

**Frederick Douglass' *Narrative of the Life of Frederick Douglass*:
Between the Expressions of Unpleasant Feeling and Freedom Gaining on Slavery**

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Abstract: Romanticism in America coincided with the period of national expansion and the emergence of a distinctive American voice triggering the American Renaissance. It was exactly when many American writers were able to express Americans' new expressions such as imaginative expression over emotion and individual, defense of individual potential and individual freedom as they were rarely vocalized during the former era.

*The upcoming idea of egalitarianism which is based on the American Liberalism urged Afro-American writers to spread out the spirit of freedom and egalitarianism. They describe several stories about living as a slave. Frederick Douglass has a leading role in the abolishment of slavery in the history of America with his masterpiece *Narrative of the Life of Frederick Douglass*. That is why the researchers want to find out the spirit of the Romanticism by proving how the social background had taken a part in creating well-known narratives.*

*Using the Sociology of Literature approach, this research is assumed to give effect on shaping the meaning of *Narrative of the Life of Frederick Douglass*, where his work expresses liberalism in the period of Romanticism and could also be used to characterize the Romanticism. That is why literary discussion can not be separated from the issue when and where a work was written. The question when the literature was written is only a part of the discussion about this period including the remarks of the work and the question where it is associated with the society or sociological background where the work was created.*

*Insecure feeling is one main feature of the Romanticism found in *Narrative of the Life of Frederick Douglass*. Douglass actualizes the correlation of song and slavery where song is depicted as an escape from the insecure feeling as experienced by slaves. The first objective is to show that when a slave is feeling insecure in his surroundings, then he will try to cheer himself up by singing and will become romantic, too. The second one is the strong spirit of the Romanticism thoroughly found in *Narrative of the Life of Frederick Douglass* that is the spirit of Liberalism – almost all his narratives express his greatest dream of abolishing slavery trademark of his own. Meanwhile, the sociological background reflected in revolutionary movement took place in Douglass' surroundings and he accidentally experienced it himself. Then, he made his words to set the slaves free and slavery must be abolished for goodness.*

Keywords: *Romanticism, Insecure feelings, spirit of Liberalism*

Romanticism in America coincided with the period of national expansion and the emergence of a distinctive American voice triggering the American Renaissance. It was exactly when many American writers were able to express Americans' new expressions such as imaginative expression over emotion and individual, defense of individual potential and individual freedom as they were rarely vocalized during the former era. Besides, during this era, there were various other voices conveyed starting from the celebration of imagination and intuition, subjectivity and nature, the celebration of revolutionary until the celebration of individualism and egalitarianism leading to the value of American liberalism as depicted by many of American-Romanticism writers. The latter influences and triggers African-American writers to vocalize the spirit of being free from slavery by producing some slave narratives depicting their life experiences to make effort of promoting slavery abolishment in order to set slaves free for life. At last, a magnificent moment starts to exist during the Romanticism era in America that is the issue of vanishing enslavement or abolitionist movement.

An obvious remark of abolitionist movement in this era is colored by Frederick Douglass as one of the outstanding slave narrators and abolitionists. As an abolitionist and a Romantic author, he wrote several narratives dealing with his life experiences as a slave in the South and a fugitive in the North after his escape. Further, he campaigned for the end of slavery and voice of liberalism through his writings. One of them is *Narrative of the Life of Frederick Douglass* that becomes the concern of this study. Therefore, the study of Frederick Douglass' expressions of unpleasant feeling and freedom gaining on slavery Romantic era is worth analyzing because it can reveal his attitudes and world view on slavery abolitionism and it is also to relate his spirit of anti-slavery with the spirit of Romanticism.

Literary works produced during Romanticism era have particular characteristics and natures. Romanticism is identical with emotional, sentimental and individualistic atmosphere. Not only is it powered by creative energy of satisfaction on solitude and nature, but also it carries the spirit of liberalism and revolutionary. Liberalism is believed to be a voice Douglass wants to vocalize in this narrative: setting free from enslavement. Therefore, liberalism implicitly depicted by Douglass is going to be analyzed to show that his work meets and depicts the nature of Romanticism era. In conclusion, the characteristics of Romanticism era are applied to answer the statement of problem whereas the sociology of literature is to guide revealing and explaining that those characteristics found to be the characteristics of American Romanticism appear because more or less are influenced by the society.

Biographical Sketch of Frederick Douglass

He was born as Frederick Augustus Washington Bailey a slave in Tuckahoe, Talbot country, Maryland without an exact date of birth. He estimated that he was born in February 1817. He changed his surname to conceal his identity after escaping slavery in 1838. He was a *mullato*, for his parentage was a slave mother, Harriet Bailey, and his father was assumed to be his mother's master, Aaron Anthony. His childhood was

commonly like any other slave children that they experienced being separated by their mothers to destroy the natural affection between mothers and their children. He was separated from his mother when he was still an infant and his enslavement experiences began soon after this separation.

Douglass spent the first seven years of his life working on the plantation owned by Colonel Edward Lloyd. In 1825 he was sold to Hugh Auld and came to live in Baltimore. Life in the city was his turning point. It was the time when his master's wife taught him how to read. He considered this time as a pathway from slavery to freedom. The very first escape was taken though it failed in 1835. Fortunately, his spirit to abolish himself never died then in 1838 Douglass, posing as a freedman sailor undercover, successfully escaped to Philadelphia to New York. He married Anna Murray, a freedwoman he met in Baltimore and soon after that the newly wedding couple moved to New Bedford, Massachusetts.

The following years were his time to start his movement. He became the active member of a black abolitionist group in New Bedford, gave lectures for Massachusetts Anti-Slavery Society and finally between 1841 and 1844 he toured to several states to deliver speeches on abolitionism. In 1844, Douglass began to write his autobiography and in 1845 Douglass' *Narrative of the Life of Frederick Douglass* was published becoming an instant bestseller. Later he published *My Bondage and My Freedom* and *Life and Time of Frederick Douglass* in the same year as subsequent revisions.

Frederick Douglass' Social and Historical Background

During 1820s-1850s, there were two concentrations taken into account happening in the society. Firstly, Americans in general were seeking for the early value of American nationalism from American classicism both for the country and the existence of American literature that later relates to the idea of American Renaissance. It triggered every aspect of culture and art, education, philosophy and even science. Besides, Americans also underwent the beginning industrial and technological developments such as steamboat, spinning mills, railroad and telegraph. This success of northern industry made slavery appear out of ordinary. It was because it remarked the time when there were many slaves from the south trying to escape and they dreamt of having better acknowledgment in the north. Eventually, this early spirit of abolitionism would lead to the second social background happening in the Romanticism era.

Secondly, African-Americans in specific were demonstrating their voices to gain their freedom from slavery. Afro-American voice had been singular and beneficial value for America throughout reform. During this era, Afro-Americans who were slaves and writers produced innumerable written accounts of peculiar voice: complex ethical and psychological orientations toward slavery and abolitionism in America. The flourish of this spirit colored the genre of American literature namely slave narrative. Slave narrative was occupied by Afro-Americans as propaganda of the nature of slavery, slave personality, strategies, and tactics of escape. Overall, it can be concluded that Romanticism era was slightly covered by the atmosphere of dynamic social background coming from Americans African-Americans that both of them vocalized enlightenment in a different way.

ANALYSIS

1. Frederick Douglass' *Narrative of the Life of Frederick Douglass*: The Expression of Unpleasant Feeling

After scrutinizing the work, the writers can analyze that the expression of unpleasant feeling becomes one of the underlying characteristics of Romanticism found in Douglass' *Narrative of the Life of Frederick Douglass*. It means Douglass used his narrative to state and to convey that he was not pleased with the slavery situation happening in his life at that time. This expression is actualized in terms of telling and describing the relation of slaves and songs; illustrating how bad treatment slaves got from their masters through the dictions Douglass employs in his narrative; and associating the unpleasant feeling and the way how to release it. By expressing such unpleasant feeling throughout his narrative, Douglass has strengthened the spirit of Romanticism in his work. At last, it makes Frederick Douglass' *Narrative of the Life of Frederick Douglass* worth identifying as a masterpiece in Romanticism.

There are five principal Romantic themes in American Literature proposed by Skipp (1992:23). Skipp (1992:23) states that Romanticism characteristic is to express deeply some life experiences either satisfying or unpleasant feeling. In this case, based on the observation, Douglass' narrative conveys the expression of unpleasant feeling and later it also demonstrates Douglass' satisfaction after he made his dream came true. The first expression of unpleasant feeling is to tell the relationship of slaves and songs. Songs were considered as one way how slaves expressed their unpleasant feeling over the slavery condition at that time. Douglass' expression of this unpleasant feeling can be seen from the following data:

They would sometimes sing the most pathetic sentiment in the most rapturous tone, and the most rapturous sentiment in the most pathetic tone. Into all of their songs they would manage to weave something of the Great House Farm. Especially would they do this, when leaving home. They would then sing most exultingly the following words:—
“I am going away to the Great House Farm!
O, yea! O, yea! O!”... (Douglass, 1845:13)

Therefore, this remarks that Douglass' illustration shows that being slaves are unpleasant even singing and praying are done in secretive manner. In relation to the romantic nuance, songs are to show their sorrows, rather than their joys. It is just like tears that become a relief to their aching hearts.

The second expression of unpleasant feeling is found in the dictions Douglass uses to express the harsh and heartless treatment masters or white people did to their slaves. Douglass experienced himself such kind of treatment and for several times he witnessed such treatment happened to African slaves around him. Douglass expressed his anger on whipping done by slaves' masters and he was actually expressing unpleasant expression on that bloody transaction. His language used is sort of different from other scenes when he illustrates some slaves experienced whipping as it can be seen through the following data to illustrate an overseer's barbarism expressed by using Douglass' narrative style:

The overseer's name was Plummer. ... He always went armed with a cowskin and a heavy cudgel. I have known him to cut and slash the women's heads so horribly, that even master would be enraged at his cruelty, and would threaten to whip him if he did not mind himself. Master, however, was not a humane slaveholder. It required extraordinary barbarity on the part of an overseer to affect him. He was a cruel man, hardened by a long life of slaveholding. He would at times seem to take great pleasure in whipping a slave. I have often been awakened at the dawn of day by the most heart-rending shrieks of an own aunt of mine, whom he used to tie up to a joist, and whip upon her naked back till she was literally covered with blood. No words, no tears, no prayers, from his gory victim, seemed to move his iron heart from its bloody purpose. 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 her hush; and not until overcome by fatigue, would he cease to swing the blood-clotted cowskin. 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. (Douglass, 1845:5)

Based on the data above, his language is somewhat emotional since he wants to convey that whipping is unpleasant occasion. It is mean and harsh. Besides, he is actually deliberately showing propaganda on how slaves are badly treated.

Frederick Douglass suffered from so many unpleasant circumstances during his life time as a slave in the Southern part of America. He got insulted and underestimated all the time by his masters. Fortunately, Douglass was blessed because he was strong both mentally and physically. He could keep his spirit lively. The unpleasant circumstances and his being strong have led Douglass to set up a way out to release his unpleasant feeling over them. This way out is in line with the spirit of Romanticism that Douglass believes in his intuition. Skipp (1992:23) even emphasizes that it is intuition as the truth of the heart that is more trustworthy than reasons. Believing his intuition that he could set himself free from slavery, Douglass expresses it here and takes this as propaganda to spread the threat slaves might have. His strong intuition seems not to be realistic since he has got limitation on literacy. However, reasons are subject to deny in this case. The following data show that Douglass proves his intuition to be real even if he has been underestimated by his master.

... From this time I was most narrowly watched. If I was in a separate room any considerable length of time, I was sure to be suspected of having a book, and was at once called to give an account of myself. All this, however, was too late. The first step had been taken. Mistress, in teaching me the alphabet, had given me the inch, and no precaution could prevent me from taking the ell. (Douglass, 1845:40)

... If you teach that nigger how to read, there would be no keeping him. It would forever unfit him to be a slave. ... He would at once become unmanageable, and of no value to his master. ... These words sank deep into my heart, stirred up sentiments within that lay slumbering and called into existence an entirely new train of thought. (Douglass, 1845:36)

Finally talking about Frederick Douglass' *Narrative of the Life of Frederick Douglass* as the expressions of his unpleasant feeling over slavery happening in his life time, so far, the writers can conclude that his expression of unpleasant feeling does represent the spirit of Romanticism in America. The expressions of unpleasant feeling are recorded in the relation of slaves and songs, bad treatment slaves got from their masters through the dictions Douglass employs in his narrative and on the ways how Douglass has released them. As the writers have defined the characteristics of American Romanticism previously, expression of unpleasant feeling is taken into account as one of the Romanticism characteristics. Therefore, Frederick Douglass' *Narrative of the Life of Frederick Douglass* is worth calling as one of American Romanticism masterpieces since the work vocalizes the value and spirit of American Romanticism.

2. Frederick Douglass' *Narrative of the Life of Frederick Douglass*: The Expression of Freedom Gaining on Slavery

Frederick Douglass' *Narrative of the Life of Frederick Douglass* has shaped another significant form of black literature that is the fugitive slave narrative. This sub genre of black literature has been used by many escaped or emancipated slaves to feed the curiosity of the northern public by writing accounts of their life experiences. Besides, it has been broadly understood that slave narrative is used as propaganda for abolitionism among slaves and among Americans in general. Furthermore, an entirely strong spirit of Romanticism found in Douglass' *Narrative of the Life of Frederick Douglass* is the spirit of freedom gaining. The whole narrative parts he wrote depict his biggest dream of abolishing himself for being a slave. Every single thought he proposed since he was twelve years old was about his being liberal and free. In other words, throughout his narrative he is actually expressing his willing to gain his freedom and eventually equalize the human right.

Frederick Douglass' *Narrative of the Life of Frederick Douglass* is his expression to gain his freedom as a slave. Based on the sequence of his narrative, he formerly expresses reasons based on the situation triggering his decision to set himself free as a slave that is the injustice White people do to African slaves. He terminates his narrative with so many steps he has undergone to gain his freedom in the long run. Therefore, the discussion of Douglass' expression of freedom gaining is going to be tied to the discussion of his condition as a slave and then to the long road he has taken to gain his freedom.

The former and obvious situation Douglass conveys in his narrative is about the fact or the illustration that slaves are badly treated and that he himself experiences such kind of occasion. Furthermore, these illustrations and descriptions Douglass reveals in his narrative are meant to be propaganda to gain reasons why enslavement must be terminated or abolished. By using the narrative as well Douglass needs to come up with an idea to rebel the enslavement. Some of the illustrations are actually rules within slavery. The following data are to show the rules the White committed over slave triggering Douglass to express his freedom gaining:

... it is of but little consequence to my purpose whilst the fact remains, in all its glaring odiousness, that slaveholders have ordained, and by law established, that the children of slave women shall in all cases follow the

condition of their mothers; and this is done too obviously to administer to their own lusts, and make a gratification of their wicked desires profitable as well as pleasurable; for by this cunning arrangement, the slaveholder, in cases not a few, sustains to his slaves the double relation of master and father (Douglass, 1845:33).

This is the very first dreadful mistreatment White people do over African slaves and Douglass also faced this as a slave. This is a rule to separate mothers and their slave children that is against the human right; therefore Douglass vocalized this to criticize masters' treatment, to demonstrate his protest and finally it influences him to gain freedom in order to break down such dreadful mistreatment.

Next, when slaves get their punishment from their masters by whipping them, they can not avoid or even refuse. Another mistreatment that slaves might get is that to kill them is not considered a crime. Again, Douglass experienced seeing these activities by himself and he explains that in the following illustrations:

... To all these complaints, no matter how unjust, the slave must answer never a word. ... When he spoke, a slave must stand, listen and tremble... (Douglass, 1845:33)

... I speak advisedly when I say this—that killing a slave, or any colored person, in Talbot county Maryland, is not related crime, either by court or by community. ... (Douglass, 1845:26)

There are some other rules slaves had to face and again those rules are subjects to change immediately since they really put human being as inanimate objects such as the way they behave on eating their food, clothing and the way they have to spend energy for working. In conclusion, by looking at those findings on Douglass' illustrations on mistreatment of being slaves, some dreadful occasion he undergoes by himself, I find it very easy to relate them as the underlying reasons for him to express his freedom gaining within his narrative.

After analyzing Douglass' underlying reasons to express his freedom gaining within his narrative, the writers would like to continue illustrating his expression of freedom gaining found in his narrative. Douglass grew up in enslavement society background, so it will be very normal when his narrative is influenced by his surrounding. Revolutionary movement happens around Douglass and fortunately he experienced that by himself. Slaves are to be free and enslavement must be terminated for good. This kind of society demand appears in Douglass' narrative because slaves want it to have so. He expressed and actualized that by writing his brave and courageous illustrations in his narrative when he was leaving for Baltimore. As he wrote in the following data:

... I look upon my departure from Colonel Lloyd's plantation as one of the most interesting events of my life. ... Going to Baltimore laid the foundation and opened the gateway to all subsequent (Douglass, 1845:33).

This utterance Douglass wrote is to vocalize that he as one person from his society members did have new spirit of committing anti-slavery movement. He is actually proposing his initial freedom seeking. Further, the demand of being liberal slaves occurs in his narrative during Douglass' preparation to have escape movement. Finally, the ultimate bravery the society conveys from Douglass' narrative is about the individual

battle to survive after escape. In this case, Douglass himself represents his black society to gain for freedom and then it is obviously depicted in his narrative.

Douglass' expression of his freedom gaining is meant as propaganda of anti-slavery movement. It can be seen starting from the way Douglass set and arranged to prepare himself for escape and then he will relate this as tricks of propaganda to distribute issues on abolition to make him feel stronger and remind White masters. The first trick of escape Douglass did does not seem to understand what people talking about Abolitionism or about the route they would talk to share. Further, it is explained by the following data:

... expecting to hear something of importance to myself and fellow-slaves. The light broke in upon me by degrees. I went one day down on the wharf of Mr. Waters; and seeing two Irishmen unloading a scow of stone, I went, unasked, and helped them. When we had finished, one of them came to me and asked me if I were a slave. I told him I was. He asked, "Are ye a slave for life?" I told him that I was. The good Irishman seemed to be deeply affected by the statement. He said to the other that it was a pity so fine a little fellow as myself should be a slave for life. He said it was a shame to hold me. They both advised me to run away to the north; that I should find friends there, and that I should be free. I pretended not to be interested in what they said, and treated them as if I did not understand them; for I feared they might be treacherous. White men have been known to encourage slaves to escape, and then, to get the reward, catch them and return them to their masters. I was afraid that these seemingly good men might use me so; ... (Douglass, 1845:44).

I was a ready listener. Every little while, I could hear something about the abolitionists. It was some time before I found what the word meant. It was always used in such connections as to make it an interesting word to me. If a slave ran away and succeeded in getting clear, or if a slave killed his master, set fire to a barn, or did any thing very wrong in the mind of a slaveholder, it was spoken of as the fruit of abolition. Hearing the word in this connection very often, I set about learning what it meant. The dictionary afforded me little or no help. I found it was "the act of abolishing;" but then I did not know what was to be abolished. Here I was perplexed. I did not dare to ask any one about its meaning, for I was satisfied that it was something they wanted me to know very little about. After a patient waiting, I got one of our city papers, containing an account of the number of petitions from the north, praying for the abolition of slavery in the District of Columbia, and of the slave trade between the States. From this time I understood the words abolition and abolitionist, and always drew near when that word was spoken, expecting to hear something of importance to myself and fellow-slaves (Douglass 1845:44).

Douglass intends to give reasons and explanations that he must not follow the route and he must not ask them what abolitionist is because he wants to show his readers both

slaves and his previous masters or any other institutions that might be trapped that slaves are not that brainless. It is because slaves learn much from experiences. In addition, Douglass also illustrates clearly when he was betrayed by his slave friends. He tells this occasion clearly in his narrative just because it is to give lessons to other slaves that do not trust man because every white man is enemy and in almost every colored man causes distrust. This is the way Douglass expresses his voice to gain freedom—freedom for being slave in the South.

Conclusion

Frederick Douglass' *Narrative of the Life of Frederick Douglass* has met and depicted the nature and the characteristics of Romanticism era in American literature. Besides, within this narrative Douglass vocalizes and expresses the unpleasant feeling and freedom gaining as the characteristics of Romanticism. The expression of unpleasant feeling is actualized through the bond of song and slavery, illustration of bad treatment slaves got from their master through the dictions Douglass employs in his narrative and the way how to release it. Meanwhile, his expression of freedom gaining is actualized by illustrating underlying reasons why Douglass was eager to gain his freedom and then followed by depicting his process of gaining his real freedom. At last, Douglass' *Narrative of the Life of Frederick Douglass* is a picture of spirit of Romanticism that is to vocalize the spirit of abolishment, the spirit of liberalism among slaves, conditions when slaves are not well-treated and the use of slave narrative as propaganda to terminate enslavement.

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