

Laura Sajko

laurasajko88@gmail.com

Frederick Douglass's Search for Relationships

Frederick Douglass was an American abolitionist and writer, and one of the few slaves that managed to escape slavery. Our assignment was to read his book "Narrative of the Life of Frederick Douglass, An American Slave: Written by Himself" and look at the replacing of fundamental family relationships – who are the mother figures, the father figures, and the siblings. In this essay I will present my thoughts on who those figures are in this narrative, and I will support those claims with quotes from the narrative. Lastly, I will try to answer the question of whether Douglass was successful in his search for relationships or not.

At the beginning, we shall look at the mother figures in Douglass's life. Douglass was very young when he was separated from his mother and did not meet with her many times before she died, so he had to find a mother figure in someone else. Throughout his story there are several female figures that could fill this role. The first such person would be, in my opinion, his maternal grandmother as she is the one that raised him until the time he moved to serve a new master in Baltimore. The fact that he does bare strong feelings for his grandmother is confirmed in the passage about his grandmother's destiny in which he refers to her as "my old poor grandmother" (Douglass 33). Apart from that, the whole passage in general is written in a very sorrowful way which can especially be seen from the following sentence:

She stands--she sits--she staggers--she falls--she groans--she dies--and there are none of her children or grandchildren present, to wipe from her wrinkled brow the cold sweat of death, or to place beneath the sod her fallen remains. (Douglass 33-34)

Another mother figure we can find in the narrative is Douglass's mistress in Baltimore, Mrs. Auld, but only at the beginning of his stay there, since he did report that slavery later changed her "kind heart". What especially makes a motherly figure is the fact that, as Douglass puts it, "very soon after I went to live with Mr. and Mrs. Auld, she very kindly commenced to

teach me the A, B, C” (Douglass 26). I find that this proves that she indeed was a motherly figure to him at the beginning as this is something that parents usually teach their children. Another instance where we can see her as a motherly figure is after Douglass’s fight in the ship-yard. Here Douglass states that his mistress’ heart “was again melted into pity” and that she “washed the blood from my face, and, with a mother’s tenderness, bound up my head, covering the wounded eye with a lean piece of fresh beef” (Douglass 55).

When it comes to father figures, on the other hand, one could argue that one of the father figures is Master Hugh, the husband of the mother figure from the previous passage. Although he was more often than not very harsh towards Douglass, the moment that shows us that he could be perceived as a father figure is, again, after the fight at the ship-yard. Here Douglass states that his master “listened attentively to my narration of the circumstances leading to the savage outrage, and gave many proofs of his strong indignation at it” and then later “he took me with him to Esquire Watson’s, on Bond Street, to see what could be done about the matter” (Douglass 55). I find that this behavior might remind us of a father’s reaction to hearing that his child is being bullied and then him reacting to that news.

Two more father figures can be found at the very end of the narrative. Here I first have in mind Mr. David Ruggles who took Douglass under his wing just after he gained his freedom. Apart from that he also helped Douglass decide where to go next so he could find a job, gave him money for the trip, and arranged for him to get married, all of which we might expect a father to do for his child.

Finally, I find that Mr. Nathan Johnson can also be regarded as a father figure mainly because he was the one that gave Douglass his name. As it is tradition for a child to take his father’s name, we can conclude that bestowing a last name upon a person is a very fatherly act, too.

Now we come to the question of who we could qualify as Douglass's brothers and sisters in the narrative. I would argue that the first sibling relationship we find in the narrative is the relationship Douglass has with the boys from Baltimore that helped him to learn how to read and write. I find that this can especially be seen from the way these boys taught him how to write – namely, Douglass states the following:

After that, when I met with any boy who I knew could write, I would tell him I could write as well as he. The next word would be, "I don't believe you. Let me see you try it." I would then make the letters which I had been so fortunate as to learn, and ask him to beat that.

(Douglass 31)

I find that this playful manner is definitely something we could see in a relationship between two siblings. Apart from that, we can also see that Douglass did care for the boys as he did not, therefore, reveal their names, but he also directly states that "it was to those little Baltimore boys that I felt the strongest attachment" (Douglass 34).

Apart from that, we also have to mention the slaves who Douglass was teaching how to read and write at Mr. Freeman's estate, that is, Henry and John Harris, Sandy Jenkins and Handy Caldwell. Douglass shows his affection to them several times in his narrative by stating, for example, that they "loved each other and to leave them at the close of Sabbath was a severe cross indeed" (Douglass 48). Another instance where we can see the strong connection they have developed is from the following quote: "The fact was, we care but little where we went, so we went together. Our greatest concert was about separation. We dreaded that more than any thing this side of death" (Douglass 52-53). Furthermore, we can consider Sandy to be an older brother figure from the description of their relationship, that is, this can mainly be seen in the sentence "I found Sandy an old advisor" (Douglass 43).

To sum up, we can clearly see from this essay that Douglass did build several relationships through the course of his life – while he was still a slave, he found brothers in his fellow slaves at Mr. Freeland's farm as well as in the little boys in Baltimore, and he found

parental figures in his grandmother, as well as his former master and mistress; after he managed to escape, he had his wife as well as his friends, the aforementioned father figures. We can therefore clearly conclude that Douglass indeed succeeded in his search for relationships and although some of those were only temporary because separation ended them, I believe that the relationships that he built after the escape were permanent.

WORKS CITED:

Douglass, Frederick. *Narrative of the Life of Frederick Douglass, An American Slave: Written by Himself*. Boston: Anti-slavery office, No. 25 Cornhill, 1845. PDF file.