Autobiography or Propaganda?
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When was the last time you were exposed to propaganda? If you think it was more than a day ago, you are probably unaware of what propaganda really is. According to Donna Woolfolk Cross in "Propaganda: How not to be Bamboozled," propaganda is "simply a means of persuasion" (149). She further notes that we are subjected daily to propaganda in one form or another as advertisers, politicians, and even our friends attempt to persuade us to use their product, vote for them, or adopt their point of view. Propaganda is usually considered in a negative sense. However, when viewing propaganda as mere persuasion, one can readily appreciate that it is neither good nor evil: the good/evil effect is the direct result of the purpose for which it is used.

Politicians and leaders have long used propaganda to further their goals; Hitler's use of propaganda as a means of controlling the populace of Nazi Germany is the most recognizable twentieth century example of propaganda used for evil. On the other hand, Martin Luther King's "I Have a Dream" speech, in which he urges non-violent resistance in the cause of racial equality, portrays persuasion used with good intentions. Although oratory, as in King's speech, is a highly effective means of delivering ideas or doctrines, the written word can be an even more influential medium. In the early days of America, long before instant communication, literature was used extensively as a means of persuasion. As early as 1631, John Smith wrote "Advertisements for the Unexperienced Planters..." to encourage settlement in the new world; indeed, much of classical early American literature was written as propaganda for one cause or another.

Such was the case with Narrative of the Life of Frederick Douglass, an American Slave, a pre-Civil War autobiography written at the urging of the Northern Abolitionist movement and employed effectively as propaganda for its cause. Although the work was ostensibly written to prove that Douglass had actually been a slave, according to critic Houston A Baker, Jr. "the light of abolitionism is always present" (584). Douglass, working for the abolitionist group, wrote for a specific audience: white Puritan Christians whom the abolitionists hoped to convert to their way of thinking. Thus, what began as a telling of life experiences evolved into a mighty tool of persuasion.

As does all propaganda, Douglass' Narrative contains certain elements that appeal to the emotions of the reader. This emotional hold allows the writer to sway the opinion of the reader. The various devices employed in his artful promotion of abolitionism are especially worthy of note, for, although a self-taught writer and orator, Douglass makes use of sophisticated elements of persuasive writing.

Most evident of the literary devices he uses is his treatment of language to manipulate or produce an impression. In Douglass' highly descriptive manner, he makes liberal use of "charged words," those words which by their connotation "carry a judgment of a person or situation" (Birk and Birk 54). The use of words with unfavorable connotations (charges) emphasizes the negative aspect of a character or situation, whereas the opposite effect is produced by the use of positive expressions. Douglass' stark portrayal of the slaveholders' inhumanity to slaves is seen in his lamentations over the fate of his grandmother. He tells of her owner "virtually turning her out to die! ... she lives to suffer in utter loneliness [...] to remember and mourn [...]" He envisions her "helplessness [...] loss of children [...] with no one to wipe from her wrinkled brow the cold sweat of death, [...]" (1782-83). He preys on the
sympathies of his readers by emphasizing the innocence of the grandmother and the horror of conditions imposed on her by slavery. In describing Mr. Gore, the cruel overseer, Douglass uses less explicit but no less damaging negativity: “He did nothing reluctantly no matter how disagreeable; [...]” (1771). He follows with a highly charged and pointedly graphic description of the man: “His presence was painful; his eyes flashed confusion; and seldom was his sharp, shrill voice heard, without producing trembling and horror [...]” (1771). Each word is calculated to produce the desired effect of unspeakable evil. Charged language is a mighty weapon in the propagandist’s arsenal.

In addition to charged words, Cross, in her analysis of the content of propaganda, recognizes “name-calling ... and glittering generalities” as two elements frequently found in persuasive rhetoric. “Name-calling” is self-explanatory: the author employs a negative noun to describe a specific person, concept, or belief. By denouncing something, the writer seeks to influence the reader to reject it (Cross 149-50). Douglass, zealously striving for an end to slavery, demonizes the Southern Christian Church as:

A mere covering for the most horrid crimes,—a justifier of the most appalling barbarity,—a sanctifier of the most hateful frauds,—and a dark shelter under which the darkest, foulest, grossest, and most infernal deeds of slaveholders find the strongest protection ... being the slave of a religious master is the greatest calamity [....]. (1796)

We are led to understand that the Southern masters as well as the overseers were exceedingly cruel, even barbarous, yet they were protected by their religion. In addition, when recounting his experience with Mrs. Auld, who began and then refused to further teach him, he again uses demonization as his weapon of choice to destroy any positive impression his audience may have of her: “That cheerful eye, under the influence of slavery, soon became red with rage; that voice, made of all sweet accord, changed to one of harsh and horrid discord; and that angelic face gave place to that of a demon” (1776). Northern abolitionists, targeting the New England Christians with Puritan backgrounds, considered this work a boon to their cause.

Slightly different from name-calling is Douglass’ penchant for identifying with descriptive names some of his more colorful characters. Mr. Gore, for example, has a name synonymous with the behavior demonstrated by the man. Likewise, Mr. Severe, another cruel overseer, “who seemed to take pleasure in manifesting his fiendish barbarity” (1766), is aptly named. Then there is Mr. Freeland, who, as the rare and compassionate slaveholder, is credited by Douglass with being “the best master I ever had” and from whom the author escapes in an effort to find the “free land” (1798). The fact that these names and others are so obviously contrived only lends credence to my contention that Narrative of the Life of Frederick Douglass, an American Slave was written with a specific purpose, propaganda, in mind.

Although “name-calling” is effective in provoking a rejection, sometimes propagandists need “glittering generalities” to entice a reader to embrace a concept or person. These expressions encourage the reader to “accept and agree” with a person or concept by using “virtue words,” those that “make us feel good.” “Feel good” words are those that fall in the motherhood, baseball and apple-pie category such as, freedom, justice, civil rights, and the American way, words that sound honorable, yet do not have a “specific, definable meaning” (Cross 150). Douglass’ “You are freedom’s swiftwinged angels [....]” (1776), referring to white sailed ships anchored in a bay, is a classic example of this element of persuasion. He uses these “glittering generalities” most frequently when discussing his dreams of a better life. In the appendix, he expresses the desire for the success of his book in “hastening the glad day of deliverance [....] faithfully relying on the power of truth, love, and justice [....]” (1818). The writer hopes his readers will associate the “glittering generalities” with his cause and come to accept and agree with abolitionism.

Although Douglass is a master at manipulating language for the sake of persuasion, he is equally adept at using structural devices to emphasize
particular passages of his writing. The expository portions of his Narrative contain comparatively short, compact sentences with few extraneous words. However, when broaching a subject about which he feels strongly, such as Southern Christianity, or the evils of slavery, his writing style changes dramatically. Instead of the simple declaratory sentences, which carry the narrative, he employs the use of lengthy compound sentences, those with parallel construction and many with balanced construction. A typical statement, "He was just the man for the place, and it was just the place for such a man" (1771) contains thoughts on the man as well as the place: the clauses actually associate the man with the place. One of the strongest statements of Douglass' book—"You have seen how a man was made a slave; you shall see how a slave was made a man" (1790)—is considered by many to be the theme of the entire Narrative. The balanced and inverted construction makes for a powerful statement. By inverting the subjects and complements, Douglass creates balanced clauses "strongly reminiscent of the Old Testament, particularly the Psalms" (Stone 136). Considering his New England Christian audience, the Biblical connection makes perfect sense when this work is viewed as persuasive rhetoric, or propaganda.

Douglas makes further use of balanced construction in the form of the many aphorisms, which he uses to emphasize ideas and make pointedly meaningful statements. While speaking of Mr. Auld, his master when he was but seven years old, Douglass recalls, "What he most dreaded, that I most desired. What he most loved, that I most hated" (1776). The opposing feelings serve to emphasize the differences in attitudes, social positions, and goals of the slave and master. The aphorism has the appearance of containing great wisdom, and would have held much significance for his audience. The rhetorical quality of both the aphorisms and the balanced/inverted sentences make for ease of reading and remembering.

Noted are but a few of the many elements of persuasive rhetoric, which can be found in Frederick Douglass' autobiography; however, the elements alone do not prove his intent to write for any reason other then to prove his background as a slave. The most convincing argument for the contention that this was indeed written as propaganda is the organization and placement of the material and the manner in which the persuasive elements are used. The body of the narrative is written in a fairly simple and straightforward manner; the tale is told quite matter-of-factly, even the gory and pathetic scenes of cruel beatings and killings of slaves. This lack of histrionics is true even when the targets of the overseers' whips are Douglass' own family members. Yet, when Douglass speaks of Southern Christianity defending slavery (a hot issue to northern abolitionists), he works himself into a frenzy of emotion and uses the more obvious elements of propaganda. When discussing slaveholders who treat their slaves no better than animals, the author uses few of the literary devices mentioned; however, when he writes of the religious practices and hypocrisy of the same slaveholders, he again reverts to persuasive rhetoric. Some chapters are genuine throughout, while others contain much propaganda. One segment in particular, that having to do with the fate of his grandmother, is written in a style that is not consistent with the rest of the book. Rather, it is a maudlin lamentation, extremely histrionic, in which the believable, factual Douglass disappears, and is replaced by someone writing solely for effect.

It appears that Frederick Douglass did begin his autobiography with the intention of writing his story in a realistic manner; the basic narrative bears that out. But in the course of writing his intent strayed, and he became aware of the power that could be unleashed by inflaming the emotions of readers. Undoubtedly encouraged in his use of persuasive rhetoric, he eventually created a masterpiece of propaganda.

Works Cited


