

Instead of taking the textbook as gospel, students need to interact with the primary sources that influence the textbook account in order to build their own understanding of the era of study. This is important for numerous reasons, one of which is students need to learn how to find their own answers instead of merely taking as fact someone else's. This is complicated by the fact that the sources themselves need analysis – people can lie, warp the truth, or misunderstand their own times or experiences. Thus teachers need to work with students on understanding how context, audience, and purpose can influence someone to write what they do. An excellent way of doing this is to analyze two of Frederick Douglass' autobiographies, written ten years apart and for different purposes yielding similar but critically different (but no less jarring) accounts.

Frederick Douglass was born Frederick Bailey, a slave on a plantation in Talbot County, Maryland. Over the course of his life as a slave, Douglass experienced everything from being a laborer on the plantation to being a domestic servant in Baltimore to working as a skilled worker with some degree of freedom. When Douglass escaped slavery, he settled in New Bedford, Massachusetts and not long after became involved in the abolitionist movement. He became a star speaker, then writer, eventually publishing his own abolitionist paper. His two autobiographies written before the Civil War – Narrative of the Life of Frederick Douglass and My Bondage and My Freedom – reveal the cruelties of the institution he escaped while also allowing the reader an insight into how the story of a man's life can be shaped to suit a purpose.

Both narratives follow the same basic outline. To this extent, My Bondage (published in 1855) is simply a fuller version of the Narrative (published in 1845). In both accounts, he reveals he doesn't quite know his age (Narrative, 1, My Bondage, 26). He also didn't know his mother very much (Narrative, 2, My Bondage, 41). The stories are the same too – of poor Old Barney who was whipped despite doing good work as a stable hand, of a slave being sold off for admitting his owner didn't treat him well, of cruel Austin Gore shooting a slave, of being unable to reveal the names of the Baltimore street boys who helped him learn to read, etc. These similarities are interesting in that they work to back one another up – by telling the same story twice Douglass makes both narratives more credible. What is more revealing, interesting, and instructive are what make these narratives different.

My Bondage and Freedom is considerably longer than the Narrative, not because there's more to report on his life as a freeman, but because stories told in a more concise manner in the Narrative are given a considerably fuller treatment in My Bondage. In the Narrative, by page 20 he's in Baltimore and his master's wife is being chastised for teaching Douglass basic reading skills, this same event doesn't occur until page 113 in My Bondage and My Freedom. Similarly, he refuses to reveal the names of the boys who helped him learn to read on page 23 of the Narrative, he does so on page 121 of My Bondage and My Freedom. This occurs for a number of reasons. Firstly, stories are told in greater depth and more details are described. Whether it's the tale of his being taken from his grandmother's care as a child or his fight with Covey, there are

more people with whom he interacts and more details on the scenery and actions he took. Secondly, his descriptions are far more dramatic and emotional. He spends a lot of time in My Bondage explaining how he felt in certain moments and how he made sense of what was happening to him. Violent incidents are more jarring – such as the whipping of his aunt, Austin Gore's murderous rage, Covey's abuse, his struggles at the navy yard, etc. – the reader lead to a greater outrage over the peculiar institution. Related to this is in My Bondage the important people he meets are analyzed in greater depth – he tries to understand and help the reader understand Gore, Covey, Mrs. Auld, and others he meets and who shape his life (it is no surprise that Gore and Covey come across as more despicable in this account).

Finally, how Douglass experiences freedom is different. In the Narrative, Douglass describes the difference between the industrious North and agrarian South, explaining how the North's dependence on free labor lead to a higher quality of life and healthier society (Narrative, 66). In My Bondage, Douglass provides a similar sketch and still prefers the North, but he chooses to emphasize northern refusal to participate in capturing fugitive slaves and general anti-slavery attitude more (My Bondage, 271). Perhaps this is because in between the Narrative and My Bondage, Douglass experienced firsthand that racism still persisted in the North (Douglass, 288). In the Narrative, Douglass had only been free a short time, so the North would have appeared to be so much more enlightened than the South. In My Bondage, Douglass has had the time to find out that the North was not so perfect, that reserved New Englanders still carried

with them prejudices and even abolitionists could view Douglass as inferior. The years in between the accounts altered how Douglass understood his own life.

In between 1845 and 1855, Douglass lived through more than simply being a free man. The Mexican War added territory to the US, this territory had to become either slave or free and thus touched off fierce debate. The 1850 Fugitive Slave law as part of the Compromise of 1850 mandated the return of fugitive slaves (which Douglass himself had been) from the North to the South. In 1854, the Kansas-Nebraska Act paved the way for slavery to potentially expand its borders.

Douglass had split with Garrison to form his own abolitionist paper and went away from Garrisonian non-violence and disengagement to the belief that slavery was unconstitutional and would probably have to be ended by force. William Lloyd Garrison's strategy of political disengagement and fervent moral appeals to end slavery seemed to be ineffective – as society debated the issue, not only did pro-slavery arguments proliferate but slavery showed no signs of stopping (indeed it seemed to be expanding). When Douglass wrote his Narrative in 1845, he certainly was trying to show the horrors of slavery, but his primary purpose was to prove to doubters (who felt a slave couldn't be so articulate) that he had indeed been a slave. By the time of his 1855 My Bondage, he didn't need to prove he was a slave – he needed to prove slavery was wrong.

In the classroom, there are numerous ways these two accounts can be used to enhance the learning of students. These accounts shed light on slavery,

on the abolitionist movement, on Douglass himself, and on an America lurching towards Civil War and nearly incomprehensible bloodshed. What follows below are but two of a myriad potential lesson ideas for these narratives. The first lesson uses the narratives to show students how a primary source reveals as much about the person writing it as the times in which they live. The second lesson uses the narratives to show vice versa.

For the first lesson, students would be given an informational reading on controversial events from the Missouri Compromise up to John Brown's raid and asked to create a timeline on which they placed the various events and explained their significance. Class would then begin by adding to that timeline events from Frederick Douglass' life, in particular: his escape from slavery, his introduction to the Abolitionists, his work as a speaker, his publication of the Narrative and subsequent flight to the United Kingdom, his return to the United States and purchase of his freedom, his moving to Rochester, NY and beginning his own paper, and the publication of My Bondage and My Freedom. Then students will be broken into small groups of two or three and given excerpts from the Narrative and My Bondage (one from each). Depending on the size of the class and groups, there may be anywhere from five to seven groups. The excerpts they will be given will describe the same event in Douglass' life, one the Narrative version, the other the My Bondage version. Good events to use are: his leaving the care of his grandmother, the actions of Austin Gore, his initial experience in Baltimore, his work for Covey, his time at the shipyard, his initial experience in

the North, and his first foray into the abolitionist movement; there are several other events that can be used as well.

Students will then be asked to read each excerpt and in their groups answer the following questions: what is the author describing in these excerpts, what do you think the author is trying to convince you of, which is more effective in achieving this goal, and if there are any differences in the two accounts, why might this be? Students will then explain to their classmates the events their excerpt describes and as a class we will analyze what Douglass was trying to achieve and which account is more effective. The groups will then be given a new question to discuss: given what you know about his life and the era in which he lived, how much do you think the context of Douglass' life impacted each work? The class will then discuss what the excerpts reveal about Douglass and how events around him politically and personally shape how he sees his own life. After this, the groups will disperse back to their assigned seats and we will use our experiences with these sources to discuss primary sources in general, this discussion will be described later.

For the second potential lesson, the focus is more or less reversed and we will seek to better understand the era through the life of the author. For this lesson, it would be best for the students to have learned about the events from 1820 – 1859 in a separate lesson (as opposed to having it be the first part of this one). Then as the homework assignment before the lesson, students would be given lengthier excerpts from each autobiography formatted in a similar way to the group activity in the previous lesson: one excerpt from each account

describing the same event. Instead of focusing on how the era shaped the author, they will write a brief summary of what they think each account reveals about America in 1845 and 1855, respectively. Key questions to consider here are: what seems to be the mood of the country as revealed by the tone of each work, what does the purpose and style of each work tell you about the political and social issues being debated in each era, and how might each work be received in each era?

The lesson would begin with the class discussing their responses in pairs as the teacher circulates around the room to listen to the responses of students reluctant to join in a full-class discussion (thus providing an opportunity to check their understanding without cold-calling them in a discussion). Then the class would convene and one person from each pair (the more willing participant) would describe their discussion. We would then as a class put on the board all the events that occurred between 1845 and 1855. In groups of two to three, students would then create a visual showing how the narrative sheds light on the times in which it was written, picking a particular event from the book and an event from history. For example, students could draw a picture or create a t-chart based around Douglass' first comparisons of the North vs. the South from the Narrative vs. the story he tells of the congregation that refused to return a fugitive slave from My Bondage. In the Narrative, Douglass describes Northern industriousness and its more refined culture as opposed to southern planter laziness and social degradation, this is a sharp contrast but it paints a less abrasive scene than the story from My Bondage. In the more heated mid-1850's,

Douglass writes about how a congregation brought together a fugitive slave and a man who (after a dispute with the fugitive) threatened to turn him in, the congregation moves to kill the man who would turn in the fugitive, scaring the man away and saving the fugitive. They could then discuss what these accounts reveal about the direction of American discourse in light of the controversial Fugitive Slave Law (passed in 1850, halfway in-between the two autobiographies). After each group explains their visual, the groups will disperse to discuss primary sources in general.

For each lesson, it will end with a discussion about primary sources. In particular, the class will discuss what primary sources reveal about the person writing them and the era in which they lived. Using Douglass as a guide, we will then discuss what that means for the students as they venture forth beyond the academic realm: how should they interpret stories told from friends, opinion pieces in the papers, or ramblings from a cable “news” commentator? What can this experience teach them about how to navigate a world where controversy still exists, events still shape perspectives, and people still try to convince you they see things the “right” way?

As history teachers, it is our responsibility to help students build critical analytical skills so that as they form their own opinions and get exposed throughout their lives to new or controversial ideas they have the basic intellectual tools necessary to analyze, critique, and understand the implications of what different sources will tell them. Among the many ways this can be done, Frederick Douglass’ accounts offer an excellent opportunity to build these skills.

Works Cited

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