

Text: *Narrative of the Life of Frederick Douglass,*
an American Slave, Written by Himself

Passage: “He [the slave] must be able to detect no inconsistencies in slavery; he must be made to feel that slavery is right; and he can be brought to that only when he ceases to be a man”
(Douglass 2084).

Question: How does Douglass use the recurring theme of the slaveholder’s necessity to keep slaves ignorant to highlight why many slaves do not seek freedom?

Issue: Issue of cause and effect. The question relates to what slaveholders believe would happen if slaves were not kept in the dark about matters that concern them. Slaveholders believe the effect of knowledge gained by slaves would cause the slaves to seek freedom.

Critical Approach: Post-colonial criticism is the most appropriate approach since the question deals with the oppression of slaves. Since slaves are treated like property, both slaves and slaveholders view them as an inferior race.

Answer: Douglass repeats the theme showing how slaves become complacent in their lives, becoming so caught up in their daily tasks that they have no time to even contemplate an alternative. By keeping the slaves life steady and predictable, the slave owners continuously squelched any hope of the slave bringing about change in his future.

During the few time that slaveholders do offer “freedom” it is given in such a way that slaves cannot appreciate or enjoy it, such as the time between Christmas and New Years when slaves were encouraged to drink so heavily that they are ready to return to life in the fields.

Additionally, since so many slaves become families – either by blood or common slaveholder – the bonds between them become so strong that they do not want to break their families up. Lacking the ability to read or write, gaining freedom by a large group of slaves seems unlikely.

By keeping knowledge from the slave, even simple knowledge such as the year of his birth, the slave becomes less of a person – his soul can only be dehumanized so many times before the fight is taken out of him. It is through Douglass' quest for knowledge and his desire to fight for his freedom (both literally and figuratively) that he becomes part of the small percentage of slaves who gains his freedom.