

# A Challenge to Power: Thoreau and Douglass' Writings on Institutes of Power and Slavery

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**Abstract:** Henry David Thoreau (1817-1862) and Frederick Douglass (1818-1895) were contemporaries who both wrote autobiographies about their experiences during a transformative time in American history. On the surface, these two men's autobiographies have virtually nothing in common. They are set in completely different areas of the country. Thoreau's *Walden* takes place during a two-year, two-month, and two-day stay (compressed into a one-year narrative) in the woods near Concord, Massachusetts. On the other hand, Douglass' autobiography, *The Narrative of the Life of Frederick Douglass: An American Slave Written by Himself*, spans several decades and is set in a variety of locations, to include a plantation in the South and the urban city of Baltimore. Moreover, Thoreau writes his narrative from the position of a free, white, privileged, formally educated (Harvard graduate) male elite; whereas, Douglass's narrative is told from the worldview of a black, former slave without a formal education or prestigious family background.

While these men, in many ways, were polar opposites, if one scratches below the surface of their autobiographies, it becomes clear that these two men shared much in common with one another. Both were committed to the ideals that were revolutionary for their time. Their autobiographies paint pictures of progressive men who dared to challenge the status quo, rethink old institutes and stereotypes, question institutes of power and influence, and respect and regard all people as equal and worthy of dignity and respect. Moreover, both narratives show men who looked towards a higher power – whether that be nature, the Christian God, or the virtue of humankind – as a guiding principle, a source of truth, and a way of spreading their message of change and egalitarianism to the masses.

**Keywords:** Slavery, Liberty, Freedom, Government, Narratives.

## I. INTRODUCTION

Henry David Thoreau (1817-1862) and Frederick Douglass (1818-1895) were contemporaries who both lived and wrote about their life experiences and observations during a transformative time in American history. On the surface, these two men's lives were dramatically distinct, and their writings are the result of different life experiences and perspectives. Thoreau writes his essays and narratives from the position of a free, white, privileged, formally educated (Harvard graduate) male elite (Walden.org, 2015); whereas, Douglass's narrative is told from the worldview of a black, former slave without a formal education or prestigious family background (Douglass, Ritchie and Douglass, xii). Yet, despite their radically diverse backgrounds, these two men write on remarkably similar topics, to include the injustice of government and present-day laws in general and the institute of slavery in particular. By analyzing Douglass' autobiography *The Narrative of the Life of Frederick Douglass: An American Slave Written by Himself* and Thoreau's essays "Slavery in Massachusetts" and "Civil Disobedience," it becomes obvious that both men challenge the power structures and the institute of slavery by using the high ideals of a government supposedly based on the consent of the governed and solidified in the U.S. Constitution to shame the actualities of slave holding America.

## II. SLAVERY

Thoreau and Douglass take a distinct approach to undermining the every institute of slavery by showing how it goes against the fundamental ideals that American society holds so dear. Instead of merely arguing that the institute of slavery is extremely brutal and callous, pointing out the inhumanity slavery represents, or launching an emotional appeal, these men highlight the myriad of ways that slavery, at its root, is against American ideals and founding principles. By placing their argument in this context, the authors put their opponents in a precarious situation, and

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take the issue of slavery to the next step by insisting upon analyzing its morality from the perspective of basic, American values.

For instance, Douglass, in Chapter X, when describing his plan to escape from slavery with his fellow slaves, writes: “In coming to a fixed determination to run away, we did more than Patrick Henry, when he resolved upon liberty or death” (Douglass 71). In this one sentence, Douglass accomplishes three main tasks. First and foremost, he compares his own plight for freedom to the plight of American hero Patrick Henry. This Founding Father, former-governor of Virginia, and fighter for American and Virginian independence, is best remembered for his quote “Give me liberty or give me death.” (Myer 41). This infamous statement was uttered in reaction to the oppressive policies and overbearing regulations the British government put on the American Colonies. Rather than remaining enslaved to the powers of the British monarchy, Henry, as well as his fellow compatriots, compromised their own safety and wellbeing and supported the American Revolution to gain independence. America’s independence, basic freedoms, and rights are, in many ways, indebted to men like Henry (Myer 2). Therefore, Douglass is making a bold and candid statement when he compares his escape from slavery to Henry and the Founding Fathers’ escape from their own slavery (i.e. the institution of colonialism).

Second, with this statement, Douglass is linking his and his fellow slaves’ decision to escape their cruel master with bravery. Rather than allowing his audience to view their actions as anti-social and indicative of a general lack of respect for the law, Douglass shows how their deeds are brave and noble. Similar to Henry and the Founding Fathers, Douglass and his fellow slaves are daring enough to go against the powers that be and challenge the government’s support for systematic oppression. Moreover, like Henry, Douglass’ actions are a noble and virtuous counter-cultural challenge and not the nefarious behavior of a criminal. Once more, the comparison to Henry and the Founding Fathers allows Douglass to show his audience the link between American slaves and American colonists’ fight for freedom, dignity, and respect.

Third, with this quote, Douglass demonstrates his and his fellow escapees’ ability to rationalize and think. Douglass specifically writes, “in coming to a fixed determination” (Douglass 71) to show that their final decision to flee was not spur of the moment or instinctual – like an animal reacting out of natural inclination – rather, it was well-thought-out and deliberate. One of the arguments used to promote the institute of slavery was the notion that people of color were not capable of rational thought. The overarching idea that white people were more evolved and mentally superior, supported in part by Social Darwinism, was very much in vogue during the lifetime of Douglass (Haynes 12). Douglass undermines this presupposition by eloquently writing about the careful thought and meticulous planning that went into their decision to flee slavery and seek out freedom. Once more, this supports the notion that all men [sic] are created equal and that men of color were, by virtue of their ability to think and reason, entitled to the same privileges and rights as white folk. This drives home the U.S. Constitution’s statement that “We hold these truths to be self-evident, that all men are created equal, that they are endowed by their Creator with certain unalienable Rights, that among these are Life, Liberty and the pursuit of Happiness” (U.S. Const. Preamble).

Throughout his narrative, Douglass continues to throw in catch phrases and loaded words that harken back to the concepts and ideals of American nationalism. For instance, in describing headway made in the liberation of slaves, Douglass writes “Fortunate, most fortunate occurrence!—fortunate for the millions of his manacled brethren, yet panting for deliverance from their awful thralldom!—fortunate for the cause of negro emancipation, and of universal liberty!” (Douglass, Preface 1). In this quote, two words stand out as carrying a significant amount of weight – emancipation and liberty. In the collective American psyche, the word emancipation has come to be automatically associated with the freeing of slaves (i.e. the Emancipation Proclamation); however, prior to the issuing of this decree, the term was mostly associated with the Colonies’ emancipation from British colonialism. At its root, emancipation means the process of being set free and liberated from legal, political, or social restrictions. Americans, reading Douglass’ work in or around the time it was written, would have probably associated the term emancipation with American liberation from British oppressors (Douglass, Ritchie and Douglass 25). Therefore, through carefully choosing his verbiage, Douglass, once more, links the cause of the slave with the cause of the colonialists. This parallel would have, undoubtedly, gained him the support or at least attention of some of his adversaries.

### **III. LIBERTY**

The second key word – liberty – is remarkable as well. Specifically, Douglass refers to universal liberty, that is, the basic idea that all people (or at least all men in the 19<sup>th</sup> century worldview), should be entitled to equal freedom and rights. Obviously, the U.S. Constitution is riddled with direct and indirect references to universal liberty. Even the Preamble reads: “We the People of the United States, in Order to form a more perfect Union, establish Justice,

insure domestic Tranquility, provide for the common defense, promote the general Welfare, and secure the Blessings of Liberty to ourselves and our Posterity, do ordain and establish this Constitution for the United States of America” (U.S. Const. Preamble). Liberty, therefore, is a basic tenant of American values and guaranteed to all people via the rule of the land – the U.S. Constitution. The overarching ideas associated with liberty would have been viewed as particularly American and part of the larger, collective American value system.

In sum, it is obvious that Douglass, repeatedly, compares the fight of the American slave to the fight of the American colonist, and demonstrates how each oppressed group was battling to have the same general principles and ideals upheld and honored. By associating American values and norms – such as freedom, emancipation, and liberty – with the plight of the American slave, Douglass successfully aligns himself and his position with the side of the American liberators and Founding Fathers, and the position of his opponents with the side of the British imperialists. In other words, by shaming those who support slavery, Douglass manages to substantiate his position and undermine the very institute of slavery.

Thoreau, through similar strategies, manages to create the same, overarching effect and employ the same series of arguments as his contemporary Douglass. Like Douglass, Thoreau does not just appeal to emotion; rather, he uses the basic, fundamental principles and ideals that the American people supposedly support and the U.S. Constitution specifically guarantees to launch an argument against those who continue to defend the institution of slavery. Similar to Douglass, Thoreau uses catch phrases and loaded words that harken back to the concepts and ideals of American nationalism.

Thoreau’s 1849 essay “Civil Disobedience” begins by calling into question, from its very first lines, the validity of government. Thoreau writes, “I heartily accept the motto, ‘That government is best which governs least’; and I should like to see it acted up to more rapidly and systematically. Carried out, it finally amounts to this, which also I believe- ‘That government is best which governs not at all’ (Thoreau “Civil Disobedience” 1). Significantly, the Founding Fathers, like Thoreau, were very leery of government and its tendency to become too powerful and too involved in the personal lives of the people. In fact, one of the most serious complaints the colonists had against the British government was its unbridled power (Thoreau, Thomas and Thoreau 12). The various checks and balances that were put into place to govern the American republic, as well as the division of power between the States and Federal governments, were all heavily debated and diligently reasoned to ensure that government did not over step its boundaries and become oppressive and tyrannical. Thoreau specifically uses the phrase “governs least” to remind his audience about the benefits of less government. Thoreau, in writing about the limited position of government, is not being anarchistic, anti-America or defiant; rather, he is being patriotic and subscribing to the basic principles of American freedom and liberation (Thoreau, Thomas and Thoreau 13).

By setting himself up with the side of liberty and justice, Thoreau places himself in an ideal position to launch his series of attacks, one of which is against slavery. Probably the most audacious anti-slavery statement made by Thoreau in his essay can be classified as nothing short of a quasi-call to arms. The transcendentalist writes, “when a sixth of the population of a nation which has undertaken to be the refuge of liberty are slaves, and a whole country is unjustly overrun and conquered by a foreign army, and subjected to military law, I think that it is not too soon for honest men to rebel and revolutionize” (Thoreau “Civil Disobedience” 1). He then goes on to explain that “What makes this duty the more urgent is the fact that the country so overrun is not our own, but ours is the invading army” (Thoreau “Civil Disobedience” 1). Once more, there are several words and phrases that should be scrutinized. In the first quote, Thoreau combines “nation” and “liberty” to show the patriotic side of his message. He is specifically talking about the nation of the Founding Fathers and demonstrating how one of the principle concepts of this nation – liberty – is being denied to a large portion of the population.

#### **IV. GOVERNMENT**

Additionally, by specifically identifying “slaves” as part of the nation’s “population,” Thoreau is humanizing this marginalized group of individuals who, traditionally, had been regarded as sub-human and not considered part of the American population (Thoreau, Thomas and Thoreau 19).

In these statements, Thoreau is further supporting and forwarding the idea that American slavery is no better than British colonialism and that, like the Founding Fathers, it is time for men of liberty and justice to take a stand against the oppressive power structure. Moreover, Thoreau is calling the U.S. Government out as being the very institute that is systematically oppressing the people and going against the basic tenants of American freedom and liberation. America, in essence, has become the British monarchs who are oppressing the powerless people, systematically,

through unjust laws and the denial of legal representation. This is a brazen approach that severely undermines the U.S. Government's stance on slavery and the Americans who support this oppressive institute. Additionally, Thoreau argues that the United States, for all intents and purposes, fits the criteria for an unjust government due, in part, to its continued support of slavery. He adds that "This American government- what is it but a tradition, though a recent one, endeavoring to transmit itself unimpaired to posterity, but each instant losing some of its integrity?" (Thoreau "Civil Disobedience" 1). According to Thoreau, the fact that the American government supports anti-freedom and anti-liberty positions makes it illegitimate and calls into question its integrity and virtue. In other words, how can a government, which is based on the ideas and principles of "life, liberty, and the pursuit of happiness" expect to be viewed as a serious and valid institute when it denies a good sixth of its population these fundamental rights and submits them to the confines of slavery? To Thoreau, this is a downright contradiction because slavery and freedom are mutually exclusive concepts that cannot reside side by side. His opponents will have to counter his arguments by explaining how the U.S. Government can legitimately hold its head up high after succumbing to the same power temptations as the British government – a government that the Founding Fathers so adamantly insisted was corrupt, dishonest, unfair, lacking in integrity, and unscrupulous. Additionally, Thoreau's essay "Slavery in Massachusetts" employs similar tactics in order to shame the U.S. Government and its people into abolishing slavery. Moreover, he calls into question the obligation and purpose of the U.S. military. Critiquing the U.S. Military's involvement in helping a certain Mr. Suttle catch a man "whom he calls his property," Thoreau writes: "Is this what all these soldiers, all this training, have been for these seventy-nine years past? Have they been trained merely to rob Mexico and carry back fugitive slaves to their masters?" (Thoreau "Slavery in Massachusetts" 1). Thoreau is showing his audience the inappropriate use of government resources (i.e. the troops), and, in doing so, once more criticizing the government's abuse of power. Instead of standing up for liberty and justice, the government is involving itself in the sale and trade of human beings, supporting the notion that humans are property, and misusing taxpayers' money to support the hunting down of one man's slave. This is Thoreau's way of showing how corrupt and out of line the government has become as well as the evils inherent in slavery. He demonstrates how the whole institute of slavery reduces individuals of color to the status of property – like an inanimate object that can be bought, sold, and disregarded at will. Like Douglass, Thoreau emphasizes the U.S. Government's failure to support the basic ideal of liberty by allowing slavery. Thoreau recalls the Governor of Massachusetts' acts and writes "After he [ the governor] and the United States government had perfectly succeeded in robbing a poor innocent black man of his liberty for life, and, as far as they could, of his Creator's likeness in his breast, he made a speech to his accomplices, at a congratulatory supper!" (Thoreau "Slavery in Massachusetts" 1). Here, not only does Thoreau show how the actions of those who agree with and support the institution of slavery are un-American for going against basic American ideals, such as liberty, he also demonstrates how his opponents are also in violation of the laws of God. The accusation that those who support slavery are actually robbing the African slave of "his Creator's likeness in his breast" is a direct reference to Genesis creation myth that explicitly states that humankind was made in the likeness of its Creator. This is a double assault on those who support slavery. It also serves as an additional means of launching a strong argument against the very fundamental principles inherent in slavery. Furthermore, Thoreau accuses the government of literally robbing from its people, a crime similar to the crimes levied against the British Government when they taxed the colonists without giving them the right to represent themselves in government (Thoreau, Thomas and Thoreau 19).

## **V. INCONCLUSION**

In sum, both Douglass and Thoreau carefully craft eloquent and well-thought-out arguments against their pro-slavery opponents. After analyzing their writings, it becomes obvious that both men challenge the power structures and the institute of slavery by using the high ideals of a government supposedly based on the consent of the governed to shame the actualities of slave holding America. In doing so, Douglass and Thoreau leave their opponents with no other options but to argue against the basic principles of American liberty and justice or else accept their anti-slavery, pro-liberty position. By calling into question the compatibility of the institute of slavery with basic, fundamental American ideals and principles, these men elevate the common debate beyond the level of just emotions and human rights. Rather, they demonstrate how slavery, at its very core, is anti-American, unpatriotic, and places the American government and people in the same boat as the British Monarchy. The rhetorical strategies both men use show their innate cleverness, passion for their positions, and amazing writing abilities. Certainly, Thoreau and Douglass are two of the most eloquent and well-written authors who contributed, significantly, to the abolitionist movement by adding another dimension to the countrywide debate regarding slavery.

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