

PSYCHOANALYTIC LITERARY CRITICISM OF AMERICAN ROMANTICISM LITERATURE AS REFLECTED IN *NARRATIVE OF THE LIFE OF FREDERICK DOUGLASS*

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Abstract: One of the most prominent themes in the Narrative involves the association of literacy with freedom. Within the context of Afro-American literature, slave narratives have attracted a great deal attention in recent criticism due to the fact that they represent the origins of the desire to search for an appointment and represent vehicle to portray the reality of Black identity. In this paper, it merely focuses on the psychological aspects of Frederick Douglass to escape from slavery influenced by the romantic era. In this work, instead of telling his life in a set of events, Frederick Douglass wrote in a form of an autobiography in which he could put forward his feelings—regret, fear, sadness, hope and enthusiasm, love, and despair personally. It shows how instead of sinking him to a weak and helpless condition, Douglass's feelings

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make him strong and firm to determine his path to gain freedom. That is the characteristic of romantic feelings.

Key words: *American romanticism, literature, psychoanalytic approach, slavery*

INTRODUCTION

Most students have often heard the word of literature, but they sometimes find difficulties to define the term. Simply it is defined as anything written, with the restriction that not every written document can be categorized as literature in the more exact sense of the word. The straight point of definition is not strong enough as a satisfactory answer. The definitions, therefore, usually include additional adjectives such as “aesthetic” or “artistic” to distinguish literary works from texts of everyday use such as magazines, newspaper, legal documents, books, and scholarly writings.

There are some related theories held by literary scholars and creative artists attempting to define literature. Since they use different lens to throw the light over it, there is a diversity of its definition. In my college, some students are familiar with the terms both informative literature and imaginative literature in relation to the above definition. Informative literature presents information and tells us about facts, explanations, history, real great figures life and so forth. Its main purpose is to offer knowledge. Meanwhile imaginative literature aims to arouse thoughts and feelings. Its author expresses his idea, his feelings and his attitude. He may talk of things, people and so forth. He wants to communicate feelings, not facts; emotion, not information only. Imaginative literature is in the deeper sense than informative literature. R.J.Rees (1973) defines this second kind of literature is writing which expresses and communicate thoughts, feelings and attitudes towards life

In addition, Barnett (1974) in his book *An Introduction to Literature: Fiction, Poetry, Drama* elaborates the definition of literature based on the three theories of art: imitative, expressive and affective. Art is an imitation of something or reality. However an artist or a writer does not merely imitates but creates and fashions it in which its essence can be seen more clearly. Since literature is a vital record of what men have seen in life, it is fundamentally an expression of life through the medium of language. And the last value is affective in which a work of art arouses particular emotion or affects the reader.

According to Harry Levin (1973:63), '*Literature is not only the effect of social causes, it also the cause of social effect*'. Related to this idea, one may say that to study a literary work means also study the social and cultural condition. On the other hand, studying social culture along with language in learning literature gives better understanding of the country, the people and their identities. Social culture studies give students a chance to deepen their insights into the country and the people whose language and literature are being learned.

Moreover Langlang and Tom Burns said that '*Literature is an attempt to make sense of our lives. Sociology is an attempt to make sense of the way in which we live*' (1973:9). Exploring a literary work means to question the phenomena emerge in society. Understanding phenomena lead to understand the character. As the alternative world, literature gives a chance to students to explore human beings through the characters in literary work, as Plato said that '*Literature is an imitation of a reality*'

In relation to the theories above, the *Narrative of the Life of Frederick Douglass* as a literary work thus can be analyzed concerning that is an imitation of reality, an expression of what Douglass has experienced in his life, and a work to arise particular

emotion of its readers. In short, methods of interpretation for any literary work can be focused on text, author, reader, and context.

As the *Narrative of the Life of Frederick Douglass* is categorized as a romantic work produced during the age of romanticism and transcendentalism in which the tendency of making any literary work as the expression of the author marked the age. The Romantic period of American literature was also called the Age of Transcendentalism (1826 – 1865). The words *romantic and romanticism* refer to a style of art a way of thinking, and to the historical period during which the style developed in Europe, the mid-eighteenth to the mid-nineteenth centuries. Romantic thought and art is characterized by an emphasis on inspiration, imagination, spontaneity, naturalness, originality, unconscious intuitiveness, passion, and in some of its manifestations, sublimity, frenzy, and mystery (Kohl 1992:17).

Therefore this paper is mainly aimed to dig out the feelings of Frederick Douglass toward slavery embodied in *the Narrative of the Life of Frederick Douglass*. An author approach is suitable with this discussion called biographical criticism. It establishes a direct link between the literary text and the biography of the author and compares the fictional portrayal with the facts and figures from the author's life.

According to the author-centered approaches, the central theme of the novel, the creation of an artificial human being, can be traced back to Frederick Douglass's intense psychological occupation with the issue of birth at the time. Many biographical approaches also tend to employ psychological explanations. This has to lead to psychoanalytic literary criticism, a movement which sometimes deals with the author, but primarily attempts to illuminate general psychological aspects in a text that do not necessarily relate to the author exclusively. Under the influence of Sigmund Freud (1856-1939), psychoanalytic literary criticism

expanded the study of psychological features beyond the author to cover a variety of intrinsic textual aspects. For instance, characters in a text can be analyzed psychologically, as if they were real people (Klarer 2004:91).

THE ROMANTIC VIEWS AND THE BIOGRAPHICAL SKETCH OF FREDERICK DOUGLASS

A. The Romantic View

Romanticism was a movement in literary history in the first half of the nineteenth century. It appears more or less simultaneously in American and English literature. Nature poetry and individual, emotional experiences play important roles. Romanticism may be seen as a reaction to the Enlightenment and the political changes throughout Europe and America at the end of the eighteenth century.

Born as the reaction to neo-classicism and formal orthodoxy, romantic movement brought some prominent changes of outlook. The center of life is in the heart not in the head. It affirmed the supremacy of the heart—the inner life of one self. It stressed strong emotion, imagination, freedom from classical correctness in art forms and rebellion against social conventions (Spanckeren 1994:115).

Romanticism had appeared in England in the last of the eighteenth century. It spread to continental Europe and then came to America in the early nineteenth century. The attitudes of American writers were shaped by their new world environment and were highlighted by the ideas inherited from three romantic traditions of Europe, especially of England (McMichael 1955:585). Some say that still, early American literature was the mere copy of the English traditions.

...and American romanticism was chiefly imitative. Where the great romantics in England wrote on English and continental themes, early romantics in America copied, not American life, but English copies of English life..., the main current of derivative romanticism, and the ever increasing pull of indigenous American romanticism (Spiller 1995:284).

Therefore, America pursues its own identities in line with its literary movements. The new romanticism has been born finally and given the American literature new characteristics. There are five prominent aspects of American romantic world view, namely romantic individualism, humans' feelings, imagination, nature worshiping, and the self-expression. However, only humans' feelings will be elaborated as they are ones that are connected with the discussion of the *Narrative of the Life of Frederick Douglass*.

In the romantic period, feeling was praised as reason and it had also been in the neo-classic age. This feeling stated as the opposition of reason believed to be the goodness of the human nature. It can be said that truth lies in feeling. Literature as in romantic life placed the feeling more introverted and personal than in the former period. It was individual joy, rapture, love, longing, regret, fear, hope, faith, enthusiasm, despair and auto-registration of moods (Forster 1980:66-67).

Something to be recognized that being romantic is not similar with being sentimental. Forster distinguished them to some extent that a feeling of a sentimentalist is weak and shallow. The sentimentalist luxuriates in feeling for its own sake. Meanwhile, the feeling of a romantic is strong and deep, even they are often engaged in searching for the truth (Forster 1980:67).

Still by borrowing the writing of Forster (1980:77), since there is an exaltation of feeling, the literary works is produced in

this period tended to be self-expression. It might be an expression of writer's feeling and experiences of a society or the spirit of era as he knew or chose to make it. Literature became largely confessional-personal, autobiographic and lyrical.

B. The Biographical Sketch of Frederick Douglass

Frederick Douglass was born in a slave cabin, in February, 1818, near the town of Easton, on the Eastern Shore of Maryland. Separated from his mother when only a few weeks old, he was raised by his grandparents. At about the age of six, his grandmother took him to the plantation of his master and left him there. Not being told by her that she was going to leave him, Douglass never recovered from the betrayal of the abandonment. When he was about eight he was sent to Baltimore to live as a houseboy with Hugh and Sophia Auld, relatives of his master. It was shortly after his arrival that his new mistress taught him the alphabet. When her husband forbade her to continue her instruction, because it was unlawful to teach slaves how to read, Frederick took it upon himself to learn. He made the neighborhood boys his teachers, by giving away his food in exchange for lessons in reading and writing.

At about the age of twelve or thirteen Douglass purchased a copy of *The Columbian Orator*, a popular schoolbook of the time, which helped him to gain an understanding and appreciation of the power of the spoken and the written word, as two of the most effective means by which to bring about permanent, positive change. Returning to the Eastern Shore, at approximately the age of fifteen, Douglass became a field hand, and experienced most of the horrifying conditions that plagued slaves during the 270 years of legalized slavery in America.

In 1841 he addressed a convention of the Massachusetts Anti-Slavery Society in Nantucket and so greatly impressed the group that they immediately employed him as an agent. He was such an impressive orator that numerous persons doubted if he had ever been a slave, so he wrote *Narrative of the Life of Frederick Douglass*. During the Civil War he assisted in the recruiting of the colored men for the 54th and 55th Massachusetts Regiments and consistently argued for the emancipation of slaves.

After the war he was active in securing and protecting the rights of the freemen. In his later years, at different times, he was as Secretary of the Santo Domingo Commission, Marshall and Recorder of Deeds of the District of Columbia, and United States minister to Haiti. His other autobiographical works are *My Bondage and My Freedom*, and *Life and Times of Frederick Douglass* published in 1855 and 1881. He died at his home in Anacostia, Washington, DC in 1895 (http://www.frederickdouglass.org/douglass_bio.html)

THE PSYCHOANALYTIC APPROACH OF FREDERICK DOUGLASS TO ESCAPE FROM SLAVERY

This part attempts to make an analysis of *Narrative of the Life of Frederick Douglass* based on the assumption that this literary work falls into a romantic as it is a reflection of Frederick Douglass's psychological desire to escape from slavery reflected through his feelings and his individualism. Perspectives and Interpretations by psychoanalytic literary criticism are applied as it is the most appropriate method to explicate those two aspects of romanticism.

As mentioned before, the exaltation of feelings marked one of the romantic characteristics. In this work, instead of telling his life in a set of events, Frederick Douglass wrote in a form of an autobiography in which he could put forward his feelings—regret,

fear, sadness, hope and enthusiasm, love, and despair personally. Herewith the following feelings of Frederick Douglass are descriptively expressed.

Regret. Because of the practice of a common custom in slavery, Frederick Douglass was separated from his mother before he reached twelfth month. This separation was purposed to hinder the development of natural affection between a mother and her child. This is what happened to Frederick Douglass, something that he regretted. He had a little of time to spend with his mother even he was not allowed to be present during her illness, death, and burial. His mother died when he was about seven years old. The inadequate love and care he got from his mother had caused him feel like hearing a death of a stranger when he heard of her death and this was his regret. As a child he should have been very sad to hear of his mother's death. All he could remember was the hardship of his mother to face in order to see him.

I do not recollect of ever seeing my mother by the light of day. She was with me in the night. She would lie down with me, and get me to sleep, but long before I waked she was gone. Very little communication ever took place between us. Death soon ended what little we could have while she lived, and with it her hardships and sufferings (Douglass 1963:2).

Fear. Anyone who reads some incidents in this narrative will be able to imagine how terrified little Douglass was when he witnessed for the first time of the horrible punishment his aunt, Hester. As the consequence for going out evenings and being caught in company with a young man named Ned Roberts, Hester was cruelly whipped. The heavy cow skin caused her warm, red blood came dripping to the floor.

I remember the first time I ever witnessed this horrible exhibition. I was quite a child, but I well remember it. I never shall forget it whilst I remember anything ...I was so terrified and horror-stricken at the sight, that I hid myself in a closet, and dare not venture out till long after the bloody transaction was over (Douglass 1963:6-7).

Sadness. At the first page of this narrative, it is expressed by Douglass how he was unhappy due to the fact he was a slave and he could not get any information concerning with his self identity. His enthusiasm to find out how old he was, and whether his master was actually his father or not, brought unhappiness to him.

A want of information concerning my own was a source of unhappiness to me even during childhood. The White children could tell their ages. I could not tell why I ought to be deprived of the same privilege. I was not allowed to make any inquiries of my master concerning it”(Douglass 1963:1).

Hearing the songs that were often sung by slaves when they were on their ways to the Great House Farm (the home plantation of Colonel Lloyd where all the mechanical operations for all the farms were performed) depressed Douglass’s spirit and plunged him into sadness.

Every tone was a testimony against slavery and a prayer to God for deliverance from chains. The hearing of those wild notes always depressed my spirit, and filled me with ineffable sadness. I have frequently found myself in tears while hearing them (Douglass 1963:14).

Hope and enthusiasm. Even though Douglass was seldom whipped by his master and had a better condition compared to

many other unfortunate slaves, his hope of being freeman emerged strongly. The cruelty of slaveholders he saw and the sufferings he experienced strengthened his hope to release from his status of being a slave and gain a better life. His hope is reflected when he was sent to Baltimore to live with Mr. Hugh Auld.

So strong was my desire that I thought a gratification of it would fully compensate for whatever loss of comforts I should sustain by exchange. I left without regret and with the highest hope of future happiness (Douglass 1963:31-32).

Another luck that Douglass had is he found a good mistress who was willing to teach him to read. Though it did not last for long as it was then stopped by his master, Douglass's hope to be a free man grew stronger. His young spirit struggled to understand his master's arguments but it was in vain. He then understood that by being able to read he would be more aware of his injustice of slavery therefore he would claim his freedom. Douglass's hope to gain freedom led him to have more enthusiasm and determination to study.

Douglass's ability of reading however distressed him as he was led to abominate his masters and become more aware of his woeful condition without having any ability to improve it. This condition caused him to keep thinking and the deeper he thought the more severe his pain was. He tried to get rid of the thinking but finally he was awakened. The quotation below shows how his hope of freedom was embedded so deeply, how it gave him spirit and enthusiasm.

The silver of freedom had aroused my soul to eternal wakefulness. Freedom now appeared, to disappear no more forever. It was heard in every sound, and seen in everything... I often found myself regretting my own existence, and

wishing myself dead; and but for the hope of being free, I have no doubt but that I should have been killed. While in this state of mind, I was eager to hear anyone speak of slavery (Douglass 1963:43).

Love. His engagement with new fellow-slaves during his service to Mr. William Freeland gave Douglass a feeling he had never had before. It was a feeling of love, love of brotherhood. He held a Sabbath school to teach his fellows how to read and to write. And in fact, he succeeded in arising their desire to learn how to read. They went to the school even though they had to take the risk of getting thirty-nine lashes if they were caught. Being encouraged to improve the condition of his race, he found teaching his fellows as a delight of his soul. The days he spent with them were great days for Douglass. Their loving and brave heart arose Douglass's love of brotherhood.

I believe we would have died for each other. We never undertook to do anything of any importance, without a mutual consultation. We never moved separately. We were one... They were great days to my soul. The work of instructing my dear fellow-slaves was the sweetest engagement with which I was ever blessed. We loved each other (Douglass 1963:82-83).

Despair. In spite of his hope and spirit of being free, Douglass also felt despair on the middle of his struggle. It happened when his plan of escape that he and his fellows arranged was in fact betrayed. He and his fellow were caught, tied, and put in jail. Mr. Freeland then took his fellows out of jail and let him alone in the jail for about one week. This separation caused him much pain. He was in despair. Douglass's master, Captain Auld, at last took him out and sent him away to live with Mr. Hugh in Baltimore again.

I was now left to my fate. I was all alone, and within the walls of a stone prison. But a few days before, and I was full of hope. I expected to have been safe in a land of freedom; but now I was covered with gloom, sunk down to the utmost despair. I thought the possibility of freedom was gone (Douglass 1963:92).

CONCLUSION

The *Narrative of the Life of Frederick Douglass* is well known by many people as a romantic work of literature expressing the characteristic of romanticism both the exaltation of feelings and individualism. This work also explicates how individualism of Douglass which is reflected in his self-trust and spirit of freedom did not merely rely on his feelings but also reason. His spirit of freedom is an aspect of romanticism as it was against the practice of slavery.

The psychological values can be considered the driving force in the *Narrative of the Life of Frederick Douglass* which undertakes the exploration of the ex-slave Douglass recounts his transition from the slave to freedom which would result in the creation of a new self, a new identity. It also refers to American individualism which to be one of the American cultural traits.

By using the psychoanalytic criticism, the readers can focus on the reception of a text or on the reading process can, therefore, be seen as investigations of psychological phenomena in the widest sense of the term. Based on the psychological values above, Frederick Douglass sought to embody three keys for success in life. They are: believe in yourself, take advantage of every opportunity, and use the power of spoken and written language to effect positive change of yourself and society. By taking these keys and making

them his own; Frederick Douglass created a life of honor, respect and success.

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