

Alexandra Vargová

Jeffrey Alan Vanderziel, B.A.

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Family and Friendships in the Narrative of the Life of Frederick Douglass

Throughout the Narrative, Frederick Douglass introduces a number of people. The relationships established with these people are different due to various levels of closeness that are developed. However, it can hardly be said that any of the people could fully substitute the missing parental figures.

At first, Frederick Douglass is brought up by his grandmother. This period is very brief and Frederick himself mentions her only a handful of times, which may indicate that their bond was not a very strong one. This could also be later observed when he is to move to a different plantation: “I found no severe trial in my departure...my grandmother lived far off, so that I seldom saw her” (Douglass 24). He admits that it is not difficult for him to leave because the relationship with her is not that close as their mutual contact was already limited.

Frederick is moved to live with Mr. Hugh Auld and his wife Sophia. There he is surprised by Mrs. Auld as her treatment of Douglass is substantially different than that of the other white people. This relationship is a very crucial one. Initially, Mrs. Auld was kind to Douglass and wanted to teach him how to read, which later became an impulse that inspired Douglass to pursue his freedom. The will to teach Douglass and her amiable nature suggest that Mrs. Auld partly substituted the role of mother for a short period of time in Douglass’s life. His descriptions of Mrs. Auld also hint that he felt quite close to her but nonetheless, the effects of slavery changed Mrs. Auld’s approach and their bond eventually deteriorated.

The second important encounter with Mr. and Mrs. Auld was after the incident on boat when Douglass was attacked by four men and nearly killed. He fled to them in hope of help. Judging by Douglass's description he was quite delighted with their reactions: "He listened attentively to my narration...and gave many proofs of his strong indignation at it. The heart of my once overkind mistress was again melted into pity" (Douglass 55). In this case, both of them played more the role of Douglass's protectors than anything else.

Furthermore, the people that may account for new sisters and brothers are other slaves that shared his fate. Mainly, the people on William Freeland's plantation. The way Douglass depicts his feeling towards these people show that strong friendships were formed: "We were linked and interlinked with each other. I loved them with a love stronger than any thing I have experienced since" (Douglass 49). Out of all the people he meets, the connections with other slaves seem to be the most profound. As their attempt to run away failed it was seen that Frederick's worst fear was to be taken away from them: "I was ready for any thing rather than separation" (Douglass 53). Douglass seem to have found in these people a connection that he never experienced before.

Moreover, as the story progresses and the day of Douglass's second attempt to flee is near he speaks of his dear friends in Baltimore: "the thought of being separated from them forever was painful beyond expression" (Douglass 59). Contrary to his feelings at the beginning when he was leaving his home and had no relationships to hold him back, the friendships here were difficult to leave behind.

To conclude, the traditional figures of mother and father were never truly replaced in Douglass's life. The relationship with grandmother was too brief as well as the relationship with Sophia. There was not one character who could be placed in the position of a father. On the other

hand, Douglass was successful in finding a sort of a surrogate family among friends who he clearly loved dearly. However, he was forced to abandon this family too for the price of being free.