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## Literacy Reflection

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Literacy Reflection

by Laurel Kunath

(Honors English 1101)

In the other side of the window, just a few feet from where I sat, it was a beautiful day. Rows of rainbow flowers blew gently in the breeze. Above them, the sun shone blissfully in the azure sky. A cluster of plump white clouds rolled by, and for a moment, the world darkened strangely. One cloud looked like a butterfly, the next, like a dragon...

Suddenly, a familiar voice snapped me back into reality. “Huh?” I looked over at Maureen, confused. “I *said*,” she repeated, “what are you doing this summer?” It took me a few seconds to process the words. “Well?” She raised an eyebrow in annoyance. “Oh...nothing really,” I finally replied. She sighed before turning her blond head to talk to someone else. The polite smile disappeared from my face.

There was less than one week of school left in eighth grade, and, as usual, no one was paying attention. While I had been daydreaming, the rest of the students had been busy elucidating their summer plans. Maureen would be staying with her grandparents on their farm in Kentucky. Becky was going to Niagara Falls. Nina boasted about vacationing in Rome. I suppressed my jealousy. Although I was not sure what I had planned yet, I was certain it would be more enjoyable than being at school. As the days stretched with the approach of summer, so too, it seemed, did the time. I glanced over at the clock. At this rate, I could be here for the rest of my life.

My frizzy-haired English teacher, Mrs. Merskey, looked exasperated. I felt sorry for her. She was trying to speak to the class, but all around her, private conversations were sprouting up like weeds. There was so much going on that I could barely hear her voice over the din. I stuck my fingers in my ears, but the dull roar continued. A frowning Mrs. Merskey returned to her desk, but she was not defeated.

Before long, my teacher re-entered the battle, wielding a hefty stack of neon green papers. Groans spread like wildfire as the papers were passed around. Curious to see what all the fuss was about, I reached out for one of the fluorescent sheets. Ominously labeled “Required Summer Reading,” the paper detailed the assignment. The class was to read a book called *The Narrative of the Life of Frederick Douglass, An American Slave*. Ugh, I thought. Even the title was long. We were going to be tested on the book in the fall.

I can’t say I felt very enthusiastic at that point. It wasn’t that I didn’t enjoy reading – I did. I was simply interested in a different kind of books. At fourteen, I gravitated towards young adult fiction. The stories were generally about modern young girls and boys, friendship, and dating, with the occasional person developing magical powers here and there. *The Narrative of the Life of Frederick Douglass*, on the other hand, dove right into the depressing topic of slavery. It was nonfiction, too, written in 1845. How could I possibly relate to something that was written almost one hundred and sixty years ago? I did not understand how I was supposed to get excited about such a serious, historical topic.

Nevertheless, it was an assignment. Early in the summer, I went out and bought the title reluctantly. On the cover of the paperback, there was a portrait of Frederick Douglass himself. Dressed in a suit and bow tie, he almost looked as if he was smirking at me. Arriving home from the bookstore, I opened the book up. I tried to read it, but I was not used to the writing style. It felt like I was reading fact after fact, with no end in sight. In addition to the print being tiny, the old-fashioned language was disconcerting. “Intimation.” “Odiousness.” The list of words I did not recognize kept

growing. I made my way about two pages in before I decided that I needed a break. I put the book back down, resolving to try again in a few days.

Because I was not looking forward to reading the book, it was easy for me to procrastinate. I knew I would have to finish *The Narrative of the Life of Frederick Douglass* eventually, but why worry about it? Surely, I would get to it tomorrow...yet somehow, a string of tomorrows ran together, faster and faster, like a snowball gaining speed as it went down a hill. If I was not careful, it would overtake me. An inescapable Frederick sat on my shelf, as if mocking me, but I ignored him for as long as I could. With only a day or two left, I finally made myself sit down and read the book.

As I turned the pages, it was clear that Frederick Douglass had a hard life. He was born a slave, shuffled about from master to master. Separated from his family, he did not even know his age or his father's name. In the early years of his life, he lived on his master's plantation, where he dealt with cruel overseers and numerous beatings, once, even witnessing the murder of another slave. I could never have imagined the horrors he was forced to endure. My comfortable surroundings faded away as I continued reading.

When Frederick was a boy, he was sent to live with Captain Auld and his wife in the city of Baltimore. He was treated better here than he had been in the past. The Captain's wife had never owned a slave before, and as a result, was good to Frederick. Never before had he experienced such warmth. The lack of kindness in his life previously was shocking to me. Mrs. Auld taught him the alphabet and to spell a few short words, but the happy times did not last long. When her husband, the Captain, found out about what she was doing, he was furious with her. The Captain explained: "Learning would *spoil* the best nigger in the world...It would forever unfit him to be a slave. He would at once become unmanageable, and of no value to his master. As to himself, it could do him no good, but a great deal of harm. It would make him discontented and unhappy" (Douglass 34).

Frederick realized from his master's vehemence that learning must be his way out of slavery. By this time, however, his mistress had turned against him. Not only did she stop giving him lessons, but she went to extremes to keep him from reading at all. Frederick was never left alone in the house. The only place he could find teachers was out on the street, where he traded bread with a few poor white boys in exchange for lessons. In doing so, he risked beatings, or worse, being sent to a new plantation with even harsher masters. Painstakingly, he learned to read and write, and, in the process, he came to understand his position as a slave. In this way, literacy was to him both a blessing and a curse. It gave him hope for a better life, but, at the same time, made him aware of the intolerable conditions he was subjected to (Douglass 34-39).

That someone went to such lengths to read and write was something totally new for me. As a child, I had taken my education for granted. I had always been encouraged by my parents to learn and provided with the more than the necessary materials. I took easily to reading, and soon after, to writing. I had many books as a child that I read once and never looked at again. To me, these books were just another possession. At most, they were entertainment – something to look at when I became bored. And yet, to Frederick, books were so much more. They represented a light and a hope for freedom. He was willing to risk everything on that one hope.

I realized that many students in America today viewed literacy as an inconvenience. They treated it as a chore: reading and writing were not things they *wanted* to do, but rather, things they *had* to do. I, too, was guilty – just earlier that year, I had *complained* when I was given a book to read. I thought that reading the book would be the worst part of my summer! Frederick would have been appalled by my current attitude, and with good reason. Now, for perhaps the first time, reading about another person's struggle had forced me to appreciate my own literacy.

If literacy was in fact a pathway to greater things, it was one I had previously walked unknowingly. Now, able to see the road, I am grateful. Unlike so many in the past and present, I was given the ability to read and write at a young age. The moment I understood, the door was opened to a world of opportunities. Literacy has made it possible for me to comprehend and benefit

from the experiences of others – not only those around me, but those in other times and places. The combination of these experiences and my own has made me who I am today. Though I cannot honestly say that I never complained about a reading assignment again, every now and then, I think back to Frederick Douglass and thank him for showing me how lucky I truly am.

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Works Cited

Douglass, Frederick. *Narrative of the Life of Frederick Douglass, an American Slave*. Delaware: Prestwick House, 2004.