
Presentation of Various Forms of Freedom and Oppression

Frederick Douglass's *Narrative of the Life of Frederick Douglass, An American Slave* brings to light many of the injustices that African-Americans faced in the 1800s under Southern slavery. The story of Douglass's life is presented in a way that makes a compelling argument against the institution of slavery, reinforced by anecdotes detailing graphic beatings and inhumane cruelty on the part of the slaveholders. However, Douglass's most compelling argument does not simply display the physical burdens of slavery, but also speaks to the toll it takes on both slave and slaveholder. The underlying theme of the story is that slavery corrupts the minds of slaveholders and weakens slaves' intellects.

In order to justify keeping an entire race of people enslaved, slaveholders had to claim that blacks were inferior - on the same level as animals. Consequently, they paid no regard to the sanctity of black families. They treated the slaves as if their familial bonds were completely worthless - something they would never have imagined doing to another white person. This is illustrated by Douglass's own relationship to his mother, from whom he was separated in his infancy, "Very little communication ever took place between us...I was not allowed to be present during her illness, at her death, or burial...I received the tidings of her death with much the same emotions I should have probably felt at the death of a stranger" (Douglass, 21). This passage shows how the slaveholders became so convinced of the worthlessness of the slaves that they saw no reason to respect the bond between mother and child. As a result, the slaves' view of family was also skewed. In the book, although Douglass appears to know that his mother is important and desires a relationship with her, he is not saddened by her passing because he was never allowed to have a healthy relationship with her. He also has no affection for his sisters and brother, who he was similarly unable to interact with. Additionally, slaveholders showed contempt for the families by raping slave women, impregnating them, and then encouraging their white children to whip their half-black siblings, (Douglass was rumored to have been fathered by his master). Slaves suffered from the loss not only of their freedom, but also of their family life, which the slaveholders deemed unnecessary for the slaves.

Douglass argues that the slaveholders' minds were so corrupted that they viewed the slaves as animals - thus their disrespect for black families and marriages. This is displayed through the story of Mr. Covey's first slave, Caroline: "After buying her, he hired a married man of Mr. Samuel Harrison, to live with him one year; and him he used to fasten up with her every night!" (Douglass, 74) Covey, who professed to be a pious Christian, disregarded the holy institution of marriage by forcing adultery upon two unwilling people in order to breed more laborers. Additionally, the man was only hired for one year, showing that Covey had no intention of allowing the children to have any sort of relationship with their father. The attitude that regarded

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blacks as lesser beings warped the perceptions of slave and slaveholder alike towards black families.

Another way in which Douglass believes the slaves were kept in mental bondage was in the area of education. The ability to read and write was denied - indeed obstructed at all costs - to slaves. They were expected to work all day and remain ignorant of the world around them starting at a young age. Their masters would rather see them engaging in drinking and boxing than learning to read the Bible: "It was necessary to keep our religious masters at St. Michael's unacquainted with the fact, that, instead of spending the Sabbath in wrestling, boxing, and drinking whisky, we were trying to learn how to read the will of God; for they had much rather see us engaged in those degrading sports, than to see us behaving like intellectual, moral, and accountable beings" (Douglass, 89). Douglass argues that the slaveholders would rather have the slaves engage in frivolous and degrading activities than read the very book that their faith centered on. He says that the slaveholders kept the slaves imprisoned through this deprivation of knowledge because they made the slaves think that debauchery was all freedom entailed. Also, when Douglass himself learned to read, he discovered that he no longer had the mentality of a slave and that the injustices of the system became much more apparent, inspiring him to work harder to attain freedom. This was an epiphany that the slaveholders did not want to occur amongst their slaves because it could lead to rebellion or mass desertion.

Another way in which the slaveholders prevented the slaves from rebelling or running away was by making them accustomed to the system to the point where they accepted it as a permanent reality. From the youngest age at which they could possibly do physical labor, slave children were required to work. They grew used to a life of small rations, uncomfortable homes, long hours, and ever-vigilant overseers. Douglass says of the slaves who were selected to do errands at the largest house in the area, "It was associated in their minds with greatness. A representative could not be prouder of his election to a seat in the American Congress...They would sometimes sing the most pathetic sentiment in the most rapturous tone...To those songs I trace my first glimmering conception of the dehumanizing character of slavery" (Douglass, 28-30). This form of imprisonment is the one that Douglass seems most affected by. It is imprisonment through complacency. The slaves are so resigned to their condition and so unaware of the possibility of a better future that they rejoice when they are enslaved in a slightly more comfortable place. They desire the respect and admiration of their cruel overseers and feel they have earned it when they are sent to the Great House Farm. Rather than competing with rival farms over their own individual abilities, they bicker over who has the wealthier master and whose master treats them better. Their whole identity is based upon their masters' wealth and reputation. This is also a form of psychological bondage because it causes the slaves to not only accept their enslavement, but adopt it as a definition of their own self-worth. This acceptance and embracing of their status as slaves results in submission to perpetual servitude because it is they only way of life they have known.

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Another example Douglass gives of the slaves' ignorance of any way of life other than the one they endure is his own trip to Baltimore to serve under Hugh Auld. Upon arriving, Douglass sees Mr. Auld's wife, Sophia: "And here I saw what I had never seen before; it was a white face beaming with the most kindly emotions...She did not deem it impudent or unmannerly for a slave to look her in the face" (Douglass, 45-47). Douglass had become so accustomed to white people showing overt disdain for slaves that he considered it completely unfamiliar to receive any positive attention from a white person. Sophia Auld's kindness towards him is so foreign to him that he does not even know how to act around her. The difference between black and white is made so distinct by slaveholders that the slaves are unable to comprehend a white person treating them as they would treat a fellow white person.

One of Douglass's most important arguments is that slavery corrupts and mentally enslaves the white slaveholders, as well. The clearest example is that of Sophia Auld. Douglass says of her, "The fatal poison of irresponsible power was already in her hands, and soon commenced its infernal work. That cheerful eye, under the influence of slavery, soon became red with rage; that voice, made all of sweet accord, changed to one of harsh and horrid discord; and that angelic face gave place to that of a demon" (Douglass, 47-48). Invoking images similar to those of a demonic possession, Douglass describes the transformation that Mrs. Auld undergoes when she becomes a slaveholder. After initially attempting to teach Douglass to read, she changes her opinion to that of her husband, believing that "education and slavery were incompatible with each other" (Douglass, 52). The power she gained over another human being and her desire to retain this power motivated her to try to keep Douglass in ignorance and treat him like a lesser being. She had once been kind-hearted, but is transformed by her corrupting power into a cruel and unfeeling person, exploding with rage at Douglass when he tries to read. Slavery blinds her to the suffering of another person with whom she normally would have sympathized.

Douglass's narrative is, on the surface, intended to show the barbarity and injustice of slavery. However, the underlying argument is that freedom is not simply attained through a physical escape from forced labor, but through a mental liberation from the attitude created by Southern slavery. The slaves of the South were psychologically oppressed by the slaveholders' disrespect for black families and for education, as well as by the slaves' acceptance of their own subordination. Additionally, the slaveholders were trapped by a mentality that allowed them to justify behavior towards human beings that would normally not be acceptable. In this manner, both slaveholder and slave are corrupted by slavery.

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