

Gabriela Kamenská

Jeffrey Alan Vanderziel, B.A.

AJL17051

14 March 2021

Frederick Douglass: A No-Family's Man

Unaware of his father's identity, with a deceased mother at his very young age, and without any proper relationship with his siblings or further relatives. Frederick Douglass grows up without a biological family to bond with. Throughout his life, however, Frederick Douglass does not stay alone. Although he meets many cruel and selfish people, a few gentle and righteous people serve him as life inspiration and role-models. Who are the people that filled out the holes of his lost family?

It might strike as ironic that the most fatherly figure Frederick Douglass establishes throughout his slave-to-free journey is a slave master, William Freeland. As a slave, Frederick does not come into contact with many just people. In fact, his own biological father is most likely Captain Anthony, a cruel master of the very plantation Frederick grew up living on. In comparison to his alleged father, a sadistic whipper who often took advantage of the author's aunt, William Freeland is the definition of justice and mercy.

“[Mr. Freeland] seemed to possess some regard for honor, some reverence for justice, and some respect for humanity” (Douglass 67). This is how the author describes the nature of Mr. William Freeland. Although still a slaveholder, he is the most gentle man of power Frederick has ever encountered. Because he is fairer and more understanding than all his previous owners (and compared to his father he is also very much decent), it is not surprising that Mr. Freeland is the first father figure in Frederick's life. Unlike the father figure, he meets his motherly figure early on.

The place of his deceased mother was taken by the already mentioned Aunt Hester. She is described as “a woman of noble form, and of graceful proportions, having very few equals, and fewer superiors, in personal appearance, among the colored or white women of our neighborhood” (Douglass 5-6). With this description, the author already establishes certain respect and high opinion of his aunt. Further, the author mentions his aunt’s “innocence” (Douglass 6). Being described as a noble, innocent lady, Aunt Hester gives an impression of a perfect role-model for a motherless boy.

Douglass’s warm relationship with his aunt is also apparent from his behavior while Aunt Hester is being punished by whipping. “I was so terrified and horror-stricken at the sight, that I hid myself in a closet, and dared not venture out till long after the bloody transaction was over,” the narrator says (Douglass 6). The suffering of his dear aunt causes psychological pain to the author himself, as a mere observer. He perceives his aunt's pain as if his mother were experiencing it in her place. Frederick's new-found relationships, however, do not end with a mother and a father.

If William Freedman represents a father figure and Aunt Hester a mother figure, then there is room for a brother figure in Frederick Douglass’s life - Wendell Phillips. In fact, it is right at the beginning of the novel where it is possible to learn about Wendell’s brotherly relationship with Frederick. It is Wendell’s letter addressed to Frederick which testifies about it. “We have known you long, and can put the most entire confidence in your truth, candor, and sincerity,” Wendell sincerely writes to Douglass (Douglass xvi).

In addition to the affection in the exchanged correspondence, their close relationship can also be seen from the information provided by Frederick to Wendell. “I hardly knew, at the time, whether to thank you or not for the sight of them, when I reflected that it was still dangerous, in Massachusetts, for honest men to tell their names,” (Douglass xvii). It is Wendell, whose hands can Frederick put his trust into enough to tell him the truth about his past and

identity. After all years of slavery and suffering, Wendell is the one who can be Frederick's brother and confidant. It surely must have been a challenge for Frederick to establish such profound trust and relationship with somebody.

Such a relationship was also established with Douglass's fellow slaves while he was living with Mr. Freeland. Although it is not quite clear whether Mr. Douglass perceived them as siblings or simply very close friends, they certainly held a very important place in his life. "The work of instructing my dear fellow-slaves was the sweetest engagement with which I was ever blessed," (Douglass 70) the author writes. These people were the primary source of joy in Frederick Douglass's life while enslaved.

Although Frederick Douglass found a place in his heart for his new, non-biological, and distant family members, from whom he was able to draw inspiration and recognize the magic of human character and decency, he did so very quietly and inconspicuously. Throughout the novel, the author seems to act not as a character, living and feeling through every story of his life, but as an observer, a literal narrator, who objectively examines and evaluates everything that happens and everyone he meets. The relationships he established during his story thus seem only superficial, perhaps with the exception of his fellow slaves. The same is true of Frederick's love relationship with Anna Murray.

Anna Murray, a free black woman, is Frederick Douglass's future wife. Although they live in a romantic relationship, there is no subjective mention of affection or passion from Frederick's position. He stays very objective and observant while describing her, just as when he describes fellow slaves or his masters and their wives. His description is very simple — "Anna, my intended wife" (Washington, 94). Though the author talks about "writ[ing] to her immediately," (Washington, 94) when arriving in New York, any previous or further proof of passionate emotions cannot be found. Although Anna found a place in Frederick's life as well as his new family members, his narration of them remains objective.

Leaving aside the absence of Frederick Douglass's biological family, the author shows in his narrative how difficult it was for a black slave to meet decent people who would respect his person. When Frederick was lucky enough to meet someone who would pass on true human values to him, they automatically became a family figure. Although these people probably did not even know about it, they inscribed themselves forever in his heart and his life.

Works Cited

Douglass, Frederick. "Narrative of the Life of Frederick Douglass." Boston, 1845.