

Michaela Odehnalová

Jeffrey Alan Vanderziel, B.A.

AJ17051 Introduction to African American History and Culture I

April 29, 2021

Frederick Douglass: Familial Relationships

Frederick Douglass in his novel *Narrative of the Life of Frederick Douglass, An American Slave: Written by Himself* seldom mentions any familial relations. The reader is told only briefly about his mother, an unknown father, and several siblings and aunts and uncles, but none of them seem to be close to Douglas. The only exception is perhaps his uncle Henry Bailey, who belongs to a group of slaves with whom Douglas plans an escape from slavery. In the novel, the relationship that Douglass has with these slaves is described as one of the strongest. He says “I believe we would have died for each other. We never moved separately. We were one” (Douglass 49). Besides Anna Murray Douglass, Douglass’ wife, this group of slaves is perhaps the closest that Douglass ever comes to having a family. Nevertheless, there are more people that Douglass might have considered as close friends or familial figures.

There are two potential father figures in the novel – Master Daniel Lloyd and Mr. Auld. The reader is only told one thing about Douglass’ father – that he was white. Although Douglass mentions that he heard rumors of his father being also his owner, his father’s identity was never revealed to him, and therefore he was forced to grow up without a father. In the novel, however, Douglass mentions two figures – one positive, the other a strange mixture of both positive and negative. The first of these is Master Daniel Lloyd. This man is mentioned in the whole novel only briefly – however, Douglass says that he had a “connection with [him]” and explains that “He became quite attached to me, and he was sort of protector of me. He would not allow the older

boys to impose upon me, and would divide his cakes with me” (23). Douglass was under eight years old at the time, and so his positive relationship with Master Daniel Lloyd could serve as a replacement of his absent father. The second person – Mr. Auld – was Douglass’ master after leaving the Lloyd plantation, and because he was there when no one else was and Douglas was still a young boy, he could also be seen as a potential father figure.

Douglass’ grandmother, and his mistress Sophia Auld can easily be seen as mother figures in the novel. From what the reader is told in the novel, Douglass grew up without a mother – he was separated from her at a very early age and had almost no relationship with her. Douglass says that “I never saw my mother, to know her as such, more than four or five times in my life; and each of these times was very short in duration and at night” (12). He later adds that “I do not recollect of ever seeing my mother by the light of day” (12), thus admitting that he might have not even known or remembered what she really looked like. Furthermore, when he was leaving the Lloyd plantation at the age of seven or eight, he describes his familial relationships as basically non-existent: “my mother was dead, my grandmother lived far off, so that I seldom saw her” (24), and when his mother died, he says that due to their separation and no real mother-son relationship, he “received the tidings of her death with much the same emotions I should have probably felt at the death of a stranger” (13). The only person who was there during his childhood as a mother figure was his grandmother, but she was not only a mother figure to him, she was also a mother figure to a dozen other children. Douglass mentions her only a handful of times – and at the age of seven or eight, when he was leaving the Lloyd plantation, he already says that she “lived far off, so that I seldom saw her” (24). Thus, just like his mother, she was removed from his life. Douglass nevertheless expresses anger and sadness when he learns of her fate of being left to live out her days alone when she ceased to be useful due to her age, which is more than he had ever expressed

for his birth mother. The only other person in this novel that could serve as a mother figure is his mistress Sophia Auld, to whom he belonged after leaving the Lloyd plantation. Douglass describes her as “a woman of the kindest heart and finest feelings” (26). She fulfills some of the functions that a mother should – as Douglass says, “she had bread for the hungry, clothes for the naked, and comfort for every mourner that came within her reach” and she goes as far as to teach him to read, which she later ceases to do (28). Despite her later harshness, when Douglass returns to Baltimore and gets hurt, she takes care of him “with mother’s tenderness” (55), thus confirming that she can be seen as a mother figure.

When it comes to siblings, Douglass’ only relationships that can be seen as sibling-like are with his fellow slaves and other briefly mentioned friends. At the beginning of the novel the reader is told that Douglass “had two sisters and one brother, that lived in the same house with me; but the early separation of us from our mother had well nigh blotted the fact of our relationship from our memories” (24). Later in the novel, the reader is also told that one of his sisters was named Eliza, but other than the fact that that was her name and that she was there, there is nothing else to suggest any kind of a strong relationship. Douglass’ relationships with his siblings were therefore similar to his relationship with his parents, despite his siblings not being absent. The only people that Douglass mentions in the novel as having a friend-like or sibling-like relationship with is a brief mention of little boys in Baltimore who helped him to read and were concerned about his condition as a slave, and other unnamed friends in Baltimore. Douglas says that “I had a number of warmhearted friends in Baltimore – friends that I loved almost as I did my life” (59). When he left Baltimore for the first time, Douglas also writes that “It was to those little Baltimore boys that I felt the strongest attachment . . . and the thought of leaving them was painful indeed” (34). Other than the people in Baltimore and the aforementioned group of slaves with whom he attempted to

escape slavery, the novel does not mention any other kind of relationship that could replace that of siblings.

In conclusion, although Douglass was forced to grow up without his mother and father, he still succeeded in creating meaningful relationships with some people. He had his grandmother, and later his wife Anna Murray Douglass, and some slaveowners who were not as harsh as others and showed kindness to him when he was a child, if only for a short time. However, the most meaningful relationship that he formed was with his fellow slaves, with whom he shared the burden of slavery and a hope for escape.

Work Cited

Douglass, Frederick. *Narrative of the Life of Frederick Douglass, An American Slave: Written by Himself*. Boston, The Anti-Slavery Office, 1845. Antislavery Literature Project ed., 2005.