

Chapter 4

The Life Cycle of a Slave

The words ‘life cycle’ refer to a pattern almost all, human beings follow. It includes birth, relation with parents, marriage, living with wife or husband, old age and death. Slaves as well as free people experienced these five stages of the life cycle. Only, it was different for a slave because of his helplessness and dependence on the generosity of his/her owners.

Frederick Douglass was born a slave. He escaped to the North, became a leader of the abolitionist movement, and a spokesperson for African-Americans. The following, excerpted from his autobiography, universally hailed as the most powerful narrative of a former slave:

I was born in Tuckahoe, Maryland. I have no exact knowledge of my age, for I was never told of the year of my birth. Most slaves know as little of their ages as horses know of theirs. It is the wish of most masters to keep their slaves thus ignorant. I do not remember knowing a slave who could tell of his birthday. They seldom could say more that it was planting time, harvesting – time, cherry – time, or fall – time. A want of information about my own birth caused me unhappiness even during childhood. The white children could tell me their ages. I could not tell why I should not have the same privilege.¹²

Children and their Mothers

Frederick Douglass continues to tell the little he knew about his mother.

I will say nothing of my father, for I never knew who he was. Slavery does away with fathers, as it does away with families.

My mother and I were separated when I was but an infant. This was before I knew her as my mother. It is a common custom in this part of Maryland to part children from their mothers at a very early age. Often, before the child has reached its twelfth month its mother is taken from it. The real mother is often hired out to some farm a long distance away from the child. It may be to prevent the child from becoming fond of his mother, and to destroy the mother’s love for her child. This is always the result.

I never saw my mother more than four or five times in my life. Each of these times the visits were very short and at night. She worked about twelve miles from my home. She made the journey to see me in the night. She had to travel the whole distance on foot after her day’s work. She was a field hand and a whipping is the penalty for not being in the field at sunrise. I do not remember ever seeing my mother by the light of day. She was with me in the night. She would lie down with me, and get me to sleep. Long before I waked, she was gone. Very little talk ever took place between us. Death soon ended what little we could have while she lived. It also ended her hardships and suffering. She died when I was about seven years old.¹³

¹² Frederick Douglass, *Narrative of the Life of Frederick Douglass*, Boston, 1845), p. 1.

¹³. loc. cit.

Digital History

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In the 1930s, the government paid people to record stories told by old black people who once were slaves. The following, was one of these stories. It is about a woman who never got to keep tier babies, and what she did:

My mother told me that master owned a woman who was the mother of many children. When her babies would get about a year or two of age. he would sell them. This would break her heart. She never got to keep them. When her fourth baby was born and was about two months old, she worried about how she would have to give it up. One day she said, "I just decided I'm not going to let the Master sell this baby. He just ain't going to do it." She got up and give it something out of a mottle. Pretty soon it was dead. Course didn't nobody tell on her, or he would of beat her nearly to death.¹⁴

Children and their Fathers

Josiah Henson was a famous slave who escaped to freedom. He went to live in Canada, where he was safe from slave catchers. In his book, he tells of how he lost his father:

The first sorry thing I can remember happened while mother lived at Mr.. Newell's farm. One day the overseer tried to rape my mother. She told her husband. When the overseer tried again, my father got so mad he beat the overseer. He would have killed him, but the man promised that nothing would happen if his life was spared. Despite his promise, the overseer had my father brought to trial. Father was given 100 lashes with a whip and had his right ear cut off. I well remember how my father looked after the punishment. His head was covered with blood and his back was laced with stripes. Afterwards, my father became a different man. He became so disobedient that Mr. Newell decided to sell him. He sold father to a man in Alabama and neither my mother or I ever heard of him again.¹⁵

Getting Married

The following stories were told by people who were born before the Civil War. They lived as slaves in the South before they were freed by the 13th Amendment in 1865. These stories were recorded and written down 70 years later, in the 1930's as part of a government project designed to provide jobs.

When you married, you had to jump over a broom three times. Dat was de license. If master seen two slaves together too much he would tell 'em dey was married. Hit didn't make no difference if you wanted to or not; he would put you in de same cabin an' make you live together.

Marsa sometimes used to pick our wives fo'us. If he didn't have enough women for the men, he would wait on de side of de road til a big wagon loaded with slaves came by. Den Marsa would stop and buy you women. Was no use trying to pick one cause Marsa wasn't going to pay but so much for her. All he wanted was a young healthy one who, looked like she could have children. Den he would lead you an' de woman over to one of de cabins and stand you on de porch. He wouldn't go in. No sir. He'd stand right dere. He'd read sompin real fast out of de Bible an' finish

¹⁴ B.A. Botkin, ed., *Lay My Burden Down*, Chicago, University of Chicago Press, 1945.

¹⁵ Josiah Hensen *The Life of Josiah Henson, Formerly a Slave*, London, 1852, pp. 1-3.

*up wid dis verse: 'Dat you' wife – Dat you' husband – I be you' marsa – She you' missus – You married.*¹⁶

Mothers and Children

Solomon Northup was a free black man who was kidnapped into slavery. His description of his life as a farm worker was given in Chapter III. Here he describes a slave market in which a mother and child are separated.

A planter from Baton Rouge purchased Randall. The little fellow was made to jump and run to prove his fitness. All this time his mother, Eliza, was crying aloud. She begged the man not to buy him, unless he also bought herself and Emily (her daughter). She promised she would be the most faithful slave that ever lived. The man answered that he could not afford it. Eliza burst into tears. The slave auctioneer turned around to her, with his whip in his hand. He ordered her to stop the noise, or he would flog her. Unless she stopped that minute, he would take her to the yard and give her a hundred lashes. Eliza shrunk before him, and tried to wipe away her tears, but it was all in vain. She wanted to be with her children, she said, the little time she had to live. All the frowns and threats of Freeman could not completely silence her. She kept begging and begging them not to separate the three. Over and over again she told them how she loved her boy. The bargain was agreed upon and Randall must go alone. Then Eliza ran to him: embraced him: kissed him again and again; told him to remember her – all the while her tears falling in the boy's face like rain.

Freeman damned her, calling her a bawling wench, and ordered her to get to her place. and behave herself. He swore he wouldn't stand such stuff but a little longer. He would give her something to cry about, if she was not mighty careful, and she could depend upon that.

The planter from Baton Rouge with his new purchases was ready to leave.

*"Don't cry mama. I will be a good boy. Don't cry:" said Randall, looking as they passed out of the door.*¹⁷

Husbands and Wives

Nor is this cruel punishment inflicted on the bare backs of the male portion of slaves only. Oh no! The slave husband must submit without a murmur, to see the form of his cherished, but wretched wife, not only exposed to the rude gaze of a beastly tyrant, but he must unresistingly see the heavy cowhide descend upon her shrinking flesh, and her manacled limbs writhe in inexpressible torture, while her piteous cries for help ring through his ears unanswered.¹⁸

Old Age

Frederick Douglass describes the suffering of his old grandmother. More than anything else in his life.. he said, the treatment of this old woman, filled him with hatred of slavery.

¹⁶ B.A. Botkin, ed., *op. cit.*, p 154.

¹⁷ Solomon Northup, *op. cit.*, pp. 78-82.

¹⁸ Austin Steward, *Twenty-Two Years a Slave*

Her present owner found she was now of very little value to them. Her body was racked with the pain of old age. Her once active body was becoming completely helpless. So they took her to the woods where they built her a little hut and made her support herself. There she was in perfect loneliness, like being put out to die. If my poor old grandmother now lives, she lives to suffer in utter loneliness. She lives to remember and mourn the loss of her children, the loss of her grandchildren. and the loss of her great grandchildren.

Her home is empty. The children who once sang and danced in her presence. are gone. She feels her way, in the. darkness of age. for a drink of water. Instead of the voices of her children, she hears by day the moans of the dove, and by night the screams of the owl. All is gloom. The grave is at the door. My poor old grandmother in this most needful time, is left all alone, in yonder little hut, before a dying fire. She stands - she sits - she staggers - she falls - she groans - she dies - and there are none of her children or grandchildren present. to wipe from her wrinkled brow the cold sweat of death, or to place beneath the sod her fallen remains. Will not a righteous God visit for these things? ¹⁹

Suggested Student Exercises:

1. Do you blame the woman in the story for killing her baby; could blame be put on the slave owner; on the system of slavery? Other?
2. Note in each case how the life cycle of a slave differed from that of a free person, by citing at least one case at each stage - birth, relationships with parents, getting married, mothers and children, old age and death.

19 Frederick Douglass, op. cit., pp. 76-78.