

**A Brief Look at the Lives of Frederick Douglass and Malcolm X**

Teaching American History

A More Perfect Union:

The Origins and Development of the U. S. Constitution

Year Two

Final Paper

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"Malcolm was our manhood, our living, black manhood. This was his meaning to his people." This quote from the eulogy of Malcolm X, as written and delivered by Ossie Davis on February 27, 1965, could well have been spoken of Frederick Douglass, especially if the latter had lived in a time of increased media attention, notably television.

Although they were born more than one hundred years apart, Frederick Douglass and Malcolm X both used their significant oratorical skills to object to the place that African Americans held in the society and culture of the United States during their respective lifetimes. They are both part of an oral rhetorical tradition born of African tradition and refined in the African American Christian church of the nineteenth century. Though these men had some clear differences, as did the times they inhabited, they also shared some distinct points of similarity. Neither would be seen as less than a man who, not only stood for what he believed in, but, in fact, bruited far and wide his demands for respect without equivocation. Upon founding the Organization for African American Unity on June 28, 1964, Malcolm declared "We declare our right on this earth... to be a human being, to be respected as a human being, to be given the rights of a human being in this society, on this earth, in this day, which we intend to bring into existence by any means necessary." This clear, shared character trait is also evident whether reading Douglass's Independence Day speech in Rochester, New York or his tribute to Abraham Lincoln in Washington, D.C. or Malcolm's advice "To Mississippi Youth" or his "Ballot or the Bullet" speech, both delivered in 1964. All these speeches evince a clear statement of the inadequate place of the African American in the United States. They both took care to expound on the "truth" as they experienced it and demanded that this inequity be put right. Perhaps we are more familiar with the confrontational manner of Malcolm X,

but is it very far from Douglass declaring to his white audience that “You are the children of Abraham Lincoln. We are at best only his step-children; children by adoption, children by forces of circumstances and necessity.”? The latter occasion was the Unveiling of the Freedmen’s Monument in Memory of Abraham Lincoln in Lincoln Park, Washington, D. C. on April 14, 1876 and Douglass went on to decry "the spirit of barbarism, which still lingers to blight and destroy in some dark and distant parts of the country". Many found this speech an affront both to Lincoln and the blood shed so gallantly in the the Civil War. In fact, it is Douglass at his most moderate, limiting his condemnation to "dark and distant places". In 1841, in his Independence Day speech, Douglass declared, "America is false to the past, false to the present, and solemnly binds herself to be false to the future." Certainly, this later would easily be attributed to the fiery Malcolm X.

Early in their lives, both men "lost" their families. Douglass tells us of his separation from his mother and her early death. He does not know the identity of his father or whether he has any siblings. Malcolm's father dies a brutal death at the hands of white supremacists in 1931, when he is six years old, and his mother never truly recovers. By 1939, she is committed to the State Mental Hospital in Kalamazoo, Michigan and Malcolm and his siblings are dispersed to foster homes. Later that year, Malcolm is remanded to the Michigan State Detention Home and lives with the Swerlins, a white family who run the facility. While living with the Swerlins, Malcolm attends a nearby white public school, excelling in his academics and popular enough to be elected class president during his eighth grade year. During the spring of that year, Malcolm discusses his future with his favorite teacher, Mr. Ostrowski, stating that he might like to be a

lawyer. The teacher responds, "Malcolm, one of life's first needs is for us to be realistic. Don't misunderstand me, now. We all like you, you know that. But you've got to be realistic about being a nigger. A lawyer, that's no realistic goal for a nigger." This, along with other social affronts, convinces Malcolm there is no place for him in the "white world". He is angry, drops out of school, and enters a life a crime within the black ghettos, beginning in Roxbury, Massachusetts, and moving to Harlem in New York City. Malcolm is sixteen years old and, like Frederick Douglass, he appears older and is accepted in the company of older men. When Frederick Douglass is first living with the Aulds and begins to learn to read at the age of approximately ten to twelve years, he, too, is abruptly put in his place. Hugh Auld scolds his wife, "A nigger should know nothing but to obey his master - to do what he is told to do. Learning would spoil the best nigger in the world. Now, if you teach that nigger to read, there will be no keeping him." There is a clear parallel here, but we must make allowances for the situational differences of slavery in the South the early 1830s and of the segregated Northern United States in the 1940s. However, these are pivotal experiences that cause both men to define themselves relative to their "white oppressors". It is undeniable that they had both become the "bad Niggers" of their time, with Douglass sent to Covey in 1834 for "breaking" and Malcolm in prison in Massachusetts for robbery by 1946.

With quite different life experiences, both men turn to learning as the means of their escape from bondage. Their personal drive to know and understand their world becomes central to their existence. Malcolm is later attributed the following: "Education is our passport to the future, for tomorrow belongs to the people who prepare for it

today". This is the assertion of their manhood, their declaration of their identities as humans with rights and freedoms. They wield their intelligence as their chief weapon against oppression. While there are certainly great differences, they each have a mentor who enables them by offering the opportunity to speak to audiences. Both are strengthened by international experiences that provide differing perspectives from outside the United States. Additionally, Frederick Douglass and Malcolm found newspapers, The North Star and Muhammed Speaks, and write, realizing the additional potential to spread the message through the written word.

As they grow in proficiency, they both condemn the white Christian church for its passivity in the face of slavery and discrimination. They both condemn alcohol and other drugs as the means of the self imprisonment of the African American and dramatically reject this self-degradation. They both see this as designed and implemented by the white power structure. They both call on African Americans to take pride in themselves and assume the mantle of manhood by assuming responsibility for themselves. They live their lives in an almost ascetic manner devoted to the cause of equality and self-actualization for African Americans. Sadly, today, we still hear the echoes of this message in some of the speeches of our president, Barack Obama, most recently in his Fathers' Day address or his "stay in school" message.

Both of these men reach their complete and final identity by breaking with the mentors who originally elevated them by offering them the opportunity to spread their message through oratory. Certainly there are major differences here as well. Douglass

breaks with William Lloyd Garrison because he cannot see the political efficacy in Garrison's crusade. There is no option for progress: it is moral condemnation, but Douglass is a realist. Slavery is real and must be stopped. Separating from the sinful South will not solve the problem of slavery for those slaves who live there. After the break, there clearly was mutually no fondness remaining and Douglass was demeaned by Garrison's followers. According to the Malcolm X, Elijah Muhammed's adultery and lack of faith is what begins the division between them. However, Malcolm must have seen the impracticality of the demand for a separate state and was simply too intelligent to continue to repeat the idiocies of Yacub's History. The adultery may have provided the excuse for the break but it also brought the enmity of the Black Muslims which led to Malcolm's violent death.

These were deeply religious men who believed they were pursuing God's work and that their oratorical talents are gifts from God. To be sure, Malcolm must reject the false and racist nature of Black Muslimism to achieve true spirituality through Islam and become Malik EL-Shabbaz. Although Douglass rejects the American church as a bulwark of slavery and decries the hypocrisy of Thomas Auld's conversion, he maintains a spirituality which might be compared to that of Abraham Lincoln, who also eschewed organized religion yet powerfully spoke of God in many speeches. In a sense, both Douglass and Malcolm must reject a "false" and flawed religion.

Slavery was the great sin incorporated in the founding of the United States and, as a country, we are still struggling to overcome its curse. Would that Lincoln's words were

true, and that the blood and suffering caused by the lash of slavery would have been adequately recompensed by the blood drawn by the sword during the Civil War. In truth, the abolishing of slavery was merely the beginning of the battle to undo the corrosive social cancer of slavery. Both these men, more than one hundred years apart, have been warriors in the ongoing combat for social equality and for the United States to reach the glory of its ideals. In their quest for racial equality, legally and socially, these men spoke powerfully. To close, let us examine their words:

"I'm for truth, no matter who tells it. I'm for justice, no matter who it is for or against. I'm a human being first and foremost, and as such I'm for whoever and whatever benefits humanity as a whole." Malcolm X

"One and God make a majority." Frederick Douglass

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## Notes

1. Ashbrook Center for Public Affairs, Collected Douglass Papers, Lincoln Oration  
p.4
2. Ibid. p.2
3. “The Hypocrisy of American Slavery” [www.historyplace.com/speeches/douglass](http://www.historyplace.com/speeches/douglass)  
p.2
4. The Autobiography of Malcolm X, p.38
5. Narrative of the Life of Frederick Douglass, p.20
6. This is attributed to Malcolm in many locations, but I cannot locate its source in a particular speech or writing.
7. The Autobiography Of Malcolm X, p.373
8. Once again, although this quote is widely credited to Douglass, I have not found its source.

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