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FREDERICK DOUGLASS (All Scenes 1-8)

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(ii) Quick Note

If a writer begins with "how to read" something, you should generally run - but maybe this is an exception.

This play is meant for internet video. Each scene is quite short, no more than a few minutes at most. The line-breaks are in place to help the actors find the internal music of the dialogue. In the same way, you will likely enjoy it more if you read aloud - but, while reading, simply ignore the line-breaks, reading from punctuation to punctuation as you normally would, and let the rhyme and rhythm of the language emerge.

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(iii) Characters

FREDERICK DOUGLASS, slave to Thomas Auld, loaned to Edward Covey for one year in the 1830s

EDWARD COVEY, farmer of about 300 acres in Maryland

BILL HUGHES, cousin to Edward Covey, member of Covey household

BILL SMITH, slave to Samuel Harris, loaned to Edward Covey

SANDY, older slave to Williame Groomes

THOMAS AULD, inheritor through his deceased wife of part of Anthony estate, including slaves

KATY, older slave (cook) of Anthony estate

DANIEL WEEDEN, preacher

SOPHIA AULD, sister-in-law to Thomas Auld

MRS COVEY, wife to Edward Covey, non-speaking

MISS KEMP, disabled sister to Mrs Covey, non-speaking, member of Covey household

CAROLINE, slave (cook) to Edward Covey, non-speaking

FREDERICK DOUGLASS

=====

1. (Covey's farm by Chesapeake Bay.)

D - Frederick Douglass, C - Edward Covey (to enter)

D: My God, my God,
why hast Thou forsaken me!
You have taken me
from my father and mother
and trod
upon my head
as if I were
a dead
forgotten broken
reed
and not a man.
You've cracked me open,
bleeding,
in this cursed land
of human chattel
needing
love
but battered
since my birth with hate.
With blows
and curses
rough
I'm shattered.
Lo,
I make
myself a worm here
pleading
on my knees.
But for all your goodness still I burn here
meeting
misereries
at each turn here.
I am starving. I am weak.
I am wounded to my wooden
blood and
bones -

O God, I seek
You, please!
I beseech
You on Your Throne
to see
me.
Simply speak
and You can free
me!
Aren't You God?
Aren't You God?
You'll have me dodder,
groping
through my hell here,
hoping
till the end,
but finding only failure,
pinned and nailed here
to this cursed cross
of slavery
till I
die?
You gave me
life and breath
and bravery
just to watch
me cry
out, writing
to my death,
until I lie
down in my grave beneath
the soil for my sky?
It cannot be,
O God!
Or am I
the one who doesn't see?
that You are nothing but the need
of my desperate brain,
that I deceive
myself
with some imagined Helper
for me
and my wretched pain,
and that there's no explaining
my horrid lot
except that You are not?
that You never were?
and I am just deranged,
the rotting
afterbirth
of a strange
and pur-

poseless creation?
Or worse
that You for your own
unknown
elation
make my hurts
and wounds to multiply
and will give Yourself divers-
ion in my suffering till I
die?
I cannot believe that, God!
I cannot believe that all
I compass,
when I stand awed
before Your wondrous
sunrise
with all I am inside
like the raw d-
eep wail
of a trumpet s-
ounding joy, is only frail
reprieve
or accident!
That I cannot believe!
No, I swear it that
in everything I perceive
the marks of Your love -
in the bay and its clouds above
and the horse's mane
and the dove-
white water in the rain-
squall
fall-
ing on the Chesapeake ships -
O God, above all, those ships!
that upon this Friday's
gray
horizon
eclipse
themselves from my eyes and
across the tides
and ocean's
wide
ellipse
fly zealously
into the sunlight's
open
rays.
O illuminated freedom!
Dear God, so suddenly with those ships
there -
I can see them! -

are come
better days!

C (entering): You there! Frederick!
You stray s-
on of a dog! Don't run!

=====

=====

2. (Covey's farm by Chesapeake Bay.)

D - Frederick Douglass, C - Edward Covey, S - Bill
Smith (away)

C: You lazy
ungrateful
cow!
What are you doing! Sitting arou-
nd glazy-
eyed
and hateful,
screwing
away the
day's
hou-
rs, chewing
the air against
your upright
patient benefactors!
You conniving
arrogant
bastard!
While on the backs of your
cow-faced consorts
the sun is blazing,
you're lying
pride-
fully sideways
in comfort
grazing
on dreams
like grass!
It seems
you're the mas-
ter now, huh, mass-
a Fred!
Huh, mass
a!

D: No, Mr Covey!
I swear
I never as-
ked to be here!
I pass-
ed out over
near
the horse

and mud
for the force
of the sudden sun
blazing out
from the spring clouds
on me and for the blood
that's run
down
my skin like rain
from
the sores
on my back
where you cane-
d me!

C: So, now I'm to blame!
See what I get!
D: No, sir!
I mean -

C: And I'm sure
I believe
it
that the angels came
to Ear-
th and relieved
you from your wor-
k and flit-
ted
you nur-
se-like
to the sea-
side,
Moses
Fred!
I'm cer-
tain the Big Massa said
he chose you, His
lead-
bodied cow,
to sou-
nd some trumpet
out
till the country melts,
instead of ear-
ning your bread
by the sweat
of your brow
like everyone else!

D: No, Mr Covey! Please!
Can't you see

me s-
treaked with welts
and gore?
I cannot tell th-
e taste anymore
of health-
giving food
from mud!
and I mouth the latter
like cud
for hunger's sake!
I seld-
om eat!
I am sore
and spattered
red
with my own dead
insides from the rash
an-
gry beat-
ing you Cain-
like lash-
ed into me yesterday!
C: You insult me!

D: No, please! I pray! I beg
you! Let me clutch your leg
for mercy!
Just please don't hurt me
anymore today!
O God, Mr Covey, see how I degra-
de myself like earth be-
neath you! I lick your boots! I squirm
here like a tooth-
less leech who
needs you,
my despot,
just to eat!
O, give
me a little respite,
Mr Covey! Let me sleep
for I am weak
and hungry! My blood is gone out
from me
and I feel like I am about
to release
myself from my
body's mortal holding! Let me sleep, Mr Covey!
Let me rest,
or you will know me
no more as Fred
but as one de-

parted
sinking lead-
like into earth-
en darkness.

C: You worth-
less heartless
cow!

D: No, Mr Covey!

S (away): Mr Covey! Look out
the horse has broken
his harness
and is bolted!

C (exiting): Get the rope
and hold him! Watch out, the gate is open!

(Douglass runs into the woods.)

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3. (The woods by Chesapeake Bay.)

C - Edward Covey, H - Bill Hughes, S - Bill Smith,
D - Frederick Douglass (non-speaking)

C: Frederick, you coward
sow!

Come out,
you proud hog! You're powerless!
You're lost!
You're no bog
turtle
to survive out
here
in this
wilderness,
and even if you were
the hour
would still cost
you half your shell
curdled
off your back -
for I swear
I will take that
at least of your skin!
You'll know hell
first-hand!
Just let me catch you again!
And this lightning
storm
will be like a friend-
's murmuring
compared to the frightening
lash of my whip's end
on your torn
and gurgling
flesh!

H: Here is fresh
blood and the broken mesh-
ing of a wolf spider's web.
He is thresh-
ing a trail
through the cattails -
here are threads
of his rent shirt;
look, here he collapsed
as if dead

and vomited.
He is hurt.
Here upon his
knees he crawled ominously
near these copperheads
nesting
in the muddy dirt.
He is retching.
He is desperate
and wretched
and cannot make it much furth-
er.

C: Frederick, I'll un-burd-
en you!
I'll scrape the weight off your black-
skinned back!
I'll turn it in-
to pulpy chaff
for you
and wrack
you, laugh-
ing, with my spitting whip,
you idiot
flitt-
ing pig!
What is your plan!
Where will you go!
Come dig
yourself a hole
and fit
yourself inside
its span,
you pride-
ful unman-
ly wallow-
ing hog!
Where are my dogs!
Run and hide
while you can
now, Fred! For my hounds
are coming to swallow
you! I know you're around! You're here! You're
listening!
And how sweetly you must be glistening
with sweaty fear
of the teeth about to hunt you down
and drag you back to me!
Where are my dogs!

H: The pack was three
hundred yards off,

tied fast to their
logs
when Frederick broke away
and you shouted.
Bill heard you say
to get the pack out of
their tethers,
and they were coming fast for their
excitement
and the rowdy
weather
when you and I
spied
this cane
smashed in
where
Fred came
into the wetland.
They should still be on our heels!
Listen, I can hear them bark!

C: Hark there, Frederick! Hark!
You hear the hounds!
Come out fast
before you're found
by beasts
in their biting frenzy!
I do not ask! I am not friendly
toward
you!
But Christ my Lord
who
was pleased
to make you my ungrateful
slave
would find it hateful
of me not to save
you! Do you not hear His grace
in my voice!
Make your choice!
Come out, and I swear I'll only flay s-
kin from your back
for your benefit,
whereas when my dogs
attack,
your degenerate
bones will splinter int-
o their mouths
and there'll be no end to the s-
pouting of your veins!
Your blood will
spill

in the rain-
puddles
and ripple!
For the rest of your life you'll be brain-
lessly troubled
by pain
and deformed like a cripple!

H: Here they come!
But some
of them do not come straight!

C: Frederick, my son!
It's almost too late!
I swear for my part
on Christ
that I'll only whip you! But my big dog Brice
will you rip you
apart
and split your bones
from the meat!

H: What are they doing!

S (arriving with dogs): I'm sorry,
Mr Covey! The dogs compete
with the storm
for tempestuous
wetness,
warmth
and beat!
They are wild with bestial
heat
and perform
no calling
except that of carnal nature!

H: Hear each bitch yawling
while big Brice mates her!

C: You dumb black mutts!
You're all sluts
and beasts!
But with my knife
I'll at least
cut s-
some sense
into Brice!
Listen now, Frederick, and wince
for what's
coming when I find you,
the price

you'll pay!
I wonder,
pray,
have you never under-
stood nor even thought twice
why the worst slaves
are confined to
my care
to be broken!
I will not blind you
or burn
you or tear
you open
in any way
that others will discern,
but I will slice
off something no white man will degra-
de himself to check!
And which black
defect
you for shame
will keep an ab-
ject
secret,
never nam-
ing what you lack!

S: Mr Covey!

C: Hear him, Fred-
erick! Listen! Lo!
Big Brice so
head-
strong,
remind you, Fred,
of anyone
you know!
How he can yelp!
How he is squeaking!
Now he's a whelp
and a weakling
pissing
blood!
He is least of all mutts
for what he is missing!
And soon enough
you'll be wishing
you had what he too doesn't!
And anyone who cares to puzzle it
or reckon it
will have to wonder
at some instance

why you, Frederick,
never had any descendants!

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4. (Cowshed outside Thomas Auld's farm, hillside.)

D - Frederick Douglass, K - Katy (to exit and enter),
A - Thomas Auld, W - Daniel Weeden

D: Aunt Katy! It's me -

K: Damn! Get beneath
my feet,
you evil ghost!
I plead
the blood of Jesus, most
High,
to save me -

D: Aunt Katy!
It's me! I'm -

K: Take your hating
and haunting
and your grotesque bleeding
and go vaunting back
to the black
sky,
you disbelieving
boasting
on of the dead! I stand on Mount Zion!

D: It's Fred!

K: I make the cross
and testify!

D: Dammit, I said
I'm Frederick!

K: Come quick,
Lord!
Save your lost
little lamb
from this resurrected
and damned

living corpse!

D: Stop it! No more!
I've forded swamp
and briar
in this darkness,
and with gore
now I am mired
like a carcass,
but I am alive!
And I am sorely tired!
Dying! Bleeding!
Hungry! this night's beatings
have undone me
and I will expire
if you don't bring me
something
to eat! Please!

K: O God!
O help! Sweet Jesus!
Master Auld!

A (entering): What's this screaming!
Katy,
Reverend Weeden
is waiting
for his meat in
the dining room
and you're out here shrieking
at the moon
like you want a wallop -

K: I thought a ghost was following
me!

A: Christ!

K: He attacked me!

A: Get back beside the column-beams
of the shed-wall
out of the fall
of moonlight
so I can see!

D: Master Thomas, please,
it's me!
It's Frederick. But this night

deceives
you of my countenance,
for I have been out in this
seething
storm for hours,
weeping,
bleeding,
my flesh is crowded with
welts and injury,
and wounds are wound in-
to the crown
of my head from menacing
briar-thorns
and the wild pound-
ings of Mr Covey's warm-
est violence! And in a whitening
flash of the storm
I believe I was struck by lightning
for m-
y bones collapsed
within my skin
and I lapsed
into a blindness
that has lasted
even while I climbed this
familiar in-
cline up to your farm.

A: Enough now, Fred! You alarm
me! You look a devil! Get back before I help!

D: I alarm myself! I tell you I crawl
on the bevel
of a blade,
Master Auld!
And the shade
draws near! I am dying here!
Help me!

W (entering): Mr Auld,
I heard all th-
is clamor
and thought
I'd - Good God,
what manner
of man or
creature am I
seeing?

K: I thought it was an evil spirit,
sir!

A: Don't go near it
yet, sir.

D: It's me! Frederick! Please!

A: Yes, now I perceive
in the moonlight indeed
it is Fred!
But my God, boy, you'd freeze
the red
blood of a beast
just to look at you!
How'd you come to this state?

D: By the hate
of Mr Covey,
that has broken
over me
with more blasts and unreasonable
weight
than this unseasonable
northeast-
er! My hour draws late! I am a feast for
crawling things and time!
I die!

W: Not yet, say I!
Will it be God's will
to fill
the earth with dead unjustly?
Only trust me,
Frederick!
If brother Covey has spill-
ed your blood or life's quick
by ill-
ness of sin
then God must be
on your side to convict
him
now through your tongue!
Speak to us, son!
It is not yet your hour!

D: But, lo, I am a worm and not a man!

W: Speak, boy, for I say by holy power
that you can!

D: He has murdered me!
Crushed me! He burdened me
with hunger and unceasing toil
and pushed me

to work in the storm and heat
until I boil-
ed over sweating,
shaking, convulsing
while he beat
me till my head
was jetting
blood
and my back was shred-
ded to flood-
ing over with my tatter-
ed gory insides!
He drives
me into my grave!
O, Mr Auld!
If not as a fellow man who matters
to you before God's
level eyes,
at least save
me as your slave!

A: Indeed I shall, Frederick!
O God, how I crave
justice
from that negligent
rustic
piece of trash!
Though I invested
you unto his lash -
and I admit I loan-
ed him you to break you -
yet I am fledged of
neither cash
nor stone
and I would not have him make you
useless.
Katy bring to this
poor man whatever left ov-
er ash-
cake you
have from -

W: Stop! Not so!
I have spoken once
with God's ow-
n voice tonight
and I feel again
more than this storm-front
his right-
eous unbend-
ing law
upon me! Mr Auld,

you will succor
this man with neither supper
nor sleep!
Katy, you will suffer
him neither cake nor butter
nor water
for he is not your
wretched
sheep-
like wander-
ing kinsman only!
But rather you more truly guessed it
when you told me
he was an evil ghost!
He is Fred
but so steep-
ed in sin
that no honest friend
to him
would host
him nor give him bodily aid!
You are right to be afraid,
Katy!
Run as fast as
you can
for the pistol I keep
in my baggage
and I warn you with
the wrath of
God
that if it's not in my hand
soon
I will use it on you!
Go!
And though
you are young and new
to our faith Mr Auld
yet I believe Our Lord
choo-
ses early to show
you where you must store
up your treasures!
Would you give this boy the pleasures
of food
and snor-
ing rest
while evil fest-
ers in every measure
of his essence
and eternal
being!
Would you make infernal

test
of God by freeing
this boy from the mortal lessons
that will keep his sins from sequest-
ering him to hell forever!
I say we dare not lack
reverence
for God's dread
laws!
We must send this boy back
or kill him dead
where he crawls!

D: Mr Weeden, you are insane!

A: You watch your lan-
guage, Frederick!

W: All that he says is
stain-
ed with sin!

D: Mr Weeden!
Please!

W: Dare not believe him,
Mr Auld! Let not the white
reas-
on you've been
given
in Christ
now lose its lustrous
light
to lies!
A spirit of vice
on this boy would truss us
tight-
ly to millstones
and pull us deep
down
into a ris-
ing lake
of hellfire!
For only take
and weigh
the devil-choir
sound
of his weep-
ing with the sac-
red ways
you know are wise,
and you will see that he is spir-

aling round
in sin's painful conflagration
towards infernal
eternal
damnation!

D: Mr Weeden! Mr Auld!

A: Be quiet, Frederick!
For I believe I hear the voice of God!

W: This boy has been negligent
in his duty;
he is unregenerate
and hastening
rudely
away
from his overseer who was only chastening
him for how he disobeyed;
he has made
crude
and cowardly desertion
into woods as dark as Had-
es where who knows what further
incursion
of evil waylaid
his soul;
and now in conniving tirade
his goal
is to make a blind
blade
of anger for you to use
against your neighbor;
who knows but in time
he would cut you loose
from your Savior!

D: O God, I am poured out like water!

W: See how his sin grows hotter!
This - the burning
of one who refuses
learning
from the Most High!
O God, I know it's better that Frederick
lose his
life than infect Thy
servants, Mr Auld or I!
Only give my
hand the strength to carry out
this instance
of Thy vengeance!

Stand forth, Mr Auld! And if doubts
are still about
you, just bear witness
to his semblance
of one already dead!
Indeed, he's been struck by lightning! Is there any
more frightening-
ly certain emblem
of God's wrath on you, Fred!

D: Master Auld!

A: Run, boy!
Run and pray his bullet misses
you!

W: Behold, boy, this is
what I must do
by God's aw-
ful law!
But by His mercy
I swear it hurts me
more than you!

D: Master Auld!

A: Run, Frederick! Pray God turns the shot!
Run towards Mr Covey
with your heart bent wholly
on forgiveness
and maybe God will stop
the hammer
or send this
bullet wide!
But I must stand aside
from God's command-
ments! Only run! Run!

W: O God, let Thy will be done!

=====

5. (The woods by Chesapeake Bay.)

D - Frederick Douglass, S - Sandy (to enter)

D: O God, what are you!

How far you
are from
goodness
and mercy!
And how hard you
are in heart - you
worthless
parcel
of my brain!
I am insane!
There is no God!
There is no God,
and I am a tott-
ering nobod-
y brought
by plain
and simple
odd-
ity of incle-
ment chance
to circum-
stance
of pain
and plodding
an-
xious horror
and s-
calding borrowed
time,
before
no
more
I have a mind
to even know
I am no
more
nor
ever
was
and never-
mind
because
my know-

ing even does
me noth-
ing! I am nothing!
I am just another
black-mothered
incarnation
of cosmic
self-hatred,
empty space and
nothing! And nothing
I can say makes
all this
regurgitation
of my suffering
even matter
anyways! And
now I die!
By my blood scattered
and by starvation
I
lie
down from my senses
in this
endless
stupidity
into senseless
lividity
and smell
and then nothing! Nothing!

S (entering): Good God, boy, what hell
has been hunting
you
and what
have you come through!
You look
like you've swum through
blood
and run through
twisted mud-
dy briar-
brambles
and blades
of fire!
You're a shambles
of wir-
y flesh
undone from too
little frame!

D: And everyone else the same!

S: What?

D: I am dying!

S: Are you trying
to die?
And why
are you out in the rain
to do it? Fred, do you know my name?

D: Sandy. You can bury
me.

S: Do I mean
you harm?

D: No.

S: Good. Now lean
on my arm
and I'll carry
you back to Mr Covey's farm.

D: Don't you touch me
or I'll pluck the
eyes from your head,
old man!
Get back, San-
dy!
Time for me
to be
dead
and damned!
For I swear I am
both ahead-
y! I am nothing already!
I am getting
unburden-
ed of my lunatic self!

S: You're hurt and
in need of help!

D: Certain-
ly! But who else
isn't!
Now fiddle
not with the furious dying
and keep your next
trying
word in-
side your neck, S-

andy,
until my lying
self-importance
is lying
wrecked
and re-
leased
from my broken body!
Get back!
Don't stand be-
side me, I am rotting
already!
Behold, ungodly
world drown-
ing in space
black as pitch,
I go down
spitting in your face
and quit y-
ou!

S: Frederick!

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6. (Sandy's cabin in the woods by Chesapeake Bay.)

D - Frederick Douglass, S - Sandy (to enter)

D: Hello?
Where am I?
And can I
eat this yellow
crust
of pan-fried
pone -
I must,
I'm hungry to my bones!

S (entering): Ah, welcome to my home,
Frederick.

D: Sandy!

S: Easy! Man, be-
lieve me
when I say
you've sown
by devilry
and must harvest
by sleep.
I daresay every
piece
of my cornpone
you've eat-
en won't
keep
down.

D: I was starving!
I ate it all.

S: Yes I've marked it
al-
ready you are small
in grit.

D: What?

S: It seems you're too tall
to get
your head low,
and too appall-

ed with
the blind blows
and lances
of brit-
tle circumstances
to just flit
yourself quiet-
ly away from where
they're
falling.
Instead you make
unholy riot
in calling
them to you
and then with unslake-
d impiet-
y you brui-
se your own mind
with confus-
ion and rage,
when, at your age,
if you kept yourself glued to
a way j-
ust and unobtru-
sive, you'd find
days
of calm at each loose end
of a fraying
hour.

D: But there's no use in
balm
nor power
anyways, Sandy.
You cannot shame me
for unmanly
behavior,
for all is fraud.
There is neither Savior
nor God
nor past nor future,
and in the main
I am only a pain-
ful man-shaped suture
between
nothing-
ness torn mean-
ly around me.

S: You're blustering
unsoundly,
for there is certainly god.

D: No, there is not.
But believe as you will.

S: There is White God and Black God
and many other gods still.

D: What?

S: You spill
your prayers before the god
you've been taught
of by white
men,
right?
But why, when
he loves
them enough
to make you their slave,
would he trouble
himself to save
you from them
after?
He makes them your masters
because you let him.

D: That's blasphem-
y. God is One.
He is the Lord.

S: They have fettered
and undone
you by just such lies
poured
into your ears.

D: No, it's by their letters
and reading
and by our fears
that they've shored
up their oppression.
But if God is here
He is in the lessons
of Christ.
And He is our One Father.

S: Except you've realized
already that's not true,
for He does not bother
to rescue
you
from an evil you've despised

and endured
since birth.
First
I found you in sick
furious
fit
that God was only injurious
insanity,
but now you rebuke
yourself by puk-
ing up the inanity
and spit
of Christianity.

D: You're right. But my enem-
y is my tired brain,
falling back
on regurgitation.
In reason I maintain
that God is neither black
nor white
but blight
of imagination.

S: Wrong. You recoil
from darkness to darkness.
The heartless
white god for the sake
of his spoil-
ed chosen few
make-
s you
ache
and burn
and grovel before them
while you learn
to deplore
your-
self
for surviving in whoredom.
But there is more than
you revolve
in mind
or eye
involved
in earth and
mankind,
and I
my-
self am your example.
Consider my ample
powers and shudder.

For did you or anyone ever hear
me utter
supplication
to a white overseer
or owner?
Did you ever notice I am fear-
less and utter-
ly without molestation
while I roam
between plantations
for my liveli-
hood
and this wood
for my home?
My mighty
Black God
is good
and gives me liberty
from harm.
Since yesterday
has any white man
from any farm
nearby
dared come disturbing
my security
or raising alarm
to collect
you from my
aegis?
My Black God's arm
is sturdy
against such egregious
disrespect.

D: Since yesterday?

S: Saturday. I expect
everybody knows I've kept
you here -

D: Dear
God! Saturday!

S: What's the matter? Stay
put.

D: But it's Saturday now!

S: It's Sunday
just abou-
t sunrise,
I think.

You slept one day
through without a blink
of your eyes.

D: I have to get to Mr Covey's
flying!
Or by his blows
I'll be stove deep through
and lying
stowed be-
neath his plot
of earth
in God-
knows
what mangle
of rot
and dirt
and death!

S: Stop! You're a man out of breath
with contradiction.
There is no God except
the one whose benediction
and milieu
belongs to white men;
and you're anxious to die then
afraid Mr Covey will kill you!

D: Not afraid!
Just temporarily unstead
in my tired wits and in my will to
tolerate
much
pain.
I'd rather take
my last touch
of this lonely
blind
bane
between birth
and death
in my own pre-
ferred
time
and plain
meth-
od.

S: You need rest!

D: Get off! Nettle
me not! And test

not my distaste
for striking an old meddler
in his face!
Look, I'm sorry, Sandy,
but unhand me
and let me pace
off into the wood
to go my way.
You should have let me die
on Good
Friday.

S: I saved
your life.

D: You only postponed
my most certain
appointment.
You gave me more strife
and hurt instead of the ointment
of unbecoming.
Shall I live till my teeth disjoint
and I'm gumming my food?
till I'm rude with outdated
speech and temper?
till I'm secretly hated
by my offspring who must wait on
my whimper and groveling?
Let me go my way, Sandy,
but I understand you were trying
to help me as a friend.

S: I was and am, truly.

D: I know. And duly
to my dying end
I will be thankful
for your well-meaning
and compassion.
Now good-bye. And
leave me

to fashion
my own short future as I would.

S: Fine then.
Good.
You are uncompliant
to loaned perspective
though wretched
in the one you own.
But reflect that -
by a pleasure grown
to me in those very measures
of time
you just maligned -
I do not mind
your disrespectful
behavior
and ask you only a favor
for your own profit.
Here is the root of a plant.
Her fragrance is charmed
like armor for how much my Black God
loves her scent and therefore
her bearer.
No white man will dare to
harm you as long as you wear her
behind your ear.

D: Sandy, this weed
is everywhere
underfoot and I don't need
it.

S: Of course not.
But it's a small favor to a friend
who pleads it.
And then
I will let you go.

D: Very well. Thank you. Though
I put no credence
in its ability to show
me advantage,
yet for your openhandedness
and understand-

ing, I accept.
Only respect
my command
not to follow me.

S: So I solemnly
vow,
if you can honestly
promise me,
too,
to keep that roo-
t I just gave you now
about
you.

D: I will do
as you've said.
Good-bye now, Sandy.
Don't follow me.

S: Good-bye, Fred.
My Black God'll be
watching over you.

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7. (Outside of Edward Covey's.)

D - Frederick Douglass, C - Edward Covey (to enter), Y - Mrs Covey (to enter, non-speaking),
A - Sophia Auld (to enter)

D: O God, I tremble
and mumble
in fear
for every single
simple
sound I hear!
I saw a nimble-
footed deer
lope by
and tumble-
d over groping wild-
ly for the root behind my ear!
Sandy was right
and a more dear
friend to me
than myself!
For my mind is
many
enemies
and I am blind
with my antinomies,
and I find no help!
Every step near-
er to Mr Covey's melts
me.
I am water
and venom be-
neath my skin!
I pray to You God to
shelt-
er me from him,
and then
I remem-
ber that you are just the disingen-
uous
stimulus
of my brain
to my thin and
weary heart
that it maintain
its beating
and impart its tenuous

energies
to my arms
and legs
for beg-
ging and breeding
and eating -
then I pray again!
And I clutch this stem
Sandy gave
me in crave-
n insane be-
lief it has some power
to defend
me from harm,
even though its raven
flower
grows at every haven
and every farm
in Chesapeake Bay,
where every hour
under slaver-
y dying
black men
are skinn-
ed cra-
zily to their carm-
ine gore
by whips,
and crying
black women
are for-
cefully penetrated
with hated
white worm-
s between their hips -
but still I make stupid
supplication
to it
to prove it-
self my preservation!
O God, I am raving
and numb!

C (emerging from the house with Mrs Covey and
Sophia Auld): Good day, Fred-
erick! Come
here!

D: Sir?

C: Frederick, you look ill
and near

to ruin!
And forgive me saying
but you are fil-
thy with more than
a few un-
treated hurts
and too man-
y earth-
en smears
on your fraying
shirt.
Clean
up and get you in-
side to rest.

D: Sir?

C: I mean
for you to have a blessed
day.
For though
you ran away
hatefully
on Friday
I know
now, gratefully,
that such stress
of my a-
nger was a test
of God, which I did not pass.
Miss Sophia here has
convinced me
to ask
God's forgiveness
and since this
is East-
er He must be pleased
at least
in this instance
to show me the quickness
of his mercy
for here first thing
you return.
Learn
from me instead of worsening
in your way,
Frederick.
Take this day
to rest and pray
before God.

D: Yes, sir.

C: I understand your
doubt -
my words
are much confection -
but this Third Day
is about
our dough-
y God's good resurrection,
a day of genuflection
and humility,
on which it behooves
us all to consider how He's proved
his ability
to loose
our servility
to death and the grave.
Therefore every slave
and white
man
in Maryland
has right
to draw near His Sav-
ior and waive
himself from toil.
Let us allow the bright
oil
of Aaron
to run anew
between us, Frederick.
Let it undo
our sins unto
each other
and forswear in-
to quondam
days
any pondering
on them
or rehash.
And hereaft-
er let there be less clash
between
us: I shall be a more compass-
ionate master and use the lash
less meanly;
and you shall serve more keenly
and willingly as slave.
What do you say?

D: Yes, sir.
Thank you, sir.

C: Certainly your thanks is more deserved by God's good providence and this best person I know: my wife is acquaintance of and hopefully now friends with dear Miss Sophia here, who by clemence of fate was visiting late yesterday and delayed her departure to impart her sense into me. She's the only one whose clear counsel could pierce the hazy rage I was in.

D: Thank you, ma'am.
I am glad to see you again.

A: Indeed, I am glad to do you some good on this sacred day as Christ would have me do, Frederick. Take your rest and convalesce a little. Mr Covey has left you a bit of cheese and ash-cake on the middle of the table in the kitchen.

C: The other hands are at their ease and you can rest with them; or they have plans to go see some kin, for which you have my permission,

too -
only eat first, please,
and then
clean yourself up before you
leave.

D: Yes, sir.

C: We are going to see
Mr Weeden and attend
his warning-call
and sermon
for all
the morning.
Happy Easter to you, Fred;
may your day be holy.

D: Happy Easter, Mr Covey.

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8. (Inside Edward Covey's kitchen.)

D - Frederick Douglass, C - Edward Covey (to enter and exit as needed), O - others: at least Bill Smith, Caroline, Miss Kemp (to enter, non-speaking)

D: I am too startled
by this strange
reprieve
and change
of heart in
Mr Covey
to even feed
myself
the first part of
what Miss Sophia
arranged
for him to leave
me -
indeed
from his danger
I don't yet truly
believe
I am relieved,
and I wager
this food
for my fortification
was not by his own new
nature
or inclination
set out.
I am full of doubts
about
him.
But then
again,
what do I know?
The last two days
have routed
my confidence
and shown
me my sense
of judgment
runs to error
well-wide from the mark.
Could something such
of God's touch win

Mr Covey to suddenly
hark
and care for
others,
or some thunder
of coincidence
awaken
his brotherly
concern?
It is Easter - perhaps Christ has earned
the joy of another
once-forsaken
sinner who's turned.

C (entering): Ah, Fred.
Eating already. That's good.
Please, sit down.
I let the women go ahead
into town
so I could
carry out something I said
I would
do.
Here's that cane I used
on you.
I promised to
keep it in the shed
instead
of at hand
so that my head
might clear if I planned
to abuse
anyone without need.
No, please,
sit.

(Mr Covey goes out.)

D: He lies
and there is loathing
in his eyes
and hands -
or am I
holding
my
grudges
too tightly
to behold when
God's good judgment
and plans
are unfolding?

C (entering): No, I told you,
Fred, please sit.
Eat.
It-
's a miracle to meet
you so early
after I did -
indeed, I admit -
get
prayerfully
on my knees
in pearly-
teared need
of confession
before
my Lord
for
my surly
attacks
and aggression
toward
you. Such quick redemption!
Look, here is the axe
we make
boards
with for the pigpen.
I wish you had taken
it when
you wen-
t into the for-
est for
your
safety.
Would you like it now?

D: No, sir.

C: Well, I will place the
axe ou-
tside the door
then,
here beside the machete.
And let me
bring this shovel
in -
I keep forgetting
to store
it under the kitchen's cover
by the cupboard
in this cor-
ner behind

your chair,
where Caroline
keeps it to bang the floor
and frighten rats.
Is it okay there?

D: Yes, sir.

C: Well, I guess that's
good
enough for the time
being,
but you know I'm
seeing
a warp in the wood
behind your head
where you've put
yourself
against the wall.
Let me get
read-
y this ball-
peen hammer
off this shelf
to straighten
it - no, please, wait in
your chair;
I won't even tamper
your hair
while I bash this
unnatural
camber
flush, I swear.
Just sit tight.
There, it looks all right.
What, aren't those dishes of
victuals
worth eating?

D: Yes, sir. I'm just needing
a -

C: Fiddle-
sticks, Fred. It's the best
day of the year.
It's Easter.
Let me at least share
some salted
pork
with you.
You have your fork.
I have this carving

knife.
Let's feast, for
you must be hungry to your life,
just starving,
right? No, please stop. Sit.
Don't move
until you've
had some ham.
Just hand
me that far drinking
pitcher and -
you stinking
carping
bitch!

D: O God!

C: You stupid black
cow!

D: Mr Covey, get back
from me! Please, Mr Covey! Please, stop now!

C: I'm going to gouge
out
more
of your gore
than ever,
Fred!
And hold you down
on the floor
and cut off your never-
used manhood
like I said
I would!
And then I might just kill you,
anyways!

D: Stop!

C: Defy me, will you!
You'll pay screaming
for it!

D: By God I will defy you!
I'll forfeit
my own life
and right to
heaven just to drive through
your neck your own knife,

you Judas-sprung
coward!
Now
is the hour
of my wrath and power
wrung
out
upon you, Mr Covey!
I will show you the tower-
ing fury
of a blame-
less man!
You have sold your
brothers to injury
for only
silver survey-
chains
laid furlows
long
across the land!
Your soul goes
for a song,
Mr Covey! The fields you farm
are full of blood!
I'll be lynched
but you yourself no inch
of me will touch
for harm
again before you die!
Let fly
your violence, Mr Covey. I will tear off your arms!

C: You bastard
braggard! Bill! Bill!
Come help
me!

D: Like hell he
will,
or I will kill
him too!
One of us is dying in this room
today, Mr Covey!
I swear to God it's you!

(They fight while others enter.)

D: You feel my foot upon your neck
now! Do you! Do you!

C: I do!

D: And I expect
you feel
the blood-fleck-
ed blade you let
drop
caught
between my heel
and your throat then too!

C: I do! I do!

D: Then do not mo-
ve while I get
up or I will jam
it
through
your gullet
and watch your blood
puddle
on the floor like I'd kill a hog.
There!
Now shall I unclog
your fetid
reek-
ing soul from your bod-
y or will you beg and
plead
with me not
to kill you!

C: Please don't!

D: I swore to God you'd be dead!

C: Please! Please don't, Fred!

D: Look at Bill
Smith
then -
with
your eyes not your head!
Look, before I kill
you! Look at his skin,
black as mine,
and grovel before him,
swine
that you are, for your life!

C: Bill, boy, please -

D: Call him Master!

C: Master Bill - Master Smith!
Please let me live!

D: Look at Caroline! Look, now she is your mis-
tress by my power!
She owns every hour
of your exis-
tence!
She owns your body and being!
But she does nothing while seeing
you in such peril!
Surely she'd care if
you died! Wouldn't she! She's not terrib-
ly inhuman, is she!
Beg her, Mr Covey!
Beg
your former maid!
See
if she'll lift e-
ven her tongue's weight
to aid
you!
Ask your ex-
cellent Missus to persuade
me to stop!

C: Caroline - Miss Caroline! Miss Caroline, please!
O Frederick, you bastard!

D: What's that, Mr Covey!
You're bleeding! You better beg
faster!

C: Miss Caroline! Master Smith! Please help me!
Please, Fred!

D: No! Ask Miss Kemp
instead!
Look at her! With her skin p-
ale white
like yours!
But yours is redder
from better
days spent in the sunlight
outdoors!
Has she said
yet
any clear
word for
you,

Mr Covey!
Why is she here?
Did you introduce
her last night
while Miss Sophi-
a Auld
was staying?
Did you hide her?
Did you dig her
a hole?
Did you forget
to invite your
own
sister-in-law
to church today be-
cause she's broken
and disfigured?
What does God care!
She's right there,
Mr Covey, to help
you, but has she spoken
one word
for your
release
or health?
Look at her! She's not witless!
Beg! Beg her and beseech
her for your life and for forgiveness!
Beg, Mr Covey!

C: Sister, please! I'm sorry -

D: No! Beg me, Mr Covey!
Beg me,
boy!
Pour
your
supplications
on the floor
lest I destroy
you in my hatred
and then mutilate y-
our body after!
I ache
to see your blood spill
bursting
from your neck!
But call me Sir!
Call me Master!
I might still
find some
last mer-

cy in me that isn't entirely
wrecked
and will-
ed to butchering you!

C: Please, Sir! Please, Sir!
Please, M -

D: No stop!
Hold your tongue!
O God,
what am I become
that I'd so tyrannize
one
of your belov-
ed sons
to such degradation!
At last my eyes
behold Your ways,
Your own Holy patience!
Your will be done!
I accept my suffering and part to play in
Your eternal plan!
There is no Black God, no White God, but God of
all Man-
kind! One God of Christ
who paid the blood-price
that we still take
from each other
in His hope He might make
us brothers
instead!
I am neither master nor slave
but good plain
Fred,
and that is my most sac-
red treasure!
No man will ever
terrify me again!
Nor will I endeavor
to subjugate
other men!
True power must
stand
just-
ly and perpetual-
ly again-
st all
evil but it can
al-
so yield
and wait.

I will work out my year
here
on
your fields,
Mr Covey,
and you will show me
no further act of hate -
or everyone will know the
extent of your humiliat-
ion.
From now on any white
man - or black -
who dares to fight
me will take
in-
juries twice back
what he gives.
But other than that
I will live
in brotherhood to all.
And even as I saw
in v-
ision on Friday
the Chesapeake ship-sai-
ls blind-
ingly bright
like angel wings to Eden,
so God in His own good time
will help me escape
from this cursed land
into deliv-
erance and
freedom.

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But allow a final example of the above, with editorializing.

(iv) Historical Notes and Liberties

Frederick Douglass was born in antebellum Maryland as a slave. When he was about 16 years old (probably around 1832), he was loaned to Edward Covey, who had a reputation for "breaking" slaves. The treatment was severe. On a particularly hot Friday in August, Douglass passed out at his work and then was beaten by Covey with a hickory plank until his face was covered in blood. Left in stupor, Douglass managed to rise and escape through the woods. He went to his master Thomas Auld, who ignored his pleas for release and sent him back to Covey.

Hungry and fearful, Douglass was discovered in the woods by Sandy, an older slave with considerable liberty and a reputation for "magic" powers, who induced Douglass to carry a root with him for protection. Douglass took the root and returned to find Covey strangely gracious. But early Monday morning, Covey again attacked Douglass, this time in the stables, where Douglass fought back. Afterwards, Covey never struck Douglass again.

In his own words, Douglass described his state of mind in the woods as "passing over the whole scale or circle of belief and unbelief, from faith in the overruling providence of God, to the blackest atheism". This play transposes August to April, setting the ordeal between Good Friday and Easter Sunday.

This play aims for illumination of character while adjusting places, extremes, and dialogue. For examples: Daniel Weeden was a preacher with a reputation for cruelty to slaves, but he was likely not with Thomas Auld on the night of Douglass's escape; "Aunt" Katy had been antagonistic to Douglass at the Anthony estate, but it's unclear whether she was inherited by Thomas Auld; Sophia Auld had been gracious to Douglass in Baltimore, and extended visits were part of Southern culture, but it's unlikely she was staying at Covey's farm. Such focus on persons over particulars applies to each character of the play.

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Frederick Douglass deserves his place as a great man. To make his bright qualities more apparent, this play sets him against the black background of a villainous Edward Covey. But Covey was a white farmer of his time. He was likely no more nor less horrible than others like him. To centralize our repugnance onto one wicked man is generally to ignore the guilt of many others - often including ourselves - whose sins compel him.