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Family Figures in *Narrative of the Life of Frederick Douglass, An American Slave: Written by Himself*

Frederick Douglass's family relationships are anything but simple. As for his biological family, he knows little – his father is an unknown white man, his mother died during Frederick's childhood and the bond between him and his siblings is anything but close. However, he does have some sort of a family when the reader looks at the bigger picture. He gets close to some of the people he meets during the Narrative, and these people have a significant impact on his life. Even though he never has a real family in the proper sense of the word, these characters almost substitute the important family figures and give him the feeling of belonging that he has been longing for all his life.

The first figure that has greatly influenced Frederick Douglass is Mrs. Sophia Auld, whom he describes as “a woman of the kindest heart and finest feelings” (Douglass, 26). Mrs. Auld was Douglass's mistress when he was moved to Baltimore and at first, she treated him “as she supposed one human being ought to treat another” (Douglass, 28). It was her who made sure that Douglass was properly fed, clothed and that he slept in a proper bed. She was also the one who taught Douglass the alphabet and how to spell short words. It is safe to say she took care of him like a mother would do. However, later she was influenced by her husband and his beliefs that literacy would encourage slaves to want freedom. She stopped teaching him altogether and became cruel

towards Douglass. In the end however, she feels pitiful of Douglass when he is injured and tends to his wounds until he is fully healed, reestablishing their relationship.

The second figure that has a significant impact on Douglass's life is Mr. Hugh Auld, Sophia's husband. As it was mentioned before, it was under the beliefs of Mr. Auld that his wife stopped teaching Douglass. However, the character of Mr. Auld undergoes some changes in his behavior when Douglass comes to him beaten. Hugh is kind regarding this situation, and even refuses to let Douglass go back to the shipyard where he works. Mr. Auld takes it upon himself to find a lawyer for Douglass, and though this task is impossible as they all refuse to do something for person like Douglass, Mr. Auld takes on a parental role when he cares for Frederick like that.

The last group of people that played a big role in Douglass's life are his fellow slaves. He befriends them and even teaches them how to read. He takes upon a role of an older sibling taking care of his younger siblings, feeling responsible for them. They "were linked and interlinked with each other" (Douglass, 49) and Douglass loved them "with a love stronger than any thing [he has] experienced since" (Douglass, 49). They become close to each other and Douglass gains enough trust in them that he plans to escape with them by his side. Though their escape is unsuccessful in the end and they are separated from each other, he got to experience the sense of unity and bond that can often be found between siblings.

It is with certainty that Frederick Douglass, even though he lacked biological family as he himself mentioned, had some family characters in his life representing the roles of parents and siblings. And it is these characters who provide him with safety, love, and a sense of belonging.

Works cited:

Douglass, Frederick. *Narrative of the Life of Frederick Douglass, An American Slave: Written by Himself*. 2005. PDF file. 29 April 2021. https://elf.phil.muni.cz/20-21/pluginfile.php/37350/mod_resource/content/1/narrativeofthelife.pdf