



# The struggle for freedom - black literature and the abolitionist movement in antebellum America

*Mareike Hanisch*

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Mareike Hanisch

Seminar paper from the year 2004 in the subject American Studies - Culture and Applied Geography, grade: 2,0, University of Münster, 20 entries in the bibliography, language: English, abstract: Looking back on the origins of African-American literature one can say that breaking the chains of silence by acquiring the skills of reading and writing was the most important step towards emancipation of the black race from white suppression in North America. Aware of the fact that reading would give slaves the opportunity to get a critical awareness of their situation, the slave states for a long time enacted laws that prohibited slaves from being educated.

Nevertheless, African Americans succeeded in proving that they were no retarded savages, but well able to produce aesthetic pieces of literature and they established a new literary genre, the slave narrative, with the aim to tell the world about their fate. And indeed, the slave narratives were well received by the white audience of the North and helped to support the abolitionists' attempt to call into question the institution of slavery.

One of the most famous 'slave narrators' was Frederick Douglass, whose Narrative became one of the best-selling autobiographies in antebellum America. He was well aware that the weapon of the published word had to be used with great caution.

One form of help for fugitive slaves like Douglass was the Underground Railroad. It established a network of 'stations' all over the country where fugitives on their dangerous journeys to the North would find food and shelter during the day before they went on at sunset.

The abolitionist literature, including the slave narratives, inspired the national debate over slavery and pushed the slaveholding South into a rigid defensive position. Resistance was understood not only as a personal need, but as the unalienable right of every enslaved individual and the pursuit of liberty was conceived as a collective effort and never simply as an individual matter.

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