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Mark Twain, Frederick Douglass, and Abolitionist Discourse
(English / Arts and Sciences)

During the Millard Fillmore administration in 1850, the Fugitive Slave Act was passed, requiring that any slave who had escaped from their master would be coerced into returning to slavery. This act ignited tempers of both the North and the South as the debate centered around one relatively unknown slave named Jerry from Hannibal, Missouri. Jerry had escaped slavery, fled to Syracuse, NY, and upon passage of this act, was placed under arrest for return to his former master in Hannibal. A staunch defender of the slave act was Samuel Langhorne Clemens, the future Mark Twain, who believed in the sacredness of slavery in southern states. Twain knew Jerry's master and argued in print for the slave's return. Frederick Douglass, on the other hand, strongly argued that slavery was morally wrong and Jerry should be let free. Douglass, one might say, had a personal investment in the situation as he had escaped from slavery in September of 1838. In 1845, Douglass published his autobiography, *The Narrative of the Life of Frederick Douglass*, giving insights into his years as a slave from birth. This debate over the Jerry incident gave rise to national prominence for both men. Douglass was just beginning to enter the public's eye culminating with his interaction with Lincoln with the Emancipation Proclamation and Twain was years away from writing in 1885 his most famous work, *The Adventures of Huckleberry Finn*. This debate in many ways forged the characters of both men and helped give them a platform for their later careers in the public arena. Leading up to the Civil War, Douglass delivered numerous lectures on abolition which reflected his worldview that slavery is morally and inherently wrong. He also gave a preeminent lecture in 1859, "Self-Made Men," in which he advocates self-reliance, hard work, faith, and determination, all values which still resonate today. Regarding Twain, this research will follow his reaction to the Jerry incident by examining some of the newspaper articles in which he was involved and his developing response to American slavery. Eventually, Douglass's discourse helped to win Twain over, the two became friends, and both became national icons.