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“Close reading analysis”

In the *Narrative of the Life of Frederick Douglass*, Frederick Douglass explicitly mentions that he withholds details of his escape North for fear that slave holders would prevent slaves from escaping. Because Douglass shows that slavery damages the black psyche through brutal acts of physical, emotional, and mental torture, the system of slavery eventually took a toll against the enslaved. Therefore, it was necessary that Frederick Douglass withhold details of his escape North in order to give other slaves a chance at escaping and obtaining the freedom they rightfully deserve.

When Douglass makes his claim about his escape North, he explicitly makes known that he is withholding information. He provides two reasons as to why he felt it was necessary to withhold information; the first, the slaveholders would find out about their escape plans and make their plans of carrying out the actions difficult for them. The second, it would “induce greater vigilance on the part of slaveholder... guarding a door whereby some dear brother bondman might escape his galling chains” (106). Throughout all of the sections in his narrative—his upbringing, his suffering, escape, and his freedom—Douglass only withholds information in this one section, which shows that he is aware that his audience is still slaveholders, the people who are oppressing the slaves he hopes to free. Because the slaves have endured so much suffering, he hopes that by withholding information about his escape he would give them a chance at obtaining freedom.

Though he withholds details about his escape North, Douglass explains in detail to his audience the kind of physical torture the slaves endure; slaves were often punished by being whipped with a cow skin and a heavy cudgel (44). They would receive these forms of punishment for disobeying, for being difficult to the overseer/owners, and in some cases out of pleasure by the overseers for no reason at all. Douglass recalls the horror of a time when his aunt was whipped, saying “The louder she screamed, the harder he whipped; and where the blood ran fastest, there he whipped longest. He would whip her to make her scream, and whip her to make hush” (45). Slaves were also punished for being difficult to their masters for not working up to their standards. An example of this is an instance Douglass recalls when his owner’s wife, Mrs. Hamilton, blew the cow skin over the head or shoulders of the female house slaves for not moving ‘fast enough’; she would yell, “Take that, you *black gip*!—continuing, “If you don’t move faster, I’ll move you!” (65). In addition to these cruel lashings, the slaves were kept nearly half starved.

Furthermore, Douglass explains in the narrative that slaves were at times whipped solely for what he described to be for the overseer’s own pleasure. Douglass explains in chapter three that Colonel Lloyd’s three sons—Edward, Murray, and Daniel—and his three son-in-law who all lived at the Great House Farm “enjoyed the luxury of whipping the servants when they pleased” (53). The reason why the suffering the slaves endured was so heinous and inhumane was because many of their punishments were not justified. Douglass adds, “They were frequently whipped when least deserving” (53). Likewise, “No matter how innocent a slave might be… To be accused was to be convicted, and to be convicted was to be punished” (56). As a result, the fear of torture kept the slaves oppressed.

Douglass shows that when one is physically tortured, they are mentally tortured as well. As he explains in chapter three, many slaves were constrained to report being contented with their life and their masters, for fear of being punished—although some slaves spoke truthfully about their master’s kindness, others would only feel obliged to lie about the kindness of their masters. In addition, Douglass recalls a time when a slave spoke the truth about his dissatisfied conditions under Colonel Lloyd, and not knowing he was speaking to Colonel Lloyd himself, that same slave ended up being sold to a Georgia trader (54). It was also common for slaves to become competitive and prejudiced when it came to their masters, and such case led to psychologically disturbing situations where slaves would feel compelled to wager whose Master was more socio-economically privileged than another’s, because they had this belief that “the greatness of their masters was transferable to themselves” (55). Another form of mental torture is when Douglass’s master Auld decides to rent Douglass to Edward Covey, a man that has a “very high reputation for breaking young slaves” (79) for one year as punishment. Douglass goes on to explain how it was while he was enslaved under Covey where he was broken in body, soul, and spirit. During his year-long stay at Edward Covey’s, Douglass recalls how Covey made him and the other slaves work in all weather. Douglass writes, “It was never too hot or too cold; it could never rain, blow, hail, or snow, too hard for us to work in the field… The longest days were too short for him, and the shortest nights too long for him” (83). Douglass depicts this mental exhaustion in order to show how mental torture plays a role in the master-slave power dynamic.

Despite showing their suffering, Douglass humanizes the slaves by showing the emotional suffrage the slaves endure. Douglass explains that slaves who were born due to rape by the master usually ends up suffering greater hardships because they are a “constant offence to their mistress” (43). Moreover, “The master is frequently compelled to sell this class of his slaves, out of deference to the feelings of his white wife” (43). Douglass goes on to add, “they can seldom do anything to please her… she is never pleased than when she sees them under the lash” (43). Although these slaves are at no fault, the master’s wrongdoings causes the slaves to be separated and sold away from their biological parents, to spare the feelings of the mistress.

When Douglass’s mother passes away he explains missing out on her ‘soothing presence’ and ‘tender and watchful care’, provoking the kind of feelings associated with our being. However, when Douglass says about his own mother’s death: “I received the tidings of her death with much the same emotions I should have probably felt at the death of a stranger” (43), it dehumanizes slaves to a much degraded level of existence. While Douglass’s diction brings about the pathos in this section, his sentimental rhetoric reveals the true inhumanity of slavery.

Appealing to humanity, Douglass shows the kinds of suffering the slaves endure; the physical, mental, and emotional torture that damaged the black psyche. Through such inhumane, and often unjustified torture, slavery as a system dehumanizes the enslaved, depriving the enslaved of human qualities, personalities, and spirit. As Douglass writes in his narrative, he was broken in body, soul, and spirit (83). This, in turn, eventually took a toll against Frederick

Douglass and pushed him to escape North to his freedom. That is why it was necessary that Douglass withheld details about his escape North, so that other slaves have a chance at escaping and obtaining the freedom they rightfully deserved.

# Bibliography

Douglass, F. (1845). *Narrative Of The Life Of Frederick Douglass.* Boston: Bedfordstmartins.