

How Do Thomas Jefferson And Frederick Douglass Intersect?

Posted on October 24, 2019

Thomas Jefferson, Frederick Douglass, and Historical Context

Frederick Douglass was a slave, and he was born in February 1818 on the Eastern seashore of Maryland. Thomas Jefferson died when Douglass was eight years of age on July 4, 1826. It was the 50th anniversary of the adoption of the Declaration of Independence. Coincidentally, the same day after some time, President John Adams passed away, but it was not in his knowledge that Jefferson had died (McMichael et al.). Adams's last words before death were very famous: "Only Thomas survives me now." Apparently, this was not an exact statement, as James Madison, the last person in the revolutionary generation, did not die until 1836.

Douglass was born to an African-American slave lady, Harriett Bailey, and most probably, his father was her white master, whose real identity was not known to him. When he was almost seven years of age, he was sent to the area of Baltimore to serve Hugh Auld, and his wife was Sofia, who gave Douglass some books while teaching her son. Mrs. Auld started thinking that young Douglass should become part of this enterprise. However, her husband finally got to know what was going, he was furious and warned his wife strictly in front of Douglass that if she continued teaching the slave, you would end up damaging him. Douglass narrated this particular incident in his autobiography as the first significant incident that changed the course of his life.

As he became an adult, his passion for learning also grew. He thoroughly read the New and Old Testaments and enhanced himself through his skill in the classical writings of Plutarch, Livy, Suetonius, Plato, and other prominent authors of that time. Also, Shakespeare, along with other writers of the Enlightenment, which include Montaigne, Gibbon, Hume, Rousseau, etc., were excellent sources of inspiration for him. Also, he was fully aware of the literary contributions of his great generation, such as Emerson, Dickens, Melville, and Whitman. As a result of all these characteristics, the self-made and self-taught Douglass became one of the country's notable authors and debaters of the 19th century.

Douglass's Life, Family, and Antislavery Activism

Douglass escaped slavery and married Anna Murray, an independent African-American, in the year 1838. Together, they started the family and raised three sons and two daughters. Their marriage

lasted for 44 years until the death of Anna in 1882. For some reasons that were never explained, she opted to remain illiterate throughout life, which created confusion and ambiguity among their children, who were inspired by the achievements of their father while keeping a strong affiliation with their mother. Two years after the death of Anna, Douglass married a white lady, Helen Pitts, who was well-educated. Her family distanced themselves from her as they were abolitionists.

The marriage was not primarily appreciated by the black community, which also included his oldest daughter. Before the Civil War, during the 1840s and 1850s, Douglass transformed into an adamant abolitionist (Newman, Lance). He firmly rejected the idea of blacks returning to Africa, which was the objective of the Colonization Society of America, which was formed in 1817, and the creator of the Liberia colony in 1822, which finally became the first republic of Africa in the year 1847. Douglass always considered himself and other black people (regardless of them being slaves) as Americans of African background. He classed America as his home and said home is nowhere else except this place. Frederick Douglass was not a typical slave, and Thomas Jefferson was not a typical slave master. The former was perceived as a mindless, low-level man and a burden on the earth, whereas the latter had the freedom to enjoy free labor and all the perks and privileges that were linked with the status during that time, which was the representation of white supremacy during that time. But one thing was common in both of the men that they thought about indiscrimination and exploitative environment so deeply that it made a massive impact on their lives, and they shared their views with the public to awaken them.

In 1852, the year of the publication of Uncle Tom's Cabin, Douglass, in his speech in Rochester, NY, he passionately opposed the celebration of Independence Day by presenting the viewpoint to the white audience that all these celebrations are fraud and based on injustice as the slave in America is in a miserable condition, he highlighted the gross discrimination with black people and deemed all the system is based on the hypocrisy, and all these events such as thanksgiving, religious parade, all are fake as you don't realize the hardships and sense of deprivation of slave (Douglass, Frederick). What circumstances a slave goes through his life, the lives of the slave are miserable; his emotions were evident in his speech. He was developing a sense of realization among the audience that slaves are also human beings and black people do have rights. He pointed out that on the one hand, some white men talk in favor of black and their rights, but on the other hand, they enjoy the full luxuries of life and are living the presence of a privileged man. This, indeed, was an attack on Jefferson, but Douglass didn't mention his name directly. During his speech, Douglass considered Jefferson as the ultimate hypocrite. He delivered his statement that we can't forget that the revolution had begun one day before the adoption of Independence Day (Douglass, Frederick).

Jefferson's Racial Thought and Douglass's Critique

Just before the start of the Civil War, Douglass learned about Jefferson's book "Notes on the State of Virginia," which was published in the year 1785 in Paris when he was U.S. ambassador to France. In this book, there was an essay on the topic of "Manners," which was his consideration of the

consequences of ill behavior to those who we contact on a daily basis. He said that there must be an unpleasant influence on the manners of our community as a result of the existence of slavery. He said that the trade of master and slavery is tyranny by the dominant class, and ultimate submission by slaves is degrading and appalling. He called it a vicious circle that continues. Children observe this and try to copy the same level of oppression. His popular observation was that the liberties of the nation must be ensured, and no one should intrude in the freedom of a particular country, and it can be done only if we all consider that freedom is the gift of God and not the charity given by any rich to poor people.

The use of power must not violate the liberty of people, and they should not be enslaved. Every person is born free, and the right to freedom is by default. He said he trembles when he thinks about the justice of God; he said that the justice of God could not sleep forever, and one day, he would show justice to everyone who is unjust on the earth. After going through "Manners," Douglass started considering Jefferson as a humble individual rather than as a hypocrite, as he had thought about him earlier. Douglass found Jefferson's views very impressive and close to his style of thinking. He was so influenced by Jefferson's thoughts that one Sunday, while attending the Church, he said: "*How can I claim my love for Jesus when I continue to hate Jefferson.*" (Jefferson, 1952). Douglass realized that he couldn't keep both things at a time. He also understood the message of Christianity, which was based on forgiving. For Douglass, with his new approach, Jefferson was a kind soul who was seeking redemption and salvation by fighting against the evils and the crimes against the humanity of his country. Douglass was of the view that Jefferson should be forgiven. Also, President Lincoln who always stood against slavery recognized Jefferson as the fatherly figure who are the source of inspiration for many people who still believed in equal rights and who taught the society that what are wrongs and rights of the community.

Finally, both Thomas Jefferson and Frederick Douglass had the same approach, they both were literary people, they both always opposed slavery and believed in equal rights of a human. According to Douglass (2000), "*A slave seldom dies, but his death is attributed to trickery*" (80). Considering this statement, Douglass, it can be felt that in that era, slaves faced so many troubles in their lives that their death was considered fraud and not the result of the hardships they came across. This was the point in the works of both Thomas Jefferson and Frederick. Jefferson's powerful and robust words inspired Douglass greatly. He was convinced about the humility of Jefferson, and he realized his aggression in his speech in the year 1852 was wrong as Jefferson was on the right path, and he was educating society about the ills of slavery and its consequences through his writings, which was a great thing to do. We shouldn't be judgmental about anyone, and we first need to analyze the situation and listen to their viewpoint to draw any conclusion. Both Thomas Jefferson and Frederick Douglass were intellectuals and activists, and they'll be remembered in the history of the U.S.

Works Cited

Douglass, Frederick. **My bondage and my freedom**. Modern Library, 2007.

Douglass, Frederick. *Narrative of the life of Frederick Douglass, an American slave*. Random House Digital, Inc., 2000.

Jefferson, T. *The declaration of independence*. Encyclopedia Britannica, 1952.

McMichael, George, et al. *Anthology of American Literature Volume I: Colonial Through Romantic*. Macmillan Publishing Company, 1989.

Newman, Lance. "Free Soil and the Abolitionist Forests of Frederick Douglass's "The Heroic Slave"." *American Literature*81.1 (2009): 127-152.

Yarborough, Richard. "Race, Violence, and Manhood: The Masculine Ideal in Frederick Douglass's 'The Heroic Slave.'" *Frederick Douglass: New Literary and Historical Essays*(1990): 166-88.