
The Political Station in Douglass's "Narrative of the Life" and Emerson's "Self-Reliance"

In their respective writings, Ralph Waldo Emerson and Frederick Douglass learn to operate and rebel in their own, personal political communities and are both ostracized by their political convictions. Douglass, a slave living in antebellum America, learns to read and write; his literacy in itself is a form of rebellion and he uses his newfound language against the system that educated as well as oppressed him. Emerson is also an outsider, but by choice; the ideals expressed in his writings necessitate his separation from his community. Both Douglass and Emerson are revolutionaries in their own right, defying their communities and consequential politics to pursue their personal ideologies. However, because of their respective positions in society, Douglass and Emerson approach politics and revolution in differing ways—Douglass must maneuver and rebel within the confines of the politics established by his community, while Emerson is able to redefine the political structure entirely, essentially existing outside the laws of his community.

Douglass, because of his position in his community as a former slave, must work within the existing political guidelines to fashion his rebellion. Douglass must abide by the laws of his masters; he can only defy them while operating within the very political community they had established to subjugate Douglass. Because of Douglass's suppression, he has no license, inclination, or impulse to act outside of the political community into which he has been forced. Instead, he rebels within the constraints of his community, and his revolutionary actions are therefore exceedingly recognizable as such. For example, as Douglass's mistress, Mrs. Auld, teaches him to read and write, he begins to discover the politics surrounding his enslavement: "I now understood what had been to me a most perplexing difficulty—to wit, the white man's power to enslave the black man. It was a good achievement and I prized it highly" (29). As Douglass acquires his own utility by becoming literate, he learns the politics of the community that enslaves him. What's more, Douglass is proud of this realization and guards it steadfastly because his newfound knowledge will allow him to challenge these politics, his community, and his master by rebelling against them.

The fact that Douglass's form of revolution occurs within the confines of the politics of his community is manifested in the syntax of his rhetoric. He states, "What he [Douglass's master] most dreaded, that I most desired. What he most loves, that I most hated. That which to him was a great evil, to be carefully shunned, was to me a great good, to be diligently sought" (29-30). Through his rhetoric, Douglass aligns himself with his master, with the white man, with power and utility, and learns to rebel. The parallel structure of Douglass's phrasing leads the reader to envision Douglass as the equal of his master, as a worthy adversary. Yet, by employing such a structure and syntax, Douglass demonstrates his adherence to the politics of his community. Douglass works within the confines of his political community, only able to defy his master through a carefully constructed equation. Douglass does not and cannot envision himself superior to his master; that would be a revolution completely unsupported and illogical within his political community because of his status as a black man, as a slave. Instead, he employs a structure that allows him to equate himself to his master, which is both revolutionary and possible within his political community.

Emerson, on the other hand, as a prominent, white figure in academia, is able to manipulate his community's politics. He is, therefore, able to fashion his own political community, living in a self-created world, by self-created laws. Unlike Douglass, Emerson is not subject to the politics of his community because he has the authority and status, through his position in society, to create his own political community. In his essay "Self Reliance," Emerson argues that, "society everywhere is in conspiracy against the manhood of every one of its members... The virtue in most request is conformity. Self-reliance is its aversion" (261). That is, Emerson proposes a new type of politics. Instead of working within the type of community that has always exists—instead of simply accepting the notion of "society"—Emerson creates a new ideology: where man stands alone, self-reliant and independent.

Emerson is able to accomplish this task, to live outside the politics of his community as a voluntary exile, because of his position in society. As an educated scholar established firmly in the realm of academia, Emerson not only has the ability to create these new politics, but the authority and the confidence, as well. He states, "To be great is to be misunderstood" (265). Emerson's view of the self within the community is revolutionary because it is far removed from any type of ideology the reader is familiar with and, while Douglass's attempts to convey his autobiography is complete clarity about his position within his community, Emerson's essay is far more interpretive. There is room to peruse and explore within Emerson's essay because it is his creation. There is opportunity to "misunderstand" Emerson because of the freedom of his thought and rhetoric.

Emerson's view of politics and the community is not more or less revolutionary than Douglass's. Both Douglass and Emerson manage their own type of revolution, yet Douglass does so within the established politics of his community, whereas Emerson is able to redefine the ideas of "politics" and "community" entirely, creating for himself a new set of guidelines by which to live, a new notion of what society actually is or should be. Emerson's essay "Self-Reliance" is written with an air of freedom and entitlement; after all, he creates for himself a community where the individual is king. Douglass's brand of revolution, on the other hand, is confined and dictated by his community. His political station within his community is reinforced by the sentence structure he employs. That is, his ideas of revolution are informed and determined by his social standing as a slave—even in his rebellion. While Emerson plays God, creating for himself a new politic, Douglass maneuvers within the constraints of his community, locating revolution by playing by the rules of his masters.