



The Black Intellectual Tradition and the Great Conversation with Dr. Angel Parham

Lesson 3: Frederick Douglass, Part I

Outline:

Frederick Douglass

- Frederick Douglass was born in 1817. His mother was Harriet Bailey.
- His relationship with his mother was bittersweet. They were not allowed to develop a relationship. His mother was hired out to a plantation 12 miles away.
- Douglass says he never saw his mother by the light of day, but his mother worked hard to sustain some contact with her son.

Brutality of Slavery

- Slavery was brutal psychologically, spiritually, and physically. Frederick Douglass gets this across in his narrative.
- The overseer was the one who was on the scene wielding the whip. The master is the owner of the slaves. There is a tension between the overseer and the master.
- Douglass is careful to say that the master was not a good man either. He was oriented in a way that was just about as bad as the overseer.
- The master was a cruel man hardened by a long life of slaveholding. He would whip women (Douglass's family member) until they were covered in blood. Douglass witnessed this terrible spectacle.
- Douglass is sent to Baltimore between 8-11 years old. He will take care of the son of the family.
 - His mistress begins to teach Douglass to read. This is very short-lived.
 - Her voice changed to harsh and horrid discord, and that "angelic face gave way to that of a demon."
 - His mistress's natural goodness quickly leaves. Her husband convinces her not to teach Douglass to read.
 - Douglass gets clear insight into the path toward light and freedom.
 - Douglass studies from his master's son's copy books. He painfully learns to write over a long period of time.

Allegory of the Cave

- There are some powerful parallels between the Allegory of the Cave and the significance of literacy and knowledge in Douglass' life.



- Learning to read is the beginning of liberation for Douglass.
- Learning to read is also the beginning of a period of extreme pain for Douglass.
- Douglass expresses his real pain and torment at learning to read – he felt it was at times a curse rather than a blessing. He sometimes wanted to run back into the cave than realize the tragic reality of his condition.

The Columbian Orator

- In Douglass's self-teaching, he read the Columbian Orator. This was filled with classic speeches from antiquity through the contemporary period. This was where he honed his oratorical skills as well as logic and persuasion.
- The Dialogue of the Oppressive Landlord, shows how he oppresses his tenants. A fire takes all of his property, and he is left with nothing. There is a lesson of justice in this story.
- The Dialogue between a Master and a Slave:
 - As soon as the man gets his liberty, he doesn't completely change the hierarchy.
 - He says he will work for him a more just basis.
 - "I will return a kindness to you..." You are surrounded with implacable foes. "You have reduced them to brute beasts."