

“Have To” History: Frederick Douglass

Stuff You Don't Really Want To Know (But For Some Reason Have To)

Three Big Things:

1. Born into slavery. Started learning to read from master's wife who didn't know you weren't supposed to do that; continued educating himself secretly and eventually escaped to the North.
2. Wrote *Narrative of the Life of Frederick Douglass*, arguably the best-known and most influential slave narrative ever. Although he later wrote several longer autobiographies, this first one is the classic.
3. Became prominent abolitionist and traveled around the North and Europe speaking against slavery. Some had trouble believing someone so eloquent and confident could have ever been a slave.



Frederick Douglass in Slavery

Douglass was born into slavery around 1818. Like many slaves, he never knew his birthday. His father was most likely his white master, although that information, too, was intentionally withheld from him. He had very limited knowledge of his biological mother, who came to him periodically at night and lay with him until morning when she had to walk back to the plantation of her own master. When she died, he wrote, it didn't really change much.

The pivotal moment in Douglass's young life – and the one on which you'll wish to focus if you're writing or presenting for anything school-ish – occurred when he was around 12 years old. He was sold to Hugh and Sophia Auld. In his best-known *Narrative*, Douglass records that Mrs. Auld was an especially kind-hearted and pure woman when he first met her. She soon started teaching him how to read, but when Mr. Auld discovered this, he flipped out and explained to her angrily (in front of Douglass) that teaching a slave (OK, he actually drops the N-bomb several times at this point) to read will *ruin* him, and he'll never be happy or good for anything ever again.

It was largely based on this reaction that Douglass recognized the power reading must hold, and from that time on he took numerous risks to continue educating himself. He discovered the strange term “abolition,” intuitively recognizing the power it held and the reaction it produced among his captors, long before he understood what it actually *meant*. Increased knowledge broadened his perspective and raised his vision, he records, but simultaneously increased his misery by intensifying his awareness of his situation. The idea that “more truth brings bigger hopes but heavier burdens” is a recurring theme in history and literature, whether talking about slavery, politics, social work, philosophy, or Jackson Browne hits. Douglass captures it as well as anyone, so if you go there, go hard.

Mrs. Auld quickly becomes a horrible, twisted person, highlighting another key theme of Douglass's writing. Slavery was bad for the *slave* (presumably that's a given), but according to Douglass and others of his ilk, it was also bad for the *slave-owner*. As a corrupt institution, it corrupted everyone involved. Sin destroys the sinner as it wounds those sinned against. This emphasis on slavery's destructive power against white society, civil government, and religious faith, while no doubt entirely sincere, was also a strategic decision by Douglass. Most of his readership were educated whites; impacting them most effectively meant moving past “things suck for Black folks” and into “slavery really messes up otherwise decent white folks.”

The *Narrative* includes several passages of Douglass wrestling with the uncertain boundaries between “man” and “beast.” He is at times almost suicidal, but later stands up physically to “slave-breaker” Edward Covey – and gets away with it. (A similar scene occurs in Solomon Northup's *Twelve Years A Slave*, leading modern readers to wonder how often this might have happened and white power simply not recorded it.) If you're wishing to come

across as particularly profound, it's not too much of a stretch to reference this as an analogy of sorts for later civil rights efforts by Black Americans, particularly those which leaned towards the aggressive. You might also Google "I am a man!" (just trust me on this) and tie it all together using this scene.

Frederick Douglass In Freedom

Abolitionist and Orator: Douglass gave innumerable speeches across the north and western Europe sharing his story and making it more difficult for audiences to remain apathetic or lethargic about slavery in the south.

The Liberator/ The North Star: Douglass became a favorite of William Lloyd Garrison, radical abolitionist and publisher of *The Liberator*. He later published several papers of his own; *The North Star* is the best-remembered.

Women's Rights: Douglass saw Black rights as part of the larger issue of human rights. He was the only Black attendee of the Seneca Falls Convention in 1848 – that's the one where Elizabeth Cady Stanton and Lucretia Mott published the "Declaration of Sentiments" which is probably excerpted in the back of your textbook somewhere. ("We hold these truths to be self-evident: that all men and women are created equal...") The convention also passed a very controversial resolution calling for women's suffrage (letting women vote).

The Civil War: Douglass met with (some sources say "advised") Lincoln several times during the war and may have been part of the decision to muster Black troops to fight for the Union. If you've seen the movie *Glory*, he's at the dinner party where Matthew "Bueller" Broderick decides to accept command of the Massachusetts 54th – an all-Black regiment – and persuades Cary "As You Wish" Elwes to join him. Two of Douglass's sons joined the 54th as well, although that's not in the movie. And if you *haven't* seen *Glory*, what's *wrong* with you?! Seriously?!

Post-Civil War: Douglass kept working for civil rights until his death in 1895. He wrote several more biographies and never slowed down on his travels or his speaking schedule.

You Wanna Sound REALLY Smart? {Extra Stuff}

"What To The Slave Is The Fourth Of July" – Speech given in 1852; I'll let you guess the topic. Outside of his first autobiography, this is his best-known work. It's a great speech, but kinda long by "When can I get to go back to *Call of Duty*?" standards. If you want to go for broke and reference an excerpt, consider this one:

O! had I the ability, and could I reach the nation's ear, I would, to-day, pour out a fiery stream of biting ridicule, blasting reproach, withering sarcasm, and stern rebuke. For it is not light that is needed, but fire; it is not the gentle shower, but thunder. We need the storm, the whirlwind, and the earthquake. The feeling of the nation must be quickened; the conscience of the nation must be roused; the propriety of the nation must be startled; the hypocrisy of the nation must be exposed; and its crimes against God and man must be proclaimed and denounced.

What, to the American slave, is your 4th of July? I answer: a day that reveals to him, more than all other days in the year, the gross injustice and cruelty to which he is the constant victim. To him, your celebration is a sham; your boasted liberty, an unholy license; your national greatness, swelling vanity; your sounds of rejoicing are empty and heartless; your denunciations of tyrants, brass fronted impudence; your shouts of liberty and equality, hollow mockery; your prayers and hymns, your sermons and thanksgivings, with all your religious parade, and solemnity, are, to him, mere bombast, fraud, deception, impiety, and hypocrisy — a thin veil to cover up crimes which would disgrace a nation of savages. There is not a nation on the earth guilty of practices, more shocking and bloody, than are the people of these United States, at this very hour.

First Black Candidate For Vice President: Nominated in 1872 by the Equal Rights Party – an outlier even in the political chaos of that election. Above him on the ticket was the first serious female candidate for President, Victoria Woodhull – and OMG what a character *she* was! But that's for another time...

Married a White Woman: Douglass's first wife was Anna Murray, a Black woman who helped him escape. After she died in 1882, he married Helen Pitts, a white feminist from New York. That Freddy!