

Our study concerning the thoughts of the abolitionists would not be complete without first considering the thoughts of the slaves. The slaves' thought have been overlooked because most of them could not read or write. In fact there were laws in most states which forbade teaching slaves to read and write. One slave master once stated: "If you give a nigger an inch, he will take an ell. A nigger should know nothing but to obey his master-- to do as he is told to do. Learning would spoil the best slave in the world. It would forever unfit him to be a slave. He would at once become unmanageable, and of no value to his master. As to himself it would make him discontented and unhappy". However, Frederick Douglass did learn to read by mere accident. He learned mostly from his master's children. He states that he would steal cake from the cupboard to give them for teaching him to read. Douglass practiced reading and writing until he was able to escape from slavery.

Benjamin Quarles, the editor of this narrative, states that "aside from its literary merit, Douglass' autobiography was in many respects symbolic of the Negro's role in American life". The central theme of this narrative is struggle. The narrative is a clear and passionate utterance both of the black man's protest and of his aspiration. Quarles points out that slavery was to be measured by its blighting effect on the human spirit.

This narrative of slavery reveals many interesting aspects about this institution. The first interesting thing about it is the family life. Douglass states: "My mother was named Harriet Bailey. My father was a white man"., He was separated from his mother when he was an infant. She was sold to another slavemaster. Later, she became ill and died, but little Douglass was not allowed to visit her during illness, at her death, or burial.

Another interesting aspect about this institution is its inhuman nature and treatment of slaves. For example, Douglass gives an instance: "Mr. Gore (slavedriver) once undertook to whip one of Colonel Lloyd's slaves, by the name of Demby. He had give Demby but few stripes, when, to get rid of the scourging, he ran and plunged himself into creek, and stood there at the depth of his shoulders, refusing to come out. Mr. Gore told him that he would give him three calls, and that, if he did not come out at the third call, he would shoot him. The first call was given. Demby made no response, but stood his ground. The second and thrid calls were given with the same result. Mr. Gore then, without consultation or deliberation with any one, not even giving Demby an additional call, raised his musket to his face, taking deadly aim at his standing victim, and in an instant poor Demby was no more. His mangled body sank out of sight, and blood and brains marked the water where he had stood."

The most interesting thing about this is that Mr. Gore was not even reprimanded for this incident. Douglass sig cites again:

"I have often been awakened at the dawn of day by the most heart rending shrieks of an aunt of mine, whom Master used to tie up to a joist, and whip upon her naked back till shoe was literally covered with blood."

The most interesting thing about this incident is that Douglass' aunt had not done anything to be whipped for. The master enjoyed hearing her cry early in the morning.

The white abolitionist did not understand slavery. Many of them would visit some of the plantations, and return thinking that the slaves were being treated well. However Douglass states:

"The slaveholders have been known to send in spies among their slaves, to ascertain their views and feelings in regard to their condition. The frequency of this has had the effect to establish among the slaves the maxim, that a still tongue makes a wise head. They suppress the truth rather than take the consequences of telling it."

Quarles points out in the introduction that if one can understand the conditions of black people in slavery, one will have a better insight on black people today. All of the dignity and pride in being human was being exploited. For example, Douglass cites an incident:

"Mr. Covey was a poor slavemaster; he was just commencing in life; he was only able to but one slave; and, shocking as is the fact, he bought her, as he said, for a breeder. This married man of Mr. Samuel Harrison, to live with him one year; and him he used to fasten up with her every night. The result was, that, at the end of the year, the miserable woman gave birth to twins."

In order to keep up their psychological morale the slaves spent most Sundays playing ball, wrestling, running foot-races, fiddling, dancing, and drinking whisky. It was deemed a disgrace not to get drunk at Christmas. In doing this, the slaves kept themselves happy and from becoming amoral fatalists. Douglass believed "were the slaveholders at once to abandon this practice, I have not the slightest doubt it would lead to an immediate insurrection among the slaves". These holidays served as conductors, or safety-valves, to carry off the recalcitrant spirit of enslaved humanity. Most white people took these holidays to mean that the slaves were happy.

Douglass was also a member of the Garrison-Phillips wing of the abolitionists. Garrison states that:

"Mr. Douglass has very properly chosen to write his own Narrative, in his own style, and according to the best of his ability, rather than to employ some one else. It is, therefore, entirely his own production. Nothing has been left undone to cripple their (slaves) minds, debase their moral nature, obliterate all traces of their relationship to mankind".

Wendell Phillips says of Douglass' Narrative:

We have been left long enough to gather the character of slavery from the involuntary evidence of the masters. They say the fathers, in 1776, signed the Declaration of Independence with the halter about their necks. You, too, publish your declaration of freedom with danger compassing you around".

Phillips saw in Douglass a new hope for the slaves. He saw the mistake that the abolitionists were making in interpreting the slaves

Douglass' major contribution to American democracy was that of holding a mirror up to it. As Garrison said while introducing Douglass at a meeting of abolitionists: "It is certainly a very remarkable fact, that one of the most efficient advocates of the slave population, now before the public, is a fugitive slave, in the person of Frederick Douglass". In speaking, Douglass spoke not to the slave, but to the American people concerning this great evil. He travelled abroad to speak also, and won many sympathetic friends to the cause of abolition.

Douglass worked with President Lincoln during the Civil War. He advised the President on using volunteer slaves and free black people to fight in the war. After the war, he won most of the ex-slaves over to the G.O.P. party. Three GOP presidents had political plums for him: Marshall of the District of Columbia, Recorder of Deeds for the district, and Minister to Haiti.