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### What Makes a Man a Man for Frederick Douglass?

In Frederick Douglass do we have the perfect example of a man? This is not to say that there is, or has ever been, ‘a perfect man’, but that he attained, through resilience, persistence, perseverance, and patience, the highest form of manhood. But how does a man become a man? This is a premise that Douglass pursues throughout his memoir, *Narrative of the Life of Frederick Douglass, an American Slave*. He is of the belief that real manliness is accomplished through understanding, thoughtful way cultivation, and letter skill. (Douglass)

One of the most important tenets of manhood, in Douglass’ point of view, is steadfastness. Resilience and persistence, when held on to patiently, yield favor for men. He was born into slavery and knew very little of his parents – these are circumstances that often urge one to give up the hope to champion the self-actualized form of manhood that one inherently wishes to attain. However, Douglass’ struggle is the best counter for such a belief. In his memoir, he narrates his experience at the farm of Edward Covey, more commonly known by people as the ‘slave-breaker’. Douglass stood unwaveringly in the face of sheer torture and pain, and ultimately redeemed manhood.( Douglass)

“Well, my dear reader, this battle with Mr. Covey—undignified as it was, and as I fear my narration of it is—was the turning point in my “life as a slave.” It rekindled in my breast the smoldering embers of liberty; it brought up my Baltimore dreams, and revived a sense of my

own manhood. I was a changed being after that fight. I was nothing before; I WAS A MAN NOW.” (Douglass).

Moral uprightness and self-control as a way to control desires and passions – a prominent principle of Channing’s faith, of which Douglass was a follower – are two attributes Douglas believes a man must have in order to truly be a man. Every single person has the ability to be a good person. He states that men can develop and live up to their expectations, making themselves exemplary men, through self-culture, and the subsequent intellectual and moral development. He defines a sense of morality as the repression of impulses and urges intrinsic in human behavior but harmful to the spirit. A man of self-cultivation is a man of civilization. In his book, Douglass discusses how illiteracy was used as a tool to keep the slaves in the dark about their true rights and ensure a smooth run. Because slaves were kept away from books, and were granted only a crooked sense of language at best, most slaves believed that slavery was a natural course; that ‘blacks were born to be the slaves and white to be the slaveholders.’ Since his slaveholder’s wife, Sophia Auld, had a soft spot for Douglass from the day that he arrived at the farm, she tutored him briefly. However, the short period had brought the much-needed motivation for Douglass to know more. In his pursuit to know and learn more, he was emancipated from the gruesome confines of slavery. This self-making - or in the terms of Channing, self-culture – is what made Douglass a FREE man. Self-made men are the individuals who have acquired intelligence, utility, strength and place under unusual challenges and even without the usual aid of favored conditions, and have learned from oneself the primary uses in which life can be placed in this world.

The idea of humanity, though, that of the advancement of cultures, plays a major role in the theory of Douglass. A man rides himself off the label of barbaric savage by becoming a decent and self-cultured individual. The principles of morality intact, one must always tread in a way that is suitable for men. Keeping the premise of morality as the subject, Douglass argues that there are two forms of Christianity – Christianity of Christ and Christianity of the Slaveholders. He found the more a slaveholder claimed to be ‘pious’, the more they had become greedy and inhumane. This was the latter of the forms of Christianity that stemmed from insatiable greed, inhumanity and a sense of pride. These moral shortcomings, he believed, took away from slaveholders their humanness – the manhood from a man. In contrast, he believed that a true child of Christ was morally upright and egalitarian in his practices. It is imperative to mention here that since we see Douglass as an ideal man, his equality was not restricted to just slavery. Frederick Douglass, alongside being an abolitionist, was an advocate for women suffrage and racial desegregation. In 1848, at the Seneca Falls Convention, where Elizabeth Stanton asked the assembly to pass a notion in favor of women suffrage, Douglass supported her and said, In this deprivation of the right to free speech in democracy occurs not only the humiliation of the female and the propagation of a grave injustice, but perhaps the mutilation and rejection of most of the spiritual and conceptual capacity of the global government. Through such instances, it is clear that Douglass’ morality was not confined to the victims of slavery but of injustice worldwide. This, in Douglass’ belief, is the highest form of humanness and the only true Christianity – that of Christ.

Furthermore, Douglass emphasizes the deep roots of the self-made man who, by birth or other favorable conditions, have not received his role in society, but who does everything

without external support. It is not a chance that makes a man a self-made man, but the physical and emotional effort is substantial. Douglass stresses the importance of working hard as a reasonable means to succeed. He states that there is nothing good, wonderful, or valuable that doesn't come through some sort of work. His own life is perhaps the best example of this – from a slave-born to being nominated, albeit against his will, for Vice President of the United States as the running mate and Vice Presidential nominee of Victoria Woodhull, on the Equal Rights Party. He believes that a true self-made man is not one that is ‘brought up, but is obliged to come up, not only without the voluntary assistance or friendly co-operation of society but often in open and defiance of all the efforts of society.’ (Foner)

In light of Frederick Douglass' early life, his suffering as a teenage slave under the heavy hand of Edward Covey, his freedom struggle, and his inevitable rise to prominence, it suffices to say that he was the ideal man. In his struggle is the perfect example of manhood and humanity. The answer to the question, what makes a man a man for Frederick Douglass, lies in the way that he dealt with the atrocities and adversities he faced as African-American. So much was his effect as a leader, that about 150 years after his struggle, his words are still echoing and his philosophies continue to shape the modern world. (Foner)

Works Cited

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