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The Substitution of Relationships in the Life of Frederick Douglass

Although the role of master and parent seem to contradict each other, it is Frederick's masters whom the reader might consider as the parent figures in the protagonist's life. As one might expect, most of his masters acted like anything but his parents. Most of them lacked any empathy and saw their slave only as their purchased items. Hence to find a caring soul in this novel who may treat their slave with different manners is not an easy matter. There were only a few mere exceptions among those ranks.

The first one being Master Daniel Lloyd, with whom Frederick spent his leisure time. The behavior of Master Daniel that exceeds the typical cruelty of other masters can be seen in as Frederick referred to him as more of his "protector" (23). Another one who differed from the rest was his last master, Mr. Freeland, from whom he fled. According to the way Frederick described his last master, Mr. Freeland seemed as having the power to at least slightly resembled a parent figure in Frederick's life. Frederick himself thought of him as the best master he had ever had. Although the bar was still low, and even though sufficient time determined for eating seems a bare minimum, in the world of slavery, it was an act worthy of praise.

Lastly, it is important to mention Frederick's grandmother. In the beginning, Frederick implies that he had not had the chance to develop any strong feelings towards his biological mother. The first woman who takes the role of his caretaker is his grandmother Betsy Bailey. Another hint of a possible mother figure in his life is his former mistress Sophia Auld. She taught him the basics of reading and was somewhat kind to him at first,

partly because he was her first slave. He even refers to her behavior once as “a mother’s tenderness” (55). Although this attitude did not last her long and she got spoiled by the slavery system.

Frederick few times vaguely refer to some people as his siblings, but for the uncertainty about whether they truly were his siblings or not and the lack of a proper interaction mentioned, he can relate to these as far as the blood goes. Because of the lack of interaction with any of his possible blood-related siblings and the frequent shifting of places of his servitude multiple times for a long time Frederick had no one, whom he could refer to as a brother or sister. Instead, he sought the brotherly love in the other slaves, whom he taught to read and write, and thus spent most of his leisure time with them. Douglass described their mutual feelings as “a love stronger than any thing I have experienced since” (49). The intensity of these bonds he created with his fellow slaves was maybe even stronger than what a relationship between siblings might look like because of the terrible experiences they all had in common.

His autobiography is focused on his life as a slave, so we do not get to know much about his spouse, whom he marries after he had fled from Baltimore to the free states. However, it was a significant step out of the solitude he experienced after he managed to free himself and fled all alone to the free states and therefore lost the only bonds that he created during those dreadful years.

Work Cited

Douglass, Frederick. *Narrative of the Life of Frederick Douglass, an American Slave*. Published at the Anti-Slavery Office, 1845.