Names and Terms

John Locke, *Second Treatises of Government* (1690)
ontological individualism / possessive individualism
Orlando Patterson, *Slavery and Social Death*
social death

Points to Remember

• Douglass’s work and career, like those of his fellow escaped slaves and abolition workers, pose deep questions about the meaning of “America.” They bring up the issues that the Declaration of Independence conjures up but ultimately shies away from addressing. They ask what the terms “freedom” and “equality” can mean in a country that practices slavery.

• When it was published in 1845, the 125-page *Narrative*, offered for 50 cents, was enormously popular, selling some 30,000 copies in the United States and Europe within five years, and soon translated into French and German. Its gripping story, along with Douglass’s commandingly original voice, immediately distinguished it from most slave narratives that had appeared by this time. The *Narrative* exemplifies the purpose of testimony by former slaves: it shows us the spiritual survival of the black family and community despite the oppression of plantation life, while exploring the means by which dehumanization can be overcome and by which political and cultural power can be gained.

• Two later versions: *My Bondage and My Freedom* (1855) and *The Life and Times of Frederick Douglass* (1881).

• Douglass’s self-naming (p. 2122) as emblematic: appropriates the powers of white culture (here represented by Sir Walter Scott) in order to oppose that culture.

• Two selves at work in Douglass’s Narrative: a Jonathan Edwards-self and a Benjamin Franklin-self.

The Edwards-self follows a developmental history that leads from Christian enlightenment, to the establishment of Sabbath schools for fellow slaves, to a career of messianic service on behalf of abolitionism. The central moment of Douglass’s religious development is the fight with Mr. Covey (p. 2101): “You have seen how a man was made a slave; you shall see how a slave was made a man.” For Douglass, the fight marks “a glorious resurrection, from the tomb of slavery, to the heaven of freedom” (p. 2104).

Douglass’s Sabbath school: “The work of instructing my dear fellow-slaves was the sweetest engagement with which I ever was blessed. We loved each other. . . . Every moment they spent in that school, they were liable to be taken up and given thirty-nine lashes. They came
because they wished to learn. I taught them, because it was the delight of my soul to be doing something that looked like bettering the condition of my race” (p. 2108).

The Franklin-self: secular, literate, and follows a course dictated by the economics of slavery. Both Franklin’s and Douglass’s lives are marked by the rise from obscurity to renown, the bondage to a kinsman, and the self-education of the young man are suggestively parallel events in the two lives. Franklin’s life can be viewed as parallel and progenitor to many of the slave narratives in its emphasis on personal freedom, its espousal of hand work and industriousness, and its announcement of lowly origins are hallmarks of both works.

At what moments, do these two selves seem to be intertwined. For example, part of Douglass’s literary education involves reading the Bible.

Alain Locke, an African American critic who was an influential force in the Harlem Renaissance during the early part of this century, called Douglass “a sort of Negro edition of Ben Franklin.”

However, just as Phillis Wheatley both exemplifies and exceeds the marginal status of the eighteenth-century poet, so too does Douglass far outstrip Franklin in terms of lowly origins: 1) .Franklin’s genealogy vs. Douglass’s lack of genealogy; 2) Franklin’s autodidacticism is difficult; Douglass’s is illegal.

- Relation of literacy and rhetorical education to Douglass’s pursuit of freedom: Hugh Auld’s prohibition (p. 2086); importance of The Columbian Orator (p. 2089).

- The Narrative as a self-consciously literary text. By its existence, it refutes the argument that African Americans are intellectually inferior. See, for example, the "apostrophe" at Chesapeake Bay (p. 2100).

- Douglass and possessive individualism: because the slave does not own himself, he or she suffers what the sociologist Orlando Patterson describes as “social death.” The liberating experience of wage labor for the slave: it leads Douglass to value individualistic, economic enterprise. Douglass’s achievement of the status of contracting agent is signified by the inclusion of his marriage certificate in the text.

- In the introduction to My Bondage and My Freedom, James McCune Smith described Douglass as “a Representative American man—a type of his countrymen.” The goal of Douglass’s Narrative is not to tear down the foundations of nineteenth-century individualism, but to point out its internal contradictions and compromises, to extend its benefits to all, to finish the work begun by the Declaration of Independence. Douglass’s goal is not to subvert American culture; his goal is to perfect it.

- Compare the prefatory letters by Garrison and Phillips to the materials that frame Rowlandson’s narrative and that precede Wheatley’s volume of poetry? What does Douglass’s relation to his horizon of expectations share with the relation of those writers to theirs?
• What are the limitations of Douglass’s imagination? For example, what does the repeated evocation of “manhood” indicate about the assumptions about gender that underlie his narrative? Think, for example, about the relative importance given to his wife and his marriage? Think again, in this case, about what the reproduction of the marriage certificate indicates.

• How would you respond to critics who suggest that Douglass has traded one form of slavery for another by adopting the economic system of the North (with what critics called its “wage slavery”)?

**Today’s Songs**

“Chimes of Freedom,” by Bob Dylan, performed by 1) Bob Dylan; 2) Bruce Springsteen and the E Street Band
“Stay Free,” The Clash