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Opening the White Eye to Black Suffering

Narrative of the Life of Frederick Douglass is an autobiography written by African-American abolitionist, public speaker, social reformer, and former slave Frederick Douglass. It was published in the year 1845, and was especially controversial and moving at the time of its publication. The novel was written to expose people, with graphic imagery, to the horrors of slavery from the eyes of a former slave himself. While the book covers a wide range of socially progressive topics such as gender equality and ending racism altogether, the primary focus is illustrating, with words, the very serious pain and struggles that African-Americans in and even out of slavery were forced to endure from white men every day. The memoir effectively appeals to the audience through pathos, ethos, and logos, and uses a composite mixture of rhetorical strategies to do so throughout the entirety of the book.

The first four chapters of *Narrative of the Life of Frederick Douglass* appeal to the audience primarily through pathos. These chapters are based on sadness and anger, and they call for an emotional and sympathetic reaction. Chapter one begins in Tuckahoe, Maryland, where Douglass was born. The author describes how he had no accurate knowledge of his age, and never saw any authentic record of his birth date. Not only does he not know how old he is, but he is not allowed to make any inquiries of his master regarding his age. Douglass makes a claim of policy when he explains how it is his right to know his date of birth just as all of the white

children do, and argues that his master should allow him to investigate and discover his age. This claim of policy in the first paragraph is useful, because the reader immediately sees Douglass as a confident man with clear opinions regarding what he believes to be right, making him sound more credible and helping the audience to gain sympathy for his lack of knowledge surrounding his birthday. He uses periodic sentences to add drama and grace to his tone, which is effective in capturing the reader's attention and bringing a sense of euphony into his writing. An example of this can be seen on the third page of the first chapter: "They are, in the first place, a constant offence to their mistress" (Douglass 3). In the first chapter, there are also numerous instances in which Douglass describes various slaves being brutally whipped in horrific detail, creating graphic imagery for the readers, and further helping him appeal to his audience through pathos. The second chapter is set upon the home plantation of Colonel Lloyd, with the master Captain Thomas Auld, his wife Lucretia, and their kids Andrew and Richard. Douglass continues to explain that slaves could not even imagine having the privileges of white kids. Things like getting to know their dates of birth, having close relationships with their parents, and traveling to expensive locations were foreign concepts to slaves. This analogy between privileged white kids and poor African-American slaves is meant to achieve sympathy and sadness from the reader, as well as make them see why this social segregation between black and white kids is wrong. As a result, Douglass appeals to the audience through both pathos and ethos in this instance. In the third chapter, Douglass continues his utilization of imagery to appeal to his reader through pathos with sensuous language in the description of Colonel Lloyd's garden, equipage, and establishment as a whole (Douglass 19). These descriptions evoke vivid imagery in the reader's sense of sight, as well as a couple of his or her other senses such as smell and

touch. In the fourth chapter, Douglass explains that he has a new overseer on Colonel Lloyd's plantation (Douglass 26). This new overseer's name is Mr. Austin Gore and is described as Colonel Lloyd's idealistic "first-rate overseer" (Douglass 26) by the author. He describes Mr. Gore as "proud, ambitious, and persevering" (Douglass 27) as well as "artful, cruel, and obdurate" (Douglass 27). He uses parallelism to add rhythm to his prose, as seen on page 28: "He spoke but to command, and commanded but to be obeyed; he dealt sparingly with his words, and bountifully with his whip" (Douglass 28). Here, Douglass describes how Mr. Gore found whipping easier than communicating verbally. This usage of parallelism as well as anaphora adds sophistication and seriousness to the piece, helping to appeal to the audience through pathos. This sophistication brings credibility with it, also helping Douglass appeal through ethos. In chapters five through nine, this primary appeal to pathos continues.

In the fifth chapter of the book, Douglass is still on Colonel Lloyd's plantation, and is doing the work of a child slave; he is not old enough to work in the fields. Although Douglass is not whipped very often by Master Daniel Lloyd, he suffers terribly from hunger and the cold. He describes his negative experiences with the cold using sensuous language in explaining the horrors of sleeping nearly completely nude on the cold floor in a bag normally used for carrying corn. He says, "I was kept almost naked--no shoes, no stockings, no jacket, no trousers, nothing on but a coarse tow linen shirt, reaching only to my knees. I had no bed. I must have perished with cold, but that, the coldest nights, I used to steal a bag which was used for carrying corn to the mill. I would crawl into this bag, and there sleep on the cold, damp, clay floor, with my head in and feet out. My feet have been so cracked with the frost, that the pen with which I am writing might be laid in the gashes" (Douglass 34). This graphic imagery and use of sensuous language

to evoke feeling in the reader's sense of touch strongly assists Douglass in appealing to his audience through pathos and ethos as well. Most anyone reading this, particularly white and privileged people who have never been in a slave's position, would feel emotional and physical pain simply imagining the horrors of sleeping on the cold floor described, let alone almost naked and in a bag. This thought could possibly anger people as well, forcing them to realize how wrongly they felt these people were being treated, and how horrible the slave-owners must have been for allowing this kind of torture to occur under their own roofs. In the fifth chapter, Douglass also appeals to the audience through ethos using a simile: "The children were then called, like so many pigs, and like so many pigs they would come and devour the mush" (Douglass 33). This comparison of children to pigs may anger people, because the treatment of kids as though they are animals is something that, presumably, most would consider to be severely unethical. In the sixth chapter of the memoir, Douglass has just moved to Baltimore, and is adjusting to the Aulds' house and family. Douglass continues with his usage of parallelism as well as anaphora to appeal to his readers through pathos in this chapter; he says, "That cheerful eye, under the influence of slavery, soon became red with rage; that voice, make all of sweet accord, changed to one of harsh and and horrid discord; and that angelic face gave place to that of a demon" (Douglass 41). In this quote, he is speaking of Sophia Auld's transformation after her husband explained to her the dangers of educating a slave. In this chapter, the author also makes an analogy between slaves on plantations and city slaves, helping him appeal to his audience through logos. He describes city slaves as almost freemen because of the way they are treated and the privileges they may achieve (Douglass 44). In the seventh chapter of the autobiography, Douglass uses a simile to describe Sophia Auld's "tiger-like fierceness"

(Douglass 46). A thorough description of Mistress Sophia Auld's transition from a kind and compassionate lady into every other slave-holder is given in this chapter, perhaps to put emphasis on how much power men had over their female counterparts, and giving the reader a peek into Douglass's feminist ideals. He even goes so far as to make her sound power-hungry and competitive with her husband: "She finally became even more violent in her opposition than her husband himself. She seemed anxious to do better" (Douglass 46). This chapter strongly appeals to the audience through pathos; in this chapter, Douglass describes feeling hopeful for the future after learning about abolitionists, human rights, and that there were people in the world fighting for the end of slavery. In chapter eight, he appeals through pathos using anaphora and describing his sadness over the underappreciation of his grandmother and her mistreatment by Douglass's old master: "She had served my old master faithfully from youth to old age. She had been the source of all his wealth; she had peopled his plantation with slaves; she had become a great grandmother in his service. She had rocked him in infancy" (Douglass 58). Additionally, the writer continues with his utilization of graphic and gory imagery to appeal to his reader through pathos in this chapter when he describes a memory he has of Master Andrew and Douglass's little brother. He recalls that "Master Andrew--a man who, but a few days before, to give me a sample of his bloody disposition, took my little brother by the throat, threw him on the ground, and with the heel of his boot stamped upon his head till the blood gushed from his nose and ears--was well calculated to make me anxious as to my fate" (Douglass 49). With what many people would see as a strong and even upsetting lack of ethics being described in this quote, it could be argued that this passage also appeals to the reader through ethos. The appeals through ethos and logos continue in chapter nine. This chapter begins with Douglass having just gone to

live with Master Thomas Auld in March of 1832. He begins appealing to his audience through logos in this chapter with an analogy made between Master Thomas and his wife: “I was made acquainted with his wife not less than with himself. They were well matched, being equally mean and cruel” (Douglass 67). He then appeals to the audience through ethos with a clever usage of juxtaposition; speaking about Master Thomas, he says, “He was a slaveholder without the ability to hold slaves” (Douglass 68). Chapter ten brings bouts of figurative language, parallelism, and antithesis to create a steady rhythm and to appeal through pathos.

The tenth chapter of *Narrative of the Life of Frederick Douglass* begins with Douglass leaving Master Thomas’s house and going to live with Mr. Covey at the very beginning of 1833. At Mr. Covey’s, Douglass has to adjust to a new life of being severely whipped and working in the field. In the first paragraph of chapter ten, figurative language may already be found; Douglass uses a simile to describe the horrors of getting whipped at Mr. Covey’s: “raising ridges on my flesh as large as my little finger” (Douglass 75). He also uses a metaphor for Mr. Covey as his nickname, calling him “The Snake” (Douglass 77). He describes the reason for this nickname: “When we were at work in the cornfield, he would sometimes crawl on his hands and knees to avoid detection, and all at once he would rise nearly in our midst” (Douglass 77). Utilizations of parallelism and antithesis help keep a steady rhythm in Douglass’s prose, and assist the author in appealing to his readers through pathos. An example of parallelism in chapter ten may be seen in the quote “Work, work, work” (Douglass 81) and an example of antithesis may be seen in the quote, “A combination of hope and fear” (Douglass 83). Another peek into Douglass’s feminist ideals may also be found in the tenth chapter, as he describes the story of Caroline. He painfully describes Mr. Covey only being able to afford one slave, and buying

Caroline to use as a breeder. Mr. Covey then hires Mr. Samuel Harrison who is a married man to live at the house for a year and have sex with the female slave every night (Douglass 79). This story is used to appeal to the audience through pathos and ethos. In chapter eleven through the appendix, readers find fairly strong appeals to their senses of pathos, ethos, and logos.

The eleventh chapter shows Douglass becoming a free man after escaping slavery. There are many instances in this chapter in which the author explains his reasons for escaping slavery the way that he did. In the first paragraph in chapter eleven, a metaphor is used to appeal to the audience through pathos: "...run the hazard of closing the slightest avenue by which a brother slave might clear himself of the chains and fetters of slavery" (Douglass 126). He also uses deductive reasoning throughout the second paragraph to explain his admiration yet concern and opposition to the underground railroad, and to appeal to the audience through logos (Douglass 127). He uses anaphora to appeal to the audience through ethos and pathos, adding sophistication and drama to his language: "Let him be left to feel his way in the dark; let darkness commensurate with his crime hover over him; and let him feel that at every step he takes, in pursuit of the flying bondman he is running the ...of our flying brother" (Douglass 127). He also appeals to the audience through ethos in the quote, "I could see no reason why I should, at the end of each week, pour the reward of my toil into the purse of my master" (Douglass 129). In the appendix, Douglass's writing is riddled with irony. He uses irony frequently throughout the appendix to show the contrast between the church's supposed beliefs in love and acceptance, and their lack of respect for slaves. An example of irony can be seen right from the beginning in the first paragraph: "We have men-stealers...the warm defenders...all for the glory of God and the good of souls" (Douglass 149). Also found in paragraph one is an example of anaphora which is

used to appeal to the audience through pathos and ethos: “He who sells my sister...wholesale pollution” (Douglass 149). Additionally, there is a frequent utilization of deductive reasoning from beginning to end which is extremely effective in appealing to the audience through logos.

Douglass does a very effective job of appealing to the audience through logos, ethos, and pathos using numerous recurring rhetorical strategies. He makes a point to put emphasis on the irony of slaveholding Christians throughout the memoir, but specifically in the appendix. He keeps a confident voice and adds a high level of sophistication to his narrative with his usage of various schemes and tropes. He does a good job of keeping a balance between asking for sympathy and demanding respect. *Narrative of the Life of Frederick Douglass* was a very progressive and important book at the time of its publication, not just for African-Americans all over the United States, but for white people who had yet to be educated about the horrors of slavery. Douglass’s text is highly effective in light of the rhetorical situation, and the author was able to write a book that kept constant, unchanging opinions, while taking on many different situations, topics, and progressive ideals.

Works Cited

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