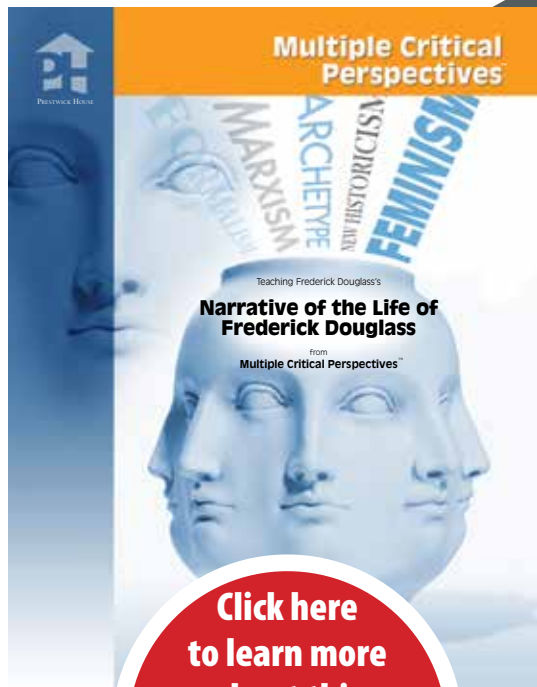




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Teaching Frederick Douglass's

Narrative of the Life of Frederick Douglass

from

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by

Michael Stacey



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General Introduction to the Work

Introduction to *Narrative of the Life of Frederick Douglass*

NARRATIVE OF THE LIFE OF FREDERICK DOUGLASS is a 19th-century American autobiography. In it, Frederick Douglass, an escaped slave and abolitionist, chronicles his life from childhood to adulthood, including his escape to freedom from slavery. One possible motive for Douglass's writing his narrative is to depict slavery in a realistic way in order to further the abolitionist cause. Douglass makes sure to highlight both the positive and negative attributes of his former owners in order to present as complete a portrayal as possible and to make his writing credible to his overwhelmingly white audience.

When considering the length of the autobiography, it can be assumed that Douglass did not want to bog down the reader with minute details, as he could easily have done. The rhetorical attributes of the narrative are important to consider as the points covered show major moments of Douglass's life. Those moments are detailed to explore the maltreatment of slaves and Douglass's desire for freedom. The brevity of the narrative also allows the text to be read more like an anti-slavery treatise than a traditional autobiography.

A difficulty one might encounter while reading the narrative is Douglass's recursive style, in which he frequently returns to earlier points. His loosely chronological writing does give a sense of linearity to the narrative, but his use of flashback and digression interrupts what would otherwise be a smoother progression. Also, there is the acknowledgement of the incompleteness of data in the beginning of the narrative when he is talking about his birth and early childhood. While the lack of information might be problematic because the reader cannot make claims about Douglass's early childhood, Douglass makes it clear to the reader that he does not have all of the information, which leads him to gain further credibility as a writer.

Formalist Theory Applied to *Narrative of the Life of Frederick Douglass*



Notes on the Formalist Approach

THE FORMALIST APPROACH TO LITERATURE was developed at the beginning of the 20th century and remained popular until the 1970s, when other literary theories began to gain popularity. Today, formalism is generally regarded as a rigid and inaccessible means of reading literature, used in Ivy League classrooms and as the subject of scorn in rebellious coming-of-age films. It is an approach that is concerned primarily with *form*, as its name suggests, and thus places the greatest emphasis on *how* something is said, rather than *what* is said. Formalists believe that a work is a separate entity—not at all dependent upon the author's life or the culture in which the work is created. No paraphrase is used in a formalist examination, and no reader reaction is discussed.

Originally, formalism was a new and unique idea. The formalists were called “New Critics,” and their approach to literature became the standard academic approach. Like classical artists such as da Vinci and Michaelangelo, the formalists concentrated more on the form of the art rather than the content. They studied the recurrences, the repetitions, the relationships, and the motifs in a work in order to understand what the work was about. The formalists viewed the tiny details of a work as nothing more than parts of the whole. In the formalist approach, even a lack of form indicates something. Absurdity is in itself a form—one used to convey a specific meaning (even if the meaning is a lack of meaning).

The formalists also looked at smaller parts of a work to understand the meaning. Details like diction, punctuation, and syntax all give clues.



Activity One

Observing Recurring Images and Motifs

1. Copy and distribute the worksheet: *Narrative of the Life of Frederick Douglass* Formalist Activity One: Observing Recurring Images and Motifs.
2. Divide the class into four groups or a number of groups divisible by four.
3. Assign each group one of the following motifs/images:
 - Slaves as property (commodity)
 - Images of freedom
 - Supportive Females
 - Violence (Physical and Psychological)
4. Have groups complete the worksheet.
5. Reconvene the class and have groups report their findings.
6. As a class, discuss how the author uses these reoccurring motifs/images in order to focus his overall commentary.

Marxist Theory Applied to *Narrative of the Life of Frederick Douglass*



Notes on the Marxist Approach

THE MARXIST APPROACH TO LITERATURE is based on the philosophy of Karl Marx, a German philosopher and economist. His major argument was that whoever controlled the means of production in society controlled the society—whoever owned the factories “owned” the culture. This idea is called “dialectical materialism,” and Marx felt that the history of the world was leading toward a communist society. From his point of view, the means of production (i.e., the basis of power in society) would be placed in the hands of the masses, who actually operated them, not in the hands of those few who owned them. It was a perverted version of this philosophy that was at the heart of the Soviet Union. Marxism was also the rallying cry of the poor and oppressed all over the world.

To read a work from a Marxist perspective, one must understand that Marxism asserts that literature is a reflection of culture, and that culture can be affected by literature (Marxists believed literature could instigate revolution). Marxism is linked to Freudian theory by its concentration on the subconscious—Freud dealt with the individual subconscious, while Marx dealt with the political subconscious. Marx believed that oppression exists in the political subconscious of a society—social pecking orders are inherent to any group of people.

Four main areas of study:

- economic power
- materialism versus spirituality
- class conflict
- art, literature, and ideologies



Activity One

Exploring Economies Based on Geography

1. Copy and distribute the worksheet: *Narrative of the Life of Frederick Douglass* Marxist Theory Activity One: Exploring Economies Based on Geography.
2. Divide class into three groups or a number of groups divisible by three.
3. Assign each group one of the following locations:
 - Eastern Shore of Maryland (Easton, St. Michael's, etc.)
 - Baltimore, Maryland
 - New York City and New Bedford, Massachusetts
4. Have groups complete the worksheet.
5. Reconvene the class and have groups report their findings.
6. As a class, discuss the following questions:
 - How does Douglass characterize the economies of the different locations?
 - What do you think accounts for the differences in the economies from location to location?
 - How are these differences significant in terms of understanding 19th century American industrial and agrarian economies?

Feminist Theory Applied to *Narrative of the Life of Frederick Douglass*

Notes on the Feminist Theory

FEMINISM IS AN EVOLVING PHILOSOPHY, and its application in literature is a relatively new area of study. The basis of the movement, both in literature and society, is that the Western world is fundamentally patriarchal (i.e., created by men, ruled by men, viewed through the eyes of men, and judged by men).

In the 1960s, the feminist movement began to form a new approach to literary criticism. Of course, women had already been writing and publishing for centuries, but the 1960s saw the rise of a feminist literary theory. Until then, the works of female writers (or works about females) were examined by the same standards as those by male writers (and about men). Women were thought to be less intelligent than men, at least in part because they generally received less formal education, and many women accepted that judgment. It was not until the feminist movement was well under way that women began examining old texts, reevaluating the portrayal of women in literature, and writing new works to fit the developing concept of the “modern woman.”

The feminist approach is based on finding and exposing suggestions of misogyny (negative attitudes toward women) in literature. Feminists are interested in exposing the undervaluing of women in literature that has long been accepted as the norm by both men and women. They have even dissected many words in Western languages that reflect a patriarchal worldview. Arguing that the past millennia in the West have been dominated by men—whether the politicians in power or the historians recording it all—feminist critics believe that Western literature reflects a masculine bias, and, consequently, represents an inaccurate and potentially harmful image of women. In order to repair this image and achieve balance, they insist that works by and about women be added to the literary canon and read from a feminist perspective.



Activity One

Analyzing the Portrayal of Female Characters

1. Copy and distribute the worksheet: *Narrative of the Life of Frederick Douglass* Feminist Theory Activity One: Analyzing the Portrayal of Female Characters.
2. Divide class into six groups or a number of groups divisible by six.
3. Assign each group one of the following characters:
 - Harriet Bailey
 - Aunt Hester
 - Sophia Auld
 - Mrs. Hamilton
 - Caroline
 - Betsy Freeland
4. Have groups complete the worksheet.
5. Reconvene the class and have groups report their findings.
6. As a class, discuss how the author characterizes female characters, paying close attention to class status as well as possible gender stereotypes.