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**The Myth of the Happy Slave (from CliffsNotes.com on an essay by Frederick Douglass)**

One of Douglass' central goals is to debunk the mythology of slavery. Mythologies are institutionalized beliefs or ideologies, often accepted without question by the public. Southerners and some Northerners held certain beliefs about slavery which helped them rationalize its existence.

First, some believed that slavery was justifiable because it seemed to be supported by passages in the Bible (1 Timothy 6:1-2; 1 Peter 2:18; Ephesians 6:5-9; Colossians 3:22-24:1). They pointed to accepted dogma regarding the descendants of Ham (a name traditionally believed to mean "black") being destined for slavery (Genesis 9:18-27). If, however, Douglass asks, the dark skin of Ham is said to be a sign of this curse, then why are mulattos — some of whom have skin not significantly darker than whites — also destined by birth to be slaves? Douglass exposes the hypocritical nature of Southern Christianity by showing that slave owners simultaneously broke the laws of God in their treatment of slaves — while professing fervent Christianity.

Some slave owners, of course, believed slavery must exist, for without it, the American economy would suffer. Douglass refutes this myth. In the North he has observed many more examples of wealth than he saw in the South. Moreover, workers seem happier laboring for their own benefit. In addition, machines are more efficient and have replaced some slave labor. Finally, Phillips (in his introduction to the *Narrative*) points to the emancipation of slaves in the British colonies as being positive proof that the institution of slavery is unnecessary. The British economy did not collapse when slavery was abolished on West Indian plantations.

Another myth held by Southerners was that Africans were intellectually inferior and deserved, or even needed, the white man's care. It was, as British writer Rudyard Kipling describes, "the white man's burden" to colonize, civilize, and Christianize non-Europeans. Some whites believed that slavery was a means of protecting and bringing Africans into the civilized era. But, as Douglass points out, slavery provides no such benefits. The very text itself is a testimony against the belief of black intellectual inferiority. In the preface, Garrison argues that any person, regardless of race, would lose "all reasoning power" if kept under slavery.

Finally, many Southerners had a romantic image of the institution of slavery, believing it to be an integral part of gracious, genteel Southern living. This image of the Old South exists up to the present day — fortified by such cultural icons as *Gone with the Wind.* In fact, however, as Douglass points out, many slave owners were far from rich and grand — many lived in modest conditions and were crass and mean. The reality of the grand and gracious South was far from the mythical images of gentility and noblesse oblige of Southern living. This romantic image myth about the South includes a belief that the slaves were happy being slaves. Douglass rebukes this image; slaves never sing because they are happy — they sing because they are sad.



Douglass condemns both whites and blacks who buy into this fraudulent mythology. He is aware that even blacks can be fooled into accepting these myths about their position in Southern culture. Douglass is particularly incensed and sad about the vast disunity among slaves. He mentions slaves fighting among themselves to determme whose owner is kinder. While there is considerable natural fellowship among slaves, he says, the system promotes disloyalty among slaves. Owners encourage slaves to betray other slaves; a traitor double-crosses Douglass and prevents his first escape attempt. Some slaves cast their lot with slave owners and not with fellow slaves in the false belief that their prospects were better as slaves.

Slave owners encouraging slaves to buy into this false belief was one of the most insidious aspects of the mythology of slavery.