

The Syntactical Nature of Reality:  
Education and Text in Frederick Douglass and Harriet Jacobs

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The key incidents in the lives of Harriet Jacobs and Frederick Douglass are those which simultaneously highlight both the similarities and the differences between the two. These are, of course, the respective moment when each learns to read and write. Jacobs is instructed openly by her first mistress while Douglass is forbidden to learn. While both of them are eventually successful in becoming literate, the different means through which they learn color their own estimation of literacy's importance. While Douglass considers reading the most important event in his life and the one which set him on the path to freedom, Jacobs is not quite so enthusiastic about her education. It is, however, their literacy which ultimately serves to unite them, as they both make use of their education to record their personal histories and communicate the events of their lives to others.

Jacobs and Douglass are united in their possession of something wholly uncommon in slaves, the ability to read and write. Clearly, both value this ability highly, but it is Douglass who points to his education as the defining moment in his life. After his master forbids him to continue his education and explains to his wife the dangers of educating slaves, Douglass begins to see his life in an entirely new and different way. His master claims that learning to read would spoil a slave and make him unfit to serve another man. From this, Douglass infers that language and education are the most powerful tools used by the white man to keep the slaves in chains and begins to determinedly search for an education, that he might be free of these chains. His search is not easy, and he must often sacrifice his physical well-being to increase his knowledge, but he is content in giving up his bread in return for "the more valuable bread of knowledge." (Narrative, 23) Douglass nourishes himself on education, because he knows that this food is the only one which will someday make him into a free man.

At the time of her education, Harriet Jacobs is less aware of its importance than Douglass is, primarily because she comes across it without much effort and no attempt is made to prevent her from acquiring it. Naturally, she is grateful to her mistress for teaching her, and as she writes her narrative, she is fully aware of the importance of her education, but at the time, she is not as impressed as Douglass is by the power of literacy. Also, it is difficult for her to feel a great deal of affection towards her teacher, since she was also her owner and master and this seeming contradiction only further confuses the importance of literacy in the mind of young Harriet Jacobs. After her escape, Jacobs demonstrates the importance that she attributes to education by providing one for both of her children. Jacobs does not want to part with her daughter when she leaves for boarding school, but her “judgement prevail[s] over her feelings,” and she realizes that this is a small price to pay for the priceless gift of education (Incidents, 188).

Although Jacobs and Douglass approach education from completely different perspectives, it is ultimately their literacy that brings them together. Without the ability to read and write, Douglass and perhaps Jacobs, would never have been able to find their way to freedom, but even more importantly they would not have been able to express how they were able to get there. If it were not for their ability to read and write, Douglass and Jacobs would not be known today by the millions who have read their texts and their influence on the abolitionist movement and our nation’s history would have been non-existent. In effect, Jacobs and Douglass wrote themselves and millions of other slaves into American history with their texts. Their education allowed them to have their voices heard by the nation, and made it impossible for their stories and experiences to be ignored or denied. Both Jacobs and Douglass are aware of how they are, in effect, defined by their writings and as a result of this, they both

preserve a few key documents which demonstrate the importance of text in their lives. Jacobs makes special note of the notice that is posted at the time of her escape. This notice describes Jacobs and her escape and, in effect, proves textually the existence of Harriet Jacobs. To this day, the original text can be read and, like Jacobs' book, it exists as a physical object that cannot be ignored or denied. Of course, the notice is not created by Jacobs, and only proves her existence insofar as she exists as the property of another, but with the inclusion of this notice in her own autobiographical text, Jacobs changes its meaning and reclaims her own existence from the words of her former master. Douglass makes similar use of an external text in his narrative, when he includes a copy of his marriage certificate. Like the notice that describes the runaway Harriet Jacobs, Douglass' marriage certificate is a concrete, undeniable object, separate from himself, which proves his existence textually. Unlike Jacobs' document, however, this also proves that Douglass is free and able to enter into marriage without the consent of any other man. By including this certificate in his text, Douglass is not so much changing or reclaiming its meaning as he is preserving it.

Ultimately, however, it is not any certificate or notice that defines or characterizes Frederick Douglass and Harriet Jacobs, but the texts that they have created. Douglass' Narrative and Jacob's Incidents are tangible and immutable objects that have served and continue to serve a variety of purposes. To the authors, these texts are concrete, textual proof of their existence and the importance that they have placed on their own education and literacy. Further, the texts were central in winning support for the abolitionist movement in pre-Civil War America and in communicating the conditions and injustices of slavery to the American public. Finally, the texts are part of the larger canon of American literature, no less a part than the works of Hawthorne, Melville or Hemingway. Incidents and Narrative have become a part of American

literature and moreover, a part of America itself. By virtue of this, their authors have helped to make themselves and millions of others complete and total Americans. As Douglass remarks, when he sees the correlation between literacy and freedom, “It was a grand achievement, and I prized it highly.” (Narrative, 20)