

Themes

Ignorance as a Tool of Slavery

Douglass's Narrative shows how white slaveholders perpetuate slavery by keeping their slaves ignorant. At the time Douglass was writing, many people believed that slavery was a natural state of being. They believed that blacks were inherently incapable of participating in civil society and thus should be kept as workers for whites. The Narrative explains the strategies and procedures by which whites gain and keep power over blacks from their birth onward. Slave owners keep slaves ignorant of basic facts about themselves, such as their birth date or their paternity. This enforced ignorance robs children of their natural sense of individual identity. As slave children grow older, slave owners prevent them from learning how to read and write, as literacy would give them a sense of self-sufficiency and capability. Slaveholders understand that literacy would lead slaves to question the right of whites to keep slaves. Finally, by keeping slaves illiterate, Southern slaveholders maintain control over what the rest of America knows about slavery. If slaves cannot write, their side of the slavery story cannot be told. Wendell Phillips makes this point in his prefatory letter to the Narrative.

Knowledge as the Path to Freedom

Just as slave owners keep men and women as slaves by depriving them of knowledge and education, slaves must seek knowledge and education in order to pursue freedom. It is from Hugh Auld that Douglass learns this notion that knowledge must be the way to freedom, as Auld forbids his wife to teach Douglass how to read and write because education ruins slaves. Douglass sees that Auld has unwittingly revealed the strategy by which whites manage to keep blacks as slaves and by which blacks might free themselves. Douglass presents his own self-education as the primary means by which he is able to free himself, and as his greatest tool to work for the freedom of all slaves.

Though Douglass himself gains his freedom in part by virtue of his self-education, he does not oversimplify this connection. Douglass has no illusions that knowledge automatically renders slaves free. Knowledge helps slaves to articulate the injustice

of slavery to themselves and others, and helps them to recognize themselves as men rather than slaves. Rather than provide immediate freedom, this awakened consciousness brings suffering, as Hugh Auld predicts. Once slaves are able to articulate the injustice of slavery, they come to loathe their masters, but still cannot physically escape without meeting great danger.

Slavery's Damaging Effect on Slaveholders

In the Narrative, Douglass shows slaveholding to be damaging not only to the slaves themselves, but to slave owners as well. The corrupt and irresponsible power that slave owners enjoy over their slaves has a detrimental effect on the slave owners' own moral health. With this theme, Douglass completes his overarching depiction of slavery as unnatural for all involved.

Douglass describes typical behavior patterns of slaveholders to depict the damaging effects of slavery. He recounts how many slave-owning men have been tempted to adultery and rape, fathering children with their female slaves. Such adultery threatens the unity of the slave owner's family, as the father is forced to either sell or perpetually punish his own child, while the slave owner's wife becomes resentful and cruel. In other instances, slave owners such as Thomas Auld develop a perverted religious sense to remain blind to the sins they commit in their own home. Douglass's main illustration of the corruption of slave owners is Sophia Auld. The irresponsible power of slaveholding transforms Sophia from an idealistic woman to a demon. By showing the detrimental effects of slaveholding on Thomas Auld, Sophia Auld, and others, Douglass implies that slavery should be outlawed for the greater good of all society.

Slaveholding as a Perversion of Christianity

Over the course of the Narrative, Douglass develops a distinction between true Christianity and false Christianity. Douglass clarifies the point in his appendix, calling the former "the Christianity of Christ" and the latter "the Christianity of this land." Douglass shows that slaveholders' Christianity is not evidence of their innate goodness, but merely a hypocritical show that serves to bolster their self-righteous brutality. To strike this distinction, Douglass points to the basic

contradiction between the charitable, peaceful tenets of Christianity and the violent, immoral actions of slaveholders.