



A Fugitive Slave's Writing

The Examination of the Rhetorical and Insightful Literature of Frederick Douglass

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Abstract. Frederick Douglass is a renowned American social reformer, abolitionist, orator, and writer. This research paper aims to Frederick Douglass's writing in order to analyze his usage of the rhetorical triangle and literary devices incorporated in his works to support his reputation as a renowned author. Despite the setback aligned with slavery for twenty years in the early stage of his life, Douglass's unique but intellectual experience smooths the pathway for his later development, becoming a devoted adherence to the social reform within the United States. By illustrating multiple excerpts from Douglass's works, the paper testifies to his compelling voice in writing. The writing emphasizes his unsurpassable place in American literature and American history, as Douglass frequently exhibits rhetorical skills in support of his persuasive writing, especially in his slave narrative. Frequently connecting with readers through logos, pathos, and ethos and advancing linguistic progression propel the need to combat injustice, which also deserves the appreciation of contemporary readers. In addition, the paper reinforces his legendary attainment from the revelation of his exceptional literary manipulation, reflecting his literary talents. In terms of the contribution of this paper, it sheds light on the most accurate portrayal of slavery that used to be a prevalent phenomenon for nearly a century and raises awareness among people in the current society of this dark and ineradicable history.

Keywords: Frederick Douglass · Logos · Pathos · Ethos · Literary Techniques · Narrative · Slavery

1 Introduction

Instead of exposing the scars and bruises to draw attention, Frederick Douglass beholds the grail in sewing up a genuinely fascinating time in American life and development – an all-inclusive comment by Lisa Sisco [1]. Indeed, this man, the first African-American to receive nationwide recognition, was Frederick Douglass. His contributions in filling in the blanks left unwritten and unspoken by history made him an outstanding author, orator, reformer, and political leader before and after the Civil War [2]. Through his courageous manner, keen words, and definite goals, he discerned the predicament facing the United States was the relationship between blacks and whites, that was, slavery. His

works capture the undoubted truth that is a self-portrait demonstrating his multidimensional self [2]. Under the most adverse circumstances of slavery, the early stage of life exerted a substantial influence on Frederick Douglass's literary works, which reflects his prominent rhetorical talent and manipulation of language.

2 Biographical Information

2.1 Early Stage of Life

While spending the twenty years of life under servitude, Douglass's unconventional but intellectual slave experience molds his awareness of literacy that underpins his authoritative and efficacious voice, emphasizing the need to fight against iniquity. Russel K. Hively's biographical essay regarding Frederick Douglass divulges all the information about his entire life. According to the essay, Douglass was born in Tuckahoe, Maryland – a remote place he once described. Notwithstanding, his exact birth date was uncertain, yet he calculated it in February, 1817 [3].

Soon after Douglass's birth, he was reared by his grandmother on a Maryland plantation after being estranged from his birth parents. His mother was a black slave; the identity of his father remained ambivalent, and historians assumed he was one of the slaveholders. Then, Douglass was sent to Baltimore as a domestic slave. Despite the fact that it was against the law, his mistress unintentionally taught him to read. He escaped to New Bedford, Massachusetts, through the Underground Railroad in September 1838 with the help of friends, where he ultimately managed to free himself from slavery [3].

Douglass acquired his freedom, but he never lost sight of the misery endured by his fellow Southerners, who were still subjected to oppression by villainous enslavers. *The Liberator*, William Lloyd Garrison's most prevalent anti-slavery newspaper, further incentivized Douglass's devotion to the abolition movement, to which he laboriously committed his effort in advocating and accelerating the emancipation process [4].

2.2 Two Major Events: Establishing Foundation

2.2.1 Maternal Separation

Douglass's unconventional but intellectual experience reveals through his maternal separation and literacy instruction, as both events lay a solid foundation for his later development. The influence of childhood on a person is significant. In particular, family affection accounts for a higher proportion, leading to a "system of dispositions": "the permanent manners of being, seeing, acting and thinking [5]." Tragically, Douglass cannot enjoy this inborn privilege of kinship "to any considerable extent." His vivid reverie of his mother's love featuring "her soothing presence, her tender and watchful care, I received the tidings of her death with much the same emotions I should have probably felt at the death of a stranger [6]."

Isolating a child from his mother prevents the development of familial feelings and distorts the natural bond that should be inherited: an innate possession of each individual. The adjectives "soothing" and "tender" descriptively depict Douglass's imagination of

his amiable mother, and both words insinuate the yearning toward maternal love that was unjustly deprived due to the institution.

The breakdown of family structure marks the moral decay of slavery, and it reflects the gloominess that all the slaves have regularly endured from the moment they are born. On the contrary, “Douglass experienced what is most important for a child in order to develop self-love: he benefited from the deep affection and loving care of his grandmother [5].” Even though the family fabric has been torn apart, his grandmother acts as a psychological parent who pieces together a sanctuary of family life that is uncommon for most slaves. Her upbringing is vital in furnishing the fundamental nourishment to help him grow and suture the trauma that has been deeply wounded.

2.2.2 Literacy Instruction

In addition to the deprivation, literacy instruction plays a central role in increasing Douglass's thirst for learning. The relocation to Baltimore is a turning point in which he receives valuable lessons: not only the class taught by mistress Mrs. Sophia Auld but the formation of critical thinking. After living with the Aulds in Baltimore, Mrs. Auld, unfamiliar with the Anti-literacy laws, starts to teach Douglass the alphabet. This unlawful act is sternly interrupted by her husband, denouncing that “if you give a nigger an inch, he will take an ell. A nigger should know nothing but to obey his master – to do as he is told to do. Learning would spoil the best nigger in the world [6].”

The existence of slavery depends mainly on the ignorance of the slaves themselves, for whom freedom is a vague concept. Denying access to education parallels the dehumanizing process that intentionally produces a sense of inferiority to slaves. Mr. Auld's words are epiphanies to Douglass, as they prompt him to realize that acquiring literacy is an indispensable precondition to unlock the fetter of bondage. This event undoubtedly reveals white people's measure to enslave African Americans for decades while illuminating Douglass's only pathway toward freedom. It also foreshadows and establishes the connection of his aspiration to pursue physical and linguistic freedom in the following years.

3 Proficiency in Using Rhetorical Triangle Within Douglass's Writing

3.1 Logos

Douglass Drawing upon Douglass's speeches and the *Narrative of the Life of Frederick Douglass, an American Slave*, one of the most famous autobiographies written by a fugitive slave, he consistently demonstrates his rhetorical talents in assisting his persuasive writing. The technique of appealing to logic is applied frequently in his *Narrative*, in which Douglass excerpts William Lloyd Garrison's tale as the “Preface,” recounting an account of an American sailor who is held for three years as a slave. The sailor fails to recall his native language and “could only utter some savage gibberish between Arabic and English, which nobody could understand, and which even he himself found difficulty in pronouncing [6].”

This anecdote indicates an implicit argument by appealing to reason and logic that degradation is the ramification of slavery. Using concrete evidence, Douglass implies the detrimental effect of enslavement and reinforces the argument that slavery is a devolution process, twisting a person's life and degrading intellectuals. The deliberate choice of the white slave as an example eliminates the disparity between different races of readers. It conveys the logic that both white and black will lose control over their consciousness, humanity, and even the native language.

Moreover, Mrs. Sophia Auld's transition is another example of *logos*, manifesting Douglass's rhetorical strength. The first time when she appears in front of Douglass, he "was utterly astonished at her goodness. ... I could not approach her as I was accustomed to approach other white ladies. ... The crouching servility, usually so acceptable a quality in a slave, did not answer when manifested toward her. ... Her face was made of heavenly smiles, and her voice of tranquil music [6]."

Nonetheless, the ruinous effect of 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 [6]." The transition from the "lamblike disposition" toward "tiger-like fierceness" forms a vivid image that Mrs. Auld is no longer a slaveholder with motherly kindness. From tenderness to callousness, her changing of *habitus* is prodigious, yet it evokes readers to question the righteousness of slavery. Her prior compassion represents the natural outpouring of human love. This kind of love exhibits unconsciously while coming into contact with others. The evil of slavery subverts this virtue, as it deteriorates a person's morality the same on enslavers.

Douglass's dramatic portrayal of Mrs. Auld, from idealized femininity to a character with demonic qualities, elucidates his exceptional use of *logos*. This radical change of sympathy is atypical for nineteenth-century readers. It rebuts people's presumption of an ideal maternal figure at that period. This contradiction underscores Douglass's reasoning that he connects an individual, who epitomizes in all aspects, to a broader social context. Mrs. Auld's post-transformation symbolizes the corrupting social morals induced by the institution of slavery. Both pieces of evidence demonstrate Douglass's talent in appealing to *logos*, and readers are thoroughly convinced by his outlandish perspectives in analyzing the effects of slavery. The aftermath displayed on the white accounts for a more persuasive medium that speaks directly to the audiences' sense of reason – the trauma of slavery.

3.2 Pathos

Aside from the *logos*, Douglass also excels in forming a connection with the audience, arousing emotion to assist his persuasive writing. One of the examples is his initial encounter with the whipping of Aunt Hester. Douglass delineates the scene that her master "took her into the kitchen, and stripped her from neck to waist, leaving her neck, shoulders, and back entirely naked. ... she now stood fair for this infernal purpose. ... he commenced to lay on the heavy cowskin, and soon the warm, red blood (amid heart-rending shrieks from her, and horrid oaths from him) came dripping to the floor [6]."

The precise narration of a violent episode denotes the hideous atrocity inflicted on slaves, as physical torture accompanies incessantly in this hellish world. Being the

witness of Aunt Hester's whipping, Douglass convinces his audiences by creating an emotional response of vivid imagery that exposes and accuses the inhumanity of slavery. This reflects his talent in mastering pathos, and the particular abuse of enslaved women aggravates readers' abomination to it.

Slaveholders' brutal treatment betrays the bestiality of the entire system while functioning as mental control. Fearing too much for his own safety, Douglass not only lacks the capacity to stop the whipping but is also constrained by the psychological struggle to keep himself apart from the lash wounds. Thus, the ineptitude in adopting corresponding measures evokes more readers' compassion that African Americans' civil rights are forced to withdraw and denied.

Additionally, the physical fight with Convey also signifies an emotionally affecting argument of Douglass's use of pathos. Part of the routine for Convey, who has a reputation for "breaking young slaves," is to punish Douglass. Douglass's "natural elasticity was crushed, my intellect languished, the disposition to read departed [6];" however, Douglass's consciousness, in return, guides his action, as he cannot accept the brutality and physical exhaustion anymore. The two-hour fight with Convey described in detail illustrates how a slave became a man.

Douglass takes advantage of violence to defend his dignity and natural rights as a human being because he is aware of the conflicting views on freedom and the reality of slavery. A series of compelling details portraying the violent confrontation juxtaposes with his reaffirmation in pursuing personal spirit, yet his effort to challenge the oppression renders readers' contemplation upon the sinfulness of slavery. Appearing as the culmination of the *Narrative*, the irreversible transformation into a "man" insinuates Douglass's tenacity to break the harsh living conditions that carry an overwhelming emotion, implicitly reflecting horrors inside slavery. No one would be insensible with his thrilling eloquence. This evidence manifests Douglass's technique of appealing to pathos, which evokes sentimentality among the audiences and inadvertently galvanizes the need to oppose persecution.

3.3 Ethos

According to the identity as a fugitive slave, Douglass's slave narrative is the most authoritative testification that reveals the life on the plantation; meanwhile, it demonstrates his skillfulness of ethos. The book is an introspective chronicle in which Douglass records the gory facts he has personally experienced and seen, the brutal nature of slavery, and the irresistible longing for freedom.

Christa Buschendorf comments on Douglass's writing in his essay that "the narrative of his personal life is intricately interlocked with the analysis of society. Whatever Douglass lets his readers know about himself is related to his existence as a slave deprived of human rights and later as a citizen of color who is discriminated against [5]." The writing of Douglass's autobiography is self-evident that mirrors the unimpeachable fact of being a slave that he, himself, is qualified to establish the credibility: to attest and to question the system in dehumanizing Afro-Americans. Their living structure is utterly distorted, as slaves suffer numerous maltreatments that are hardly imagined by those outside the circle.

The relevant experience alludes to Douglass's talent of appealing to ethics, emphasizing the abhorrence of enslavement. The *Narrative* hinges on persuading the readers' moral character that implies the unjustified act of insulting a person's fundamental rights. His work establishes a curiously ironic tone, formulating the "before" and "after" structure that renders the flashback to the experience of chattel slavery while chronicling it from the angle of a freed person. Douglass's *Narrative* of his harsh reality past is more than an account of victims. In Mason Lowance Jr.'s words, the writings are "tales of unendurable suffering and torment that alert the reader to a counterculture present in America [7]."

3.4 Douglass's Rhetorical Talent Beyond the Written Works

Besides the persuasive writing, Douglass's manipulation of the rhetorical triangle is also expressed in public speaking. He delivered a speech in an assembly among the Anti-slavery Society, condemning the pervasiveness of racial prejudice. In the address, he depicts the discrimination by citing two of his experiences "on 8 September, while en route to Dover, New Hampshire to attend a meeting..., Douglass refused to leave the Eastern's first-class compartment [8]," though he carries the ticket.

"The conductor had four or five subordinates forcibly remove him to the 'negro car.'... Three weeks later, Douglass boarded the Eastern cars at Lynn, Massachusetts, and again joined his white companions in the first-class seats. ... This time, the conductor called on eight or ten of his assistants. 'Snake out the d—d nigger!' one cried. Douglass clung to his seat so tightly that it was ripped up and tossed out with him onto the platform at Lynn [8]."

The emotional and passionate diction implies a strong endorsement of eliminating prejudice. Even though Douglass has broken the shackles upon thralldom (the slavery), the treatment he received daily is still inferior. The verbal abuse and physical dragging directly indicate the extensive American prejudice against people of color. The social inequity is deeply rooted in political regimes and personal ideology, which can only be arduously eradicated. Referring to real-life evidence enhances Douglass's credibility as a speaker and bolsters the argument in withstanding the unfairness.

In a well-reasoned order, Douglass also associates his expulsion with the antagonism against the black. Paying full fare does not grant him the same as the white "because you are black [8]." This causality elucidates his predominant rhetorical talent in pathos and logos as well, which the audiences obtain crucial insights into the gigantic system of iniquity that Douglass is one of the victims. It stimulates people's feelings of resentment, which surges resolution and aspiration in adhering to equal rights.

4 Literary Techniques

Literacy is a major theme that plays a critical part in Douglass's writing, narrating the metamorphosis from a former slave to a distinguished abolitionist. The embedded literary techniques also supplement Douglass's status as a renowned writer. Critics comment on his writing, containing that "since any act of writing the self into being takes into account a past self from the perspective of the present, autobiography is necessarily an interplay

of selves. This interplay, this double-consciousness, ensures that any autobiographical act is diachronic [9].”

Two examples substantiate Douglass's interweaving between the “past” and “present” self, which elicits the diachronic process of his elevation. In his autobiography, Douglass describes the deplorable sleeping condition that there is “no bed. ... I would crawl into this bag, ... with my head in and feet out. My feet have been so cracked with the frost that the pen with which I am writing might be laid in the gashes [6].” Later in the passage, Douglass emphasizes the importance of learning in Baltimore, which

“is possible, and even quite probable, that but for the mere circumstance of being removed from that plantation to Baltimore, I should have to-day, instead of being here seated by my own table, in the enjoyment of freedom and the happiness of home, writing this Narrative, been confined in the galling chains of slavery [6].”

Both quotations convey the inextricable relation between literacy and freedom that the present act of writing would not exist without acquiring knowledge. Douglass's language to describe the frostbite wound creates an immersive feeling of what it is like to be under bondage. The “pen ... laid in the gashes” juxtaposes the former status as a slave with the capacity to form language, though the conduct of writing is against the legal code. The pen is a writing tool for Douglass to inscribe his self-fashioning and self-promotion; however, it is also figuratively portrayed as a symbol representing the individual success of extraordinary social rise that propels linguistic autonomy. Through writing himself into a book, this synchronic act parallels Douglass's mastery of literacy, which, in diachrony, illustrates a distinct trajectory from subservience to freedom [9].

Literacy is intangible; yet a literate person retains a wide range of recognition, laying a solid foundation for personal development in self-definition. Once deprived the inalienable right to freedom, Douglass forms literacy into a weapon that denotes his adversity in striving for fundamental human and civil rights. Even though being a fugitive slave narrator, his writings assist him in reattaining the American definition of man and subsequent freedom [10]. Beyond the title of an ex-slave, Douglass has heretofore seen through the narrow framework of mental superiority granted by knowledge, as he eventually transforms into a celebrated American writer who divulges the dark side of society and gives account for his status.

5 Douglass's Manipulation of Language

From the embryo state of forging to the demonstration of fluency, Douglass's linguistic progression advances in several phases, and each phase encompasses sophisticated manipulation of language. He learns to write while earning extra income as a shipbuilder in the port of Baltimore, “frequently seeing the ship carpenter, ... write on the timber the name of that part of the ship for which it was intended. ... I soon learned the names of these letters, and ... I immediately commenced copying them [6].” The shipyard serves as a sanctuary to Douglass, where he reinforces the learning of the alphabet and benefits from the self-education of the authoritative discourse - the English - as he reconfigures the capacity of language: a vital cultural and social capital under the confined structure of the white rubric.

Copying the letters in the marginal spaces alludes to Douglass's dexterity in analyzing the efficacy of literacy in addition to the purely utilitarian purpose. The ships represent

an inexhaustible curiosity and adventurous spirit to explore. Nonetheless, the vessel Douglass sets out to build is ironic, which cannot take him wherever he wants. The body of ships paradoxically metaphors a carrier conveying a vision of freedom, yet it facilitates the transportation system, expanding the market of slavery that exacerbates the dichotomy between liberation and enslavement.

Moreover, literacy also emerges acoustically that does not leave a trace, as Gayl Jones claims that musicians employ a variety of sounds to express ideas to one another that language is unable to do well [1]. According to the commentary of hearing slaves' singing, Douglass is "within the circle" who "did not, when a slave, understand the deep meaning of those rude and apparently incoherent songs [6]." Singing is usually an expression of a person's pleasant mood; conversely, whites, in this case, are the illiterate ones, mistakenly associating the song directly with the happiness of slaves. This elusive form of literacy denotes pain of oppression, and the ability of orality reveals African-American spirituality under subconsciousness.

Interpreting the most original and artistic treasure in black culture, the utilization of the spatial metaphor of being inside "the circle" manifests Douglass's manipulation of language, which only the heterogeneous identity has the power to understand the "deep meaning." The distance between staying inside and outside slavery is the key for Douglass to decipher the encoded information hidden between the lyrics that slaves used to exhibit their resentment. It empowers him with an elevated status in linguistic autonomy, and the elucidation of slaves' songs overthrows the binary opposition of literate/illiterate, highlighting the invisible cultures that white people often ignore. Songs are as meaningful as the pursuit of freedom to the black community but meaningless jargon for whites who show indifference to human rights.

6 Conclusion

Richard Wright, notes in his essay that books are abstruse, serving as the portal to the unattainable while having any black man author is a euphoria to the readers. The unremitting and indefatigable efforts in pursuing freedom and linguistic autonomy are fully reflected in Frederick Douglass's literary works regardless of the most adverse circumstances: the brutal nature of slavery. Similarly, Deborah E. McDowell comments that Douglass's works as the "first of a first" that brings an affluent contribution to the American written literature. His epoch-making *Narrative* extends mighty influence to subsequent ideologues, such as Booker T. Washington and Philip Foner. Contemporary readers should appreciate his contributions to the fight for civil rights while maintaining prominent rhetorical talent and manipulation of language in his writing. His achievement of such a monumental status is inseparable from his fortuitous contact with literature in the early stage of life. His usage of logos, pathos, ethos and other literary techniques demonstrates his excellent literary attainments, though, who loomed under the adversity of slavery: the period during which educated slaves were impermissible to exist. Frederick Douglass was a living spirit of freedom that cemented an irreplaceable position in the record of literature and the history of the United States.

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