

Professor Alice Fahs  
Humanities Core Course Study Questions, Winter 2014, Week 1

**Please note that there are separate sets of study questions below for the different readings assigned for this week.**

**Overview of Week 1 readings:**

This week we are first examining how Frederick Douglass mounts a "war against slavery" with his famous 1845 NARRATIVE. How does Douglass work to convince his readers of the cruelty and injustice of slavery? You will want to examine what Douglass tells us about the actual practices of slavery as well as the kinds of arguments he is making and techniques he is using in order to persuade his readers.

Next, we will be examining Douglass's most famous speech, delivered in 1852, as well as Douglass's writings after the outbreak of the Civil War in April 1861. How did the arguments he was making change over time and with the onset of war? What did he argue for and against? How did his style of argumentation change, if at all?

Finally, we will look at an article written by the escaped slave Harriet Jacobs--herself the author of a famous slave narrative--regarding the conditions of escaped slaves in Washington, D. C., during the Civil War.

**Study questions for Frederick Douglass, NARRATIVE OF THE LIFE OF FREDERICK DOUGLASS, AN AMERICAN SLAVE (1845).**

Why does the NARRATIVE include a Preface by William Lloyd Garrison and a Letter from Wendell Phillips? Both men were prominent abolitionists of the day. How does this prefatory material establish Douglass's authority? Do you think that having such prominent men "vouch" for Douglass undermines his authority in any way?

Within the text (starting with Chapter 1), how does Douglass establish his own authority--his believability as narrator? How does he tell his story so that we trust his account?

How is Douglass's experience of slavery different in different locations? Under different masters and mistresses? In the country or in the city of Baltimore? Conversely, what is universal to his experience of slavery in all of these locations?

What role does violence play in Douglass's NARRATIVE?

What does Douglass have to say about his experience of being in a family? What views does he articulate about the possibilities of forming slave families? How important is family to Douglass? What kinds of "alternative families" does he form?

What, in Frederick Douglass's view, were the most effective forms of resistance he engaged in while still a slave? To answer this question, you will of course need to define what is meant by "resistance," to explain the forms of resistance available to slaves, and to explain how resistance to slavery played a role in Douglass's life as a slave.

Why was reading so important to Frederick Douglass? What did it mean to him? How did reading play a role in his life as a slave? How does the importance he ascribed to reading shape his narrative?

How is the experience of slavery gendered in Douglass's text? That is, how is it experienced differently by men and by women according to Douglass, and why? What is instead universal in the experience of slavery according to Douglass?

How are manhood and womanhood defined differently in Douglass's narrative? What does manhood mean to Douglass? Why was it so important to him? In Chapter X, Douglass says that his "battle with Mr. Covey was the turning-point in my career as a slave." Why? Analyze this incident.

Is there one single argument Douglass makes against slavery, or does he offer a collection of arguments?

How does Douglass structure his narrative to offer the most powerful possible argument or set of arguments against slavery?

Do you think that an autobiography like Douglass's NARRATIVE can be trusted as a good historical source? What are the strengths and limitations of autobiography as historical evidence?

How does Douglass explain his escape from slavery?

What does Douglass NOT tell you that you are curious to know? Where are the "silences" in his text? What do you wish you could ask him after having read the *Narrative*?

Is religion important to Douglass? How is religion discussed throughout the NARRATIVE? Pay special attention to Douglass's discussion of religion in the Appendix. Why does he include this "extra" chapter not directly related to his life story?

Is the NARRATIVE a work of literature or a work of history? Or both? Why?

### **Study questions for Frederick Douglass's 1852 speech "What to the Slave Is the Fourth of July?"**

This 1852 speech--considered Douglass's greatest--is notable for its repetitive use of "you" throughout. Why did Douglass make this rhetorical choice and how effective is it? Likewise, how effective do you find his use of Biblical language in this speech?

What praise does he initially offer the signers of the Declaration of Independence and why?

What does he say his own feelings are about a 4th of July celebration, and why? What is his own answer to the question he poses in the speech's title?

How does Douglass employ history in his speech? What is his analysis of the Declaration of Independence and the Constitution in relation to slavery?

What hope does he offer in the final passages of his speech for the end of slavery?

### **Study questions for Douglass's Civil War writings from *Douglass's Monthly*:**

"How to End the War," May 1861

"Fighting Rebels with Only One Hand," September 1861

"What Shall Be Done with the Slaves if Emancipated?", January 1862

"Why Should a Colored Man Enlist?", April 1863

What are the various arguments Douglass makes in these short articles published during the Civil War itself? What does he agitate for in each piece? How do his arguments and calls for action shift over time, and why? To what audience is he directing each article?

### **Study questions for Harriet Jacobs, "Life Among the Contrabands," Sept. 5, 1862**

What does Harriet Jacobs show us about the treatment of escaped slaves in Washington, D. C.? What role does the American government play in the lives of former slaves?

What is Jacobs lobbying for? What is the purpose of this exposé of the conditions of "contrabands" in Washington, D.C.?

What is Jacobs's own view of the escaped slaves she visits? How optimistic is she about their future?