

## **From Little Baltimore Boys to Brethren in Bonds: The Analysis of Frederick Douglass's Search for Relationship**

Frederick Douglass's *Narrative of the Life of Frederick Douglass, An American Slave: Written by Himself* gives an incredible insight into the slavery and the life of slaves and sheds light on the blatant injustice and inconsistency of the system of slavery. The narrative is, furthermore, an account of a life of a human and a social being, and, in the narrative, Douglass frequently discusses relationships and bonds he has with other characters, and puts a great emphasis on the toil it takes on him when these bonds are broken, usually as a result of separation. Having lost his mother at a very young age and having virtually no relationship with his biological siblings, Douglas tries to replace these family relationships with people he meets and interacts with. This short essay will analyze these relationships and attempt at determining whether Douglass truly succeeds in his search for relationship.

Frederick Douglass's father was a white man and, according to rumors, his master, which seems to be a plausible explanation given the context of the American South in the early 19<sup>th</sup> century (Douglass 12). With this in mind, one might expect Douglass to look for father figures in his masters and other white people he encounters. This is, however, not frequently the case since the encounters with white people that can be described as pleasant are extremely rare. However, there are exceptions to this in Mr. Freeland and Mr. Auld, who may not be classified as father figures, but have certainly at least been given some father-like traits by Douglass. Mr. Freeland is described as a firm, but a dependable master, who treats Douglass "heavenly" compared to the previous owner, and as an "open and frank" person who has "some regard for honor, some reverence for justice, and some respect for humanity" (Douglass 46). Mr. Auld is more of a

stretch in this respect, but Douglass does go to him to complain about the way he has been treated at the shipyard and he describes his conduct on this occasion as “heavenly”, adding that he “listened attentively to [his] narration” and “gave many proofs of his strong indignation” at what happened at the shipyard (Douglass 55). Furthermore, he shows that he is enraged by Douglass’s story and tries to bring the people who did the deed to justice, which he ultimately fails as black people cannot testify against white people (Douglass 55). Other than his masters, there are two other people Douglass gives father-like traits, with the first one being Mr. David Ruggles, and the second Mr. Nathan Johnson. David Ruggles can be described as a sort of patron of Douglass; he was an abolitionist who helped fugitive slaves and so he “deemed it unsafe” for Douglass to stay in New York so he arranges for him to go to New Bedford with his intended wife (Douglass 61). Douglass writes that he will never forget Ruggles’ kindness and perseverance and that he is happy to have the opportunity to express “the love and gratitude” [he] bear [s] him” (Douglass 61). Nathan Johnson is less of a father-figure for Douglass, but Douglass gives him the privilege of giving Douglass his new name, which is a privilege which usually only parents of a child have (Douglass 62).

As for mother figures, it is not necessary to go further than Douglass’s grandmother who can with certainty be deemed a true mother figure. Douglass was raised by her on the outskirts of Mr. Lloyd’s plantation and he spent the first few years of his childhood with her (Douglass 15). Douglass expresses great affection for her in chapter VIII, where he describes how she has been unfairly treated by her master. He states the following: “If any one thing (...) served to deepen my conviction of the infernal character of slavery, and to fill me with unutterable loathing of slaveholders, it was their base ingratitude to my poor old grandmother” (Douglass 33). Douglass is appalled by the fact that his old and weak grandmother will have to live alone in a hut in the

woods, that, instead of being nurtured by children she raised, she is literally left for dead (Douglass 33). There are no additional clear-cut mother figures, but Douglass does give certain mother-like traits, at least in the beginning and in their last encounter, to his mistress, Sophia Auld. The affection with which Douglass talks of their first encounter is matched by none other people in the narrative. He describes her face as “beaming with the most kindly emotions”, and that it was a sight that brightened up “[his] pathway with the light of happiness” (Douglass 25). He later adds that she proved “to be all she appeared when [he] first met her at the door – a woman of the kindest heart and finest feelings” whose face “was made of heavenly smiles” and “her voice of tranquil music” (Douglass 26). Unfortunately, she is later corrupted by the institution of slavery and turns into a typical, cruel slaveholder. However, in their last encounter, she does exhibit humane behavior toward Douglass and Douglass even writes that she tended to his wounds “with a mother’s tenderness” (Douglass 55).

In terms of foundational family relationships, however, Douglass unquestionably establishes the strongest bonds with his “new” brothers and sisters, regardless of the color of their skin. While living in Master Hugh’s family, Douglass meets little white boys in the street where he lives in Baltimore. These boys undertake the role of Douglass’s older brothers; they teach him to read and write, they express “the liveliest sympathy” for his state of being a slave and console him “that something would occur by which [he] might be free” (Douglass 29). Furthermore, Douglass expresses his affection for the boys when he has to leave Baltimore. He says that “it was those little Baltimore boys that I felt the strongest attachment”, that he “received many good lessons from them” and that “the thought of leaving them was painful indeed” (Douglass 34). Later in the narrative, Douglass undertakes the role of an older brother to his fellow slaves with whom he lived at Mr. Freeland’s. He organizes a Sabbath school and teaches

them to read. He explicitly mentions that they “were linked and interlinked with each other” and that he “loved them with a love stronger than any thing [he has] experienced since” (Douglass 49). Later on, Douglass emphasizes several times how hard it stung to be separated from his slave brothers and that he was ready for anything but separation (Douglass 53).

With the aforementioned in mind, and taking the circumstances of him being a slave, it should be argued that Douglass’ quest for relationship can indeed be deemed a successful one. Though many of the bonds he established on this quest were short-lasting due to various reasons, he shows in his writing that these bonds were indeed deep and strong, especially those pertaining to the little white boys in Baltimore and the fellow slaves at Mr. Freeland’s. Despite being betrayed and hurt by people that he ascribed parent-like or sibling-like attributes to, and despite living in an environment in which it is often dangerous to even attempt at establishing a relationship with either a white person or a fellow slave, his detailed professions of love and affection toward the people these connections are established with are witness to profound, humane, and deep connection.

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## **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.