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Parental Roles in *Narrative of the Life of Frederick Douglass, An American Slave:*

*Written by Himself*

Like many other people born into slavery, Frederick Douglass' family life was hugely affected by it, not only during his childhood but throughout his adult life as well. As Douglass mentions in the first chapter of *Narrative of the Life of Frederick Douglass, An American Slave: Written by Himself*, he never learned much about his father and was taken away from his mother before he could become acquainted with her. He did not know anything about his ancestry or his own identity, since the date of his birth is unknown. His struggle was thus not only to find a way out of slavery but also to establish himself. From the psychological theory of attachment, it is known that a child's psychological and social development is to a great extent reliant on the parents - and it is only natural that the children deprived of parental figures seek them in people around.

While Frederick Douglass had never had any biological nor foster father, there were several men in his life who could potentially substitute in this role. "Children look to their fathers to lay down the rules and enforce them", father figures are the source of security and confidence (Pediatric Associates of Franklin) - as much as the system of slavery lacked affection and space for inner growth, it certainly did not lack these two fundamental things; rules and their enforcement and sense of safety.

Due to the lack of any other fatherly figure, it was many times the slave owner who was seen as the biggest authority. Despite the hardships the slaves experienced, they still felt proud of their masters, as Douglass points out: "[they] think their own masters are better than the

masters of other slaves; ... it is not uncommon for slaves even to fall out and quarrel among themselves about the relative goodness of their masters, each contending for the superior goodness of his own over that of the others.” (20) Douglass further explains that “[t]hey seemed to think that the greatness of their masters was transferable to themselves” (20). For a child living in what is considered a normal family consisting of two parents, the feeling of pride comes from its own background. For those born into slavery, on the other hand, there is no such background - not only there usually are no achievements to be proud of, but more importantly, there is no one to connect these achievements to, since the parents are unknown. By connecting themselves to their masters, the slaves could find at least some sense of identity and belonging.

Similar attempts for replacement of the fundamental needs of a child can be seen also in connection to security. This can be seen when Douglass talks about Master Daniel Lloyd: “He became quite attached to me, and was a sort of protector of me. He would not allow the older boys to impose upon me, and would divide his cakes with me.” (23) While Douglass sees him as a protector, he nevertheless suffers from hunger and cold, yet he still perceives his master as kind and protective since he does not physically abuse him.

The meaning of the word security is shifted - instead of comfort, trust and respect, it means at least something to eat, at least somewhere to sleep and a chance to survive. Douglass’ experience of several slave owners shows clearly how every act of human decency is perceived as a blessing because it is completely out of the ordinary.

Frederick Douglass met his mother several times, however, it was his grandmother, Betsy Bailey, who functioned as the main mother figure. As the child’s brain is undergoing significant social and psychological development in the first five years of life (Min Lee), Douglass’ grandmother had undeniable influence over his future life. The fact that he spent those few first years of his life living aside from the plantation can be what allowed his

personal and intellectual development. The first encounter with the reality of slavery was something “[he] never shall forget it whilst [he] remember[s] any thing.” (Douglass 14) Sophia Auld figured as another significant source of guidance, even though her stance markedly changed as she developed a better understanding of her role of a mistress. However, Mrs. Auld was the first teacher Douglass had ever had as she taught him the alphabet and basics of spelling (26). Without any acknowledgment, she engaged in the motherly role of teaching and thus helped Douglass to become a part of the educated society later in his free life.

Frederick Douglass’ *Narrative* shows the impact of slavery on the overall eligibility for education and personal growth of the enslaved people. At the same time, it helps to explain how even the people living in such harsh conditions took every opportunity to better themselves.

Works Cited

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