

## Frederick Douglass

From 1830 to the end of the slavery era, the fugitive slave narrative dominated African American letters, providing the first African American best sellers in American literature. The *Narrative of the Life of Frederick Douglass, an American Slave* sold approximately 30,000 copies between 1845 and 1850, its first five years of existence. This huge sale exceeded the combined sales of three American literary classics of the 1850's, Melville's *Moby-Dick* (1851), Thoreau's *Walden* (1854), and Whitman's *Leaves of Grass* (1855) during their first five years of existence.

The *Narrative of the Life of Frederick Douglass* epitomizes the form of the classic antebellum slave narratives. Douglass's narrative carries a black message inside a white envelope. In the Preface or sometimes in the Appendix of many slave narratives, including Douglass's, a white man often attests to the reliability and good character of the narrator, while also calling attention to what the narrative will reveal about the horrors of slavery. Douglass's narrative is prefaced by William Lloyd Garrison, founder of the American Anti-Slavery Society and editor of the *Liberator*, the major antislavery newspaper in the antebellum U.S. Between the preface and the appendix, the former slave recounts his or her story. In most cases, the story follows the narrator's life from his or her earliest memories of slavery through various moments of often terrible initiation into the institution. These narratives generally reach a climax in the narrator's rite of passage from slavery in the South to freedom in the North. Precipitating the narrator's decision to escape is some sort of personal crisis, such as the sale of a loved one, a violent incident, or a dark night of the soul in which hope contends with despair for the spirit of the slave. Impelled by faith in God and a commitment to liberty and human dignity comparable (the slave narrative often stressed) to that of America's Founders, the slave undertakes an arduous quest for freedom that climaxes in his or her arrival in the North. In many antebellum narratives the attainment of freedom is signaled not simply by reaching the free states but by renaming oneself and dedicating one's future to antislavery activism.

Douglass's *Narrative* has often been treated as the epitome of the antebellum slave narrative tradition. Although scholars debate whether his *Narrative* should be accorded primacy among the most than 100 narratives published as books and pamphlets before 1865, most scholars agree that Douglass's *Narrative*, along with his well-received second autobiography, *My Bondage and My Freedom* (1855), were the most widely-read and influential of all the antebellum slave narratives. Douglass's *Narrative* expanded and deepened its readers' understanding of and empathy with the psychological struggles of the narrator to achieve intellectual and emotional fulfillment even before he made his physical escape to the North.

The opening paragraph of Douglass's *Narrative* presents an African American engaged from early childhood in an arduous process of self-discovery, despite slavery's denial of his right to a self, through the most basic statement of self-determination, laying claim to one's birthday:

I was born in Tuckahoe, near Hillsborough, and about twelve miles from Easton, in Talbot county, Maryland. I have no accurate knowledge of my age, never having seen any authentic record containing it. By far the larger part of the slaves know as little of their ages as horses know of theirs, and it is the wish of most masters within my knowledge to keep their slaves thus ignorant. I do not remember to have ever met a slave who could tell of his birthday. They seldom come nearer to it than planting-time, harvest-time, cherry-time, spring-time, or fall-time. A want of information concerning my own was a source of unhappiness to me even during childhood.

### **Solomon Northup's *Twelve Years a Slave* and the Slave Narrative Tradition**

The white children could tell their ages. I could not tell why I ought to be deprived of the same privilege. I was not allowed to make any inquiries of my master concerning it. He deemed all such inquiries on the part of a slave improper and impertinent, and evidence of a restless spirit.

To read the full narrative, see [Documenting the American South](#).

To know one's birthday is to be aware of one's personal origins as a unique self. By preventing slaves from knowing their birthdays, slaveholders robbed the enslaved of access to their own individuality by denying them a traceable point of reference for their beginnings as a human being. Instead of being defeated by this denial of his individual origins, Douglass turns this considerable disadvantage into an autobiographical opportunity. If he can't document himself by citing his birthdate, as the usual white autobiographer could do, he traces the origins of his selfhood, not to a date but to his determination to *learn* the date of his origins. Thus, deprivation of self-knowledge actually inspires self-determination, the "restless spirit" to affirm himself in spite of slavery's attempt to frustrate all "impertinent" inquiries, all questions as to the rightness of a status quo based in the slave's ignorance of self. Through these questions, Frederick even as a child ironically identifies himself as the challenger of slaveholding mastery and authority. The very "restless spirit" that ignorance was intended to suppress becomes the point of origins for the freedom-bound slave resister. The desire and demand for "information" will become the motive force for the quest for freedom that characterizes the remainder of Douglass's life in his *Narrative*.

To the noted transcendentalist clergyman Theodore Parker, slave narratives qualified as America's only indigenous literary form. "All the original romance of Americans is in them, not in the white man's novel," Parker asserted. Douglass's *Narrative* became so popular because it followed Equiano's narrative a half-century earlier in portraying the fugitive slave as a triumphant individual, a figure who rises from enslavement to professional success, a public intellectual, a black man who has mastered words and can command the ear of whites and blacks alike in the North. Douglass became one of the best-paid platform lecturers of his time, to whom white audiences flocked to hear the one-time slave speak on "Self-Made Men," Douglass's most popular speech during the latter years of his life.