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To live without one's parents is a horrible hardship that usually leads to, at least in some ways, one parenting oneself. For Frederick Douglass, it was not only a loss of parents, but of a family unit as a whole, as even though some of his blood relatives live close to him, he never feels this familial bond.

At the beginning of his life, he was cared for by two women, one of whom his aunt Hester and the other one his grandmother. When he is taken away from his mother, who ultimately passes away, they care for him and are at the time the closest thing to family he has at this young age. It is likely he feels closer to these two women than he did his own mother, as when she dies, he likens the emotions to the same ones he would feel at the death of a stranger.

Given his closeness to these women, it is very distressing for him when he sees his Aunt being whipped brutally, so much that it sticks with him for the rest of his life. Some might argue, it is this fact that may prevent Douglass from letting himself get too attached if only to protect his psyche from seeing his family getting hurt.

His grandmother is a different story altogether. She is everyone's mother or grandmother; she has nursed almost the entire slave population owned by Captain Anthony and her role on the plantation was to care for children of the younger women. She sees everyone as her children. She even nursed her master when he was a baby. Sadly, this does not guarantee her treatment is any better than her fellow slaves. She eventually ends up being discarded like an old pair of shoes that is no longer useful. Again, the hate he felt for the slaveholders for their treatment of his grandmother was so strong he describes the emotion as loathing.

The only kinship he really feels after this is for the other slaves at the Great House Farm. But even here, when the slaves sing as they work, Douglass admits to not understanding the feelings these songs evoked, and the kinship the slaves felt, when he himself was a slave.

There are some bonds with white folk as well, but all of them seem spoiled by the system. For example, when he first meets Sophia Auld, she is kind, unmarred by slavery and treats him with some respect, teaching him some letters and sparking within him the passion for reading. Sadly, though, the horrible system eventually gets to her as well, and she becomes a cruel and savage slave owner.

The bond he created with some of the white boys in his pursuit of an education is much purer than the initial respect Sophia held for him. Children, after all, are less marred by slavery, and their hearts tend to be more open. Therefore, when Douglass bargained and bartered with bread to learn to read and write, the boys obliged, and he felt thankful for it for the rest of his life.

Overall, though, it may be said that Douglass has never entirely succeeded at replacing the foundation of a family unit in his childhood, and if it looked as though he might, it was always snatched from his grip by the cruel system.