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# The Multiple Voices of Frederick Douglass

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The Multiple Voices of Frederick Douglass  
(TITLE)

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BY

Gesthemane Vasiliadou

**THESIS**

SUBMITTED IN PARTIAL FULFILLMENT OF THE REQUIREMENTS  
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## Thesis Abstract

## The Multiple Voices of Frederick Douglass

by

Gesthemane Vasiliadou

In this rhetorical analysis of Frederick Douglass' style, I argue that the power of his language comes from the multiplicity of voices arising from his work. I specifically concentrate on the Narrative of the Life of Frederick Douglass, an American Slave, Written by Himself (1845), as well as on some of the speeches he delivered soon after the book was published.

Coming from a different culture, I was intrigued by my reaction to Douglass' writing style. I find him a writer with very strong rhetorical skills which have a tremendous appeal to any reader. My personal response explores the reasons for Douglass' success both as a writer and an orator. However, I especially focus on what fascinates me most about his use of language. Furthermore, I account for my choice of the Narrative and the specific speeches as the primary texts I am using.

Influenced by other major figures and works in American literature, I distinguish among different voices that arise from Douglass' prose. I am convinced that the Narrative echoes the voices of a southerner, a preacher, an orator, and an ex-slave. In the main body of my thesis, I demonstrate how each voice contributes to the writer's fascinating personality, as

well as to the creation of a strong relationship between Douglass and his audience. My discussion of the ex-slave's voice serves as an overview of Douglass' transition from the world of ignorance and slavery to that of literacy and freedom. At this point, I emphasize the techniques he uses in order to become a master of the language and, subsequently, a master of himself.

In the last pages of this project, I focus on the American reader's response to the Narrative. The reviews that the book received when it was published help me examine in detail the reactions of Douglass' contemporary audience. In addition, I rely on the autobiographical nature of the Narrative, in order to point out the effect that the book has to the reader today. Finally, I discuss the issue of slavery as the main theme of the Narrative and as the main reason for Douglass' appeal to the American reader of the twentieth century.

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I would also like to thank Dr Bruce Guernsey and Dr Roger Whitlow for the constructive criticism they provided to me as readers. Finally, Dr Carol Schmudde, my director, deserves special recognition for offering positive feedback and for guiding me through this difficult undertaking.

Frederick Douglass' Narrative of the Life of Frederick Douglass, an American Slave, Written by Himself is one of the best autobiographies in American literature. Written in 1845, it still appeals not only to Americans, but also to readers of different nationalities and cultures. With slavery as its main theme, the Narrative becomes a part of American history--an obvious reason for its appeal to the American reader. For Greece, however, the country I come from, slavery has not been considered a part of contemporary history. The only contact Greeks have with it is determined by the media, in the form of documentaries or movies about slavery in the nineteenth-century America. Nonetheless, despite the historical, geographical, and cultural distance from a subject like this, I found that the Narrative had a tremendous appeal to me. My preoccupation with the reasons for such a response has resulted in this study.

I read the book for the first time as an assignment for a course on the American Civil War literature. Inevitably, my first reaction was to place it in that particular historical and political context. Class discussion and Ken Burns' "Civil War" series helped me get an overall picture of the war. First, the Narrative was for me another historic event, along with the battles, the soldiers' letters, the speeches of politicians of the period, the photographs of slaves with scarred backs. The focus became sharper when I examined the theme of the book and compared Douglass' treatment of his

subject to that of other slave narrators. His choice not to restrict his story to the pains and sorrows of slave life impressed me. Furthermore, I realized that the other slave narrators lacked Douglass' powerful language, a language that excited and fascinated me.

The Civil War period and the slave narratives gave me a sense of time as a reader. My response to the book, however, was influenced by other factors as well. My interest in Douglass' language resulted primarily from my interest in the English language itself. As a non-native speaker in an English-speaking country, I try to "master" the language, in many ways as Douglass did. Although English was his mother tongue, it took him a long time to speak it as the majority of white Americans do. He had to "get rid of" the black dialect, so that, at least in this sense, he would not be considered a minority. My experience with English bears similarities to his, since I also had to try to "get rid of" my Greek accent, resist the impulse to translate in Greek what I heard and read in English, and learn to articulate my thoughts in writing. Words not only serve a purpose of communication; they expose us to others as well, giving them information about our ethnic background, social status, and personal history. For speakers who find themselves outside a particular linguistic situation, the choice of words involves a shaping of thoughts at the same time. I believe that Douglass, very much like myself, had to discover fine distinctions between the meaning of different



words that seem to describe the same idea.

Besides an awareness of distinctions like these, the Narrative also shows how Douglass' telling of his story was shaped by the writing of others. His discussion of the books that influenced his own suggests that his response as a reader is closely connected with his writing experience. He had read many more books than the ones he refers to in the Narrative, but he chooses not to mention them because they had been less appealing to him. For similar reasons, I chose the Narrative instead of one of his other autobiographies. Although My Bondage and My Freedom as well as Life and Times of Frederick Douglass reveal much more about his experience and cover a longer period of his life, it was the Narrative that first made me experience his strength as a writer. What I found in the other autobiographies later only reinforced my first impression that the Narrative invites the reader to look for more behind what the writer chooses not to mention, since, as John Sekora states, it is "as tightly written as a sonnet" (169).

The most important reason, however, for responding so strongly to this work and selecting it as the main focus of my study involves my conviction that the power of Douglass' language arises from the different voices one "hears" in the book--voices that all of us have heard before. At times, Frederick Douglass sounds like a Southerner, a preacher, an orator, and an ex-slave. In order to analyze these voices in

detail, I found it necessary to use some of the speeches that Douglass delivered as an abolitionist orator. Specifically, I focused on speeches that were delivered soon after the Narrative was published. My rhetorical analysis of Douglass' voices, however, has also been influenced by other texts that dominate American literature. Having read works by southern writers, the Puritans, nineteenth-century politicians and orators, as well as other slave narrators helped me focus on certain themes and methods that are being repeated or challenged in the Narrative.

The way in which Douglass establishes his southern identity offers perhaps the greatest challenge to the image of the South as it is portrayed in the works of white southern writers. According to this image, the Southerner is always identified with the aristocrat, the plantation owner, the man of power who is associated with wealth and social status. Douglass, of course, does not fit this description. Nevertheless, he is a Southerner, both from a geographical and a psychological point of view. Born in Maryland, a southern state, he identifies slavery with the South. This connection makes him a man with no sense of possession and, subsequently, with no roots. James M. Cox argues that "being a southerner...is to feel the sense of loss--and to feel a sense of both the defensiveness and defiance that go along with it" (238). The critic also claims that Douglass represents "the old southern defiance against absolute rule" (Cox 244). From

Douglass' point of view, then, defiance is the way in which the writer reacts against the stereotype of the Southern aristocrat, who is identified with the southern landscape. His early writings, however, do not reveal any feeling of defensiveness.<sup>1</sup> Instead, they portray a black man who claims his right to be considered a part of the same landscape that the white man treats as his own.

In the Narrative, we have a detailed account of the South. Here, the writer distinguishes between his life as a slave and the slaveholder's life as a ruler. Geographically, they are both Southerners. The difference between them, however, is emphasized in Douglass' description of the Lloyd plantation and, especially, the Great House Farm:

Few privileges were esteemed higher, by the slaves of the out-farms, than that of being selected to do errands at the Great House Farm. It was associated in their minds with greatness. 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. They regarded it as evidence of great confidence reposed in them by their overseers. (Blight 45)

In this passage, Douglass emphasizes how inappropriate it is for the slave to feel a place as his own. The master's house is associated with "greatness" not only because it is big, but

also because it stands for power and authority. Describing Colonel Lloyd's garden, Douglass gives us the picture of the black man whose sense of possession is projected onto his master's belongings. But, even so, the slaves are not allowed to get into the garden and enjoy the abundance of fruits.<sup>2</sup> They do not own anything. Like the house, the plantation, the animals, they are owned by somebody who has the right to be called a Southerner:

If Frederick Douglass, writing a book about slavery years later, had sought to construct an archetypical master of a great plantation, he might have taken as a model a grandee in New Orleans with a large bank account, a delta planter who owned more slaves, a South Carolinian with a more flamboyant house, a Virginian with a more celebrated name, but none of these creations would have stood taller than the tidewater aristocrat of Wye House...Douglass did not have to imagine such a man when he wrote; he knew him. (McFeely 11-12)

After his escape to the North, Douglass tries to show what being a Southerner means to him. In his 1845 address "My Slave Experience in Maryland," he talks to the abolitionists in New York City as one who has come from another world--the world of the South:

I can tell you what I have seen with my own eyes, felt on my own person, and know to have occurred in

my own neighborhood. I am not from any of those States where the slaves are said to be in their most degraded condition; but from Maryland, where Slavery is said to exist in its mildest form; yet I can stand here and relate atrocities which would make your blood to boil at the statement of them.

(Blight 131)

New Yorkers, as sensitive to the issue of slavery as any audience in the country at this time, feel the need to know what slavery actually is. Who would be more appropriate to talk about it than a black man who was formerly a slave? Douglass knows that, because of the geographic distance and the misinformation about the South, northerners have misconceptions about the lives of the slaves. Many of them have heard that there is nothing really wrong about black people working in the plantations. They have heard that the slaveholders treat the slaves as their children, providing them with food, shelter, and moral values. Waldo W. Braden points out that "the Old South image...embraced a kaleidoscopic composite of plantation life, a romantic fantasy dear to southerners": "the white-columned mansion, acres of snowy cotton, the coquettish belle, the genteel master, the crooning mammy, singing field hands, reckless young gallants, and a native chivalry" (70). In his speech, Douglass implies that this "romantic fantasy is also dear to northerners. It is worth noting here the words of the American historian J.S.

Bassett, who, in 1925, still talks about slavery as something positive:

It was the force of slavery that taught him [the African] to labor with some degree of regularity, it was the authority of the master that taught him to improve his idea of morality, it was the superior authority of the white race that induced him to change fetishism for a rude and simple kind of Christianity. (qtd. in Diedrich 254)

If a historian can give such a picture of slavery eighty years after Douglass' address to the New Yorkers, what chance does Douglass have to support abolitionism in a world of white people who are taught to dismiss rumors of "atrocities" in the South as lies?

Using his life in Maryland as an example, the speaker goes on not to praise the northerners for their liberal ideas, but to treat them as accessories in the crime of slavery. In her discussion of the slave narratives written by ex-slaves after 1840, Maria Diedrich argues that these writers "not only understand a world that baffles their predominantly white audience, but [they also], on account of their tragic experience as members of a morally uncontaminated shame culture, understand incomparably more than their readers" (259). In this address, Douglass not only seems to understand more than his audience does, but he also directly accuses them of sharing the limited vision of the southern slaveholders:

You, the people of New York, the people of Massachusetts, of New England, of the whole Northern States, have sworn under God that we shall be slaves or die!...here you come up to our masters and tell them that they ought to shoot us--to take away our wives and little ones--to sell our mothers into interminable bondage, and sever the tenderest ties. You say to us, if you dare to carry out the principles of our fathers, we'll shoot you down.

(Blight 133)

Douglass here distinguishes himself from his audience. "You" and "we" underline a number of oppositions and stress his accusations. "You" stands for the white people, the northerners, the ones who claim to be liberal because they live in "non-slaveholding states" (Blight 133). "We" refers to the slaves, the southern blacks who are either free or in bondage, the oppressed. For Douglass, supporters of slavery are not only the slaveholders of the South but also those who assist them. According to the law, after all, a northerner is supposed to give a fugitive slave back to his or her master:

And in this land of liberty, I'm a slave. The twenty-six States that blaze forth on your flag, proclaim a compact to return me to bondage if I run away, and keep me in bondage if I submit...I may go to your deepest valley, to your highest mountain, I'm still a slave, and the blood hound may chase me

down. (Blight 134)

"Unlike many white abolitionists," McFeely argues, Douglass "seldom allowed his audiences the comfort of thinking their region was innocent" (94). At this point, Douglass becomes ironic. The word "liberty" loses its meaning when it is associated with the Fugitive Slave Act. The difference between North and South does not exist any more. What difference does it make if these people do not own slaves? They have the right to make sure that black people are kept as somebody else's possessions. This kind of liberty, Douglass claims, is not liberty at all. In this respect, the North is not any better than the South.

Another strategy that Douglass employs in order to make his audience feel guilty and assume responsibility for the existence of slavery involves his voice as a preacher. The word "preacher" here should not be taken strictly as an indication of Douglass' preoccupation with religion and, especially, with Christianity. It mainly refers to the way in which he ties religion to the issue of slavery. Furthermore, the delivery of his speeches, as well as the structure of his writings in general, shows connections with both the early Puritan and the black pulpit tradition.

The first reference to religion in the Narrative discusses the issue of children who are the offspring of a white slave and a black slave. Since God cursed Ham, Douglass points out, American slavery should be right for Ham's "lineal



descendants" (Blight 41). Blacks, however, are not considered "lineal descendants," so

...it is certain that slavery at the south must soon become unscriptural; for thousands are ushered into the world, annually, who, like myself, owe their existence to white fathers, and those fathers most frequently their own masters. (Blight 41)

In this passage, Douglass attacks the arguments of those who want to justify slavery as God's will. He takes an excerpt from Genesis and offers another reading of it. Unlike the traditional reading of the scriptures by white preachers--isolating an excerpt and treating it as an end in itself, that is, literally--Douglass uses logic, in order to prove that slavery is ethically wrong. Relying on the Bible as the foundation for his point not only demonstrates a knowledge of his opponents' religious beliefs, but also a knowledge of how to contradict them.

Preoccupation with leading a good, moral life guided by the word of God has been prominent in America since the time of the first settlers. Douglass knows that, more than anything else, the word of God will catch his audience's attention. Moreover, the words "father" and "master" underline the close relationship between religion and politics in American society. The image of the "white father" brings to mind the image of God, whose benevolence is above all things. In his discussion, Douglass challenges his audience to identify God

with the slaveholder. They both have power and authority, but how do they use them? In opposition to God's benevolence, the slaveholder rapes, whips, and sells his people.

Douglass becomes more specific about this comparison in the "Appendix" he added to the Narrative. Hoping to avoid misunderstandings about the nature of his own religious beliefs, he declares: "What I have said respecting and against religion, I mean strictly to apply to the slaveholding religion of this land, and with no possible reference to Christianity proper;...To be the friend of the one, is of necessity to be the enemy of the other" (Blight 104-5). He goes on to offer a long list of parallels between the slave trade and religion--parallels that emphasize the hypocrisy of the ministers and the slaveholders who are full of "religious pomp and show" (Blight 105). In his notes on the text, David Blight accounts for this appendix as "a classic of Garrisonian doctrine, a masterful use of antithesis, and a splendid illustration of Douglass's place in the jeremiadic tradition" (115, n.70). Indeed, the rest of the appendix is a paraphrase of biblical references to the "scribes and Pharisees" (Blight 106).<sup>3</sup>

More than anywhere else in his writings, Douglass sounds like a preacher here. His tone is condemning and fiery. Like Jesus, who found the synagogue turned into a market place, he turns against the traders and their practices. Like Jonathan Edwards in "Sinners in the Hands of an Angry God," he warns of

the time of judgment, when "the kingdom of heaven [will be shut up] against men" (Blight 106). Who can stay indifferent to salvation and the promise of an eternal life in heaven? Douglass here does what all the successful Puritan preachers did before him: he inspires awe and fear. The audience becomes afraid not of him but of his words. They know that what he says is what they have been reading in the Bible. It is the word of God. It is truth. At this moment, they do not see him as a man, but only as an instrument of God.

He was such an instrument for some time in his life. As he states in the Narrative, he kept a Sabbath school for slaves who wanted to learn how to read. "The work of instructing my dear fellow-slaves," Douglass writes, "was the sweetest engagement with which I was ever blessed" (Blight 84). After his escape from bondage, however, he actually became a preacher for the African Methodist Episcopal Zion Church in New Bedford (McFeely 81). The letter that Douglass wrote accounting for his work there shows his respect for the profession and emphasizes how useful it was for him:

...helped to prepare me for the wider sphere of usefulness which I have since occupied. It was from this Zion church that I went forth to the work of delivering my brethren from bondage, and this new vocation, which separated me from New Bedford and finally so enlarged my views of duty, separated me also from the calling of a local preacher. (qtd. in

Andrews, "Preacher" 596)

The connection between preaching the word of God and preaching abolitionism is unmistakable here. Douglass acknowledges how much the pulpit helped him in choosing his real vocation as an antislavery orator. His subject "was not salvation or any other unsatisfying, and very likely hypocritical, preacher-man's subject--but slavery, which he knew to be a moral, public wrong, and which at the same time, in the deepest possible way, he hated personally" (McFeely 84).

Despite the difference of the subject, though, Douglass adopts some of the basic characteristics of the Puritan sermonic tradition in the delivery of his speeches. As Edward H. Davidson states, sermons in the seventeenth and the eighteenth century New England were "formulaic: a text, a message derived literally and directly from Scripture; a movement toward an exposition and an enlargement of that message; and a resolution in a Use and Application" (503). Douglass, of course, does not strictly follow this pattern. His writings, however, indicate that he has incorporated these three steps in a more free-flowing style.

His speech "What to the Slave Is the Fourth of July?" serves as an example of such an incorporation. The text here is taken from a special event in American history:

Fellow-Citizens--pardon me and allow me to ask, why am I called upon to speak here to-day? What have I, or those I represent, to do with your national

independence? Are the great principles of political freedom and of natural justice, embodied in that Declaration of Independence, extended to us? and am I, therefore, called upon to bring our humble offering to the national altar, and to confess the benefits, and express devout gratitude for the blessings, resulting from your independence to us?  
(Blight 141)

The Declaration of Independence is another version of the white American's Bible. "Political freedom" and "natural justice" are ideas taken from the text itself. Douglass uses them in order to remind his audience of the underlying statement in it--the equality of all men. In addition, he includes an excerpt from the Psalms (Blight 145, n.2):

By the rivers of Babylon, there we sat down. Yea! we wept when we remembered Zion. We hanged our harps upon the willows in the midst thereof. For there, they that carried us away captive, required of us a song; and they who wasted us required of us mirth, saying, Sing us one of the songs of Zion. How can we sing the Lord's song in a strange land?  
(Blight 142)

Like the Puritan preachers, Douglass adapts the scriptural narratives to the present. This reference to the Psalms makes a very successful analogy between an old and a new story of people in exile. Based on two texts of major importance for

the American people, Douglass' speech incorporates "a set of motifs" found in the sermon form: "situations like biblical illustrations and analogies, linkages of one text to another, digressions on the signs in the Old Testament leading to their fulfillment in the New, and the like" (Davidson 503).

The exposition and enlargement of the message includes a specific reference to Douglass' America and its failure to stay true to what it has professed: "America is false to the past, false to the present, and solemnly binds herself to be false to the future" (Blight 143). In the same manner, the speaker offers the use and application of what he argues:

...it is not light that is needed, but fire; it is not the gentle shower, but thunder. We need the storm, the whirlwind and the earthquake. The feeling of the nation must be quickened; the conscience of the nation must be roused; the propriety of the nation must be startled; the hypocrisy of the nation must be exposed; and its crimes against God and man must be proclaimed and denounced. (Blight 144-145)

Besides the Puritan sermonic tradition, Douglass' Narrative also includes elements of the black pulpit oratory and, especially, what William H. Pipes calls "old-time Negro preaching."<sup>4</sup> Working on the emotional rather than the intellectual level, "the original old-time Negro preacher" appeals to the audience's emotions--"friendship, duty, honor,

fear, shame, emulation, patriotism, compassion" (Pipes 110). Douglass' address to his audience is characterized by an appeal to the same emotions. The basic difference between him and the old-time Negro preacher is that Douglass works on the intellectual level as well. His reason and logical arguments do not restrict the discussion to a theoretical level; instead, they lead to an excitement of emotions for both the speaker and the audience. As David S. Reynolds states, "just as the Bible is a poetic construct of concrete symbols of indefinite truths, so the effective sermon is an imaginative appeal to 'our wonderfully punctuated humanity' through images possessing both factual solidity and emotional warmth" (492).

The connection between preaching and storytelling has been very strong in the black pulpit tradition. Reynolds points out that Southern black preachers of the antebellum period use folk storytelling techniques characterized "especially by vernacular dramatizations of the Bible and by secular stories about the conflict between the powerless and the powerful" (486). The black preacher has a story to tell--a story that gets both the audience and the preacher himself involved in it. Especially "the teller," Henry H. Mitchell notes, "must play all the roles and make the story live" (70). In black folk preaching, according to Keith Miller, "the 'I' of the pastor merges with the narrative voice of the hymn and with the past and present Christians who sing or have sung it" (25). Douglass' "What to the Slave Is the Fourth of July?"

speech re-enacts, brings back to life again the stories found in the Bible: "If I forget thee, O Jerusalem, let my right hand forget my cunning. If I do not remember thee, let my tongue cleave to the roof of my mouth" (Blight 142).

Douglass here identifies himself with the voice in the Psalms and with the people in the audience who are familiar with it. For Douglass, Jerusalem stands for all the values that the American nation has not been faithful to. Significantly, with the disappearance of these values, the speaker is doomed to silence. The tongue will "cleave," and the ability for articulation will be lost.

Douglass' oratorical skills, however, show much more than just an ability for articulation. In addition to his physical charm and his deep voice, he owes much of his reputation and success as an orator to his desire for literacy. Not only was he determined from an early age to learn how to read and write, but he also studied various old and contemporary models of oratory and incorporated them into his own.

In the Narrative, Douglass tells the remarkable story of his initiation to the world of written language. After his mistress, Sophia Auld, stops teaching him the alphabet, he uses his imagination to learn more from the letters marked on the ships and his knowledge of human nature to make the other children his teachers:

I soon learned the names of these letters, and for what they were intended when placed upon a piece of



timber in the ship-yard...After that, when I met with any boy who I knew could write, I would tell him I could write as well as he. The next word would be, "I don't believe you. Let me see you try it." I would then make the letters which I had been so fortunate as to learn, and ask him to beat that. In this way I got a good many lessons in writing, which it is quite possible I should never have gotten in any other way. (Blight 63)

Convinced that literacy will lead him to freedom, Douglass starts reading whatever he can get hold of. Perhaps the most important and influential book for him was Caleb Bingham's The Columbian Orator. As Blight points out, "it contains a remarkable collection of speeches from classical times and from the Age of Revolution by Cato, Socrates, Napoleon, George Washington, William Pitt the elder, Charles James Fox, and others" (Blight 112, n.28). No other book would have been more suitable to exercise Douglass' rhetorical skills. His autobiographies, as well as his speeches, prove that the power of his language, either written or oratorical, is partly a result of his exposure to multiple models of oratory.

In his Lectures on Rhetoric and Belles Lettres, Hugh Blair defines eloquence as "the Art of Persuasion" and states that "to be truly eloquent, is to speak to the purpose" (2:2). Once he learns the meaning of the words "abolition" and "abolitionist," Douglass understands that they are "of

importance to myself and fellow-slaves" (Blight 62). These words become his purpose and give him a cause to fight for. Furthermore, Douglass finds in The Columbian Orator the importance of eloquence and its signification: "An Alexander and a Caesar would conquer a world; but to overcome the passions, to subdue the wills, and to command at pleasure the inclinations of men, can be effected only by the all-powerful charms of enrapturing eloquence" (qtd. in Buell 139-140).

The influence of the oratory of classical Greece is evident in the speech Douglass delivered in 1871 on Decoration Day, at Arlington, near the monument to the "Unknown Loyal Dead." This speech bears many resemblances to the *Epitaphioi*, the State Funeral Orations, which belong to a genre established before Pericles' time in the Golden Age of ancient Greece (Wills 49). Garry Wills points out patterns of this genre that can be found in Lincoln's Gettysburg Address. He roughly divides the *Epitaphios* in two parts: the *epainesis* of the dead, that is, the praise of the dead, and the *parainesis* of the living, which is the advice for the audience (59). Douglass' speech follows the same patterns as Lincoln's and, by extension, as the classical Greek orators'. His *epainesis* accounts for "those unknown heroes...(who) reached in their glorious career that last highest point of nobleness beyond which human power cannot go. They died for their country" (Douglass 413).

Referring to "the dark and vengeful spirit of slavery"

(Douglass 413) as the primary cause of the Civil War, Douglass makes an appeal to his audience not to forget the cause for which these people gave their lives:

We must never forget that victory to the rebellion meant death to the republic. We must never forget that the loyal soldiers who rest beneath this sod flung themselves between the nation and the nation's destroyers...we are indebted to the unselfish devotion of the noble army who rest in these honored graves all around us. (Douglass 414-415)

By using patterns found in the classical Greek oratory, Douglass not only employs models of the past that have been proven successful, but he also shows a knowledge of his audience's expectations. As Wills notes, nineteenth-century America was viewed as "a second Athens" (42), bearing all the implications of the idea of democracy.

Following and continuing the classic oratorical tradition, famous speakers who were Douglass' contemporaries influence his rhetorical strategies. Political and literary figures like William Ellery Channing, Ralph Waldo Emerson, and Charles Sumner insist on "a purification of utterance," a "taste for imagery and allusion," and specific rhetorical devices (Buell 144). One of these devices involves modesty. Considering it a basic characteristic of the introduction of a discourse, Blair argues that, along with being "favourable,

and prepossessing" (163), the modesty of an introduction requires that "it promise not too much" (164). In the introduction of his address "My Slave Experience in Maryland," Douglass follows this rule:

I do not know that I can say anything to the point. My habits and early life have done much to unfit me for public speaking, and I fear that your patience has already been wearied by the lengthened remarks of other speakers, more eloquent than I can possibly be, and better prepared to command the attention of the audience. And I can scarcely hope to get your attention even for a longer period than fifteen minutes. (Blight 131)

With this introduction, Douglass gets his audience's attention and sympathy, even before he comes to the point of his speech. Stating that he is "unfit" and unprepared for public speaking, he presents himself exactly as what his audience expects him to be: an illiterate fugitive slave who can talk about his experience in bondage. On the other hand, Douglass knows that, although he is not only a literate but also a gifted speaker, he should not present himself as superior in knowledge or technique to the white speakers who preceded him. Following the instructions he read in The Columbian Orator, he distinguishes between the other speakers' ability to "command" the audience's attention and his "hope" to get it. Douglass here employs modesty or, in Buell's terms,

apologia, which means "excuse." This device was also common in the nineteenth century, as Henry David Thoreau's Walden shows. Although Walden was published nine years after Douglass' speech was delivered, we have to remember that its author is considered to belong to the classical tradition. Thoreau's apologia comes in the first pages of the book: "I should not obtrude my affairs so much on the notice of my readers if very particular inquiries had not been made by my townsmen concerning my mode of life" (qtd. in Buell 154).

Adopting rhetorical strategies like these helps Douglass establish his own identity as an educated, free man. The Narrative gives him the opportunity to show his transition from the world of slavery to that of freedom--a transition that becomes the most remarkable aspect of his story. At the time the Narrative was published, Douglass was still technically a slave. It was one year later, in 1846, that "British antislavery friends" bought his freedom (Blight 149). But while writing the Narrative, Douglass tries to liberate himself in every way. Since he has escaped from his master, he is considered physically free. Legally and psychologically, however, he is still a captive of the institution of slavery. The significance of being caught between the two worlds underlines the importance and the urgency of the autobiographical act.

In the very beginning of the Narrative, Douglass deals with two issues that have probably been the most crucial to

his existence throughout his life: his exact age and his father's identity. The brevity with which he treats these issues does not mean that he dismisses them as unimportant or irrelevant to his story. On the contrary, it creates the basis, the foundation of what is going to follow. Douglass tries to give some meaning to his existence, although he has to construct a self "from an ontological and historical void" (Niemtzow 100).

Douglass' struggle to trace his origins back in history is typical of the slave narrator. As Stephen Butterfield argues, the slave narrator "begins with nothing: he is uncertain of his exact age, he has no name of his own or his name changes whenever he is sold, he cannot trace his family much further back than his mother, and he is punished whenever he shows the slightest aspiration to become more than a piece of property" (18). Douglass cannot provide any "authentic record" of his birth (Blight 39). He cannot be accurate about his age. Immediately, whether he wants to or not, he has to distinguish himself from the audience he is addressing: "The white children could tell their ages" (Blight 39). This statement not only makes him different in terms of race, but also in terms of social status. Although he writes while he is in the North, he cannot escape being black and having been a slave. The absence of a birth certificate denies him the right to exist in written history. As Annette Niemtzw points out, "he seems to understand from the start that he lacks the very

stuff on [sic] which autobiography must consist" (98); thus, he is "unhappily forced back to the oral tradition" (99).

Douglass uses oral tradition again, when he goes on to talk 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" (Blight 40). The assertiveness of the first sentence is contradicted by Douglass' careful choice of words in the next two sentences: "He was admitted to be such," "opinion," "whispered." Again, he does not have any written record that proves his father's identity. He cannot be sure. If indeed his father was white, what does this make him? He has to resort to his mother, a woman "of darker complexion" (Blight 39), to whose existence he can at least testify himself. Moreover, he has to identify himself with her as a black and, subsequently, as a slave. His father's identity, however, remains an unsolved mystery. Douglass cannot ignore the significance of the master-slave and father-son relationship with the white man; he knows that "he himself is the product of the ominous mating of whiteness and blackness; night and day" (Evans 28).

In chapter II, Douglass states that this narrative intends to present slavery "as it...existed" (Blight 43) for him. However, he does more than just present. His account is a way for him to re-live his slavery days not because he wants to, but because he has to. He still has unanswered questions. He still wonders about who he is while he is writing. The

Narrative is not just a testimony; it is a re-birth. As many critics have argued, Douglass is trying to create a new self. Supporting abolitionism does not seem to be enough, although it gives him the opportunity to write his story. By telling us about his past, he finds a way to explore and change both the present and the future. The events he relates have to be treated not just in their historical significance, but also in terms of what they reveal about his metamorphosis from a slave to a free man. The question is not only "What has changed?" but also "What has remained the same?"

Literacy provides the first concrete evidence of Douglass' new self. Hugh Auld's words about what education can do to a slave paradoxically underline Douglass' acceptance of white values:

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...there would be no keeping him. It would forever unfit him to be a slave. (Blight 57)

Douglass accepts his master's ideas: "The very decided manner with which he spoke, and strove to impress his wife with the evil consequences of giving me instruction, served to convince me that he was deeply sensible of the truths he was uttering" (Blight 58). He understands that literacy is "the pathway from slavery to freedom" (Blight 58). Hugh Auld's words bring the



opposite result from the one that the master wants. In a strange way, Douglass is indebted to his master for this "special revelation" (Blight 57). Mastery of the written word makes him a master of himself. In this passage, the assumption that blacks are intellectually inferior and thus unable to become educated is undermined. If Douglass is indeed inferior as a black and as a slave, why does Hugh Auld get so alarmed when he sees the young slave learning how to read and write? The narrator here subverts the roles of the slave and the master. Hugh Auld fits the stereotype of the slave who is thought to be unsophisticated and ignorant. He underestimates Douglass' intelligence, giving him thus the opportunity to become a master.

This "special revelation" that Douglass experiences bears many similarities to the religious revelations we find in the early spiritual autobiographies of the Puritans. What Daniel B. Showy remarks about Jonathan Edwards' "Personal Narrative" applies to Douglass' Narrative as well: it is "a narrative of a search for grace, or for education" (266). For both writers, grace and education are closely related, because they lead to freedom. Douglass, of course, does not seek freedom in another world, as Edwards does. But, like the Puritan minister, he realizes how much literacy contributes to the elevation of one's self from the state of a savage (physical and intellectual) to that of a human being. This realization characterizes the conversion experience. In the early

spiritual autobiographies, Shea states, the narrator asserts that "he did not identify his conversion when it took place, but only in retrospect" (186). Similarly, it is only after becoming familiar with the world of learning to which books introduce him, that Douglass understands the change in his way of thinking:

The silver trump of freedom had roused my soul to eternal wakefulness. 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. (Blight 61-62)

In retrospect again, Douglass appreciates the meaning of the words "abolition" and "abolitionist": "The light broke in upon me by degrees" (Blight 62). This time, conversion gives a new meaning to his future life and signals the beginning of his career in the public sphere, as well as his dedication to a cause.

One of the typical characteristics of the autobiography involves the depiction of characters that the narrators treat as influential models in their quest for identity. In Douglass' case, almost all of the authority figures depicted

in the Narrative influence the narrator only in terms of his decision not to imitate them. Most of the masters and the overseers are portrayed as cruel and cunning. Aaron Anthony takes "great pleasure in whipping a slave" (Blight 42); Mr Severe "was rightly named; he was a cruel man" (Blight 45); Colonel Lloyd "could not brook any contradiction from a slave. When he spoke, a slave must stand, listen, and tremble" (Blight 49); Mr Gore "was artful, cruel, and obdurate" (Blight 51); Thomas Auld "was a mean man" (Blight 68); and Mr Covey is so cunning "that we used to call him, among ourselves, 'the snake'" (Blight 73). Douglass the narrator presents Douglass the slave surrounded by men who have a sense of their own manhood only when they give him lessons of cruelty and deceit.

Thomas Auld's false conversion serves as an example of another kind of revelation for Douglass. After attending a Methodist camp-meeting, Thomas Auld becomes "more cruel and hateful in all his ways" (Blight 69). He uses religion to justify his cruelty and barbarity. His "great pretensions to piety" (Blight 69) cannot deceive Douglass, however, who later makes use of his own true conversion experience and writes his own "pass" to freedom. But, if Thomas Auld gives the slave a lesson of deceit, the "nigger-breaker" Covey (Blight 71) gives him the opportunity to become a man--both physically and psychologically. Douglass acknowledges his fight with Covey as "the turning-point in my career as a slave" (Blight 79). When the two men start fighting, Covey's "disposition to deceive"

(Blight 73)--either by his appearance of devotion to religion or by his ability to take the slaves by surprise--ceases to exist.

Douglass' description of the fight proves that he considers it a man-to-man, as well as a master-to-slave, confrontation. From a physical point of view, the black man is portrayed as masculine as the white man--if not more, since he is the winner. On a psychological level, however, the fight is "a glorious resurrection, from the tomb of slavery, to the heaven of freedom" (Blight 79). Douglass knows that from now on he can remain a slave only "in form," not "in fact" (Blight 79). As Gibson explains,

A person is a slave, then, not when his body is held captive but when his psyche is not his own, when his self does not belong to him, when he does not exert resistance against those who would define him. Being a slave 'in fact' has to do with one's attitude toward one's condition. (556)

Through these interactions with white male models, through masters like Thomas Auld and Edward Covey, Douglass finds his own self, and the Narrative becomes, as Lucinda MacKethan argues, "a mastery narrative...structured upon a network of metaphors...that explore with thoroughness what it means to be a master, not what it means to be a fugitive slave" (56). Most of all, he masters the written word. The white man's language is undoubtedly a free man's language.

Douglass becomes so skillful with it that, besides proving a black man, who is also an ex-slave, able to use it effectively, he does not hesitate to show his audience how much control he has over it. The careful choice of words, the intriguing metaphors, and the irony confirm Douglass as the master in the writer-reader relationship. Moreover, the Narrative functions as the proof of his existence in the history of letters. Despite his inability to provide a written record of his birth or his father's identity, Douglass "subscribe(s)" himself (Blight 109) at the end of the book. The subscription is repeated in the subtitle "Written by Himself" and the first words of the story: "I was born..." James Olney notes that statements like these not only show that "the events narrated are factual and truthful," but they primarily claim, "I exist" ("I Was Born" 155).

Many critics argue that the Narrative follows patterns found in early autobiographical works by white American men. Benjamin Franklin's Autobiography, especially, provides Douglass with the model of the self-made man and the ideal of the American Dream. As Rafia Zafar points out, both writers emphasize their personal freedom, hard work, and "lowly" origins (99). Like Franklin, Douglass wants his story to be exemplary, so that all slaves can benefit from it. In demonstrating self-reliance, however, he does not become didactic; he simply shows how he succeeded. His accomplishments cannot be imitated, but his motives, attitude,

and goals make him a representative man.

Franklin's and Douglass' works are also characterized by the writers' preoccupation with serving their country. Franklin, of course, does not have any doubts about being an American. One of the most remarkable strategies he employs in the Autobiography, the silence about his accomplishments that benefitted the nation, proves his dedication to the well-being of America. Similarly, the Narrative does not reveal how Douglass escaped to the North or what the relationship with his wife was like. His primary purpose is to relate only the events that will prove useful to the reader and contribute to the improvement of the political situation in the States. Although Douglass many times feels like an outcast--both because his ancestors came from Africa and because America denies him any civil rights--he also does not want to reject his American identity. Appearing in The Life and Times of Frederick Douglass, his letter to William Lloyd Garrison shows the dilemma of the black man:

In thinking of America, I sometimes find myself admiring her bright blue sky, her grand old woods, her fertile fields, her beautiful rivers, her mighty lakes, and star-crowned mountains. But my rapture is soon checked--my joy is soon turned to mourning. When I remember that all is cursed with the infernal spirit of slaveholding, robbery, and wrong, when I remember that with the waters of her

noblest rivers the tears of my brethren are borne to the ocean, disregarded and forgotten, and that her most fertile fields drink daily of the warm blood of my outraged sisters, I am filled with unutterable loathing, and led to reproach myself that anything could fall from my lips in praise of such a land. America will not allow her children to love her. (242-243)

Perhaps Douglass' dilemma makes him more of an American than people like Franklin and Jefferson, who both signed the Declaration of Independence. He seems to be taking the words of the document even more seriously and literally than its writers do. The "self-evident" truths of the national document once again are challenged by another part of the title of the Narrative: "an American Slave." How can an American be a slave? Even if we accept that blacks are not Americans by origin, doesn't the white man's right to own blacks as slaves make them Americans by extension? According to James Olney, the phrase "American Slave" presents "the most radical, the most aggressive, the most thoroughgoing challenge imaginable to the very idea of the American nation and to the Declaration of Independence" ("Founding Fathers" 6).

Perhaps the political dimensions of the Narrative account for the debate that still exists among the critics as to whether, being a slave narrative, the book should be considered literature or merely a historical document.<sup>5</sup>

However, the tremendous popularity of the Narrative when it was first published, the excellent reviews it received by critics of Douglass' time, and the position it holds today in American literature suggest that this book is literature, and its writer an artist. Having survived not only in time, but also in the imagination of entire generations of Americans, the Narrative bears the mark of a classic masterpiece. By using the word "classic," I do not intend to show connections between the theme of this book and those of other literary works that are considered "immortal" in the history of Western literature; I mainly refer to what makes the Narrative such a powerful book: a combination of a strong argument and effective rhetorical devices.

For the American reader, the Narrative owes much of its appeal both to its political and aesthetic dimensions. Some of the reviews that the book received in the nineteenth century seem to recognize these, although they put an emphasis on the political aspect of Douglass' story. Margaret Fuller's 1845 review starts with pronouncing Douglass "a prominent member of the Abolition party" (Blight 122). William Lloyd Garrison's "Preface" to the Narrative testifies to the truth and accuracy of Douglass' story: "I am confident that it is essentially true in all its statements; that nothing has been set down in malice, nothing exaggerated, nothing drawn from the imagination; that it comes short of the reality, rather than overstates a single fact in regard to SLAVERY AS IT IS"



(Blight 32).

Since the book shows an excellent command of the written word, Garrison realizes that the audience will have some difficulty considering it a product of an ex-slave. Therefore, he needs to emphasize that the writer of the book is the same person who, a few years ago, was still a slave in the South. As William L. Andrews notes, "it was assumed that the black first-person narrator, poorly lettered if literate at all, was too unsophisticated to be much more than an oral data resource" ("The First Fifty Years" 6). So, Garrison, with the authority of the white man whose words cannot be doubted, verifies the words of another man, whose authorship is being questioned:

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; and, considering how long and dark was the career he had to run as a slave,--how few have been his opportunities to improve his mind since he broke his iron fetters,--it is, in my judgment, highly creditable to his head and heart. (Blight 32)

Similarly, Wendell Phillips' letter, although addressed to Douglass personally, serves as a second affirmation of this authorship. A prestigious and powerful figure in the anti-

slavery movement, Phillips helps Douglass get credit for the Narrative, by alluding to the fable of the man and the lion and identifying Douglass with the lion that "wrote history" (Blight 36).

Garrison's and Phillips' testimonies give Douglass the chance to make his story an example for his fellow-slaves who are still in bondage. Without the abolitionists' assistance and support, he could not have published the Narrative and convinced his audience that it was a proof of his own existence. As Raymond Hedin points out, "the framing letters signal the unavoidable presence of the white audience, the power that resides in that audience's standards of approval (and disapproval), and the fact that form can be both instrument and power" (25).

The argument that many critics make about Garrison's and Phillips' prefatory remarks and their dominant position in the book questions the authenticity of the Narrative. The word "authenticity" here refers to the critics' concerns about the language used in the narrative. Is this Douglass' language or his patrons'? Margaret Fuller expresses her dissatisfaction about the political nature of the abolitionists' "communications," by arguing that Garrison "has indulged in violent invective and denunciation till he has spoiled the temper of his mind" and that Phillips' remarks "are equally decided, without this exaggeration in the tone" (Blight 123). In his 1849 review of the Narrative, Ephraim Peabody cautions

Douglass about his affiliation with the abolitionists and points out the danger that the writer risks if he adopts his patrons' linguistic style: "A flippant, extravagant speaker, especially if he be gifted with the power of sarcasm, will probably be listened to and applauded, but nothing comes of it" (Blight 126). Modern critics are also concerned with the presence of the white authority in the Narrative. They claim that Douglass is being overshadowed and used as an "ornament" (Blight 30)--to use Garrison's own words--by the white abolitionists, because he has to accept their "protection" and use their language. I would argue that the relationship between them is one that involves exchange. The abolitionists use Douglass for their political propaganda, but Douglass also uses them in order to be heard. He chooses the white man's language and, as the Narrative proves, he deliberately subverts it. Once again, he becomes the master, since he takes the "white words" and makes them his own tool and weapon.

Another reason for the popularity of the Narrative involves its autobiographical nature. According to Stephen Butterfield, "black autobiographies are also a mirror of white deeds. They fill in many of the blanks of America's self-knowledge. They help us to see what has been left out of the picture of our national life by white writers and critics." (3). Like all the slave narratives, Douglass' story presents slavery from the victim's point of view. The writer is also the main character of the story, and this perspective always

fascinates the reader.<sup>6</sup> In every autobiographical work, we always find ourselves following the narrator very closely. Whether we believe him or not, we are always concerned with his assertion that he is talking about his life. The best piece of fiction does not have as much power over us as the autobiographical work that allows us to get close to the writer's personal history and secret thoughts.<sup>7</sup> Of course, what we forget (or choose to ignore) is that the writer uses his experience selectively.

For Douglass, autobiography does not only mean "tell," but also "be silent." His account is not a detailed one. He chooses to be explicit about only three incidents of his slave life: the literacy episode, his thoughts about running away and becoming free like the sailboats in the Chesapeake Bay, and his fight with Covey. None of these incidents, however, makes the reader feel "forced" to sympathize with the writer. Unlike other slave narrators who "concentrated on the traumatic family separations and physical violence of slavery" (Sundquist 3), Douglass' success does not arise from sensational examples, but mainly from his knowledge of what a sophisticated audience wants. Narratives like Harriet Jacobs' Incidents in the Life of a Slave Girl concentrate on extraordinary events like her seven-year imprisonment. Jacobs appeals to the reader's humanistic feelings in an exaggerated and pleading tone, which does not function as a sign of liberation. At the end of the book, we see not a free woman,

but a woman who has suffered. Nothing about her conclusion shows us how she is going to use her experience in the future. In the Narrative, Douglass creates and shapes his life, based not on the emotional intensity of the experience itself, but on allowing us to form our own opinion about the significance of the experience.

The autobiographical nature of the Narrative also places Douglass in the tradition established by the autobiographies of white American men who still influence the American society today. Considered the cornerstone of American literature, Puritan autobiographies show the writers' preoccupation with success in a new world, their struggle for physical and cultural survival, and the importance of achievement for the individual. Douglass' story adopts all these values and, in this sense, preserves the idea of hard work and endurance--both characteristically American traits. Moreover, Daniel Shea's argument about the co-existence of the private and the public in the Puritan autobiographies applies to Douglass as well: "The autobiographical search for self, the self that would endure in the life of grace, very often has a quite public purpose. In autobiography as in life, seclusion was a luxury that could interfere with accomplishment in the society of other men" (118). Celebration of individuality and contribution to public life, however, are also elements that another influential American figure used in his Autobiography. Benjamin Franklin's model of the self-made man provides

Americans with the same ideals that the Puritans accept. Similarly, Douglass' life as it is depicted in the Narrative symbolizes "the myth of American individualism" as well as "the ideals of American communalism, altruism, and self-sacrifice" (Moses 69).

Although the Narrative does relies not only on its theme but also on Douglass' rhetorical devices, slavery both as political and literary subject has been a source of uneasiness and--very often--shame for Americans. Deborah E. McDowell and Arnold Rampersad give a very insightful account of slavery as a literary theme and its effects on the American reader:

For many readers, slavery undoubtedly is for the most part romance, complete with stereotypical characters and distinctive costumes. For the more sensitive, it is the American heart of darkness, the historic national sin that no holy water will ever wash away, the stony fact that denies many claims about the purpose and the nature of the historic American experiment. Less colorfully, slavery is perhaps the central intellectual challenge, other than the Constitution itself, to those who would understand the meaning of America.

(vii-viii)

I believe that the Narrative is the epitome of these thoughts. Americans today more than ever before, are preoccupied with their place in history. Every public figure's

home has become a historic site. Everything that bears any historical significance, whether a document or a piece of furniture is placed in a museum for public display. Americans have reasons to be proud of their history, but white Americans, especially, realize that slavery is not one of these reasons. On the contrary, it fills them with guilt. They try to learn as much as they can about it, they turn against their ancestors, they defend black rights, they find "proper" terms to refer to their black fellow-citizens. Most of all, they want to undo the wrongs and injustices of the past. A book like the Narrative and a figure as powerful as Frederick Douglass make them feel that they share the blame. Put together, the words "American Slave" are the evidence of "a social conscience that still pricks white America after one hundred fifty years" (Doyle 83).

Studying American literature in the States, I had the opportunity to experience signs of this conscience in the culture I lived in, the language of the books I was reading, and, as a whole, in the American academic world. Frederick Douglass' Narrative gave me the opportunity to synthesize and utilize what I have learned about American literature so far. I believe, however, that literature offers little to the reader if taken only in its particular aesthetic context. In the case of the Narrative, I found it necessary to examine not only Douglass' intentions for writing his story, but also the effect of the book on people, both as individuals and groups.

For me, the Narrative also offers a glimpse of the modern American society and its way of thinking. It serves as an example of the cultural diversity in this country and assures all of us that it is never too late to start respecting each other and ourselves.



## Notes

<sup>1</sup>Wayne Mixon's "The Shadow of Slavery: Frederick Douglass, the Savage South, and the Next Generation" discusses Douglass' ideas about the South after the Reconstruction period. In this period, we can argue that Douglass does become defensive about the South.

<sup>2</sup>Edward Dupuy's "Linguistic Mastery and the Garden of the Chattel in Frederick Douglass' Narrative" provides an extensive analysis of the description of the garden and treats it as another version of the Garden of Eden.

<sup>3</sup>In her article "Biblical Allusion and Imagery in Frederick Douglass' Narrative," Lisa Margaret Zeitz isolates several biblical references in the book and discusses them in detail.

<sup>4</sup>In his article "Frederick Douglass' 1845 Narrative: The Text Was Meant to Be Preached," Robert O'Meally argues that the Narrative is a black sermon and Douglass' message is that of a black preacher.

<sup>5</sup>I believe that questions of this nature miss the point. They distract the critic from looking at the work for what it offers to literature, and they merely resort to a classification in terms of literary genres.

<sup>6</sup>In her article "Language in Slavery: Frederick Douglass's Narrative," Ann Kibbey sees the Nantucket convention, the last event described in the Narrative, as the

point where the narrator and persona of Douglass become one.

<sup>7</sup>Even in the early English novels, we see the intention of the writer to convince the reader that the events narrated in the book are indeed history and not fiction.

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