In his autobiography, how does Douglass use the power of narrative to address the prevailing myths about slavery?

What was Douglass’ purpose for writing his autobiography?

What choices does Douglass make as a writer to gain his reader’s sympathies?

Can you identify aspects of the writer’s technique that seem particularly effective?

In what ways does the writing produce a strong sense of the author?

How does Douglass build upon the idea of ‘education as a means of freedom from slavery’?

To what extent does Douglass follow the conventions of the “slave narrative” genre? Can you identify some of the features of the writer’s technique that you find to be particularly effective?

What is Douglass’ purpose for writing his narrative? Which aspect of his work do you find most convincing?

How is the thematic link between “literacy and freedom” developed in Douglass’ narrative?

Which scenes exemplify Douglass’ development of his “antithesis” as a response to the myth of black inferiority?

How does Douglass develop his credibility as an academic scholar? In what ways is Douglass’ narrative an attempt at social engineering?

In what ways would a social-class reading of Douglass’ narrative provide an insightful interpretation of the politics and economics of the time?

In what ways does Douglass appeal to his white readers, and in what ways is he providing his narrative as a moral compass for the United States?

How should we view Douglass’ relationship with the ideas of “power” and “powerlessness”? How is his narrative developed so that we engage in the questions about power?

Discuss the archetypal pattern of “birth to death and death into birth” in Douglass’ narrative. What is significant about this idea in Douglass’ work?

Are there some ideas or opinions put forward in the writing that you feel particularly sympathetic or antagonistic towards? What do you think prompted such a strong reaction?

**Narrative of the Life of Frederick Douglass Summary**

The *Narrative* begins with Douglass explaining that he was born in Talbot County, Maryland, but did not know his birthday because such information was often kept from slaves, which was lamentable and bothersome to him throughout his life. He rarely saw his mother and the identity of his father was unknown, although it was commonly assumed to be his first master, [Captain Anthony](http://www.gradesaver.com/character.html?character=47057). Anthony was a moderately wealthy slaveholder and was not particularly kind or conscientiousness. He rarely interfered when his overseers treated his slaves brutally.

Anthony was the clerk and superintendent for [Colonel Lloyd](http://www.gradesaver.com/character.html?character=47061), one of Maryland's wealthiest slaveholders. His plantation home was known as the Great House Farm, where Douglass resided when he was very young. Slaves received scanty allowances and had little time of their own; many were also cruelly beaten by the overseers. However, slaves on the outlying farm spoke highly of Great House Farm and considered it an honor to be sent there on errands.

Douglass detailed the sumptuous gardens of Colonel Lloyd's plantation and provided further information about the realities of slavery. He explained why slaves often praised their masters: they were afraid that the whites to whom they were speaking would report their insolence and they would be punished. Douglass also wrote of the wild and mournful beauty of the slave songs and how they suggested the horrors of slavery.

Douglass did not have many tasks on Colonel Lloyd's plantation. He was often cold and hungry. Thankfully, it was announced one day that he amongst several slave children was chosen to live with Anthony's son-in-law's brother, [Hugh Auld](http://www.gradesaver.com/character.html?character=47079), in Baltimore. Douglass attributed this fortuitous event to divine intervention; he knew God meant for him to one day escape the bonds of servitude.

Douglass's new mistress, [Mrs. Auld](http://www.gradesaver.com/character.html?character=47097), was sweet and untouched by the destructive effects of slavery. She refused to treat him ill and even decided she would teach him how to read. Her husband, however, knowing the effects of teaching a slave to read – intractability, unmanageability, disillusionment – forbade her from doing so. Douglass decided he would teach himself how to read and write; this he did by learning from the Baltimore street boys and using the Aulds' son's copybooks to practice writing. Douglass attained a copy of the *Columbian Orator*, which provided him with writings on emancipation and a denunciation of slavery.

After Captain Anthony died his assets, including all of the salves, were divided amongst two of his children. Thankfully Douglass was able to remain with Master Hugh, but this was short-lived: a quarrel between Hugh and his brother, Thomas, resulted in Douglass being sent to live with Thomas instead. He was not sad to go, as drink and the realities of slavery had ruined Mr. and Mrs. Hugh Auld, respectively, but living with Master Thomas was not pleasant either. Thomas was ignoble, cowardly, cruel, and virulently hypocritical in his faith. He and Douglass did not have a good relationship, and the latter was sent to work on the farm of [Edward Covey](http://www.gradesaver.com/character.html?character=47065), the famed "slave-breaker" known for "taming" slaves.

Living with Covey was the low point of Douglass's life. He was beaten frequently in the most unjust manner conceivable, he lost his desire to read and improve his intellect, and his spirits were broken. Covey was a most abominable man; he was duplicitous, merciless, fickle, and capable of savage brutality.

One day Douglass was very ill and could not complete his labor. This drew the attention of Covey, who beat Douglass until he was nearly senseless. Douglass resolved to journey to Master Thomas and beg him to protect him against Covey. Thomas was not amenable to this decision and Douglass had to travel back to the farm. On his way he stopped at the house of a wife of a fellow slave, Sandy. Sandy gave Douglass a special root and promised him that if he kept this root at his side he would never be touched again by a slaveholder. Douglass was skeptical but took the root.

When he arrived back at the farm Covey once again came upon him and began beating him. Douglass resolved that he would resist this time, and for over two hours the men were locked in combat. Douglass did not actually *fight* Covey but physically resisted the man's attacks. Finally Covey backed down and Douglass was free. For the duration of his stay on the farm Covey did not touch him, and Douglass believed it was his desire to keep his reputation that prevented him from turning Douglass in. This episode was the chief moment in Douglass's life; he viewed it as the time when he moved from being a slave to being a man.

After a year with Covey Douglass left and went to live on the farm of [William Freeland](http://www.gradesaver.com/character.html?character=47107). Freeland was the best master Douglass had; he was fair, honest, gave his slaves enough food and tools, and had no pretensions to piety. Douglass started a Sunday school for nearly forty slaves, teaching them how to read and write. As time passed Douglass became increasingly aware that he was getting older and he was still a slave. He resolved to devise a plan to escape. Several of his friends decided to join in the escape attempt, even though they were all aware of the possible dangers that awaited them.

However, the plot was discovered and the escape attempt foiled. Douglass and his friends were put into jail and Douglass's spirits were profoundly depressed. Finally he was released back into the custody of Hugh Auld in Baltimore. When he returned to the city he was allowed to be hired out to learn calking (waterproofing a ship). His first experience resulted in his being beaten by several white men, afraid they might lose their jobs to free blacks. Douglass went to another shipyard and worked diligently. Soon he was commanding high wages but was bitter that he had to turn nearly all of them over to Master Hugh. It was his taste of freedom and autonomy that revived within him the desire to escape, and he began to formulate a plan.

In order not to rouse the suspicions of his master, he worked assiduously at his calking. He was loath to leave his friends in Baltimore but knew that the time was come for him to try and go to the North. Finally, he achieved this escape; however, he did not publish any details in the *Narrative* as to not provoke danger to those who helped him or those who were still in slavery.

He arrived in New York and was exultant at his independence. Almost immediately, though, he felt lonely and lost in the city. If not for [David Ruggles](http://www.gradesaver.com/character.html?character=47063), a man who was most helpful to slaves and free blacks, he would have had a much more difficult time. In New York he was able to marry his love, Anna, and the two decided to move to New Bedford where it was safer. There Douglass found work and reveled in the ability to keep all of his wages and take on the responsibilities of an independent man. He even changed his name from Frederick Bailey to [Frederick Douglass](http://www.gradesaver.com/character.html?character=47067); "Douglass" was suggested by a friend who had just read "Lady of the Lake".

Douglass experienced some prejudice working in New Bedford. He also began reading the prominent abolitionist newspaper, *The Liberator*, and was in awe of its impassioned denunciations of slavery. One day he attended an anti-slavery convention in Nantucket and was asked to speak. He took the stage, and although he was slightly nervous, he was able to tell his story. The *Narrative* concludes with his explanation that he has been doing this very thing ever since that fateful day.

The Appendix to the autobiography sets out Douglass's criticisms against the Christianity of slaveholders and explains to readers that Douglass is only critical of that very hypocritical type of religion, not religion in general. He locates authentic Christianity in the black community.

**Character List**

**Frederick Douglass**

The author of the work, Douglass was a famed orator, writer, abolitionist, and reformer. He tells his life's story from birth to his introduction into the abolitionist circles of Massachusetts. He narrates his experiences as a slave, his move to Baltimore, how he taught himself how to read and write, his passage from childhood and ignorance to adulthood and self-realization, his foiled escape attempt, and his final successful escape attempt, followed by a short discussion of his time in the North. Douglass the "character" is seen to be patient, industrious, intelligent, impassioned, caring, and spiritual. He wrote that he derived great pleasure from communion with his enslaved brethren, and loved teaching them how to read and write. He was a deeply religious man but criticized the hypocritical Christianity of slaveholders.

**Harriet Bailey**

Douglass's mother. She worked for Mr. Stewart on a neighboring farm and traveled by night to see Douglass a handful of times before she died of a long illness. Douglass did not feel like he knew her very well and came to understand that the estrangement of mothers and children was one of the worst aspects of slavery.

**Betsey Bailey**

Douglass's maternal grandmother. She was married to a free man, Isaac Bailey, and was owned by Aaron Anthony. A midwife, she also had twelve children of her own. She was passed to several masters and eventually was turned out of the plantation to live alone in a small hut in the forest. Her poverty, loneliness, and feebleness of body, and the lack of gratefulness and sympathy on behalf of the slaveholders she had worked for, caused Douglass much rage and distress.

**Isaac Bailey**

Douglass's paternal grandfather. He was a free man and worked as a sawyer on the farms of Anthony and Lloyd.

**Captain Anthony**

Douglass's first master, Captain Aaron Anthony was the clerk and superintendent on Colonel Lloyd's farm. He was not a rich slaveowner, but moderately wealthy. He was not humane and did not interfere when his overseers were cruel to his slaves. He had two sons and a daughter and son-in-law.

**Mr. Plummer**

The overseer on Captain Anthony's farm when Douglass was young. He was a drunkard and a blasphemer, given to intense bouts of violence and depravity.

**Colonel Lloyd**

One of the largest landowners and slaveowners in Maryland, Colonel Lloyd employed Douglass's first master, Captain Anthony. Douglass lived on the Great House Farm, the main plantation home of Lloyd's large landholdings. He was a charter member in the Maryland Agricultural Society, a Republican delegate to the state legislature, a U.S. Congressman, the governor of Maryland, and a U.S. Senator.

**Thomas Auld**

The brother-in-law of Hugh Auld with whom Douglass lived for a period of your time. He was cruel, mean, merciless, and cowardly. Since he was not used to having slaves, he was incapable of managing them properly "either by force, fear, or fraud" (43). He never gave them enough to eat and worked them too hard. What Douglass loathed most about him was his conspicuous hypocrisy regarding religion; he claimed to be pious and devoted to Christianity but was demonstrably brutal and duplicitous. He eventually sent Douglass to live with Edward Covey, the famed slave-breaker.

**Lucretia Auld**

Captain Anthony's daughter and the wife of Captain Thomas Auld. After the deaths of her father and brother Richard, she and her brother Andrew inherited their father's estate. Douglass was considered part of the estate, but to his delight he escaped living with Andrew and was returned to Hugh Auld in Baltimore, the brother of Lucretia's husband. She died not long after this separation of assets.

**Richard Anthony**

The second-eldest of Captain Anthony's sons.

**Andrew Anthony**

One of Captain Anthony's sons.

**Mr. Severe**

The overseer at the Great House Farm. He was cruel and conscienceless, as well as an unbelievably profane man. He died not long after Douglass arrived at Colonel Lloyd's.

**Mr. Hopkins**

The overseer at Colonel Lloyd's who replaced Mr. Severe. He was better than his predecessor and was generally liked by the slaves. He found no pleasure in disciplining them.

**Mr. Austin Gore**

The overseer at Colonel Lloyd's plantation when Douglass was a young child, Gore was "proud, ambitious, and persevering" (24) as well as "artful, cruel, and obdurate" (24). He was a young man but quite serious and humorless. He was merciless in his treatment of the slaves, tolerating no critique of his behavior. Douglass saw him as a savage barbarian and a master of deceit.

**Hugh Auld**

The brother-in-law of Thomas Auld, husband of Lucretia Anthony. Douglass lived with Auld and his wife in Baltimore for two periods of time. Auld was not particularly cruel, but he was firmly entrenched in the world of slavery and forbade Douglass from learning his ABCs because he knew that would make his young slave intractable and unhappy. Later, when Douglass was sent back to him after his escape attempt, he assisted him after being beaten up at Gardner's on Fell Point and allowed him to hire himself out for work.

**Mrs. Auld**

Sophia Keithley Auld married Hugh Auld and was Douglass's mistress in Baltimore. Before her marriage she worked as a weaver. She treated him kindly and respectfully when he first moved in with the family, but soon fell prey to the downfalls of slavery. She became cruel and controlling, especially after her husband forbade her to teach Douglass his ABCs. However, she and Douglass stayed in contact even when he moved to the North, and her son told Douglass that she had always spoken of him kindly.

**Rowena Hamilton**

The second wife of Thomas Auld.

**Henny**

A young woman owned and frequently beaten by Thomas Auld. She was disliked by her master because she was essentially useless, having burned herself terribly as a child. The last record of Henny found her a free black living in St. Michaels.

**Edward Covey**

Known for being a consummate "slave-breaker," Covey was a poor man and a farm renter. Thomas Auld sent Douglass to him in order to avail him of his insolence. Covey was a hard worker and was thus intensely critical of his slaves; he spied on them and tolerated no laziness or perceived autonomy. He professed to be religious, but was a hypocrite and a blasphemer. Douglass was never more broken and despairing than while at Covey's farm, but eventually proved his mettle by fighting back against him and not allowing himself to be whipped.

**Sandy Jenkins**

A slave owned by William Groomes and hired out to farmers in Talbot County, Jenkins had a free wife whom he visited frequently. He counseled Douglass to keep a root with him to protect him from being touched by slaveholders. He initially agreed to participate in the escape but then decided against it.

**William Freeland**

A slaveholder with whom Douglass lived for a short time following his time with Covey. Freeland was an "educated southern gentleman" (57) and did not possess the evil traits of most slaveholders. He did not profess to be religious and had traits of humanity and kindness. He fed his slaves enough and Douglass considered him the best master he had.

**Henry Harris**

A slave on Mr. Freeland's farm who attempts to participate in Douglass's escape attempt. The two men were very close friends and Douglass helped him learn how to read and write.

**John Harris**

A slave on Mr. Freeland's farm who attempts to participate in Douglass's escape attempt. The two men were very close friends and Douglass helped him learn how to read and write.

**Handy Caldwell**

A hired slave on William Freeland's farm.

**Henry Bailey**

Douglass's uncle who belonged to Thomas Auld. He participated in Douglass's aborted escape attempt.

**Charles Roberts**

The husband of Douglass's aunt, he was owned by Charles Hamilton and participated in Douglass's aborted escape attempt.

**Mr. Gardner**

A ship-builder on Fell's Point to whom Master Hugh hires Douglass out. Douglass's time at Mr. Gardner's is brief, as he is attacked by white men who fear the competition of free blacks in the workplace.

**David Ruggles**

Sought Douglass out when he moved to New York and took him to his boarding-house. Later he assisted Douglass in moving to New Bedford. Ruggles was a free black man who was active in the antislavery movement. He lectured, spoke, and was a traveling agent for a reform publication. He also worked on the Underground Railroad. He was afflicted by temporary blindness in 1842 and would suffer from complications for the rest of his life.

**Anna Douglass**

Formerly Anna Murray, she married Douglass on September 15th, 1838. She was a free woman.

**Nathan Johnson**

An abolitionist man who took in Douglass and his wife when they arrived in New Bedford. His reading of "Lady in the Lake" inspired Frederick, then known as Johnson, to take the surname Douglass from then on.

**Demby**

One of Colonel Lloyd's slave who was murdered by overseer Gore. Demby ran into a creek to put a stop to a whipping. Gore gives Demby to the count of three to come back so he could resume the whipping. Demby refuses and is coolly shot dead. No punishment comes to Gore. Douglass uses this story to illustrate the fact that whites could kill blacks with impunity.

**Major Themes**

**Ignorance as a means to perpetuate slavery**

One of the most important ways slaves were kept in bondage was not simply the threat of physical brutality; rather, it was through deep and sustained ignorance. Slaves were not allowed to read and write and were thus generally not aware of the events outside of the plantation, could not communicate with each other well to foment rebellion or conduct escape plans, and could not attain the sense of self-sufficiency and pride that came from being lettered. Literacy brought with it an understanding of the larger world. It opened up before a slave the idea of justice and an understanding of history. Reading the Bible led to a truer comprehension of Christianity. Douglass was able to first engage with abolitionism when he attained literacy. He also became fully aware of the reality of slavery; he wrote "[Literacy] had given me a view of my wretched condition, without the remedy. It opened my eyes to the horrible pit, but to no ladder upon which to get out. In moments of agony, I envied my fellow-slaves for their stupidity" (36). Ignorance was thus a way for slaveholders to keep their slaves manageable, happy, placid, and content. Once a slave moved beyond such darkness into a world filled with understanding, he was only able to do what Douglass eventually did - attempt to escape from his bonds.

**Religion**

Religion weaves itself through the text in a myriad of ways. Douglass expresses that he is a spiritual man and a Christian, but takes pains to explain that his Christianity is based on the teachings of Christ, not the hypocritical perversions of the religion by slaveholders. He lambasts their pretensions to piety that conceal their corruption and evil. He chastises the Church for supporting the system of slavery, and calls the fake Christians Pharisees for their abhorrent actions and words. Importantly, he locates authentic Christianity in the black community. Douglass also alludes to the traditional religious beliefs of Africans, legitimating them alongside Christianity.

**Resistance**

Douglass's encounter with Edward Covey, which reveals "how a slave was made a man," demonstrates that his commitment to nonviolent resistance was crucial in securing his passage to manhood and self-actualization. Douglass was a paragon of patience, endurance, and fortitude. Although passionately roused on behalf of himself and his fellow slaves, he had a remarkable ability to channel that anger into healthy forms of resistance characterized by wisdom and maturity. He did nothing spontaneous or irrationally. He did not burst out in violence or rage and jeopardize his plans to escape or to attain literacy. His anger was calm and cool. In his epochal battle with Covey, keen readers will note that he did not actually *fight* back; he kept Covey from whipping him and gaining the upper hand. This resistance finally broke Covey, and the fight ended with neither man essentially victorious. What resulted from the fight, however, was Douglass's realization of manhood and autonomy. Thus, resistance in the *Narrative* centers on nonviolence and patient endurance. It is not rash or violent. Even though Douglass makes it clear that any man who wants to beat him must be prepared to kill him, he is not aggressive for aggression's sake. His path to individuality and fullness of self is not paved with blood.

**Coming of age**

The *Narrative* is not just a harrowing tale of an escape from slavery or an indictment of the southern system of bondage and religious hypocrisy; it is also a *bildungsroman*, the story of a boy becoming a man. Douglass journeys on a path from childhood to adulthood, from ignorance to knowledge, from slave to free man, from object to subject. He relates his growing comprehension of the realities of slavery while a child, and charts his course through his teen years while in the hands of several slaveholders. He details how literacy broadened his mind and made him aware of the deleterious and unjust nature of slavery. His resistance against Covey secured his attainment of manhood, allowing him to finally demonstrate the physical and moral strengths that were necessary to throw off the yoke of slavery. He also undertook a physical journey to escape bondage, knowing that to be fully self-actualized he would need to be free. Finally, he married and changed his name, further cementing his status as a grown man whose life was in his own hands. Douglass thus charts his coming of age in this remarkable autobiography, but sets his work apart from others in the genre due to the heightened quality of the obstacles he faced.

**The importance of friendship**

Douglass takes pains to negate whites' assumptions that slaves could not make friends with one another. This is categorically untrue; Douglass wrote of his fellow slaves at Freeland's farm that they would have died for each other, that they loved each other and consulted in each other in all things. They would not leave each other in the escape attempt and pledged to each other their lives and fortunes. Separation was a greater fear than death. Douglass's promulgation of friendship also exists when he laments leaving his young friends on the Baltimore streets behind and begins a Sunday school for his fellow slaves. He was a man who was sustained by community and fraternity; it made slavery more palatable and tolerable. Friendship was so important to slaves because oftentimes they were severed from their families in an effort to dehumanize them and thus had to rely on their non-familial brethren for emotional, mental, and even physical support.

**The perversity of slavery**

Slavery is revealed to be an utterly loathsome, execrable system that oppressed and physically and mentally brutalized its captives, and destroyed slave and slaveholder alike. Slaves were held in a system of absolute and total oppression; they were kept in ignorance of their birthdays, severed from family and friends, endured the most savage beatings at the hands of capricious masters, were raped and pimped out, forbidden to learn their letters, and deprived of enough food, clothing, and sleep. They were not allowed to marry whom they pleased or associate with those with whom they wished. They were denied education and the pursuit of knowledge. Their masters capitalized upon their ignorance by deceitfully trying to convey to them that freedom was onerous and debauched (as in the discussion of the holidays). Slaves became used to lying about being happy with their master and situation for fear that they would be punished otherwise. Slavery also ruined slaveholders, turning them from kind and fair individuals (such as Mrs. Auld) to individuals that delighted in and abused power. Slavery ruined not only individual lives but poisoned all of southern society.

**The abuse of women**

There are few female figures in the autobiography. The white women depicted were the wives of slaveholders, inured to cruelty and capriciousness. The black women were slaves (except for the minor examples of freed women like Douglass's wife and Sandy Jenkins's wife) and often bore the brunt of a master's hatred and brutality. One woman, Caroline, was pimped out by Mr. Covey, forced to bear the children of a male slave. Douglass's own mother was forced to have sex with a white man, thus begetting Douglass. Other women experienced the most savage beatings. Henny, a young woman who was maimed by burns, was specifically targeted by Thomas Auld. He whipped her multiple times a day. Aunt Hester was the favored victim of choice for Captain Anthony, no doubt because he was sexually attracted to her. He beat her mercilessly and humiliated her. Douglass recounts another tale of a white mistress so heavily beating a young slave girl that the girl died. Slavery took its toll on all of its participants, but women fell prey a larger part of the abuse due to the fact that their bodily strength was less and slaveholders perceived them as weaker.