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Frederick Douglass's Family-like Relationships

Born a slave, Frederick Douglass was deprived of the most fundamental family relationships. He was separated from his mother, never learnt who his father was and his biological siblings were not of a great significance to him. Yet the need to create and maintain close bonds with others is common to everyone and Douglass is no exception. Throughout his memoir, he mentions various examples of relationships that are almost family-like. These create at least fleeting sense of belonging for a person whose status of a slave dooms him to never fully connect with other people.

In the first chapters of Douglass's autobiography, in which he portrays the early years of his childhood on the plantations of Colonel Lloyd, there are almost no instances of possible family-like relationships being created. Most of these chapters consist of depictions of the cruelties that Douglass had to witness from a very young age. One of the few mentions of kinder behaviour is that of Master Daniel Lloyd, with whom Douglass spends his leisure time as a child, helping him hunt birds. He notes how Lloyd became attached to him, "and was a sort of protector of [him]," not allowing "the older boys to impose upon [him]" (Douglass 23). Douglass, however, does not mention anything alluding to his reciprocation of such attachment. Master Daniel Lloyd, although behaving in almost fatherly manner, remains solely a master to him.

As Douglass is sent to Baltimore to his new master, Mr. Auld, he finds a mother-like figure in Mrs. Auld, "a woman of the kindest heart and finest feelings" (Douglass 26). Mrs. Auld, lacking previous experience in slaveholding, behaves benignly towards Douglass and

begins to teach him to read. Yet this state of their relationship lasts only a short period: after Mr. Auld discovers his wife's actions, he firmly forbids her to continue, explaining the dangers the teaching poses. Thus, Mrs. Auld grows hostile towards Douglass.

However, Douglass's seven-year stay at the Aulds does not allow them to remain unaffected when seeing him heavily injured after the incident with the white apprentices at Gardner's shipyard during Douglass's second period in Baltimore. They react to it as parents would: Mr. Auld manifests "his strong indignation at it" while Mrs. Auld treats Douglass "with a mother's tenderness" (Douglass 55). When Douglass's wound heals, Mr. Auld arranges a position for him at a different shipyard, safe from aggression of others.

There are also brotherly-like relationships created during Douglass's first Baltimore stay. These are the ones developed outside of the Auld family, with the boys that Douglass tricks into helping him improve his reading and writing abilities. When describing his first departure from Baltimore, he notes that "[i]t was to those little Baltimore boys that [he] felt the strongest attachment" and that "the thought of leaving them was painful indeed" (Douglass 34). Douglass expresses only positive feelings about those boys, who, probably not yet strongly infected with the predominating racism, saw him as one of them.

Douglass's ability to read and write forms a fundamental point in creating strong bonds with other slaves whom he teaches in a secret Sabbath school while living with Mr. Freeland. As a result, Douglass is unable to perform his first attempt on an escape without offering his closest fellow-slaves an opportunity to run away as a group. Apart from one, they all agree. Therefore, Douglass acquires a position of an older and wiser brother in the group, arranging all necessities for their try. Interestingly, one of his companions is in an actual blood relation to him. Yet that he is Douglass's uncle is mentioned only briefly and it does not make their relationship any stronger.

Douglass recalls similar difficulties with his second attempt on an escape: “I had a number of warmhearted friends in Baltimore, friends that I loved almost as I did my life, and the thought of being separated from them forever was painful beyond expression” (Douglass 59). As with the case of the Baltimore boys, the strongest affections described are the ones that arose independently of Douglass’s status of a slave. His adult Baltimore friends most likely formed a family to him in the notion of the saying that ones’ friends are the family one chooses.

After his successful escape, Douglass marries and finally creates a family of his own. Nevertheless, it is important to mention one last family-like relationship he creates. It is the bond with Mr. Johnson from New Bedford, to whom Douglass gives “the privilege of choosing [him] a name” (Douglass 62) and Mr. Johnson suggests the name Douglass. This time, the relationship created through the act of naming is highly symbolic.

To conclude, there are many different examples in Douglass’s autobiography in which he forms relationships with others on a family-like level. Several stem from humanly motives of some of his masters. More are strong friendship bonds with people in the same circumstances, be it common social status or the fact that they are of a similar age. However, none of these relationships lasts long as Douglass is repeatedly forced to relocate, always losing connection with the people towards whom he has grown affectionate. He gains the ability to freely establish and maintain relationships only after he becomes a free man.

Works Cited

Douglass, Frederick. *Narrative of the Life of Frederick Douglass, an American Slave: Written by Himself*. Antislavery Literature Project, 2005.