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The construction of subjectivity in the  
*Narrative of the Life of Frederick Douglass*

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DEPARTAMENT D'ESTUDIS ANGLESES I ALEMANYS

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## Abstract

This paper aims to study how subjectivity is built and portrayed in Frederick Douglass's story, *The Narrative of the Life of Frederick Douglass* —an autobiography written in 1845 by Douglass himself, which tries to fight for the abolitionist movement by describing a real example of slavery. Firstly, I begin by setting this paper into a theoretical framework. Secondly, I identify and discuss some of the significant aspects that characterise the construction of his subjectivity, such as identity and individuality, memory, freedom, and dignity concepts. Finally, the last section —the conclusions section —creates a round image of Douglass's subjectivity. The results conclude that even though Douglass's subjectivity varies throughout the story, his subjectivity is built around personal traits like identity, memory, freedom and dignity.

*Keywords:* North American literature, Slave Narrative, Subjectivity, Frederick Douglass, 19th-century literature.

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## 1. Introduction

The *Narrative of the Life of Frederick Douglass* is a story of bildungsroman. The protagonist shows the reader his moral and psychological growth from his childhood to his adulthood. Douglass describes “the personal dimensions of what it means to be embodied in black skin under white hegemony” (Yancy, 2016) through the first-person narrative. According to Yancy (2016), Douglass assumes the role of subject, and by narrating his story in the first person, he clarifies to the reader that it is his personal story. He provides the reader with an actual testimony of what it meant to live under circumstances of racial oppression. Through this process of self-narrating, Douglass emphasises his subjectivity by stripping his soul to pieces to analyse every aspect of this embodied subjectivity.

This story is Douglass’s first autobiography, and after it, although he found himself in danger of being recaptured by one of his former owners, he was proclaimed as one of the most famous abolitionists, given that he had been enslaved. Robert Hayden, an acclaimed poet and known as the first Afro-American US Poet Laureate, paid tribute to Douglass in one of his poems, in which he is described as a man who “shall be remembered” (Hayden, 1985). Douglass’s primary goal when writing was to fight for his liberty, and, to a certain extent, he was in pursuit of American Liberty. He was interested in making readers — especially those who were profoundly ignorant— understand the nature of slavery. After his release from slavery, he consistently advocated universal emancipation and promoted public morality to favour the black community.

The *Narrative of the Life of Frederick Douglass* is an impressive autobiography of self-determination that follows a linear narrative. It is composed of eleven chapters that explore issues of identity, consciousness, liberty, memory, dignity and others. These issues suffer multiple transformations, gradually showing Douglass's "robust subjectivity". It is a book about slavery and abolitionism in the United States of America in the 19th century. Also, it is a book that shows the importance of *becoming*. It is a book that explores all the changes someone undergoes to achieve that sense of *becoming*.

The moment I saw this topic in the list of topics, I thought it might be interesting to work on it because I have always liked to challenge myself to research matters on which I am not an expert. Surprisingly, previously to this dissertation, I had never heard about Frederick Douglass and the relevance of his work. The only thing that I was almost sure about was that the story would be a cruel depiction of the reality of the XIX century. Once I started reading it, I realised that what Frederick Douglass had done by narrating his own experience as an enslaved person was not only to give visibility to the significant problem of slavery but that he tried to make clear that blacks could think, write and be as sophisticated as a white. Yet, despite their skin tone difference, they should all be considered humans.

## 2. Objectives

The main objective of this paper is to analyse the construction of subjectivity in the slave narrative called *The Narrative of the Life of Frederick Douglass*. To achieve this objective, I will divide the analysis section around four main aspects:

- Identity which is the set of qualities that make you be you.
- Memory, understood as the ability to store and recall —or not— one's memories.
- Freedom, recognised as the absence of limitations or the quality of acting with free will.
- Dignity is the quality of being valuable and worthy.

I chose these aspects because they are the basis from which Douglass builds his subjectivity. Each element will represent a different section of the critical analysis. Once I complete the study, I will conclude this paper by comparing one aspect with the other and thus see how subjectivity is built.



### 3. Methodology

This paper is structured into three main sections. The first section consists of the theoretical framework using critical publications to provide the theoretical basis for this paper's analysis. This first section intends to familiarise the reader with the concept of subjectivity. Firstly, I will briefly explore the idea of subjectivity with Gibson's *Frederick Douglass, a psychobiography*. The author of his book argues how Douglass's "robust subjectivity" is built in a context of extremity. It is worth mentioning that the terms "robust subjectivity" and "extremity" belong to Gibson (2018), who uses this term as the outcome of Douglass's experiences under acts of slavocracy, racism and domination. Having resisted all these brutal contexts shows his "robust subjectivity" — that is, the individual consciousness of the self that one acquires through processes of cognition and rationality. Also, while he could have chosen the term strong, meaning a physical force, he used the term "robust" to emphasise that subjectivity is something about physical or psychological strength. Besides, I will also give voice to other authors like Bernardo Ferro, Jörg Noller or even Fiona McKellar —a former PhD student at Simon Fraser University. Secondly, —and also within the theoretical framework section— I intend to develop, in short, issues like identity, memory, freedom, and dignity through Ferro's *Masters, Slaves and Philosophers*, and Noller's *The unity of a person - philosophical perspectives*. While the former is more centred on questions of freedom and selfhood, the latter is more focused on arguing about personal identity and personal existence issues. However, both books share similar features and can complement each other.

After doing an in-depth reading, I will apply the theory to the autobiography analysis in the second section to perform a critical analysis. I will actively use theoretical tools to

provide examples from the book related to the theory. This second section is divided into four main parts: identity and individuality, memory, liberty, and dignity. This section is determined to analyse subjectivity in Douglass's story and to see what the protagonist says, how he says it, and how it contributes to the creation of his subjectivity.

Finally, in the last section, I shall record the conclusions on how Douglass portrays his subjectivity by combining the different approaches I have given to the various aspects.

#### 4. Theoretical Framework

As Fishova (2020) claims that the term *subjectivity* is usually quite ambiguous as many philosophers give different interpretations. In Western philosophy, the notion of subjectivity plays a vital role in determining subjects with agency, consciousness, and personhood. Therefore, it is asserted that each human being is a carrier of a unique form of subjectivity.

One thinker, who has had much influence on how human beings consider themselves as subjects, is Descartes. As Fiona McKellar (n.d) — a former PhD student at the Simon Fraser University— discusses: “*cogito ergo sum* or *I think, therefore I am* led to the common understanding that humans may be recognised as sapient beings that are conscious of their existence [...]. Subjectivity brings with it the notion of the individual as a sapient, [...] conscious of his/her self as an individual [...]” When Descartes uttered these words, he was aware of the importance of self-awareness. He knew that being a human being meant that one was fully aware of his identity and individuality. And as a result, this entailed other basic human principles, such as the right to be free and have a dignified life. Thus, with the *cogito ergo sum* statement, Descartes intended to demonstrate the existence of other things, starting from the recognition of our existence. Therefore, the starting point of existentialism is the subjectivity of an individual.

The *Narrative of the Life of Frederick Douglass* presents the life of Frederick Douglass, a former Afro-American enslaved person who faced discrimination and oppression due to the colour of his skin. In his book, *Frederick Douglass, a psychobiography*, Gibson claims that it is not possible to talk about subjectivity without addressing a key aspect like

one's identity. Otherwise, in his book *Masters, Slaves and Philosophers*, Ferro agrees with Gibson that subjectivity is the threshold of consciousness and that "the object of consciousness is one that simply *is*, regardless of whether it is known or not" (Ferro, 2022, p. 160). Therefore, it could be argued that personhood can be related to subjectivity, although it is not strictly tied to it.

Ferro (2022) argues that humans are naturally forced to shape their subjectivity and turn their inner aspects into an existential setting. He also says that this can result "in different degrees of freedom, depending on the extent to which one is aware of oneself as an artistically creative subject" (Ferro, 2022, p. 259). Finally, he states that those human beings who seem to be more *intuitive* can express their subjectivity more freely and more completely than those who seem to be more *rational* as they are locked within the limits of objectivity. Nietzsche argues that that is because "rational individuals are diligent, conscientious and thoroughly obedient whose only concern is to provide for the future and guarantee a safe and regular life [...] [h]owever their obedience is unable to bring them real happiness" (Ferro, 2022, p. 259). He also adds that it is just a way of "minimizing the uncertainty of an otherwise unbearable life" (Ferro, 2022, p. 259). Besides, intuitive individuals are deemed to be "carefree and spontaneous."

Besides, subjectivity has not gone unnoticed by Noller (2022), who asserts that subjectivity can be understood as an inherent process of human beings by "maintaining a self/non-self-distinction through the interactive construction of a boundary between organism and environment" (Noller, 2022, p.116). Therefore, subjectivity is not only a question of recognising one-*self* but also a question of recognising one-*self* in relation to others and in relation to everything that surrounds us.

Approaching subjectivity through different theories demands an acknowledgement of different philosophical and not-so-philosophical interpretations. Descartes, Nietzsche, Plato, and more philosophers are actively used within the secondary sources found in this dissertation paper. On top of that, combining different theories seems to be the best approach to obtaining the sphere of subjectivity. However, it is also important to learn about the different issues tackled in this paper.

### ***Identity***

Learning about identity is essential to understanding this paper. The concept of identity is one of the main issues covered in *The Narrative of the Life of Frederick Douglass*. The novel explores how Douglass's identity changes shape as he matures and understands his surroundings and life circumstances. However, the meaning of the concept of "identity" has changed over the decades given that societies have evolved. We know that our identity is conditioned by external forces like cultural, economic or political forces; that is, our identity is shaped by specific beliefs that we might have.

America suffered its most major metamorphosis during the 19th century when it started the industrial revolution, and the civil war broke out. Along with these changes, civilians' identities also changed. This is a clear example of how external forces shape our identities. Thus, it is not surprising to see how Douglass's identity changes along with the story.

### ***Memory***

Memory is the name we give to the ability to store information. Our memory is an

essential aspect of our subjectivity, and a memory deficit can damage it. To a certain extent, we are what we remember, and our subjectivity is built around those memories. However, we are also made up of those things we do not remember anymore; otherwise, we would be completely different and therefore have a completely different subjectivity. It is important to note that the human brain has the capacity to make us forget things in order to make space for new or more relevant information. However, sometimes our brain does not completely forget something but maybe alters it and makes us remember it differently from reality. Thus, our subjectivity comprises two key components: everything we remember and everything we forget or remember differently from what originally happened or was understood.

### *Freedom*

“Freedom” is another key aspect that appears in this paper. This term unfolds different meanings depending, to a large degree, on different beings. The first meaning would be the one known as “free will” — one’s capacity of choosing between different options— or even the absence of limitations. Thus, everyone might not understand the term “freedom” in the same way. A clear example is a distinction we can draw between white and black communities: perhaps, the concept of freedom in the 19<sup>th</sup> century among these two communities differed from one another. Even so, the final meaning of this term should be the same for all human beings: on the one hand, “freedom” should be the antonym of “slavery”. On the other hand, “freedom” — in the individual sphere— should consist of having the competence to act, think, and say whatever one wants without the necessity of having an imposed choice or having to be punished for your final decision on a given matter.

## *Dignity*

Lastly, the concept of “dignity” seems to be one of the most controversial topics when it comes to talking about subjectivity. “Dignity” is a concept that is made up of different components like fairness, respect, inclusion, and more. This concept, in the same line as the previous one, can be interpreted in different ways depending on different cultures. However, we might all agree that there are some fundamental aspects that are shared in all cultures. The most obvious one could be interpreting “dignity” as an inherent quality that every human being should be granted when they are born. Also, and according to Dr Ângela Simões and Dr Paula Sapeta (2019) “dignity” can consist of two spheres: the intrapersonal sphere and the interpersonal sphere. While the core of the former would be formed around self-esteem, autonomy, and integrity the core of the second one would be formed around mutual respect, relationship quality and concern with the other.

## **5. Analysis of the text**

This section summarises the findings reached through an exhaustive analysis of the novel: *The Narrative of the Life of Frederick Douglass*. It is evident that the strategies the author uses to construct the main character are textual strategies; that is, through the use of language, the author tries to bring the reader to favour a particular interpretation of the text.

Therefore, this section will be divided into four different parts, which simultaneously can be interpreted as the various strategies that Douglass has used to construct subjectivity.

### ***5.1 The role of identity and individuality in the story***

The struggle to define one's identity seems to be the basis for Douglass's narrative. He tries to de-objectify his identity by taking "control of the existential, political, legal, and aesthetical dimensions of the self" (Yancy, 2016). Yancy makes a clear point here when he says that Douglass has to take control of every aspect of his existence because one's identity is not made up of one single factor but many different factors. In fact, "self-identity is equated with self-expression and subjects become creators or producers, whose true identity lies in their work" (Ferro, 2022, p.201)

On the other hand, Douglass also struggles to find his individuality throughout his journey in slavery. He tries to break the bridge between himself and the others; he is not satisfied to be considered the same *self* as his fellow slaves because he knows he is different from them. In the story, Douglass knows that people tend to think that we will always exist "in



the same moulds” (Ferro, 2022, p. 201) for the rest of our lives, but the truth is that we are formed from different events because “no temporal moment is lived as an isolated moment” (Ferro, 2022, p.60). So it could be said that, after all, identity is an active process of self-creation.

This appears to happen in Douglass’s story, as the protagonist is constantly defining and redefining himself as the circumstances surrounding him, change. The autobiography starts with a powerful opening sentence in which the main character introduces himself.

I was born in Tuckahoe, near Hillsborough, about twelve miles from Easton, in Talbot County, Maryland. I have no accurate knowledge of my age, never having seen any authentic record containing it (Douglass, 1999, p.15).

“Douglass’s narrative begins with the *here* of an experiential perspective. He does not begin with an abstract Cartesian ‘I think’ but a rich description of an embodied subjectivity that finds itself thrown within a particular historical situation” (Yancy, 2016). This beginning could have been different, but the protagonist preferred to start with a strong “I” to let the reader know that the novel will be exclusively about him and his story. As Yancy points out, Douglass uses his story to expose his subjectivity to let readers know that his-*self* will be the narrative centrepiece. The purpose of a good opening sentence is to catch the reader’s attention, and Douglass has used the advantage of being a nonfiction author to jump right in and use the first person “I” with the advantage of using his real-life story — him subjugated by slavery.

However, according to Yancy (2016), Douglass feels “like an abomination before God despite this strong beginning.” “His knowledge that his father was possibly a white man further solidifies his identity as a dejected thing, [...] his very birth is a testament to his oppression, his illegitimacy, sub-humanity, and thingified existence” (Yancy, 2016, p.307). Yancy’s explanation is justified by the following passage in which Douglass exposes his alleged kinship relationships and what profits others take from this.

The whisper that my master was my father may or may not be true; and, true or false, it is of, but little consequence to my purpose whilst the fact remains, [...] that by law [...] the children of slave women shall in all cases follow the condition of their mothers; and this is done too obviously to administer to their lusts, and make a gratification of their wicked desires profitable as well as pleasurable; for by this cunning arrangement, the slaveholder, in cases, not a few, sustains to his slaves the double relation of master and father. (Douglas, 1999, p.16-17)

Indeed, the previous fragment serves to say that he is still black and therefore considered inferior by the oppression, the whites. Also, this fragment helps the reader to understand the profits the masters take from owning a slave.

In Gibson’s *Frederick Douglass, a psychobiography* (2018), he states that Frantz Fanon, a French-Caribbean philosopher, and writer, argues that “the black man’s identity is not organic but always juxtaposed to that of the white man.” Hence, Douglass’s first thought is that the process of becoming a “human being” just as a white person is considered can be possible. In view of this, one’s skin colour conditioned if one could be considered a

human being or rather a beast. Then, he gradually discovers that the important thing to actually be regarded as a human being is being able to distinguish good from bad, being able to show emotions, and, what is more, being empathic. Indeed, these are vital points concerning the construction of his identity, as Douglass is constantly evolving to define his subjectivity.

Throughout the story, we see how Douglass presents the different masters to whom he has “belonged”:

I have had two masters. My first master’s name was Anthony. I do not remember his first name. He was generally called Captain Anthony [...] (Douglass, 1999, p. 17)

He resolved to put me out, as he said, to be broken; and, for this purpose, he let me for one year to a man named Edward Covey (Douglass, 1999, p.57)

On the first of January, 1834, I [...] went to live with Mr. William Freeland, who lived about three miles from St. Michael’s (Douglass, 1999, p.71).

Douglass belonging to different masters is proportional to the fact that he forfeited his individuality. He is considered another unimportant piece of the enslaved group; he is just part of a flock. But, at some point, “Douglass realizes that he is not a slave, a brute beast, but is metastable and trans phenomenal [...] he is an absolute point of moral worth”

(Yancy, 2016). He can even recognize his identity and individuality when he says, “I was myself within the circle” (Douglass, 1999, p.24). According to Yancy (2016), the main idea here is that he recognizes the truth of his existence, and to an extent, he asserts his freedom when he compares himself to the rest of the group.

The Black body/self is a ‘calling out to the other’, which, if ethically and successfully answered, will constitute a form of intersubjectivity, mutual respect, and recognition. Whiteness, however, attempts to arrest the Black body/self from speaking and from existing (Yancy, 2016, p. 315-316).

In the previous fragment, Yancy clearly distinguishes black-on-black relations and white-on-black relations. While the former calls for “mutual respect and recognition” (Yancy, 2016, p. 315-316), the latter seems to arrest this black self from existing (Yancy, 2016, p. 315-316).

All in all, the quest for identity in Douglass’s narrative could be compared to Plato’s “Allegory of the Cave,” in which he describes a cave in which people believe that the shadows they saw on the walls are reality, ignoring that the actual truth was the one outside the cave. Unable to free themselves from those illusions, they lived in the shadow world (Plato, 1963). In the same line, Douglass begins his journey towards finding and shaping his identity, as a prisoner in Plato’s cave, unaware of the realities of the outside world. When he encounters his own identity and individuality, he frees himself in an attempt to continue to build his own these two previously mentioned aspects that shape his existence but away from the chains that had been binding him to slavery all this time.

## 5.2 *The role of memory in the story*

When we remember the past, this appears as our own. We cannot remember any other past than the one we have lived in, even if we can remember historical facts or events that others have told us about. Blight (1989) claims that Douglass was highly conscious that memory mattered and that people were shaped by it. He knew it was a primary source of identity, meaning, and motivation” (p.1160). According to Gibson (2018):

Douglass’ fear of losing history and its impact on the collective psyche of the nation, and in particular African Americans, is captured [...] in Eyerman’s (2004) conception of cultural trauma. [He] situates cultural trauma in the *dramatic loss of identity and meaning, a tear in the social fabric, affecting a group of people that has achieved some degree of cohesion* (p.61).

In the previous passage, Gibson refers to the loss of history and its impact on the nation. History and memory are not the same but how this fragment is characterised —although talking specifically about history— serves this paper as an example of how memory also works.

Eyerman asserts that memory is a multigenerational process in which societies interact to interpret different events. Hence, Gibson (2018) claims that, for better or worse, how we explain memories can unfold forms of individual and group subjectivity. Despite Douglass’s concern about how his narratives would be perceived by current and future generations, he “also understood the potential of testimony and the counter-narrative to foster a life-giving collective memory and bolster one’s internal force of being” (Gibson,

2018, p.153). Gibson is not far from reality when he states those words, given that Douglass's story starts with two white testimonies —William Lloyd Garrison and Wendell Phillips— who use their reputation to confirm its veracity. They seem to present Douglass as the spokesperson of the slaves —although each particular story might be different— the basis of other stories is the same: slavery.

Frederick Douglass's writing occurs in the first person as he recalls his own past life. While narrating his story, Douglass can discern between *the* Douglass of the present and *the* Douglass of the past. Here some might argue that *the* Douglass from the present and the one from the past share the same identity, but the truth is that, as he is in constant evolution throughout the whole story, he is not the same subject, so his subjectivity is different.

Nowadays, we have different ways of storing official documents, academic works, or even memories, that did not exist in Douglass's days and certainly not for a slave. For that reason, memory has more importance for Douglass's perception of himself and his story as he recalls it. Birth certificates already existed in Douglass's time to verify when and where a person was born. However, it was not as easy as checking on that document for Douglass. He relied on his memory to verify his most basic and personal details. He begins the novel by saying: "I do not remember to have ever met a slave who could tell of his birthday" (Douglass, 1999, p. 15). And later on, he goes on to enforce his humanity upon his readers when he says: "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, 1999, p. 15). This was a commonly used tactic

by slaveholders to strip enslaved people's identities, and once denied, masters were able to shape them.

Another example of the stripping of memory is the situation in which young children have to be separated from their families, especially their mothers. Douglass does not practically remember his mother. Families, especially parents, are essential elements of our identity: firstly, they serve as role models and secondly, they are part of what we call "ourselves".

Besides, Frederick does not remember his first master's name: "I have had two masters. My first master's name was Anthony. I do not remember his first name. He was generally called Captain Anthony" (Douglass, 1999, p. 17-18). However, he can remember unpleasant things, like the first time he witnessed his master whipping her aunt until "she was literally covered with blood" (Douglass, 1999, p. 18).

Moreover, he realised that he "had no knowledge of the days of the month nor the months of the year" (Douglass, 1999, p.36); he just remembered the days of the week. This reminds us of the importance of memory—even though Douglass might not know about that because he was not educated— and it reminds us that having memory is a gift that human beings have.

As seen so far, Douglass does not remember many details of his own life, yet he can still tell his story with lots of other details. Noller (2022) argues that *one-self* is partly constituted by its memories, so it is a relevant experiential feature of the self. However, he also argues that the absence of memory does not mean the "absence of one's history

[in the sense of past experiences] as constitutive of the self” (Noller, 2022, p. 168). Hence, memory seems to be necessary to one’s sense of identity. With Noller’s statements, we can see how both Douglass’s memory and Douglass’s absence of memory are essential for his subjectivity in the narrative and the creation of his identity. In this same line and to support Noller’s argument, Locke asserted that personal memory matters are essential for personal identity (Noller, 2022, p.166).

With all of the above, it can be seen how our memory is like a pen drive where we store our memories, but sometimes, as time goes by, memories become distorted, and some of them might even get lost. Humans are made of what we remember and what we do not remember anymore— and this is how memory works. Therefore, Douglass creates an active process of narrative construction within which he ultimately builds his identity. As proven in this section, Douglass has the competency of self-narrating his own experiences. Self-narrative requires building on our own experiences concerning other people. Also, Douglass shows the reader that he has autobiographical memory, which is an aspect that shapes narrative competency, that is, the capacity to see things in a narrative framework (Noller, 2022, p.137). All in all, this is how memory works: we store and retain information, but if we lose part of it, we might need to reconstruct it using different tools from our surroundings.



### ***5.3 The role of freedom in the story***

Out of all the matters that shape the history of Western philosophy, the one of human freedom is one of the most relevant ones. However, “many discussions of responsibility focus on questions about freedom or free will – is an agent-free, did she choose or could she have done otherwise?” (Noller, 2022, p.165). Hence, to what extent was Douglass free? Could he choose? Could he have done otherwise? In a strict sense, freedom is understood as the absence of limitations, and it “is confined to an interval located somewhere between complete powerlessness and omnipotence” (Ferro, 2022, p.3)

In addition, Ferro (2022) also claims that freedom is about power and knowledge, as our free choices must be “meaningful, intelligible and coherent.” Douglass presents the instant of his literacy acquisition as the moment in which he realises that he could be free: “Mistress, in teaching me the alphabet, had given me the inch and no precaution could keep me from taking the ell” (Douglass, 1999, p.43). Education gives him access to ideas that he did not have before, and now he can reflect on how he is himself. From that moment on, the power that slavery had exercised over Douglass started to vanish because, for the first time, he was treated as a human being. He began to read abolitionist books like *The Columbian Orator*, which made him see how unfair his situation was. “Freedom now appeared, to disappear no more forever. It was heard in every sound, and seen in everything. It was ever present to torment me with a sense of my wretched condition” (Douglass, 1999, p.45).

After his stay with Covey, on the first of January 1834, Douglass went to live with Mr. William Freeland. This Master, in Douglass’s eyes, seems to be the fairest one of the ones

he had so far, but from that fairness, he acknowledges the double meaning of Freeland's name — Free land. "At the close of the year 1834, Mr. Freeland again hired me of my master for the year 1835. But, by this time, I began to want to live upon free land as well as with Freeland; and I was no longer content, therefore, to live with him or any other slaveholder" (Douglass, 1999, p. 76). This ironic passage in which Douglass is aware of this sameness between slavery and his master's name makes him realize what is lacking in his life: his freedom.

According to Hegel (Ferro, 2022, p. 33), freedom depends on a cognitive progression that leads from an immediate to an informed perspective on reality, capturing the complexity of human life in all its dimensions. This informed perspective on reality is acquired by living experiences that shape our identity, consciousness, and ignorance with which we are brought to the world. Indeed, the question of human freedom "amounts to nothing less than to question what it means to be human" (Ferro, 2022, p.4). Being human means being able to choose according to our interests. Hume said that "We can only understand by freedom the power to act or not to act" (Hume, 1998). Therefore, we can choose and act or choose not to act. Eventually, Douglass decides he wants to act and escape, and he recreates a conversation with the ships in chapter X.

You are loosed from your moorings and are free; I am fast in my chains and am a slave! You move merrily before the gentle gale, and I sadly before the bloody whip! You are freedom's swift-winged angels, that fly round the world; I am confined in bands of iron! O that I were free! [...] Let me be free! Is there any God? Why am I a slave? I will run away. I will not stand it. Get caught, or get clear, I'll try it. I had as well die with ague as the fever. I have only one life to

lose. I had as well be killed running as die standing. Only think of it; one hundred miles straight north, and I am free! Try it? Yes! God helping me, I will. It cannot be that I shall live and die a slave. I will take to the water. This very bay shall yet bear me into freedom. [...] I am not the only slave in the world. Why should I fret? I can bear as much as any of them. [...] There is a better day coming (Douglass, 1999, p. 62-63).

Both the ships and the speech symbolise freedom, reminding him of his enslaved condition. Douglass recalls speaking to the boats, wondering why they are free and why he is still enslaved. He also begs for God's help and finally decides to escape. Douglass's existence is reduced "to a long and ceaseless compromise between what we could do and what is within our reach, between what is conceivable and what is possible" (Ferro, 2022, p.4). At this point of the novel, Douglass's liberation is both conceivable and possible, yet in his mind, it is not. Ferro (2022) notes that if men and women are prevented from not acting or saying what they want, the balance between what they can and cannot do is altered. In the worst cases, if they are sold into slavery and are denied control of their bodies, their freedom is even more compromised. "Yet these constraints, however serious, are never serious enough to invade one's inner citadel and destroy one's implicit belief in personal freedom" (Ferro, 2022, p.5)

In a film, the ships of this fragment would appear framed in a close shot, while in the background, the voice of Douglass would explain his sorrows while accompanied by a nostalgic melody. However, a book does not contain these cinematographic techniques because it is the author or, in this case, the protagonist who must create very vivid imagery

for the reader to depict this scene as it would appear in a film. Ultimately, the reader would understand his sorrow and understand the importance of freedom and his desire to become a free man. This is why this part of the story is one of the most relevant parts of this book: one needs to put him or herself in the protagonist's shoes to understand his feeling of impotence towards slavery.

In short, the concept of freedom is not a closed concept. On the one hand, it can be understood as what has come to be called "free will," i.e., the ability to choose after deliberation. On the other hand, this requires the existence of an original indeterminacy and, at the same time, a complementary capacity to self-determine oneself to achieve a previously proposed end. But, at the same time, this latter possibility demands the existence of a foundation of absolute independence concerning the means, without which no one would be able to give himself any rule to reach the proposed end. Schiller (1879) suggests that while freedom is a crucial characteristic of humanity, servitude is not. "This is the kind of humanist claim generally championed in modern Western societies and that most reasonable people are ready to endorse" (Ferro, 2022, p.4). At first, Douglass believes he cannot choose his path, but he gradually discovers that he can self-determine his own life with his own decisions. Douglass fights for his freedom, and, to an extent, he is in pursuit of American freedom.

#### *5.4 The role of dignity in the story*

At the very beginning of the story, Douglass compares himself to animals, particularly horses. Was he putting himself at the same level as animals with this kind of comparison? Was he animalising himself? With whom did Douglass negotiate his personhood when every time one said his name, he imprinted his essence in the world with being the property of others?

Douglass writes, “By far the larger part of the slaves know as little of their ages as horses know of theirs, and it is the wish of most masters within my knowledge to keep their slaves thus ignorant” (Douglass, 1999, p. 15). This is the third sentence the reader finds when reading the first chapter. Douglass uses the comparison to state that Blacks are degraded in life and are now considered as if they were horses. By using this comparison, Yancy (2016) argues that Douglass realises that he has been assigned an inferior position in the ontological chain of being human. Also, Yancy (2016) states that what makes blacks a signifier of evil and bestiality is their epidermal blackness. Douglass chooses to mention horses because they are deemed brutes of the field. Time, the fact of historical becoming or even “seizing one’s life as a protensive project” (Yancy, 2016) is irrelevant to horses. Also, comparing it to a horse, Douglass’s existence has a purpose that is assigned by a white. Douglass also compares his existence with that of other beings. He testifies:

We were all ranked together at the valuation. Men and women, old and young, married and single, were ranked with horses, sheep, and swine. There were horses and men, cattle and women, pigs and children, all holding the same rank on the

scale of being and subjected to the same narrow examination. (Douglass, 1999, p.48)

In this passage, Douglass depicts the reality of his existence and that of all those who were enslaved. At the beginning of the narrative, we see how Douglass is like an animal without identity. He was deprived of the sense of awareness, the importance of memory, and the understanding of freedom, just like animals. It did not matter if you were a man, a woman, or a young boy or girl because you would serve the same purpose as if you were an animal. Through this method of keeping blacks ignorant, Pennington (1849) notes that this strategy makes them consider themselves chattel by making them think they are ahistorical beings. Yancy (2016) also claims that “[i]t is of utmost importance, [...] that Blacks know themselves as ‘slaves’ along with a kind of ‘atemporal’ axis, phenomenologically having experienced and understood themselves as having always been *slaves*”.

In the same line of being considered an animal, Douglass compares himself once again with animals as he writes:

I arrived at the master’s store. I then presented an appearance enough to affect any but a heart of iron. From the crown of my head to my feet, I was covered with blood. My hair was all clotted with dust and blood; my shirt was stiff with blood. I suppose I looked like a man who had escaped a den of wild beasts and barely escaped them. (Douglass, 1999, p.65)

The basic idea here is that Douglass describes himself and his enslaved companions as “wild beasts”. Once again, we can see how the absence of dignity is present in describing different events to create a clear image of how enslaved people felt like animals. This act of only degrading blacks is a straightforward way of annihilating each enslaved person's subjectivity and Douglass's. But where does this subjectivity come from? Do animals have subjectivity? The truth is that in Noller's book *The Unity of a Person*, he summarises Olson's perspectives on this issue. Olson believes that we should all consider humans as animals and, thus, put ourselves at the same level as other animals like monkeys, lions, or horses. The discerning point here is that, distinctly from animals, humans have a brain with cognitive functions. Olson makes this point clear by using the following example:

‘I’ does not refer to Anne Marie; instead, Olson uses the first-person pronoun to refer to Anne Sophie. But who is Anne Sophie? Ontologically speaking, in Olson's sense, Anne Sophie is the animal that loses its cerebrum and gets a new one from Anne Marie. This animal Anne Sophie, however, can refer to itself with the first-person pronoun only thanks to Anne Marie's cerebrum and, i.e., thanks to Anne Marie's psychology.

Hence, extrapolating this to Douglass's narrative, we can infer that Douglass was not wrong when he firstly compared himself with an animal because he was one. The point is that, as he was capable of thinking and reasoning, he was able to answer a simple question like “*Who is 'I'?*” (Noller, 2022, p.105). “I” now is a person with a “psychological continuity” (Noller, 2022, p.105).

However, there is only one instance in which he is not treated like an animal, and it is when Sophia Auld teaches Douglass how to read and write and treats him like a person before she turns into a cruel person because of slavery. Even so, within this situation, Douglass could be considered a foreigner, a member that does not belong to that particular household. Here some might argue that he was still seen as an animal but not a wild animal; instead, he was seen as a domestic animal. The question here is, why like a domestic animal? When we own a domestic animal first, we know that it is from a different species than ours, whether it is a cat, a dog, or a bird. So, as he was black and the rest of the family was white, he could be considered different. Also, he could be given that domestic animal status because Douglass was treated as a person and was given an identity like how we usually do it with our pets.

All in all, Douglass first starts believing he is an animal, too, like the horses with which he compared himself. He went where the master said like the animals; he seemed to have no conscience like the animals and nobody cared what he was called, like the animals. Throughout the story, Douglass reconceptualised his identity when he could link it to the human's psychological and cognitive traits, some characteristics that other types of animals do not have. And this leads us to think that "it's not only that subjectivity must not be equated with personhood; subjectivity rather appears to be inextricably intertwined with the organisation of living systems as such." (Noller, 2022, p.118)



## 6. Conclusions

Frederick Douglass shared his own slavery story in the quest to disseminate information about slavery and, ultimately, in the pursuit of abolitionism. This story has been internationally acclaimed because of his excellent portrayal of what being black meant in the United States of America in the XIX century. Additionally, with this autobiography, Douglass wanted to demonstrate to the whites that he could think, write and be as sophisticated as a white but with the only difference that his skin was of a different colour. Yet, they should all be considered humans.

Initially, I set out to examine how Douglass constructed his subjectivity in his narrative while exploring issues like identity, memory, freedom and dignity. Once these concepts have been analysed, I can assert that I have been able to fulfil my initial objective. On the one hand, I have seen that the term subjectivity applies to organisms that qualify themselves as subjects of experiences. On the other hand, “subjectivity is rooted in intersubjectivity” (Ferro, 2022, p.173). That is, “subjectivity is communication and openness towards the other” (Noller, 2022, p. 117). Finally, according to Gibson (2018), forming one’s subjectivity seeks one’s own life.

Moreover, I have noticed that each aspect I initially chose to do this paper is interrelated. That is, our memory makes us rational beings and, therefore, able to know that we are individuals with identity and the capacity for reasoning. Also, the research shows that throughout history, many have struggled to free themselves from oppression like slavery, but one cannot be free until one is conscious of themselves — of their identity. And finally, once we are free, we can obtain the dignity we deserve.

Exploring slavery in the XIX century in the United States of America has allowed me to have a broader image of black people's situation under slavery: a system of segregating and oppressing black people. Moreover, I have demonstrated that one's subjectivity is made up of different factors like the ones discussed previously: identity and individuality, memory, freedom, and dignity.

The *Narrative of the Life of Frederick Douglass* is a pioneering novel that tackles many issues that American society had to face in the past. Many of the issues raised in the autobiography were interesting to me, but I decided I would choose just some of them and explore them in-depth rather than choosing more topics and going through them superficially. That is why I narrowed down the number of issues I would like to perform the critical analysis. In addition, I chose to explore how identity, memory, freedom, and dignity built the idea of subjectivity because these concepts were the ones that appeared in my mind after reading Douglass's work.

All in all, I am pretty satisfied with the research and analysis that I have done in this dissertation. However, while the investigation could include more examples, the provided ones are significant. Also, I could indeed have explained the examples in more detail. However, I have not been able to do so, mainly because of the limited pages we had to discuss the paper and time constraints.

Lastly, if I had to set a starting point in the lines of future research, I would add concepts related to subjective mental phenomena like one's behaviour, or I would add terms like "intersubjectivity", which is the existential relation, communication, and openness

towards others (Noller, 2022, p. 117). The latter would be an interesting aspect to discuss because Douglass is in constant relation with others and one's subjectivity can be also constructed on the basis of interrelations. Consequently, I believe this concept could create a sense of closure to this dissertation.

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