

*Irony in Narrative of the Life of Frederick Douglass, An American Slave*

*Narrative of the Life of Frederick Douglass, an American Slave* is rife with irony, a powerful rhetorical device that uses words to convey the opposite meaning of that which is actually stated and often includes approbatory language that implies condemnation or contempt. This essay explores Douglass' use of irony to denounce the institution of slavery, expose its participants, and criticize its proponents. "In this confrontation, [he] ... shakes the foundation of one of the primary undergirding social, political and economic structures of nineteenth century American culture—the white Christian churches" (Carson 19). He achieves this, first, by employing irony to draw parallels between the master-slave relationship and God-man relationship. Second, he uses irony to examine how Christian precepts and tenets were manipulated and misused to sanction white supremacy. And, third, he employs irony to juxtapose the civility of Black slaves with the barbarity of their white slaveowners as a way of undermining the widespread belief that Blacks are inherently dangerous and inferior and only able to be controlled through an ironfisted institution such as slavery. Remarkably, Douglass—a self-professed American slave—manages to harness the power of irony to lay bare his convictions while navigating the "tactical confinement" (Burns 83) of writing "his narrative of liberation ... from the same white society whose language he must borrow" (84). Ultimately, this paper seeks to prove that Douglass, perhaps most poignantly uses irony to defend the very religion he, at first blush, appears to condemn by acknowledging the paradoxical difference between how Christianity is presented to the world versus how mankind chooses to use it.

Foundational to the institution of slavery is the interplay of power and submission. Positioning themselves as "masters," white Southerners claim lordship over their slaves and endow themselves with the ability to establish the often arbitrary rules to which their slaves are

subject as well as the authority to unilaterally decide when those rules are transgressed and what the punishment for that transgression will be. There are many examples of this dynamic at play in Douglass' slave narrative. One is that of the author's account of Colonel Lloyd's stable and carriage houses, tended to by father and son slaves—old Barney and young Barney. Colonel Lloyd is particular about how his horses are cared for and, consequently, any suspicion of inattention by the Barneys is met with swift and severe punishment:

They never knew when they were safe from punishment. They were frequently whipped when least deserving, and escaped whipping when most deserving it. Everything depended upon ... the state of Colonel Lloyd's own mind ... no matter how unjust, the slave must answer never a word. Colonel Lloyd could not brook any contradiction from a slave. When he spoke, a slave must stand, listen, and tremble. (344)

With no discernible rhyme or reason to the Colonel's dissatisfaction and ire or his meting of mercy and discipline, the two slaves are reduced to blindly obeying an interminable list of commandments and submitting to an uncontestable higher power with the self-appointed authority to pardon or penalize. This exploitive power struggle between a supreme being and his inert subjects, at its core, is central to both the master-slave relationship and the God-man relationship. "Both demand obedience. Both punish failure to obey, [and] the position of both rests on the assumption that the universe is and ought to be hierarchically structured" (Peysner 87). Like all slaves, Douglass suffers tremendously as a result of being on the losing end of the power struggle. But his mistreatment at the hands of his white masters does not appear to dampen his trust in God or his belief in God's presence and active involvement in his life. For instance, Douglass calls his move from Colonel Lloyd's plantation "... a special interposition of divine Providence in [his] favor" (350). As a child, he alone, is chosen from a number of

other slaves to move to Baltimore to serve Mr. and Mrs. Auld. Some might call the change coincidence or luck; others may have seen it for what it likely is—a business deal between slave owners, but Douglass credits God, believing that every living thing is subject to his sovereign will. In addition to God's predestiny, Douglass also believes in God's palpable and ever-present help even in the most hopeless circumstances. He draws strength from Biblical scriptures as well as from the Spirit of God, crediting them for buoying him. He recalls, "in the darkest hours of my career in slavery, this living word of faith and spirit of hope departed not from me, but remained like ministering angels to cheer me through the gloom. This good spirit was from God, and to him I offer thanksgiving and praise" (350).

Douglass' representation of Christianity as both the cause of American slavery through the endowment of power to Southern slaveowners and the source of his freedom is an irony that plays out repeatedly in his narrative. Ultimately, he uses parallels between the master-slave and God-human relationships as a springboard to advocate for self-sovereignty. Man's best and quickest path to freedom, he contends, is to become his own master. The author, perhaps first, awakens to this realization as a young boy when Mrs. Auld, his new mistress, not yet corrupted by "the fatal poison of irresponsible power" (351), takes it upon herself to teach him how to read and write. When Mr. Auld discovers their lessons, he forbids his wife to continue, warning her that a slave that can read will become as unsafe as he is unmanageable. He asserts that "a nigger should know nothing but to obey his master—to do as he is told to do" (351). His master's words stir something deep within Douglass, calling into existence a different way of thinking that proves revelatory. He understands that the white man's ability to subjugate Blacks is wholly dependent on the latter's dependence and ignorance. Conversely, he also realizes that "the pathway from slavery to freedom" (351) is knowledge. What results is Douglass' single-minded

determination to teach himself to read. Without his mistress' aid, he takes his education into his own hands, tricking the poor, neighboring white children into giving him lessons in exchange for bread. As Douglass slowly metamorphosizes into his own master by advancing his own education, the truth of his circumstances unfolds before him. "The more I read, the more I was led to abhor and detest my enslavers. I could regard them in no other light than a band of successful robbers, who had left their homes, and gone to Africa, and stolen us from our homes, and in a strange land reduced us to slavery" (354).

Douglass' conviction to take the reins of his own life only deepens as he gets older. After an especially brutal stint with Mr. Covey, Douglass is sent to live with Mr. William Freeland, a slave owner with a number of redeeming qualities, the most notable of which is his utter lack of piety and religion. Having had his body beaten and his spirit broken by Mr. Covey, respected within the community as God-fearing man, Douglass reaches the conclusion that religious slaveholders are the worst. "I have ever found them the meanest and basest, the most cruel and cowardly, of all others" (371). Compared to his treatment while living on Covey's plantation, Douglass describes his time with Mr. Freeland as heavenly. He admits that Freeland is the best of all his masters, save for one: himself. "I will give Mr. Freeland the credit of being the best master I ever had, *till I became my own master*" (373). It's worth noting that Douglass' desire to be his own master is in itself an irony. It opposes both the power struggle that defines American slavery as well as the power structure that is central to the Christian tenet of mankind as a submissive to God's sovereign and divine authority.

Another use of irony in Douglass' slave narrative is as an exploration of how Christianity, a religion that espouses grace and love, is used in the Antebellum South to allow for the abuse and exploitation of slaves, while sanctioning the cruelty of white slaveowners. As a

rule, Southern whites and their brand of Christianity stand in stark contrast to what Douglass refers to as "... the pure, peaceable, and impartial Christianity of Christ" (389). With regard to slaveowners, he characterizes Christianity as nothing more than a shield behind which they justify and rationalize slavery and its accompanying atrocities.

I assert most unhesitatingly, that the religion of the south is a mere covering for the most horrid crimes, —a justifier of the most appalling barbarity,—a sanctifier of the most hateful frauds, —and a dark shelter under, which the darkest, foulest, grossest, and most infernal deeds of slaveholders find the strongest protection. (371)

Though whites make a show of upholding the religious practices of praying, attending church, holding revivals, singing hymns, and reading the Bible, they not only live contradictorily to their professed faith, but they also use their religion to justify their evil deeds. Douglass denounces their faith as "... the corrupt slaveholding, women-whipping, cradle-plundering, partial and hypocritical Christianity of this land" (389). He also likens white Southerners who own and abuse slaves but profess to be followers of Christ to Pharisees, a sect of Jews in the Old Testament whose system of religion is characterized by outward form more so than genuine faith.

Captain Auld serves as just one example of a false Christian who uses religion to sanction his sins. Douglass recounts Auld's treatment of a female slave:

I have seen him tie up a lame young woman, and whip her with a heavy cowskin upon her naked shoulders, causing the warm red blood to drip; and in justification of the bloody deed, he would quote this passage of Scripture—"He that knoweth his master's will, and doeth it not, shall be beaten with many stripes." (361)

The irony, as Douglass points out, is that Captain Auld grows crueler after experiencing religion at a Methodist camp-meeting. Douglass initially holds out hope that Captain Auld's conversion is genuine but soon discovers that religion has "... made him more cruel and hateful in all his ways" (360). Douglass reasons this is because before finding religion, Auld can only look to his own sinful nature to condone his indefensible actions. However, after his conversion, he is emboldened by the belief that his behavior is permitted by God. Consequently, his barbarity toward his slaves intensifies, even as his role and status within the church grows. Of this incongruity, Douglass notes:

He made the greatest pretensions to piety. His house was the house of prayer. He prayed morning, noon, and night. He very soon distinguished himself among his brethren, and was soon made a class-leader and exhorter. His activity in revivals was great, and he proved himself an instrument in the hands of the church in converting many souls. His house was the preachers' home. (360-361)

Edward Covey, to whom Douglass' Master Thomas, lends or rents Douglass for one year, is another example of religious incongruity. He is simultaneously a professor of religion, a leader of the Methodist church, and a reputed "nigger-breaker" (362). He earns himself this title among the other slaveowners by breaking or taming into submission young, obdurate slaves. But, Covey, much like Auld before him, can only occupy the disparate and conflicting roles of devout Christian and merciless slaveowner by conforming his Christian teachings to validate his decidedly un-Christian ways. Covey lives up to his name as a soul-crusher. For months, he overworks, half-starves, and brutally beats Douglass, who eventually concedes to being broken in mind, body, and soul. At the same time Covey abuses his slaves, however, he carries himself as an exceedingly righteous man. He prays in the morning and again at night.

He hosts family devotionals. He leads his family and associates in signing hymns. But he does so beneath a shroud of deceit. Douglass, who is of the belief that one cannot be a participant or a proponent of slavery and a true Christian, concludes that Covey succeeds not only in deceiving others, but also in deceiving himself. “I do verily believe that he sometimes deceived himself into the solemn belief that he was a sincere worshipper of the most high God” (364).

A third use of irony is to juxtapose the civility of Black slaves with the barbarity of their white slaveowners as a way of undermining the widespread belief that Blacks are inherently dangerous and inferior and only able to be controlled through an ironfisted institution such as slavery. Henry and John Harris, Mr. Freeland’s only two slaves serve as examples of intelligent Blacks with a desire to learn. Fairly quickly, Douglass establishes a Sabbath school through which he, Henry and John, and a few slaves from neighboring farms convene secretly every Sunday, and he teaches them how to read and write. They are only able to meet because their masters believe they are whiling away the day “wrestling, boxing, and drinking whiskey” (372). Douglass points out that Southern white Christians would “much rather see [Blacks] engaged in ... degrading sports, than to see [them] behaving like intellectual, moral, and accountable beings” (372). When their owners realize what the group is really doing, they rush into “the virtuous little Sabbath school” (372) like savages wielding primitive weapons, including sticks and stones, and put an end to their gatherings. Undeterred, Douglass finds a way to continue teaching, at one point nearly forty fellow slaves, of all ages, who desire to learn by holding meetings at the house of a free colored man. In doing so, he extends an act of truly altruistic, sacrificial love conspicuously unexhibited by a signal white Christian:

These dear souls came not to the Sabbath school because it was popular to do so, nor did I teach them because it was reputable to be thus engaged. ... They came because they wished to learn. Their minds had been starved by their cruel masters. They had been shut up in mental darkness. I taught them, because it was the delight of my soul to be doing something that looked like bettering the condition of my race. (373)

Throughout his narrative, Douglass pits Blacks' brand of Christianity—something he later refers to as Christianity proper—at odds with white slaveowners' brand of Christianity—something ultimately dismisses as Christianity of this land. The former's faith relies on a belief and a hope in God to see them through and ultimately deliver them from their oppressors. As an example, Douglass writes specifically about the spirituals slaves sing. "Every tone was a testimony against slavery, and a prayer to God for deliverance from chains" (343). Rather than foster resentment toward God, their suffering draws them closer to him. They do not blame him for their suffering, but instead look to him as a source of relief and redemption. Unlike their white owners, the slaves' put their profession of faith into practice, leading Douglass to call the other slaves in his community "...noble souls [who] not only possessed loving hearts, but brave ones" (373). Douglass and his fellow slaves confide in one another, uplift one another, and protect one another. He asserts, "I believe we would have died for each other" (373), a claim reminiscent of the New Testament scripture that reads, "Greater love has no one than this: to lay down one's life for one's friends" (*NIV Bible*, John 15.13) and, more importantly, alludes to the core Christian belief of Jesus' ultimate sacrifice of death on the cross.

Perhaps *the* key distinction between Douglass' Christianity and the Christianity of southern white slaveowners is relationship versus religion. Through his narrative Douglass



positions Christianity as belief founded upon and action rooted in a personal heart-transforming relationship with Jesus Christ. He does this by identifying God in the indelibly monumental as well as in the seemingly inconsequential. For Douglass, God is everywhere and in all things, including his circumstances, which are often inconceivably grim, and his internal condition, which, more often than not, reflects optimism and gratitude, but occasionally falls victim to bouts of anger and despondency. Still, even during his darkest hour as a slave, Douglass holds fast to his belief in the Almighty's ability to rescue him, at times addressing him directly and with confidence that God knows his plight and hears his pleas. "...with no audience but the Almighty, I would pour out my soul's complaint, in my rude way ... O God, save me! God, deliver me! Let me be free" (365)! Briefly, in the throes of desperation, he questions if he will ever be free. But his doubt proves fleeting, and his faith prevails. He concludes, "Yes! God helping me, I will" (365).

It's easy to point to Douglass' denouncement of the hypocritical religiosity associated with the white American church, the suffering it sanctioned, and the unjust institution it upheld and conclude that he outright rejects Christianity. Ironically, however, Douglass turns whites' perversion of Christian laws and love on its ear, using it instead as a measuring stick for what not to believe and how not to act. By positioning the religion's true form at odds with what whites depraved manipulation of it, Douglass readily distinguishes between how Christianity is presented to the world and how mankind chooses to use it. In the end, the author does not mince words. Christianity proper and Christianity of the land are not merely two different approaches to the same faith; they are fundamentally and diametrically opposed:

Between the Christianity of this land and the Christianity of Christ, I recognize the widest possible difference—so wide that to receive the one as good, pure, and holy, is

of necessity to be the enemy of the other. I love the pure, peaceable, and impartial Christianity of Christ: I therefore hate the corrupt slaveholding, women-whipping, cradle-plundering, partial and hypocritical Christianity of this land. (389)

Douglass goes so far as to liken religious Southern white slaveowners to the Old Testament Pharisees, whose faith is not a matter of an inward conversion but instead an elaborate display of pomp and pretension. Pulling from Old Testament scripture, Douglass uses Jesus' own words to the Pharisees to call out, condemn, and caution Southern white slave owners, the white American church, and their proponents: "All their works they do for to be seen of men ... Woe unto you scribes and Pharisees, hypocrites! ... Even so ye also outwardly appear righteous unto men, but within ye are full of hypocrisy and iniquity" (390).

Frederick Douglass' slave narrative employs irony, a powerful rhetorical device, in multiple ways to denounce slavery, expose its participants, and criticize its supporters. He achieves this by using irony to draw parallels between the master-slave relationship and God-man relationship; to examine how Christian precepts and tenets are manipulated and misused to sanction white supremacy; and to juxtapose Blacks' civility with whites' barbarity as a means of undermining the widespread beliefs that catalyze and later perpetuate the institution of slavery. Finally, Douglass employs irony to defend Christianity by making a clear distinction between how the religion is presented to the world and how the white American church chooses to use it.

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