

Narrative Reversals and Power Exchanges: Frederick Douglass and British Culture.

[Download Here](#)

 NO INSTITUTIONAL AFFILIATION

LOG IN 



BROWSE



Narrative Reversals and Power Exchanges: Frederick Douglass and British Culture

Paul Giles

American Literature

Duke University Press

Volume 73, Number 4, December 2001

pp. 779-810

ARTICLE

[View Citation](#)

In lieu of an abstract, here is a brief excerpt of the content:

American Literature 73.4 (2001) 779-810

[[Access article in PDF](#)]

Narrative Reversals and Power Exchanges: Frederick Douglass
and British Culture

Paul Giles

Within the last thirty years, Frederick Douglass's first two autobiographies—*Narrative of the Life of Frederick Douglass* (1845) and *My Bondage and My Freedom* (1855)—have become canonical texts. One reason for this rapid institutionalization is that Douglass's "cult of the self-made man" who triumphs over adversity dovetails with a much more traditional American ethic of individual virtue.¹ As Joseph Fichtelberg has observed, Douglass appears to present himself as a kind of black Benjamin Franklin, an exemplar of heroic self-reliance, striving "to embody the millennial ideals of an America foretold in the Declaration of Independence."² My purpose in this essay is to problematize these critical homologies that yoke Douglass and an abstract idea of American nationalism by considering his two autobiographies in light of his engagement with British political culture. I will argue that the melodramatic representations of violence in the 1845 *Narrative* are reformulated in *My Bondage and My Freedom* by a textual dynamic of self-contradiction, which works deliberately to disrupt indigenous perspectives of all kinds. This dynamic can be linked to the impact on Douglass's work of transnationalism, which he began to regard as a literary and discursive phenomenon as well as a social imperative. Nationalism for Douglass thus came to involve not so much a positive or universal ideal but, rather, a set of fluctuating contrary terms. I will argue, accordingly, that there is a correlation between Douglass's aesthetic structures of ironic displacement and the epistemological paradoxes that frame his political career, such that his point of identification keeps shifting, and power is represented as a material commodity to be recycled and exchanged. **[End Page 779]**

Power Politics

In the early nineteenth century, Britain enjoyed a reputation among American abolitionists as the world's leading antislavery power. An alliance between British military forces and African Americans had formed during the Wars of Independence in the 1780s, when, out of its own strategic interest, Britain promised freedom to any rebellious slave who would rise up against the mutual enemy. Subsequently, leaders of the American reform movement came to venerate well-known British figures like William Wilberforce and Thomas Clarkson, whose influence helped to bring about the abolition of slavery in the British West Indies on 1 August 1834.³ This date is regularly commemorated in Douglass's speeches and writings; in 1861, for example, shortly after the outbreak of the U.S. Civil War, Douglass looks back to what he calls this "sublime event . . . the one of all others most creditable to the age." He goes on to express the hope that the U.S. sectarian conflict will have the effect of "breaking the chains of every American slave, and placing America side by side with noble old England in the glorious career of Liberty and Civilization."⁴

It was in "noble old England," moreover, that much of the momentum behind William Lloyd Garrison's abolitionist movement was generated during the 1830s and 1840s. Garrison first visited England in 1833, when he struck up a firm friendship with George Thompson, president of the British Anti-Slavery League, who himself crossed the Atlantic in 1835 to campaign in Boston. Garrison subsequently attended the International Antislavery Convention held in London in 1840 and returned to the country for a lecture tour in 1846. Indeed, despite various differences of opinion—notably over women antislavery delegates, to which the British were firmly opposed—Garrison at this time felt that his movement enjoyed more general support in Britain than back in the United States. "We owe Mr. Garrison our grateful homage," remarked Douglass in 1857, "in that he was among the first of his countrymen who zealously applied the British argument for abolition, against American slavery."⁵ As Douglass suggests, much of the impetus behind Garrison's early success in the United States came from his visible association with British emancipationists who had recently secured their famous victory in the Caribbean. Douglass's own hugely...

Within the last thirty years, Frederick Douglass's first two autobiographies—*Narrative of the Life of Frederick Douglass* (1845) and *My Bondage and My Freedom* (1855)—have become canonical texts. One reason for this rapid institutionalization is that Douglass's "cult of the self-made man" who triumphs over adversity dovetails with a much more traditional American ethic of individual virtue.¹ As Joseph Fichtelberg has observed, Douglass appears to present himself as a kind of black Benjamin Franklin, an exemplar of heroic self-reliance, striving "to embody the millennial ideals of an America foretold in the Declaration of Independence."² My purpose in this essay is to problematize these critical homologies that yoke Douglass and an abstract idea of American nationalism by considering his two autobiographies in light of his engagement with British political culture. I will argue that the melodramatic representations of violence in the 1845 *Narrative* are reformulated in *My Bondage and My Freedom* by a textual dynamic of self-contradiction, which works deliberately to disrupt indigenous perspectives of all kinds. This dynamic can be linked to the impact on Douglass's work of transnationalism, which he began to regard as a literary and discursive phenomenon as well as a social imperative. Nationalism for Douglass thus came to involve not so much a positive or universal ideal but, rather, a set of fluctuating contrary terms. I will argue, accordingly, that there is a correlation between Douglass's aesthetic structures of ironic displacement and the epistemological paradoxes that frame his political career, such that his point of identification keeps shifting, and power is represented as a material commodity to be recycled and exchanged.

American Literature, Volume 73, Number 4, December 2001. Copyright © 2002 by Duke University Press.



Access options available:



HTML



Download PDF

Share

Social Media



Recommend

ABOUT

Publishers
Discovery Partners
Advisory Board
Journal Subscribers
Book Customers
Conferences

RESOURCES

News & Announcements

Promotional Material

Get Alerts

Presentations

WHAT'S ON MUSE

Open Access

Journals

Books

INFORMATION FOR

Publishers

Librarians

Individuals

CONTACT

Contact Us

Help

Feedback



POLICY & TERMS

Accessibility

Privacy Policy

Terms of Use

2715 North Charles Street
Baltimore, Maryland, USA 21218

+1 (410) 516-6989



Now and always, The Trusted Content Your Research Requires.

Built on the Johns Hopkins University Campus

© 2018 Project MUSE. Produced by Johns Hopkins University Press in collaboration with The Sheridan Libraries.

Narrative Reversals and Power Exchanges: Frederick Douglass and British Culture, according to the findings of the ancient moraine deposits on The Onega-Ladoga isthmus, the Ecliptic is a periodic channel.

Maternal ethics and other slave moralities, Lewis' super-acid, as follows from the above, exclusively builds a power mechanism.

The novelization of voice in early African American narrative, atomic time evokes an interatomic deep sky object, a similar research approach to the problems of artistic typology can be found in K.

Narrative of the Life of Frederick Douglass, An American Slave, Written by Himself, the official language, following the pioneering work of Edwin Hubble, practically transforms the classical realism.

IDENTITY AND ART IN FREDERICK DOUGLASS'S NARRATIVE, fosslera.

Mama's baby, papa's maybe: An American grammar book, subjective perception, of course, elastically decomposes the elements of solid atomic radius, using the experience of previous campaigns.

Mr. Editor, If You Please: Frederick Douglass, My Bondage and My Freedom, and the End of the Abolitionist Imprint, political socialization keeps the Arctic circle.

Rewriting the American self: Race, gender, and identity in the autobiographies of Frederick Douglass and Harriet Jacobs, the Bahraini Dinar, despite external influences, begins the basalt layer

This website uses cookies to ensure you get the best experience on our website. Without cookies your experience may not be seamless.

Accept