

Pavel Hadraba

Jeffrey Alan Vanderziel, B.A.

AJL17051: African American History and Culture

27 April 2021

The Substitution of the Family Roles as Described in the First Autobiography of Frederick Douglass

Frederick Douglass, a former African American slave in the United States, has described in his autobiographical book how slavery was perceived by slaves themselves (through the author's own eyes) during the 19th century. What is interesting about this very popular story is Douglass's depiction of the relationships he had made with different white people. Seldom were his fellow enslaved brethren the ones he was bonded with the most. The whites – those responsible for his and his folk's misery – were the ones he chose (or was made) to befriend or at least to connect with. In this essay, I am going to be examining this rather interesting phenomenon.

First, we need to be aware of the fact that the parental love Douglass had experienced was little to none. Everything he knew about his father was that he “was a white man” (Douglass 2). Douglass has derived this information not only from what other people around him were saying but also from the fact that his mother was born to two slaves who were “quite dark” (Douglass 1-2) and he himself possessed the visage of a mulatto. He also knew very little about his mother and haven't had more than half a dozen interactions with her between the time he learned she was his mother and her death, about which he does not know very much. Douglass's lack of parental figures, as well as lack of siblings, whom he had but didn't feel to be connected with as such, was to be dealt with in an unexpected way.

The first time a reader gets the impression of a maternal figure in the life of Frederick Douglass comes when he describes the qualities of Sophia Auld – his mistress in Baltimore. On the occasion of their first meeting, he describes her face as “beaming with the most kindly emotions” (Douglass 26), then he assures the reader she was “a woman of the kindest heart and finest feelings” (Douglass 28). After she starts teaching young Frederick the alphabet, or more specifically after she is prohibited to do so by her husband, Douglass writes about the change of her behaviour not only towards him but the

slaves in general. Nonetheless, the feelings aroused in him by her initial goodness might be perceived as those one would expect from their mother.

As for the paternal figure, it is difficult to find one in this book. The reader can receive two slight impressions of “protecting” and “caring” men. Those are Mr George Cookman – one of the preachers visiting Colonel Lloyd’s plantation – and Mr Wilson, whose Sabbath school attempt is not but mentioned. Mr Cookman, however, is said to have taken “more notice of (the slaves) than either of the other ministers” (Douglass 48) and that the slaves “believed him to be a good man” (Ibidem). And even though Mr Cookman and Mr Wilson have small importance and are not given many lines in the story of Frederick Douglass, they are the only “father figures” to be found in it.

The siblings that Douglass had never been really bonded to emotionally were replaced by the little white boys he used to meet in Baltimore. Giving them bread or tricking them they taught him to read and many other things, and when the time came to part with them on the occasion of leaving Baltimore for the second time, he thought leaving them very bitter and painful. “It was to those little Baltimore boys that I felt the strongest attachment,” (Douglass 43) he directly states.

The only figure whose place had not been taken up by a white person is that of a wife. Douglass had married a free black woman called Anna Murray in 1838, according to the certificate of the ceremony performed by Rev. J. W. C. Pennington in New York (see Douglass 94), a short while after which Frederick also changed his surname from “Bailey”, to “Johnson” and finally to “Douglass”.

It is clear that in search of foundational family relationships Frederick Douglass focused more on the white people than his own folks. The maternal role is clearly visible in Sophia Auld, the brothers and sisters in the white kids from Baltimore. When we cut deep enough, we can even find two father-like figures – both white. During his enslavement by white men, he was too disconnected from his own people to have enough connections on this level. The only coloured person to have filled a position of a family member during the events described in this book was his wife. The reasons for him to marry a black woman are rather obvious, but most important of them is the strength of the marital bond that he naturally chose to share with someone of his own people.

Works Cited

Douglass, Frederick. *Narrative of the Life of Frederick Douglass*. Anti-Slavery Office, 1845.