

Addendum A

Plain English and the Civil War

In the years leading up to — and following — the Civil War, these writers mastered the art of expressing their ideas by relying on simple words, well-organized sentences, and skillfully crafted paragraphs. But they were connected in another way as well. They were all opponents of slavery.

Unfortunately, careless generalizations by some critics have resulted in gross misunderstandings about certain language conventions that were common in the 19th century. In particular, Mark Twain has come under attack because of the language used by the main character in one of his books, a scantily educated boy named Huckleberry Finn, who talked like this:

You don't know about me without you have read a book by the name of *The Adventures of Tom Sawyer* but that ain't no matter. That book was made by Mr. Mark Twain, and he told the truth, mainly. There was things which he stretched, but mainly he told the truth. That is nothing. I never seen anybody but lied one time or another ...

As was common at the time, the boy also used the N-word.

Was Mark Twain a racist?

In the introduction to his most famous novel, Twain said that "a number of dialects are used ... The shadings have not been done in a haphazard fashion, or by guesswork; but painstakingly, and with the trustworthy guidance and support of personal familiarity with these several forms of speech." In other words, the language used by Huckleberry Finn and other characters in the book reflected the way that different groups of people living along the Mississippi River during the pre-Civil War era actually spoke. But some of Twain's critics have claimed that he was a racist — that Huck Finn's words represented Twain's racial bias.

Others have praised Twain for his accurate depiction of the English dialects of the different characters in his book. In 2011, writer and educator Bill Maxwell, who grew up in the strictly segregated South of the 1940s and 50s, defended Twain's use of the N-word in a St. Petersburg Times article:

One of my most precious literary possessions is a 1948 copy of *Huck Finn* ... My grandmother gave me the novel when I was in sixth grade.

When I first encountered the N-word, on Page 4, I took it in stride. It was a word I was accustomed to hearing uttered every day by blacks and whites. As an avid reader, I was accustomed to seeing the word in stories by white writers and black writers such as Zora Neale Hurston, Ralph Ellison and Richard Wright. I couldn't count the number of times I'd been called the N-word by fellow blacks, sometimes to diminish me, other times as a term of endearment. The word was part of the fabric of my life.

My 10th-grade English teacher, Gloria Bonaparte, assigned "Huck Finn" to us, and we read it without a second thought. Bonaparte said it was one of the great American novels we

should read, and she explained that Twain used the N-word because it was the most natural word for Huck to refer to blacks, given his time and place. We understood.

It is true that Twain was born into a slave-owning family and, as a young man, served very briefly in a Confederate militia. Disillusioned, he deserted after two weeks and moved to the West, where he lived for a time with his older brother, who had been appointed Secretary of the Nevada Territory by President Abraham Lincoln.

Diverse Paths: Enduring Friendships

Over the course of many years, Mark Twain and Frederick Douglass became friends. We know this because Twain said so. In a letter of recommendation to President-Elect James Garfield in 1881, Twain praised Douglass for his character and dedication:

I offer this petition with peculiar pleasure and strong desire, because I so honor this man's high and blemishless character and so admire his brave long crusade for the liberties and elevation of his race. He is a personal friend of mine, but that is nothing to the point — his history would move me to say these things without that. And to feel them too.

To get a clear picture of how this friendship developed requires some familiarity with the details of the life of Frederick Douglass after he escaped from slavery in Maryland in 1838. At times, he relied on the support of the underground railroad, the network of "safe homes" of dedicated abolitionist families who harbored slaves seeking freedom in the North. Among these was the home of Jarvis Langdon, a successful businessman who lived in a small town near Elmira, New York. (That chance encounter with the Langdon family would serve as the link in the relationship between Douglass and Twain — 30 years later.)

Frederick Douglass, Harriet Beecher Stowe, and Abraham Lincoln

In the 1840s, the self-educated Frederick Douglass gained fame as a prominent figure in the anti-slavery movement and the author of a popular book about his life as a slave. He then began publishing a weekly paper in upstate New York called *The North Star*, later renamed *Frederick Douglass' Paper*. Several articles that appeared in the *Paper* praised Harriet Beecher Stowe's *Uncle Tom's Cabin*, published in 1852. For example:

Nothing could have better suited the moral and humane requirements of the hour... Its effect was amazing, instantaneous, and universal.

He met with Stowe at her home the following year. Although they did not agree on all of the issues related to the abolitionist movement, Douglas expressed a "deep sense of the value of the services which you have already rendered my afflicted and persecuted people, by the publication of your inimitable book on the subject of slavery."

Stowe's book, which focused on the cruelty of slavery and the benevolent, Christ-like strength of its main character, became America's best-selling novel of the 19th century. Many contemporary pundits have dismissed it as a condescending, sentimental soap opera. They have failed to appreciate the revolutionary influence of *Uncle Tom's Cabin*, which was branded as "a most evil omen" and banned in the slave-holding states that later seceded from the Union.

By some accounts, Abraham Lincoln once referred to Harriet Beecher Stowe as "the little woman who wrote the book that made this great war." (One of Stowe's biographers described her as "barely five feet tall." Lincoln was 6'4.) Whether he used those exact words is open to question. But there is no doubt that he and other leaders of the era recognized that *Uncle Tom's Cabin* was enormously successful at mobilizing public opinion in the North against slavery — and changing the course of American history.

The civil rights leader W.E.B. DuBois once noted: "Thus to a frail overburdened Yankee woman with a steadfast moral purpose we Americans, black and white, owe gratitude for the freedom and union that exist today in the United States of America."

And in a 2011 book review in the *New Yorker* magazine, Pulitzer Prize-winning historian Annette Gordon-Reed set the record straight:

The novel's overtly religious appeal to the reader, sometimes cringe-inducing portrayal of blacks, and unabashed sentimentality may grate upon modern sensibilities. But Stowe knew things—heard things, saw things—that we, thanks in part to her, will never be forced to confront: American slavery as it was. Arguments will continue about the novel's literary value and about her handling of race. For all that, it's still possible to see "Uncle Tom's Cabin" for what its author intended it to be: a *cri de coeur* [cry from the heart] to the American people, one that forced them to ask what kind of country they wanted their nation to be. Fortunately, Stowe's answer to the question was persuasive.

Most of what Frederick Douglass wrote in the 1850s about Harriet Beecher Stowe were words of praise, but the same cannot be said for the words he used describe Abraham Lincoln after he became president in March of 1861. At various times, he described Lincoln as a man with "an ever-increasing passion for making himself appear silly and ridiculous" ... "timid as a sheep" ... "a genuine representative of American prejudice and Negro hatred."

In Lincoln's long (3,627 words) First Inaugural Address, the new president referred repeatedly to the Constitution and its role in preserving the Union, not to the abolition of slavery. He seemed to be pleading with slaveholders in the South when he said, "We are not enemies, but friends. We must not be enemies." Although some parts of his speech were beautifully written, it was not persuasive. A few weeks later, the South and the North were at war.

During the early stages of the war, the South appeared to be winning, but the tide of battle shifted in the late summer of 1862, and on January 1, 1863, the Emancipation Proclamation freed the slaves in the 10 states of the South that were in rebellion against the United States. After the Proclamation, many of Lincoln's harshest critics — including Douglass — began to view Lincoln in a different light.

Douglass and Lincoln: Their First Meeting

In *The Life and Times of Frederick Douglass*, published in 1881, Douglass described his first meeting with Lincoln in August of 1863.

My efforts to secure just and fair treatment for colored soldiers did not stop at letters and speeches. I was induced to go to Washington and lay the complaints of my people before President Lincoln.

Note: Douglass, like most writers in the North in the 19th century, generally used the terms "colored" or "Negro." Sometimes, he would also use "black" (not capitalized), but not "African-American," which did not become a commonly used term until the 1960s.

I was accompanied to the executive mansion and introduced to President Lincoln by Senator Pomeroy. ... [T]here I was to talk with, and even to advise, the head man of a great nation. Happily for me, there was no vain pomp and ceremony about him. I was never more quickly or more completely put at ease in the presence of a great man, than in that of Abraham Lincoln.

He was seated, when I entered, in a low armchair, with his feet extended on the floor, surrounded by a large number of documents... Long lines of care were already deeply written on Mr. Lincoln's brow, and his strong face, full of earnestness, lighted up as soon as my name was mentioned. As I approached and was introduced to him, he rose and extended his hand, and bade me welcome. I at once felt myself in the presence of an honest man—one whom I could love, honor, and trust without reserve or doubt. Proceeding to tell him who I was, and what I was doing, he promptly, but kindly, stopped me, saying, "I know who you are, Mr. Douglass ... Sit down. I am glad to see you."

During their meeting, Douglass and Lincoln discussed several issues. They agreed on some and disagreed on others. Douglass expressed concerns that went beyond "the just and fair treatment for colored soldiers." He was adamant in his belief that the Civil War was primarily about ending slavery and conferring all of the rights of citizenship upon those held in bondage. Although Lincoln was reserved in his immediate response, later events were to demonstrate the influence of these ideas on his future course of action, and Douglass felt that Lincoln "showed a deeper moral conviction against slavery than I had ever seen before in anything spoken or written by him..."

The meeting ended with a lasting sense of mutual respect — and eventually, a lasting friendship as well.

Although neither man belonged to a specific denomination, both Lincoln and Douglass were deeply religious. But in voicing their public views, Douglass was a more impassioned orator. He frequently used Biblical references to denounce the evils of slavery and to condemn the cruel, inhuman practices of slaveowners who professed to be Christians.

Many observers have commented on Lincoln's religious convictions, and this has led to an assumption that these convictions were expressed frequently in his speeches. One internet study guide for writing essays about Lincoln informs students that he "employed biblical allusions and imagery throughout his speeches ..." Not true.

Before meeting Frederick Douglass, he may have made occasional references of a religious nature in his speeches. In one speech, for example, when he was still in his twenties, he referred to the Declaration of Independence and the Constitution as forming "the political religion of the nation." In 1858, in one of his most famous speeches, Lincoln paraphrased a verse from the Book of Mark: "A house divided against itself cannot stand." But after stating this as the theme of his speech, Lincoln made no further references to the Bible or to religion in general. Instead, he pieced together an interesting, logical, step-by-step argument, just as he had in the legal briefs he prepared as a successful lawyer in Illinois. And in another speech later that year, his statement opposing "political and social equality between the white and the black races" raised the ire of Christian abolitionists.

But two of his speeches after meeting with Douglass — speeches for which he is best remembered today — reflected dramatic changes in Lincoln's thinking. While he quickly recognized in Douglass a man who was intellectually his equal, he was also moved by the deeply felt passion of the man who was widely recognized as America's most accomplished anti-slavery orator.

In his Gettysburg Address, delivered just three months following his meeting with Douglass, Lincoln began with the immortal phrase, "Four score and seven years ago ..." Most critics have assumed that he was simply paraphrasing the Biblical passage, "The days of our years are three score years and ten."

The Influence of Douglass on the Mind of Lincoln

A more likely scenario is that after their meeting, Lincoln wanted to know more about Douglass and found the time to read some of his speeches, including his famous, "What to the Slave is the Fourth of July?" — delivered in 1852. In that speech, Douglass denounced the hypocrisy of America's founding documents, the Declaration of Independence and the Constitution, which proclaimed the rights and liberties that "all men" are entitled to, while ignoring the fact that these were the very rights and liberties denied to all people held in bondage. One remark that Douglass included in his speech apparently made a particularly strong impression:

Three score years and ten is the allotted time for individual men; but nations number their years by thousands. According to this fact, you are, even now only in the beginning of your national career, still lingering in the period of childhood.

A comparison between these two sentences and the first two sentences of the Gettysburg Address suggests that Lincoln did not just borrow the Biblical language from Douglass; he applied it to the concept of equality and to the reality that the American nation was still in its infancy.

Four score and seven years ago our fathers brought forth on this continent a new nation, conceived in liberty, and dedicated to the proposition that all men are created equal. Now we are engaged in a great civil war, testing whether that nation, or any nation so conceived and so dedicated, can long endure.

Unlike his 1852 denial of the "political and social equality between the white and the black races," Lincoln uses unequivocal language in the first sentence of the Address to affirm "the proposition that all men are created equal."

Second Meeting

For the second White House meeting between Douglass and Lincoln, in August of 1864, the roles were reversed. This time, Douglass was responding to an invitation from the president.

After more than three years of bloody fighting, many in the North had grown weary of the war. Although Lincoln had won renomination as the candidate for president at the Republican (briefly renamed National Union) Party convention in June, some prominent Republicans were convinced that he would be defeated in November's general election. One of these was Horace Greeley, publisher of *The New York Tribune*, at that time one of

the nation's most influential newspapers. In a letter to New York City's Republican Mayor, Greeley expressed extreme pessimism:

Mr. Lincoln is already beaten ... He cannot be elected. We must have another ticket to save us from utter overthrow.

Greeley and other disgruntled Republicans joined in a conspiracy to stage a second convention — scheduled for late September — to select a different candidate to replace Lincoln.

Lincoln had hoped that after publication of the Emancipation Proclamation, large numbers of slaves would cast off their bondage and escape to the North or to areas controlled by the Union army in the South. He also hoped that such an uprising would be recognized as a momentous victory for the Union, which would persuade voters in the North to elect him for a second term.

But there had been no uprising. Realizing that he needed advice from outside the normal military channels, Lincoln called on Douglass to discuss a new tactic. In his *Life and Times* book, Douglass provided details of their meeting, including "the means most desirable to be employed outside the army to induce the slaves in the rebel States to come within the Federal lines."

[Lincoln] said, in a regretful tone, "The slaves are not coming so rapidly and so numerously to us as I had hoped." I replied that the slaveholders knew how to keep such things from their slaves, and probably very few knew of his proclamation. "Well," he said, "I want you to set about devising some means of making them acquainted with it, and for bringing them into our lines."

He spoke with great earnestness ... and seemed troubled by the attitude of Mr. Greeley. ... What he said on this day showed a deeper moral conviction against slavery than I had ever seen before in anything spoken or written by him. I listened with the deepest interest and ... at his suggestion, agreed to undertake the organizing a band of scouts, composed of colored men. [Their] business should be ... to go into the rebel States, beyond the lines of our armies ... [to] carry the news of emancipation, and urge the slaves to come within our boundaries.

During the course of their conversation, an aide to the president announced the arrival of Connecticut Governor William A. Cunningham. Lincoln responded by saying, "[T]ell Governor Buckingham to wait, for I want to have a long talk with my friend Frederick Douglass."

Just two weeks later, while their bold strategy was in the early planning stages, the direction of the war shifted dramatically — much faster than either Lincoln or Douglass had anticipated. On September 2, the Confederate stronghold of Atlanta surrendered to the advancing Union army.

In the North, the news of the Union's momentous victory brought about an immediate change in public opinion and in Lincoln's prospects for winning reelection. The *New York Times* trumpeted:

The great rebel stronghold ... has fallen, and Atlanta is ours.

This is a victory so great in itself, of such wide scope, such far-reaching result, such indisputable importance, that the country will receive the news of it with unbounded exultation.

And an announcement in Greeley's *New York Tribune* made clear the end of any effort to replace Lincoln as the Republican's choice to continue leading the country:

Henceforth, we fly the banner of ABRAHAM LINCOLN for our next President.

The fall of Atlanta, along with a series of other Union successes, rendered the Lincoln-Douglass plan unnecessary. Lincoln was reelected president in November. His next meeting with Douglass took place a few months later — on March 4, 1865, shortly after Lincoln delivered his Second Inaugural Address.

Third Meeting — "my friend Douglass"

In his First Inaugural Address, delivered just three weeks after the South had launched an attack on the U. S. garrison at Fort Sumter, Lincoln had stressed the idea of preserving the Union — and avoiding war — by following the principles spelled out in the Constitution.

Although he personally abhorred slavery, Lincoln's public position at the time was that he opposed extending slavery into new territories and states applying for admission to the Union. He mentioned slavery several times, but expressed his views in language that many abolitionists, including Douglass, had found objectionable:

I have no purpose, directly or indirectly, to interfere with the institution of slavery in the States where it exists. I believe I have no lawful right to do so, and I have no inclination to do so.

But as the war progressed, his views began to change, as evidenced by the specific language in his Emancipation Proclamation:

[A]ll persons held as slaves within any State ... in rebellion against the United States, shall be then, thenceforward, and forever free; and the Executive Government of the United States, including the military and naval authority thereof, will recognize and maintain the freedom of such persons, and will do no act or acts to repress such persons, or any of them, in any efforts they may make for their actual freedom.

After his meetings with Douglass, Lincoln's thinking about the war — and about slavery — continued to evolve. When the time came for Lincoln to deliver his Second Inaugural Address on the afternoon of March 4, 1865, he noted that the message "delivered from this place" four years earlier had been "devoted altogether to saving the Union without war." This time, however, without mentioning him by name, Lincoln fully acknowledged that the view held by Douglass was at the heart of the conflict:

One-eighth of the whole population were colored slaves, not distributed generally over the Union, but localized in the Southern part of it. These slaves constituted a peculiar and powerful interest. All knew that this interest was, somehow, the **cause of the war**.

Lincoln continued — "The Almighty has his own purposes," and he quoted from the Book of Matthew:

Woe unto the world because of offenses! for it must needs be that offenses come; but woe to that man by whom the offense cometh.

He then proposed American slavery as "one of those offenses" and the national devastation caused by the long war as a form of divine retribution: "The judgments of the Lord are true and righteous altogether." Lincoln developed his theme through a series of powerful religious references instead of his usual practice of creating carefully crafted arguments based on his understanding of the Constitution. In his First Inaugural, Lincoln had made 37 references to the Constitution. This time, there were none.

That evening, Douglass attended a reception at the White House. After being detained briefly at the entrance, he entered the elegant East Room. Lincoln spotted him immediately:

Recognizing me, even before I reached him, he exclaimed, so that all around could hear him, "Here comes my friend Douglass." Taking me by the hand, he said, "I am glad to see you. I saw you in the crowd to-day, listening to my inaugural address; how did you like it?"

I said, "Mr. Lincoln, I must not detain you with my poor opinion, when there are thousands waiting to shake hands with you."

"No, no," he said, "you must stop a little, Douglass; there is no man in the country whose opinion I value more than yours. I want to know what you think of it?" I replied, "Mr. Lincoln, that was a sacred effort."

"I am glad you liked it!" he said; and I passed on, feeling that any man, however distinguished, might well regard himself honored by such expressions, from such a man.

Six weeks later, Robert E. Lee surrendered to Ulysses S. Grant at Appomattox, Virginia, about 90 miles west of Richmond, and for all practical purposes, the Civil War was over. When Douglass received a note from Lincoln requesting yet another meeting, he had to decline because of a scheduling conflict.

Douglass deeply regretted that the opportunity to meet with Lincoln would not present itself again. A few days after Lee's surrender, Lincoln was shot in the back of the head at point-blank range by the assassin John Wilkes Booth. "Having made it one of the rules of my conduct in life," Douglass later said ...

[N]ever to break an engagement, if possible to keep it, I felt obliged to decline the honor. I have often regretted that I did not make this an exception to my general rule. Could I have known that no such opportunity would come to me again, I should have justified myself in disappointing a large audience for the sake of such a visit with Abraham Lincoln.

Douglass meets Twain via the Underground Railroad Connection

The abolitionist Jarvis Langdon and his family, whose home had provided shelter to Frederick Douglass as part of the Underground Railroad in 1838, played a critical, if coincidental, role in his developing friendship with Mark Twain.

It began as a fortuitous exchange of ideas between Twain and Charley Langdon (Jarvis's son) while they were passengers on a ship tour bound for Europe in 1867. At the end of

the tour, Twain received an invitation to visit the Langdon family, which included Charley's 22-year-old sister, Livy. Although he was attracted to Livy, she did not immediately return his affection. She rejected his proposal of marriage — not once but twice.

Over time, however, her feelings began to change. They corresponded regularly, and she helped him edit his first book, published in 1869. When the couple married the following year, the Rev. Thomas Beecher (brother of Harriet Beecher Stowe) officiated at the ceremony.

There is no direct evidence of exactly when and where the first meeting between Douglass and Twain took place, but it is likely that they met in early 1869 at the Langdon home, where Douglass was a frequent visitor. We know that soon after they met, Twain signed on with Douglass's publicist and booking agent, the radical abolitionist James Redpath. In a letter to Livy in December 1869, he described a chance meeting with Douglass, apparently at Redpath's agency in Boston:

Had a talk with Fred Douglas, today, who seemed exceedingly glad to see me – and I certainly was glad to see him ... He told me the history of his child's expulsion from Miss Tracy's school, and his simple language was very effective.

Miss Tracy said the pupils did not want a colored child among them – which he did not believe, and he challenged the proof. She put it at once to a vote of the school, and asked "How many of you are willing to have a colored child be with you?" And they all held up their hands! Douglass added: "The children's hearts were right."

Mark Twain's New Nextdoor Neighbor: Harriet Beecher Stowe

After his marriage, Mark Twain edited and published a newspaper in Buffalo, New York, for a couple of years before moving to Hartford, Connecticut, the city where his book publisher at the time was located. Hartford was also home to a number of prominent literary figures, including Harriet Beecher Stowe. "To Twain," according to the Mark Twain Project (Bancroft Library, University of California), "Stowe's accomplishment — to write something meaningful and successful — was extraordinary. It was literature of a high order, the sort he had long thought to be out of his reach."

In 1873, he purchased a plot of land right next to her property and built a large house for his young but growing family on it the following year. The two authors became fast friends; each was a frequent guest in the others home.

There is a tendency to think of Stowe as a meek, obsessively pious old soul who prayed a lot and seldom smiled. In fact, she was a highly spirited woman with a quick, even mischievous sense of humor. Dartmouth College James Cox has noted that Twain was "profoundly similar ... to Mrs. Stowe as a writer."

Like her, he was popular, commercial, even vulgar. Like her, he never rested easy in the categories of literature established and sustained by the genteel writers; and yet, like her, he was somehow recognized, however uneasily, as a writer by that very tradition.

In the 21st century, we don't normally associate Harriet Beecher Stowe with the term "vulgar," but in some of her published work, particularly on the subject of marriage, her use of plain English revealed "things that women should certainly not state, even if they knew about them."

Walt Whitman, a poet whose use of plain language was considered radical by many 19th century critics, was also an outspoken opponent of slavery. After the assassination, he dedicated several poems to Abraham Lincoln and later delivered a series of lectures on the life of the great president.

We know that Whitman once attended a political conference where Frederick Douglass was a featured speaker, but there is no record of an actual meeting with Douglass, Lincoln, Twain, or Stowe.