COMMONLIT

Name: _____ Class: _____

Letter from Frederick Douglass to Harriet Tubman

By Frederick Douglass
1868

In 1869, Sarah Hopkins Bradford published an authorized biography called Scenes in the Life of Harriet Tubman. Tubman was an abolitionist, Union Army scout, nurse, and "conductor" on the Underground Railroad, risking her own life more than a dozen times to lead enslaved people to freedom. Tubman reached out to fellow abolitionist Frederick Douglass, a famous public speaker and author, requesting that he write a letter about her accomplishments to be included in her biography.

As you read, take notes on how Frederick Douglass defines private and public accomplishments.

Rochester, August 29, 1868

[1] Dear Harriet:

I am glad to know that the story of your eventful life has been written by a kind lady, and that the same is soon to be published. You ask for what you do not need when you call upon me for a word of commendation. I need such words from you far more than you can need them from me, especially where your superior labors and devotion to the cause of the lately enslaved of our land are known as I know them. The difference between us is very marked.[1] Most that I have done and suffered in the service of our cause has been in

"TUBMAN, HARRIET. from the Library of Congress" by Harvey B. Lindsley is in the public domain.

1. noticeable

public, and I have received much encouragement at every step of the way. You, on the other hand, have labored in a private way. I have wrought[2] in the day – you in the night. I have had the applause of the crowd and the satisfaction that comes of being approved by the multitude,[3] while the most that you have done has been witnessed by a few trembling, scarred, and foot-sore bondmen[4] and women, whom you have led out of the house of bondage, and whose heartfelt, "God bless you," has been your only reward. The midnight sky and the silent stars have been the witnesses of your devotion to freedom and of your heroism. Excepting John Brown[5] – of sacred memory – I know of no one who has willingly encountered more perils and hardships to serve our enslaved people than you have. Much that you have done would seem improbable to those who do not know you as I know you. It is to me a great pleasure and a great privilege to bear testimony[6] for your character and your works, and to say to those to whom you may come, that I regard you in every way truthful and trustworthy.

Your friend,

Frederick Douglass.

2. worked
3. **Multitude** ***(noun)*** a great number of people
4. "Bondman" is an outdated term for "slave."
5. John Brown was an abolitionist who wanted to start an armed uprising of enslaved people against the government and slaveholders. He led an attack on a US military factory and warehouse, which led to his trial and execution for treason.
6. to make a statement saying that one saw or knows something

Text-Dependent Questions

Directions: For the following questions, choose the best answer or respond in complete sentences.

1. PART A: Which statement identifies the central idea of the letter?
    A. Harriet Tubman contributed to the abolitionist movement in mostly unknown, unrecognized ways.
    B. Frederick Douglass is upset that not more people know about Harriet Tubman's contributions to the abolitionist movement.
    C. The accomplishments that go unknown are more important than those recognized and appreciated by the public.
    D. The sacrifices that Harriet Tubman made for the abolitionist movement can be rivaled by no one.

2. PART B: Which detail from paragraph 2 best supports the answer to Part A?
    A. "I am glad to know that the story of your eventful life has been written by a kind lady, and that the same is soon to be published."
    B. "I need such words from you far more than you can need them from me, especially where your superior labors and devotion to the cause of the lately enslaved of our land are known as I know them."
    C. "The midnight sky and the silent stars have been the witnesses of your devotion to freedom and of your heroism."
    D. "I know of no one who has willingly encountered more perils and hardships to serve our enslaved people than you have."

3. How does the quote in paragraph 2, "the most that you have done has been witnessed by a few trembling, scarred, and foot-sore bondmen and women, whom you have led out of the house of bondage" contribute to the development of ideas in the text?

    A. It shows how thankful freed slaves were of Harriet Tubman.
    B. It provides an example of Harriet Tubman's secret accomplishments.
    C. It depicts the journey to freedom as a difficult one.
    D. It expresses Frederick Douglass's desire for more people to know about Harriet Tubman's accomplishments.

4. How does Douglass compare his and Tubman's reputations?

    A. They are both well-known abolitionists who have worked in the public spotlight.
    B. Tubman has a better reputation than Douglass because she put her life at risk for the cause.
    C. Douglass has a wider reputation than Tubman at the time because his work was public and hers private.
    D. Douglass believes that he earned his more esteemed national reputation because he faced more public scrutiny than Tubman.

5. How does Douglass view Tubman's work in the context of John Brown's work? Cite evidence from the text in your answer.

Discussion Questions

Directions: Brainstorm your answers to the following questions in the space provided. Be prepared to share your original ideas in a class discussion.

1. Frederick Douglass discusses how Harriet Tubman does not receive applause for her private actions in the abolitionist movement – what are the benefits to contributing privately to a cause? What are the disadvantages or dangers?

2. In the context of the text, how do people create change? Were Frederick Douglass's public actions more impactful than Harriet Tubman's private forms of resistance and protest? Cite evidence from this text, your own experience, and other literature, art, or history in your answer.

3. What makes Tubman a hero in the eyes of Douglass? Do you agree with his assessment? How has Tubman become a national hero?

4. Tubman put herself at risk of recapture and death to free other slaves, breaking the law to do so. In the context of the text and Tubman's legacy, what is good and how do we know?

5. Harriet Tubman was largely unknown during her life, but has since become an American hero. What can Americans do to shine a light on lesser-known heroes from the past? Why do you think many heroes end up going unnoticed?