

Discussion Guide

Frederick Douglass, *Narrative of the Life of Frederick Douglass*

Introduction

Frederick Douglass composed three autobiographies over the course of his life, the *Narrative* being the first and most widely read. The *Narrative* follows the conventions of what is known as the genre of the “slave narrative.” Hundreds of slave narratives were published in the North during the nineteenth-century. Citizens who read them bolstered their abolitionist sentiments by being exposed to first-person accounts of slavery’s harms. Though some Northern citizens encountered escaped or freed slaves, their conceptions of enslaved persons’ lives were often incomplete and distorted. Enslaved persons provided testimony drawn from lived experience, with slavery’s harms witnessed, internalized, and given expression.

“Shine a Light” proceeds on the assumption that the first step in broadening and deepening our conceptions of U.S. racism is to listen carefully—with compassion and critical thought—to what those most affected by racist ideologies have to say to us. It is *understanding* that we are after.

Reading Douglass

Narrative of the Life of Frederick Douglass holds special interest to St. Albans’ readers, not only because we witness innumerable transgressions of Christian precepts by white enslavers, but also because Douglass spends important time commenting on the hypocrisy of the nineteenth-century Southern church.

In addition to Douglass’s testimony about the church, readers will likely be taken by the sheer detail of enslaved life that Douglass provides. He leaves no aspect of enslaved life—its social arrangements, its familial core, its attempt to obfuscate identity, its cruelty—unaccounted for. Many readers report that they feel overwhelmed, especially at a first reading, by Douglass’s sharp descriptions of enslavement’s horrors.

No feature of Douglass’s writing is off-limits for our discussion. Our interests in his work will vary, and it’s important to articulate what matters to us as contemporary readers, especially as we may struggle to fully comprehend this peculiar world.

Questions for Discussion: Part I | Wednesday, Feb 25 (pages 1–14)

1. Douglass has been described as an early sociologist of sorts. He is methodical, observant, and detailed in his depictions of life on the Wye plantation. He makes it clear that though he is documenting his own experiences, he is speaking on behalf of other enslaved persons. He focuses on persons who fuel the profit-making machine of an enormous farm (the field slaves, the house servants, the overseer, the slave-breaker, etc.). As a child, Douglass knows no other environment. Knowing that Douglass is writing the narrative as a 35-year-old adult, what can you infer about the effects of his childhood experiences on him? We might begin by locating what he pays most attention to, what he frequently calls to our attention.
2. Douglass refers to the presence of the Christian church in nineteenth-century planters’ territories. How does he describe his experience of Christianity as an enslaved person?

3. Many readers notice the theme of *literacy* that runs through Douglass's representation of his childhood and adolescence. Some readers point out that his studying *The Columbian Orator*, the primary textbook on public writing and speaking used in nineteenth-century education, was key in Douglass's development as a public intellectual. Can you locate passages that demonstrate for you Douglass's particular skills as a writer? Try to say what you find especially powerful about these passages.
4. If you were to speak to a friend about how your experience of reading this first section of the *Narrative* enhances your understanding of enslaved life in the United States, where would you begin?

Questions for Discussion: Part 2 | Wednesday, March 4 (pages 14 –23)

1. Recall Douglass's depictions of violence done to enslaved persons. The whippings, the banging and battering of heads, the stripping of clothes—each irrevocably polluting the environment of the farm. One could say that the primary purpose of such behaviors was to assert white power. (Recall that what farmers feared most was potential rebellion and insurrection by their laborers). Some readers find that the psychological and physical harms perpetrated on enslaved persons is deeply rooted in a pervasive *sadism*, passed down by example from generation to generation, a pathological vein that runs through white's treatments of Blacks. How might characterizing excessive violence as sadistic help us to better understand the white racism evident here?
2. Recall Douglass's encounter with Mr. Covey. Douglass tells us that "This battle with Mr. Covey was the turning-point in my career as a slave. It rekindled the few expiring embers of freedom, and revived within me a sense of my own manhood" (42). Douglass treats the experience as a hinge moment: before his triumph, he felt less than a man; after it, he comes into his own manhood. Given the way that "manhood" and its associated behaviors were understood in the nineteenth-century (and may continue to similarly be understood by some contemporary Americans), what would you say are the strengths and limits of connecting manhood to physical prowess? Why might Mr. Covey's retreat be especially meaningful for Douglass?
3. Some say that unless and until Americans, regardless of race or ethnicity, take the time to study our history of enslavement, we won't fully understand how racialization affected nearly every aspect of life in the U.S. Do you agree? Why so? What's unique to historical information in enhancing our understanding? As we move forward in our study of U.S. racialization, what aspects of Douglass's work do you want to make sure to take with you?