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The Slave Family of Frederick Douglass

In his story, Frederick Douglass describes a plethora of both Black and white characters that entered his life and had influence on him. Daniel Loyd, a plantation owner, is referred to as a protector, somebody he almost finds a friend in, a figure to look up to. There is the family of Aulds, someone Douglass abundantly describes as a blessing, a respite, a living surprise to his stereotypical views of the white man. The man David Ruggles mediates an escape route for Douglass and a beautiful passage of his thankfulness follows. However, the resemblance of family he so desperately seeks, a person he can trust and rely on, is found in his interactions with other Black slaves.

A great example of this is the encounter with Sandy Jenkins, who was important both for the protagonist personally and in the bigger picture of slavery. When owned by Mr. Covey, Douglass is sent to collect wood from felled trees in the nearby forest. This is where Sandy Jenkins, a slave who is coming back to his free Afro-American wife, makes an appearance. In inviting Douglass over and talking to him, the reader almost sees Dante Alighieri's twist in how much of 'an old adviser' Jenkins is - Vergil to our protagonist's Dante. Jenkins describes a root he has been carrying in his right pocket, an amulet protecting him from whipping. Douglass is advised to do the same, something he hesitantly accepts. Only later does Frederick Douglass realize that the root itself is not special, it is just a mere token of understanding freedom, hope, and one's ability to fight back. And indeed, he does utilize this newfound strength and topples Mr. Covey together with his pawn Hughes, which seems to be a confirmation of Sandy Jenkins' promise.

What is arguably even more important is the happenings on Mr. Freeland's plantation. During his stay with the Auld family, he was taught to read. With nearly every single black man unable to read, all the slaves, be it of the plantation or other neighboring farms, gather around the protagonist in anticipation to learn alphabet as well. Douglass reminisces of these moments fondly, referring to his pupil as 'these my loved fellow-slaves' (Douglass 48). In gaining pure joy from teaching, it is as if the pursuit for happiness and family is over; instead of coming into one, he creates it. The following attempt to escape together may be perceived by many as foolish and a waste of opportunity, yet the deed in some way reinforces the bond the men have formed, showing that they trust each other and want to commit to the escape as a collective; as a family.

Through providing insight into his perilous life, Frederick Douglass tries to highlight the evil within the construct that is slavery. He reminds readers that in becoming a slave in the institution of America, one must not give up their hopes for 'normal' life and relationships. In doing so, it is no longer a question of achieving freedom, but rather deserving not to be deprived of it.

Works Cited

Douglass, Frederick. "Narrative of the life of Frederick Douglass, an American slave." The Antislavery Literature Project, 2005. *ELF muni (AJL17051)* https://elf.phil.muni.cz/20-21/pluginfile.php/37350/mod_resource/content/1/narrativeofthelife.pdf