FROM SHACKLED TO FREE: A STUDY OF FREDERICK DOUGLASS'S *NARRATIVE* AND IMPACT

DE ENCADENADO A LIBRE: UN ESTUDIO SOBRE LA *NARRATIVA* DE FREDERICK DOUGLASS Y SU IMPACTO

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TRABAJO FIN DE GRADO

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En este Trabajo Fin de Grado sobre el libro *Narrative of the Life of Frederick Douglass, Written by Himself* (1845) podemos encontrar una visión generalizada sobre el funcionamiento de la esclavitud a mediados del siglo XIX en Estados Unidos. También encontramos un destacado ejemplo del género literario de las narrativas de esclavos (slave narratives). En el trabajo resaltamos el desarrollo físico e intelectual de Frederick Douglass a lo largo de sus años de esclavitud, además de información de los lugares y de las personas con las que convivió. Podemos ver cómo afrontó la idea de ser una persona libre, cómo esta idea fue progresivamente evolucionando hasta que definitivamente Douglass decidió huir hacia los estados libres del norte y establecerse allí como ciudadano libre; y cómo una vez allí asentado, comenzó a contar su historia a otras personas, convirtiéndose en una pieza muy importante para los movimientos abolicionistas y para la posterior abolición de la esclavitud en los Estados Unidos.

In End of Degree Paper paper about the *Narrative of the Life of Frederick Douglass, Written by Himself* (1845) we see an overview of slavery in the United States during the first half of the nineteenth century. We also see a noteworthy example of the genre of slave narratives. In the paper we detail the physical and intellectual development of Frederick Douglass throughout his years as a slave, along with information about the places where he lived and the people he lived with. The way in which the idea of freedom developed inside him is also explained, as the idea evolved up to the point in which Douglass decided to escape from slavery to the North and to establish himself there as a free man. The paper also examines how he started using his oratory to tell other people his experiences, turning himself into an important spokesman for the abolitionist movements and for the subsequent abolition of slavery in the United States.

KEYWORDS: Douglass, Narrative, Slavery

1. Introduction, Objectives, and Methodology.

Slavery has existed in many civilizations and cultures throughout history. The Slavery Abolition Act of 1833 marked an end to slavery in most of the territories of the British Empire (Rodriguez, 223-224). However, before the American Civil War (1861-1865) slavery was common in the United States, primarily in the Southern States. Frederick Douglass was an important member of the abolitionist movements that were trying to end slavery in the United States in the nineteenth century. He was a skilful orator who spoke to audiences in the United States and England about slavery with firsthand insight from his life as a slave. In addition, he not only defended African-American Rights through his oratorical skills; he also wrote three autobiographies. The most influential one was *Narrative of the Life of Frederick Douglass, an American Slave, Written by Himself* (1845). William L. Andrews described Douglass as follows: "The premier African American leader and spokesman for his people", who was devoted to creating an image of himself to inspire in African Americans the belief that

"color need not to be a permanent bar to their achievement of the American dream, while reminding whites of their obligation as Americans to support free and equal access to that dream for Americans of all races" (*Concise Oxford Companion*, 113).

In this paper I will be including the most relevant data of this *Narrative* and explaining the impact that the persona of Frederick Douglass had in the abolition of slavery in the United States. Slavery is a theme that always catches my attention; two years ago, in "Literatura Norteamericana I", we studied the beginnings and the basis of slavery. Our teacher, Mrs. Mar Gallego Durán, brought to class various slides in which we could see the "Middle Passage", how the slaves were transported from Africa to the New World, or wanted posters of runaway slaves. That fascinated me; however, what really encouraged me to choose this topic in particular for the "Trabajo Fin de Grado" was a lesson that we devoted to Frederick Douglass. In that lesson we read passages from *Narrative of the Life of Frederick Douglass, an American Slave, Written by Himself*, which impressed me. After that lesson, I read the *Narrative* on my own, just to make my mind up about how the life of a slave was.

From my point of view, understanding slavery and slave narratives is necessary to be able to study American culture and literature. I am going to talk now about slave narratives as a genre. Henry Louis Gates explained that slave narratives, as a genre, were created by the black slaves that escaped from their plantations and reached the North, where they were free and secure. Then they used the assistance of northern abolitionists to produce their narratives. In the narratives they testified against their captors and claimed the need of every black slave to be free and literate. Gates stated that:

> Hundreds of ex-slaves felt compelled to tell their tales on the anti-slavery circuit of the North and in the written form of the autobiographical narrative. There is an inextricable link in the Afro-American tradition between literacy and freedom. And this linkage originates in the salve narratives. […] One scholar, Marion Wilson Starling, stated that sixty thousand slaves escaped to the North. Of this number, over one hundred wrote book-length "slave narratives". (1-2)

William L. Andrews explained how the authors of the slave narratives addressed themselves and what they transcribed:

> Most Afro-American autobiography addressed itself, directly or indirectly, to the proof of two propositions: 1. that the slave was, as the inscription of a famous antislavery medallion put it, "a man and a brother" to whites, especially to the white reader of slave narratives; and 2. That the black narrator was, despite all prejudice and propaganda, a truth-teller, a reliable transcriber of the experience and character of black folk. (*To tell a Free Story*, 1)

As we observe, slave narratives wanted to demonstrate how these "inferior" black slaves could turn into literate people, if they had the right tools and the help from the abolitionists.

In order to present *Narrative of the Life of Frederick Douglass, an American Slave, Written by Himself,* I will focus on certain aspects of the life of a slave, such as family, religion, love, psychological and physical abuse, identity, literacy, and economy. Once I end commenting on the themes of the book, I will try to explain the importance that the persona of Frederick Douglass had in American history. In order to do that, I will use primary and secondary sources, including some fragments written by Frederick Douglass himself to clarify some of his *Narrative*.

2. The Narrative as a Moving Depiction and Denunciation of American Slavery

The *Narrative* was published as an anti-slavery tract in the spring of 1845 by The Boston Anti-Slavery Society. Douglass tells in the book the story of his life, from his early years as a slave until he is solidly established as a freeman in New Bedford, Massachusetts. The *Narrative* sold more than thirty thousand copies in the first five years of its existence. The book was published several times and translated to different languages. In the *Narrative* Douglass addressed instances and passages in order to make readers understand how the slavery system worked, and how slaves were cruelly treated, up to the point in which they were not classified as human beings. Andrews stated that: "slavery was hell, a state of deprivation epitomized by the absence of mother, father, family, and, except during a short interlude at Mr. Freeland's, community with others. In the heaven of freedom, the black isolato was restored to community not only with blacks but with right-thinking whites". (*To Tell a Free Story*, 218)

Gates explains the importance of the mission that Douglass wanted to accomplish with the *Narrative*. Douglass tried to convince us that he is "the" black slave who embodies the thoughts and feelings of all the black slaves. Gates stated that:

> Douglass's narrative demonstrates not only how the deprivation of the hallmarks of identity can affect the slave but also how the slaveowner's world negates and even perverts its own values. Deprivation of a birth date, a name, a family structure, and lots of legal rights makes of the deprived a brute, a subhuman. (6)

Valerie Smith explains how Douglass's *Narrative* is admired by her and most of the authors and teachers of American literature. He examined and explained thoroughly the meaning of freedom and American democracy. She also stated that: "the *Narrative* anticipates themes that have recurred in twentieth- and now twenty-first-century literature, including the relationship between narrative and political authority, the relationship between self-making and national ideologies, and the status of the black body within the institution of antebellum slavery". (*Cambridge Companion*, Web)

2.1. Birth, Parentage, and Witnessing Cruelty

The *Narrative* starts with Douglass introducing himself; he begins by saying that he was born in Tuckahoe, in Talbot County, Maryland. He adds that he does not know

accurately his age. He continues talking about what he knows about his own family. He knew little about his father: "My father was a white man. He was admitted to be such by all I ever heard speak of my parentage. The opinion was also whispered that my master was my father; but of the correctness of this opinion, I know nothing; the means of knowing was withheld from me" (12). His mother was named Harriet Bailey, they were separated from each other soon after he was born, and it was a common custom in Maryland to part children from their mothers at a very early age. Douglass details his sincerely limited relationship with his mother in this passage:

> I never saw my mother, to know her as such, more than four or five times in my life; and each of these times was very short in duration, and at night. [...] She made her journeys to see me in the night, travelling the whole distance on foot, after the performance of her day's work. She was a field hand, and a whipping is the penalty of not being in the field at sunrise. […] She would lie down with me, and get me to sleep, but long before I waked she was gone. […] She died when I was about seven years old, on one of my master's farms, near Lee's Mill. I was not allowed to be present during her illness, at her death, or burial. She was gone long before I knew any thing about it. (12)

In this fragment of the *Narrative*, we see how the early life of a slave in the state of Maryland was. Though Douglass is restrained in his language, he suffered from a severe case of loneliness, knowing neither his father nor his mother. The privilege of knowing was withheld from him, as it was for the majority of slaves. He has not seen his mother in daylight, and he only knew about her illness and subsequent death much later.

Often slaveholders were at the same time masters and fathers of their slaves, since they had the right to spend time with their slaves, and to use them as they wished. Other sorts of abuse were common. In various fragments of the book, we observe instances of severe beating from an overseer or a master to a slave. It is accurate to say that physical and psychological abuses were the order of the day. Sometimes the whippings were caused when the slaves disobeyed their masters; sometimes masters beat their slaves because they thought they were planning to do something, not working as they should, or just simply because some masters were pleased and stimulated by punishing and abusing their slaves. Douglass gives us descriptions of his masters and overseers, and this is seen in the following fragment:

> The overseer's name was Plummer. Mr. Plummer was a miserable drunkard, a profane swearer, and a savage monster. He always went armed with a cowskin and a heavy cudgel. I have known him to cut and slash the women's heads so horribly, that even master would be enraged at his cruelty, and would threaten to whip him if he did not mind himself. Master, however, was not a humane slaveholder. (15)

In this fragment Douglass described Mr. Plummer as if he were not human. In this description, he depicts the overseer while he is torturing Aunt Hester:

> I have often been awakened at the dawn of day by the most heart-rending shrieks of an own aunt of mine, whom he used to tie up to a joist, and whip upon her naked back till she was literally covered with blood […]. The louder she screamed, the harder he whipped; and where the blood ran fastest, there he whipped longest. He would whip her to make her scream, and whip her to make her hush; and not until overcome by fatigue, would he cease to swing the blood-clotted cowskin. […] It was the blood-stained gate, the entrance to the hell of slavery, through which I was about to pass. It was a most terrible spectacle. I wish I could commit to paper the feelings with which I beheld it. (14-15)

Mr. Plummer is one of those overseers that took great pleasure when they whipped a slave. The situation was so that dreadful that Douglass could not even transcribe it onto paper appropriately. On Captain Anthony's plantation (C. Anthony was Douglass's master), men and women slaves received monthly eight pounds of pork or fish, and one bushel of corn meal. Douglass details other aspects of their lives: "Their yearly clothing consisted of two coarse linen shirts, one pair of linen trousers, like the shirts, one jacket, one pair of trousers for winter, made of coarse negro cloth, one pair of stockings, and one pair of shoes" (12). The children and adults that were unable to work only received two coarse linen shirts per year. Slaves did not have beds, and only the ones able to work had a coarse blanket.

2.2. The Move to Colonel Lloyd's Plantation: Songs, Further Cruelty, and Suffering

Eventually Douglass was transferred to Colonel Lloyd's plantation. The plantation had the appearance of a country village; among the slaves it was named the Great House Farm. Slaves were willing to be transferred to this plantation; Douglass wrote: "A representative could not be prouder of his election to a seat in the American Congress, than a slave on one of the out-farms would be of his election to do errands at the Great House Farm" (18). Slaves chose to go to the Great House Farm because there they could receive more food and clothes for themselves. While they were on their way to Colonel Lloyd's, they would sing wild songs, revealing their feelings. In those songs they always managed to include a line that talks wonders about the Great House Farm. Douglass explains how he did not understand the deep meaning of those songs when he was a slave, because he was in the misery of slavery. About the songs he explained:

> They told a tale of woe which was then altogether beyond my feeble comprehension. […] Every tone was a testimony against slavery, and a prayer to God for deliverance from chains. The hearing of those wild notes always depressed my spirit, and filled me with ineffable sadness. […] To those songs I trace my first glimmering conception of the dehumanizing concept of slavery. Those songs still follow me, to deepen my hatred of slavery, and quicken my sympathies for my brethrens in bond. (19)

Eventually, sometime after he arrived at the Great House Farm, a new overseer was selected to guard the slaves, named Mr. Gore. He was described as a first-rate overseer: proud, ambitious, preserving, artful, cruel, and obdurate. Of all the overseers, he was the most dreaded by the slaves. Once Mr. Gore was whipping a slave, and the slave tried to avoid it. Mr. Gore gave him three calls and instantly after the last one he shot the slave in the face and killed him. He defended his action, arguing that "if one slave refused to be corrected, and escaped with his life, the other slaves would soon copy the example; the result of which would be, the freedom of the slaves, and the enslavement of the whites" (24). The crime was not investigated, nor was Mr. Gore interrogated: "Killing a slave or any colored person in Talbot County, Maryland, is not treated as a crime (24)". Douglas explains Mr. Gore's behavior as follows:

> Mr. Gore acted fully up to the maxim laid down by slaveholders; it's better that a dozen slaves suffer under the lash, than that the overseer should be convicted, in the presence of slaves, of having being at fault, […] He was cruel enough to inflict the severest punishment, artful enough to descend to the lowest trickery, and obdurate enough to be insensible to the voice of a reproving conscience. (23)

When Douglass lived on the plantation of Colonel Lloyd, he was not old enough to work, and he was rarely whipped. However, he suffered greatly from cold and hunger. He described the way children were fed as follows:

> Our food was coarse corn meal boiled. This was called mush. It was put into a large wooden tray or trough, and set down upon the ground. The children were then called, like so many pigs, and like so many pigs they would come and devour the mush; some with oyster-shells, others with pieces of shingle, some with naked hands, and none with spoons. He that ate fastest got most; he that was strongest secured the best place; and few left the trough satisfied. (26)

This fragment reveals one of the many instances of the book in which slaves are not treated as if they were human. They are treated as pigs, which are considered dirty, indecent, and immoral animals.

2.3. The Move to Baltimore: Literacy, the City, and Finding Oratory

When he was seven or eight years old, Douglass left Colonel Lloyd's plantation, when his old master, Anthony, sent him to Baltimore to live with Mr. Hugh Auld. He was given a pair of trousers, which were important for him because he had never had a pair of trousers before. He left Colonel Lloyd's plantation without regret and hoping to have a better future.

On his arrival to Baltimore, Mr. and Mrs. Auld were at home with their son Thomas. Douglass was positively surprised when he saw the face of Mrs. Auld, a white face full of the kindest emotions. He described Sophia Auld as a woman with a kind heart and fine feelings. She also was "in a good degree preserved from the blighting and

dehumanizing effects of slavery" (28). Soon after Douglass went to Mr. Auld's house, Mrs. Auld started to teach the young slave the alphabet and to spell short words. Briefly after the lessons started, Mr. Auld realized what was happening and forbade his wife to continue teaching the slave. He said to her:

> 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 nigger in the world. Now, if you teach that nigger (speaking of myself) how to read, there would be no keeping him. 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 could do him no good, but a great deal of harm. It would make him discontented and unhappy. (29)

Those words remained as wounds in the flesh of Douglass. However, they influenced him in a miraculous way. From that point onwards, Douglass understood "the white man's power to enslave the black man […], I understood the pathway from slavery to freedom" (29). This path is literacy and education.

Douglass here shows us that there are different kinds of slaves. City slaves, as in Baltimore, are better fed and clothed than plantation slaves. City slaveholders are proud of having their slaves fed and clothed, but there are also exceptions, and some city slaveholders are as cruel and mean as the plantation slaveholders.

During the time that Douglass lived in Mr. Auld's family, he learnt to read and write. He tells us how the notion of slavery that Mr. Auld told to his wife changed her life completely, up to the point that she turned into another completely different person. There was not a clue of where the former Sophia Auld went. Douglass described his new mistress as follows:

> Slavery proved as injurious to her as it did to me. When I went there, she was a pious, warm, and tender-hearted woman. There was no sorrow or suffering for which she had not a tear. She had bread for the hungry, clothes for the naked, and comfort for every mourner that came within her reach. Slavery soon proved its ability to divest her of these heavenly qualities. Under its influence, the tender heart became stone, and the lamblike disposition gave way to one of tiger-like fierceness. The first step in her downward course was in her ceasing to instruct me. She now commenced to practise her husband's precepts. She finally became even more violent in her opposition than her husband himself. (31)

It is appropriate to say here that the power which is provided by means of slavery to white people corrupts them, turning them into different persons.

Douglass adopted certain habits when he was in the street in order to learn new knowledge. He became a friend with some white boys that he met in the street, and step by step, he was improving his ability to read. He also used to carry the scraps of bread of Mr. Auld's house; he exchanged the scraps to poor children for information and

knowledge. He used to tell the white boys how unlucky he was, being born a slave. If you were born as a slave, these shackles will stick with you during your whole life. He got hold of a book, called *The Columbian Orator,* and took every single chance that he had to read it. Within the book he found a speech from Richard Brinsley Sheridan, who was an Irish dramatist and political leader. In the speech he found a denunciation of slavery and a powerful call for human rights. While reading the book, he was getting to know more things about slavery, arguments and motifs which he had not imagined before. As Douglass writes he was progressively finding more information that would be useful for him to confront slavery:

> The more I read, the more I was led to abhor and detest my enslavers. I could regard them in no other light than a band of successful robbers, who had left their homes, and gone to Africa, and stolen us from our homes, and in a strange land reduced us to slavery. As I writhed under it, I would at times feel that learning to read had been a curse rather than a blessing. It had given me a view of my wretched condition, without the remedy. Freedom now appeared, to disappear no more forever. It was heard in every sound, and seen in every thing. It was ever present to torment me with a sense of my wretched condition. I saw nothing without seeing it, I heard nothing without hearing it, and felt nothing without feeling it. It looked from every star, it smiled in every calm, breathed in every wind, and moved in every storm. (33)

The more knowledge that he acquired, the more tormented he became. Finally, he understood completely why slaves are not taught how to read and write. If slaves have access to knowledge, they will become smarter, and they will start asking questions among themselves and also to their masters. Then riots and bloodbaths would have become a common thing in the South of the United States, and slaveholders and overseers were afraid of something of that caliber, because it would endanger their status and their lives. Douglass would have committed suicide, or committed a crime that would result in his death. The only thing that saved him was a blurred hope of achieving freedom.

2.4 Abolitionism, Writing, and the Return to Plantation Slavery

Occasionally, when he was listening to information related to slavery, he heard the concepts of abolition and abolitionism being mentioned repeatedly. Once he found a paper from the North in which he could read about abolitionism. It was a petition to abolish slavery in the District of Columbia and the slave trade between the States. He associated the abolition of slavery with the North. He talked to a couple of fishermen that were working in the wharf of Mr. Waters, and they advised him to run away to the North, that he should be able to find friends there, and that he should be free. From that moment, he resolved that he needed to run away to the North to reach freedom. In addition, he decided that he should learn to write.

He started by copying letters from pieces of wood that he found in the shipyards. He continued learning by playing with the boys that he knew could write. His means were simple: "My copy-book was the board fence, brick wall, and pavement; my pen and ink was a lump of chalk" (35). The following step that he took was copying the Italics in Webster's spelling book. Webster was the leading American lexicographer of the time. Whenever his mistress left home, Douglass took advantage of it. He copied what Master Thomas had written in his copy-book. Finally, after a long time he succeeded in learning how to write. (35)

At this point, a decisive event is explained. After Douglass was sent to Baltimore, Captain Anthony, his older master, died. Then, the young slave was sent to be valued with the other property:

> There were horses and men, cattle and women, pigs and children, all holding the same rank in the scale of being, and were all subjected to the same narrow examination. Silvery-headed age and sprightly youth, maids and matrons, had to undergo the same indelicate inspection. At this moment, I saw more clearly than ever the brutalizing effects of slavery upon both slave and slaveholder. (35-36)

Slaves could have three destinations: being sold to Georgia traders, or being kept in property of Mrs. Lucretia or Mr. Andrews, both sons of Captain Anthony. Douglass explained that his feelings were stronger than the ones of the rest of the slaves: "I suffered more anxiety than most of my fellow-slaves. I had known what it was to be kindly treated; they had known nothing of the kind […]. Their backs had been made familiar with the bloody lash, so that they had become callous; mine was yet tender" (36). Douglass indicates that by a kind Providence he fell in the hands of Mrs. Lucretia, and for this reason he was sent to Baltimore to live with the family of Master Hugh Auld. Soon after that both Master Andrew and Master Lucretia died, and all their property was held by strangers. None of the slaves was set free. There was an incident in particular that filled Douglass with hatred towards slaveholders:

> It was their base ingratitude to my poor old grandmother. She had served my old master faithfully from youth to old age. She had been the source of all his wealth; she had peopled his plantation with slaves; she had become a great grandmother in his service. She had rocked him in infancy, attended him in childhood, served him through life, and at his death wiped from his icy brow the cold death-sweat, and closed his eyes forever […]. They took her to the woods, built her a little hut, put up a little mud-chimney, and then made her welcome to the privilege of supporting herself there in perfect loneliness; thus virtually turning her out to die! (37)

Various years after, Master Thomas married his second wife, Rowena Hamilton, and took Douglass with them. Master Thomas was mean; he did not provide his slaves with enough food to survive. Douglass writes: "A great many times have we poor creatures been nearly perishing with hunger, when food in abundance lay moldering in the safe and smoke-house, and our pious mistress was aware of the fact; and yet that mistress and her husband would kneel every morning, and pray that God would bless

them in basket and store!" (39); Douglass described Master Thomas as an unstable person, who was unprepared to have slaves. In August 1832, Master Thomas went to a Methodist camp meeting held in Talbot County. There he experienced religion. This made him more cruel and hateful than before. Before his conversion to religion, he relied on himself to cause barbarity, but after his conversion, he "found religious sanction and support for his slaveholding cruelty" (40). He also provided an example in which he shows what his new modus operandi was:

> I will state one of many facts going to prove the charge. I have seen him tie up a lame young woman, and whip her with a heavy cowskin upon her naked shoulders, causing the warm red blood to drip; and, in justification of the bloody deed, he would quote this passage of Scripture—"He that knoweth his master's will, and doeth it not, shall be beaten with many stripes". (41)

Douglass and his master had numerous differences; to solve them, Master Thomas sent Douglass to Edward Covey in order to be broken. Mr. Covey had a high reputation for breaking young slaves, and he gave much importance to that reputation. Mr. Covey was also a religion teacher, a pious soul, a member and a class leader in the Methodist church. After a week with him, Douglass received a severe whipping because he damaged Covey's cart when he was coming back from gathering wood in the forest. Mr. Covey was a hard-working man. He did work with his own hands, which is uncommon among the slaveholder community: "Mr. Covey's forte consisted in his power to deceive. His life was devoted to planning and perpetrating the grossest deceptions. Every thing he possessed in the shape of learning or religion, he made conform to his disposition to deceive" (44). In the exercises of his family devotions, Douglass was usually the singer, because Mr. Covey was a poor singer himself:

> To show himself independent of me, he would start and stagger through with his hymn in the most discordant manner. Poor man! such was his disposition, and success at deceiving, I do verily believe that he sometimes deceived himself into the solemn belief, that he was a sincere worshipper of the most high God; and this, too, at a time when he may be said to have been guilty of compelling his woman slave to commit the sin of adultery. (45)

Those first six months with Edward Covey were the hardest ones for Douglass: "It was never too hot or too cold; it could never rain, blow, hail, or snow, too hard for us to work in the field. Work, work, work, was scarcely more the order of the day than of the night. The longest days were too short for him, and the shortest nights too long for him" (45). Sometimes, when he was alone, Douglass prayed to the Almighty, as in this passage:

> I am left in the hottest hell of unending slavery. O God, save me! God, deliver me! Let me be free! Is there any God? Why am I a slave? I will run away. I will not stand it. Get caught, or get clear, I'll try it. I had as well die with ague as the fever. I have only one life to lose. I had as well be killed running as die standing. Only think of it; one hundred miles straight north, and I am free! Try it? Yes! God

> helping me, I will. It cannot be that I shall live and die a slave […] There is a better day coming. (46)

One day Douglass felt dizzy, and he had to stop working. Mr. Covey appeared and kicked him and also hit him in the head, producing a large wound. Douglass decided to go to his master and ask for protection. He asked Captain Auld to look for a new destination for him. However, Douglass had to come back with Covey because their contract was signed for the duration of one year. When he arrived, after the long journey, he received neither dinner nor breakfast the next day. Mr. Covey went to give him another whipping, but Douglass managed to escape and hide in the cornfield. That night he went to Sandy Jenkins' house. Jenkins promised magical protection from whipping:

> He told me, with great solemnity, I must go back to Covey; but that before I went, I must go with him into another part of the woods, where there was a certain root, which, if I would take some of it with me, carrying it always on my right side, would render it impossible for Mr. Covey, or any other white man, to whip me […]. I at length took the root, and, according to his direction, carried it upon my right side. (49)

Apparently after Douglass received the root, everything was going well for him. However, on Monday morning Covey entered the stable with a long rope. He tried to tie Douglass, however

> from whence came the spirit I don't know—I resolved to fight; and, suiting my action to the resolution, I seized Covey hard by the throat; and as I did so, I rose. He held on to me, and I to him. My resistance was so entirely unexpected that Covey seemed taken all aback. Covey called upon him for assistance. Bill wanted to know what he could do. Covey said, "Take hold of him, take hold of him!" Bill said his master hired him out to work, and not to help to whip me; so he left Covey and myself to fight our own battle out. We were at it for nearly two hours. Covey at length let me go, puffing and blowing at a great rate, saying that if I had not resisted, he would not have whipped me half so much. (50)

At the end of the fight, Douglass was not whipped. In fact, from that point onwards he would never be whipped again. The battle was a turning-point in Douglass's life as a slave. He acquired a strong self-confidence: "I resurrected, from the tomb of slavery, to the heaven of freedom" (50). Douglass was never sent by Mr. Covey to the whipping post because that would endanger his reputation as a negro-breaker.

2.5. A Failed and a Successful Escape

In 1834, Douglass went to live with Mr. William Freeland. He was an educated southern gentleman. He found an advantage in his master; he made no pretentions to religion. Douglass found religious slaveholders especially intolerable:

> Were I to be again reduced to the chains of slavery, next to that enslavement, I should regard being the slave of a religious master the greatest calamity that could befall me. For of all slaveholders with whom I have ever met, religious slaveholders are the worst. I have ever found them the meanest and basest, the most cruel and cowardly, of all others. It was my unhappy lot not only to belong to a religious slaveholder, but to live in a community of such religionists. (53)

Mr. Freeland was the owner of two slaves, John Harris and Henry Harris. Douglass soon created in them a desire to learn to read. He also created a Sabbath school; he held it at the house of a free colored man. Douglass asked them: "Does a righteous God govern the universe? and for what does he hold the thunders in his right hand, if not to smite the oppressor, and deliver the spoiled out of the hand of the spoiler?" (55). Slaves came to the school because they wished to learn. Douglass also taught slaves at home three times per week. In 1835, Douglass decided to attempt to escape from slavery. They were a group of five slaves, John and Henry Davis, Henry Bailey, Charles Roberts, and Douglass himself. They planned to escape using a canoe and to follow the guidance of the North Star until they got beyond the limits of Maryland (58). Douglass wrote a protection for each one of the group. One protection appears in the *Narrative* as follows:

> This is to certify that I, the undersigned, have given the bearer, my
>
> servant, full liberty to go to Baltimore, and spend the Easter holidays.
>
> Written with mine own hand, &c., 1835.
>
> WILLIAM HAMILTON (58)

These protections showed the significance that writing and literacy meant for a slave.

The day that they proposed to execute their plan, they were betrayed. They were all tied up and sent to the Easton Jail. They agreed to eat or burn their protection. They were separated into two cells to hinder contact. After the holidays, all the slaves but Douglass were picked up. One week after, Captain Auld took him out to send him back to Baltimore, to live with his brother Hugh again. He then hired Douglass to Mr. William Gardner, an extensive ship builder, on Fell's Point. He was supposed to learn how to calk. He only stayed there for eight months, until he had a fight with four white apprentices. They also said that they would work no longer, unless he discharged his black carpenters. He told Master Hugh what happened. Mrs. Auld cleaned the blood from his face and bound up his head. Both Master Hugh and Douglass went to Esquire Watson's. Mr. Watson said that he needed a white carpenter to testify in order to do something, although Master Hugh said that it was very clear who caused the fight. Then he started calking in the shipyard that was supervised by Mr. Waters. Eventually Douglass started hiring himself and earning a bit of money for himself. Although he was working hard he realized the following:

> whenever my condition was improved, instead of its increasing my contentment, it only increased my desire to be free, and set me to thinking of plans to gain my freedom. I have found that, to make a contented slave, it is necessary to make a thoughtless one. It is necessary to darken his moral and mental vision, and, as far as possible, to annihilate the power of reason. He must be able to detect no inconsistencies in slavery. (64)

The last week of August, Douglass refused to pay Master Hugh his part of the wages from working in the shipyard, and also told him that next week he had no job. He just did that to trick his master and get the full wages for himself, which were around eight or nine dollars. The hardest thing that Douglass had to confront was leaving his friends from Baltimore behind. But he remained firm, and on 3 September 1838, he succeeded in reaching New York. That was the moment of highest excitement of his life. He still was in danger, and he was afraid of talking to someone that he should not talk to. He was a fugitive in a foreign land, as Douglass writes, addressing the reader:

> let him place himself in my situation—without home or friends—without money or credit—wanting shelter, and no one to give it—wanting bread, and no money to buy it,—and at the same time let him feel that he is pursued by merciless men-hunters, and in total darkness as to what to do, where to go, or where to stay,—perfectly helpless both as to the means of defence and means of escape,—in the midst of plenty, yet suffering the terrible gnawings of hunger,—in the midst of houses, yet having no home. (70)

2.6. Marriage, New Bedford, and Activism

Luckily, Douglass did not remain much time in that situation. Mr. David Ruggles found him and helped him out. He recommended that Douglass go New Bedford, in Massachussets. Anna, his intended wife, came to New York, where she and Douglass were married.

They received the certificate and a five dollar bill from Mr. Ruggles. Then they embarked to New Bedford. They were kindly received there by Mr. Nathan Johnson, who gently paid their fares. When he got to New Bedford, Douglass changed his name, from Frederick Augustus Washington Bailey to Frederick Douglass.

He described New Bedford as cleaner, newer, and more beautiful than the places where he had lived before. People also looked more able, stronger, healthier, and happier than those of Maryland (73). He found a job in stowing a sloop with a load of oil. Work seemed not a problem for him, since all the money that he earned was for his family. Four months after he went to New Bedford, he became a subscriber to *The Liberator*, an abolitionist paper. He started going to anti-slavery meetings. On 11 August 1841, he felt strongly moved to talk, urged to do so by Mr. William C. Coffin: "I spoke but a few moments, when I felt a degree of freedom, and said what I desired

with considerable ease.From that time until now, I have been engaged in pleading the cause of my brethren" (75).

3. Instances of Reception of the *Narrative*

3.1. Acknowledgements of the *Narrative*

Margaret Fuller rated Douglass as an excellent speaker who had upon the audience the influence of a strong character and uncommon talent. She explains that Douglass had the courage to name specific persons, times and places, thus becoming exposed to obvious danger, and setting the seal on his deep convictions. She writes of the *Narrative*: "It is an excellent piece of writing and on that score to be prized as a specimen of the powers of the Black Race" (*Review of the Narrative*, Web).

William L. Andrews stated that: "His *Narrative* and *My Bondage and Freedom* gave the world the most compelling and sophisticated renditions of an African American selfhood seen in literature up to that time". Andrews also said about Douglass that he aspires to be "the role of African American culture hero" (*Concise Oxford Companion*, 114)

3.2. Issues Related to the Authorship of the *Narrative*

A.C.C Thompson, a slaveholder, was a neighbor of Thomas Auld. He decided to write a review after Frederick Douglass published the *Narrative.* He started by saying: "Am aware that no sensible, unprejudiced person will credit such a ridiculous publication, which bears the glaring impress of falsehood on every page, yet I deem it expedient that I should give the public some information respecting the validity of this letter". Thompson said that he knew closely most of the characters that appear in the *Narrative,* and he included that they were "shamefully traduced". In addition, he is sure that Douglass was not the writer of the book, that some "evil designed person or persons have composed this catalogue of lies to excite the indignation of the public opinion against the slaveholders of the South". He stated that he knew Frederick Bailey (instead of Douglass), and that he was an "unlearned, ordinary negro, and not capable of writing the *Narrative* alluded to". He also said that in Maryland children are raised with their mothers, generally in the same house, and that they are not normally separated at an early age. Then he proceeds to blame Douglass for denouncing the Methodist church and the religion of the South. He ended up saying that he "was raised among slaves, and also owned them, and am well aware that the slaves live better and fare better in many respects then the free blacks […] Intrigue and false accusations will never liberate the slave of the South".

Frederick Douglass answered Thompson with a letter in *The Liberator* in 1846. Douglass was thankful to him, because he gave proper recognition to some of the

characters and places that were included in the *Narrative*, including verifying the old identity of Douglass. Douglass wrote in the letter published in *The Liberator* that "Slave-holders and slave-traders never betray greater indiscretion, than when they venture to defend themselves or their system of plunder, in any other community than a slaveholding one". He added that the wise slaveholders know that their safety is in their silence; he argued that pro-slavery people were protesting because there was not any other testimony to consider, written by a slaveholder. He also answered some comments that Thompson included in his letter. For example, when talking about the laws of Maryland. Douglass explained that a black man cannot testify against a white in any court in Maryland, or any other Slave state.

As I discussed before, there is a dilemma about the authorship of the *Narrative.* Peter Ripley, a well-known authority on abolitionism, wrote about doubts that he and other abolitionists had about the publication of the *Narrative*: "The book signaled Douglass's emergence as a committed abolitionist and suggests his developing intellectual skills during those early years of freedom" (16). It is a fact that Douglass's oratory got better progressively as he was participating in more anti-slavery conventions. Douglass educated himself by reading, participating in discussions, and absorbing the lectures of his associates on the tour. At the same time that Frederick Douglass was getting known, numerous skeptics continued appearing. Douglass appeared in the anti-slavery movement when a person of his qualities was most needed. The preface of the *Narrative* was composed by statements of William Lloyd Garrison and Wendell Phillips. Both of them assure that the book was entirely produced by Douglass. He also used a letter of skepticism that A.C.C. Thompson wrote him because, as I explained previously, it verifies the data of the *Narrative.* The book indicated a growth in Douglass intellectual abilities and maturity.In a very real way, this, the first of his autobiographical statements, represents Douglass as of 1845, when he was moving beyond the posture of "exslave" Garrisonian lecturer and was maturing into a strong-willed reformer.

3.3. Comments on the Suffering and Identity Issues of Slaves

Gates comments that in the course of the *Narrative* Douglass relates two instances of extreme cruelty, in which slaves died only because they did not accept an order. He explained that there were no arrests or investigations about those assassinations. He explains that at the time there were other slave casualties under the same circumstances. Gates writes: "Let it never be forgotten, that no slaveholder or overseer can be convicted of any outrage perpetrated on the person of a slave, however diabolical it may be, on the testimony of colored witnesses, whether bond or free" (333). As we can observe what Gates stated is confirming what Douglass said in the *Narrative* about the legal system, which I addressed before in the second point of this paper. Andrews comments on the importance of literacy and identity for a slave. He reviews how Douglass felt when he arrived at Mr. Auld's house in Baltimore: how Sophia Auld treated him more as the "half-brother" than as the "slave" of his son. And

then Andrews explains the transformation of Sophia Auld, from having "motherly tenderness" towards Douglass to behaving as a cruel slaveholder. Before the transformation, she taught Douglass the basics of reading. But that stopped completely after the transformation. Andrews stated that "Through a new and special revelation, young Fred realizes that knowledge and the expanded awareness that accompanies it constitute the direct pathway from slavery to freedom" (224). Also he recognizes how knowledge disoriented Douglass: "The more light that reading cast on his consciousness, the more distressed and tormented the black boy became" (224). From these assumptions we see how Andrews supports the stream of thoughts used by Douglass in his *Narrative*.

4. Conclusion

In conclusion, I can affirm that the *Narrative* is a book that had agreat influence on the American population of the nineteenth century. Frederick Douglass was a pioneer when it comes to a slave narrative. He opened the way to several potential writers that were willing to share their stories. This book is probably the most influential slave narrative published in the United States, along Harriet Beecher Stowe's *Uncle Tom's Cabin* (1852). Both as an orator and as a writer, Frederick Douglass created a lot expectations. There were a lot of people that were skeptical about the authorship of Douglass's books, but the important fact is that whether pro-slavery or anti-slavery, everyone reacted to Douglass's publications and speeches. They form an irreplaceable part of American and African-American history.

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