

Vignette 1: "Created Equal"

A dialogue between Frederick Douglass and Thomas Jefferson.

Frederick Douglass is a stern looking Black man of middle years dressed in gentleman's clothing of the middle 19th Century. A pocket watch chain hangs from his pocket. Thomas Jefferson, president of the U.S., is a lanky tall Caucasian man wearing powdered wig of the statesmen of the 18th Century. He is dressed in waistcoat other clothing of a statesman of the mid 18th Century. He too has a watch.

DOUGLASS (bowing slightly in the manner of greeting): Thomas Jefferson, I presume -- author of those most resonant words in the American canon -- "We hold these truths to be Self evident, that All men are created equal ..."?

JEFFERSON (bowing): The same, and most humbly, Sir. And you?

DOUGLASS: I am Frederick Douglass, editor of The North Star newspaper. I seek an interview with you regarding your views on emancipation.

JEFFERSON: Certainly, Sir. Emancipation -- from the British! (claps his hands together) Well, I ...

DOUGLASS: No, no, Sir! Not emancipation of mere colonies of men, but of an entire race. You see, I myself am an escaped slave ...

JEFFERSON (surprised, checks his pocket watch): Suddenly, I realize the hour is late for such a large topic.

DOUGLASS: Ah, but sir, allow me to insist. Years ago you spoke out bravely against the bane of slavery. (Forcefully, punctuating the air) I've read of your fight for laws that would end the blight, and with exterminating thunder cast this evil asunder ...!

JEFFERSON: Uh, yes. (With deep concern) No one exceeds my hatred for man's bondage over his fellow man. (Steps back, retracts a bit). But the truth is, and you must know this, emancipation and assimilation would be impossible at this stage. The Black race is not yet fit to take its place in our society. They can neither read nor write ...

DOUGLASS: Sir! I am the Black race. I read, I write ...What you are, I am.....

JEFFERSON: (absorbed in his own declamation, continuing).... Their skills are (dismissive) ... slight. Their very presence as freemen would incite -- violence. (Deeply concerned again)

DOUGLASS: God created both of us, and made us separate beings. I am not by nature bound to you, or you to me ...

JEFFERSON: (finally listening)....) Do not misunderstand me -- I do believe a day will come to put an end to the most depraved institution of slavery ...

DOUGLASS: (Steps up to Jefferson, for the first time confrontational): How can you speak of slavery? What do you know of slavery? You possess 200 slaves, yet you do not truly know them. You cannot see the grim horrors that rise in all their ghastly terror before me - nor hear the wails of millions piercing my heart, chilling my blood...

JEFFERSON (rambling on)...The black race is by its very color, less (hands gesturing in the air, as if trying to find the words) less ... pleasing to the eye. It is a known fact that they secrete less by the kidneys and more by the glands ...

DOUGLASS (gall rising): In the pages of my own newspaper, I wrote, with that very freedom of press granted us by the Constitution, of my terrible bondage. "I remember the chain. The gag. The bloody whip. The deathlike gloom overshadowing the broken spirit of the fettered bondman, the appalling liability of his being torn away from wife and children -- and sold like a beast in the market ..." I wrote those very words.

JEFFERSON (still going on):... They seem to require less sleep ...and ... their emotions, are transient, their griefs -- less felt and sooner forgotten than with the whites.

DOUGLASS (now furious): Sir, admit -- you believe we are a race that is less than human, slight of brain, akin to apes!

JEFFERSON: Not true!

DOUGLASS: You have written it. I, ape that I am, have read it!

JEFFERSON: Sir, you go too far. You may leave now. I pity you.

DOUGLASS: Save your pity, sir, for the shackled thousands. You who took arms against the tyranny of George; who railed against bondage now impose it yourself. Bloody history shall one day so record. (Storms off, pausing at the perimeter of the action, his back to Jefferson.)

JEFFERSON: (Sighs) I fear your words, sir. I fear your face. (self-reflective, stepping apart from Douglass, as if talking to himself). Could it be that those of us who helped raise the torch of Liberty will be held responsible by generations to come for the unfulfilled promise of those very words? All men ARE created equal -- (turns to Douglass.. pauses) -- aren't they?

DOUGLASS (turns, looks back): We shall see.

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Sources: "To My Old Master," Frederick Douglass, published Dec. 3, 1847, in the North Star. Thomas Jefferson, The Writings of Thomas Jefferson; "Virginia Letter;" "Monticello," a libretto © by LeRoy Aarons and Glen Paxton.