

PAL: Perspectives in American Literature - A Research and Reference Guide - An Ongoing Project

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Chapter 3: Early Nineteenth Century: Frederick Douglass (1818-1895)

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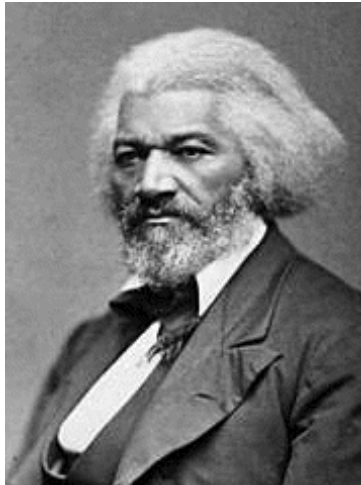
Page Links: | [Achievements](#) | [Primary Works](#) |

| [Selected Bibliography to 1989](#) [Selected Bibliography 1990 to Present](#) |

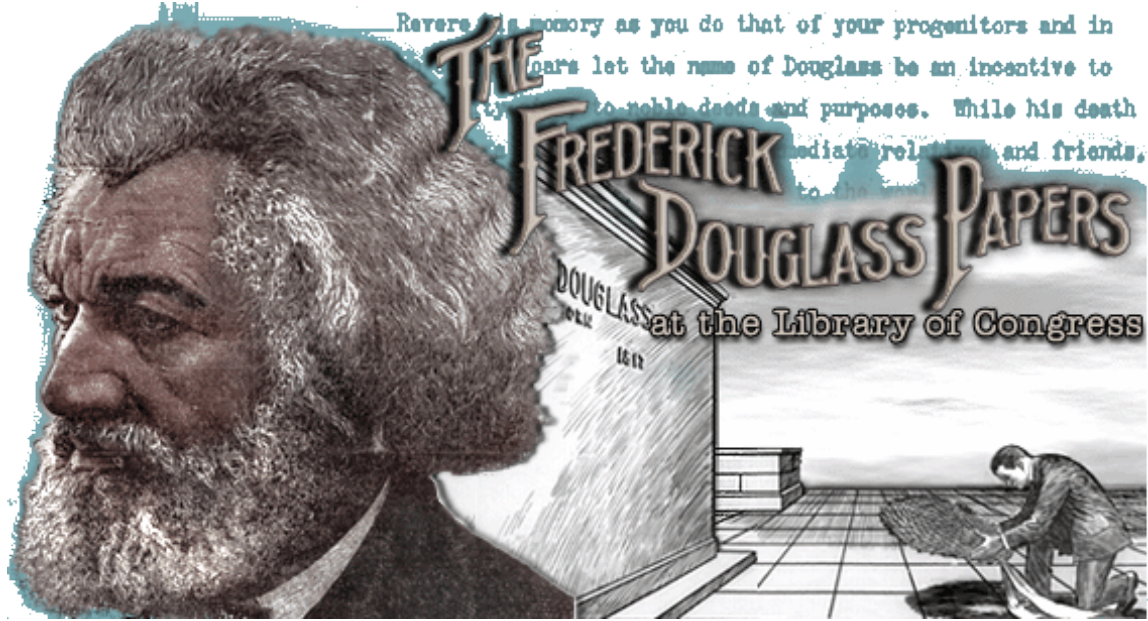
| [Study Questions](#) | [MLA Style Citation of this Web Page](#) |

| [A Brief Biography](#) |

Site Links: | [Chap 3: Index](#) | [Alphabetical List](#) | [Table Of Contents](#) | [Home Page](#) | February 1, 2008 |



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Achievements

1. Douglass, without any formal education, gained a reputation for his speaking skills and lectured extensively for the anti-slavery forces.
2. He used his recall of details and his speaking style to write the important *Narrative*.
3. He enlisted black troops for the Union cause and spoke on behalf of women's rights. He was present, along with Ralph Waldo Emerson, at the first national women's congress held at Seneca Falls, NY, in 1848.
4. He led a distinguished life as a newspaper publisher, a United States marshal and recorder of deeds, and consul-general to the Republic of Haiti.

[Top](#) | Primary Works

Narrative of the Life of Frederick Douglass, An American Slave, Written by Himself (1845); *The Heroic Slave*, 1853; *My Bondage and My Freedom* (1855); *Life and Times of Frederick Douglass: Written by Himself* (1881). (He was a prolific writer - his speeches, editorials, articles, and autobiographies fill five volumes).

SELECTED MAJOR SPEECHES AND LETTERS

- "Address by Frederick Douglass, Formerly a Slave to the People of the United States of America", 1852, Edinburgh, Scotland
- "What to the Slave Is the Fourth of July", 1852, Rochester, New York
- "Capital Punishment is a Mockery of Justice", 1858, Rochester New York
- "Is the plan of the American Union under the Constitution, Anti-Slavery or not", 1857, New York
- "John Brown and the Slaveholders' Insurrection", 1860, Edinburgh, Scotland
- "The American Constitution and the Slave", 1860, Glasgow, Scotland
- "Fighting the Rebels with One Hand", 1862, Philadelphia
- "What I found at the Northampton Association", 1895, Florence Massachusetts

| [Top](#) | Selected Bibliography through 1989

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| [Top](#) | Frederick Douglass: A Brief Biography

A Student Project by Philip Schmidt

Frederick Douglass was born Frederick Augustus Washington Bailey in 1818 in Easton, Maryland (Huggins, 3). Douglass saw little of his mother, a slave, before her death when he was still a child and he knew virtually nothing of his father, save that he was, in Douglass's words, *ia white man* (McFeely, 7-8). Instead, Douglass's grandmother, a privileged slave who was allowed to live on her own, was the guiding maternal force in his childhood. As little was demanded of his grandmother and him, young Frederick was thus spared the horrors of slavery during his youngest years. This blissful ignorance was not to last, however. At age six he was sent to Wye House, his master's home, and witnessed the realities of slavery, including floggings and sadistic overseers (Huggins, 4).

Fortunately for Douglass, he was sent to Baltimore by his master to serve as a companion to the son of Hugh and Sophia Auld. It was here that Douglass first discovered the joy of learning. Sophia Auld taught Douglass to read and to write monosyllabic words, although it was illegal and considered unwise to do so; upon learning of his wife's efforts, Hugh Auld raged that learning will spoil the best nigger in the world [Ö] if you teach him how to read, he'll want to know how to write, and this accomplished, he'll be running away with himself (Martin, 7). In the urban environment of Baltimore, Douglass had opportunities to further his rudimentary education even though the early guidance of Sophia Auld had been terminated. Douglass therefore took it upon himself to gain more knowledge in reading and writing, acquiring books whenever possible and copying from the schoolbooks of his master's son. When his master died and left Douglass to the Aulds in 1831, he was allowed to keep part of his wages while he worked in Baltimore's shipyards (Huggins, 12). During this period, Douglass became close friends with Anna Murray, whom he would later marry. Murray, who was freeborn, proved to be the final motivation that led to Douglass's escape from the South. In 1838, at the age of twenty, he escaped from his bondage in Baltimore (Martin, 14) and changed his former slave name of Bailey to that of Douglass.

Douglass made contact with northern abolitionists in Massachusetts, attending meetings when he was able. The abolitionists realized that tales of slavery's horror would be especially effective if they came from first-hand accounts, and Douglass was asked to speak during their campaigns. Douglass, however, was not merely an exhibition of slavery, for he was a gifted orator. Indeed, as Nathan Huggins states, he was quickly acclaimed not only a powerful speaker but a master of subtleties of the art. Those who heard him were astounded at the sharpness of his mind, his poise and ease on the platform, noting especially his deftness at humor, mimicry, and sarcasm (17). Such was his skill as a speaker that audiences began to doubt his credibility. During his speeches, Douglass was careful not to detail the specifics of his escape or the identities of his owners. In doing so, he would have essentially placed a bounty on his own head, as he was still legally bound to his former master (Huggins, 19). The lack of details in Douglass's accounts, however, also served to undermine his credibility.

In response to his detractors, Douglass wrote The Narrative of the Life of Frederick Douglass, an American Slave in 1845. An autobiography, Narrative discussed the specifics of his life in slavery and his escape. While some again questioned how a former slave could write such a book, those who read it recognized Douglass's distinctive language (McFeely, 117). Narrative was important as an intensive vilification of slavery, which Douglass believed to be too firmly ingrained in the complacent American's mind. Views purporting slavery's necessity, especially those in a Christian context, were proven false by Douglass: slavery, rather than being a means of civilizing and Christianizing backward and pagan Africans, was shown to keep slaves unschooled and unlettered and ignorant of Christianity, except as it might serve the master and the institution (Huggins, 22). Following the publication of Narrative, Douglass traveled

to Great Britain to rally the abolitionists there to the American slaves' plight and to avoid bounty hunters whom his former master might send. During his stay, Douglass's friends secured his freedom by paying his former master for Douglass's freedom, an action Douglass defended in a letter that warned others not to confuse the crime of buying men into slavery, with the meritorious act of buying men out of slavery (Huggins, 35). While in Great Britain, Douglass met Julia Griffiths, a white Englishwoman who was to figure prominently in Douglass's life. She helped to finance his paper, *The North Star*, but her greatest influence was that of a tutor.

Douglass had proved himself a gifted orator, and had already published a book, but as Huggins notes, being self-taught he naturally remained unsure of written style (45), and Griffiths continued his education in the art of prose. Douglass's prowess as a writer grew, leading to his second autobiography, *My Bondage and My Freedom* in 1855. *Bondage* further elaborated on *Narrative*, but its most important function was its author's declaration of independence (McFeely, 181). In *Bondage*, Douglass proved that he was not dependent on the white abolitionists who had aided him in earlier years, as white abolitionists who had prefaced his essays in *Narrative* were nowhere to be found in his second autobiography (McFeely, 181). During this time Douglass also professed a unique view of Manifest Destiny, the American belief that God intended that American institutions and ideals be spread to all peoples in order to ensure prosperity for all (Martin, 214). Douglass believed that, while God did indeed intend for Americans to achieve prosperity for all, this goal was unreachable as long as slavery existed, a view that helped to uphold Douglass's fight against slavery due its divine implications.

The outbreak of the American Civil War in 1861 meant several things to Douglass. Although President Lincoln and the majority of the North viewed the war's purpose as the preservation of the Union, Douglass and other abolitionists sought to broaden the war's intention to include the abolition of slavery. Douglass once again turned to his skill as a writer to encourage blacks to enlist in the Union Army in his editorial, "Men of Color to Arms" (McFeely, 223). In return, with the assurance of white politicians, black soldiers would be guaranteed the same wages, the same rations, the same protection, the same treatment, and the same bounty, secured to white soldiers (Huggins, 87). Unfortunately, great disparity would exist between black and white soldiers in all of these areas, and a disillusioned Douglass ceased his campaign to enlist black soldiers in protest.

Douglass also grew frustrated with Lincoln's hesitancy to promote the war as a quest to free America's slaves. Still, with the Emancipation Proclamation of 1863 came great hope for Douglass, as he made its flat rhetoric a sharpened call for freedom and equality (McFeely, 217). After the war ended, Douglass was no less vocal in his ideal of equality for the newly freed blacks. In 1881 he wrote *Life and Times of Frederick Douglass*, an elaboration and continuation of his earlier autobiographies (Martin, 272). Most notable among his editorials was "Lynch Law of the South," published in 1892, in which he condemned the practice of lynching, considered common among Southerners.

Douglass asserts that the true reasons for the murders was that the negro meets no resistance when on a downward course. It is only when he rises in wealth, intelligence, and manly character that he brings upon himself the heavy hand of persecution. The men lynched [Ö] were murdered because they were prosperous (McFeely, 361). Clearly, even in his later years, Douglass was not content to idly stand by while injustices were still suffered by his race. Three years later, Frederick Douglass died at the age of seventy-seven.

True equality for the black people of America was still many decades away, yet the reforms that Frederick Douglass strived for in the nineteenth century did much to enlighten Americans and Europeans alike as to the plight of the American slave. Douglass was still more than an activist; he was a gifted orator and a courageous, outspoken writer. His autobiographies, speeches, and editorials exist today because of their content and Douglass's determined, skillful manner of both speech and prose.

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Study Questions

1. What is the function of the prefatory material? Why does Douglass add an appendix?
2. What is the relationship of literacy to Douglass's quest for freedom? Of violence?
3. What idea of God animates Douglass?
4. How does Douglass attempt to engage the sympathies of his audience?
5. Discuss the extent to which Douglass may be considered a transcendentalist.
6. Compare and contrast the way Douglass sets himself up as a model with the way Benjamin Franklin does it in *The Autobiography*.
7. Douglass writes his slave narrative as a series of incidents or adventures. Discuss the picaresque elements of the *Narrative of the Life*.
8. Compare Harriet Jacobs, *Incidents in the Life of a Slave Girl*, with Douglass's *Narrative*. Was the model of "heroic fugitive" possible for female slaves? Jacobs's *Incidents* depicts the network of relationships within the slave community and between black and white communities. Look for evidence of such a network in Douglass's *Narrative*. What explains Douglass's lack of attention to emotional connections?
9. In his prefatory letter to the *Narrative*, abolitionist Wendell Phillips compares Douglass with the signers of *The Declaration of Independence*: "You, too, publish your declaration of freedom with danger compassing you around." Does the *Narrative* share formal similarities with *The Declaration of Independence* as well as rhetorical ones? Compare Jefferson's characterization of the British king and his itemizing of grievances with the design and structure of Douglass's *Narrative*.

10. Compare and contrast A Narrative of the Captivity and Restoration of Mrs. Mary Rowlandson with Narrative of the Life of Frederick Douglass, an American Slave. What formal, thematic, and historical continuities exist between these indigenous genres?

11. In The Meaning of July Fourth for the Negro, Douglass writes that the reformer's heart "may well beat lighter at the thought that America is young," and that "were the nation older," its "great streams" may dry up, leaving "the sad tale of departed glory." Explain why Douglass takes hope from America's youth, and contrast this expression with the twentieth-century poet Robinson Jeffers's sentiments in Shine, Perishing Republic.

12. Trace Douglass's views concerning the role of reform and dissent in the American republic in The Meaning of July Fourth for the Negro.

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| [Top](#) |