Veronika Tomášová

Jeffrey Alan Vanderziel, B.A.

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The Replacement of Family Relations

Only slaves themselves give a convincing and genuine account of slavery – only they can truthfully describe the hardships of this institution. One of these accounts is *The Narrative of the Life of Frederick Douglass, an American Slave.* Frederick Douglass, born a slave, recounts his life from his childhood until the beginnings of his freedom in New Bedford. Held in bondage, he is prohibited by law to form his own family to pursue well-being and stability. Even if he did, the danger of painful separation would always linger in the air. Thus, he is pushed to replace natural familial relationships with different and usually short-term ones.

In its most basic terms, family is established on common ancestry – its members are recognized by birth. Even though Frederick knows his birth mother, Harriet Bailey, he is, by common custom, separated from her. Separated by distance, and consequently, by her early passing, he develops no affection or attachment towards her. Frederick's father is not entirely unknown either. Captain Anthony is not only his first master but most likely his father, too. It was common for masters to father the children of their female slaves. However, neither of them is a proper parental figure. Since parents are thought to be one of the most important figures in one's life, Frederick had to look elsewhere.

To follow the ancestry pattern, Frederick's grandmother, Betsy Bailey, might be a replacement for his mother. After all, he has lived with her on Captain's plantation for the first seven years of his life. She has attended him in his infancy, as a mother should. She has

been taking care of him during the most vital years of his life – when a child starts discovering the world around him. Frederick deeply cares for his grandmother and remembers the times spent with her. He is especially angered by the treatment from her master who, after years of devoted service, lets her die alone in a rotting hut separated from her family.

Moreover, parents should provide food, clothes, and housing for their children. Any of Frederick's masters do fulfil this and could, in theory, replace the father figure. However, parents also create emotional bonds with their children. For example, Master Daniel Lloyd shows some attachment to Frederick; he is protective of him and shares cakes with him. Yet, this attachment only comes from the master's side – not from Frederick's, as he remembers the cold nights and hunger. Masters do not provide sufficient material support and no emotional support at all and cannot be, thus thought of as parental figures.

Parents also help to educate their children and support their mental development. Sophia Auld, the wife of Frederick's master Hugh Auld, attempted to teach Frederick part of the alphabet. Since she has never owned slaves before, she is untouched by the institution of slavery, thus, she treats them kindly, sympathizes with them and does not look down on them. At first, Frederick thinks highly of her – she is angelic and caring. However, the corrupting nature of slavery and the control over other human beings has transformed her kind personality into a cruel one. If she did not allow the corruption of her kindness, she could have been Frederick's replacement of mother figure. Furthermore, it confirms that masters, or mistresses, cannot ever be genuine parental figures.

Lastly, parents often continue supporting their children during adulthood when they need help. After Frederick's escape to freedom, him and his wife are received by the Johnsons, who start taking care of them and helping them to settle in New Bedford. They make them feel welcomed and, most importantly, safe. Frederick mostly remembers and

highly speaks of Mr Nathan Johnson. He financially supports Frederick and gives him the tools he needs for the new employment so he could provide for himself and his wife. Moreover, children tend to look up to their parents. He seems to admire Mr Johnson, as a son would his father.

As mentioned before, family is established by ancestry. Frederick knows who his siblings are – he has lived with them at his grandmother for some time. However, the absence of their mother caused them not to create any meaningful bonds between each other, like brothers and sisters usually have. Again, he has to find replacements. In Baltimore, Frederick meets little white boys whom he tricks into teaching him how to read. Surprisingly, he creates a strong attachment to them. He speaks of them full of gratitude and affection. When he is forced to depart from Baltimore, he confesses that he will not miss anything more than the boys. For him, it is a painful separation as if he was leaving his family.

In general, any slave Frederick encounters could be considered as someone like his sibling. Frederick himself says that he has never felt closer to anyone or loved anyone as much as his fellow slaves. They are bonded together by similar experiences and hopes. On the Freeland's plantation, he meets slaves he loves and trusts the most. With them, he forms a stronger bond than ever before – they are inseparable and would die for each other. Since parents cannot know everything, siblings often confide in each other. Frederick, together with Henry Harris, John Harris, Henry Bailey, and Charles Roberts, creates an escape plan. Unfortunately, someone betrays them. They unanimously decide not to say a word when being questioned. Separation is their biggest fear – if they are sold, they hope to be sold together. Sadly, Frederick, as the leader, is separated from his brothers. It causes him, and the others, a great pain. Additionally, a sibling-like relationship might be seen in Frederick's creation of Sabbath school at St. Michael's where he teaches slaves how to read and write. He

behaves, in a way, like an older brother helping his little siblings. This school brings him happiness and a sense of purpose. Eventually, the masters destroy the school.

The strongest relationships Frederick ever forms are, in most cases, with his fellow slaves. It appears that only them leave him with fond memories and attachments lasting even when he is not a slave anymore. It is only natural – their feelings and experiences are relatable. On the other hand, the ones he forms with whites, especially his masters, do not have any positive effects on him – only hate and disappointment. The only exceptions are the little boys from Baltimore and Mr Johnson. However, Frederick's relationships all have something in common – they are only temporal. Clearly, he cannot form any kind of long-term relationship even with slaves he lives with – each time, separation comes. For Frederick, the key to a successful and long-term relationship lies within freedom. After his escape, he marries Anna Murray and starts building his own family – a life of his own, not his master's. The freedom to establish family or to maintain any kind of relationship is not possible when held in slavery and out of bondage, separation is less likely.

Frederick Douglass's account of his life as a slave shows how difficult it was for an enslaved man in the United States to form and preserve a familial relationship or relationships of any kind. Replacements, often insufficient, were not permanent. Being looked at as property, his owners had no regard for his feelings whatsoever, and they separated him from people he deeply cared for many times. Because of the danger of separation, and laws, it is impossible for the slave to maintain a family. The possibility and stability of the family are where the freedom is found – not on the plantations.