

ANALYSIS

THE STYLE OF FREDERICK DOUGLASS

(1817-1895)

"While reading this narrative, I suddenly realized that I completely understand the text—which is very surprising considering that I have always had immense trouble understanding old literature, even pre-civil war American literature. Because of this, I decided to analyze his writing style since it seemed much different than others at the time. The first thing I noticed is that Douglass' writing isn't grandiloquent—compared to today's way of writing—opposed to other pieces of literature at the time. Frederick's writing seems much more informal, as if he wanted everyone to understand it, he stayed away from the rich-white-guy pretentious jargon of the time and remained very straightforward throughout most of the narrative (well, at least for what I've read so far) He wanted to convey his experiences in a simple, easily comprehensible manner so that anyone and everyone could understand his story. But at times his vocabulary seemed a little elevated; I think he may have been showing off, since he had to endure so much and fight so hard to learn how to read and write; but besides those instances, his writing seemed very old-fashioned, straightforward, and personal throughout."

Joshua James

"The Writing Style of Frederick Douglass"
aplanguajames.wordpress (2 February 2015)

"Frederick Douglass included various *symbolic* and *metaphorical* literary devices within his written work, the *Narrative of the Life of Frederick Douglass*. In the scene where Douglass is on a ship being sent to Baltimore and leaving Colonel Lloyd's plantation he wrote: 'I then placed myself in the bows of the sloop, and there spent the remainder of the day looking ahead, interesting myself in what was in the distance rather than in things near by or behind' (18). He used the words 'the distance' and 'looking ahead' as metaphors for freedom, the future, hope, change, something better, new horizons, emancipation, self-determinism, liberty, decolonization, release, and sovereignty (18). He did not want to dwell on the past nor the situation and people surrounding him, but saw into the distance; that is, he saw a new way of life, a style of life beyond his physical grasp, but within his visionary, philosophical, and political scope.

Douglass chose his words wisely: He did not write that he looked into the ocean's distance, he looked 'ahead' (18). The ocean is *symbolic* of emotions and the emotional turmoil and anguish he may have endured. Looking 'ahead' and into 'the distance' meant he was looking through the air, which is *symbolic* for thought and reason. He did not give his past emotional experience power over his reason and intellect. By leaving out the fact that he probably looked at the ocean in reality and by not mentioning looking into the ocean or at the water, Douglass is *symbolically* suggesting that he used his wisdom and intellect to reason with and work out his situation the best way he could. In this passage, the important element is what he does not write—not what he writes. We understand and know that the ocean is there and whether it is rocky or calm is unwritten. He bypassed writing about the ocean, its waves, and any of the ocean's calmness knowing that his readership would understand that he was not emotionally reactive nor would he allow emotional overreaction to interfere with his poetic and just quest for change. But, was he looking at 'the distance' within the ocean?

Strictly speaking, while looking out to sea and while sailing on a ship, 'the distance' and 'looking ahead' may have defined the ocean and what he could have literally seen with his two eyes (18). Read in a literal context, he would have seen hills and valleys of ocean, movement, the sky, clouds, maybe some birds, and possibly some land. Intuitively, we understand that Douglass used a literary metaphor that was *symbolic* of his life experience, which encompassed an entire spectrum of injustices, unfairness...and the intolerability of his experience as a slave, so that 'interesting' himself 'in the distance' would refer to a resolution.

Douglas summed up his experience and the political irrational philosophy of slavery through the *symbolic* and *metaphorical* usage of the word 'behind' in this passage and scene. He wrote (repeated): 'I

then placed myself in the bows of the sloop, and there spent the remainder of the day looking ahead, interesting myself in what was in the distance rather than in things near by or behind' (18). He left the violence, wrongs, and horrors he experienced 'behind' in his conscience, so he could clear the way to envision a future that involved positive change and any semblance of freedom. In a literal sense, the word 'behind' would refer to his position of sight on the sloop, whether 'behind' literally related to the scenery, people, sky, or the wood of the ship. He could simply look behind him to view the immediate view. 'Behind' is a *metaphor* and *symbolic* of slavery, his history, the captured African slaves' plight, the breaking of slaves, and his personal sorrow, suffering, and sense of injustice.

He wrote that he placed himself in 'the bows,' which was in the front of the ship. This may have been *symbolic* of being in charge of his own destiny, steering the direction of his own life, securing the reins over his choices and lifestyle, and being in control over his physical safety and economic livelihood. Whether Douglass literally stood or sat in the bows of the sloop is uncertain, but standing near the helm, the oars, or central control of the ship, where he could have seen greatest without hindrance or obstruction to his physical or spiritual sight, is related to the idea of changing the future, changing the destiny of slaves, and his desire to manifest a new philosophy and political situation concerning slavery. He claimed he 'placed himself in the bows,' which was a *metaphor* for taking the lead, being a leader—not a follower, and being confident enough to be the person in everyone's view when others looked towards the future (18)."

Debbie Davidson
"Symbolism and Metaphor in Frederick Douglass's *Narrative*"
portfolium.com (3 October 2016)

"One of the most convincing devices that Douglass utilizes in the *Narrative* is animal **imagery**. Such imagery reveals the dehumanizing effects of slavery in both slaveholders and slaves, especially in the rural context of the plantation system, where slaves were chattel, similar to domesticated animals. These images include **similes** (such as describing the young children feeding at a trough as being 'like so many pigs') and **association** (as in chapter eight, when Douglass describes the slaves' experience at the valuation as being 'on the same rank in scale' of 'horses, sheep and swine'). Douglass makes it clear that slaves were not only viewed as being animals, but they also lived in conditions that reinforced that stereotype. However, Douglass, in a clever move, uses animal **metaphors** to suggest that slave owners were not exempt from being perceived as animals by slaves... For example, Mr. Covey...

Old-Fashioned, Elevated, Plain, Personal, Biblical: Although Douglass's language may seem a bit stilted to us today, his **style** is usually pretty straightforward. He wants you to understand him, so he doesn't write long or complicated sentences, and he tries to speak informally, as if it were just you and him. Still, he does sometimes use a kind of elevated language, and parts of the book can be a bit difficult. It might be that he's emulating the style of the King James Bible, one book that almost all of his readers would be familiar with. For example, this is how he describes Aunt Hester being whipped: *'I remember the first time I ever witnessed this horrible exhibition. I was quite a child, but I well remember it. I never shall forget it whilst I remember any thing. It was the first of a long series of such outrages, of which I was doomed to be a witness and a participant. It struck me with awful force.'* Words like 'exhibition' and 'spectacle' remind us that, even though Douglass is remembering something he saw as a child, he's a well-educated adult now. He seems to want to show us that his hard-earned education was a success. But he is also aware of the limitations of language. At the end of the quote, he reminds us that no matter how powerful a writer he might be, language cannot quite capture the trauma of the experience.

Symbolism, Imagery, Allegory: When Douglass is at his lowest point--when Covey has beaten him into submission and he is, for all intents and purposes, broken--he looks out onto the Chesapeake Bay and is suddenly struck by a vision of white sailing ships. It's one of the most powerful **symbols** in the book, but it's also one of the most elusive. Why do these ships suddenly strike his fancy as the very embodiment of freedom? Is it because they are white? Do they appear to fly and seem like angels? Are they what eventually drive him to become a dock-worker in Baltimore? Almost everyone who reads Douglass's narrative notices this passage, and we have lots of questions, but not many answers. But maybe that's the point: freedom appears in many different forms and with many different names.

Female Suffering: Douglass doesn't talk about women very often, and when he does, he usually associates them with suffering. Perhaps because the nineteenth-century South was a time and a place where women were supposed to be shielded from danger, Douglass makes a special point of describing the traumatic sight of female slaves being beaten and abused. The rape of female slaves by their masters was a common occurrence, as Douglass reminds us. The beating of Aunt Hester in Chapter 1, the neighbor whipping his slaves Henrietta and Mary in Chapter 6, and Thomas Auld's cruelty to Henny in Chapter 9 are all moments of ferocious violence toward women. Note, though, that Mr. Auld is not violent toward his wife when he catches her teaching the slaves to read. Only black women are the victims of violence in this story.

City vs. Country: No slave wants to live on a plantation in the country, and Douglass is somewhat luckier than most in this regard. For much of his life, he lives in Baltimore, where slaves are treated better, and which is an easier place from which to escape to freedom. In the country slaves are often whipped brutally, and they are rarely given enough food or clothing. Slave owners in the city would be ashamed for their neighbors to see their slaves going without enough food or clothing. In the city, Douglass learns to read and meets a wide variety of people who help him on his road to freedom: the white children who help him learn to read and write, the sailors who teach him a trade, and people from the North who show him that not all whites are slave owners.

Sandy's Root: Sandy Jenkins offers Douglass a root from the forest that supposedly has magical powers to protect slaves from being whipped. Douglass doesn't seem to believe this, but he wears the root on his right side--as he's told to--in order to appease Sandy. In a footnote, Douglass calls Sandy's belief in the root 'superstitious' and typical of the 'more ignorant slave' population. In this regard, the root stands as a **symbol** of a traditional African approach to religion and belief. While we might expect Douglass to be sympathetic toward African traditions, he doesn't really seem to be. As a Christian, he doesn't believe in other forms of spirituality."

"Frederick Douglass's Writing Styles"
bookrags.com (2020)

"On analyzing the language of the book, it is important to dwell upon key artistic details and stylistic devices, which help to understand the diversity of the language and the life of the narrator. F. Douglass uses *metaphor* to convey the true life of slaves and slave owners. For instance, slaves are compared to 'property.' In such a way, the author emphasizes the position of slaves in American society, the lack of human rights and liberties for them. At the same time, F. Douglass uses *simile* to show that slaves and African Americans are ordinary people. Douglass writes: 'slaves are like other people.' The *simile* is used for comparison and emphasizes the similarity of slaves to other people in order to show that they should have equal rights and liberties like other people do. In addition, the author uses *personification* to depict masters and their attitude to slaves. The masters of Douglass are associated with the evil. In such a way, the author stresses the negative implications of slavery and reveals the slaveholders' evil nature.

On the other hand, the author attempts to show the oppressed position of slaves. For this purpose, he uses *onomatopia*, which is used to compare the position of slaves to that of animals. Using *onomatopia* Douglass tends to compare slaves to sheep. To show the absurd of slavery, Douglass uses *oxymoron*: 'I have often been utterly astonished, since I came to the north, to find persons who could speak of the singing, among slaves, as evidence of their contentment and happiness' (21) Happiness and slavery comprise the *oxymoron* since these two notions are absolutely antagonistic and the author is sarcastic about the happiness of slaves. The author attempts to show that happiness of people is impossible as long as slavery persists and the abolition of slavery is the only way to improve the lives of African Americans and to make them happy.

At the same time, Douglass uses *irony* to show the true life of people. In fact, the author repeatedly uses *irony* when he refers to concepts of happiness of slaves or the possibility of the 'normal' life of slaves... In addition, Douglass uses *hyperbole* to manifest the desperate position of slaves whose lives are unbearable and worse than that of animals. The *hyperbole* enhances the *irony* to reveal the full extent to which the life of slaves was terrible and unbearable in the US. *Hyperboles* make the narrative highly emotional and have a significant impact on readers.

Furthermore, Douglass refers to universal values and, for this purpose, he uses *allusions*. To put it more precisely, the author refers to biblical motives to appeal to Christian values of the audience. In such a way, he helps readers to understand that slaves should be liberated because slavery contradicts basic, fundamental Christian principles. He reminds the audience about humanistic values, which they should not abandon. To enhance the impact of *allusion* on the audience, the author uses *rhetorical questions* to make the audience think of the necessity to abolish slavery...

At the same time, the author uses *anaphora/parallelism*: 'He was just the man for such a place, and it was just the place for such a man. He was ambitious enough to be contented with nothing short of the highest rank of overseers, and persevering enough to reach the height of his ambition. He was cruel enough to inflict the severest punishment, artful enough to descend to the lowest trickery, and obdurate enough to be insensible to the voice of a reproving conscience. He was, of all the overseers, the most dreaded by the slaves' (41). The author uses *anaphora* to characterize the master and show that all the bad qualities are typical for him and constitute a part of his nature.

Douglass uses *repetition* to show the state in which the American and slaves lived in the epoch described by Douglass. *Euphemism* is used when Douglass refers to slavery as a social problem that Americans apparently decreased in significance and simply underestimated. Moreover, the author uses *paradox*: 'I received the tidings of her death with much the same emotions I should have probably felt at the death of a stranger' (11). The author speaks about the death of his mother as a stranger, which is unnatural to modern readers... *Antithesis* is used when the author contrasts his view on the life of slaves as miserable to the view of whites who speak about the happiness of slaves.

Furthermore, Douglass uses *metonymy*: 'The master is frequently compelled to sell this class of his slaves, out of deference to the feelings of his white wife; and, cruel as the deed may strike any one to be, for a man to sell his own children to human flesh-mongers' (46). Masters are compared to flesh-mongers to demonstrate their evil nature. Finally, Douglass uses *synecdoche* to show that slave masters are only representatives of a part of the American society."

"The Role of Language in the *Narrative of the Life of Frederick Douglass*"
essay4you.net

"The narrative of the life written by Frederick Douglass is considered to be one of the most powerful books created by abolitionists. It makes us dive into the time of slavery, suffer together with the slaves, and feel physically and emotionally the injustice of the system of the slavery. It gets more values by the fact that this work was written by the American slave by himself. Therefore, we can find out black people's real living conditions and their slavers' cruelty in its true colors. Douglass was a genius who applied skillfully emotion imagery, figurative language, and anecdotes for presenting readers the evil of slavers. In our work we will analyze the literary devices which Frederick Douglass used in the narrative...Thesis: In order to show the cruelty, cynicism, and meanness of slavers Douglass appeals to emotional imagery, a wide range of figurative language such as metaphors, metonymy, personification, epithets, simile, repetitions, irony, and anecdotes.

The use of emotion imagery in Douglass's narrative allows readers to feel almost physically slavers' cruel actions and get into Frederick's shoes. The emotion imagery is very important for creation of true-to-life situations and images. It appeals to readers' five senses, influencing their taste, touch, sight, smell, and sound...Emotions are produced by the mental images which are "the experience of a perceptual phenomenon...The mental images activate the visual brain areas which cause the activation of the emotional brain areas (Langer, 2012, p. 178)...For example, the image of a hungry slave created by the author makes us suffer from the hunger together with Frederick. Thus, the description of the slaves as 'poor creatures nearly perishing with hunger' and feeling 'the painful gnawings of hunger' which the narrator experienced makes us create an exhausting starving image of slaves. (Douglass, ch.9). Then, we feel the delicious taste and smoke of the dishes and feel hunger together with Douglass 'when food in abundance lay mouldering in the safe and smoke-house' (Douglass, ch.9). This painful experience underlines the cruelty and meanness of Douglass's master.

The book is full of the images of the masters who owned Douglass at different times of his life. All of them reinforced each other and were built into one image of a cruel, mean, cynical slaver whose belief in God did not prevent him from beating the slaves up to death, raping the black women, treating them as cattle, and neglecting their human features."

"The Use of Literary Devices in the *Narrative of the Life of Frederick Douglass*"
examplesassignmentlab.com

"In reading the *Narrative of the Life of Frederick Douglass, An American Slave*, I was astonished to look at slavery from the perspective of an actual victim of that era in American history. There were many things in this text that stood out for me, but I centered only on three things that I thought truly encapsulate not just Douglass's account of his experiences as a slave in the early 19th century, but also the idea of slavery itself. Among those three is a quote found on page 242, in which Douglass writes: "If any one wishes to be impressed with the soul-killing effects of slavery, let him go to Colonel Lloyd's plantation, and, on allowance-day, place himself in the deep pine woods, and there let him, in silence, analyze the sounds that shall pass through the chambers of his soul,—and if he is not thus impressed, it will only be because "there is no flesh in his obdurate heart."

His whole narrative is about his experiences as a slave in 19th century America and shows the detrimental effects and unjust doings of both slavery as a whole and the slaveholders he had. In this text, and the ones that came before and after it, Douglass recounts his experience being part of a group of slaves in which they sing their feelings out while making their way towards the Great House Farm to collect their monthly allowance. These, he noted, were 'wild songs, revealing at once the highest joy and the deepest sadness' (241). In what seems to be a joyful moment for them to express their feelings as they go to collect the fruits of their hardship, it also depicts their deepest sorrows in realizing that it's just another day in the cycle of their life-long suffering. In relation to slavery, this shows not just the physical effects of what slavery has done to countless bodies that left them bloody and scarred, but also the dehumanizing effects it makes in a human soul. It adds to our understanding that slavery does not just inflict physical torment with every swing of its lash to its victims, but it also leaves crushed souls in its wake. Like the narrative itself, Douglass, in this passage, calls out people who may think that slavery wasn't all that bad as it was economically uplifting and challenges them to be one with the slaves, hear their pleas and cries of agony, and, as the old saying goes, 'walk in their shoes.'

This text also reveals Douglass's mental health at a very young age and his abhorrent feelings against what slavery, may it be physical or emotional, can do to a mere human being, and thus sprang out of him a strong will to fight for the end of slavery. In the end, I deem this quote as the most significant because it shows a more powerful reason to abolish slavery than mere torture accounts as it also damages the innermost self and attempts to raise the question, at least for me: How evil can a human being be against his brother?"

Armand Caguete
"Narrative of the Life of Frederick Douglass"
(24 March 2020)

"*The Narrative of the Life of Frederick Douglass, an American Slave*" is an autobiography that tells the story of the author's 21 years as a slave and later years as a free man and abolitionist. It is one of the earliest narratives written by a former American slave. Within the narrative, Douglass makes use of literary elements including **symbolism** and **allegory**, recurring **themes**, **point of view**, and **syntax** and **diction** to tell his story:

Themes explored in the work include the importance of literacy in gaining freedom, the role of Christianity in slavery and the role of ignorance as a means of reinforcing slavery as an institution, according to Ronald Sundstrom's article 'Frederick Douglass,' in the *Stanford Encyclopedia of Philosophy*. The book also explores the link between slavery and spiritual emptiness. An additional **theme** explored is the link between violence and revelation, particularly the way in which Douglass' final fight with temporary owner Edward Covey resolves doubts within himself about his desire for freedom.

Symbolism: According to Waldo E. Martin's 'Mind of Frederick Douglass,' important **symbols** in the work include the white-sailed ships Douglass sees in Chesapeake Bay when he is first rented to Edward Covey and *The Columbian Orator*, a collection of essays Douglass read after achieving literacy. Douglass saw the abandoned white sailed ships as **metaphors** for himself, abandoned to Covey's rule. He conversely saw *The Columbian Orator* as a path to freedom and a **symbol** of the power of oration.

Point of View: The narrative's first person **point of view** plays a key role in the story. Because it is one of the first narratives written by a former slave, the firsthand account stands as a vitally important aspect of the work, according to the Harvard University Press website article, 'Narrative of the Life of Frederick Douglass, Revisited.' Douglass uses the...first person to display his own intelligence and to refute arguments that slaves and African Americans in general were incapable of learning.

Motifs: Douglass makes use of several different **motifs** throughout the narrative to emphasize certain aspects of slavery, many of which would also be used as literary devices in other slave narratives. Douglass' narrative frequently describes his quest for literacy and freedom, creates a sense of sympathy that the audience is affected by, and details the destruction of his family by the institution of slavery, according to Washington State University English professor, Donna M. Campbell."

Jamie Applegate
"Literary Elements in *Narrative of the Life of Frederick Douglass*"
pen&thepad.com

Michael Hollister (2020)