

The Life and Writings of Frederick Douglass

Professor David Blight

Summer 2021 Term I

Course Description

These twelve lectures, the readings, and the discussions probe the nature of the life, the work, and the thought of the nineteenth-century abolitionist, orator, and author Frederick Douglass. We examine in depth the public and private sides of Douglass's life, and his importance as a thinker and as a political activist in the great dramas of the Civil War and Reconstruction eras.

Course Readings

1. Blight, David W. *Frederick Douglass: Prophet of Freedom*. New York: Simon and Schuster, 2018.
2. Douglass, Frederick. *My Bondage and My Freedom*. Edited By David W. Blight. New Haven: Yale University Press, 2014.
3. Douglass, Frederick. *The Selected Speeches and Writings of Frederick Douglass*. Edited by Philip S. Foner and Yuval Taylor. Chicago: Lawrence Hill Books, 1999. (Accessible through Pace University with your library credentials)
4. Buccola, Nicholas. *The Political Thought of Frederick Douglass: In Pursuit of American Liberty*. New York: New York University Press, 2012.

Course Requirements

- Contribute to five discussion boards
- Participate in at least three Q&As
- Complete one book review (1,000 words)
- Complete a 15-page research paper or project of appropriate rigor

Learning Objectives

1. To learn and understand the full trajectory of Frederick Douglass's life from 1818 to 1895, as a saga both public and private for one of the most important Americans of the nineteenth century. Douglass's life will be presented in many contexts and through some of the most pivotal events of the century, including slavery's role in disunion, the Civil War, Reconstruction, and the Gilded Age retreat from the emancipationist victories of the era Douglass helped to shape.

2. To read and understand Douglass as a writer and an orator. He was a genius with words and left millions of them for us to study in almost all genres—autobiography, short-form editorials, one work of fiction, and thousands of speeches, some of which are the rhetorical masterpieces of American abolitionism and American letters generally.
3. To grasp and analyze Douglass as a political thinker and actor in the slavery crisis, the war, and the great issues of Reconstruction, and on concepts such as race, natural rights, memory, modernity, the arts, the nature of the human imagination and of oppression and resistance against it.

Group Work

This course requires students to work in groups assigned at the beginning of the semester. Groups will complete readings together and interact on discussion boards focused on final paper/project.

Peer Review (discussion boards four and five)

This two-part assignment requires that you a) post an abstract and the first five pages of your final paper/project to your group discussion board and b) review and add track changes to the first five pages of the other members of your group's final papers/projects.

Book Review

Write a 1,000-word book review on one of the books from your final paper/project bibliography. (See assignment descriptions in Classes for an example.)

Class Schedule (Q&A Dates To Come)

Week 1 Module A: May 27–30

“A Childhood of Extremes”: Douglass’s Slave Youth

Readings

- Blight, chs. 1–3
- Douglass, *Bondage and Freedom*, first half
 - Make sure to read James McCune Smith’s introduction.

Baltimore Dreams and Escape from Slavery

Readings

- Blight, chs. 4–7
- Douglass, *Bondage and Freedom*, second half

Assignments

- Discussion Board One: Introduce yourself to your group and list three potential topics for your final paper/project. Comment on one potential topic for each member of your group.
 - First post due Friday, May 28
 - Second post due Sunday, May 30
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Week 1 Module B: May 31–June 2

Assignments

- Final paper/project research question: due June 2
 - In roughly 1–2 pages, outline the question your final paper or project will attempt to answer. This should include a description of the paper or project you are proposing, some background information and historical context on your topic, a brief description of your research plan, and a justification for why your particular paper or project is worth pursuing.
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Week 2 Module A: June 3–June 6

The Making of an Orator and a Writer

Readings

- Blight, ch. 6–8
- Douglass, *Speeches and Writings*, pp. 3–9, 10–20, 55–83

Independence: Douglass as editor and his Transition to Political Abolitionism

Readings

- Blight, chs. 12–14
- Douglass, *Speeches and Writings*, pp. 97–100, 111–117, 122–133, 146–150, 163–170, 176–182, 275–282, 282–331
- Buccola, first half (skim)

Assignments

- Discussion Board Two: Post three potential sources (a mixture of primary and secondary) for your final paper or project. Suggest an additional primary or secondary source for each of the members in your group and explain why you chose that source.
 - First post due Friday, June 4
 - Second post due Sunday, June 6

Week 2 Module B: June 7–9

Assignments

- Revised question and annotated bibliography due Wednesday, June 9
 - Revise your initial proposal to incorporate your section professor’s feedback, AND
 - Create an annotated bibliography containing at least five sources. Each of these sources should be followed by a short paragraph describing the source and what it will contribute to your final paper/project.
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Week 3 Module A: June 10–13

Douglass and Biblical Story: Hope, Despair, and the Coming of the Civil War

Readings

- Blight, chs. 15–16
- Douglass, *Speeches and Writings*, pp. 188–209, 219–246, 271–273, 342–390, 417–422
- Buccola, second half (skim)

“The Kindling Spirit of his Battle Cry”: Douglass and the Meaning of the Civil War

Readings

- Blight, chs. 17–21
- Douglass, *Speeches and Writings*, read as much as possible from Parts 5 and 6, especially the *Douglass Monthly* editorials from 1861, and then the major speeches for 1862–1864, particularly “Men of Color to Arms!”, “Our Work Is Not Done,” and “Mission of the War”

Assignments

- Discussion Board Three: Post an outline of your final paper/project.
 - Post due Sunday, June 13
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Week 3 Module B: June 14–16

Assignments

- Paper/project preview due Wednesday, June 16
 - Paper: Turn in a rough draft of the first five pages of your final paper
 - Project: Submissions of the project preview will differ from project to project according to type. Determine with your section professor an appropriate portion of your final project to turn in.
 - Discussion Board Four: Post a 200-word abstract for your final paper/project. Submit the first five pages of your paper (or the portion of your final project submitted to your section professor) to your group members for peer review.
 - Due Wednesday, June 16
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Week 4 Module A: June 17–20

Othello's New Occupations: Douglass and the Rise and Fall of Reconstruction

Readings

- Blight, chs. 22–23
- Douglass, *Speeches and Writings*, read as much of Part 7 on Reconstruction as possible, but especially the two pieces in *North American Review* and the *Atlantic*, as well as "Oration in Honor of Abraham Lincoln."

The Aging Douglass Radical Outsider Becomes the Political Insider

Readings

- Blight, chs. 25–26
 - Douglass, *Speeches and Writings*, pp. 615–624
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Week 4 Module B: June 21–23

Assignments

- Discussion Board Five: Return peer reviews to group members as attachments on the discussion board.
 - Due Wednesday, June 23
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Week 5 Module A: June 24–27

Ventures and Failures

Readings

- Blight, ch. 24
- Douglass, *Speeches and Writings*, pp. 625–684

Joys and Sorrows at Cedar Hill: Douglass’s Troubled Extended Family

Readings

- Blight, chs. 27–29
 - Douglass, *Speeches and Writings*, pp. 685–692, and all documents related to women’s rights and suffrage
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Week 5 Module B: June 28–30

Assignments

- Book review due Wednesday, June 30
 - Write a 1,000-word review of one of the books in your final paper/project bibliography
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Week 6 Module A: July 1–4

Douglass and Haiti: Diplomat Trapped between Two Masters

Readings:

- Blight, chs. 30–31
- Douglass, *Speeches and Writings*, pp. 724–740

Douglass and the American Conscience in the Age of Jim Crow and Lynching

Readings

- Blight, epilogue
 - Douglass, *Speeches and Writings*, all relevant speeches and documents on violence and lynching in Part 8
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Week 6 Module B: July 5–7

Assignments

- Final Draft due Wednesday, July 7