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Family Relationships of Frederick Douglass

This essay will discuss Douglass's attempts at replacing family relationships, which had not been present during his childhood and early adolescence, as described in his memoir *Narrative of the Life of Frederick Douglass An American Slave*.

Douglass had been separated from his mother while he was an infant, according to a common custom in Maryland. He had been brought up by his grandmother. Even though his mother travelled a few times in the night to visit him, he did not spend enough time with her to form a bond. She died when he was around 7 years old and according to Douglass, her death affected him the same way that a death of a stranger would (13).

The only thing Douglass knew about his father was that he was white. He also heard some rumours that his master was his father, but because of the doctrine of *partus sequitur ventrem*, he found any information about his father of "little consequence" (13).

When it comes to his siblings, Douglass knew he had two sisters and a brother at Colonel Lloyd's plantation, but because of their early separation from their mother, they did not really share a relationship. (24) His master's son, Daniel Lloyd, felt much more like a sibling to him than his real siblings, as he mentions that Daniel was "a sort of protector" to him (24). Even though he was closer to Daniel, Douglass says, "My connection with Master Daniel was of some advantage to me" (23). Douglass was aware of the fact that Daniel was his master, therefore

holds some power over him. Because their positions within society were not equal, Douglass was unable to appreciate their relationship.

Douglass describes this lack of relationships at the plantation as the reason why he felt happy when he heard that he would live in Baltimore with Mr. Hugh Auld, "... it was not home to me ... I looked for home elsewhere ..." (24).

The real parental figures for him were Mr. and Mrs. Auld. Mrs. Auld welcomed him with a smile and kindly emotions and he was astonished by her warmheartedness and positive attitude, even towards slaves. Also, Douglass would serve here as a domestic slave, which meant that he would spend much more time with Aulds than he would with his master if he worked at a plantation or farm. How much time people spend together is an important factor when it comes to establishing relationships.

Soon after his arrival, Mrs. Auld had decided to teach Douglass. Even though Mr. Auld was strictly against it, it was, ironically, him, that gave Douglass the most important advice of his life, albeit accidentally. Mr. Auld correctly thought that it is dangerous for masters to teach their slaves how to read. A slave that is literate will sooner or later realize the value of knowledge and most importantly, freedom (26,27). While Mrs. Auld laid the foundations of Douglass' literacy, it was her husband who laid the foundations of Douglass' escape from slavery.

Although Douglass describes how the attitude of Mrs. Auld changes for the worse in the course of his stay, she and her husband would later display a sign of affection towards him, affection that can be described as parental. After Douglass' fight at the shipyard, they both believed his side of the story. Mrs. Auld tended to him until he was healthy again, "She took a chair by me, 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” (55). Meanwhile, Mr. Auld tried to seek justice, although unsuccessfully.

Another argument that can be mentioned, is that Douglass mentions that during his stay in Baltimore he received few whippings, but he never explicitly describes any of them (32). On the other hand, when it comes to other masters, he often specifies the particular instances of whippings, beatings or violence. But this might only be associated with the fact that the Auld were much less cruel than some of Douglass’ other masters.

Douglass adored the Aulds, at least at the beginning of his servitude in Baltimore. As previously mentioned, their characters changed over the years. According to Douglass, they changed so much that he did not care that he later had to leave and serve elsewhere (34). But he was saddened by the thought of leaving the boys from Baltimore, the boys that taught him how to read and write. Although Douglass says that he “felt the strongest attachment” (34) towards them, it does not feel like the attachment of the brotherly kind. Douglass probably felt more like he is losing his teachers than his friends, as he mentions that he was still receiving the lessons from them, lessons that he had to get by trickery. Furthermore, these boys were free, so once again their relationship was not equal, just as in the case of his relationship with Daniel Lloyd.

Douglass found his brothers in the slaves that worked with him at Mr. Freeland’s farm. Mr. Freeland treated his slaves humanely, as proved by Douglass, who called him “the best master I ever had, till I became my own master” (48). As previously mentioned, how much time does a person spend with someone influences the creation of their relationship. If the slave is forced to work extensively or work to the point of total exhaustion, he has only a little time to do anything other than work. But because Mr. Freeland treated his slaves kindly, they were able to bond – for example, thanks to Sabbath school, where Douglass tried to teach other slaves how to

read. He would later also teach them in the evenings. Douglass shares his feelings towards his fellow slaves in this passage:

They were noble souls; they not only possessed loving hearts, but brave ones. We were linked and interlinked with each other. I loved them with a love stronger than anything I have experienced since. It is sometimes said that we slaves do not love and confide in each other. In answer to this assertion, I can say, I never loved any or confided in any people more than my fellowslaves, and especially those with whom I lived at Mr. Freeland's. I believe we would have died for each other. We never undertook to do anything, of any importance, without a mutual consultation. We never moved separately. We were one; and as much so by our tempers and dispositions, as by the mutual hardships to which we were necessarily subjected by our condition as slaves. (48,49)

For most people today, it is impossible to imagine the things that the American slaves had to go through. It is equally impossible to imagine the emotions, feelings and thoughts of a person, that had been told since birth, that his only destiny was to serve other people. For this reason, we can today only discuss how slaves, in this instance Douglass, replaced the relationships that they had been deprived of since they were born.

Works Cited

Douglass, Frederick. *Narrative of the Life of Frederick Douglass An American Slave*. Boston, Anti-Slavery Office, 1845, https://elf.phil.muni.cz/20-21/pluginfile.php/37350/mod_resource/content/1/narrativeofthelife.pdf