

Narrative of the Life of Frederick Douglass, An American Slave

by Frederick Douglass

StoryLines Southeast Discussion Guide No.3

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Discussion questions

"You have seen how a man was made a slave;" wrote Frederick Douglass, "you shall see how a slave was made a man." How are men made slaves? How are slaves made men?

Douglass said he saw clearly "the brutalizing effects of slavery upon both slave and slaveholder." How did ownership of slaves brutalize the owner? Beyond physical punishment, how were slaves brutalized?

Additional readings

Henry Louis Gates. *The Classic Slave Narratives*, 1987.
Harriet A. Jacobs. *Incidents in the Life of a Slave Girl*, 1861.
William McFeely. *Frederick Douglass*, 1991.
Eric L. McKittrick, ed. *Slavery Defended: The Views of the Old South*, 1963.

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Prefacing this autobiography of escaped slave, Frederick Douglass, is an impassioned message of support from abolitionist leader William Lloyd Garrison. "Fortunate, most fortunate occurrence!" exhorts Garrison, "fortunate for millions of his manacled brethren, yet panting from their awful thraldom!—fortunate for the cause of Negro emancipation . . . fortunate for the multitudes, in various parts of our republic, whose minds he has enlightened on the subject of slavery, and who have been melted to tears by his pathos, or roused to virtuous indignation by his stirring eloquence against the enslavers of men!"

Fortunate, indeed, for the abolitionist movement was the sudden appearance of an American-born slave, a literate, articulate, and determined black man, who had emancipated himself from slavery and would soon gain recognition as one of the most influential voices in a rising chorus of anti-slavery sentiment. Fortunate, too, for American history. "We have been left long enough to gather the character of slavery from the involuntary evidence of the masters," writes Wendell Phillips in a letter of support for Douglass's book. "You remember the old fable of 'The Man and the Lion,'" Phillips continues, "where the lion complained that he should not be so misrepresented 'when the lions wrote history.'" With the publication of the autobiography of Frederick Douglass, the lions found a spokesperson. A rare, primary-source documentation of a slave's life, this book is considered both a landmark in American biography and a classic of American literature.

Douglass was born Frederick Augustus Washington Bailey in Tuckahoe, Maryland, on the estate of Captain Aaron Anthony. No record of his birth date is known, though scholars guess it to be sometime in 1817. He wrote his autobiography in 1845, at the young age of 28, in response to a number of critics who questioned his authenticity; it seemed doubtful that a true slave might behave so boldly, speak so eloquently.

"The opinion was also whispered that my master was my father," writes Douglass. His mother, Harriet Bailey, was sent 12 miles away to another plantation upon his birth—babies of slaves were commonly separated from their mothers—and Douglass was raised by his maternal grandmother. Harriet Bailey nonetheless managed to visit her son, walking the 12 miles in

the dark after a full day's work in the fields, risking a whipping if she failed to return by sunrise. "I do not recollect of ever seeing my mother by the light of day. She would lie down with me, and get me to sleep, but long before I waked she was gone."

Shortly after his mother's death, the eight-year-old boy was sent to work in Baltimore as a domestic servant for Hugh and Sophie Auld. Mrs. Auld began teaching Frederick to read, but these lessons were soon halted. "Learning would spoil the best nigger in the world," chided Master Auld. ". . . If you teach that nigger how to read, there would be no keeping him." His master's words were a revelation to Douglass; at a young age he understood that learning was the key to unlocking his chains. He resolved to persevere with his studies surreptitiously, befriending white children on the streets and pressing them for whatever schooling they might provide. Later he taught other slaves to read. Douglass writes:

That which to him was a great evil, to be carefully shunned, was to me a great good, to be diligently sought; and the argument which he so warmly urged, against my learning to read, only served to inspire me with a desire and determination to learn. In learning to read, I owe almost as much to the bitter opposition of my master, as to the kindly aid of my mistress. I acknowledge the benefit of both.

Upon the death of his master, Douglass was hired out as a field hand to Edward Covey, a farmer skilled in breaking stubborn slaves. With little experience with farming, he stumbled in his chores and Covey whipped him regularly. "You have seen how a man was made a slave; you shall see how a slave was made a man," he wrote. He resolved to stand against his master's aggression, and with fists and kicks he eventually subdued him. This act rekindled Douglass's desire for freedom, restored some measure of his dignity, and propelled him to the conclusion that ". . . however long I might remain a slave in form, the day had passed forever when I could be a slave in fact."

Douglass returned once again to Baltimore where he was forced to be a ship caulker. After one failed attempt at escape, he carefully plotted a second effort, and in 1838 he succeeded in making his way northward to New York City, then to New Bedford, Massachusetts. Soon after his arrival in the north, Douglass sent for and married freed slave, Anna Murray, whom he had met earlier in Baltimore.

In 1841, at an anti-slavery convention in Nantucket, Douglass rose reluctantly to speak, but was so eloquent in his presentation that he earned fast acclaim. Soon he was traveling and lecturing as an agent for the Massachusetts Anti-Slavery Society, led by William Lloyd Garrison, and thus began his career as an influential force in the battle against slavery. He would champion this cause passionately and tirelessly for the rest of his life, editing his own anti-slavery newspaper and writing powerful editorials advocating emancipation for all slaves. He did not argue for non-violence, but he did counsel against John Brown's ill-fated raid on the U.S. Armory and Arsenal at Harpers Ferry, Virginia, in October, 1859.

During the Civil War, Douglass served as a consultant to Abraham Lincoln, advocating that former slaves be armed to serve the North and pressing to make emancipation the central issue of the war. During Reconstruction (1865-1877) he fought for full civil rights for all freed slaves and vigorously campaigned for women's suffrage. Douglass later served as Assistant Secretary of the Santo Domingo Commission, and Recorder of Deeds for Washington, D.C., becoming the first black citizen to hold high rank in the United States government. From 1889-1891, he was U.S. Minister and Consul General to Haiti. Frederick Douglass died in 1895.

About the author

Frederick Douglass wrote two other autobiographical works, *My Bondage and My Freedom* and *Life and Times of Frederick Douglass*, published in 1855 and 1881, respectively. After Anna Murray died, Douglass toward the end of his life married Helen Pitts, a white woman who was also committed to humanitarian causes.