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Frederick Douglass Paper

“Life and Times of Frederick Douglass” is an autobiographical book about Frederick Douglas, who was an American abolitionist leader, orator and author. The book, author by Douglas himself, is his third biography authored in the year 1881, which was later revised in the year 1892. The previous two biographies were authored in the years 1845 and 1855 respectively. Frederick Douglas was born as a slave and spent a few years of his life as a fugitive slave before finally buying his freedom. He wrote three biographical books about his life, because he was unable to reveal all the details of his life and his escape from slavery, due to the controversial status of his life, as well as due to the fear of causing trouble to the people who had helped during his life-threatening journey of becoming a free man. In this particular book, “Life and Times of Frederick Douglass” the author has shared the minutest details of his life, as well as his journey of escaping from a life of slavery to that of a free man. He has uncovered the names of the people who helped him in his escape, as well as in the process of becoming a free citizen. The author has also discussed the details of his life as a free man, after which he became an abolitionist leader and travelled across the country as well as abroad, to help the people in slavery by raising awareness about the social cause and collecting funds for their help. This paper will discuss the escape of Frederick Douglas from slavery, as well as his efforts and services for the abolition movement, in addition to discussing the interview of Eric Foner, in which he has talked about the ways and techniques utilized by the slaves to escape slavery.

Frederick Douglass was born a slave in an isolated Maryland plantation and the early years of his life had instilled the desire of escaping from slavery. He was not aware of his date of birth and even year. He was separated from his mother when he was an infant, therefore, did not know his mother as well. His father was probably a white slave owner, and he suspected to be his master, Captain Anthony, however, he was not sure about it. He spent his early life with his grandmother, however, was separated from her as well, at the age of six and moved to the wye house plantation. The plantation was owned by Colonel Lloyd and Captain Anthony was the overseer. His life on the plantations was not as brutal and worse as compared to that of the other slaves, probably because of his young age. He was not exposed to violence, beatings and whippings. When he was seven years old, he was sent to Baltimore to Hugh Auld, who was the brother of the son-in-law of Captain Anthony. He had comparatively pleasant life there, as his new masters had never owned a slave and were not cruel and violent like the other hit slave owners of the southern plantations. Hugh Auld’s wife Sophia Auld was specifically kind towards him, as she taught him reading and writing. This was the major introduction of Douglas with education, which instilled the hope of learning and becoming educated in Douglas. However, Hugh shortly stopped his wife from teaching him as they feared that education would make him rebellious. However, he was not ready to give up on education then and kept finding ways to learn more. This was the main reason that he was sent to the son in law of Captain Anthony, named Thomas Auld. Douglas continued his efforts to getting an education as well as teaching other slave kids. Fearful of his rising rebellions, Thomas sent him to Edward Covey, who used to whip him and he forgot about his mission of getting an education and teaching other kids. Till the age of twenty years, Douglas spent his life as a slave, while spending his time with different relatives of Captain Anthony. He faced violence and brutality, as well as worked as a ship caulker. At first, he used to hand over all the money to his mater, however, after some time he got the permission of saving up for himself. The purpose of saving was to attempt the escape (Douglass, 35).

At the age of twenty years, Douglas attempted the third escape of his life from slavery, which ultimately proved successful. He had failed in the previous two attempts because of the betrayal of the fellow slaves, as well as due to the turn of the circumstances. On September 3rd, 1838, Douglas boarded the train from Baltimore to Philadelphia, disguising himself as a free black sailor. He not only changed his appearance by wearing clothes like that of back sailors, however, changed his accent and language accordingly. The trains used to check the papers of the black people, which declared them to be free, in order to avoid the issue of escapes of the slaves from the south to north. Douglas did not have the papers, however, he borrowed the sailor license of one of his acquaintance who was now a free man. The sailor license had the stamp which used to declare the holder as the citizen of the states. It was equal to proving that the person is a free citizen and it was the only document which could enable Frederick Douglass to escape from slavery. He was quite nervous at the time of checking, as the description of the person given in the documents did not match with Douglas and he feared to be caught. However, when the conductor reached him and asked him for his free papers, he claimed that he does not carry them with him while working on the ship and he only has his sailor license with him. The conductor checked the stamp of the eagle on the license, collected the fee of the ticket from him and moved ahead. It was the very first success of Douglas, as he was not caught and sent back. During the course of his journey, he came across three white people who knew that he was a slave. However, they were unable to acknowledge him as the encounter was quite brief, which was another important success of his journey. He moved to New York, right after reaching Philadelphia. There, he provided refuge by David Ruggles, who was an anti-slavery activist. Shortly after that, he married Anna Murray, who was his acquaintance from Baltimore and a free black woman. The couple then moved to New Bedford, Massachusetts, in order to ensure that Douglas is not caught by the slave patrol roaming the in the New York, intending to catch the slave fugitives and sending them back to the south. Douglas changed his last name and adopted ‘Douglas’ as his last name in order to avoid being caught due to his name. Socially, he had become a free man; however, legally he was still a slave, liable for punishment according to the constitution of the country (Douglass, 50).

In Massachusetts, Douglass joined up with abolitionists in the North and became a prominent abolitionist. He had received the basic education and was a great orator, due to which he became popular among the abolitionist group. He played quite an important role in the abolitionist movement in the U.S. and abroad, as well. Being a fugitive slave, he used to tell the story of his escape to the masses, who often doubted his story because of his eloquent speech and personality. He travelled across the north, as well as abroad which include Canada, Ireland, England and many other countries to support the abolitionist movement as well as collect funds to buy his freedom. His acquaintances from abroad Henry Richardson and Ellen Richardson helped him collect the funds and ensured his freedom. He worked with anti-slavery leader William Lloyd Garrison, who was greatly inspired by his orating skills and he was also the one who introduced him to the world of abolitionists. After buying his freedom, he became more vocal for the rights of the slaves and supported the Underground Railroad as well, which was the main source of the escapade of the slaves from the south to north. He also started offering refuge to the fugitive slaves at his home. He believed that he was able to buy his own freedom, however, most of the slaves were not able to do so and it did not mean that they should spend the rest of their lives as slaves as they had an equal right to spend their lives as free people. He believed that slavery was a matter of political power and choice which was protected by the constitution and not merely public opinion. He also believed that the constitution needs to be changed while acknowledging, as well as declaring the people of colour as the free people. Due to his active role as an abolitionist leader, he got the chance of meeting and becoming close to the American president Abraham Lincoln and gave him the suggestion of abolishing slavery from the southern states. He supported the notion of the Union army in the American civil war and influenced Abraham Lincoln's decision of recruiting the African Americans in the Union forces. His two sons also participated in the war, fighting along with the union forces (Douglass, 135).

 Talking about the book, “Gateway to Freedom: The Hidden History of the Underground Railroad” Eric Foner told to Terry Gross of NPR that the slaves used to escape from south to north using different transportation means. They left their families behind and kept struggling to take them along, after securing their position. Moreover, the slaves used to travel and escape in groups and when caught, they were brought back to Philadelphia, even from New York. One of the most important similarity see between Douglass' experiences and the experiences that Professor Foner discussed is that the slaves used to escape utilizing different modes of transportation. They mostly relied on the train, as it was fast and more efficient and enabled them to escape slavery within twenty-four hours. On the other hand, the Underground Railroad emerged then as the greatest mean of transporting slaves from south to north. It is also true that the slaves attempting escape used to leave their families behind. There was number of reasons behind it, and the most important out of them were the unfavourable circumstances, in the availability of enough resources and not being able to take children with them due to the fear of being caught. Moreover, the experience of Douglas shares similarity with the description of Foner in the way that the slave patrols used to roam in New York to catch the fugitives and send them back to their owners. Some of the black men also served as the slave patrols and spied on the black fugitives in order to earn their living. They had to stab their own people in the back, for the sake of ensuring the livelihood of their families. According to Foner, the slaves gave the reasons of achieving liberty and living their lives as free people, for wanting to escape. It was not just slavery, they wanted to escape brutality, violence and oppression. Foner gave the estimate for the number of slaves who escaped through New York City as more than a hundred slaves a year, for almost thirty years. Foner also shared his opinion on the importance of the Fugitive Slave Act and claimed that it helped to shape the civil rights act of 1866. He was of the view that the Fugitive Slave Act endangered the peaceful lives of the freed slaves, who had established their life in New York, even after fifteen years of their escape. The law allowed the authorities to search for the fugitives and return them to their owners, even if they had established their new lives for years. The Fugitive Slave Act shaped the civil rights act of 1866 by highlighting the cruelty of the system towards the African Americans and providing the chance of ensuring their due rights and status in society. The source of the information in Foner's book “Gateway to Freedom” is Sydney Howard Gay, who was an operative of Underground Railroad and he was found by an undergraduate student of Columbia University (Gross).

Frederick Douglas is one of the most important abolitionists and orator in the slave history of the United States of America. He was born as a slave and bought his freedom by escaping to the north. He became an abolitionist leader and travelled across the country and the world as well to collect funds for the slaves, and preach the cause of abolishing slavery from the United States of America. He was able to develop relations with influential leaders like Abraham Lincoln and influence their decisions, due to which slavery as abolished from the United States of America.

Works Cited

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