

Dominika Letková

AJ17051 African American History and Culture I

Jeffrey Alan Vanderziel, B.A.

29 April 2021

### Important Figures in Life of Frederick Douglass

Relationships are foundation of people's lives from early childhood and they have a great impact throughout the whole life. It was not different in the case of Frederick Douglass, a former slave, abolitionist, significant writer and orator. In his work *Narrative of the Life of Frederick Douglass* he describes his story from early childhood in slavery until his escape to the North in his twenties. Even though Frederick Douglass was separated from his biological family, there can be found parental figures as well as siblings throughout the novel that influenced Frederick's life.

To begin with, Frederick Douglass was a son of slave mother and probably his master Captain Anthony. He was separated from her and spent first few years at his grandmother who was responsible for upbringing and care of slaves' children. His mother, Harriet Baily, tried to keep in touch with him, travelled at night to see him, however, he never thought of her as a maternal figure: "Never having enjoyed, to any considerable extent, her soothing presence, her tender and watchful care, I received the tidings of her death with much the same emotions I should have probably felt at the death of a stranger" (Douglass 13).

As a possible maternal figure in the life of Frederick Douglass can be considered Sophia Auld. At Frederick's arrival to Baltimore, as his new mistress, she was "the woman of the kindest heart and finest feelings" (26). She was the one who introduced him the world of letters and words as she started to teach him how to read which had an important impact on

his life. It opened his eyes as he realized the reality of his position. However, through Sophia Auld, Frederick Douglass shows in his *Narrative* the negative effect of slavery on the masters: “The fatal poison of irresponsible power was already in her hands, and soon commenced its infernal work. That cheerful eye, under the influence of slavery, soon became red with rage; that voice, made all of sweet accord, changed to one of harsh and horrid discord; and that angelic face gave place to that of a demon” (26).

Moreover, as other parental figures can be considered Mr. Ruggles who looked after Douglass after his escape and helped him in difficult situation to start over in New York. He helped him to arrange a wedding with Anna Murray and to leave for New Bedford. There was another couple, Mr. and Mrs. Johnson who were abolitionists. They again helped the newly wed couple to start over and live freely which can be considered as a parental act. When Frederick needed a new name for life in New Bedford, he asked Mr. Johnson. These people had a great influence on Douglass since they were on the beginning of his life as a free person.

In *Narrative of the Life of Frederick Douglass* can be found sibling figures, too. The possible brothers of Douglass can be the little white boys who he befriended when in Baltimore in order to learn how to write and practice reading. Gradually, they became close and had mutual affection and sympathy for each other. It was these three little white boys that Douglass discussed the matter of slavery with and showed his anxiety about his position at a young age. And as a reaction to that, they would express their sympathy: “These words used to trouble them; they would express for me the liveliest sympathy, and console me with the hope that something would occur by which I might be free” (29). Douglass even felt sorry when he was leaving behind these friendships when moving to his new master.

As another sibling figures can be recognized Douglass's fellow slaves, especially at Mr. Freeland's. Douglass was teaching them at Sabbath school because they wanted to learn;

and through them, he showed the “mental darkness” and starvation for knowledge of slaves. They were all very close as they shared the same condition: “We were linked and interlinked with each other. I loved them with a love stronger than anything I have experienced since” (49). Together they planned an escape for a better life in the North.

All things considered, in spite of separation from his biological parents, Frederick Douglass was able to meet other parental figures in his life who had deeply influenced him. One of them was his mistress, Sophia Auld who helped Douglass to learn how to read with a great kindness. However, slavery changed her into cold and cruel slave mistress. Other possible parental figures can be found at the beginning of his new, free life in the North. Mr. Ruggles and the Johnsons were the important support for Douglass as they helped him to build his life as a free person. Douglass describes important friendships which he cultivated at first as a little boy in Baltimore and then later as a young man at Mr. Freeland's. These friendships can be related to relationship of siblings. As can be seen, all these relationships affected him deeply and without them, he would not be the man he was.

Works Cited

Douglass, Frederick. *Narrative of the Life of Frederick Douglass*. Antislavery office, Boston, 1845.