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### Frederick Douglass; The Search for Familial Closeness

Throughout his autobiography, *Narrative of the Life of Frederick Douglass, an American Slave*, Douglass provides a critical description of the events and the people that shaped his years as a slave. Because of the nature of his condition and the resulting separation from his biological family, he had, knowingly or not, filled in the parental and familial roles with other figures, be it positively or not, for they have served as sources of knowledge and experience, and as distinct influences on his character.

The first significant influencing figures in his life that were not outright horrible were Sophia and Hugh Auld, who served as his occasional masters in Baltimore. Upon meeting Sophia, Douglass is stunned by her demeanor: "My new mistress proved to be all she appeared when I first met her at the door, – a woman of the kindest heart and finest feelings" (Douglass 26). At first, this kindness prevails – at a much later point in the novel, he even refers to her tending to his wounds as with "a mother's tenderness" (Douglass 55), and Sophia ends up being the one to teach him the fundamentals of reading, which will eventually spark his interest in pursuing knowledge.

When her husband forbids her from teaching him, Douglass learns another important lesson – that slavery is an unjust institution perpetuated by the fear and ignorance that slaves are held in, and that knowledge can become a weapon. The characters of Sophia and Hugh are presented as perhaps the most complex, polarizing figures, and they influence his life

greatly – while they may not be what one would imagine as parental figures, they do guide, teach, protect, punish, and influence him.

Douglass formed close relationships with slaves during his stay at Edward Covey's. He specifically mentions Sandy Jenkins, Henry and John Harris, and a few others, who (apart from Jenkins) end up being a support system in the eyes of the cruelty they all suffer under Covey's rule. Jenkins helps him out, but he serves more as a reminder of the effects of slavery and all that Douglass wants to leave behind. With Henry and John, Douglass becomes a sort of a leader figure when he teaches them to read – it becomes a fulfillment, and they develop a sense of fellowship that Douglass describes like this: "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" (Douglass 49). These people became his family, and even upon plotting their escape, the thing they are concerned with the most is separation, for they have found in one another a closeness they had been deprived of before.

In Baltimore, Douglass once again struggles with the idea of having to leave the friends he made there behind – so much so that they make him question his decision to run away (Douglass 59). Once he finally escapes into a free state, he finds a great ally in David Ruggles, a man who takes Douglass in, helps him with his further plans, such as his move to New Bedford, as well as makes it possible for him to marry Anna. Ruggles, as well as Nathan Johnson who, along with his wife, help the pair once they reach New Bedford, become figures in Douglass' life that he thinks back on fondly and with utmost respect. He describes their help as not only kind, but selfless, and he describes Johnson as a friend who was there for him in times of need, but who also inspired him by earning his nice belongings with hard work.

While Frederick Douglass was not granted the privilege of growing up with his biological family, or having any loving familial bonds from a young age, he had both appeared in the presence of and actively surrounded himself with people who shaped him, who pointed him to his goals, who served as both embodiments of the horrors of slavery as well as inspirations, and who made it possible for him to regain his optimism, will, and determination to keep on going.

Works Cited

Douglass, Frederick. *Narrative of the Life of Frederick Douglass, an American Slave*. 1845.

Antislavery Literature Project, 2005.