Frederick Douglass, *Narrative*, chapters 1-6

> = new entry; ¶ = new paragraph in the same entry

Liberation?

Since this class is based on two questions, "How has Western culture defined itself through tales and declarations of liberation? How have such texts, though affirming freedom, also imposed constraining norms of gender, class, ethnicity, and sexuality?" one way of viewing the work of Fredrick Douglass is as a document "affirming freedom" yet "imposing constraining class and ethnicity norms". Fredrick Douglass is as it states, half-white and half-african american, it makes one wonder was his freedom helped by his mixed heritage? Also thinking about what this recollection as slave says as a declaration of freedom. The stories he tells can be viewed more as a description of the horrors of slavery than a declaration of liberation, so another question we should keep in mind is, What exactly defines a declaration of liberation? To me, that is the most important question to think about going into this class, besides the two main points.

Cruelty

It is noted that the life of Frederick Douglass was a life of hardship; however, the level of hardship that he endured was not to the level of a slave in Georgia or any other deep Southern states. I found it interesting to peak into the view of a white man versus Douglass's view, in the preface. True, the white man did realize that Douglass's treatment was better than that of other slaves, but he seemed horrified by the treatment Douglass endured, more so than I would have expected.

I do not have a question but just a thought or concern about the reading. I was familiar with Fredrick Douglass, his book, and his role in history, although I did not read his *Narrative*. I expected Douglass's life to be similar to the descriptions and contain the hardships described in William Lloyd Garrison's preface. I am not trying to say that Douglass had a wonderful life before he was freed, for he saw despicable acts of scarring violence and suffered greatly, but compared to the lives of other slaves, his family even, he seemed to be spared a lot of the physical punishment, such as the whippings and beatings he witnessed. Douglass admits that he was too young while in Maryland to do much work and that his relationship with master Daniel who was by no means kind, "was of some advantage" and often treated Douglass better than he did other slaves. And after he was sent to Baltimore, he was even better off under the
care his new mistress. He was treated like a human for the first time. His story was not what I assumed to it to be from what I have read.

> This reading was especially difficult for me to read. Of course I had known about slavery in America; it is, after all, a part of our past that is way too gruesome to ignore, but it was just so much more intense of a reading since it was such a raw, firsthand account. The thing that struck me the most was how cruel some of the characters (— see, I have to call them characters because it doesn't even seem real! ) were, and yet the slaves still "bragged" about them to their neighboring slaves. Pride is such an instinctual human attribute and yet the slaves were constantly being treated like inferior beasts; why couldn't anyone else realize that they were people? How did our country even reach such a state of ignorance?

Cruelty/education:

> How can a slave that was privileged with relatively good treatment and partial, rudimentary education truly relate to the experiences of slaves that were treated far worse?

¶ How significant was education as a factor in the differences of the treatment of black and white persons?

Imagery and concepts (freedom / property)

Even before reading the notes at the end of the assignment, I was struck by all the Biblical allusions in the reading, especially Garrison's comparison of Douglass to Christ: "May he 'continue to grow in grace, and in knowledge of God.'" Also in the letter there is a mention of the Valley of Death. Douglass uses less of these but does seem to recognize his mission as determined by "Providence," showing similarities to Jesus. He seems to view his mission humbly, also in Christ-like fashion.

¶ I also identified several of Douglass's definitions of freedom: identity (knowing his age, "information concerning my own"), justice, ability to express opinion ("could not brook any contradiction from a slave"), property/ownership, and, seemingly above all or at least crucial at first, literacy. These definitions are usually conveyed by demonstrating the opposite treatment: slaves not knowing their age, or being whipped when undeserving, or being silent, or being prohibited from learning to read. Douglass is the only example of freedom from slavery, and he uses "my own" several times to show that property is also a major aspect of freedom. Also, his very act of writing his Narrative portrays the key to freedom: literacy.
Slaves are frequently compared to animals, and their bestial nature is a result of being treated as such: "the children were then called, like so many pigs, and like so many pigs they would come and devour the mush." Sometimes the animals they care for are even above them, like the horses.

**Slavery as poison**

> I found it interesting how slavery corrupts and ruins not only the slave but the slaveowner as well. The equality of man is shown by the damage done on both sides. The slaves are degraded to a subhuman form because of slavery (both the blacks and the example of the white slave) and slaveowners are also ruined no matter how good they are. The "good christians" of the south would not refrain from severely hurting the slaves, fathers would sell off their own children, and even Sophia Auld was transformed by her power from a kind woman into a cruel and cold slaveowner.

> "The fatal poison of irresponsible power was already in her hands and soon commenced its infernal work. That cheerful eye, under the influence of slavery, soon became reed with rage; that voice, made all of sweet accord, changed to one of harsh and horrid discord; and that angelic face gave place to that of a demon" (Douglass 32).

> This fatal poison of slavery permeated all beings equally in a world based on inequality.

**Why so poetic?**

> I found the reading to be disturbing and thought provoking. I am most curious about the impact Douglass' words can have in the present day. Douglass' states that he sees the same traits of character in black slaves that are seen in the slaves of political parties. I am amazed that this comparison still has some truth today. More obvious is the power that learning to read had on Douglass and its correlation to today's educational system. Douglass' words tend to be poetic which intensifies the horrors he is describing. Why would Douglass' use such language to describe such a traumatizing experience?

> After reading through the first six chapters of the narrative I realize how well spoken Frederick Douglass was. His writing is evocative, not soley due to the nature of the topic, but also because of the diction. One of the many phrases that stood out to me was: "he dealt sparingly with his words, and bountifully with his whip" (27). In this quote he was describing the overseer, Mr. Gore. The narrative is only difficult to read in terms of
the description of the horrors of slavery. Otherwise, I found this to be a good read and I’m looking forward to reading and discussing more of the narrative.

Mother

The first six chapters are, like Garrison noted, are difficult to fathom that Douglas actually experienced these things. While many slave stories are similar, Douglas’ seem to be unique in the sense that he actually wrote it. I honestly was in shock that Douglas could write so beautifully and properly as he did because he was in a situation where he had proper schooling. My question came from the first chapter, I may have missed something but he talked about his mother and father. He knew that his mother’s name was Harriet Bailey, but then he says that they barely spoke to each other and then she died. Was Harriet Bailey that mother that actually birthed him and then died, the woman from the above description? Or was she sold, like most mothers of children made by the slave owner, and Harriet Bailey played a surrogate mother to Douglas? I also admire how Douglas does note he does not have the most grueling experience in this unjust institution, however he still does not undermine what he endured.

>What strikes me most is the similarity between Western (especially American) slavery and Korean patriarchy: the relationship between white masters and black slaves are in parallel with that between a father and sons. Slaves were punished out of their masters’ sadistic tendency (as can be seen from Mr. Severe, “He seemed to take pleasure in manifesting his fiendish barbarity”, p.22) or a mere duty to maintain the strict discipline of slavery (“When [Mr. Gore] whipped, he seemed to do so from a sense of duty, and feared consequences”, p.27); likewise, mostly (though I cannot recall the exact literature) sons served as ‘punching bags’ for their emotionally tyrannical father or were disciplined ‘justly for a good reason.’ Both slaves or sons could not say a single word to defend themselves, of course. I wonder why do they share this similarity -- Is it one of characteristic of oppression? Or, is it that Western slavery can be interpreted as “patriarchal”?¶(It is frequently taught in Korea that “while Western slavery had little humane aspects, Korean caste system had some.” Such an opinion seems true when I compare with Western slavery with Korean one, but it becomes not convincing when I turn on Korean patriarchal system in the past -- thus, to underscore the similarity of oppression, I used the phrase “Korean patriarchy” instead of just “patriarchy”.)
¶(The reason I used the word “sons” instead of “children” is to emphasize that females are not even considered as main subjects but rather than as objects of the system. While sons grow up and reproduce the patriarchal relationship, daughters cannot -- they are brought to another patriarchal family when they get married.)
I am also interested in these two parts:

“I was called by the slaves a good overseer. (p.22)”

“Indeed, it is not uncommon for slaves even to fall out and quarrel among themselves about the relative goodness of their masters, each contending for the superior goodness of his own over that of the others. (p.26b)”

Those parts remind me of “consciousness that betrays one’s existence” (a phrase from Sewha Hong, a Korean sociologist), a paradox in which the working class ends up endorsing the bourgeois’ political/economic interest. How can this be explained? Why do they (the relationship between masters and slaves, the bourgeoisie and the proletariat) share such a similarity? Is it a phenomenon that can be essentially found in oppression? Questioning by myself, I’m reminded of E. Fromm, who argued that the submission is an escaping response to insurmountable freedom.

Constitutional rights

After reading the first assigned chapters of Fredrick Douglas’s novel, I came up with more of a thought than a question. I was quite surprised at how the focus on the horrible connotations of slavery were split between how it went against Christianity and how it went against the constitutional rights of every individual. It was strange to me that in our current country, full of individuals who so insist upon the state being separated from church organizations. It was quite strange to me that some of the natural religious rights that a person apparently has are remarkably similar to the rights laid out in the constitution which were so vital in the freeing the slaves. I guess my question is why does Douglas argue religious and constitutional aspects if only constitutional rights pertain to the situation of slavery?

1U.S.Constitution, Art. I, Sec. 9: “Representatives and direct Taxes shall be apportioned among the several States which may be included within this Union, according to their respective Numbers, which shall be determined by adding to the whole Number of free Persons, including those bound to Service for a Term of Years, and excluding Indians not taxed, three fifths of all other Persons.” (Emphasis mine.—RG)

Art. I, Section 9: “The Migration or Importation of such Persons as any of the States now existing shall think proper to admit, shall not be prohibited by the Congress prior to the Year one thousand eight hundred and eight, but a Tax or duty may be imposed on such Importation, not exceeding ten dollars for each Person.”

From “Things That Are Not in the U.S. Constitution” 7 Sept. 2010
<http://www.usconstitution.net/constnot.html>

Slavery

FYS 16 (September 7, 2010)
Nature/religion:

> I found this quote from the preface interesting. I’m requesting that we discuss it as a class.

"...henceforth cease to talk of the natural inferiority of those who require nothing but time and opportunity to attain the highest point of human excellence."

¶ The other things I would like us to discuss is the role of religion in liberating a people and the healing of the African Americans as a people group from the wounds of slavery.

Education

The text deals greatly (to my delight) with education. While the institution of slavery no longer exists in the United States, I found myself interested/frustrated to find that many of the tactics used by those in power for the purposes of remaining in power still exist today. For example, in the text, we learn that “...it is the wish of most masters to keep their slaves ignorant.” In modern day America, education levels of middle/lower income families (working class) are significantly lower than the education levels of those from high income families. Therefore, those who already have better access high-paying jobs will continue to have children with better access to high-paying jobs.

Because employment opportunities are anything but infinite, the limited number of spots is divided disproportionately among income-levels, keeping power in the hands of those who already have it.

Originally, the Framers were very careful about avoiding the words "slave" and "slavery" in the text of the Constitution. Instead, they used phrases like "importation of Persons" at Article 1, Section 9 for the slave trade, "other persons" at Article 1, Section 2, and "person held to service or labor" at Article 4, Section 2 for slaves. Not until the 13th Amendment was slavery mentioned specifically in the Constitution. There the term was used to ensure that there was to be no ambiguity as what exactly the words were eliminating. In the 14th Amendment, the euphemism "other persons" (and the three-fifths value given a slave) was eliminated. The Slavery Topic Page has a lot more detail.

"We hold these truths to be self-evident, that all men are created equal"

This phrase is commonly attributed to the Constitution, but it comes from the Declaration of Independence.