

Frederick Douglass' Name & the Duality of His Nature

Frederick Douglass was an emancipated slave who passed from one master to another until he finally found the satisfaction of being his own; he went through almost as many names as masters. His mother's family name, traceable at least as far back as 1701 (FD, 5) was Bailey, the name he bore until his flight to freedom in 1838. His father may or may not have been a white man named Anthony, but Douglass never firmly validated or rejected this possibility. During transit to New York (where he became a freedman) his name became Stanley, and upon arrival he changed it again to Johnson. In New Bedford, where there were too many Johnson's, he found it necessary to change it once more, and his final choice was Douglass, taken, as suggested to him by a white friend and benefactor, from a story by Sir Walter Scott (although the character in that story bore only a single 's' in his name). All throughout, he clung to Frederick, to 'preserve a sense of my identity' (Norton, 1988). This succession of names is illustrative of the transformation undergone by one returning from the world of the dead, which in a sense is what the move from oppression to liberty is. Frederick Douglass not only underwent a transformation but, being intelligent and endowed with the gift of Voice, he brought back with him a sharp perspective on the blights of racism and slavery. Dropped into America during the heat of reform as he was, his appearance on the scene of debate, upon his own self-emancipation, was a valuable blessing for the abolitionists. In their struggles so far, there had been many skilled arguers but few who could so convincingly portray the evils of slavery, an act which seemed to demand little short of firsthand experience, but which also required a clear understanding of it. Douglass had both, and proved himself an incredibly powerful weapon for reform. While the identity of his father is uncertain, it is generally accepted that the man was white, giving Douglass a mixed ancestry. Mirroring this, he was also blessed with an eye that could bring into focus different perspectives and, just as many multi-racial children today are able to speak multiple languages with ease, he had the ability to translate in the most eloquent fashion between the worlds of the black man and white man. Thus, ironically, the torturous beginning of Douglass' existence was inadvertently made (by him) into a treasure for 'us' (being mainly white America). The story of the American Dream, wherein a young man, born into a hostile world, never loses sight of one goal, is not all that distant in theme from Narrative of The Life of Frederick Douglass. The story of the American Dream has been embedded deeply in our (American) culture from the beginning. Similarly anchored in the American consciousness is the presence of a 'slavery-complex'. Along these lines Douglass' role is a major one, for relatively few first-hand accounts of slavery as powerful and representative as his exist, in light of the magnitude of the crime, and few voices have been as far-reaching. More recent heirs of this 'office' such as Malcolm X have carried the torch further, just as America's racial sickness still clings to our collective consciousness. Frederick Douglass has been described as 'bicultural'. In other words, he occupied a middleground shared by blacks and whites alike. This designation proves to be thematically consistent

with his biological (if we are to take his word for it) as well as psychological characteristics. Dual-natured in this fashion, he is made accountable for both sides. This can be seen in his gravitation towards freedom when he was a slave, and manifests itself just as strongly in his vision, once he was able to look back, of the 'graveyard of the mind' that American slavery was for him -- as it was for the rest of black America.

"They would sometimes sing the most pathetic sentiment in the most rapturous tone, and the most rapturous sentiment in the most pathetic tone...they would sing, as a chorus...words which to many would seem unmeaning jargon, but which, nevertheless, were full of meaning to themselves. I have sometimes thought that the mere hearing of those songs would do more to impress some minds with the horrible character of slavery, than the reading of whole volumes of philosophy on the subject could do. I did not, as a slave, understand the deep meaning of those rude and apparently incoherent songs. I was within the circle; so that I neither saw nor heard as those without might see or hear." (Norton, 1944) With the duality of perspective came also one of language, a fact to which we owe his writings and abolitionist activism. This is seen in Douglass' reflection on slave-songs (above). Men such as Malcolm X and Frederick Douglass do not occupy the niche of translator accidentally; they each earned the title of spokesman because it takes a certain kind of man to bridge the gap between the two worlds of black and white, or freeman and slave. This job calls not only for access to the two worlds which he must inhabit, but also for the ability to pass freely back and forth between them, in body, mind and spirit; most importantly, such a man must be capable of acting as a human filter or channel, so that each side can see the other.

Becoming such a bridge extracts a profound price from the individual and leaves scars just as deep as those of slavery itself. It makes fundamental alterations in the very identity of the host, who is morally obligated to present his boons to the world. A man in this position is called upon to balance his experiences of the two realities. He must embrace the new world he finds himself in and glean as much as he can from it; he also must continue to carry the weight of his past so that he can interpret it for others, who must learn from it. So did Douglass learn and master the 'power dialect', or upper-class English, and use it to show the very same group who invented and hoarded it, the evil that they and their withholding of language caused. In a world where knowledge is sat on by the 'have's, language is power, and language was first Frederick Douglass' first key to freedom, then his armor, and finally his sword. He turned on his oppressors and raised it against them. But Douglass and his gift of language underwent yet another transformation, and his words became a healing balm and a fixer of wrongs. From slavery to freedom, from the South to the North, from a young man of many names to the adult named Frederick Douglass, in revealing songs of happiness to be ones of woe, and 'singing' those songs so that all could hear, this gifted man helped America come to terms with slavery as it really was.

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