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Frederick Douglass and Understanding of Parenthood and Descent

The Martin Luther King, Jr. of the 19th century, abolitionist, activist and a free man, Frederick Douglass was a diamond formed in difficult situations of pressure. As a slave-born man, he struggled but did not give up on himself and later fled to freedom of North. He captured his life in an autobiography called *Narrative of the Life of Frederick Douglass, An American Slave: Written by Himself*. However, he reveals more than details of his life and gives a background of how the lack of parents' love and his descent shaped him into the revolutionary figure he is remembered as.

Frederick Douglas starts of his work recalling his earliest days on Earth. He “specif[ies] a place but not a date of birth” (Olney 50) which Olney includes in the list of similar features of books with the same themes as the one by Douglass. The missing or unknown date of birth points towards the alienation of a slave child from his parents, but most importantly the whole concept of one's descent. The slaveholders made it their goal to deprive the slaves of anything that could possibly lead to any rebellious behavior, therefore starting from the cancellation of the first relationship a person is ought to have, that is with their parents and their own self, for example knowing the basic information such as their birthdate. It did, however, not stop many from courageously changing their lives against all odds, similarly to Frederick Douglass. He as well did not understand parenthood and connected parts of one's life in a same way as the white

population around him did at that time. He, therefore, struggled to find a stable basis for his life and grasped to whatever signal of stability, so he can build on it and move forward.

He knew his biological mother only very briefly through encounters at night in time of his early childhood and describes their situation briefly in the beginning of his autobiography:

“My mother and I were separated when I was but an infant--before I knew her as my mother. It is a common custom, in the part of Maryland from which I ran away, to part children from their mothers at a very early age.” (Douglass 12)

The second most significant female figure in his life, mainly his growing-up, was one of his owners, ironically as most ones he served were often brutal. Being “the property of Lucretia Anthony Auld” (Koehn 213) greatly helped Douglass in the forming of his own self. Despite the lack of affection in his life, especially the parental love he was deprived of, Auld represented what was at least closest to what could be understood as a mother by Douglass. With her guidance, he outgrew the uneducated person most slaveholders wanted their slaves to be and learned the basics needed for education, that is alphabet. Although this woman did not stay in his life for long, due to her becoming less of a person he thought he knew additionally to other circumstances, he nevertheless continued to pursue his literary ambitions, learned the rest of the alphabet, started reading and then moved to imprint these information onto other fellow slaves of his. As he understood at a young age, when Auld’s husband reacted to the fact of him learning the alphabet negatively, that the key to freedom is education. Nevertheless, Frederick Douglass followed in footsteps of the few now-free slaves, showing that he never overcame struggles with his identity entirely.

After escaping slavery, by unknown actions hidden by him to give a chance to others to do the same, he decided to leave his two middle names among other things in the past and changed his name to Frederick Douglass, by which he is known as one of the most significant figures regarding African American rights. The previously mentioned list by Olney mentions “taking of a new last name” (Olney 51) as another common feature of previous slaves’ lives. This action can be understood as a bandage to cover up their past or dealing with the lack of understanding and information about their descent. Fortunately, as mentioned before, Douglass took an advantage of his difficult life to teach others, speak up and use his knowledge for a change towards the better, as in one of his most famous speeches *What to the Slave Is the Fourth of July?*.

The stereotype of African Americans growing up without one or both parents still resonates with society of the last three decades. H. Elaine Rodney and Robert Mupier wrote on this, mentioning that in “1993, [...] 90% of Black children spent part of their childhood in a single-parent female-headed household” (Rodney and Mupier 45). It is, therefore, clear that the efforts of the slaveholders of the past have far-reaching consequences even today, more than a hundred years later and the connection might be vague but can be still clearly seen. The efforts of these wealthy Caucasians have proven to be partially successful, but far from what was expected. Frederick Douglass himself resisted their efforts. Despite the lack of parental love, information about his origins and about himself, he managed to be successful and exceeded so many expectations.

Works Cited

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