

Defining and Regaining the Human Identity:
queries of existence in Frederick Douglass's *Narrative*

At the approximate midpoint of the year 1833, Frederick Douglass was a slave, residing on a farm in Maryland, within sight of the Chesapeake Bay. He was officially considered the property of a man known as Thomas Auld but was on lease that particular year to another slaveholder by the name of Edward Covey, who was known widely among his neighbors as a “nigger-breaker” (Douglass 296). Around those middle months of 1833, Douglass and Covey had a terrible fistfight, brawling for many hours until the latter man fled. In his autobiography, *The Narrative of the Life of Frederick Douglass: An American Slave*, Douglass describes this specific moment in time with compelling eloquence:

It was a glorious resurrection, from the tomb of slavery, to the heaven of freedom. My long-crushed spirit rose, cowardice departed, bold defiance took its place; and I now resolved that, however long I might remain a slave in form, the day had passed forever when I could be a slave in fact (302).

In light of these words, it is interesting to note that Douglass did not make his physical escape from his master until several years later, on the third of September, 1838. In contrast to the sentiment of the passage above, he recalls this event in his narrative quite simply: “I left my chains, and succeeded in reaching New York without the slightest interruption of any kind” (315). The word choice here is striking. In this description, Douglass mentions only the abandonment of “chains,” which is a clear and specific reference to physical restraints and not to the state of enslavement itself. Such a declaration suggests that Douglass believed that he did not become a free man on the day he gained physical freedom but on the one that he discovered mental liberation.

“Slavery as a labor system could work only if its African American victims at least to some degree actually became slaves in their own minds” (Zilversmit 49). In his narrative, Douglass explores this idea as he chronicles the journey of the African American slave from enslavement to freedom, asserting that a slave has to eliminate the mental and emotional effects of dehumanization enacted by the American chattel slavery system before truly becoming free. According to Douglass, this process rests entirely on the realization and acceptance of two basic human entitlements: the right to a personal identity and the right to upward social mobility. Only after assuming individual ownership of these rights could slaves regain their humanity, *the essential self*, and fully escape the clutches of slavery.

Before Douglass can set forth the steps that he deemed most crucial in the process of the re-humanization of the African American slave, he must first prove that the slave who is “content” to remain enslaved has regressed to a non-human form. Essentially, he prefaces the question of “What does it mean to be human?” with the answer to a different question: “What does it mean not to be human?” (Kibbey & Stepto 166). The answer commences at the very beginning of his narrative, as Douglass briefly addresses the identities of his mother and father. The concise and unemotional descriptions of his parents, considered by most humans as two of the most important people in one’s life, are unlike the typical perception of the mother and father. When Douglass is only seven years old, his mother dies; he recalls that experience with these words: “She was gone before I knew any thing about it” (276). The sense of utter detachment here is reminiscent of the relationship between wild animals and their offspring, many of which share only the bond of birth.

Douglass then continues his description of the nonhuman African American slave by exploring another unnatural characteristic that results from implementation of slavery: a lack of

awareness of chronological time. “I do not remember to have ever met a slave who could tell of his birthday...the larger part of the slaves know as little of their age as horses know of theirs” (276). In this instance, the comparison to an animal-like regression is even stronger. A poor comprehension of the passage of time not only increases the dependence of the slave upon the master, but also severs crucial ties to the slave’s past and future, as there is little way for the slave to imagine further than his/her immediate present.

Another method that the slave master utilizes in order to dehumanize his slaves is the seizure of individual control of personal needs. More specifically, the master takes charge of such areas in his slaves’ lives such as food distribution and mealtime operation, clothing distribution, and housing availability: needs that the normal human being is allowed to (or required to) take care of for him or herself. This is highly analogous to the relationship between a beast and his owner, wherein the animal cannot eat, sleep, or even defecate without some permission or assistance from his human master. Indeed, Douglass’s use of animal analogies in his writing is well-recognized by scholars today: “...it should not be surprising that animal imagery...abound in Douglass’s prose” (Mieder 38). “Slavery...also brutalized effectively, by endeavoring to transform them into brutes or domesticated animals...” (Myers 27).

Douglass addresses the subject of nourishment control by explaining the food rations slaves receive (279). This food is all that a slave receives until the next rationing time; slaves that attempt to disobey this rule by stealing food are severely punished with whippings and beatings (281). Even more sickening is Douglass’s description of the feeding of slave children: “Our food was coarse corn meal boiled...it was put into a large wooden tray or trough, and set down upon the ground. The children were then called, like so many pigs, and like so many pigs they would come and devour the mush...” (285). The degrading nature of this situation is painfully obvious.

In addition, clothing and shelter are likewise rationed. Douglass reports that children are given only two linen shirts per year and that when these become unsuitable, the children are forced to remain naked until the next ration came. As for housing, slaves are provided with a large space for a bed and a single blanket for shelter (279). The only way in which to obtain more warmth is to use one's neighbor for bodily heat, not greatly unlike a litter of puppies, clamoring for room underneath the mother's belly.

Ultimately, the slave is completely dehumanized by a disconnection from the knowledge of the value of human life. This forceful detachment is due directly to the continuous cycle of violence, brutality, and murder inflicted upon the slave population by their enslavers. In fact, Douglass himself was no older than a small child when he witnessed his first slave beating. The victim was his aunt, a woman named Hester. She received punishment for going out to see another slave on a nearby farm, a young man whom she likely loved. Douglass tells of her being stripped nearly naked and then being beaten to a pulp with a cowskin rope. Aunt Hester was "a woman of noble form, and of graceful proportions," according to her young nephew (278). However, her beauty does not impede the rage of her white persecutors.

The whipping of Hester is the first violent scene that Douglass relates in his narrative, but it is by no means the last. Murder and barbarity abound in the autobiography: "...[a white male of Maryland] killed two slaves, one of which he killed with a hatchet, by knocking his brains out" (284), "mangling her person in the most horrible manner, breaking her nose and breastbone with a stick" (284), "The head, neck and shoulders...were literally cut to pieces" (288). The effect that it has on the mentality of the slaves is especially apparent in the passage in which Douglass explains why slaves do not often speak ill of their masters. "Indeed, it is not uncommon for slaves even to fall out and quarrel among themselves about the relative goodness

of their masters... They seemed to think that the greatness of their masters was transferable to themselves” (282-283). Since the slaves have been completely dehumanized and desensitized to their own worth as human beings, they turn instead to take on the value of their masters.

After completing his argument for the dehumanized slave, Douglass begins putting forth the steps that he believes are crucial to the re-humanization and subsequent freedom of the African American slave. A journey must always begin with a single step, though, and Douglass himself makes this move by pursuing literacy. Like most African Americans of his time and afterwards, Douglass’s experience with literacy is “replete with examples of the denial of access and opportunity ... and the struggle against political, cultural, racial, and economic structures” (Willis 11). In light of the historical context, it is ironic that his decision is partly due to the efforts of the wife of his second slave master, Mrs. Hugh Auld. Out of pity, she begins instructing Douglass in the alphabet. However, she is soon admonished by her husband and consequently refuses to offer the young man any further education. Douglass is then left to choose whether to continue learning or to turn back. Even under the threat of physical harm, his decision to carry on is made without reserve (Douglass 289).

Douglass’s rapid mastery of the English language is the impetus that propels him to begin exploration of and eventual pursuit of his entitlement to a personal identity. His newfound relationship with the written word, however, does not lead to immediate happiness and satisfaction. In fact, after he begins to obtain and read anti-slavery tracts, his resulting emotions are indeed neither of these two sentiments but their opposites: “As I read and contemplated the subject, behold! That very discontentment...had already come, to torment and sting my soul to unutterable anguish. As I writhed under it, I would at times feel that learning to read had been a curse rather than a blessing” (290). Nonetheless, the painful experience produced results: “The

silver trump of freedom had roused my soul to eternal wakefulness. Freedom now appeared, to disappear no more forever. It was heard in every sound, and seen in every thing” (290).

After learning to read and eventually to write as well, Douglass embarks upon his journey to rediscover his own personal identity. The right to having a personal identity is, as Douglass discovers, multi-faceted, and as a result is perhaps his most difficult struggle on the pathway towards freedom. One-by-one, Douglass is forced to realize and understand each of the aspects that comprise a human identity and then to accept them as rightfully belonging to himself. The first aspect that he addresses in the narrative is the right to familial ties. Soon after Douglass learns to read and eventually write, Douglass’s master dies, and he and all the other slaves owned by the deceased man are set to be divided among the master’s two remaining children. The slaves are gathered in to be valued, and then the division begins. “I have no language to express the high excitement and deep anxiety which we felt among us poor slaves during this time,” Douglass recalled. “A single word from the white men was enough...to sunder forever the dearest friends, dearest kindred, and strongest ties known to human beings” (292). These words signal a noticeable change in his ideas regarding personal bonds to other people. The child Douglass who did not shed a single tear when his mother passed away reports as a young man that he “suffered more anxiety than most of [his] fellow-slaves” at the trading block (292).

Further evidence of his expanded understanding of human familial ties is exhibited in a passage regarding his grandmother. After the two children of his old master also die, Douglass’s grandmother is sent to live by herself in a small cabin. All of her family, however, is sold away, leaving the elderly and feeble woman alone and helpless. Douglass’s indignation is great: “The hearth is desolate. The children, the unconscious children, who once sang and danced in her presence, are gone” (293). This dramatic excerpt strongly indicates that Douglass has come to

regard a new importance for the aspect of family. This is the first major step that he takes towards the understanding of his entitlement to a personal identity.

Another step in this journey is perceived in Douglass's gradual awareness of the disparities between actual Christian ideology and religious hypocrisy. This process comes to fruition under a new master, Captain Thomas Auld. Douglass records that while he was Auld's slave, the captain attended a Methodist revival meeting and "there experienced religion" (295). Douglass initially hopes that "religion" has bettered his master, but he is terribly disappointed: "If it had any effect on his character, it made him more cruel and hateful in all his ways; for I believe him to have been a much worse man after his conversion than before" (295). Auld's hypocrisy represents a typical distortion of Christianity seen in the American South during the mid-1800s, a "religion" that had "rapidly shifted to accommodate slavery and white supremacist ideology" (Chaplin 299). The intensity of the captain's hypocrisy is disgusting; Douglass reported that his master often "had three or four preachers [at the house] at a time...while he starved us, he stuffed them" (295). However, heavy sarcasm drips from every word that Douglass writes about his master's new "religion." It is additionally obvious that Douglass understands that Auld is not a "true" Christian when he compares his master to religious men that do practice their beliefs, such as a "Mr. Cookman," who "could not come among [the slaves] without betraying his sympathy for us" and a "Mr. Wilson, who proposed to keep a Sabbath school for the instruction of such slaves as might be disposed to learn to read the New Testament" (295-296). Through the example of these men, Douglass was "convinced that the true gospel was a liberating one" (Davis 65).

A third major point in Douglass's quest to understand his personal identity is his discovery of absolute chronological time. "I have now reached a period of my life when I can

give dates,” Douglass reported around the time of his move to live with Captain Auld. From this point on in the narrative, Douglass offers specific years and even exact dates on which significant action takes place in his life. This is a considerable departure from the earlier part of the narrative, in which Douglass describes time periods in largely general terms and even admits that he has “no accurate knowledge of [his] age” (276). When Thomas Auld sends him to live with Edward Covey, Douglass is well aware that it occurs “on the 1st of January, 1833” (297). He later records that this term ended “on Christmas day, 1833” (303) and also that “at the close of the year 1834, Mr. Freeland again hired me of my master, for the year 1835” (306). This frequent mentioning of dates is nearly unnecessary for a reader’s adequate understanding of the narrative. However, there is a sense that Douglass repeats himself in order to emphasize the fact that he is indeed able to record these dates at all.

Although all of these steps are significant in Douglass’s rediscovery of his personal identity, the apex of this process is indubitably the fight with Covey. It is in this moment that Douglass fully acknowledges and accepts the two most crucial aspects of his entitlement to an identity: the right to life and the recognition of his own self-worth. At the inauguration of his journey towards freedom, Douglass truly has no concept of either of these two ideas: “I often found myself regretting my own existence, and wishing myself dead...” (290). Although many factors contribute to his gradual understanding, the experience that produces the greatest difference occurs on a day approximately six months into his year with Covey. In the narrative, Douglass recalls that he became exhausted that day and collapsed in the fields. Covey found him and promptly beat him (300). Douglass decided to appeal to his old master, Thomas Auld, but Auld refused to help. “Wearied in body and broken in spirit,” he dreaded the next inevitable confrontation with Covey (301). However, when Covey provoked a fight with him several days

later, Douglass was gripped by determination. “From whence came the spirit I don’t know,” he said. “I resolved to fight.” After a two-hour struggle, Covey gave in and left (302). “This battle with Mr. Covey was the turning point in my career as a slave,” Douglass reports afterwards (302). The choice to fight had been a choice to live: “It was a glorious resurrection...” (302). He understood not only intellectually but also emotionally that he was not an animal or a machine but a human being: “It rekindled in me the few expiring embers of freedom, and revived within me *a sense of my own manhood*” (302, emphasis added).

Although this victory marks the end of Douglass’s search for his personal identity, he later receives a unique opportunity to reinforce this right. After leaving his master and escaping into New York, a free state, Douglass takes refuge in the home of an abolitionist. While lodging there, he writes that: “the question arose as to what name I should be called by” (317). Douglass recalls the long list of names he has had in his life: his birth name, the names given to him under various slave masters, and the name he had assumed upon reaching New York. At this point; however, he is free to choose whichever name that he wishes. He decides upon “Frederick Douglass,” and “from that time... [he] has been called [that name]” (317). By doing so, he acknowledges that, as a human being, he is entitled to the possession of a personal name, and for the first time in his life, he is known exactly as he intends to be known. Although at this point in the narrative he is a free man in the eyes of the law, by taking this action he demonstrates that he is also a free man by the laws of his heart.

After recognizing his entitlement to a personal identity, Douglass embarks upon a new ambition: the realization of a second essential human right, the right to work for upward social mobility. Although he does not intentionally pursue this goal until after he achieves the first one, it must be acknowledged that Douglass initially begins to reach out in this direction, albeit

unconsciously, as a child illegally learning to read and write. He arguably would not have been able to pursue any other aspect of upward social mobility if he had remained illiterate. However, as this subject has already been explored in detail within this paper, it is mentioned here only for the sake of conveying its importance within the rediscovery of this second human right, as it had likewise for the first.

Interestingly, Douglass's first obvious attempt at upward social mobility is made while he is still a slave. After his year with Covey ends, he is hired out by another man, William Freeland (304). As a slave under Mr. Freeland, Douglass secretly begins a Sabbath school in order to instruct other slaves in reading and writing. His actions have a wide impact: "I had at one time over forty scholars, and those of the right sort, ardently desiring to learn" (306). Although his teaching position is certainly not a paid one, it is the closest stab that Douglass has ever made at an actual job. It does not put him in any place that his white captors would consider notable, but it does afford some prestige within the slave community. As a literate man, Douglass can navigate many aspects of the white-controlled society around him that his illiterate friends and family members cannot. He is also free to share this knowledge with others, which he clearly chooses to do through both teaching and writing.

In addition, the fulfillment that Douglass receives from the experience is analogous to the free man's satisfaction from a hard day at good work: "They were great days to my soul. The work of instructing my dear fellow-slaves was the sweetest engagement with which I was ever blessed" (306). His pleasure is not only sweet but enduring as a result of the positive effects his efforts produce: "And I have the happiness to know, that several of those who came to Sabbath school learned how to read; and that one, at least, is now free through my agency" (306). Until he is able to escape and earn actual wages, these results serve as a well-deserved salary.

Shortly following the course of the Sabbath school, Douglass begins to feel pressed towards a stronger pursuit of social mobility. This motivation begins to take shape after he is hired on by Mr. Freeland for a second year of work. Douglass describes Freeland as “the best master I ever had” (306). Compared to the period of time under Edward Covey, the first year spent with Freeland “passed smoothly,” with Douglass receiving not “a single blow” from the man (306). Though his new situation seems to be an improvement, Douglass again begins to experience sentiments of discomfort and dissatisfaction: “... by this time, I began to want to live upon *free land* as well as to live with *Freeland*; and I was no longer content, therefore, to live with him or any other slaveholder” (306). This return to desire for improvement, nearly destroyed by Covey’s cruelty, leads Douglass to take a huge leap towards regaining his right to be socially mobile. He and several other slaves begin to seriously consider escaping from Mr. Freeland. By taking this action, Douglass demands for himself the right to make personal plans, a key aspect of social mobility. “I therefore resolved,” he recalls in the narrative, “that 1835 should not pass without witnessing an attempt, on my part, to secure my liberty.” Almost immediately, he becomes not only the creator of the plan but also the leader of it (306). Unfortunately, he and all the others involved are discovered before they can put their ideas into action (308). Douglass is sent to live again with an old master and is forced to endure backbreaking work in a shipyard for many months (310). However, the desire for social mobility lingers. Douglass begins to ponder escape again and soon makes his final, successful attempt to run away (315). Douglass describes this tremendous moment as “that part of my life during which I *planned* [my italics] ...” (313). Through the experience he learns not only to make his own plans and set his own goals, but also to succeed at them.

Douglass's initial moments as a free man are sweet. However, the reality of the dangers of his situation quickly become clear, and he longs for the advantages of real membership in American society:

my situation...without home or friends—without money or credit—wanting shelter, and no one to give it—wanting bread, and no money to buy it... helpless both as to the means of defence [sic] and means of escape,—in the midst of plenty, yet suffering the terrible gnawings of hunger,—in the midst of houses, yet having no home. (316)

Even after receiving much-needed assistance from kind abolitionists, Douglass's desperation does not abate. Understanding that he has a right to work for personal gain, another vital aspect of upward social mobility, he strongly wishes to obtain a job for himself (316). This desire, originally sparked by his teaching position among the Freeland slaves, is strengthened when he considers the many negative “work” experiences that he has had in the course of his lifetime. For example, he writes in the narrative of working in a shipyard while a slave for the second time under Hugh Auld:

I was now getting, as I have said, one dollar and fifty cents per day. I contracted for it; I earned it; it was paid to me; it was rightfully my own; yet, upon each returning Saturday night, I was compelled to deliver every cent of that money to Master Hugh. And why? Not because he earned it,—not because he had any hand in earning it,—not because I owed it to him,—nor because he possessed the slightest shadow of a right to it; but solely because he had the power to compel me to give it up. (313)

His perspective on the working experience as a free man; however, is markedly different.

Although the work he initially finds is difficult, Douglass writes “There was no work too hard—none too dirty” and “I went at it with a glad heart and a willing hand” (319). The reason for his cheerfulness is obvious: “It was the first work, the reward of which was to be entirely my own ... I was at work for myself and newly-married wife” (319). After working for some time, he not only supports himself and his family by providing the money for their most basic needs but is

also able to purchase other items that he wishes to have, such as a subscription to William Lloyd Garrison's anti-slavery newspaper, "The Liberator" (319). This is another hallmark of upward social mobility: the right to spend one's earnings in the manner in which one pleases. Though seemingly a small triumph, this purchase reveals Douglass as a man who is well on the way towards achieving a firm reputation in American society. At the conclusion of his narrative, he has at last met all of the basic requirements of a person seeking and reaching upward social status. Coupled with his total acceptance of the right to a personal identity, Frederick Douglass can now be considered, by his own definition of humanity, as a real man.

In *The Narrative of the Life of Frederick Douglass: An American Slave*, Frederick Douglass chronicles his journey from a slave who has lost his very humanity to a man that is in full possession of it. He considers the two defining hallmarks of a human being to be the possession of a personal identity and access to upward social mobility. He addresses several aspects of the human identity, such as family, time awareness, understanding of the divine, and life itself. He also takes this approach with social mobility, investigating several different levels of "work" and the right to make plans and spend money to one's discretion. At the very core of both journeys is literacy. Without the ability to read, Douglass would have never truly understood his depravity, and likely would have remained enslaved.

Douglass's differentiation between the character of brute, of man, and of the transformation of the former to the latter creates a scale by which more recent events in the African American timeline can be judged, specifically those pertaining to the struggle for civil rights during the last half of the 20th century and the first decade of the 2000s. Would Douglass see the black man of 2009 as truly a black *man*? Does his culture possess an identity and therefore, a value? The period of time spanning the immediate post-Civil War years to the

modern-day civil rights movement in the United States could indeed be considered a relatively fruitless time in the process of seeking social equality for African Americans. The most crucial factor in the transition from stagnancy to effective action (brute to the beginning of transformation) is indeed the same for the African American race as it was for Douglass himself. The role of literacy and a personal education, the crucial bridge that began Douglass's journey, again played a central role in 1954, when the United States Supreme Court struck down segregation of public schools in *Brown vs. Board of Education of Topeka*. This spark erupted into a growing fire of many events that formed the modern civil rights movement, each adding details to the continuously progressing portrait of the new African American.

Outrage against the brutal murder of Emmett Till in 1955 was a clear affirmation of any single person's right to life. The sense of individual entitlement expanded to an awareness of family and desire for unity within supporters of equal rights between the races, evinced by the "freedom rider" bus boycotts and ultimately, the March on Washington in 1963. Indeed, these corporate actions also showed a desire to "work" for personal gain, a labor that was rewarded with the passage of several extensive civil rights bills in 1964, 1965, and 1968. The legitimacy of an identity is often verified by the fruit of its toil, and in 2009 we not only consider these past acts of Congress but the circumstances of our present as well. Current president Barack Obama, as the first black President of the United States of America, offers new consideration to the ever-evolving African American image. The "unlikeliest candidate" according to his own estimation, he overwhelmingly captured the vote in the 2008 presidential election (Obama).

Does such a result confirm that the process of change of the African American character is complete? It must not – not for African Americans, not for white Americans, not for any American – because accepting an end is equivalent to asserting that no more progress is possible,

an assumption that is both dangerous and false. Douglass thus leaves us with a powerful suggestion that is the ultimate message of both his story and of his race's history: of the animal, the man, and the in-between, the transformation is superior to all.

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