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A Search for Family in *Narrative of the Life of Frederick Douglass, An American Slave: Written by Himself*

As a slave, Frederick Douglass led a life that was at times very solitary. He had no connection with his parents – his father’s identity was unknown to him and his mother died as a stranger in his eyes, because she was forcefully separated from him “before [he] knew her as [his] mother” (Douglass 12). Also, he was frequently transferred from one master to another, having to abandon his relationships and build new ones. The changes of his surroundings prevented him from building a stable circle of friends and family and left him in the world all by himself, often without any ties. And yet, in the novel we can see his determination to overcome the circumstances and create new connections wherever he was sent, searching for a replacement of family, sometimes failing and other times succeeding.

At first, Douglass encountered two mother figures in his boyhood, neither of them fully satisfying his need for parental figure. The first was his grandmother, in whose care he was placed from his infancy. She was tasked with raising little children separated from their mothers until they were old enough to be placed on the plantation. Even though Douglass does not talk about his own connection with his grandmother, he expresses his grief at her treatment when she was left alone in the woods because she was of no use to her master: “My poor old grandmother, the devoted mother of twelve children, is left all alone” (Douglass 33). This mother figure was only temporary for Douglass, however, as she was only tasked with raising him for a couple of

years, and therefore could not keep an eye on him for long. Another mother figure was not only temporary like his grandmother, but also unsuccessful in creating a positive relationship with him. His new mistress, Mrs. Auld, seemed to him at the beginning “a woman of the kindest heart and finest feelings” (Douglass 26). Naturally, he looked up to her, because she was a woman that showed him kindness and attended to his needs – even started teaching him how to read. Even though he was her property, in some sense he was enjoying similar care as her own son. However, that started changing over time as her nature hardened under the power of slavery. Douglass does not blame her for it, which shows his persisting affection towards her, but he admits that he was rather glad to leave her house when the time came. The second mother figure thus proved to be disappointing.

The other, more successful replacement of family proved to be friendships and a sense of community among slaves. Curiously, the first friendships he felt strongly about were with the poor white boys of Baltimore who taught him how to read and write. He said that “it was to those little Baltimore boys that [he] felt the strongest attachment” (Douglass 34). It was not his master nor his mistress he said he would miss – instead, it was the white children who became his friends and treated him like their equal more than any other white person. After being forcefully taken from their company, he mentions that the brotherhood with other slaves was one of his main driving forces. About the slaves he met at the Freeland’s estate he said: “We were linked and interlinked with each other. I loved them with a love stronger than any thing I have experienced since” (Douglass 49). His connection to his fellow slaves on Freeland’s estate only deepened when he started a Sabbath school for them and fed their hunger for knowledge. In their company, he finally felt a sense of belonging and ties that could be equal to being linked by blood.

After he was transferred to Baltimore, he managed to escape, but sadness from leaving his friends in Baltimore was gnawing at his heart, proving that he once again regretted that he had to leave the people that were everything to him: “I had a number of warmhearted friends in Baltimore – friends that I loved almost as I did my life – and the thought of being separated from them forever was painful beyond expression” (Douglass 59). His friends were the only force strong enough to make him hesitate with his escape plan. Once he escaped and found himself in new surroundings he admitted how lonely he was without them: “There I was in the midst of thousands, and yet a perfect stranger; without home and without friends” (Douglass 60). This proves how much his friends meant to him and how difficult it was for him to leave this substitute family and plunge himself into the unknown, this time from his own will. Luckily, he soon started making new friends in the North and created a family of his own with his wife Anna. Anna was not previously mentioned in the novel, and yet it is she who gave Douglass what he searched for his whole life: a stable family environment. Only in his freedom, he fully achieved what he strived for his entire life and was finally able to put down roots.

All in all, in the novel the reader can witness Douglass’ attempts at creating family bonds wherever he went and see how it pained him to leave them behind. After encountering two mother figures who did not succeed in replacing his own mother, he realized that his friends were the closest thing he had to a family. Even though he seldom mentions their names in the novel, he admits that his friends gave him a sense of brotherhood and community. Only after his escape was he able to settle down and create a family of his own, but still missed his friends dearly as if they were his second family.

Works Cited

Douglass, Frederick. *Narrative of the Life of Frederick Douglass, An American Slave: Written by Himself*. Boston: Anti-Slavery Office, 1845