is the emancipation of his slaves."[8] This played directly into Douglass's identity since he was both an observer of the faith and an observer of his captor, Thomas Auld. Douglass *had* to play both parts to understand the hypocrisy of Auld's actions. He had already concluded that there was something inherently wrong about what had been preached to him, yet being forced to view a self-proclaimed "good" Christian who was also a slaveholder gave Douglass the confirmation that the two could not coexist. Douglass's earlier interactions with Christianity and Christian leaders led him to this realization, and this was best displayed when Douglass explained, "I am careful to state these facts, that the reader may be able to form an idea of the precise influences which had to do with the shaping of my mind."[9] As C. James Trotman asserts, ' "spirituality" is a critical concept for describing Douglass's journey to understand himself and the master-slave relationship into which he was born.'[10] Had it not been for Douglass's duality as both chattel and

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[8] Frederick Douglass. *My Bondage and My Freedom*. (New York: Penguin Books, 2003), 143.
[9] Frederick Douglass. *My Bondage and My Freedom*. (New York: Penguin Books, 2003), 123.
[10] C. James Trotman. "Frederick Douglass's Spirituality." *Counterpoints*, Vol. 406, TEACHING ABOUT Frederick Douglass: A Resource Guide for Teachers of Cultural Diversity (2012), pp. 91.

believer, he may never have become as outspoken against slavery as he did, thus begging the question of how influential he actually would have turned out to be.

This, in turn, depended upon the circumstances of Douglass's childhood. The fact that Frederick Douglass was born into slavery, never having received confirmation of the identity of his true father, yet also believing he was his *master's* son, was central to the development of his identity. He was born in Maryland in what he believed to be the year 1817[11] to Harriet Bailey, but he grew up without a father figure in his life. He did, at times, speculate on whether his former master was his biological father, but the fact that he never found out is actually more significant than if he had. This sense of omission contributed to Douglass's own identity in a way that could only spark a greater fire in Douglass's motivations in life. What is significant about this is that, by all accounts, Douglass was biracial, making him fifty percent white in a time when being white and being black completely altered one's station in life.

That his complexion still defined him, even though he could safely claim that half of what made him a man (in the eyes of his enslavers) came of caucasian descent, is telling of why he needed to take on so much during his lifetime. Douglass focused throughout his career on his status as a human, not simply in terms of the contrast of being enslaved or free, but as a man, regardless of color. He demonstrated this in a farewell speech in Great Britain in 1847, recollecting that he "was driven from the lower floor of a church, because I tried to enter as other men, forgetting my complexion, remembering only that I was a man, thinking, moreover, that I had an interest in the gospel there proclaimed..."[12]

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[11] Frederick Douglass. *My Bondage and My Freedom*. (New York: Penguin Books, 2003), 30.

[12] Frederick Douglass. "Farewell Speech to the British People, at London Tavern."; reprinted in *Frederick Douglass: Selected Writings and Speeches*, ed. Philip S. Foner and Yuval Taylor (1847; repr., Chicago: Lawrence Hill Books, 1999), 73.

To Frederick Douglass, the limitation of his opportunities based on his complexion was irrational and a basis for his obvious frustration. He may have evoked this best in his famous 4th of July speech, when he philosophized, "[o]ppression makes a wise man mad."[13] He went on to question, "[d]o you mean, citizens, to mock me, by asking me to speak to-day?"[14] evincing the absurdity by which he had to live his life. "Standing, there, identified with the American bondman, making his wrongs mine, I do not hesitate to declare, with all my soul, that the character and conduct of this nation never looked blacker to me than on this 4th of July! Whether we turn to the declarations of the past, or to the professions of the present, the conduct of the nation seems equally hideous and revolting."[15] Frederick Douglass knew, maybe better than anyone by virtue of his experiences, that the American covenant and ethos were imperfect, inequitable, and wholly hypocritical.

Because of this reality, Douglass took on many roles throughout his life. Freeing himself from slavery of his own volition in 1838, Douglass learned the glory of free labor in the North, taking up residence in New Bedford, Massachusetts, and marrying his wife, Anna Murray, to start what would become a very large extended family. There, Douglass persisted in his self-education, continuing to develop a fascination for reading and writing. In his early twenties and invoking his self-determination, Douglass could not have known how powerful an effect that fascination would have on his life, yet it did. As Samuel J. May noted, "in less than three years from the day of his escape from slavery, he was introduced to the people of New England as a suitable person to lecture them upon the subject that was of more moment than any other to

[13] Douglass, Frederick. "What to the Slave Is the Fourth of July?". Rochester, NY. July 5, 1852.
[14] Ibid.
[15] Ibid.

which the attention of our Republic has ever been called."[16] Not only were Douglass and his story proof of what abolitionists claimed was wrong about slavery in America, but he became a spokesman in the fight for emancipation. This is interesting for multiple reasons. Douglass, in a sense, was required to take on this role, as his skin color and private experiences were the necessary prerequisites for him to have as much influence as he could. They were also significant because they allowed him to create his public persona. The Abolitionist Movement hoped to develop as much attention as possible about the issue of slavery, so Douglass became the perfect representative: part advocate, part living illustration. Eventually, he would become the face of it. That May described slavery as "the subject that was of more moment than any other" is telling of how important Douglass's presence was to the abolitionist effort, given the value placed on the discussion of that topic in that time. What might be most interesting, however, is that Douglass already had developed his own issues with slavery, natural rights, and morality (among other concepts of humanity), so he felt compelled to take on this new role.

Douglass's early interest in literacy and composition allowed him into this world of reform and, eventually, politics, therefore giving him agency to don *many* caps in life. One of them happened to be that of "hero," as David Blight has asserted. It was because of this transition that Douglass would gain his ultimate freedom and effect the freedom of countless others, thus demonstrating his heroism. To best understand his role as "hero," one must look to Douglass's Farewell Speech in London Tavern in 1847, where he noted his sense of purpose. Douglass proclaimed,

> "I will go back, for the sake of my brethren. I will go to suffer with them; to toil with them; to endure insult with them; to undergo outrage with them; to lift up my

[16] Samuel J. May. *Some Recollections of Our Antislavery Conflict* (Boston: Fields, Osgood, 1869).; reprinted in *Douglass in His Own Time: A Biographical Chronicle of His Life, Drawn from Recollections, Interviews, and Memoirs, by Family, Friends, and Associates*. ed. John Ernest (Iowa City: University of Iowa Press, 2014), 41.

> voice in their behalf; to speak and write in their vindication; and struggle in their ranks for that emancipation which shall yet be achieved by the power of truth and of principle for that oppressed people."[17]

So the question becomes, *why could not Douglass be just one man?* The answer is simple and complicated at the same time. Douglass was born into an era when black Americans were marginalized regardless of where they were, where they were from, and to whom they were born. To be black in nineteenth century America was more than a cross to bear. It created obstacles, opponents, impossibilities, and inequality. But it also created allies, opportunities, confidants, supporters, and friends. And it was because of this that Douglass had to take on so many different identities throughout his lifetime.

One of, if not the most important, roles Douglass took on was writer. Given the value of his oratorical abilities to the various activist efforts in which he took part throughout his life, his writing was equally as important, if not more so. Douglass could and *did* disseminate his ideas on equality, natural rights, corruption, and hypocrisy; he was also able to further develop the power of his oration by carefully crafting his speeches, a task he would not have been able to do had he not the developed writing capabilities he possessed. But what was most important was that he was able to prove his existence. This was paramount to Douglass's success as an abolitionist, as it secured his identity as a survivor of slavery and became a testament to how evil the "peculiar institution" actually was. As professor Albert E. Stone suggested, "[t]elling the unvarnished truth about veritable experiences 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

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[17] Frederick Douglass. "Farewell Speech to the British People, at London Tavern."; reprinted in *Frederick Douglass: Selected Writings and Speeches*, ed. Philip S. Foner and Yuval Taylor (1847; repr., Chicago: Lawrence Hill Books, 1999), 74.

the writer and editor of slave narratives."[18] The particular value for the autobiographer was that authoring his own story distinguished him as a trustworthy source to condemn slavery's inhumanity. Indeed, "Douglass's own account creates the image of a man, and this act of identity authenticates the cause of abolition."[19]

Douglass published three autobiographies and, in each of them, he demonstrated the shifts in his mannerisms, his understanding of socio-political circumstances, and his personal sentiments on specific events from his lifetime. But beyond self-aggrandizement, Douglass felt that he *needed* to share his story. He displayed this to his readers in a prefatory letter to the editor of *My Bondage and My Freedom* when he claimed that his goal was

> "to vindicate a just and beneficent principle, in its application to the whole human family, by letting in the light of truth upon a system, esteemed by some as a blessing, and by others as a curse and a crime. I agree with you, that this system is now at the bar of public opinion—not only of this country, but of the whole civilized world—for judgment."[20]

As David Blight points out, for Douglass, "[t]he humanity of his people must be demonstrated before a racist world. Such a claim for the public duty of writing a second autobiography reflects just how much this new literary self-creation was a political act."[21] Blight shows us here how intertwined Douglass's personal and private life was, and how this, in turn, helped shape his identity as both author, activist, and survivor.

Equally important to Douglass's writing as an independent entity was the significance it had for his oratorical abilities. Throughout the lecturer's early career, he faced the challenge of

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[18] Albert E. Stone. "Identity and Art in Frederick Douglass's "Narrative."" *CLA Journal* Vol. 17, No. 2, W. Wells Brown: The College Language Association: A Special Number (December, 1973), pp. 194.
[19] Albert E. Stone. "Identity and Art in Frederick Douglass's "Narrative."" *CLA Journal* Vol. 17, No. 2, W. Wells Brown: The College Language Association: A Special Number (December, 1973), pp. 201.
[20] Frederick Douglass. *My Bondage and My Freedom*. (New York: Penguin Books, 2003), 6.
[21] David Blight. *Frederick Douglass: Prophet of Freedom*. (New York: Simon & Schuster, Inc. 2018), 254.

battling for influence in the Abolitionist Movement and, as he grew older, over a variety of forms of African American equality. Accordingly, Douglass had to constantly amend his approach to reform, famously transitioning away from moral suasion to political abolitionism in the late 1840s. Therefore, Douglass needed to be able to captivate his audiences using whatever faculties he had available to him at the time of a given speech.

As Gregory Lampe noted, "[h]e used vivid imagery to make the situation immediate and real for his audience. In addition, his artistic use of metaphor, simile, parallelism, repetition, irony, ridicule, imagery, and foreshadowing demonstrated his understanding of time-proven rhetorical devices, devices he used to gain sympathy for [African Americans] and to motivate his audience to action."[22] To be able to do so, Douglass had to employ various writing skills that enabled him to evoke his message. This did not come without practice for Douglass. In the thousands of speeches, articles, letters, and autobiographies (among other documents) he wrote throughout his lifetime, Douglass created his own education, leading to a distinct compositional and oratorical voice. David Blight points out that upon returning to the United States after his trip to Great Britain in the late 1840s, Douglass became "a more reflective and analytical thinker, and the [second] autobiography demonstrated this in his embrace of reading and "study," his advocacy of the natural-rights tradition, and his conceptions of violence."[23]

Born out of both passionate desire and dire necessity, these skills were undoubtedly transferred into the orator's ability to both enrapture and mobilize his audiences. I. Garland James voiced a similar sentiment in 1891 when he recorded, "Mr. Douglass is what is hard to find in any one man,—a good speaker, as well as an effective, able, and logical writer. There is

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[22] Gregory P. Lampe. *Frederick Douglass: Freedom's Voice, 1818-1845* (East Lansing, MI: Michigan State University Press, 1998), 151. Accessed at http://www.questiaschool.com/read/11108122/frederick-douglass-freedom-s-voice-1818-1845.
[23] David Blight. *Frederick Douglass: Prophet of Freedom*. (New York: Simon & Schuster, Inc. 2018), 254.

no man to-day who is a Douglass with the quill and upon the rostrum...No writer ever expressed truth in better and more fitting language than did [Douglass]..."[24] Interestingly, in his Fourth of July Speech of 1852, the editor-orator claimed to have "thrown his thoughts together...with 'little experience and less learning,'...[but i]n reality, Douglass spent several weeks carefully crafting his text,"[25] demonstrating his commitment to composition as a means to further his cause. What is interesting here is that "[a]though he claimed that he could not 'write to much advantage, having never had a day of schooling in my life,' Douglass produced powerful, controlled prose on behalf of"[26] both free and enslaved African Americans throughout his career.

In juxtaposing James McCune Smith's views on Douglass's writing capabilities and R. R. Raymond's observation of Douglass as an orator can we more fully understand how the fugitive-turned-abolitionist used the intersection of both his writing and elocution to achieve his political and moral goals. McCune Smith noted that "[t]he most remarkable mental phenomenon in Mr. Douglass, is his style in writing and speaking...The style of Mr. Douglass in writing, is to me an intellectual puzzle. The strength, affluence and terseness may easily be accounted for, because the style of a man is the man..."[27] Alternatively, Raymond described the abolitionist as "full of generous impulse and delicate sensibility, exuberant in playful wit, or biting sarcasm, or stern denunciation, ever commanding in his moral attitude, earnest and impressive in manner, with a voice eminently sonorous and flexible…"[28] McCune Smith understood that Douglass's

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[24] I. Garland Penn. "The North Star." in *The Afro-American Press and Its Editors* (Springfield, MA: Willey, 1891).; reprinted in *Douglass in His Own Time: A Biographical Chronicle of His Life, Drawn from Recollections, Interviews, and Memoirs, by Family, Friends, and Associates*. ed. John Ernest (Iowa City: University of Iowa Press, 2014), 151-152.
[25] Robert E. Terrill. "Irony, Silence, and Time: Frederick Douglass on the Fifth of July." *Quarterly Journal of Speech*, Vol. 89, No. 3 (August 2003), pp. 221.
[26] Ibid.
[27] James McCune Smith. *My Bondage and My Freedom*. (New York: Penguin Books, 2003), 21-22.
[28] R. R. Raymond. "Outline of a Man." in *Autographs for Freedom*, ed. Julia Griffiths; reprinted in *Douglass in His Own Time: A Biographical Chronicle of His Life, Drawn from Recollections, Interviews, and Memoirs, by Family, Friends, and Associates*. ed. John Ernest (1853; repr., Iowa City: University of Iowa Press, 2014), 57.

writing style was refined yet candid while Raymond recognized that his skill came as a result of both his physical presence and his incisiveness as an intellectual. Though Douglass's abilities as an orator were regarded as unmatched by his friends and foes alike, this reality only came out of the need to channel his expertise in language through written prose *and* the need to speak on behalf of his marginalized brethren.

David Blight gives Frederick Douglass the title *prophet* for his heroism and because he became a symbol for African Americans both during and after his lifetime. Douglass was proof of what enslaved blacks could become, and this allowed him to transform into the lead advocate for their deliverance from bondage. Douglass wrote, lectured, debated, and quite literally fought for the rights of African Americans during the course of his lifetime, whether it was for emancipation, education, citizenship, voting rights, political office, public accommodation, or more. It was through these efforts, as well as the efforts of many of his contemporaries, that the gains blacks made did occur. McCune Smith, another African American activist of the 19th Century, expressed his elation over Douglass's attitude and approach to the fight for emancipation when he wrote, "I love Frederick Douglass for his whole souled *outness*, that is the secret of his noble thoughts and far-reaching sympathies."[29] To McCune Smith, Douglass's enthusiasm for and dedication to abolitionism actually indicated both Douglass's ability and necessity to *become* the movement, or, at the very least, to be the one to lead it. This transformation thus became a precursor for the eventual emancipation and advancement of black Americans.

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[29] James McCune Smith. "McCune Smith to Gerrit Smith." *Works of James McCune Smith*. ed. John Stauffer; reprinted in *Frederick Douglass: Prophet of Freedom*. (1848; repr., New York: Simon & Schuster, Inc. 2018), 257.

While there were many limitations to how much those advances meant in the lives of African Americans, they were significant nonetheless. Looking back today on the issues Douglass sought to address, we can see how important Douglass actually was for his cause. R. R. Raymond remarked in 1853 that Douglass was "a colored man, who had known by experience the bitterness of slavery, and now by some process free, so endowed with natural powers, and a certain degree of attainments, all the more rare and effective for being acquired under great disadvantages,—as to be a sort of Moses to his oppressed and degraded tribe."[30] When we take into account the fact that reform actually occurred, his efforts become all the more important. McCune Smith echoed this same sentiment in the very first sentence of his introduction for Douglass's second autobiography, *My Bondage and My Freedom*, writing that

> "mankind pay him tribute of their admiration; when he accomplishes this elevation by native energy, guided by prudence and wisdom, their admiration is increased; but when his course, onward and upward, excellent in itself, furthermore proves a possible, what had hitherto been regarded as an impossible, reform, then he becomes a burning and a shining light, on which the aged may look with gladness, the young with hope, and the down-trodden, as a representative of what they may themselves become."[31]

Douglass, here, becomes more than a man. He becomes a savior, a source of optimism, and of inspiration. Smith had much more to say about Douglass, pointing out that he and others were "banners on the outer wall, under which abolition is fighting its most successful battles, because they are living exemplars of the practicability of the most radical abolitionism...yet they have not only won equality to their white fellow citizens, in civil, religious, political and social rank, but they have also illustrated and adorned our common country by their genius, learning and

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[30] R. R. Raymond. "Outline of a Man." in *Autographs for Freedom*, ed. Julia Griffiths; reprinted in *Douglass in His Own Time: A Biographical Chronicle of His Life, Drawn from Recollections, Interviews, and Memoirs, by Family, Friends, and Associates*. ed. John Ernest (1853; repr., Iowa City: University of Iowa Press, 2014), 56.

[31] James McCune Smith. *My Bondage and My Freedom*. (New York: Penguin Books, 2003), 10.

eloquence."[32] To Smith, Douglass had already become the living embodiment of black amelioration, and it was because of this that he was so effective at his task and necessary to his cause.

Douglass's identity was ever-shifting. He, himself, identified a change in his identity when he was, in fact, still enslaved. In all three of his autobiographies, Douglass reflected on this, representing both differences and commonalities in his perception of a specific event as the turning point in his life. In Douglass's first autobiography, the *Narrative of the Life of Frederick Douglass, an American Slave, written by Himself*, Douglass regarded his defeat of Edward Covey, known as a "Negro breaker," as the seminal moment that defined him as a human. He intimated this when he rationalized, "[t]his battle with Mr. Covey was the turning-point in my career as a slave. It rekindled the few expiring embers of freedom, and revived within me a sense of my own manhood. It recalled the departed self-confidence, and inspired me again with a determination to be free."[33] In this early recollection of his *ascendancy* from slavery, Douglass showed his readers that the emotional victory of having defeated his captor contributed more to his sense of self than the physical act of escaping from slavery. Professor Donald Gibson identified this moment in Douglass's *Narrative* as the climax of the autobiography, "the private, psychological one, explicitly revealing the formation on Douglass' part of a new consciousness, a different awareness and sense of self, and a firm resolve for the future."[34] In *My Bondage and My Freedom*, Douglass keenly surmised that "[w]hen a slave cannot be flogged he is more than

[32] Frederick Douglass. *My Bondage and My Freedom*. (New York: Penguin Books, 2003), 11.
[33] Frederick Douglass. *Narrative of the Life of Frederick Douglass, an American Slave, written by Himself*. (Boston: The Anti-Slavery Office, 1845), 72.
[34] Donald B. Gibson. "Reconciling Public and Private in Frederick Douglass' Narrative." *American Literature*, Vol. 57, No. 4 (Dec., 1985), pp. 554.

half free. He has a domain as broad as his own manly heart to defend, and he is really 'a power on earth.'"[35]

Douglass's own recognition of the transformation he experienced was only a foreshadowing of what he would become. As Gibson wrote, "[p]sychologically, Douglass' conflict with Covey is a private and personal trial whose outcome will determine whether Douglass has earned, through exercise of strength and courage, the prerogatives belonging to free, adult, white males in his society."[36] From this experience, Douglass resolved that he was entitled to the same rights as any other man, including those who were regarded as the highest ranks in the social order. In Douglass's rationale, whatever liberties a free, voting-age, white man could do, he should be able to do, regardless of the mandated status he held. Douglass may have evinced this idea best in his *Bondage and Freedom*, which he designedly repeated in *Life and Times*, when he deliberated, "I had reached the point at which I was *not afraid to die*. This spirit made me a freeman in *fact*, though I still remained a slave in *form*."[37] Douglass clearly recognized the implications of this victory at the different stages in his life. His newly found autonomy of mind, if not in law, gave him a stronger sense of purpose and belonging as a part of the human race. This was only possible, however, because he was forced to take on the role of rebel while also remaining a captive of Covey. Having the time to consider this victory while still enslaved gave Douglass a unique drive for his own liberty and, over time, to aid others in their emancipation from similar circumstances. Douglass used both the identities of his former self, which had not defeated Covey, and his secondary self, psychologically free, to better

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[35] Frederick Douglass. *My Bondage and My Freedom*. (New York: Penguin Books, 2003), 181.
[36] Donald B. Gibson. "Reconciling Public and Private in Frederick Douglass' Narrative." *American Literature*, Vol. 57, No. 4 (Dec., 1985), pp. 558.
[37] Frederick Douglass. *My Bondage and My Freedom*. (New York: Penguin Books, 2003), 181.

illustrate the depravity of slavery and racism, whether explicit or implicit, in America. In turn, Douglass was forced to reflect on this as a way to affirm his identity as a reformer.

Douglass's metamorphosis was also significant because it gave greater authority to what he had to say in the future and was regarded positively by his many advocates. "DOUGLASS is his fugitive name,"[38] claimed Nathaniel P. Rogers, in 1841. He went on, "He did not wear it in slavery. We don't know why he assumed it, or who bestowed it on him—but there seems *fitness* in it, to his commanding figure and heroic port. As a speaker he has few equals."[39] Rogers was not only blown away by his skill of oratory, but of his presence in general. He believed that Douglass's public persona matched his personal image. Furthermore, he felt that Douglass "was cut out for a hero,"[40] explaining why Dr. Blight has gone so far as to label Douglass the prophet that he was. "Yet he [was] a *thing*, in American estimate,"[41] according to Rogers, thus presenting the challenge that Douglass faced as both African American and fugitive slave. Frederick Douglass could not shake that title, even though he was in a state that had outlawed slavery. In America at that time, he was forced into the conundrum of being "a fugitive...not *from* slavery—but *in* slavery."[42] As he grew older, Douglass faced new challenges in the balancing act of being an African American and an American citizen at the same time. This

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[38] Nathaniel Peabody Rogers. "Rhode Island Meeting." in *Collection from the Miscellaneous Writings of Nathaniel Peabody Rogers*, 2nd ed., reprinted in *Douglass in His Own Time: A Biographical Chronicle of His Life, Drawn from Recollections, Interviews, and Memoirs, by Family, Friends, and Associates*. ed. John Ernest (1841; repr., Iowa City: University of Iowa Press, 2014), 21.
[39] Ibid.
[40] Ibid.
[41] Nathaniel Peabody Rogers. "Rhode Island Meeting." in *Collection from the Miscellaneous Writings of Nathaniel Peabody Rogers*, 2nd ed., reprinted in *Douglass in His Own Time: A Biographical Chronicle of His Life, Drawn from Recollections, Interviews, and Memoirs, by Family, Friends, and Associates*. ed. John Ernest (1841; repr., Iowa City: University of Iowa Press, 2014), 22.
[42] Nathaniel P. Rogers. "Southern Slavery and Northern Religion: Two Addresses," *Herald of Freedom* (February 16, 1844), reprinted in *Douglass in His Own Time: A Biographical Chronicle of His Life, Drawn from Recollections, Interviews, and Memoirs, by Family, Friends, and Associates*. ed. John Ernest (1844; repr., Iowa City: University of Iowa Press, 2014), 23.

brought different realities, opportunities, and responsibilities with which Douglass would eventually have to contend.

During the Civil War, Douglass became as actively involved in reform as he ever would. He saw the conflict as both apocalyptic and redemptive, and

> "he seemed certain of his own duty. This time the duty of hope was not merely to prescribe political faith in the face of proslavery laws and institutions. It entailed bloodlust...Douglass's own sense of revenge against slaveholders came unleashed; as he passionately vented a long-pent-up desire for righteous violence in the cause of abolition, he felt freed to advocate the death of every Edward Covey in the South."[43]

Douglass understood the war in biblical terms that entailed sacrifice, patriotism, and God's vengeance. This vengeance was necessary, in Douglass's mind, to establish "a new birth of freedom,"[44] as Abraham Lincoln justly stated. To be able to effect this change and experience the freedom Lincoln envisioned, however, Douglass knew that African Americans needed to take part in the conflict themselves, demonstrating their devotion to both cause and country. He saw this participation as evidence of their American identity and "[t]he orator wanted black patriotism acknowledged in all its forms."[45] He went so far as to identify this about himself when he stated, "I am an American citizen. In birth, in sentiment, in ideas, in hopes, in aspirations, and responsibilities...Happily, however, in standing up in their cause I do, and you do, but stand in defense of the cause of the whole country."[46] "Douglass equated true loyalty and patriotism with abolitionism,"[47] so he therefore had to take on the role of motivator at this point in his life maybe more than any other. While Douglass already recognized that citizenship was

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[43] David Blight. *Frederick Douglass: Prophet of Freedom*. (New York: Simon & Schuster, Inc. 2018), 348-350.
[44] Abraham Lincoln. "Gettysburg Address" speech. Gettysburg, PA. November 19, 1863.
[45] David Blight. *Frederick Douglass: Prophet of Freedom*. (New York: Simon & Schuster, Inc. 2018), 361.
[46] Frederick Douglass. "The Future of the Negro People of the Slave States, speech delivered before the Emancipation Leaguge in Tremont Temple, Boston"; reprinted in *Frederick Douglass: Selected Writings and Speeches*, ed. Philip S. Foner and Yuval Taylor (1862; repr., Chicago: Lawrence Hill Books, 1999), 476-477.
[47] David Blight. *Frederick Douglass: Prophet of Freedom*. (New York: Simon & Schuster, Inc. 2018), 361.

evidence of humanness *and* that because he was born in the United States, that should entitle him to this affirmation, he still understood the power of African American involvement in the war as a means to achieve that recognition. His own humanity and that of his beleaguered race depended upon it and, consequently, his own personal reality of being a black man in America became even more pronounced.

Following the war and throughout the rest of his life, Douglass continued to focus on the rights of African Americans in political, social, economic, and cultural realms. His work in this struggle undoubtedly affected his own understanding of what it meant to be an African American in the United States, and it is through this that we gain a greater knowledge of Douglass as an individual *and* as a public figure. Frederick Douglass had to act throughout his lifetime in such a way that incorporated both the challenges he encountered and the beliefs he held dearest. He could never focus solely on one task, nor take up one identity without taking up another, because of this reality. As a result, we understand Douglass as more than mythic, as his consistently-shifting realities forced him to take on the diverse set of roles and responsibilities of an African American man fighting for change in 19th Century America.

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Frederick Douglass was an escaped slave who became a prominent activist, author and public speaker. He became a leader in the abolitionist movement, which sought to end the practice of slavery, before and during the Civil War.Â Douglassâ€™ 1845 autobiography, Narrative of the Life of Frederick Douglass, an American Slave, described his time as an enslaved worker in Maryland. It was one of five autobiographies he penned, along with dozens of noteworthy speeches, despite receiving minimal formal education.Â During these meetings, he was exposed to the writings of abolitionist and journalist William Lloyd Garrison. The two men eventually met when both were asked to speak at an abolitionist meeting, during which Douglass shared his story of slavery and escape. Frederick Douglass circa 1874. In September 1862, Abraham Lincoln gave notice that he intended to free the slaves held in states still in rebellion against the Union, a promise fulfilled by the Emancipation Proclamation issued on January 1, 1863. Lincoln himself remains the subject of scrutiny and celebration as the nation marks the 150th anniversary of that major step toward the abolition of American slavery.Â Revisiting that Introduction today, weâ€™re reminded of the adage that all history is a reflection of the age in which itâ€™s written.Â The publication in 1845 of the Narrative of the Life of Frederick Douglass was a passport to prominence for a twenty-seven-year-old Negro. Up to that year most of his life had been spent in obscurity. The Life and Writings by Frederick Douglass. Other editions. Want to Read savingâ€¦Â After his escape from slavery, Douglass became a renowned abolitionist, editor and feminist. Having escaped from slavery at age 20, he took the name Frederick Douglass for himself and became an advocate of abolition. Douglass traveled widely, and often perilously, to lecture against slav Frederick Douglass (nÃ© Frederick Augustus Washington Bailey) was born a slave in the state of Maryland in 1818. After his escape from slavery, Douglass became a renowned abolitionist, editor and feminist. Having escaped from slavery at age 20, he took the name Frederick Douglass for himself and became an advoc Douglass immediately recognizes the growing uncertainty of some abolitionists surrounding the incorporation of the woman movement, and attempts to prevent further uncertainty when he discusses human duty and morality in promoting freedom and equality. Douglass proclaims, â€œStanding as we do upon the watch-tower of human freedom, we cannot be deterred from an expression of our approbation of any movement, however, humble, to improve and elevate the character of any members of the human familyâ€ (â€œEditorialâ€ 85).Â Would the pace or the outcome of the reforms have been different had the rhetoric been less emotional? More balanced?Â Douglass, Frederick. â€œEditorial from The North Star.â€ Feminism: The Essential Historical Writings. Ed. Miriam Schneir. COPYRIGHT INFORMATION. Book: Narrative of the Life of Frederick Douglass Author: Frederick Douglass, 1817?â€“95 First published: 1845. The original book is in the public domain in the United States and in most, if not all, other countries as well. Readers outside the United States should check their own countriesâ€™ copyright laws to be certain they can legally download this ebook.Â PREFACE. IN the month of August, 1841, I attended an anti-slavery convention in Nantucket, at which it was my happiness to become acquainted with FREDERICK DOUGLASS, the writer of the following Narrative. He was a stranger to