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Humanities

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Learning Wasn't a Good Experience for Frederick Douglass

Frederick Douglass was an inspiring rags-to-riches story from long ago. He was one of millions of slaves brought from Africa or born into slavery. But unlike other slaves, he taught himself to read and write. In many ways, he saw education as a beneficial thing because it took him to freedom and even to becoming a well-known abolitionist although he also believed it to be trouble. Learning to read and write was a burden rather than something good.

The stories and books read by Douglass in his life told him how his people had been cheated out of freedom. As his master had predicted when he found out his wife was teaching Douglass how to read (an unlawful practice), this knowledge upset Frederick. He now knew how truly inhumane he was being treated and he knew that he and his fellow slaves deserved more. It didn't put him at ease, in fact, it did the exact opposite. His hatred for his masters and slaveholders only grew. He couldn't find any peace in slavery and the education never showed him how to escape it. "It opened my eyes to the horrible pit but to no ladder upon which to get out." With his new knowledge, he found himself feeling more hopeless than before.

This torture of education didn't come easy though. It was extremely illegal to teach a slave to read because he would then be able to escape. The white people of the south believed that slaves were not human and education was a human right. Any slave found being taught or anyone caught teaching was punished severely or even killed. Douglass's first encounter with

education was when his mistress was teaching him to read and write. Her husband found out and demanded they stop because it was illegal and wrong for a slave to be educated. During his life, Frederick Douglass had many teachers but he never states their names because, in his words, "it might embarrass them, for it is an unpardonable offense to teach a slave to read." Educating and learning was a very dangerous practice.

As soon as Douglass's master knew he was being educated, he was watched closely so he could not continue. He had much less freedom of any kind. He says "from this time, I was narrowly watched." If one of his masters believed him to have a book or something of the type, he had to prove that he did not. His masters were being corrupted by the idea of slaves being less than human; they treated him as such. This treatment included the idea that education was a human right and slaves were not deserving of it. At one point, Frederick helped start a sabbath school, only to be chased with sticks and other weapons and threatened. He could not learn nor teach out the open, due to fear and lack of freedom.

Eventually Frederick Douglass's education led him to freedom but at what cost? The first time he tried to escape, he was caught and jailed. If he were to have been caught again, he would have been severely punished or killed. He narrowly escaped death both times. While he ended as free man, his time in slavery was a living hell. He was miserable now he knew how wrong slavery was, he had next to no freedom, and he could have been penalized for learning. He often contemplated death and suicide while a slave. He even says that "I envied I my fellow-slaves for their stupidity."

"I would at times feel as if learning to read had been a curse rather than a blessing." In his life, education was quite the burden for Frederick Douglass. It made him detest slavery even

more, knowing he deserved freedom and had been cheated and forced to live as a slave. It made him more fearful for his life, knowing he could be caught, punished, or killed at any time for learning how to read. It made his masters be more vigilant, watching him closely, and punishing him if he was found learning. While he made it to freedom, education and knowledge made his life in slavery more miserable and dangerous.