

Frederick Douglass and His Idea of a Family

In his childhood, Frederick Douglass did not have any close relations with others. His mother only visited him a few times, all during the night, before she died when the boy was seven. Young Douglass, his brother and sisters also were not close to each other, as “the early separation of [them] from [their] mother had well nigh blotted the fact of [their] relationship from [their] memories.” (24)

The boy’s first mother figure might have been his grandmother, who had the responsibility for raising all small children at the plantation. However, apart from an account of her being brutally punished by cruel slave owners, Douglass gave little information about his grandmother in his *Narrative*. This suggests that the relationship between them was not at all close, but distant and built on duty rather than love.

Douglass, who never knew who his father was, mentioned Colonel Lloyd, with whom he formed some sort of parental bond. It seemed like Daniel Lloyd treated young Frederick fairly well; the boy even used to fetch birds which were shot by Lloyd. About his then-master Douglass wrote, “He became quite attached to me, and was a sort of protector of me.” (23)

Upon arriving in Baltimore, Frederick Douglass met his new master and mistress, Mr and Mrs Auld, who were, at least at first, very kind to the boy; especially Mrs Auld, who showed unusual kindness and sympathy towards young Frederick. Adding to her soft and good-natured attitude, Mrs Auld also acted as a guiding and teaching figure to the boy by teaching him the alphabet. This, perhaps, made her the ultimate mother-figure in the eyes of Frederick Douglass. However, Mrs Auld’s maternal love was soon replaced by cruelty, when she, striving to obey her husband’s every word, stopped teaching young Frederick, as well as forbidding anyone else to give the boy any sort of instruction.

Bereft of the ability to educate himself at home, Douglass turned to the streets of Baltimore to learn to read and write, which he did manage to do with the help of poor white boys. With some of them he became particularly close. Douglass later wrote about them, “It was to those little Baltimore boys that I felt the strongest attachment.” (34)

Perhaps, after his failed attempt at escaping the plantation, Frederick Douglass’ perception of family changed from meaning actual kinship and blood relations, if he ever even perceived it as such, to a much broader and wider definition of a family. In his book Douglass multiple times expressed his endless love and trust for other enslaved blacks whom he knew: “...I never loved any or confided in any people more than my fellowslaves... I believe we would have died for each other. We never undertook to do any thing, of any importance, without a mutual consideration. We never moved separately. We were one...” (49) They were all in the same boat – confined in the chains of the injustice of slavery. This immensely heavy burden that all slaves carried was what bound them so tightly together. As Douglass himself wrote, “...as much so by our tempers and dispositions, as by the mutual hardships to which we were necessarily subjected by our condition as slaves.” (49)

And although he did eventually create a family for himself by marrying Anna Murray, Frederick Douglass found his true family among other black slaves just like him, his “brethren in bonds”. (34) This shows that family for him was not so much about blood relations, but rather shared experiences, especially those of extreme hardships. Douglass, who was never close with his mother, brother and sisters, who never knew his father, nonetheless managed to acquire a great sense of trust, love and belonging among those unjustly enslaved.

Works Cited

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