

1 FYS 16: 1st Essay (Sept. 19, 2010)

2 War of Words

3 Douglass in his *Narrative* describes physical resistance, such as his fight with Mr. Covey and his
4 escape north, as crucial to his passage to freedom and manhood, "Richard's" first lesson in "Ethics"
5 concerns the lack of that option in the Jim Crow south.

6 >Using specific passages in the *Narrative* for comparison, discuss how and why Wright
7 describes the use of words as weapons.

8 A related question, which you may or may not find helpful to continue on to: In writing
9 "Ethics," how is Wright both freer and less free than Douglass in writing his *Narrative*?

10
11 **Post-mortem on the assignment:**

12 **Challenge:** The assignment involved a difficult question about a short text
13 ("Ethics," 10 pp.), which we had analyzed only briefly, in relationship to a longer text,
14 (*Narrative*), which we had worked through in detail. The fact that the question centered
15 on a metaphor (words as weapons) made it particularly tricky, especially since Wright
16 uses that figure explicitly only once ("armed with a library card," p. 98). However, the
17 metaphor is implicit everywhere in the hostile environment of the Jim Crow South. The
18 question caused more frustration than I would have anticipated, but writers also
19 showed resourcefulness; e.g., several writers asked for clarification about the prompt
20 before finishing the rough draft. In general, writers made effective use of the process of
21 draft writing drafts, conferences, and revisions, and one or two had also talked with
22 associates at the Writing Center.

23 **Outcome:**

24 Prose: The level of prose on the level of sentences and paragraphs ranged from decent
25 to wonderful. Particular writers had better and worse moments, but no one got stuck on
26 a good idea that s/he could not get down on paper. Economy caused the most
27 problems, as for example in re-explaining already familiar issues at length when a line
28 would do. The two essays reproduced below show techniques for getting to the point
29 efficiently.

30 Argument: The greatest difficulty came in finding a persuasive and original argument
31 and supporting it with specific textual evidence. This may be more a problem of
32 reading than writing. By and large, the final drafts showed progress in this direction in

33 comparison to the rough drafts. The shortfalls of various presentations go in various
34 directions: an intriguing argument, but not much evidence; a great take on RW, but
35 little effective contrast to FD; or ingenious parallels of vignettes from RW and FD, but
36 with the contention that both authors are just showing the same problems.

37 **The following responses from writers may suggest the options:**

38 **Argument #1 (complete essay):**

39 **Armed¹ with a Library Card**

40

41 Franklin D. Roosevelt once said that, “in the truest sense, freedom cannot be bestowed;
42 it must be achieved.” Frederick Douglass’s *Narrative* and Richard Wright’s “The Ethics of
43 Living Jim Crow” are two autobiographical works that depict an individual’s attainment of
44 freedom, but through opposite methods. While Douglass manages to escape slavery by means of
45 force and even violence, Wright learns as a child that he cannot. Richard then attempts using
46 words to obtain freedom, but discovers expectations and taboos that come with spoken words.
47 Therefore, Wright must resort to written words, which he compares to weapons that replace
48 violence and which fail Douglass in his first attempt to freedom. While Douglass achieves
49 freedom through violence and action, Wright must use words to achieve it, and when spoken
50 words are controlled by whites, only written ones remain.²

51

52 When he first deals with whites as an adult, Wright tries to use spoken words to attain
53 freedom, but learns that these are controlled by whites.³ Wright suggests that certain words are
54 expected of blacks: at his job interview, Richard is careful to “[answer] all his questions with
55 sharp yessirs and nosirs” (90). The diction of “sharp” recalls Wright’s earlier description of the
56 “hard, sharp outlines of white houses” that become a “symbol of fear” (90) in his mind, implying
57 an attempt to comply with white expectations. Similarly, a white man demands that Richard
58 “talk like it then.’ ’Oh, yes, sir!’ I said with as much heartiness as I could muster” (97). This
59 man’s order that Richard “talk” as if he agrees with him shows that whites desire spoken
60 confirmation of their superiority from blacks. However, spoken words are also sometimes
61 prohibited: Wright asserts that “many subjects were taboo from the white man’s point of view”
62 (98). Wright gives a long list of forbidden topics—only “sex and religion” is allowed. This
63 drawn-out, systematic list implies thoughtless memorization; his “education” in words is, in fact,
64 the lack of one because he has been instructed in what he *cannot* say. His dilemma in the

¹ In the first word, the writer cites the one place in “Ethics” where RW explicitly uses the weapon metaphor for words.

² Introduction gives a summary of the thesis.

³ Clear transition; topic sentence for paragraph, which will present evidence from six (6) different vignettes smoothly and succinctly.

65 elevator shows this delicate balance of knowing when it is appropriate to speak or not, as does
66 his mental dilemma at the optical factory: either he calls one man a liar or disrespects the other.
67 The consequences of saying the wrong words are obvious: “The words were hardly out of my
68 mouth before I felt something hard and cold smash me” (95). “Hard” evokes once again the
69 qualities of that symbol of fear, and even more literally, the bottles that the boys threw at
70 Richard. Spoken words are thus useless to Wright in his personal attempt at freedom.

71
72 Wright consequently realizes that written words are his only means of freedom through
73 self-expression, in contrast with Douglass, who finds written words ineffective.⁴ When Douglass
74 is planning his first escape, he says he “wrote several protections, one for each of us” (62);
75 however, when they are betrayed, he “managed...to get my pass out, and, without being
76 discovered, throw it in the fire” (64). These written “protections” are destroyed, implying that
77 Frederick finds them not only ineffectual but detrimental as proof of his plan. Frederick also
78 finds his literacy frustrating, stating that he “[felt] that learning to read had been a curse rather
79 than a blessing” (43) because it torments him to ponder his unattainable freedom. Wright,
80 meanwhile, learns the power of the written word. He describes a change in his Jim Crow
81 education: “It was no longer brutally cruel, but subtly cruel” (98).⁵ This transition from
82 “brutally,” which connotes action and recalls the beatings and castrations he has witnessed, to
83 “subtly,” which Wright uses to describe himself. In his scheme to borrow books from the library,
84 Wright conveys the power of the written word: “Armed with a library card, I obtained books in
85 the following manner: I would write a note to the librarian, saying: ‘Please let this nigger boy
86 have the following books.’ I would then sign it with the white man’s name” (98). The diction of
87 “armed” clearly implies some kind of potent weaponry, to be used in battle. The seemingly dull
88 facility of the library becomes almost a fortress that Richard is able to penetrate, and his
89 language in this section is strategic and methodical, evoking battle plans; his use of “when” and
90 “if” conveys situations he encounters for which he has a set scheme. Wright uses the written
91 word (forging notes) to defy the unjust policies of his time and, even further, to increase his own
92 intelligence and literacy. Ultimately, in the act of writing the autobiographical “Ethics,” Wright
93 uses the written word to express his freedom directly. While Douglass discovers that written
94 words do not aid him in his freedom, Wright finds power and value in them.

95
96 Ultimately, in the written words lie the key to freedom itself. Douglass may define his
97 violent resistance as a “turningpoint,” but he does not deny that literacy and education did serve
98 him in his experiences. After all, he has written an autobiographical tale that transmits his
99 experiences, expresses his thoughts, and asserts his freedom, just as Wright has. Wright merely
100 recognizes its significance more acutely because he has no other choice. Both authors use the

⁴ Clear transition, which draws FD into the analysis.

⁵ Writer uses RW’s transition (“brutally cruel ... subtly cruel”) to set up the climax of the argument, about the library.

101 written word, which is vehemently denied to the slaves, as a powerful tool in their personal
102 declaration of freedom: one they have, by whatever means, not received, but achieved.⁶

103

104 **Argument #2 (complete essay):**

105

War of Words⁷

106

(RW = *Ethics*, Richard Wright; FD = *Narrative*, Frederick Douglass)

107

108 Weapons can be used but cannot be truly possessed: they can be turned right back
109 against those who wield them. So are words. In *Ethics*, Richard Wright turns the dominant
110 white language back against itself.⁸ In this essay, I will discuss what role language plays and
111 how language in *Ethics* differs in its meaning, both within the story and on *Ethics* as a whole,
from that in Frederick Douglass' *Narrative*.

112

113 Language both in *Narrative* and in *Ethics* is the way white people maintain their
114 hegemony: the Word⁹ is the way they set the hierarchy ("Sir", "Mr", "Nigger") and form a
115 discourse in favor of themselves ("taboo from the white man's point of view ... slavery; social
116 equality..", RW p.98f). Therefore, they try to keep the protagonists away from learning how to
117 read and write language: "If you teach that nigger [Douglass] how to read, there would be no
118 keeping him. It would forever unfit him to be a slave (FD, p.33a)"; "Whut yuh tryin' t' do,
119 nigger, git smart? ... Nigger, you think you're white, don't you?(RW, p.91)"; "It was assumed
120 that after a Negro had imbibed what scanty schooling the state furnished he had no further
need for books.(RW p.98d)".

121

(I) The Word Within the Story of *Ethics* and *Narrative*

122

123 Yet the protagonist of *Ethics* knows how to wield language in a subversive way: in
124 Section 9 the protagonist, "armed with a library card" and "a note with the white man's
125 name(RW p.98c)", manages to get into the library, namely the forbidden citadel of knowledge,
where he can develop higher literacy. Similarly, Douglass uses the Word during his attempted

⁶ The conclusion makes some needed qualifications (e.g., FD uses the written word as well), and gracefully loops back to the opening quotation in the introduction.

⁷ This essay has some rough edges in expression, but it packs in a great deal of well-chosen evidence and it builds to a remarkable conclusion.

⁸ The thesis statement could be somewhat clearer. The reader has to deduce that RW turns language back on the white audience in a way that FD does not.

⁹ Capitalizing "Word" needs more explanation. Does Word indicate a philosophical concept, such as Platonic *logos*, or the Word of God?

126 escape as a “protection(FD p.62), which “certifies that [the master has] given the bearer, [his]
127 servant, full liberty to go to Baltimore.” Language in both cases supersedes the protagonists'
128 apparent identity as a “Negro” and allows them a privilege that white people would not want
129 them to have.

130 **(II) The Word in *Narrative* as the Divine Light, Words in *Ethics* as the Secular**
131 **Weapon**

132 However, language bears different meanings to the protagonist of *Ethics* and Douglass
133 in the *Narrative*, while it plays the same role to achieve their goals. Notice the sharp contrast in
134 their tones concerning their knowledge of language: Richard “learned to lie, to steal, to
135 dissemble [the language]”, whereas Douglass describes it as a means of “protection.”

136 For Douglass, literacy is the way to the Truth of God, to his “Word”: it is “a new and
137 special revelation, explaining dark and mysterious things” and makes him “[understand] the
138 pathway from slavery to freedom.(FD p.33)”. As he cultivates his literacy, he becomes
139 convinced in the power of the Word leading him to freedom and exposing the injustice of
140 slavery: “The moral which I gained ... was the power of truth over the conscience of even a
141 slaveholder.(FD p.42c)” Therefore, language is the key to “learn how to read the will of God.
142 (FD p.60a)”

143 Meanwhile, language in *Ethics* is not a divine guide to freedom as in *Narrative*. For
144 Wright, language is a *weapon*, which was used to oppress him and is to be *reclaimed*. As a writer,
145 he stands outside the quotation marks, in which the white-dominant language suffocates him.
146 Therefore, his illustration of 'Jim Crow education' lies *beyond* the story itself: it is noteworthy
147 that he little uses judgmental words as Douglass does (“dehumanizing character of slavery (FD
148 p.24)”, “cruel and hateful (FD p.49)”) . Rather, he *shows forth* the absurdity of Jim Crow
149 education by a variety of styles: sarcasm, irony, sudden change of voice, etc. For example, he
150 refers to a white man in a sarcastic way(“to assure Pease that I had never called him simply
151 Pease.(RW p.92)”), freely mentions the list of taboos such as “slavery, social equality,
152 Communism(*Ethics*,p.98)”, and suggests white men's vulgarity by putting their words in a
153 dialect as they wield their physical force. He also suggests the structure of violence by
154 juxtaposing active/passive voices in the section 7 and 8. The subject of oppression is
155 concealed(“was caught, ..was castrated, ...were called, ...were given to understand(RW p.97c)”) and
156 the responsibility is attributed to the oppressed(“[Richard] walked, .. ashamed to face [the
157 victim]”), while in fact “[he] couldn't help it.(RW, p.97c)”

158 Wright turns *Ethics* as a whole into a subversive weapon: ¹⁰Contradicting its title, *The*
159 *Ethics of Living Jim Crow*, it lays bare the underlying force of 'Jim Crow education' – brute
160 physical force. It is be not the Divine Word in Douglass' sense that leads African Americans to

¹⁰ This final paragraph doesn't sum up the argument but takes it to another level: The veiled threat of revolutionary violence heard from the elevator man in fact brings the use of violence (un-learned with R's beating from his mother) back into the argument.

161 emancipation; as Wright's friend once said, "Ef it wuzn't fer them polices 'n' them ol' lynch-
162 mobs, there wouldn't be nothin' but uproar down here!(p.99c)" In conclusion, *Ethics* seems to
163 have a more revolutionary implication than *Narrative*: if language as a weapon is already
164 reclaimed by Wright and yet Jim Crow education continues "in a subtly cruel(RWp.98c)" way,
165 we would need another weapon to fight them back, namely physical force.

166 **Argument #3 (suggested by various writers):**

167 **Addressing the White Audience**

168 Some writers addressed the impression that Wright is both more elusive than Douglass
169 (where is this story heading?) and implicitly more confrontational toward his notionally white
170 audience. In terms of the "words as weapons" metaphor, Wright makes his white audience a
171 target in a way that Douglass tactfully does not.

172 This idea has much potential, and we barely touched on it in class discussion. A good
173 formulation:

174 Wright talks about the white community collectively; he employs "they" and "them"
175 which functions as a generalization about all white people. Immediately, these pronouns
176 express his feelings not just about the white people that attack him, but he sees their
177 actions as actions committed by the entire community. His decision to group the actions
178 of one or some white people to the entire community "became a symbol... Through the
179 years they grew into an overreaching symbol of fear" (90). In context, Wright explains
180 how the images of "green trees, the trimmed hedges, [and] the cropped lawns" are
181 reminders of white people which is what "they" is literally referring to. But, implicitly,
182 Wright is referring to the white community again as a symbol of fear; a community that
183 Wright does not want to encounter, but does want to address.

184

185 One can develop this perception in various directions: Douglass draws what would be for his
186 northern audience a reassuring distinction between the vicious slaveholders and the virtuous
187 white abolitionists who helped him. The southern whites become the "they" and Douglass
188 implicitly joins his white audience as an "us": because we all hate slavery; because we're all
189 educated; and because we're all Christians (and you'll show your Christianity by opposing
190 slavery). In naming and denouncing specific slaveholders, Douglass keeps the white characters
191 from merging into a "they," and he carefully assesses their individual qualities. Wright, by
192 contrast, does not use names other than Pease and Morrie and does not describe helpful white
193 people other than the Roman Catholic man who helped him get books out of the library (p. 98).
194 The danger he faces is not from a particular master or overseer, but from any white person or
195 gang anywhere who decides to put him in his place ("them ol' lynch mobs," p. 99). Douglass's
196 northern audience knows that they are not running slave plantations; Wright's audience cannot
197 so easily distance themselves from the white houses and green lawns, which they may not have
198 recognized as part of the race problem in the USA.