

Necessary Violence in Frederick Douglass's *Narrative*

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Opponents of American slavery commonly cited the physical violence of slaveholders toward the enslaved to argue compellingly against the institution. Slave narratives often featured scenes of slaves subjected to their masters' violent behaviors, and *Narrative of the Life of Frederick Douglass, An American Slave, Written by Himself* is no exception. Frederick Douglass presents numerous scenes of whippings and beatings as punishment for the slightest provocations, showing the abomination of slavery in allowing humans to be treated with such brutality. Douglass is clear in his hatred of the slaveholders' violence, which he sees not just as adding physical cruelty to slavery but as playing a fundamental role in the existence of slavery. In other words, Douglass views violence as necessary to make someone a slave and to keep someone a slave: the demoralizing characteristic of slavery is the forced submission to violence at the hands of others and the inability to return violence even in self-defense. Consequently, to break away from the hold of slavery and to free oneself mentally if not physically, the enslaved must combat this demoralization. Although Douglass does not explicitly state in his narrative that slaves should engage in violence toward their masters, his personal journey to freedom demonstrates his belief that violence in response to slavery is not only understandable, but necessary to bring about change.

As a young boy, Frederick Douglass does not fully understand the true horror of slavery until he witnesses his master's cruel treatment of his aunt. Unable to rid himself of the memory, Douglass writes with graphic detail about what he saw and heard as he remained hidden in a closet, terrified that he would be next. The violence toward his aunt has a powerful impact on Douglass: "It struck me with awful force. It was the blood-stained gate, the entrance to the hell of slavery, through which I was about to pass" (*Narrative* 1010). This violence is a rude awakening for Douglass to the reality of slavery; it is the "first of a long series of such outrages, of which [he] was doomed to be a witness and a participant" (*Narrative* 1010). Fortunately for Douglass, he is given to a new master who is not quite as cruel as many could be. Douglass's spirit, already strong, is not subdued enough through violence to keep him in the mindset of a slave. Especially after learning to read and write, Douglass is, as his master says, "unsuitable to his purpose" (*Narrative* 1033). Accordingly, Douglass is sent to be broken by Edward Covey, who is tasked with making Douglass a more submissive, and therefore better, slave.

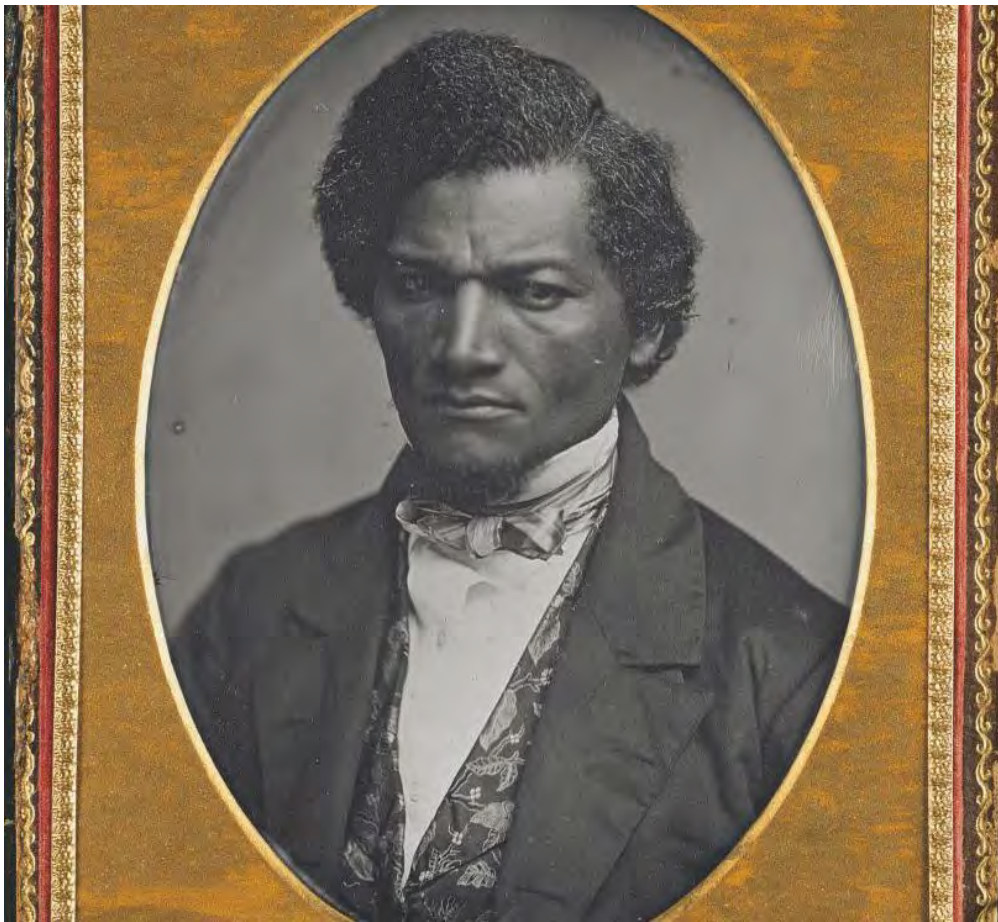
The powerful effects of violence on Douglass can be seen through his encounter with the slaveholder Covey. For six months, Covey subjects Douglass to mental and physical violence, and whips him almost every week. Covey is nearly successful in his attempt to train Douglass to be a submissive slave. Douglass writes, “I was broken in body, soul, and spirit. My natural elasticity was crushed, my intellect languished, the disposition to read departed, the cheerful spark that lingered about my eye died; the dark night of slavery closed in upon me; and behold a man transformed into a brute!” (*Narrative* 1036). In response to a letter from a white man who doubts the truth of Douglass’s narration, Douglass summarizes the result of Covey’s violence more simply: “I was driven so hard, and whipt so often, that my soul was crushed and my spirits broken. I was a mere wreck” (“Reply to Thompson’s Letter” 94). For Douglass, then, violence has the power to make someone a slave not only in name but in spirit as well, taking away a slave’s manhood and any hope for freedom by constantly asserting the master’s superiority and power over him.

How does one fight against a slaveholder’s cruelty? How does one maintain one’s sense of self in the face of dehumanizing brutality? For the few years surrounding the publication of his first narrative, Douglass seems to believe a change can be brought about by appealing to slaveholders’ compassion and ethics, and he publicly maintains the opinion that nonviolence can be effective in combatting slavery. However, Sylvie Laurent points out in her article “Is Violence Sometimes a Legitimate Right? An African-American Dilemma” that this opinion is “less for moral or religious reasons than for strategic ones” (126), as it was dangerous to promote or sanction slave violence. This accounts for any hesitancy on Douglass’s part to directly state his beliefs in his narrative. Yet even so, he provides substantial evidence through his stories and experiences that violence is the answer to the slaveholders’ cruelty.

Douglass’s narrative presents the uselessness of nonviolent behavior in changing a slave’s circumstance. His focus on his grandmother’s continued slavery after her life-long faithfulness to her master suggests that it is pointless to expect freedom as a result of any kindness or compassion on the slaveholders’ part. His grandmother had raised her master from infancy, served him through life, and stayed with him in his death, but “she was nevertheless left a slave—a slave for life” (*Narrative* 1029). It is similarly pointless to expect freedom as a result of religious conviction or of religious beliefs. In fact, Douglass declares that of all slaveholders, “religious slaveholders are the worst” (*Narrative* 1043). One of his masters, Captain Auld, converts to Methodism, and Douglass hopes that if Auld does not free his slaves, he will at least be “more kind and humane” (*Narrative* 1032). Instead, Auld’s new religion makes “him more cruel and hateful in all his ways.” These experiences explain why Douglass believes, as Jason Matzke writes in “The John Brown Way: Frederick Douglass and Henry David Thoreau on the Use of Violence,” that nonviolence can “no longer reach the conscience of slaveholders who [have] been hardened by their participation in slavery” (68). As attempting to change slaves’ circumstances by appealing to the slaveholders’ kindness or morality is ineffective, something else is needed.

Perhaps one of the most well-known quotations from Douglass’s narrative appears in the passages leading up to his monumental fight with Covey: “You have seen how a man was made a slave; you shall see how a slave was made a man” (*Narrative* 1038). Covey’s violence has turned Douglass into a brute, but the pivotal moment in his life as a slave occurs when Douglass, no longer willing to submissively endure cruel beatings, repays violence with violence and fights Covey. Douglass’s violence is transformative. His

broken spirit is healed, his sense of identity is rediscovered, and from that moment, although he remains a slave for four more years, Douglass is a man again: “My long-crushed spirit arose...and I now resolved that, however long I might remain a slave in form, the day had passed forever when I could be a slave in fact” (*Narrative* 1041). Douglass realizes the powerful role of violence in the slaveholder’s system, and after regaining his spirit, he vows never to allow himself to be whipped or beaten again. When Douglass’s fellow apprentices begin physically abusing him, Douglass upholds his promise and “[strikes] back again, regardless of consequences” (*Narrative* 1051). Additionally, when Master Hugh becomes angry and threatens a beating, Douglass is “resolved, if he laid the weight of his hand upon [Douglass], it should be blow for blow” (*Narrative* 1056). To endure violence is to be a slave, and Douglass is that no longer.



Frederick Douglass. Daguerrotype taken by Samuel J. Miller (1822-1888), August 1852, Akron, Ohio. Art Institute of Chicago.

Douglass carries the lesson he learned about violence his entire life, and in his speech “Appeal to the British People” in 1846, he explains in more detail why the cruelty of slaveholders is a fundamental part of slavery:

But the slave must be brutalized to keep him as a slave. The slaveholder feels this necessity. I admit this necessity... The whip, the chain, the gag, the thumb-screw, the blood-hound, the stocks, and all the other bloody paraphernalia of the slave system, are indispensably necessary to the relation of master and slave. The slave must be subjected to these, or he ceases to be a slave... [Let him know] that his master’s authority over him is no longer to be enforced by taking his life—and immediately he walks out from the house of bondage and asserts his freedom as a man. (11)

Douglass can say this so assuredly because he has lived through it—through Covey’s use of violence to break his spirit—but more importantly through his own violence against Covey that heals his spirit and subdues Covey. Douglass does not explicitly state in his narrative that slaves should be violent. Yet he shows that violence is successful in creating change when other methods could not, and he describes his fight with Covey as “a glorious resurrection, from the tomb of slavery, to the heaven of freedom” (*Narrative* 1041). As a continuation of Douglass’s metaphor of violence in which his aunt’s beating is the “entrance to the hell of slavery” (*Narrative* 1010), this imagery makes sense. If violence is the door into slavery, it will have to be the door out as well.

Douglass’s fight with Covey teaches him the potential power of violence against the slaveholders. Ronald Takaki, author of “Violence in the Black Imagination: Essays and Documents,” states that the fight with Covey makes it clear to Douglass that “slave violence against the master class could have crucial psychological and political meaning for the wretched, for the oppressed” (18). Considering the benefits Douglass gains in using violence, it would be difficult to say Douglass feels any regret over his acts. In his recounting of his fight with Covey, the reader can find no shame or remorse, only satisfaction and triumph. Similarly, Douglass reveals with a hint of pride that, in his fights with the apprentices, he normally “succeeded very well; for [he] could whip the whole of them” (*Narrative* 1051).

Additionally, Douglass seems to approve of other people’s violence in response to slavery. He tells a story of how the New Bedford community dealt with a would-be betrayer of a fugitive slave. A meeting was called, and after the president of the meeting had opened in prayer, he announced to the members that the would-be betrayer was present and should be taken outside and killed. The betrayer escaped, but Douglass remarks somewhat cheerfully that he did not doubt “death would be the consequence” (*Narrative* 1061) should the circumstance happen again. Not only does Douglass recognize the inadequacy of nonviolent efforts to stop slavery and experience first-hand the power of violence in changing his own circumstances, he also favors others’ violence in fighting against slavery. In his book *Frederick Douglass: America’s Prophet*, D. H. Dilbeck recounts what Douglass wrote in a newspaper article after having assisted two fugitive slaves and the killer of their slaveholder: “I believe that the lines of eternal justice are sometimes so obliterated by a course of long continued oppression that it is necessary to revive them by deepening their traces with the blood of a tyrant” (82). Stated simply, violence is necessary to combat slavery.

Nevertheless, Douglass's view of violence as necessary does not mean he endorses any and all violence. In his article "Spilling Ink and Spilling Blood: Abolitionism, Violence, and Frederick Douglass's *My Bondage and My Freedom*," Eric A. Goldman explains that although "there [is] no doubt" Douglass understood the need for violence, Douglass emphasized that it should be "defensive violence" (293). All of Douglass's violent actions in his narrative are in self-defense. He does not initiate the fights; his fight with Covey is a result of being used "like a brute for six months" (*Narrative* 1040). But neither does Douglass have any qualms in ending the fights on his terms, and Covey is the one to let go first after "getting entirely the worst end of the bargain" (*Narrative* 1041). Douglass sees his self-defense as morally right, because Covey is morally wrong in being a slaveholder and in using violence. According to Dilbeck, "Frederick never doubted that in resisting Covey he had acted in a righteous manner, as the Lord required" (41). Indeed, because Douglass sees slavery as an abomination, he considers fighting against that evil an obligation—in his appendix he states it is his "duty to testify" (*Narrative* 1064) against the hypocritical religion of the slaveholders—and if violence is the way to fight slavery, so be it.

Although Douglass himself never acts violently without direct provocation, his speech "John Brown" in 1881 shows that he views protests against slavery as a form of self-defense. John Brown's raid on Harpers Ferry and the deaths he caused were condemned by many as going too far in the fight against slavery, and Brown was convicted and executed as a result. Douglass agrees that, taken out of context, the raid was "cold-blooded and atrocious" ("John Brown" 71). But one cannot take it out of context, for Brown's actions at Harpers Ferry were in reaction to the "merciless bondage of more than two hundred years" ("John Brown" 72). Douglass stresses countless examples of that "merciless bondage" throughout his *Narrative*: Demby being murdered (1018), a young girl beaten to death (1019), and sisters half-starved with their bodies mangled and scarred (1024), just to name a few. Recompense for the wrongs against the enslaved people was long overdue, and so while the deaths were regrettable, Brown had "at least beg[u]n the war that ended slavery" ("John Brown" 87). His violence is not only to be excused but perhaps also to be praised. Douglass's belief in the need for violence to end slavery can also be seen later in his insistence on black men enlisting in the Union army. Waldo E. Martin writes in his book *The Mind of Frederick Douglass* that Douglass urged the men to learn to use weapons "as a means to secure and defend their liberty... Violence in the defense of one's liberty and manhood... was completely justified" (168). In Douglass's eyes, slavery robbed man of his inalienable rights. Therefore, the end of slavery is a righteous endeavor that justifies the means needed to bring it about.

While it took several years after publication of his first autobiography for Douglass to become more candid about his beliefs in necessary violence, the beliefs he expresses in his later speeches and writings are not new. His narrative demonstrates that he had already recognized "the necessity of violence to destroy the institution of slavery" (Takaki 23). However implicitly stated in his narrative, Douglass understands that violence plays a crucial role in the slaveholders' ability to make and keep "good" slaves and in the slaves' ability to fight against their oppressors. Starting with the violence toward his aunt as his introduction to the full horrors of slavery, Douglass sees personally that neither basic human compassion nor religion will stop the evil of slavery and the violence against the enslaved people. On the other hand, Douglass's fight with Covey proves that responding to violence with violence has the power to change the psychological, if not physical,

circumstances of slaves: it can revive broken spirits and restore the sense of manhood that slavery destroys, giving the enslaved people new hope and determination for freedom. Douglass's violence is all in self-defense, and he certainly knows how wrong violence in the wrong circumstances can be. But his narrative conveys only pride and triumph in his own violence and in the violence of others who resist slavery. In a perfect world, problems would be solved through nonviolence, but Douglass's narrative presents the belief that—in a world where people can brutally abuse their fellow men and women, and an evil such as slavery can exist—using violence to overcome that evil is both justified and necessary.

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