

**Self-Assertion in *Narrative of the Life of Frederick Douglass,*
*An American Slave and Incidents in the Life of a Slave Girl***

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Abstract

Autobiographical slave narratives stand as a powerful genre within the American literary canon, helping us understand one of the darkest epochs of American history, and speaking out about the experiences of four million African American slaves in mid-nineteenth century America. Written by former slaves who successfully escaped their cruel bondage, these slave narratives are particularly significant in their representation of a population able to assert their identity and their story with profound clarity, a power that is robbed from many of the victims of slavery.

Frederick Douglass' *Narrative of the Life of Frederick Douglass, An American Slave* (1845) and Harriet Jacobs' *Incidents in the Life of a Slave Girl* (1861) are two highly influential slave narratives that both centre around the theme of self-assertion. Yet, they differ in that the two illustrate markedly distinct male and female slave experiences. In Douglass's narrative, he is greatly concerned with not only his physical journey of escape, but also his psychological journey transforming from a slave to a "man". In contrast, Jacobs emphasizes on her experience as an enslaved female, noting that slavery is "far more terrible for women" and addressing challenges of sexual harassment and motherhood specific to the female slave (Jacobs 218). This paper aims to examine and compare the ways in which Douglass and Jacobs approach self-assertion in light of their uniquely gendered slave experience, arguing that although both writers establish that having a clear sense of oneself and asserting that identity are powerful tools of resistance against the disempowering effects of slavery, the two narratives, which highlight gender-specific challenges, call for different approaches to self-assertion that ultimately shape and re-define the gender experiences of the 19th century.

Reflection

Although these slave narratives were written over 150 years ago for the very specific political purpose of abolitionism, being a student of English literature has taught me that there are always new ways to approach, interpret, and critique texts. More specifically, having been encouraged over the past four years to maintain fluidity of thoughts and perspectives, this capstone project has given me freedom and space to challenge what I've always been told about gender stereotypes. I was able to take a riskier approach and explore how prevailing societal gender roles may actually be affirmative to the identity of a disempowered slave, while at the same time maintain an acute awareness of the specific context in which I'm entertaining this idea. It has truly been a rewarding experience to take on a project of my interest and of such scale as a conclusion to my undergraduate studies.