

# The Hardships of Slavery and the Power of Education in Slave Narratives

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Sveučilišni diplomski dvopredmetni studij engleskog jezika i književnosti –  
nastavnički smjer i pedagogije

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**Muke ropstva i moć obrazovanja u ispovijestima robova**

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## **Abstract**

Slave narrative is a narrative form depicting all the horrifying ordeals slaves had to go through and the impediments they had to overcome, both during their years of enslavement and after their emancipation. In this thesis, the severe hardships slaves had to endure will be described by providing examples from Frederick Douglass's *Narrative of the Life of Frederick Douglass, an American Slave* (1845), Harriet Jacobs's *Incidents in the Life of a Slave Girl* (1861), and Booker T. Washington's *Up from Slavery* (1901). Moreover, by referring to their narratives and stating their views regarding education, this thesis will also prove how important and powerful tool education was both during the times of slavery as well as after its abolition.

**Keywords:** Frederick Douglass, Harriet Jacobs, Booker T. Washington, slave, slave narrative, hardships, education, power of education



## Introduction

Slavery is to be regarded as one of the most shameful, disgraceful, and sordid periods in the history of the United States of America. Alongside a plethora of other atrocities, severe physical punishment, psychological abuse, and labor exploitation were all regular occurrences in slaves' lives. Being illiterate and deprived of education, slaves had very little opportunity to share their horrendous experiences or to advocate for changes. However, those who were either aided by the kind-hearted people of the American South, or who somehow managed to master the skill of writing on their own, succeeded in sharing their story. Thus emerged the so-called slave narrative, which can be defined as an account of life or one period of life during enslavement recounted by a former slave (Andrews). From this literary genre, especially the autobiographical works, we are given the best insight into what hardships slaves and former slaves had to endure and how painful their ordeals were. There are two main types of slave narratives: narratives written and published in the antebellum period, and those written and published after the Emancipation Proclamation had been issued, i.e. in the postbellum period. "The autobiographies of Frederick Douglass, William Wells Brown, and Harriet Jacobs (a native of Edenton) were some of the most influential slave narratives of the antebellum period," whereas "Booker T. Washington's *Up from Slavery* (1901) is probably the most famous example of the late nineteenth- and early twentieth-century slave narrative" (Criner and Nash). The focus of this thesis will be on Frederick Douglass's *Narrative of the Life of Frederick Douglass, an American Slave* (1845), Booker T. Washington's *Up from Slavery* (1901), and Harriet Jacobs's *Incidents in the Life of a Slave Girl* (1861). Although Douglass, Washington, and Jacobs were all slaves at one point in their lives, their narratives are slightly different. Namely, since Douglass and Jacobs had spent greater parts of their life as slaves, they depicted the hardships of their slavery days in greater detail than Washington, who spent "only" nine years as a slave. Washington, on the other hand, devotes a greater part of his narrative to describing his path towards education and just how powerful a tool it was. The aim of this thesis is to portray the daily hardships of slavery as well as the power of education before and after the abolition of slavery according to Douglass's, Washington's, and Jacobs's narratives.

The structure of this thesis consists of several chapters. The first chapter explores daily hardships in the life of a slave by providing examples from Douglass's, Washington's, and Jacobs's narratives. Identity-related issues, physical, psychological, and sexual abuse, inhumane working

conditions, and labor exploitation are major themes covered in this chapter. Chapter two explores the power of education during the times of slavery as well as after the Emancipation Proclamation. It covers former laws regarding the education of African Americans during slavery and, by referring to Douglass's, Jacobs's and Washington's narratives, explores how difficult it was to attain education and how powerful of a tool it was. Before the overall conclusion is given in the last chapter, the importance of these narratives, as well as a comparison between Douglass's and Washington's educational philosophy, will be discussed in chapter number three.

# 1. The Hardships of Slavery

## 1.1. The Identity-Related Issues

“I was born a slave on a plantation in Franklin County, Virginia. I am not quite sure of the exact place or exact date of my birth, but at any rate I suspect I must have been born somewhere and at some time.”  
(Washington 1)

“I was born in Tuckahoe, near Hillsborough, and 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 1)

The afore-quoted sentences are the opening lines of Douglass’s and Washington’s narratives, yet they are also a testament of truth for most of people born in slavery as most people born in slavery were advertently deprived of knowing the place and date of their birth. “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 1). The question arises: why were slaves not entitled to know about their roots? One of the explanations lies in the fact that slaves were always treated and coerced to feel as if they were solely a piece of property. By dispossessing them of knowledge of their date and place of birth, slaveholders attempted to erase slaves’ identity. Since knowing about your origins is one of the first steps towards building your persona and identity, being deprived of this knowledge represents one of the major identity-related issues that slaves had to combat. It often resulted in unhappiness and dissatisfaction among the enslaved ones as can be seen in Douglass’s statement to follow:

A want of information concerning my own was a source of unhappiness to me even during childhood. 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. He deemed all such inquiries on the part of a slave improper and impertinent, and evidence of a restless spirit. (1)

Another thing that gives human beings a sense of identity is their name. After being captured, slaves were legally nameless until being sold to their masters (Inscoc). Having been bought and made their masters’ property, slaveholders were the ones choosing their names. The

names they chose varied; some slaveholders let them keep their names, some gave them derogatory and condescending names, some gave them biblical and geographical names, and some opted to give them regular American names (Inscoc). However, those born in slavery were sometimes allowed to be named by their parents as was the case with Frederick Douglass, Harriet Jacobs, and Booker Taliaferro Washington. Be that as it may, they were not allowed to have their last names. Rather, their last name was automatically assigned to them according to their master's. As a result, one of the first steps that slaves took when gaining their freedom was changing their name as this made them feel free, independent, and in control of their own identity. As Washington describes it:

In some way a feeling got among the coloured people that it was far from proper for them to bear the surname of their former owners, and a great many of them took other surnames. This was one of the first signs of freedom. When they were slaves, a coloured person was simply called "John" or "Susan." There was seldom occasion for more than the use of the one name. If "John" or "Susan" belonged to a white man by the name of "Hatcher," sometimes he was called "John Hatcher," or as often "Hatcher's John." But there was a feeling that "John Hatcher" or "Hatcher's John" was not the proper title by which to denote a freeman; and so in many cases "John Hatcher" was changed to "John S. Lincoln" or "John S. Sherman," the initial "S" standing for no name, it being simply a part of what the coloured man proudly called his "entitles." (15)

## **1.2. Familial Relationships**

Family life during the times of slavery was immensely disrupted. Family bonds were often shattered at a very early stage of a person's life. In his narrative, Douglass offers an example from his childhood illustrating why that was the case:

My mother and I were separated when I was but an infant—before I knew her as my mother. It is a common custom, in the part of Maryland from which I ran away, to part children from their mothers at a very early age. Frequently, before the child has reached its twelfth

month, its mother is taken from it, and hired out on some farm a considerable distance off, and the child is placed under the care of an old woman, too old for field labor. (2)

Being taken away from one's parent at such an early age inevitably results in excruciating consequences for the development of affection and makes the creation of strong family bonds virtually impossible. Furthermore, not only were slaves separated from their parents, but were sometimes also deprived of the right of knowing who their parents were. For instance, neither Douglass nor Washington knew who their fathers were: "of my father I know even less than of my mother. I do not even know his name. I have heard reports to the effect that he was a white man who lived on one of the near-by plantations" (Washington 4). Consequently, once Douglass received the news regarding his mother's death, his following apathetic reaction came as no surprise:

She died when I was about seven years old, on one of my master's farms, near Lee's Mill. I was not allowed to be present during her illness, at her death, or burial. She was gone long before I knew any thing about it. Never having enjoyed, to any considerable extent, her soothing presence, her tender and watchful care, I received the tidings of her death with much the same emotions I should have probably felt at the death of a stranger. (3)

On the other hand, Harriet Jacobs, who knew both of her parents, had initially enjoyed her family life as a child and was fairly content with her familial situation: "though we were all slaves, I was so fondly shielded that I never dreamed I was a piece of merchandise, trusted to them for safe keeping, and liable to be demanded of them at any moment" (11). However, after losing her mother at the age of six and being separated from her father later on, she realized she was a slave, what slavery was, and what slavery meant. Just how complex and difficult it was to maintain familial ties and remain together as a family during slavery becomes apparent during Jacobs's motherhood days. Namely, not only were the strict regulations and labor policies limiting the development of their relationship, but were also providing the slaveholder with the ability to separate mothers from their children at their convenience (Li 14). As a result, Jacobs was coerced to live in a different household than their children and was constantly to live in incessant fear of them being sold away. The struggle that she had to go through, her sheer ingenuity, and determination to preserve her family were not something many slaves were capable of. In fact, Li (2006) points out that "[m]any female slaves were unable to keep their families together, yet by

emphasizing the oppositional action inspired by maternal sentiment Jacobs presents motherhood as a force that resists slavery and its supporters” (15).

Moreover, even though slaves were allowed to get married and start families, their marriages were not recognized by American law, nor were they protected from “the abuses and restrictions imposed on them by slaveowners” (R. Washington). This implies that should a slaveholder decide to sell one spouse, they were undisputedly entitled to do so. Those who lived on different plantations had to get their master’s consent in order to visit (R. Washington). Slaveholders were further entitled to forbid marriages between slaves if they wanted to, as was the case with Jacobs when her master forbade her from marrying a free white man, thus wanting to keep her for himself. All the power was in slaveholders’ hands since their slave was their property. Thornton, Yanochik, and Ewing (2009) point out how some historians argue that it was a tendency of slaveholders to sell their slaves for monetary gains, whereas they themselves argue that it was more common for the slaveholders to keep families united in order to secure stability and prevent runaways. By analyzing more than 2200 interview narratives conducted in the 1930s with aged ex-slaves, Crawford (1992) came to the conclusion that 62% of the respondents were raised in a two-parent household (334). The remainder lived either in a single-parent family or in mixed slave quarters (Crawford 342). Hence, we may not conclude that Douglass’s, Washington’s, and Jacobs’s experiences were predominant reflections of slave family structure. However, the data indicating that 38% of slaves did not grow up with both of their parents corroborates that their situation certainly is not an isolated case. Another matter to take into account is the restlessness and agitation of those who did live as a family due to the constant fear of being sold away. That being said, no marriage nor family was to be at ease at any point during the times of slavery.

### **1.3. Physical and Psychological Abuse**

It can be argued that one of the first things that crosses people’s minds when talking about the hardships of slavery is the severe physical cruelty slaves had to endure. Their ordeal was thoroughly described and presented in countless history books, television, and a plethora of other media resources. Slave narratives, though, provide us with the best insight into what slaves had to go through. One of the principal reasons why slaves included all the gory details of their physical

sufferings in their narrative was to gain people's sympathy in order to raise their awareness of the abomination of slavery, prompt them to take action against it, and to prevent it from ever happening again. In their intentions, they succeeded. The corroboration of this can be seen in Jerry Philipps's (2001) article "The Perennial Value of the Slave Narrative":

The heart feels pain in sympathy with those who suffered under slavery: the child who was sold away from her parents, never to see them again; the old man who dropped dead in a cotton row under a blazing sun, worn out like one a thousand years old; the young woman who was violated by her master and who was then daily tormented by his jealous wife, the mistress of the household; the man who lost his flesh to the whip and his spirit to the grind of long days; and the woman who escaped to the North only to be caught by slave hunters who returned her south, where the devil made his home. One feels disturbed when one reads of these events and imagines them as having involved persons as fully human as ourselves. (335)

Whipping, beating, shackling, torture, hanging, and rape were all forms of physical abuse commonly used by slaveholders and overseers in order to keep their slaves under control. Whipping was by far the most frequent form of corporal punishment. However, in the article titled "In the Slavery Years Torture Was a Standard Instrument of Racial Control," some other ways of corporal punishment were described. These include high cuffing (a method of torture where slave's wrists are tied together after which they are raised in the air with their feet barely touching the ground), branding (often with an inscription "slave for life"), burning, and mutilation (Anonymous). Some of the most severe forms of punishment and torture included putting masks and collars around slaves' faces, necks, or backs in order to prevent them from eating, talking, or sleeping, putting slaves in giant barrels and hammering nails from the outside so that they pierced from the inside, and then rolling the barrels (Anonymous). Unfortunately, there was no limit to slaveholders' "creativity" in this area. Frederick Douglass was no exception to the cruelty of the system. Douglass recounts how it did not take too long for him to become acquainted with the wickedness of slavery:

I remember the first time I ever witnessed this horrible exhibition. I was quite a child, but I well remember it. I never shall forget it whilst I remember any thing. . . . Before he commenced whipping Aunt Hester, he took her into the kitchen, and stripped her from neck

to waist, leaving her neck, shoulders, and back, entirely naked. He then told her to cross her hands, calling her at the same time a d——d b——h. After crossing her hands, he tied them with a strong rope, and led her to a stool under a large hook in the joist, put in for the purpose. He made her get upon the stool, and tied her hands to the hook. She now stood fair for his infernal purpose. Her arms were stretched up at their full length, so that she stood upon the ends of her toes. He then said to her, “Now, you d——d b——h, I’ll learn you how to disobey my orders!” and after rolling up his sleeves, he commenced to lay on the heavy cowskin, and soon the warm, red blood (amid heart-rending shrieks from her, and horrid oaths from him) came dripping to the floor. (6)

Though no physical injuries were inflicted upon Douglass during this event, the psychological trauma he went through left him emotionally scarred for life. When it comes to his experience of physical abuse, Douglass recounts how he was whipped multiple times in his life but none were severe as the ones he received after being sent to an infamous “slave-breaker” Mr. Covey: “I had been at my new home but one week before Mr. Covey gave me a very severe whipping, cutting my back, causing the blood to run, and raising ridges on my flesh as large as my little finger” (51). Douglass’s description of the physical and psychological abuse, which slaves had to endure under Covey’s command, reflects just how appalling slavery was. Apart from the constant whippings and beatings, slaveholders were masterful at subjecting slaves to psychological tortures:

He seldom approached the spot where we were at work openly, if he could do it secretly. He always aimed at taking us by surprise. Such was his cunning, that we used to call him, among ourselves, “the snake.” When we were at work in the cornfield, he would sometimes crawl on his hands and knees to avoid detection, and all at once he would rise nearly in our midst, and scream out, “Ha, ha! Come, come! Dash on, dash on!” This being his mode of attack, it was never safe to stop a single minute. His comings were like a thief in the night. He appeared to us as being ever at hand. He was under every tree, behind every stump, in every bush, and at every window, on the plantation. (Douglass 53)

The impact of such physical and psychological abuse on the state of mind of a slave can be seen from Douglass’s following words:



Mr. Covey succeeded in breaking me. I was broken in body, soul, and spirit. My natural elasticity was crushed, my intellect languished, the disposition to read departed, the cheerful spark that lingered about my eye died; the dark night of slavery closed in upon me; and behold a man transformed into a brute! (Douglass 55)

Although Jacobs had never experienced the lash of a whip on her skin, the type of abuse she suffered was one of the most psychologically devastating and traumatic ones a woman can experience – sexual abuse. Having turned fifteen, Jacobs entered, in her own words, “a sad epoch in the life of a slave girl” (44). Countless unwelcome sexual advances by her master Dr. James Norcom (in the narrative referred to as “Dr. Flint”) took place during her enslavement. Although Jacobs never explicitly stated that she was raped by her master, nor did she explicitly mention any gruesome details of such a horrible event, some of her statements in the narrative suggest that it was the case. In his article “Reading between the Lines: The Black Cultural Tradition of Masking in Harriet Jacobs’s *Incidents in the Life of a Slave Girl*,” Novian Whitsitt elaborates on why Jacobs opted for this method of conveying information:

A speculative reading of Brent’s being sexually assaulted by Flint is not only plausible but arguably more credible. At work in Jacobs’s narrative repertoire is the black cultural tradition of “masking,” a technique of double meaning that allows the storyteller to make accessible a hidden message only to those readers attuned to the secretive signs embedded within the story. “Masking” thus allows Jacobs to compose an acceptable explanation of events that will satisfy the majority of her immediate readers, white middle-class women in the North, while revealing the complete and actual experience to a select group of readers who can detect the cipher and appreciate Jacobs’s impressive cunning given her desperate circumstances. Close scrutiny of the narrative reveals Jacobs to be a clever mediator of revealed and hidden information who encourages her readers to read against the text. The latent details suggest that Flint did indeed sexually abuse Brent, leaving her with an added crisis of pregnancy. (73)

As a result of her vile treatment, Jacobs suffered vast emotional and psychological trauma. The most saddening part is that the sexual abuse and emotional trauma Jacobs experienced is solely one of countless examples of a myriad of other slave women that had to go through the same or similar ordeals.

## **1.4. Poor Living Conditions**

The living conditions of slaves greatly varied depending on whether they were a city slave or a plantation slave since “a city slave is almost a freeman, compared with a slave on the plantation” (Douglass 30). In order to draw and distinguish the difference in living conditions between the two major groups, this chapter will first discuss the living conditions of plantation slaves and then those of city slaves.

### **1.4.1. Plantation Slaves' Living Conditions**

First of all, it is important to note that there were great differences even between slaves living on plantations, let alone between the plantation slaves and city slaves. Namely, “there were two distinct classes among workers on most southern plantations – ‘aristocratic’ house servants and ‘lowly’ field hands” (Harper 42). As can be expected, house servants had better living conditions than the field hands. They were provided better clothing, better fed, and were generally less whipped and abused (Harper 49). However, those “privileged” slaves were a minority, with by far a higher number of slaves being field hands. Such was the case of Washington and Douglass.

Having spent nine years of his life as a slave before the abolition, Washington was a plantation slave throughout the entire period. Like the majority of plantation slaves, he lived in a “typical log cabin, about fourteen by sixteen feet square” (Washington 4). He recalls how it did not even have glass windows, how it had “something that was called a door, but the uncertain hinges by which it was hung, and the large cracks in it” (Washington 5), how they walked on bare earth instead of a wooden floor, and how there was no cooking stove. Many historians and researchers such as Genovese have investigated and corroborated that most of the slave cabins were indeed no bigger than sixteen by eighteen feet square, had very few basic amenities, and were generally in a run-down condition (qtd. in Otto and Burns 189). Furthermore, Douglass asserts that “there were no beds given to the slaves, unless one coarse blanket be considered such, and none but the men and women had these” (8). Apart from the deplorable dwellings and prevailing unsanitary conditions, plantation slaves also had to deal with malnutrition, poor clothing, and

excessive labor. Douglass explains how slaves received “eight pounds of pork, or its equivalent in fish, and one bushel of corn meal” (8) as their monthly allowance. Consequently, slaves would sometimes have no other option than to resort to stealing from their masters, as was the case with Washington’s mother who stole chicken from her master, or Douglass’s enslaved companions who frequently stole fruit from theirs. Regarding clothing, Douglass also describes that at the beginning of each year slaves would get their yearly clothing, which “consisted of two coarse linen shirts, one pair of linen trousers, like the shirts, one jacket, one pair of trousers for winter, made of coarse negro cloth, one pair of stockings, and one pair of shoes” (8). With that clothing, slaves had to be particularly careful because, should they lose it or destroy it, they would be left with none. To make the matters worse, the clothing was of no great quality. Just how bad the clothing was can be seen in Washington’s recollection:

That part of the flax from which our clothing was made was largely the refuse, which of course was the cheapest and roughest part. I can scarcely imagine any torture, except, perhaps, the pulling of a tooth, that is equal to that caused by putting on a new flax shirt for the first time. It is almost equal to the feeling that one would experience if he had a dozen or more chestnut burrs, or a hundred small pin-points, in contact with his flesh. (8)

Along with the afore-mentioned difficulties, excessive labor had by far the most devastating impact on the slaves’ quality of life. Apart from the regular duties of planting and harvesting, slaves had to perform a myriad of other physically demanding activities, such as digging ditches, cutting and hauling wood, transporting and carrying various heavy goods, and slaughtering cattle. No one was exempt from fulfilling their duties. In fact, children were given tasks and duties at a very early age, thus being deprived of their childhood. As Washington recalls, “there was no period of my life that was devoted to play. From the time that I can remember anything, almost every day of my life has been occupied in some kind of labour” (6). Historical data suggests that slaves had to work an average of 14 hours a day during planting and harvesting season, although this data varies from state to state and from one plantation to another (*George Washington Presidential Library*). What made their situation even worse was the fact that, despite working all the time and giving their best, their master could still be displeased and ask for more or, even worse, physically punish them. Douglass recounts how during his time working for his

previously mentioned master Mr. Covey, nothing could ever please him, and how nothing could ever prevent slaves from working:

We were worked in all weathers. It was never too hot or too cold; it could never rain, blow, hail, or snow, too hard for us to work in the field. Work, work, work, was scarcely more the order of the day than of the night. The longest days were too short for him, and the shortest nights too long for him. (55)

The leisure time of a slave was quite scarce. On the majority of the plantations, the only days a slave was entitled to some leisure were Sundays and a few major holidays, such as Christmas and the Fourth of July. However, on some plantations, the period where no work was expected from a slave was sometimes extended even to a couple of days before Christmas (Wiggins 266). Needless to say, it was the period slaves were looking forward to and enjoyed the most. Singing, dancing, hunting, fishing, wrestling, racing, and drinking whiskey were some of the most common sources of entertainment. The latter one was, as Douglass asserts, “by far the most agreeable to the feelings of our masters” (64). Although most slaves enjoyed holidays and welcomed them with joy, Douglass was fully aware of the corruption behind all of it:

From what I know of the effect of these holidays upon the slave, I believe them to be among the most effective means in the hands of the slaveholder in keeping down the spirit of insurrection. Were the slaveholders at once to abandon this practice, I have not the slightest doubt it would lead to an immediate insurrection among the slaves. These holidays serve as conductors, or safety-valves, to carry off the rebellious spirit of enslaved humanity. (64)

Furthermore, what came after Christmas diminished the prevailing happiness among slaves. As Jacobs points out, New Year’s Eve was the time when slaves were auctioned and sold away, a miserable time when “at the appointed hour the grounds are thronged with men, women, and children, waiting, like criminals, to hear their doom pronounced” (25). Taking all of this into account, it is justified to conclude that slaves’ living conditions on plantations were miserable.

#### **1.4.2. City Slaves’ Living Conditions**

Although it cannot be claimed that city slaves had good living conditions, they were certainly different and better than the ones of plantation slaves. Douglass thus notes that he “had resided but a short time in Baltimore before . . . [he] observed a marked difference, in the treatment of slaves, from that which . . . [he] had witnessed in the country” (30). City slaves were, just like house servants on the plantation, better fed, better clothed, and had overall better living conditions. In fact, many of the city slaves had the exact same duties as the plantation house servants: sweeping floors, clothing, ironing, cooking and serving food, and other domestic duties (*Encyclopedia Virginia*). Some, however, worked as carpenters, blacksmiths, shoemakers, on construction sites, or, like Douglass, on shipyards. For their work, slaves were regularly paid. However, the money was not theirs to keep. Since slaves were deemed to be their master’s property, they were to give them all of the money they had hardly earned should a master ask them to do so. Douglass recalls this situation:

I was now getting, as I have said, one dollar and fifty cents per day. I contracted for it; I earned it; it was paid to me; it was rightfully my own; yet, upon each returning Saturday night, I was compelled to deliver every cent of that money to Master Hugh. And why? Not because he earned it,—not because he had any hand in earning it,—not because I owed it to him,—nor because he possessed the slightest shadow of a right to it; but solely because he had the power to compel me to give it up. (85).

As a result, a feeling of hopelessness and bitterness prevailed among many.

Another issue that city slaves had to combat was a hostile working environment. Namely, while working in the afore-mentioned trades, city slaves had white men as their co-workers and as their proprietors. Unsurprisingly, they often had to deal with racial discrimination, slurs, and were required to perform the more complex and demanding duties, all of which rendered their working conditions and living conditions far more difficult. In his narrative, Douglass gives an example of a misfortune that befell him:

My fellow-apprentices very soon began to feel it degrading to them to work with me. They began to put on airs, and talk about the “niggers” taking the country, saying we all ought to be killed; and, being encouraged by the journeymen, they commenced making my condition as hard as they could, by hectoring me around, and sometimes striking me. (82)

In another incident, Douglass suffered such a beating that he almost lost his eye. What made matters worse in such cases was that, even though some white men might sympathize with him, it was socially and legally unacceptable for them to testify in a slave's favor.

Another problem that needs to be addressed is the appalling treatment of female slaves. Despite better living conditions when working as house servants on a plantation or a city slave in terms of food, clothing or comfort, women were often sexually abused, rendering their living conditions significantly worse. Consequently, unlike male slaves, whose quality of life was undeniably better when being a city slave or a house servant, it cannot be claimed that female slaves had the same views on this matter. For instance, Jacobs's dissatisfaction with her living conditions as a female slave can be seen in the following statement: "I would rather drudge out my life on a cotton plantation, till the grave opened to give me rest, than to live with an unprincipled master and a jealous mistress" (49).

Bearing all this in mind, the obvious conclusion presents itself; living conditions, although still far from ideal, were better for city slaves if they belonged to the male gender. However, the same cannot be corroborated for women since they were often subject to sexual abuse by their masters, thus significantly diminishing their quality of life.

## **1.5. Slave Codes**

All of the afore-mentioned hardships and atrocities slaves had to endure were permitted by the so-called slave codes. Slave code is a term that denotes a set of laws regulating, or rather limiting slaves' rights as human beings. Slave codes are best defined as "any of the set of rules based on the concept that enslaved persons were property, not persons" (*Encyclopedia Britannica*). The first elaborate slave code was introduced back in 1712, but it was not until 1740 that more comprehensive laws and regulations were passed; laws which were valid all the way until 1860 (Vaughn 17). In her article "Black Codes," Rose E. Vaughn gave an extensive overview of what slave codes generally contained and prohibited:

- “1. The slave was a chattel, and must be treated thus. He may be, as an example, seized for a debt.
2. Slaves as property were transmitted by inheritance or by will to heirs at law or legatees in the distribution of estates. They were distributed as any other property.
3. Slaves, as property, might be used by their owners for their own profit or pleasure.
4. Slaves might possess nothing. Being property themselves, they could own no property or make any contracts.
5. Slaves could not marry. As they are property, incapable of making any contract, they could not contract marriage recognized by law.
6. Slaves could not constitute families. They could have no claim on each other, no security from separation; they had no marital rights, no parental rights, no family government, no family education, no family protection.
7. The power of the master was virtually unlimited; the submission of the slave was unbounded; the slave being property could have no protection against the master, and had no redress for injuries inflicted by him.
8. The slave as a chattel might be worked at the master's discretion, as other working chattels were.
9. Food, clothing, and dwelling provided at master's discretion.
10. Coerced labor without wages existed.
11. Punishment of slaves was determined by the owner and the hirer.
12. Adequate protection of slaves impossible because of the structure of the laws and condition of the slaves.
13. All power of owners exercised by the overseers.
14. Little or no protection afforded the slaves.
15. Confinement permitted to prevent the escape of the slaves.

16. A slave might not sue his master.
17. Offspring of the slaves held as property.
18. Slaves had no right to education or religious instruction, no right of conscience.
19. A slave could not be a party to a civil suit - he had no access to the judiciary ; no honest provision for testing the claims of the enslaved to freedom.
20. Testimony of slaves and free Negroes rejected.
21. Stringent penal laws against slaves existed.” (17)

Due to these established regulations, all the mistreatment and ordeal slaves had to go through was thus legally justified. Should a slave break one of these laws, an appropriate punishment was to be administered.



## 2. Education in Slave Narratives

### 2.1. The Legal Status of African American Education During the Slave Period

Ever since the beginning of slavery back in the year of 1619, educating African Americans, whether they were free men, city slaves, field hands or house servants on plantations, was frowned upon. Education was a privilege reserved only for white people, who saw the education of African Americans as a threat to the entire institution of slavery. Consequently, between 1740 and 1867, numerous anti-literacy laws were passed by the states prohibiting the education of both free African American citizens and slaves (*Harvard Library*). South Carolina and Georgia were the first slave states to have legally forbidden teaching of African Americans (Span 27). The first law against education of African Americans passed by South Carolina, as an addition to the *1739 Negro Act*, stated the following:

Whereas, the having of Slaves taught to write or suffering them to be employed in writing may be attended with great Inconveniencies Be it therefore enacted by the authority aforesaid That all and every Person and Persons whatsoever who shall hereafter teach or cause any Slave or Slaves to be taught to write or shall use or employ any Slave as a Scribe in any manner of writing whatsoever hereafter taught to write Every such Person and Persons shall for every such Offense forfeit the Sum of One hundred pounds, Current money. (qtd. in Rasmussen 201)

Following the publication of David Walker's *Appeal to the Colored Citizens of the World* in 1829 and the bloody revolt of Nat Turner in 1831, more rigorous laws regarding education were passed in fear of further rebellion. Since both David Walker, an abolitionist, writer, and anti-slavery activist, and Nat Turner, an enslaved preacher, were literate and well-educated, white people became more aware of the threat educated African Americans imposed. Hence, Georgia, North Carolina, South Carolina, Virginia, and Louisiana "imposed fines, public whippings, and/or imprisonments to anyone caught teaching enslaved or free African Americans these prohibited skills" (Span 27). As for the slaves, their punishment was, expectedly, even harsher:

A common punishment for slaves who had attained more skills, according to blacks who were slaves as children in South Carolina, Georgia, Texas, and Mississippi, was amputation, as described by Doc Daniel Dowdy, a slave in Madison County, Georgia: “The first time you was caught trying to read or write, you was whipped with a cow-hide, the next time with a cat-o-nine-tails and the third time they cut the first jint offen your forefinger.” (Cornelius 174)

After the revolt of Nat Turner, out of fifteen slave states, Tennessee remained the only one where the instruction of African Americans was not prohibited (Kato 112). As a result, slaves had to learn how to read and write in secret, which was by no means an easy task. William Edward Burghardt Du Bois, a renowned American sociologist, socialist, and historian, “estimated that approximately 5 percent of the nation’s enslaved population was literate on the eve of the Civil War” (Du Bois qtd. in Span 39). In the following chapter, the impediments slaves had to conquer to gain education during the times of slavery will be thoroughly described, based on Douglass’s, Jacobs’s, and Washington’s experiences.

## **2.2. The Struggle for Education During Enslavement**

“Despite laws and custom in slave states prohibiting enslaved people from learning to read and write, a small percentage managed, through ingenuity and will, to acquire a degree of literacy in the antebellum period” (Williams 7). Just how great their desire to learn was, can be seen in the following words of Washington:

From the time that I can remember having any thoughts about anything, I recall that I had an intense longing to learn to read. I determined, when quite a small child, that, if I accomplished nothing else in life, I would in some way get enough education to enable me to read common books and newspapers. (17)

Due to legal restrictions, the lack of people who were willing to teach them, and scarce and limited resources, the struggle for education through which slaves had to go through was immense. Douglass, for instance, recounts his first learning experience provided to him by his former master’s wife – Mrs. Sophia Auld. Although she commenced teaching him at first, her husband

instructed her not to since it would be “unlawful, as well as unsafe, to teach a slave to read” (Douglass 29). These were his exact words according to Douglass:

“If you give a nigger an inch, he will take an ell. A nigger should know nothing but to obey his master—to do as he is told to do. Learning would spoil the best nigger in the world.” “Now,” said he, “if you teach that nigger (speaking of myself) how to read, there would be no keeping him. 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.” (29)

Thereafter, Douglass had to pursue other ways of procuring knowledge and education. “Though conscious of the difficulty of learning without a teacher, . . . [he] set out with high hope, and a fixed purpose, at whatever cost of trouble, to learn how to read” (Douglass 29). Knowing just how important education is, Douglass was determined to achieve his goal and it did not take him too long to hatch a plan:

The plan which I adopted, and the one by which I was most successful, was that of making friends of all the little white boys whom I met in the street. As many of these as I could, I converted into teachers. With their kindly aid, obtained at different times and in different places, I finally succeeded in learning to read (33)

In exchange for teaching lessons, Douglass would give them bread. Moreover, whenever he was sent to run some errands, a book would always be his travelling companion. Since writing required a completely different set of skills, Douglass had to come up with other creative methods and ways of mastering this. He started copying a few letters at the shipyard that marked certain equipment, his copybook was “board fence, brick wall, and pavement” (Douglass 38), and his “pen and ink was a lump of chalk” (Douglass 38). The way he found a teacher to help his practice demonstrates his eagerness and cunningness:

when I met with any boy who I knew could write, I would tell him I could write as well as he. The next word would be, “I don’t believe you. Let me see you try it.” I would then make the letters which I had been so fortunate as to learn, and ask him to beat that. In this way I got a good many lessons in writing, which it is quite possible I should never have gotten in any other way. (Douglass 38)

According to Span, “Douglass’s informal educational attainment typified the earliest learning opportunities for the majority of enslaved blacks who obtained some degree of literacy” (41). For instance, Benjamin Holmes, a city slave who worked as a tailor, learned how to read by observing names and signs printed on the doors of his employer’s business, Richard Parker gave away his marbles to white children in exchange for teaching lessons, Tabb Gross learned how to read in exchange for one orange per lesson (Span 41). The list of examples is endless.

Harriet Jacobs was taught to read and spell with the kind aid of her first mistress Margaret Horniblow. Like many others, she was not able to pursue and acquire education for herself. Yet, she was aware of just how important it was and craved to secure it for her children. Consequently, upon reuniting with her daughter in the free state of New York, Jacobs was discontented to learn that her demands regarding her daughter’s education were not followed through:

When she was placed with Mrs. Hobbs, the agreement was that she should be sent to school. She had been there two years, and was now nine years old, and she scarcely knew her letters. There was no excuse for this, for there were good public schools in Brooklyn, to which she could have been sent without expense. (252)

Interestingly, although schools and public education for African Americans did exist in Northern states, it was also frowned upon: “[i]n the Northern States, the colored people were generally disfranchised, and, if not forbidden education by law, were repelled from the schools by prejudice, and prejudices apparently far more bitter at the North than at the South” (Stowe 606). Taking all of this into account, it is evident how difficult it was to attain education during the times of slavery. After the abolition of slavery, the situation gradually started improving, but it was not without any obstacles on the way. In the following chapter, some of the issues emerging after the Emancipation Proclamation will be discussed by providing examples from Booker T. Washington’s path towards education.

### **2.3. The Struggle for Education after the Emancipation Proclamation**

Unlike Frederick Douglass and Harriet Jacobs, Washington spent only a short period of his life as a slave – until the age of nine. Consequently, he did not have to resort to various methods

of mastering the skills of reading and writing in secret as the majority of the enslaved population did. However, his pursuit of education, as well as those of the other newly-freed African Americans, was excruciatingly challenging. Yet, despite the inevitable impediments, the power of education was too strong to be neglected. Lamon (1983) points out how African Americans in general “sought out teachers for their schools wherever they could be found—Union soldiers, sympathetic white civilians, or from among those within their own ranks who had obtained even some of the bare essentials of formal learning” (76).

Following the Emancipation Proclamation, the United States Congress founded the Freedmen’s Bureau in 1865. Its purpose was to aid millions of newly freed slaves by providing them with food, accommodation, legal help, and education (*History.com*). With the foundation of the Freedmen’s Bureau, huge masses started going both to day schools and night schools, taking every last seat possible. As Washington recalls:

This experience of a whole race beginning to go to school for the first time, presents one of the most interesting studies that has ever occurred in connection with the development of any race. Few people who were not right in the midst of the scenes can form any exact idea of the intense desire which the people of my race showed for an education. As I have stated, it was a whole race trying to go to school. Few were too young, and none too old, to make the attempt to learn. (18)

However, financial means were a huge concern for the sustainability of those schools as the maintenance of buildings, acquiring learning materials and resources, and paying out the teachers were not something a recently freed African American individual could afford. Moreover, “due to a shortage of funds and personnel, along with the politics of race and Reconstruction” (*History.com*), the Freedmen Bureau could not sustain those schools for too long. Not having enough money to afford basic education for themselves or for their children, ex-slaves had to, once again, work long hours of physically demanding labor if they wanted to be able to gain education and secure a better future. Naturally, some opted for an easier life path by disregarding education entirely and focusing solely on making enough money to make ends meet. Such was Washington’s stepfather, who coerced him to start working in the salt furnace, and, later on, in a coal-mine – a kind of work that many dreaded. In the following description, Washington explains what made it such:

It was fully a mile from the opening of the coal-mine to the face of the coal, and all, of course, was in the blackest darkness. I do not believe that one ever experiences anywhere else such darkness as he does in a coal-mine. The mine was divided into a large number of different “rooms” or departments, and, as I never was able to learn the location of all these “rooms,” I many times found myself lost in the mine. To add to the horror of being lost, sometimes my light would go out, and then, if I did not happen to have a match, I would wander about in the darkness until by chance I found some one to give me a light. The work was not only hard, but it was dangerous. There was always the danger of being blown to pieces by a premature explosion of powder, or of being crushed by falling slate. Accidents from one or the other of these causes were frequently occurring, and this kept me in constant fear. (22)

Washington did find a solution to this problem by working in the coal mine during the day and going to night school during the evening. Eventually, after hearing of Hampton Institute, he found a better-paid job and set out to go and study there. On his way towards acquiring education at Hampton Institute, he stumbled upon numerous obstacles: being denied food and lodging due to his skin color, sleeping under the elevated sidewalk, working for minimum wages that were not sufficient to cover the costs of a school year, and many more. These occurrences from Washington’s life reflect only a small piece of the thorny path that needed to be crossed in order to attain education; the path through which many had to go through. The answer to the question of whether all of the struggle during slavery and after its abolition was worth it, and whether the power of education is that vast will be answered in the following two chapters.

#### **2.4. The Power of Education During Slavery**

For slaves, education was like a forbidden fruit; the more oppressive and rigorous slaveholders were in prohibiting it, the more slaves wanted to reach for it. Having been scolded by his master Mr. Hugh for being given instruction by his wife, a sort of spark ignited in young Douglass’s mind and his craving to learn became immeasurable:

Whilst I was saddened by the thought of losing the aid of my kind mistress, I was gladdened by the invaluable instruction which, by the merest accident, I had gained from my master. Though conscious of the difficulty of learning without a teacher, I set out with high hope, and a fixed purpose, at whatever cost of trouble, to learn how to read. The very decided manner with which he spoke, and strove to impress his wife with the evil consequences of giving me instruction, served to convince me that he was deeply sensible of the truths he was uttering. It gave me the best assurance that I might rely with the utmost confidence on the results which, he said, would flow from teaching me to read. (Douglass 29)

Why was he or any other member of his race not allowed to learn, what was the reasoning for it, what was hiding behind the closed doors, what were they not allowed to see or know? It did not take too long for those who mastered the skills of reading and writing to find out the answers to these questions. The first book Douglass came in touch with, a piece of abolition literature titled *The Colombian Orator*, opened his eyes and he was able to see more clearly than ever:

The reading of these documents enabled me to utter my thoughts, and to meet the arguments brought forward to sustain slavery; but while they relieved me of one difficulty, they brought on another even more painful than the one of which I was relieved. The more I read, the more I was led to abhor and detest my enslavers. I could regard them in no other light than a band of successful robbers, who had left their homes, and gone to Africa, and stolen us from our homes, and in a strange land reduced us to slavery. I loathed them as being the meanest as well as the most wicked of men. (Douglass 35)

Most of the abolition literature was published by the American Anti-Slavery Society, but there were also periodicals such as *Human Rights*, *The Emancipator*, *The Anti-Slavery Record*, *The Quarterly Anti-Slavery Magazine*, *The Liberator*, *Slavery As It Is* that addressed abolitionist issues (Simms 368). “The starting point of the abolition assault upon slavery was that the institution was wrong in principle; that it deprived the slave of the natural right of liberty, of the opportunity for advancement, and of the use of his labor for his own benefit” (Simms 369). Hence, by reading such literature and understanding the entire concept of the slave trade, slaves would gain awareness of just how great injustice was done to them, which would consequently inspire them to take action and demand a change. Realizing all this, Douglass, despite the potential danger he would be putting

himself and others in, decided to spread the knowledge and raise awareness by covertly instructing his fellow slaves. Realizing the power of knowledge, they were not discouraged:

Every moment they spent in that school, they were liable to be taken up, and given thirty-nine lashes. They came because they wished to learn. Their minds had been starved by their cruel masters. They had been shut up in mental darkness. I taught them, because it was the delight of my soul to be doing something that looked like bettering the condition of my race. (Douglass 70)

Apart from understanding the circumstances they were in, what could literate and educated slaves do? For starters, they could be the ones spreading words of abolitionism, the ones questioning slaveholders' authority, and the ones organizing rebellions. A superb example can be seen in Nat Turner, a literate slave who led one of the bloodiest and deadliest slave rebellions ever recorded. Known as a preacher with a great mind full of knowledge and brilliant ideas, he spread the words of abolitionism among his fellow slaves thus inducing the rebellion (Cromwell 208). A somewhat similar example can be found in Douglass's narrative. Namely, Douglass resolved that he would escape from the chains along with his fellow companions. Being the most knowledgeable of all, Douglass "commenced early to ascertain their views and feelings in regard to their condition, and to imbue their minds with thoughts of freedom" (72). In the following quote, we can also notice shrewdness and awareness of how important it was for his companions to understand why escape was a good option: "I bent myself to devising ways and means for our escape, and meanwhile strove, on all fitting occasions, to impress them with the gross fraud and inhumanity of slavery" (Douglass 72). The next part of their plan highlights another reason why being literate and educated was an important and powerful tool. Namely, Douglass managed to forge a pass for each of them; a protection that would enable them to cross the river without any restrictions. According to Douglass (74), this is how the statement went:

"THIS is to certify that I, the undersigned, have given the bearer, my servant, full liberty to go to Baltimore, and spend the Easter holidays. Written with mine own hand, &c., 1835.

"WILLIAM HAMILTON,

"Near St. Michael's, in Talbot county, Maryland."



Such passes were mandatory and slaves had to carry them. Otherwise, they would have been forcefully returned to their master. Had Douglass not had the ability to write and the necessary legal knowledge, he would not have been able to create it.

Although learning provided slaves with the power to understand the circumstances of slave trade, as well as with the ability to forge passes, and organize escapes and rebellions, some authors argue that for Douglass the most empowering element of gaining education was the development of critical thinking (Mullane 30). Namely, through various dehumanizing methods, slaves were always treated and coerced to feel as if they were a piece of property rather than independent human beings. Their masters did not want them to indulge in contemplating about having and building a future of their own. Douglass substantiates this statement by providing an example of Thomas Auld, who, according to Mullane, tried “to keep Douglass from developing his mind and his capacity for independence” (29):

He exhorted me to content myself, and be obedient. He told me, if I would be happy, I must lay out no plans for the future. He said, if I behaved myself properly, he would take care of me. Indeed, he advised me to complete thoughtlessness of the future, and taught me to depend solely upon him for happiness. He seemed to see fully the pressing necessity of setting aside my intellectual nature, in order to contentment in slavery. (Douglass 88)

Hence, if slaves were to master the skills of reading and writing, to acquire knowledge and education, and then to develop critical thinking and problem-solving, they would be able to confront the entire institution of slavery and, consequently, gain their freedom. In other words, education was seen as a key to freedom during the times of slavery. Realizing all this, Jacobs published her narrative in 1861, with the aim of inspiring others and urging them to take action against slavery. One year later, she and her daughter Louisa were sent from New York by the Society of Friends to aid African American refugees to Alexandria where, in 1864, she managed to raise fundings and open a new school for them; an institution which was of the utmost importance for the African American population (*Encyclopedia Virginia*).

## 2.5. The Power of Education in the Postbellum Period

With the abolition of slavery, countless questions regarding the social and economic situation of the newly freedmen were to be answered. However, as Anderson (1990) suggests, education was one of the most important issues that needed to be resolved, and “few values and aspirations were more firmly rooted in the freedmen's culture than education” (48). Indeed, education played a pivotal role for former slaves to become full citizens of the United States of America. Its potential positive impact on improving the quality of life of freedmen was too vast to be neglected. For instance, some benefits of pursuing and obtaining education included: legal awareness (by knowing and understanding laws and regulations, freedmen could not be subject to mistreatment), building a community (schools and universities are known not only as educational institutions, but also as places to socialize and create interpersonal bonds – something that was of the utmost importance for the freedmen following the abolition of slavery), and upward social and economic mobility (with better education come better professional skills; with better professional skills come better job opportunities, and with better jobs comes more monetary gains and chance to live a better life). Taking all of this into account, it comes as no surprise that Booker T. Washington also highlights the immense power of education in his narrative. However, Washington also points out a fallacy prevailing among other members of his race, and that is the belief that education alone will make all of their problems go away:

It could not have been expected that a people who had spent generations in slavery, and before that generations in the darkest heathenism, could at first form any proper conception of what an education meant. In every part of the South, during the Reconstruction period, schools, both day and night, were filled to overflowing with people of all ages and conditions, some being as far along in age as sixty and seventy years. The ambition to secure an education was most praiseworthy and encouraging. The idea, however, was too prevalent that, as soon as one secured a little education, in some unexplainable way he would be free from most of the hardships of the world, and, at any rate, could live without manual labour. (42)

Namely, Washington believes education to be more of a means to an end rather than an end in itself. In other words, he sees education as a crucial step towards creating a skillful individual

whose industrial knowledge will make him a successful citizen contributing to himself, his community, and his country:

at Hampton, for the first time, I learned what education was expected to do for an individual. Before going there I had a good deal of the then rather prevalent idea among our people that to secure an education meant to have a good, easy time, free from all necessity for manual labour. At Hampton I not only learned that it was not a disgrace to labour, but learned to love labour, not alone for its financial value, but for labour's own sake and for the independence and self-reliance which the ability to do something which the world wants done brings. At that institution I got my first taste of what it meant to live a life of unselfishness, my first knowledge of the fact that the happiest individuals are those who do the most to make others useful and happy. (Washington 39)

Hence, instead of providing education only in the sense of historical information and scientific facts, Washington strongly advocated and highlighted the necessity for vocational education. Consequently, he realized the need for such teaching. In 1881, Washington became one of the founders and the first teacher of the Tuskegee Institute, nowadays known as Tuskegee University (*Tuskegee University*). During his years working as a teacher at the Tuskegee Institute, Washington would provide his students with both academic education and vocational education, or, as he referred to it, "*industrial education*." Naturally, the opposition of parents whose children were attending the Tuskegee Institute emerged: "Quite a number of letters came from parents protesting against their children engaging in labour while they were in the school" (Washington 79). The reasoning behind this was most likely due to the extreme labor exploitation during the times of slavery. Namely, as it was previously mentioned, many ex-slaves deemed manual labor something not worthy of doing, as something degrading. Due to that, physical labor in school was deemed absolutely unacceptable by some people. However, despite the opposition, Washington saw the significant power of vocational education and persisted with his school of thought. That the years of teaching and hard effort have paid off and will keep paying off, Washington confirms in his narrative by sharing high hopes and positive outcomes resulting from the vocational teaching at the Tuskegee Institute:

Wherever our graduates go, the changes which soon begin to appear in the buying of land, improving homes, saving money, in education, and in high moral character are remarkable.

Whole communities are fast being revolutionized through the instrumentality of these men and women. (160)

Bearing all this in mind, it can be concluded that education for African Americans was just as important in the years following the abolition of slavery as it was during the times of slavery. Whereas during the years of slavery education was important and useful in order to escape from the chains and lead to the abolition of slavery, it was also important to attain it in the years to come so as to prevent slavery from ever happening again and to create a skillful individual who would be able to support himself, his family, his community, and his country, and later on devote himself to academic purposes.

### 3. Douglass's, Washington's, and Jacobs's Views on Education

Frederick Douglass and Booker T. Washington were both extremely influential figures whose narratives and life work contributed to the uplift of the African American race. Although they had different philosophies regarding education, they concurred about it having enormous power. However, they viewed its power in a different way. Namely, whereas Douglass highlights the power of education in terms of enlightenment, self-affirmation, and for academic purposes, Washington emphasizes the importance of vocational education. Although both fought for their race's best interests, Douglass's views were generally well-accepted, whereas Washington's ideas were frequently questioned (Dunn 27). Dunn believes that Washington advocated vocational education due to four principal reasons:

(1) because he thought it was the wave of the future; (2) because he was a product of it at Hampton Institute, and he had internalized that experience; (3) because he strongly felt that African Americans could best develop a strong economic base through the acquisition of utilitarian skills; and (4) because he deeply believed a vocational education was all that the larger, White-dominated society would allow. (27)

The latter one was the main reason why his educational philosophy was opposed by many. For example, W.E.B. Du Bois published a compilation of essays in 1903 in which he opposed Washington's idea of vocational education, deeming it to be too exclusive and putting his race in a submissive position to the white population. Du Bois asserts how with his ideas and type of educational philosophy Washington "practically accepts the alleged inferiority of the Negro race" (qtd. in Norrell 96). Nowadays, with hindsight, many authors see what Washington's true vision and goal was. For instance, Norrell (2003), defends Washington's philosophy of vocational education, emphasizing the necessity of manual labor needed at that period (73). Namely, industrial education would be only a first step in Washington's plan towards the further uplift of his people. Since the economy cannot expand itself with academically educated individuals only, manual labor comes as a precedent. Furthermore, in order to defend Washington's views, Thorpe notes the similarity between Douglass' and Washington's thoughts and actions:

Long before Washington, industrial education had been an especial interest of Afro-Americans. Beginning in 1831, most of the annual Negro conventions championed this type of education. Douglass was a very active leader in most of these conventions. He advised members of his race to “learn trades or starve.” “If the alternative were presented to us of learning a trade or getting an education” Douglass had said, “we should learn the trade, for the reason that with the trade we could get the education while with the education we could not get a trade.” (40)

Bearing this in mind, the rationale for Washington’s views became more acceptable over the course of years among numerous historians and authors.

Despite the differences in their educational philosophy, both narratives highlight the power of education. On the one hand, Douglass advocates that the power of education lies in the development of critical and lateral thinking, self-affirmation, and spiritual development. On the other, Washington emphasizes its power in the sense of equipping one with, first and foremost, the ability to perform manual labor and provide stability to himself, his family, his community, and his country. When combining their views together, an apparent conclusion presents itself: education is not only a great emancipation tool, but it also encompasses multiple dimensions; it is a source of enlightenment evoking the development of critical thinking, it enables an individual to fulfill their true potentials, and it creates a socially capable and desirable individual whose skillfulness and dexterity will benefit themselves, their families, and their communities.

Since Harriet Jacobs did not explicitly advocate for a specific educational philosophy, the academic literature exploring her views is fairly scarce. However, despite her contributions to the education of African American population not being as significant as Douglass’s and Washington’s, it can by no means be stated that she was an irrelevant figure in this area. In fact, by stating her positive views regarding the importance of education in her narrative, by opening the *Jacobs Free School* in Alexandria, and by advocating for equal educational rights for all children, regardless of their race and gender, she inspired many to obtain education for themselves, and thus reserved the right to be regarded as one of the persons responsible for the uplift of the education of African Americans.

## Conclusion

Douglass's, Jacobs's, and Washington's autobiographies can be regarded as one of the most influential examples of slave narratives. Their stories about human resilience and strength to overcome all the hardship that slavery brought about served as an inspiration to many.

In this paper, an overview of the hardships slaves had to go through was given by providing the examples from Douglass's, Jacobs's, and Washington's narratives. The analyzed hardships included physical and psychological abuse (whippings, beatings, sexual harassment, mind games, and psychological terror under the slaveholder's hands), poor living conditions (living in small shacks, sleeping on the floor with no sheets or pillows, having very meagre clothing, and receiving scarce amount of food), labor exploitation (working long hours of physically demanding work, not being given enough time to rest regardless of weather conditions or health conditions), identity erasure related issues (not knowing their place and date of birth, nor their full names and origin), and complexity and difficulty of maintaining familial relations (not knowing who their parents were, fear of separation from families). Furthermore, by exploring their quest and struggle for education, it has become evident just how powerful tool education has been for African Americans. Douglass's cunning ways of obtaining education and the teaching of his fellow-slaves in secret and Jacobs's resilience and eagerness to provide education for her children accompanied by Washington's thorny path towards getting education and his desire to spread the knowledge to other members of his race by founding the Tuskegee Institute, indicate the important role education played for African Americans during the slavery, as well as after the Civil War. The fact that their narratives are being studied nowadays goes to show how impactful they are, and how their struggle was not in vain. Although they had different educational philosophies – Douglass seeing the power of education in developing critical and lateral thinking, self-affirmation, and spiritual development, and Washington equipping one with the ability to perform manual labor and provide stability to himself, his family, his community, and his country – they both, alongside with Jacobs, agreed upon one crucial aspect: the eminent power of education.

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