Frederick Douglass, Narrative, Chapters 7-11

Religion

Comments from a Liberationist:
The theme of religion and faith is prevalent in the second half of Douglass’s Narrative. The hypocrisy of the slaveowners is shown as they pretend to be devout, religious Christians, while in reality being cruel and heartless. The term “Christian” is never used to positively describe anything, highlighting the hypocrisy with the stark contrast. This religious pretense accompanies the fraud and deceit of the slaveowners, whether with the drunkenness of the holidays or Mr. Covey’s regular hiding and spying. Douglass also begins to question his own faith, pondering the existence of God as he experiences the worst slavery of his life with Mr. Covey.

I found it very ironic that Douglass believes that more slaves would attempt freedom, “but for the strong cords of affection that bind them to their friends,” especially considering the fact that slaveowners try to sever all familial ties from an early age. Perhaps the slaves replace these family relationships with friendships, but how are the latter less dangerous than the former?

I also found interesting Douglass’s mention of the concept of TOO MUCH freedom: “the disgust the slave with freedom, by allowing him to see only the abuse of it.” As part of their deceit, slaveowners actually use this freedom to further enslave them—freedom is portrayed to slaves as something dangerous, while bondage is safe. Similarly, Master Thomas urges Douglass to “depend solely upon him for happiness.”

The known is secure.

I was unsure where to begin with my response to the close of Douglass’ narrative. I’d like to respond to the question you posed on page 79 under chapter 11. Douglass was very strategic in his writing of the 11th chapter for he did not reveal in detail the nature of his escape; Douglass only revealed that he successfully made it to New York. Douglass again illustrates his great wisdom in writing this chapter because he did not want to hint or allow any help for a slave catcher to capture slaves that plan on running away as he did.
Paranoia / What if FD weren’t educated?

>Here are my questions and thoughts about the reading:

¶What can explain Mrs. Auld’s desire to become even more violent towards young douglass?
¶At the bottom of page 43, Douglass expresses his distrust of white persons: "White men have been known to encourage slaves to escape, and then, to get the reward, catch them and return them to their masters." In this quote, Douglass further reinforces the correlation between paranoia and enslaved persons that was hinted at earlier in the narrative (chapter three). Could the institution of slavery function without paranoia? What qualities are necessary to that institution?
¶If Douglass had not been educated, would he have still attained as strong of a resolve to escape? In class we have explored the idea of ignorance as a quality typical to enslaved persons and how it helps to preserve the institution of slavery. How then might we explain those not so exceptional cases in which enslaved persons, without having been given an education as Douglass had, fled their masters and found liberation? Could we reason that there may be faculties of the mind that motive us to liberate ourselves?

Escape

After reading the final part of Douglas’s autobiography, I was most shaken by the description of Douglas’s capture and imprisonment due to his attempted escape. It was amazing to me how Betsy Freeland attacked Freddrick in front of everyone and exposed his escape plan to an extent. I really couldn’t believe that she would suddenly call upon his race in a time like that. It also shocked me that the slave community turned against Fredrick so intensely while he was in jail. I guess I thought of him as a hero for making plans to escape while his fellow slaves hated him for his attempt. I still can’t stop thinking about just how unfair the whole situation still seems.

Animals / Christianity / Trust

> In this reading I noticed Frederick Douglass’ frequent use of animals to portray a feeling or describe a situation. The most common are lions or tigers and lambs. Often, Frederick compares the ferocity and position of the slaveholders to lions. The slaves, or those unlike the typical slaveholder, would be portrayed as lambs. In chapter seven he states, "the tender heart became stone, and the lamblike disposition gave way to one of tiger-like fierceness" (41). This transformation from lamb to tiger is of his mistress who soon learns the ways of a ‘good’ slaveholder. Another commonality I found in this
reading was naming a place or person 'Christian'. Douglass gave way to a bit
of cynicism or rather noted the hypocrisy of the situation by calling America a
'Christian' country. This idea of Christianity not being used in its proper form is also
brought up when Douglass describes his master's conversion to Christianity. It is said
that "after his conversion, he found religious sanction and support for his slaveholding
cruelty" (49). His master uses the words and teachings of the Bible, as did many others,
to confirm the correctness of enslavement. Also related to backwards Christianity is the
refusal to allow the slaves to have their own Sabbath school. Ignoring the idea that
slaves are not to be educated, the way in which the oppressors broke up the meetings
was savage-like, they would rush in with sticks and stones. Such an act, with the
expectation to be called a Christian, is absurd.

¶Another idea I found compelling was that Douglass could trust no man because of the
wicked system. Every white man is suspected to be only interested in their personal
gain; and even the black men could not be trusted, for they, too, will snitch or just talk
too much and give secrets away. Although this was so, Douglass did allow himself to
love. On page 61 he describes his love for his fellow slaves when under Mr. Freeland.
Here it demonstrates that slaves do have the capacity to love because they are human
beings. Despite the separation from a natural love of mother, father and siblings, there
is still this function in which love of another can emerge. Due to this love Douglass felt
towards some of his fellow slaves, he is deeply saddened by his separation from them
(65).

Various observations

• Shocking how for Douglass learning how to read, something that is considered
  so valuable and enriching, became something he abhorred and wanted to know
  no longer. "I envied my fellow-slaves for their stupidity."
• Comparison between Douglass and Master Thomas → Master Thomas learned
  how to read, write and had written over a number of copy-books in a matter of
  short time while for Douglass "after a long, tedious effort for years..." he finally
  learned how to read.
• What kind of inspection did Andrew and Lucretia do? "Silvery-headed age and
  sprightly youth, maids and matrons had to undergo the same indelicate
  inspection." It also took more than a month to divide all the property.
• Slaves were ranked with animals.
• Masters are the source of corruption of themselves and slaves...forced slaves to
  steal.
• Ironic religious masters were the worst. (used bible lines to defend brutality)
I was appalled by Mr. Covey and how he took a married man to impregnate his woman slave.

Contradiction: “irreligious” and “heavenly” (p.67)

Was Sandy the person who spilled Douglass’ plan to escape?

Master Hugh’s saying “if you give a slave an inch he’ll take the ell” comes to play again when Douglass is giving his weekly wages to Master Thomas and when Master Thomas gives him six cents Douglass says “I regarded it as a sort of admission of my right to the whole.”

Did Douglass have an arranged marriage?

> Chapter 7:

Frederick Douglass’s credibility would be severely damaged if he had made large claims about his cleverness because, in a way, he would be challenging the intellect of a white person. Only through a more humble route would he be able to downplay the idea that he outsmarted his white owners, which could have and would have ruined his platform.

> Chapter 11:

By closing his narrative with his escape he would be ending with secrets and people do not like to feel as though something is being hidden from them. He had to end with a point, which would allow people to trust him even though part of his story includes secrets and deceiving notions.

In his initial experience as a fugitive you can see the skepticism he feels toward the world in general. With such a variety of outcomes at stake, it is not hard to believe that the dangerous and the dark are what come to his mind.

Having a wife materialize at this point gives Douglass the image of stability and reason, which adds a positive to his image. With this kind of stability he is better able to spread his story with the attention of the free world.

It appears to me that the reason for the sudden mention of Douglass’s full name derives from the idea that his real name is a part of an unidentifiable slave whereas now he has evolved into a more confident, free man and is able to accept the old and the new alike.

Genesis

I think there seems to be a structural similarity between Douglass’s Narrative and the Bible.

His attaining freedom seems to share the same pattern as one in Genesis of the Bible -- Adam ate the fruit of the tree of knowledge, was damned by God, was expelled to the Earth, where Adam was ironically condemned to be "free." In the same way, Douglass
was "enlightened" by gaining knowledge so that he was able to comprehend his
condition as a slave (which cannot be justified) and tried to escape; when his first
attempt to escape failed, he was called as "yellow devil (p.64b)" who deceived his
fellows into trying the 'unjust' escape.

¶From this, I feel there is a strong connection between the concepts, as follow:
God (especially of the Old Testament), Authority ---- Bondage, Anti-knowledge
Evil --- Knowledge, Enlightenment, Reason

¶Am I making a claim that is grand and vague too much..?

Stereotyping

> I find it interesting that Douglass even at a young age, does not generalize his beliefs
in people despite the fact that those around in him a slave society do just that - generalize
and stereotype blacks. Douglass called the white children's help in learning to read
"kindly aid". He also went to great lengths to keep the names of those responsible for
educating him secret so as not to "embarrass them" because he cared enough for their
well-being. When his master remarried and was taken by his master's brother from
Baltimore, he said the separation that was worst was the loss of "those little Baltimore
boys" who encouraged him and continued teaching him.

¶He respects and cares for these white people - good, kind hearted people - and does
not lump them in with the white slave owners who he was "led to abhor and detest..."
He called these whites "robbers" and hated them for stealing him from his family.
Douglass does not come to hate all whites despite his environm
ent and all that he's
been shown and instead seeks out the good natured individual, even if they are white.

Education

The reading assigned for today's class was a bit easier for me to read, if only because it
dealt with a much happier outcome than that of his last account. What I would really
like to discuss today is the power that can come with being literate. Several times in the
reading Douglass mentions his being able to read and I think he was strongly trying to
connect literacy in America to having power in America. Maybe I am misinterpreting
this, but that was what I gathered from the reading.