

First & Last Name

Professor Martin

American Literature

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Text: *Narrative in the Life of Frederick Douglass*

Passage: “I remember the first time I ever witnessed this horrible exhibition. I was quite a child, but I well remember it. I never shall forget it whilst I remember any thing. It was the first of a long series of such outrages, of which I was doomed to be a witness and a participant. It struck me with awful force. It was the blood-stained gate, the entrance to the hell of slavery, through which I was about to pass. It was a most terrible spectacle. I wish I could commit to paper the feelings with which I beheld it” (Douglass 2042).

Question: How does Frederick Douglass direct his narrative to target the *pathos* (Garrison 2036) and *sublimity* (Garrison 2036) of his audience in an attempt to persuade them to join his crusade for *negro emancipation* (Garrison 2032) through the abolishment of slavery in every state in the union?

Issue: Issue of Cause and Effect. Douglass’ motives are originally discovered in the *Preface* written by William Lloyd Garrison and in the letter written to Douglass by his friend Wendell Phillips. Both of these men were defined as abolitionist of the time who supported and encouraged Douglass to speak out with the objective of *enlightening minds on the subject of slavery* (Garrison 2033) and to depict the *cruel and blighting death that gathers over his* (slave)

soul (Phillips 2038). Given that the author's cause is provided for the reader, it leaves him/her to focus on determining whether Douglass' method is effective in supporting his declared cause.

Critical Approach: The Reader Response approach is the most suitable analysis tool in this circumstance. Douglass appears to be trying to clear up any misconceptions his readers may harbor regarding slavery. He narrates his experience of slavery as one of repulsion that includes many bloody scenes. He illustrates the darkness of slavery through his tale of how slaves including him suffer many hardships including being *kept ignorant, experience unhappiness even in their childhood, are deprived of privileges, and are commonly separated in infancy from their mothers in attempt to bluntly destroy the natural affection of a mother for her child* (Douglass 2040). In an effort to translate to the reader the character of the slave masters and overseers such as Plummer, he reveals them as *cruel savage monsters with iron hearts* who display acts of *extraordinary barbarity while seemingly taking great pleasure in the act of whipping till the slaves are literally covered with blood* (Douglass 2042). Douglass enlightens the reader of the meager existence he endured as a trite and sleep deprived slave whose only compensation was a minimal allowance of food, nominal coarse clothing, and a single miserable coarse blanket allotment in lieu of a bed.

In his attempt to further unravel misconceptions of the reader, he exposes the irony of the songs that the slaves sing that have been posed as *evidence to their contentment and happiness* (Douglass 2046). His desire to explain the songs so that they can, "...*impress some minds with the horrible character of slavery, more than the reading of whole volumes of philosophy on the subject could do*" (Douglass 2045), comes to fruition as he explains the "*tale of woe that is breathed the prayer and complaint of souls boiling over with the bitterest anguish,*" (Douglass 2045) encompassed within them. Through his analysis of the songs the reader can see that "*every*

tone was a testament against slavery, and a prayer to God for deliverance from chains (Douglass 2045). He connects the reader's experience with his own *ineffable sadness* as he/she discovers the *dehumanizing character* and *the soul-killing effects of slavery* as ironical lyrics sung to relieve the slaves' pain through their only allowed expression of feelings; song (Douglass 2045).

Answer: Douglass' factual narrative account of events in his life, as he witness as a slave, is triumphant in inviting the reader to join him at the *blood-stained gate of hell* and transporting them all the way down into the vilest pits of slavery (Douglas 2042). The candor of the text guides the readers' journey and expels the desired response from him/her through an appeal to their pathos and sublimity. Douglass adequately addresses many predispositions that his reader may have previously held regarding the institution of slavery. It is feasible that a common response would emerge from his readers through the virtual experience of reading his biographical account as one of sympathy followed directly by a strong repugnance of slavery.