

Learning to Read and Write: Frederick Douglass's Journey to Freedom

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Most people in modern times think that reading and writing are unessential, and they complain about why they need to be educated. In other words, they do not appreciate these skills. For example, in my life, I used to wonder why I needed to be educated and why I couldn't stay ignorant and live under a rock; however, one day, I saw a quotation on the subway: "the limit of your language is the limits of your world." It struck my heart with clarity. I came to appreciate that learning how to read and write is essential because doing so enables people to communicate, express, and understand the meaning of life and the world. Similar to my illumination, Frederick Douglass in "Learning to Read and Write" describes his realization that reading and writing are essential to him in understanding his surroundings, the truth about slavery, and the secret meaning of his life. He didn't see reading and writing as unessential, but rather significant and beneficial. He is appreciative and thankful for these skills. In his experience, he believes that learning to read and write is his way to relieve his pain about "being a slave for life." He quickly finds out that reading and writing are the only ways he can be free from slavery.

At first the mistress teaches Douglass how to read and write; however, she stops teaching Douglass due to her husband's restrictions on slaves. Douglass is controlled by his mistress not allowing him to read the newspaper. He notes,

The first step in her downward course was in her ceasing to instruct me. She now commenced to practice her husband's precepts. She finally became even more violent in her opposition than her husband himself. She was not satisfied with simply doing well as he had commanded; she seemed anxious to do better. Nothing seemed to make her more angry than to see me with a newspaper. She seemed to think that here lay the danger. I have had her rush at me with a face made all up of fury; and snatch from me a newspaper, in a manner that fully revealed her apprehension. She was an apt woman; and a little experience soon demonstrated, to her satisfaction, that education and slavery were incompatible with each other. (119)

Douglass explains that his mistress stops teaching him after her husband told her not to do so. Douglass's mistress now follows her husband's tradition, which is following the status quo and not allowing slaves to be educated. His mistress has

become even more evil than her husband, which causes the mistress to be very nasty to Douglass. The mistress is not satisfied with herself, so she forces the slave to do more than “simply doing well” as a way to torture them. In other words, the mistress wants to exhaust the slaves and puts a lot of effort into this project. The mistress dislikes Douglass when he reads the newspaper due to the “danger” of the newspaper. She is afraid that the slaves will learn how to rebel from reading articles in the newspaper about slave rebellions. Furthermore, the mistress now knows that “education and slavery are incompatible.” Douglass also realizes this fact and doesn’t give up learning by himself.

After the mistress stops teaching Douglass, he cleverly comes up with a plan to learn how to read and write even though he is forbidden to do so by his owner. In the following paragraph, he adopts some friends—the poor white children—in order to pursue how to read and write. He explains,

When I was sent of errands, I always took my book with me, and by going one part of my errands quickly, I found time to get a lesson before my return. I used also to carry bread with me, enough of which was always in the house, and to which I was always welcome; for I was much better off in this regard than many of the poor white children in our neighborhood. This bread I used to bestow upon the hungry little urchins, who, in return, would give me more valuable bread of knowledge. (119)

Douglass notes that he had to come up with an astute plan, which was making friends with the poor white children on the street, to gain his knowledge to read. When Douglass is sent to run errands, he brilliantly carries his book with him so that he has a chance of improving his reading skills. He always carries bait (bread) with him so that he can lure his catch (poor white children) to teach him the “bread of knowledge” in return. In other words, the “bread of knowledge” for Douglass is learning how to read and write with the help from the poor white children. Douglass continues to be engaged in reading and writing hoping that one day he will be free. Furthermore, these poor white children teach Douglass how to read each day until he is successful reading by himself.

After he learns how to read and write, Douglass comes to realize that he is “a slave for life”; however, Douglass hopes that something will happen by chance that will set him free. Douglass states, “I used to talk this matter of slavery over with them. I would sometimes say to them, I wished I could be as free as they would be when they got to be men. ‘You will be free as soon as you are twenty-one, *but I am a slave for life*. Have not I as good a right to be free as you have?’” (120). Douglass tells the poor white children that he wishes to be as free as the poor white children when he hits twenty-one. In other words, he now understands that he will be slave forever even after he knows how to read and write. Douglass cannot accept the fact that he’s a slave for life. He describes how “These words used to trouble them; they would express for me the liveliest sympathy, and console me with the hope that something would occur by which I might be free”

(120). The thought that hurts Douglass the most is that he will remain “a slave for life”; however, he has the spirit from these words which gives him energy in hoping that a miracle will happen, which will make him free. He is searching for an opportunity that makes him free from slavery.

After gaining reading skills from practicing with *The Columbian Orator*, Douglass finally discovers the word “abolition” and wants to know what it means. He then uncovers what “abolition” means by hearing chatter and news that run throughout his town. He writes about his depressed mental state,

While in this state of mind, I was eager to hear anyone speak of slavery. I was a ready listener. Every little while, I could hear something about abolitionists. It was some time before I found what the word meant. It was always used in such connection as to make it an interesting word to me. If a slave ran away and succeeded in getting clear, or if a slave killed his master, set fire to a barn, or did anything very wrong in the mind of a slaveholder, it was spoken of as the fruit of *abolition*. Hearing the word in this connection very often, I set about learning what it meant. The dictionary afforded me little or no help. I found it was “the act of abolishing”; but then I did not know what was to be abolished. Here I was perplexed. (121-122)

Douglass notices that he was curious to hear anything about slavery, including the word “abolition,” but he gathers little information from his surroundings. He puts the clues together and understands the meaning of the word “abolitionists.” In other words, “fruit of *abolition*” refers to anything that frees slaves from their owners. He is so eager that he wants to know what it means by looking it up in the dictionary. Nevertheless, he doesn’t know what “the act of abolishing” means. He is confused or “perplexed” by the definition in the dictionary about “abolitionists,” but Douglass didn’t give up searching for a deeper meaning of the word.

Douglass finds out the true meaning of the word “abolitionists” after patiently waiting for any news from the North. He says,

I did not dare to ask anyone about its meaning, for I was satisfied that it was something they wanted me to know little about. After a patient waiting, I got one of our city newspapers, containing an account of the number of petitions from the north, praying for abolition of slavery in District of Columbia, and of the slave trade between States. From this time I understood the words abolition and abolitionist, and always drew near when that word was spoken, expecting to hear something of importance to myself and fellow-slaves. The light broke in upon me by degree (122).

Douglass does not want to ask anyone about the word “abolitionists” because he knows that his owner wants slaves to know very little to nothing about the word. Douglass is unsatisfied with the dictionary’s definition and he is determined to

know more. He listens closely to anyone who is speaking about “abolitionists” and “abolition” in his town and subsequently sees light from heaven shining on him, which gives him strength to fight until he is free from slavery.

Overall, people in modern times should appreciate education and freedom and stop complaining with sentences like “I don’t want to be educated” or “I don’t want to be a knowledgeable person.” Modern people who don’t appreciate language and who take reading for granted should remember the pain of slavery from Douglass’s period of time. As Ludwig Wittgenstein says, “The limits of my language mean the limits of my world.” Anyone who understands this will understand the significance of language. This sentence means that when a person's knowledge is limited, they are restricted in their ability to fight against oppression. Furthermore, if a person is limited in using language, then they might have a difficult time expressing themselves, understanding the deeper meaning of a situation, and distinguishing right from wrong. A person that knows very little about their language is vulnerable to being manipulated by another intelligent person. Therefore, be grateful for your education, freedom, and knowledge about the surrounding world.

Work Cited

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