

Frederick Douglass – A Search for Family

In the opening pages of the book, we learn that Frederick Douglass was a child of mixed descent, having a black, ‘quite dark’ mother and reportedly a white father, whose identity is however not revealed any closer. We also learn that him and his mother were separated no later than a year after his birth, as per custom, and that he was subsequently placed into the care of a relative on a distant farm. Frederick does not see his biological siblings as his true brothers and sisters either.

The whole story takes place when Frederick is still very young (he finally escapes when he is approximately 20 years old) when many young people still look for parental figures to look up to, usually their own parents, and form friendships and relationships. We see that Frederick has no such relationship with his biological family, and so, he is forced to look for family relationships elsewhere.

Though this might be a brave and controversial take on this, and perhaps also wrong, it is my opinion that in a way, the slave masters could have partially replaced the missing parents, as they were the source of authority to the slaves just like parents are figures of authority to their children. Obviously, with minimum exceptions, they were horrible ‘parents’ and failed to tend to the basic needs of their ‘children’, only using them to their own benefit. Nevertheless, in Frederick’s case, we encounter in some slave masters an exception, for example Mrs. Auld who, though only initially, wanted Frederick to learn the alphabet and be able to read.

As for relationship with siblings, we can see that Frederick was involved with some groups whose members we can in a way interpret as his siblings. The first group was not exactly sibling-like, but Frederick admitted to having a very strong attachment to the little (white) boys in Baltimore who helped him when he was struggling to learn how to read. The second group was the Sabbath school where Frederick taught other slaves how to read, as if an older sibling

were passing knowledge to his younger brothers and sisters., until it was forcefully broken up by the slave masters.

The third group, which I would consider to be even more closely tied together and sibling-like, was the group of slaves who wanted to run away together with Frederick. They truly felt like a family and none of them wishes to leave the others behind, though eventually Frederick had to leave them behind as their intentions were revealed.

In conclusion, then, I believe that the lack of family relationships with his biological parents and siblings led Frederick to form even stronger relationships with his fellow slaves. I would say that his search for a 'replacement' finally ended when he became free and able to help those of his race who were still enslaved, and in this sense, he ultimately created a large family that would supplement the relationships absent in his childhood.