

Michael Hawes
TAH Final 9/21/2011
My Bondage and My Freedom
Book Review

Slavery and race relations are very often subjects that are tough to discuss in a twenty first century classroom. Even years after slavery was banned and the evolution of Civil Rights students of all backgrounds have difficulty thinking about the past treatment of others. However, one way of approaching the subject is by reading and discussing primary source documents about slavery's past. Frederick Douglass' narratives are an excellent start because of their rich detail into the thoughts and feelings of a person who was once held captive and was able to claim that almighty aspect of freedom. Though many people read only his first book, which in itself is rich with detail, Douglass' second autobiography *My Bondage and My Freedom* goes beyond just basic ideas and explains through richness of thought and mind all aspects of the slave culture before the Civil War. Unlike the first autobiography, *My Bondage and My Freedom* was written during a time in Douglass' life when his political ideology began to shift; so within his vivid descriptions of slavery we begin to appreciate Douglass' ever evolving ideology of what African Americans could accomplish if given an opportunity to share their voice.

Though short in nature, Douglass' first autobiography could be used to read in a United States History I course because it could be read over a period of a few months as students could read a chapter or two for homework and answer a few questions. The first book is perfect for a freshman level classroom but it is Douglass' second biography that allows students to not only understand the concept of slave life but also delve into the discussion of what being a free black in the North was about. Many students have this vision that because the North were "free" states then the notion of discrimination, segregation, and thoughts of blacks were different than in the "slave" states but with Douglass's second narrative students can appreciate and understand that this was not always the case. Living on the run in the North, in many cases on your own politically, economically, and socially could be just as mentally agonizing as it would have been

on a southern plantation. Also unlike the first book excerpts can be chosen from *My Bondage and My Freedom*, without requiring the whole book to read, to help students grasp the full body of slavery and black “freedom” in the years leading up to the Civil War.

For some students slavery is a concept that seems very simple in nature as they read their text book at night for homework and they answer their vocabulary terms on the subject, but what is evident with Douglass is that the institution of slavery was much more complex than specific terms and dates. Family is the first notion that Douglass brings up and in talking about Douglass’ own mother he stated “My poor mother, like many other slave-women, had many children but no family”, and later on Douglass claims that slavery does away with fathers just as it does away with families. (Douglass, pg. 50, 51) Douglass in his attempt to portray slavery as honest as possible focused on the paternalistic nature of the slave beast. Slave women were more baby producers than humans and they had no “children” because the majority of them were sold off or split up, as was common to do, and there were no fathers because in many cases the fathers were unknown. This elimination of family and its impact on Douglass was glaring as he recollected this event and ideas at the young age of seven. The family destruction can be used in class as a discussion piece because many students in class can relate because their family situation may be in distress or not the norm as divorce and remarriage is very common place with the students in my classroom. On the opposing side to the loss of a parent is how the slave masters took over that father type role and even in being a “father” figure they still felt compelled that they could own a human being. “I shall hold slaves, and still go to heaven”, was a common quote among the religious southerners who owned plantations. (Douglass, pg. 153) Family life is a way to get students thinking about slavery in a new way because it allows an

open dialogue about how the southerners in many cases felt like they were caring and helping blacks.

Aside from the actual family dynamic Douglass' vivid description and understanding of everything that involved plantation life and how slavery could be different depending upon where one was placed allows for students to gain a better understanding of the complex institution. "A plantation is a little nation of its own, having its own language, its own rules, and regulations and customs." (Douglass, pg. 60) Each place where slavery existed was different from another. Whether it was in the South or the Chesapeake or even right down the road from each other the cultures could be entirely different. Each master had their own identity and their own rules as to how their own "nation" ran. To understand the nature of how one was able to control slaves and gain power over people, one must understand the true impact of slavery. "The first condition of wealth and respectability there, being the ownership of human property, every nerve is strained, by the poor man, to obtain it, and very little regard is had to the manner of obtaining it." (Douglass, pg. 166) If students understand that everyone wanted and thrived to own slaves then they can understand how each plantation turned into an individual nation as the owners wanted all control of each aspect of the power that they had been craving. This craving often led many of these owners to be deceitful. "Every slaveholder seeks to impress his slave with a belief in the boundlessness of slave territory, and of his almost illimitable power." (Douglass, pg. 211) This ultimate control and power does two things; it shows students about how people would go to great lengths to keep on growing their power and by using this quote students can grasp more of the notion as to why slaves did not attempt more escapes. If you do not know where you are going then how can you escape?

The tough aspect of slavery is that it truly lacks consistency and it really is tough to explain with a huge overarching theme. Location and ownership played a huge role in this process as it depended upon one's situation as to how they were treated. Once Douglass got to Baltimore the differences of slavery became more glaring. "I had been treated like a pig on the plantation; I was treated as a child now." (Douglass, pg. 115) This is one of my favorite quotes to use in class. I put this quote on the board and students get in groups and visualize, discuss, and write down, what he is talking about. This quote symbolizes to many students what the differences of slavery were. Being treated like an animal versus a human being can really change one's thoughts about the slavery institution. I also like to use a side note to explain to the students, that oversleeping was the number one thing that slaves on a plantation got whipped for. (Douglass, pg. 87) This is a key addition because for many students oversleeping is their number one offense. Baltimore is the place that Douglass is talking about as he mentions about being treated like a child, and as many know this is where he learned how to read; with the help of his family and others. However, it is not that he learned to read that is important it is how he felt about reading that is valuable. "The more I read, the more I was led to abhor and detest slavery, and my enslavers. Slaveholders are only a band of successful robbers." (Douglass, pg. 127) Reading, controlled again, by the owners was a very powerful tool for Douglass and in some cases would get him trouble as later in life he almost envied the dumb illiterate slaves that knew nothing of their condition. But his time in Baltimore, which was split, was not all positive because the feeling was very bitter between all colored people in Baltimore, about this time a free or slave suffered all manner of insults. (Douglass, pg. 232) Douglass' life as a slave is a very valuable tool for students as they grasp difficult concepts and the use of *My Bondage and My Freedom* contains many more examples and descriptions of the institution.

Another major part of *My Bondage and My Freedom* is Douglass' time in the North, Europe, and as both a fugitive slave and as a freeman. Like the first autobiography the description of his escape is left out but on the other hand his emotions about the event are glaring and interesting as students attempt to further understand the time period. Being free was not all about the Underground Railroad and safety once you reached the North; it was much more difficult than that. There was fear of recapture with the Fugitive Slave Act and in many cases "free" blacks wanted nothing to do with you. "In the midst of brothers, and yet fearful more of them than of hungry wolves! I was without home, without friends, without work, without money, and without definite knowledge of which way to go, or where to look for succor." (Douglass, pg. 253) He was constitutently tormented by the thought of losing his new found liberty because unlike what students are taught in school about the North there were still issues of racism, lack of equality, and about people making a quick dollar to turn in escaped slaves. This idea of "freedom" can open up discussions as to what the North was really like before slavery ended and why people treated others this way when they were "free" states.

His fear eventually did diminish over time as he was in the North for a few years, got connected to the Abolitionist group headed by William Lloyd Garrison, and travelled throughout Europe; but it seemed that as Douglass kept evolving his connection with abolitionism began to fade. Douglass began giving speeches as part of the Abolitionist movement and he even at one time was spoken to about sounding too intelligent and that he should dumb it down because people questioned if he truly was a slave. It was almost as if these whites at the conventions were shocked that a black could be more intelligent than themselves. Even in his finest hour and as well known figure on the Anti-Slavery he was still not allowed into many places in the North. On numerous occasions he was told "we don't allow niggers in here", which after a stay in

Europe where he encountered true freedom this idea became unacceptable. (Douglass, pg. 277)

A free black in the North was in some instances treated the same as an escaped slave and it was Douglass' ever evolving notion that blacks needed to be politically active to change their status that led to his split from the Abolitionist movement. This split was a key political point in Douglass' life.

Once committed to the cause of the Abolitionist movement and that of Garrison; Douglass in the 1850's began to go off on his own. His feelings of "in their own elevation—self – elevation—colored men have a blow to strike on their own hook against slavery and caste. (Douglass, pg. 27) These ideas go unexpressed in his first book because Douglass' political involvement occurred years after it was published. His feelings about this split between him and Garrison go hand in hand with the writing of this book because unlike his first book Douglass mentions a lot more about going off on his own and the feelings of others about him starting his own newspaper. "The Garrison party did not want a colored newspaper because there was an odor of caste about it, and a wide gulf separated the free colored people from the Garrisonians." (Douglass, pg. 28) The caste order is important here because even though Douglass was a key friend and contributor to the Abolitionists it seemed that all Garrison wanted was a key contributor and not an equal.

Inequality was a key contributor to the eventual split of these two powerful men; Douglass and Garrison. Douglass expressed his last explanation of discontent towards Garrison and others as he wrote about emancipating the slaves of the South by improving and elevating the character of free colored people of the North to promote "moral, social, religious, and intellectual elevation of the free colored people." (Douglass, pg. 300) This was not written directly to Garrison however, it was very clear because the tone and direction of ideologies went

hand in hand with his split from Garrison and his Abolitionist party and if he had not split then Douglass would have been stuck in a society where the caste system was evident and where Garrison's views of disunion meant just splitting from the South rather than to increase the well being of all blacks. (Douglass, pg. 30) Even though Douglass struggled with his newspaper, partly due to Garrison's lack of support, as it lacked the success that he had once dreamed about but it did play an important part of his life as he continued to mentally grow from slave to freeman as he learned how to dress better to be better perceived and he learned how most northerners viewed this newly freed former slave. Students with Douglass' last statement of *My Bondage and My Freedom* can learn a lot of how people viewed emancipation as there were many different ways to help blacks. Garrison merely pointed out the treatment and wanted separation from the South while Douglass attempted to help slaves and blacks grow in many areas to eventually be able to emancipate themselves mind, body and soul.

Written during an era, 1850's, when things were ever changing for America and Frederick Douglass' *My Bondage and My Freedom* can awaken students eyes to all notions of slavery, freedom, and the lifelong quest for equality. By using quotes and descriptions in a classroom setting a teacher can have students analyze the changing ideologies of Frederick Douglass and how his ever evolving brain led to many different forms of escape. This second autobiography touches upon key political issues that the first one lacks and the eloquent prose helps others understand Douglass convictions. His final point, the split from Garrison, only heightens the notion that slavery as an issue and the idea of freedom for blacks was much more complicated than just the simple cause of the Civil War.