

WHITE WORDS ON A BLACK SCREEN

"We all declare for Liberty; but in using the same word we do not all mean the same thing. With some the word Liberty may mean for each man to do as he pleases with himself, and the product of his labor; while with others the same word may mean for some men to do as they please with other men, and the product of other men's labor.

Here are two, not only different, but incompatible things, called by the same name-Liberty. And it follows that each of the things is, by the respective parties, called by two different and incompatible names-Liberty and Tyranny."

-Abraham Lincoln

EXT. CALIFORNIA BEACH - DAY

SUPER: SANTA MONICA, CALIFORNIA, 1896

MOSBY (63), sits in the sand. A jack-knife, small, sharp, and scrappy, he sports a black suit, extra starch, no jacket.

AARON (V.O.)

Heard tell, truth gets dressed up by
them who wins a war, less your own
eyes give it a Saturday night scrub,
maybe so. Now this here's Sabbath
square, leastwise mostly so, course
my recollectin' ain't what it was.

Sand mounds, lined with rows of shells and pebbles, in crisp military formation, offer battle to Mosby's shark-eyed glare.

AARON (V.O.)

No more'n two eyes an' a wiggle when
I first seen John Singleton Mosby.

An undersized boy in short pants, GEORGIE (10), opposes him. A wallflower with no water or sun, and maggot pale; smaller kids take a sock at him just to feel good about themselves.

AARON (V.O.)

Well sir, I s'pose most figgered me
just his slave, but them who rode
with the 43rd knew how it cut.

Two horses graze behind the looming battle. Ivory handled Colt revolvers rest on Mosby's folded jacket.

AARON (V.O.)

We'd a whooped 'ol Billy Yank sure,
ifn' Bobby Lee fought like I done
taught the Colonel. Our fightin'
woulda' warmed an Egyptian mummy.

Mosby notices Georgie approach, stiffens, and snaps a salute.

MOSBY

The troops are formed, General Lee.

Georgie returns the salute, moves toward Mosby, and stares
down at the pistols.

GEORGIE

Colonel Mosby, you ever get scared?
Of dying, I mean.

MOSBY

Never seen a brave man, son. All
men are frightened. It's the Beast.

GEORGIE

The Beast?

MOSBY

That belly sick, make ya' spit your
guts up, and run home to mama feeling?
Fear, Georgie, is a beast. One you
best collar, sooner the better.

Mosby stands and puts his hands on Georgie's shoulders.

GEORGIE

You just funning me, Colonel?

MOSBY

Get licked much? The truth, now.

GEORGIE

Well, some boys at school-

MOSBY

Thought so. About your age when a
friend educated me about the Beast.

GEORGIE

Real, so you can see him?

MOSBY

Feel him mostly. Like 'ol Scratch.
Never stops prowling. Never sleeps.
Never chooses sides.

GEORGIE

Some boys at school say we was on
the wrong side. That your Rangers
were horse thieves and such. That-

MOSBY

Ah, s'all bosh! Why, every horse we
took had an armed Yank in the saddle.

GEORGIE

So you didn't ride with any bad men?

MOSBY

Only one man ever give me cause.

Mosby picks up his Colts. Georgie's eyes track their flight.

MOSBY

Face still jiggers me time to time.

He notes the boy's fascination with his pistols.

GEORGIE

Musta' been some face.

MOSBY

Well son, you don't forget a face
that needed that Colt emptied in it.

EXT. COUNTRY ROAD - MORNING

SUPER: FRY'S WOODS, VIRGINIA, 53 YEARS PRIOR

Two boys plod a dusty road, one black and one white. JACK
MOSBY (10), chicken-legged and scrawny, trails the black
boy, ABSALOM (12), who shoulders a large strap of books.

ABSALOM

Come on, Jacky boy. Keep up.

JACK MOSBY

I can lug my own books, just so's
you know.

ABSALOM

I'm ta' tote 'em for you, your momma
says, on a'counts you so feeble.

JACK MOSBY

Thunder, Absalom! Makes a man feel
like a kitten in a sack.

Mosby kicks a dirt clod and trots up to Absalom.

JACK MOSBY

Well, s'long as you know I can do
it, s'pose it's alright if you tag
along, since you belong to me anyways.

Absalom stops cold and stares, but Mosby keeps walking. The
barb has hooked the fish.

JACK MOSBY

You heard me right. You mine, same
as them books.

ABSALOM

Make sure no harm comes ta' Jacky,
that's what your Mam says. Didn't
say no how to learn you some manners.

JACK MOSBY

I can take care a myself, but I don't
mind much. Considering yer a nigger
and all, I figure we's still friends.

ABSALOM

This nigga'll knock some sense into
your scrawny cotton ass.

Mosby turns and comes back to Absalom. He scrounges in his
pocket and hands him a peace offering.

JACK MOSBY

Here. Know what that is?

ABSALOM

Nothin' but an 'ol smithy nail for a
hoss shoe, 'cept bent up some.

JACK MOSBY

It's a friendship ring. Yo' daddy
made it, when Poppa wasn't around.

ABSALOM

So? What I want it for?

JACK MOSBY

Means we's friends. For life, like
the Three Musketeers. Stand up for
one another. All for one and one
for all.

Absalom softens, slides it on, and admires it.

ABSALOM

Fits purty good. Ain't had no ring
before. Always and for ever?

JACK MOSBY
Always and forever. I got one too.

ABSALOM
What 'bouts bein' your nigga'?

JACK MOSBY
Ah, I'm just playing ya', Abby.

ABSALOM
Mebbe I don't want no friendship
with you. You ever figger on that?

JACK MOSBY
If you could read, you'd know how
important it is to have a friend for
life. Like the Three Musketeers.

ABSALOM
Exactly what is a Muskrat-tear?

JACK MOSBY
They's French sword fighters.

ABSALOM
Real swords?

JACK MOSBY
Absolutely. Stand up for the helpless
and less fortunate po' folk in Europe.

Mosby stops and studies the road, then brightens.

JACK MOSBY
B'jiminey! Why don't you stay Abby?
I can show ya' how to sword fight
come recess.

ABSALOM
Think it'd be aw-right with yer Mam?

JACK MOSBY
Why shore I do. See, we needs each
other. So long as we stick together,
ain't nobody ever gonna bully us,
Absalom. Nobody!

ABSALOM
Okay, Jacky boy. I'll Musketeer
with you, on your word of honor that
we stand by each other, no matter.

Mosby crosses his heart and solemnly spits. Arm in arm,
they march toward a small schoolhouse in the distance.

EXT. SCHOOL YARD - AFTERNOON

Recess.

A crowd of white children whoop and holler. At the mob's center, Absalom teeters on a crate, fighting back tears.

GEORGE TURPIN
What'm I bid for this monkey boy?

The pack howls.

ABSALOM
Please Mister Turpin-

GEORGE TURPIN
Shut yer pie hole, nigga'!

GEORGE TURPIN (12), slaps him. Everything about him blubbers fat. Swollen face, grimy neck folds, stubby fingers. When his bulgy lips part, even his teeth look fat.

BIDDER ONE
Five dollars and a three legged hog!

GEORGE TURPIN
I'm bid five and a crippled pig.

BIDDER TWO
Ten dollars an' a blind mule!

GEORGE TURPIN
Kin I git 20 and a jackass?

BIDDER ONE
Ya'll ready got the jackass!

The children laugh louder and he cuffs Absalom again, then stops when he hears...

SILENCE.

The swarm parts. Mosby advances, face to face with Turpin.

GEORGE TURPIN
Speak of the Devil an' he appears.
Halloo Jack...Ass!

JACK MOSBY
You cannot sell my friend.

Jack clenches his fists and draws back the nail ring hand.

GEORGE TURPIN

Friend? Go on for I squash you like
a weevil. Seen bigger tits on a bul-

WHACK! WHACK!

Mosby quivers, and then crumples.

Senseless, curled on the ground, Mosby sobs bloody puffs of
dust. He can see Absalom's eyes plead, well up, and gush.

The crowd cinches tighter and Absalom wilts from view.

EXT. MOSBY FARMYARD - EVENING

AARON (45), grooms a large Bay near the barn. The two boys
near. Jack trails Absalom, who no longer carries his books.

Absalom peels off to a small shack behind the barn.

Careful to keep Aaron between him and the massive horse,
Jack drifts in and drops his books.

AARON

'Bout time you young 'uns show'd.
Yo' Mam 'bout split a gut. Best git
on in there now.

JACK MOSBY

I'm real sorry Uncle Aaron. We....

He begins to sniffle and then breaks down.

AARON

Now, now. See here. Ain't no cause
fer carryin' on, Jack. We was jus'
worried, s'all.

JACK MOSBY

It ain't for being behind my time.
For letting Absalom git sold off.

AARON

Sold off? Sold off'n by who?

JACK MOSBY

Them boys at school auctioned him
off at recess. That shit tickler
Turpin done it!

AARON

Watch yer mouth, boy.

JACK MOSBY

Yes, sir.

AARON

You means to say George Turpin tried to auction off my Abby?

JACK MOSBY

It ain't funny. They sold him to a boy from Five Forks for 40 dollars!

AARON

I's sorry Marse Jack. Don't means to laugh, but them boys ain't sold nobody no how.

JACK MOSBY

They ain't?

AARON

No sir-ree. Them boys ain't got no 40 dollar and they sho' ain't got no auctioneer license.

JACK MOSBY

Ya' think?

AARON

Why sho'. I knows auctions. Wipe yer nose and git ready for supper now. Yo' Momma been a fright worryin' o'er ya'll. I see to Abby.

JACK MOSBY

I tried to stand up. Gave my word, but...just tired a' bein' sickly s'all. Like ta' whoop that Turpin upside his fat cow head!

AARON

'Spect his itch get rubbed soon 'nuff, but mebbe yer time finally come round.

JACK MOSBY

Time? For what, Uncle Aaron?

AARON

The Phil-Oh-Steen Phil-Os-Oh-Fee.

JACK MOSBY

The Phil-a-what? You joshin' me?

AARON

Look here, boy. Yo' Momma loves ya, mebbe too much, but yo' head ain't screwed on right 'bout bein' a man in this world.

Just a stare.

AARON

Sometimes ya' jest can't fight fair!
Don' much matter if ya wins, ya'
just gotta stand up to bullies. Use
fear as a weapon. The Beast, boy.

Mosby looks like he ate sour apples and rubs a bloody trickle.

AARON

Hear me now, child. Hit first, hard
and fast, see? Unexpected like.
An' while they's dazed, same as a
duck hit on a head with a rock, skee-
daddle. Hit an' git!

Aaron gets more animated, demonstrating footwork, and jabs.
Jack, mesmerized, begins to get it, and grins.

MONTAGE - AARON LEARNS MOSBY UP

AARON (V.O.)

I 'splained the story a' David an'
the Phil-o-steen giant. How David
trained for sheep. Jus' him and the
Lord. How he attacked Go-liath, ran
right at him and surprised him!

-- Twilight, a groggy Mosby shovels up Aaron's eggs, drinks
some coffee, grimaces, and grabs his shotgun. From the
kitchen window, Absalom watches him walk toward the woods.

-- Afternoon, he returns, tosses a bony, runt rabbit on the
kitchen table where Aaron prepares supper, impressed.

AARON (V.O.)

I teached Jack how David stood up to
everything, learnt to fight lions
an' bears. Move fast! Strike first.
Make the Beast work for you.

-- Mosby's in a school fight, lands the first blow, but ends
up on the bottom taking his licks, again.

-- He comes home, bloodied. Aaron dips a rag at the pump
and dabs his face, while Absalom grimaces at the deep scrapes.

AARON (V.O.)

Lord was teachin' David for Go-liath,
but Jack was a'fixin' to face his
own giant. I could see right off,
Jacky boy had the sand.

-- Wide-eyed, Mosby clenches a horse's neck, and circles the corral, while Aaron holds the rope at center. He falls off and Absalom giggles. Riled, he glares, and mounts up again.

-- The early hunt scene repeats, and he returns with two squirrels and a rabbit...and tries some more coffee.

AARON (V.O.)

If'n you gonna fight, first thump
best be a thriller. Hit hard soon.
And never fight fair. Turn fear on
them, let the Beast chew their hide.

-- The boys laugh in front of a full-length looking glass, comparing Abby's brown skinned eyelids with Mosby's shiners.

-- Mosby rides alone, faster and more agile, as Aaron and Absalom watch astride the corral fence, nodding approvingly.

-- The hunt scene echoes, older and taller, but still gaunt, Mosby drops a turkey on the table, and slurps his coffee.

-- The short end of the stick again, Mosby meets Aaron at the pump with a confident air, and offers Aaron his own rag.

AARON (V.O.)

Put Lord's fear in them first, so
the Beast git on them. Sides, nobody
gonna kill ya. Go ahead and fight,
but hit hard. And move fast!

-- A ruffled Mosby returns without a black eye, and Aaron beams, until he turns his head and presents the purple mouse.

-- Mosby rides across the rich, rolling Virginia countryside, leaps some logs, races a fox, and charges up steep bluffs. Aaron and Absalom wave as he tops the far hill, rearing up.

-- Skunked, a teenager now, he flops down and swigs his coffee. Aaron raises a teasing eyebrow until Mosby nods over his shoulder. Through the door, hung in a tree, we see a trophy buck. Aaron roars, slaps Mosby's shoulder, and the coffee flies!

AARON (V.O.)

Danged if he didn't believe me.
Took to fightin' fearless, like a
Alabama badger. After that, no mo'
Jack. We took to callin' him John.

EXT. MOSBY FARMYARD - AFTERNOON

SUPER: FOUR YEARS LATER

A large home nestled in the lush Virginia countryside. A few slaves work in the surrounding fields.

INT. LIVING ROOM

MISS ABBY (30), her bun, spectacles, and Boston twang can't hide the beauty battling the blue-blooded old maid inside.

Mosby, now 17, but barely 100 pounds, his younger brother William, and their little sisters, Lucy and Lelia, listen with rapt attention.

MISS ABBY

Just because slavery is in the Bible,
does not mean God is commending it.
He is only citing it as a fact of
history, like a king or a war.

MOSBY

But Miss Abby, we got slaves.

MISS ABBY

You have slaves, John.

MOSBY

Yes, Ma'am. We have slaves. So you
think daddy's wrong having slaves?

MISS ABBY

That is a question a great many people
are asking these days.

MOSBY

But does the Bible say it's evil?

MISS ABBY

Is it right for a man to own another?
To make someone do your work with no
say or wage? See them as less than
the thumb print of the Almighty,
like so much as a horse or wagon?

MOSBY

My pa says it doesn't call it sin.

The children all turn for her volley.

MISS ABBY

My job here is to teach. Reading,
writing, sums, and how to make up
your own mind, John Mosby. To think.
To be an adult. To be a real man.

They now all turn and look to Mosby. He stands up, puzzled,
and moves to the window.

MOSBY

My granddaddy, his granddaddy before
him. Hard seeing them all wrong.

MISS ABBY

So then, might makes right?

MOSBY

No, but my pa says, Yankees telling
us what to do with our own servants,
ain't that the same, Miss Abby?

MISS ABBY

Is that what Aaron and Absalom are?
Servants? Stella serves in my home
in Boston, whom I pay to do so. It
allows me to tutor you, but she may
leave if it suits her. She is free
to choose.

Mosby looks out the window. Absalom, dressed in "hand-me-downs," too small for his teenage frame, works in the corral.

MOSBY

My pa says if you treat them right-

MISS ABBY

My pa says! My pa says! What do
you think, John?

Absalom notices Mosby, smiles, and waves. Mosby acknowledges it, but half-hearted, almost ashamed.

MOSBY

I reckon my pa knows what's best.
They seem happy enough.

MISS ABBY

Happy? I'll show you happy!

She stands, storms at him, and flings open the window!

MISS ABBY

Yell out there, right now, and tell
Absalom he's free! Go ahead! I
dare you. Then you will see happy!

Mosby drops his head.

MISS ABBY

John, I love you like my own son.
It gives me no pleasure to quarrel,
but you must stand up for what's
right. That's what makes a man a
real man. He takes a stand.

INT. LIVING ROOM - CONTINUOUS

The door to the parlor opens and the children's father, ALFRED MOSBY (50), enters with a heavy hush.

ALFRED MOSBY

Ready for the University of Virginia, John? With your permission, Miss Abby, time for John to become a man.

MISS ABBY

We were just speaking to that very point. Becoming a man, thinking for himself, and not what others think.

ALFRED MOSBY

More abolition talk? Thinking like yours will bring blood rivers to the South. Yankee tripe, telling us how to live. We will not be bullied!

MISS ABBY

Yet you tell Aaron how to live his life with the threat of a bullwhip?

ALFRED MOSBY

You have seen no whips here. We treat our servants well enough. Why without our help, they'd be lost. You think they have sense enough-

Aaron slips in unnoticed, and now uncomfortable.

AARON

'Scuse me, Mister Alfred, sir. The wagon's all loaded, 'cept somebody crossed up the traces real bad.

ALFRED MOSBY

Yes, the new Clydesdales, full of piss and vinegar. Gave me some fuss.

AARON

No worry. I fixed 'em up proper. Mister John needing anythin' else?

ALFRED MOSBY

Thank you, no. That will be all Aaron. We will be out directly.

AARON

Yes, sir. I see to the buckboard.

Aaron backs out and Mosby begins to follow, but stops at the doorway to let his father pass first.

MISS ABBY

Uh, Mister Mosby, you were saying?

ALFRED MOSBY

Miss Abby, everyone here has slaves. Always has. Always will. It is legal. You can see Monticello from our orchard. Even Jefferson owned-

MISS ABBY

And wrote "all men are created equal with the right to life, liberty, and the pursuit of happiness." Some would predispose upon our Creator in determining the who of "all men" is.

Alfred shakes his head and leaves. Mosby starts to go.

MISS ABBY

John, please. Remember. A real man stands up for the weak. You of all people, should know that.

Mosby nods and follows after his father.

EXT. MOSBY FARMYARD - MOMENTS LATER

Mosby says his good-byes. Absalom, although nearby, is not included. Alfred motions to his son to step away with him.

ALFRED MOSBY

You are a man now, John. Miss Abby was right about that, but she could not be more wrong about our ways. You need to put her wagging tongue from your mind. Look at Absalom.

Mosby turns and sees his friend shoveling manure.

ALFRED MOSBY

Animals. Without us, they are wild. Remember that. We have spared them from a cruel life, given them structure, protection, a family of sorts. In short, we have saved them.

Mosby can see Absalom over Alfred's shoulder. Absalom notices him, but doesn't wave. Just a half nodded smile, and goes back to work.

ALFRED MOSBY

You hearing me clear, boy?

MOSBY

I thought I was a man now, father.

ALFRED MOSBY

You mind what I say, John. A real
man knows his place. Blood comes
first, then your country, Virginia.

MOSBY

And friendship? Where does it rank?

ALFRED MOSBY

Time you shed such childish notions.
He is only a slave. Just property.

Mosby looks away, shakes his head, and laughs.

ALFRED MOSBY

What, pray tell, is so amusing?

MOSBY

Just seems all the folks who favor
slavery...seem to all be free.

Aaron inches the buckboard toward them, but Mosby goes to
Absalom. Then, eyeing his father, Mosby hugs Absalom, hard.

AARON (V.O.)

And that's the day I made up my mind
'bout John Singleton Mosby.