

NARRATIVE OF THE LIFE OF FREDERICK DOUGLASS, AN AMERICAN SLAVE



CASH
Men, Women, & Children

TO BE SOLD, on board the
Ship *Barry*, on Friday the 6th
of May next, at *John Fane's*, a choice
cargo of *negroes*, who are healthy
and strong.

NEGROES,
just arrived from the
Windward & Rice Coast.
— The utmost care has
been taken, and they
will be conveyed, to keep them free from
the least danger of being infected with the
SMALL-POX, no boat having been on
board, and all other communication with
people from *Christiana Town* prevented.
Adair, Lauren, & Apply.



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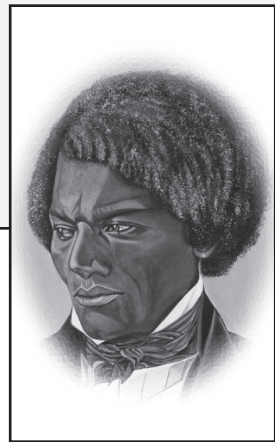
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Core Classics Plus™



Narrative of the Life of Frederick Douglass, an American Slave

by Frederick Douglass

Core Knowledge® Foundation



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What, ho!—our countrymen in chains!
The whip on *woman's* shrinking flesh!
Our soil still reddening with the stains,
Caught from her scourging, warm and fresh!
What! mothers from their children riven!
What! God's own image bought and sold!
Americans to market driven,
And barter'd as the brute, for gold!

—*John Greenleaf Whittier*

These lines by the great American poet and abolitionist John Greenleaf Whittier served as the epigraph to the original 1846 edition of Douglass's *Narrative*. They first appeared in William Lloyd Garrison's antislavery newspaper, *The Liberator*.

NARRATIVE OF THE LIFE
OF
FREDERICK DOUGLASS,
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WRITTEN BY HIMSELF.

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THIRD ENGLISH EDITION.

WORTLEY, NEAR LEEDS : PRINTED BY JOSEPH BARKER.

1846.

Title page from an
English 1846 edition
of *Narrative of the Life
of Frederick Douglass*.
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Chapter 7

I lived in Master Hugh's family about seven years. During this time, I succeeded in learning to read and write. In accomplishing this, I was compelled to resort to various stratagems. I had no regular teacher. My mistress, who had kindly commenced to instruct me, had, in compliance with the advice and direction of her husband, not only ceased to instruct, but had set her face against my being instructed by any one else. It is due, however, to my mistress to say of her, that she did not adopt this course of treatment immediately. She at first lacked the depravity indispensable to shutting me up in mental darkness. It was at least necessary for her to have some training in the exercise of irresponsible power, to make her equal to the task of treating me as though I were a brute.

My mistress was, as I have said, a kind and tender-hearted woman; and in the simplicity of her soul she commenced, when I first went to live with her, to treat me as she supposed one human being ought to treat another. In entering upon the duties of a slaveholder, she did not seem to perceive that I sustained to her the relation of a mere **chattel**, and that for her to treat me as a human being was not only wrong, but dangerously so. Slavery proved as injurious to her as it did to me. When I went there, she was a pious, warm, and tender-hearted woman. There was no sorrow or suffering for which she had not a tear. She had bread for the hungry, clothes for the naked, and comfort for every mourner that came within her reach.

What did Douglass mean in saying that it took some time for his "mistress" (Mrs. Auld) to learn how to be a slaveholder?

Vocabulary in Place

chattel, *n.* An article of movable personal property, such as a cow or wagon
Douglass despised the treatment of human beings as **chattel**.

Slavery soon proved its ability to **divest** her of these heavenly qualities. Under its influence, the tender heart became stone, and the lamblike disposition gave way to one of tiger-like fierceness. The first step in her downward course was in her ceasing to instruct me. She now commenced to practice her husband's precepts. She finally became even more violent in her opposition than her husband himself. She was not satisfied with simply doing as well as he had commanded; she seemed anxious to do better. Nothing seemed to make her more angry than to see me with a newspaper. She seemed to think that here lay the danger. I have had her rush at me with a face made all up of fury, and snatch from me a newspaper, in a manner that fully revealed her **apprehension**. She was an **apt** woman; and a little experience soon demonstrated, to her satisfaction, that education and slavery were incompatible with each other.

From this time I was most narrowly watched. If I was in a separate room any considerable length of time, I was sure to be suspected of having a book, and was at once called to give an account of myself. All this, however, was too late. The first step had been taken. Mistress, in teaching me the alphabet, had given me the INCH, and no precaution could prevent me from taking the ELL.

The plan which I adopted, and the one by which I was most successful, was that of making friends of all the little white boys whom I met in the street. As many of these as I could, I converted into teachers. With their kindly aid, obtained at different times and in different places, I finally succeeded in learning to read. When I was sent on errands, I always took my book with me, and by going

Vocabulary in Place

divest, *v.* To deprive or rid oneself of, as of rights or property

Though born a prince, Guatama **divested** himself of earthly possessions.

apprehension, *n.* Uneasy anticipation, dread

One could almost sense the **apprehension** in the air as the students waited for their test results.

apt, *adj.* Quick to learn and understand

We knew that Jerome was an **apt** student, but nobody expected him to get a perfect score on the SAT.

one part of my errand quickly, I found time to get a lesson before my return. I used also to carry bread with me, enough of which was always in the house, and to which I was always welcome; for I was much better off in this regard than many of the poor white children in our neighborhood. This bread I used to bestow upon the hungry little **urchins**, who, in return, would give me that more valuable bread of knowledge. I am strongly tempted to give the names of two or three of those little boys, as a testimonial of the gratitude and affection I bear them; but **prudence** forbids;—not that it would injure me, but it might embarrass them; for it is almost an unpardonable offence to teach slaves to read in this Christian country. It is enough to say of the dear little fellows, that they lived on Philpot Street, very near Durgin and Bailey's shipyard. I used to talk this matter of slavery over with them. I would sometimes say to them, I wished I could be as free as they would be when they got to be men. "You will be free as soon as you are twenty-one, BUT I AM A SLAVE FOR LIFE!"¹ Have not I as good a right to be free as you have?" These words used to trouble them; they would express for me the liveliest sympathy, and **console** me with the hope that something would occur by which I might be free.

I was now about twelve years old, and the thought of being A SLAVE FOR LIFE began to bear heavily upon my heart. Just about

In what way was Douglass "better off" than many white children?

Why did Douglass not want to reveal the names of the boys who helped him learn to read?

¹ You will be free . . . SLAVE FOR LIFE. At twenty-one, the white children would become adults, with the full rights of adult citizens.

Vocabulary in Place

urchin, *n.* Mischievous, playful youngster

In the nineteenth century, Horatio Alger wrote novels about poor street **urchins** who rose to become respected members of society.

prudence, *n.* Wisdom, exercise of good judgment

Julia used **prudence** when she decided to study instead of going to a movie.

console, *v.* To comfort, to relieve of sorrow or grief

Do not underestimate the power of a hug when trying to **console** someone.

this time, I got hold of a book entitled “The Columbian Orator.”² Every opportunity I got, I used to read this book. Among much of other interesting matter, I found in it a dialogue between a master and his slave. The slave was represented as having run away from his master three times. The dialogue represented the conversation which took place between them, when the slave was retaken the third time. In this dialogue, the whole argument in behalf of slavery was brought forward by the master, all of which was disposed of by the slave. The slave was made to say some very smart as well as impressive things in reply to his master—things which had the desired though unexpected effect; for the conversation resulted in the voluntary emancipation of the slave on the part of the master.

In the same book, I met with one of Sheridan’s³ mighty speeches on and in behalf of Catholic emancipation. These were choice documents to me. I read them over and over again with **unabated** interest. They gave tongue to interesting thoughts of my own soul, which had frequently flashed through my mind, and died away for want of utterance. The moral which I gained from the dialogue was the power of truth over the conscience of even a slaveholder. What I got from Sheridan was a bold denunciation of slavery, and a powerful vindication of human rights. The reading of these documents enabled me to utter my thoughts, and to meet the arguments brought forward to sustain slavery; but while they relieved me of one difficulty, they brought on another even more painful than

²**The Columbian Orator.** A popular book edited by Caleb Bingham, a Massachusetts educator, containing selected essays and speeches along with rules of oratory

³**Richard Brinsley Sheridan.** A famous British playwright of the eighteenth century. Born in Ireland, he was an orator and a supporter of Irish independence from Great Britain. He thought that the Irish should be free to vote and hold public office. Douglass saw many similarities between the subjugation of the Irish by the English and the enslavement of people of African descent.

Vocabulary in Place

unabated, *adj.* Continued at full strength or force

The monsoon rains continued with **unabated** intensity for several weeks.

the one of which I was relieved. The more I read, the more I was led to **abhor** and detest my enslavers. I could regard them in no other light than a band of successful robbers, who had left their homes, and gone to Africa, and stolen us from our homes, and in a strange land reduced us to slavery. I **loathed** them as being the meanest as well as the most wicked of men. As I read and contemplated the subject, behold! that very discontentment which Master Hugh had predicted would follow my learning to read 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. It had given me a view of my wretched condition, without the remedy. It opened my eyes to the horrible pit, but to no ladder upon which to get out. In moments of agony, I envied my fellow-slaves for their stupidity. I have often wished myself a beast. I preferred the condition of the meanest reptile to my own. Any thing, no matter what, to get rid of thinking! It was this everlasting thinking of my condition that tormented me. There was no getting rid of it. It was pressed upon me by every object within sight or hearing, animate or inanimate. 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. It was ever present to torment me with a sense of my **wretched** condition. I saw nothing without seeing it, I heard nothing without hearing it, and felt nothing without feeling it. It looked from every star, it smiled in every calm, breathed in every wind, and moved in every storm.

How did learning to read bring pain as well as pleasure?

Vocabulary in Place

abhor, *v.* To regard with horror or hatred, to detest

Max **abhorred** romances but loved detective novels.

loathe, *v.* To dislike greatly

The mailman **loathed** dogs more than anything else in the world.

wretched, *adj.* Miserable, unhappy, distressed

Felix was always an angry, **wretched** little cat, but we loved him anyway.

*How did Douglass
figure out the
meaning of the
word abolition?
What does it mean?*

I often found myself regretting my own existence, and wishing myself dead; and but for the hope of being free, I have no doubt but that I should have killed myself, or done something for which I should have been killed. While in this state of mind, I was eager to hear any one speak of slavery. I was a ready listener. Every little while, I could hear something about the abolitionists. It was some time before I found what the word meant. It was always used in such connections as to make it an interesting word to me. If a slave ran away and succeeded in getting clear, or if a slave killed his master, set fire to a barn, or did any thing very wrong in the mind of a slaveholder, it was spoken of as the fruit of ABOLITION. Hearing the word in this connection very often, I set about learning what it meant. The dictionary afforded me little or no help. I found it was “the act of abolishing;” but then I did not know what was to be abolished. Here I was perplexed. I did not dare to ask any one about its meaning, for I was satisfied that it was something they wanted me to know very little about. After a patient waiting, I got one of our city papers, containing an account of the number of petitions from the north, praying for the abolition of slavery in the District of Columbia, and of the slave trade between the States. From this time I understood the words ABOLITION and ABOLITIONIST, and always drew near when that word was spoken, expecting to hear something of importance to myself and fellow-slaves. The light broke in upon me by degrees. I went one day down on the wharf of Mr. Waters; and seeing two Irishmen unloading a scow⁴ of stone, I went, unasked, and helped them. When we had finished, one of them came to me and asked me if I were a slave. I told him I was. He asked, “Are ye a slave for life?” I told him that I was. The good Irishman seemed to be deeply affected by the statement. He said to the other that it was a pity so fine a little fellow as myself should be a slave for life. He said it was a shame to hold me. They both advised me to run away to the north; that I should find friends there, and that I should be free. I pretended not to be interested in what they said, and

*Why did Douglass
pretend not to
be interested in
the Irishmen’s
suggestion?*

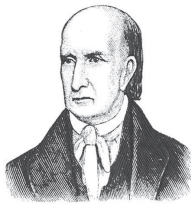
⁴ **scow.** A large, flat-bottomed boat with square ends, used for transporting freight



ABIGAIL GOODWIN



THOMAS GARRETT



DANIEL GIBBONS



LUCRETIA MOTT

FAITHFUL WORKERS IN THE CAUSE

Illustration entitled "Faithful Workers of the Cause" from *The Underground Railroad*, by William Still, published by Porter and Coates of Philadelphia in 1872. These are a few of the many famous names and faces from the Abolitionist Movement. Special Collections, University of Virginia. Used by Permission.

treated them as if I did not understand them; for I feared they might be **treacherous**. White men have been known to encourage slaves to escape, and then, to get the reward, catch them and return them to their masters. I was afraid that these seemingly good men might use me so; but I nevertheless remembered their advice, and from that time I resolved to run away. I looked forward to a time at which it would be safe for me to escape. I was too young to think of doing so immediately; besides, I wished to learn how to write, as I might have occasion to write my own pass. I consoled myself with the hope that I should one day find a good chance. Meanwhile, I would learn to write.

The idea as to how I might learn to write was suggested to me by being in Durgin and Bailey's shipyard, and frequently seeing the ship carpenters, after hewing, and getting a piece of timber ready for use, write on the timber the name of that part of the ship for which it was intended. When a piece of timber was intended for the

Why did Douglass want to learn how to write?

Vocabulary in Place

treacherous, *adj.* Dangerous, not to be relied on, not trustworthy

We took one look at the **treacherous** old bridge and decided to hike the long way through the canyon.

Why did it take
Douglass so long to
learn how to write?

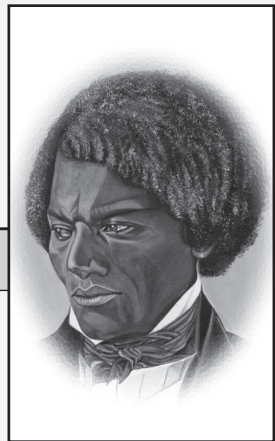
larboard side, it would be marked thus—"L." When a piece was for the starboard side, it would be marked thus—"S." A piece for the larboard side forward, would be marked thus—"L. F." When a piece was for starboard side forward, it would be marked thus—"S. F." For larboard aft, it would be marked thus—"L. A." For starboard aft, it would be marked thus—"S. A."⁵ I soon learned the names of these letters, and for what they were intended when placed upon a piece of timber in the shipyard. I immediately commenced copying them, and in a short time was able to make the four letters named. After that, when I met with any boy who I knew could write, I would tell him I could write as well as he. The next word would be, "I don't believe you. Let me see you try it." I would then make the letters which I had been so fortunate as to learn, and ask him to beat that. In this way I got a good many lessons in writing, which it is quite possible I should never have gotten in any other way. During this time, my copy-book was the board fence, brick wall, and pavement; my pen and ink was a lump of chalk. With these, I learned mainly how to write. I then commenced and continued copying the Italics in Webster's Spelling Book,⁶ until I could make them all without looking on the book. By this time, my little Master Thomas had gone to school, and learned how to write, and had written over a number of copy-books. These had been brought home, and shown to some of our near neighbors, and then laid aside. My mistress used to go to class meeting at the Wilk Street meetinghouse every Monday afternoon, and leave me to take care of the house. When left thus, I used to spend the time in writing in the spaces left in Master Thomas's copy-book,⁷ copying what he had written. I continued to do this until I could write a hand very similar to that of Master Thomas. Thus, after a long, tedious effort for years, I finally succeeded in learning how to write. ■

⁵When a piece . . . marked thus—"S.A." *Larboard* refers to the left side of the boat, and *starboard* to the right. *Forward* and *aft* refer to the front and rear, respectively.

⁶**Webster's Spelling Book.** The *American Spelling Book*, by Noah Webster, an enormously popular nineteenth-century reference book

⁷**copy-book.** A popular way of teaching writing was to copy the stories and speeches written by famous people into a blank notebook.

A Closer Look



Understanding the Selection

Recalling (just the facts)

1. What did Douglass learn to do in the seven years during which he lived with the Aulds?
2. How did Mrs. Auld try to prevent Douglass from learning how to read?
3. What were two of Douglass's favorite selections from *The Columbian Orator*?
4. What is an abolitionist?

Interpreting (delving deeper)

1. Why did Douglass say that slavery did as much to harm the slaveholder as it did to harm the slave?
2. How did Douglass feel about the white boys who helped him learn how to read?
3. What did the enslaved people of the United States and the Catholics of Ireland have in common?
4. How did the word *abolitionism* save Frederick Douglass's life?

Synthesizing (putting it all together)

1. Explain the following statement: "Mistress, in teaching me the alphabet, had given me the INCH, and no precaution could prevent me from taking the ELL." Why was Douglass so intent on learning to read well?
2. Why did Douglass become more discontent with being a "slave for life" the more he read? ■