Volume V, Issue I
January

IJELLH
International Journal of English Language, Literature and Humanities

INTERNATIONAL STANDARD SERIAL NUMBER INTERNATIONAL CENTRE
ISSN : 2321-7065

Indexed, Peer Reviewed & Refereed Journal

Writing/Righting Family in Frederick Douglass's *My Bondage and My Freedom*

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Abstract

This article focuses on Frederick Douglass' revision of his original slave narrative, *Narrative of the Life of Frederick Douglass* (1845). In particular, in *My Bondage and My Freedom* (1855), Frederick Douglass maintains a focus on family that is absent from his 1845 narrative. For instance, his "entrance to the hell of slavery" shifts from brutal violence in the first narrative to the separation from his family in the 1855 edition. He also expands his mother's role from one emotionally distant paragraph in the 1845 edition to five pages filled with emotion in his revision and his grandmother who is only mentioned twice in the first narrative becomes a key figure in the revision. This paper spotlights this new information about his mother and grandmother, and posits this additional material as Douglass' attempt to write/right family for the slave. Douglass writes family back into his life story, and in doing so, he "rights" the importance of family for the slave and disputes slavery's ability to eliminate family from the slave. Critics often focus on how Douglass uses the trope of manhood to critique slavery. However, family now becomes the trope Douglass uses to defy and critique the institution of slavery.

Key words: slavery, slave narratives, autobiography, family, domesticity

Introduction

Frederick Douglass published two different versions of his autobiography over the course of ten years and most critics agree that "each self-portrait presents a different image" (Dorsey

437).[1] Douglass wrote his first narrative under the supervision and guidance of William Lloyd Garrison, whose influence ensured that a particular image of Douglass would be portrayed. After Douglass broke from Garrison, he became freer to tell his story as he desired. This relative editorial freedom, along with the popularity of Harriet Beecher Stowe's novel *Uncle Tom's Cabin* and Douglass's experiences in the North and abroad in England, influenced the style and content of his second narrative. I examine the key changes, or corrections, one might argue, that Douglass makes to his first narrative, *Narrative of the Life of Frederick Douglass* (1845) in his second narrative *My Bondage and My Freedom* (1855), focusing on Douglass's use of the emblems of domesticity, family and home.

In "Becoming the Other: The Mimesis of Metaphor in Douglass's *My Bondage and My Freedom*," Peter Dorsey notes that many critics have "shown that the first [narrative] was limited by Douglass's imitation of (or 'enslavement' to) conventions of the slave narrative and patriarchal notions of manhood" (435). Dorsey goes on to say that "some of these critics...see his voice emerging more clearly and more forcefully in the second [narrative]" (435). Critics have noted that the second narrative reflects Douglass's enhanced literary skills and that his style "shares much with the styles of other canonical writers of the American Renaissance" (Dorsey 435). According to John Sekora, the second narrative is "a true, full autobiography while the first is not" (610). William Andrews states that the 1855 narrative "was not designed to serve as merely an updated, second installment of the narrative" (xvii) but that in "its tone, structure, and dominant metaphors, the new book represents a thoughtful revised reading of the meaning of Douglass's life" (xvii). Douglass's revisions redefined his life's meaning, and the meaning of the slave experience as fundamentally bound to domestic relations and identity.

Information about his family is absent from the 1845 narrative but highlighted in the 1855 *My Bondage and My Freedom*. This new information about his grandmother and his mother constitutes Douglass's attempt to write/right family for the slave and the slave experience. According to Michael Chaney, when critics consider *My Bondage and My Freedom* they "tend to overlook or undervalue crucial changes affecting Douglass and the nation between the years 1845 and 1855" (391). This new information about family and home that Douglass

[1] Douglass actually publishes three different versions of his autobiography over the course of his lifetime.

provides in *My Bondage and My Freedom* points to the power of domesticity as a cultural and national rhetoric. While most slave narratives emphasize slavery's erasure of family, Douglass's revisions insist that the eradication of his familial feelings is incomplete, pointing to the strength of family bonds for the slave. Douglass's family may have been broken due to slavery, but his feelings about his family and his feelings of connection and love were not erased but remained strong as seen in the second narrative.

Writing/Righting a New Narrative

Critics note that in the first narrative Douglass uses a language of conversion but Dorsey claims that Douglass's revised narrative "qualified, muted, or suppressed the language of conversion" that is so prevalent in the first narrative (438). Not only does Douglass alter the language of conversion but he adopts the discourse of domesticity as a rhetorical tool. Other critics touch on this change. Andrews notes that in the 1855 text, Douglass "suggests that before the ideal of freedom had infused his consciousness, his heart had been profoundly touched by hunger for a home" (xviii). Deborah E. McDowell describes Douglass's refinement of his representation of his mother as a "rewriting of his origins" (199). I believe Douglass uses the additional material about family and home in the 1855 text to illustrate how the slave does indeed embody the virtue of domesticity.

In the second narrative "the cause is not simply to end bondage" (Sekora 614) which was the primary purpose of the 1845 narrative. By the time he wrote the1855 narrative, Douglass had broken from William Lloyd Garrison and Garrison's organization, the American Anti-Slavery Society. As the sole editor, Douglass took full control of the second narrative. The changes in this text signal a new direction and highlight new information that was absent from the Garrison-influenced 1845 narrative. While ending slavery remained an important goal, Douglass wanted his story to have an even larger impact. Andrews states that *My Bondage and My Freedom* "became the first Afro-American autobiography publicly designed to argue that a black man's life story had a wider significance than was usually accorded to the narratives of former slaves" (xii). Douglass uses the discourse of domesticity to give his story that "wider significance." The discourse of domesticity enabled him to speak to his audience in a familiar and powerful way. Douglass uses the metaphor of family and home, icons of domesticity, to critique slavery but

also to show the humanity of blacks. This text was to be a vindication of "a just and beneficent principle, in its application to the whole human family" (Andrews xii). For Douglass, ending slavery was not enough; blacks also needed to be viewed as equals. The trope of family became a key tool to show equality. Anna Mae Duane argues that *My Bondage and My Freedom* is a "document that presents African American women and children as vital players in the struggle for black expression and recognition" (464). Douglass uses the search for and the loss of family and home to resist his status as a slave and to establish the equality of the races.

In both versions of the autobiography, Douglass attempts to create a public identity. But what kind of identity is he trying to establish? Sekora states that "Garrison was pleased to present a noble beast" (616) in his introduction to the 1845 narrative, a particular representation of Douglass in which he was deeply invested. Garrison controlled the identity put forth in the1845 text as well as when Douglass spoke at rallies. In his second narrative Douglass gained more control over the identity that was created and presented. This shift in control is represented in the 1855 introduction when James McCune Smith, the first licensed African American doctor in the country, claims that he is "proud to be associated with a noble man" (Sekora 614). I offer that Douglass's rhetorical style and his use of domesticity are key elements that transform the "noble beast" of the 1845 narrative into the "noble man" of the 1855 narrative. His use of the signs of domesticity in *My Bondage and My Freedom* suggest that Douglass is attempting to establish himself as a man who values family. This characterization of manhood extends to all black men as Douglass became the "Representative [black] Man." In his second narrative, Douglass restructures black masculinity to include elements of domesticity.

One key marker of domesticity that Douglass invokes is that of the mother. Chaney accurately notes that "the figure of the mother is uniformly romanticized in sentimental literature of the nineteenth century, and the heart-rendering absence of the mother in many antebellum slave narratives often serves the abolitionist's objective further to inculpate slavery's vicious defilement of the 'Empire of the Mother'" (393). The 1845 narrative maintains the trope of the absent or negligent black slave mother, but in the revision he counters this prominent storyline by reinstating his mother and grandmother in his life story. By reinscribing the black mother, Douglass in essence is critiquing this story line, the institution of slavery, and white notions of

blackness. In Douglass's initial narrative, very little is mentioned about Douglass's family, with only two paragraphs dedicated to his mother's life and death, and his grandmother mentioned just twice. But in the 1855 revision, he opens his autobiography with three chapters absent from the original version: "The Author's Childhood," "The Author Removed from His First Home," and "The Author's Parentage." These three chapters focus on Douglass's "home life." Why does Douglass frame his revision with these domestic facts? Why does he expand one line about his grandmother in the 1845 narrative to three chapters in the 1855 version depicting his relationship with her? His earlier self-portrait is that of the self-made man, an Emersonian or Franklinian hero who is without family. This early portrayal is invested in a solitary and self-reliant version of manhood. Ten years later, family becomes essential to Douglass's self-characterization and his critique of slavery. He transforms himself from the self-made, self-reliant man into a man shaped by and concerned for his family.

It is true that in *My Bondage and My Freedom* Douglass says that he was not "very deeply attached to" his mother, but he does paint her in a more favorable light than in the 1845 narrative. As in the earlier text, he tells how her visits were "few in number, brief in duration, and mostly made in the night" (*Bondage* 39). However, in the latter narrative he focuses on the effort she makes to see him. He writes: "The pains she took, and the toil she endured, to see me, tells me that a *true mother's heart* was hers, and that slavery had difficulty in paralyzing it with unmotherly indifference" (39 emphasis added). In the 1845 narrative, both Douglass and his mother seem relatively indifferent, but when Douglass retells his story in 1855 he emphasizes his mother's love for him and his filial respect for her. Neither race nor slavery, Douglass suggests in 1855, can erase the love a mother feels for her child. When Douglass labels his mother a "true mother," the label carries cultural significance. Douglass invokes this particular icon of domesticity to reveal that black mothers are just like white mothers—the slave mother is a "true mother" and not a mere animal. He shows that slave mothers work hard against the "unmotherly indifference" that the institution of slavery attempts to create.

In *My Bondage and My Freedom*, Douglass tells a moving story about his mother which is absent from the 1845 narrative. He recounts how he had offended "Aunt Katy" who was the cook at Col. Lloyd's plantation, and how she in turn punishes him by "making [him] go without

food all day" (40). Douglass paints a detailed and heartbreaking picture of himself as a hungry lonely child. He tells how Aunt Katy fed the other children dinner and gave him nothing. He found some Indian corn and at the risk of a beating from Aunt Katy, he takes the corn and attempts to roast it. As he was about to eat his "very dry meal," his "dear mother" came. He describes his rescue as such: "The friendless and hungry boy, in his extremest need—and when he did not dare to look for succor—found himself in the strong, protecting arms of a mother" (41). When Douglass told his mother of Aunt Katy's refusal to give him food, he informs his readers that "there was pity in her glance at me, and a fiery indignation at Aunt Katy" (41). Not only does Douglass's mother give him a "large ginger cake" but she also rebukes Aunt Katy. Douglass tells this story to show that his mother was indeed a "true mother" who protected and provided for her child when she could. This story reverses his earlier characterization of himself and their relationship as indifferent. Douglass is no longer a motherless child: "That night I learned the fact, that I was not only a child, but *somebody's* child" (41). The sense of belonging that Douglass highlights here signals his need to be part of a family and a community. He goes on to report that the sweet cake his mother gave him was in "the shape of a heart." This detail symbolizes how the maternal not only provides the body with nourishment but also nourishes the heart and soul. Douglass recounts how he was "victorious" and felt "prouder, on [his] mother's knee, than a king upon a throne" (41).

In this retelling of his life story, his mother appears as a heroine, a source of pride and love. The inclusion of this episode in his life story also gives us a Douglass who is different from the one we meet in the 1845 text. The earlier narrative goes to great lengths to refrain from presenting a sentimental view of the mother and child bond. However, in his revision, Douglass stages a scene that clearly showcases this sentimental bond. Duane states that the "laconic description of his hardy, if lonely, childhood in the 1845 narrative is replaced with visions of hearth and home more familiar to a reading public enamored of the idea of an idyllic mother-child bond" (480). This scene also enables his readers to feel empathy for Douglass and rage at the institution of slavery since these maternal encounters were brief and ceased upon the selling of his mother away from the plantation and her child. He uses this domestic scene to show the slave's inherent humanity and the true inhumanity of slavery.

This added scene also provides another piece of information that alters our previous understanding of Douglass. In the 1845 narrative, we learn the importance that literacy plays in Douglass's identity and his drive for freedom. Douglass uses the trope of literacy to add to his characterization as self-reliant. But in the 1855 text, he astonishingly credits his mother with his love of learning. Douglass writes: "I learned, after my mother's death, that she could read, and that she was the *only* one of all the slaves and colored people in Tuckahoe who enjoyed that advantage" (42). He continues: "I can, therefore, fondly and proudly ascribe to *her* an earnest love of knowledge" (42 emphasis added). In the first version, Douglass's desire for literacy and knowledge seems to be entirely self-motivated, and his mother has no connection to his desire to learn to read and write. The revision drastically alters his early characterization of himself. Andrews notes that the "mature Douglass recognized that his character, his needs, and the direction of his life had been profoundly shaped by the maternal, paternal, and fraternal relationships of his past" (xxiii). In the revised story, his mother plays a pivotal role in his understanding of self, family, slavery, and his desire for knowledge which is directly linked to his desire for freedom. When Douglass writes his mother into his story, he rights, or corrects, the importance of family to his own story as well as to the life of all slaves.

Douglass expresses very little emotion concerning the death of his mother in the 1845 edition. Indeed, Douglass is notably matter of fact about the incident: "Never having enjoyed, to any considerable extent, her soothing presence, her tender and watchful care, I received the tidings of her death with much the same emotions I should have probably felt at the death of a stranger" (*Narrative*16). This information is put forth in the first few pages, then he moves on to the whipping of Aunt Esther (Hester). However, ten years later, in the second edition, Douglass expands the description of his mother and her death from two flat paragraphs to five pages filled with emotion:

> It has been a life-long, standing grief to me, that I knew so little of my mother; and that I was so early separated from her. The counsels of her love must have been beneficial to me. The side view of her face is imaged on my memory, and I take few steps in life without feeling her presence; but the image is mute, and I have no striking words of her's treasured up. (*Bondage* 154)

Douglass's emotions towards his mother change from those of a "stranger" to a "life-long standing grief" where he takes "few steps in life without feeling her presence." Whereas she is essentially absent from the 1845 narrative, Douglass's mother is ever-present in the 1855 version. While this sentimentalized retelling can be read as an attempt to gain the sympathy of the reader, I see it as an act of defiance for Douglass. Even though slavery separated his mother from him in life, he will not permit the maternal bond to be broken in his telling of his life story. In the first narrative, he writes of the separation of mother and child before the child's twelfth month: "For what this separation is done, I do not know, unless it be to hinder the development of the child's affection towards its mother, and to blunt and destroy the natural affection of the mother for the child. This is the inevitable result" (*Narrative* 48). But Douglass rewrites "the inevitable result" of his own mother-child relationship in *My Bondage and My Freedom*. In this latter version, slavery undeniably leaves its mark, but slavery cannot "blunt and destroy" his relationship with his mother: he feels "her presence" even after death.

Douglass thus utilizes the nineteenth-century sentimental rhetoric that surrounded the cult of the mother. Dorsey points out that "Douglass recognizes the necessity of inscribing the self by imitating the rhetoric of others" (436). According to Dorsey, "Douglass mimetically uses dead and trivial metaphors and 'novelizes' them in ways that 'break through' his audience's 'previous categorization' of African American slavery and that simultaneously identify him as a 'master of metaphor'" (436). Though Dorsey focuses on other metaphors in his analysis—the figure of the mother and the home were far from “dead” or “trivial” in the nineteenth century!—his analysis of Douglass's rhetoric is nonetheless apt. Douglass does indeed use the metaphor of mother to "break through" his audience's preconceived notions of blackness and the slave. Dorsey argues that Douglass employs imitation and that imitation is a political act of resistance:

> Douglass emphasizes that resistance to oppression requires a degree of imitation: to change their position, the oppressed must at some level copy the metaphors, the behaviors, and even the thought processes of the oppressor. By imagining oneself as the other and then materially producing rhetorically effective images of this imaginative process, one gains access to political exchanges that can alter social structures. (436)

When Douglass incorporates the metaphor of the mother as integral to his story, he "alters social structures." By rewriting his relationship with his mother he challenges the dominant view maintained by antebellum ethnography that "white faculties necessary for feeling filial love was biologically impossible for figures like Douglass" (Chaney 394). By adding sentimental affection to his story, he challenges the dominant notions of the slave and shows slavery to be an inhumane institution.

The trope of family is so essential to Douglass's story that in *My Bondage and My Freedom* his "entrance" or "introduction" to slavery is altered. In the first narrative, he marks witnessing, as a child, the brutal whipping of Aunt Esther (Hester) as the "blood-stained gate," "the entrance to the hell of slavery":

> I remember the first time I ever witnessed this horrible exhibition. I was quite a child, but I well remember it. I shall never forget it whilst I remember any thing…It was the blood-stained gate, the entrance to the hell of slavery, through which I was about to pass. It was a most terrible spectacle. (*Narrative* 258)

In this scene, Douglass refers to himself as "a witness and a participant." Terrified, Douglass believes he is next, and hides in a closet. Immediately after this scene, Douglass discusses his master's family, his own alienation from the other slaves (indicated by his inability to understand the slave songs), and includes another violent scene, the episode in which Mr. Gore kills the slave Demby for disobedience. After Esther's beating, Douglass mentions for the first and only time that he lived with his grandmother: "I had never seen anything like it before. I had always lived with my grandmother on the outskirts of the plantation, where she was put to raise the children of the younger women" (*Narrative* 259). There are no opening chapters about family and home in the first text, and he mentions his grandmother just once. Her role in his first narrative is brief, fully overshadowed by Esther's whipping. In the 1845 narrative, the "entrance to the hell of slavery" is marked by violence, witnessing, and unwilling participation.[2]

In the second narrative, we see some dramatic changes in his account of Esther's beating. Douglass is in the closet asleep and "probably awakened" by Esther's shrieks. He witnesses Esther's beating from the closet without being seen. In this revised version, the master's words

[2] For a fascinating discussion of Aunt Esther's whipping, see Jenny Franchot's article "The Punishment of Esther: Frederick Douglass and The Construction of the Feminine."

are not reported—they are "too blasphemous to be reproduced"—whereas Esther's vocalizations, her cries for mercy, are highlighted. Douglass pities her and is outraged, whereas no reaction of this sort is recorded in the 1845 edition. The revised text notes that the scene of Esther being beaten was often repeated; in other words, this scene is not marked as his entrance into slavery as it is in the first autobiography.

Many critics have focused on how Douglass portrays acts of violence to show the brutality and inhumanity of slavery. However, I posit that the type of damage slavery does to human beings shifts between the first version of the narrative and the second. The first narrative focuses on physical violence and sufferings while the revised narrative highlights the mental effects of such acts of violence. In his 1855 revision Douglass shows the mental and emotional abuse that converts the human into a "brute." The attempt to deny the slave maternal and family bonds, to deny him of domestic feeling itself, is part of the dehumanization process. In *My Bondage and My Freedom*, the "entrance" into slavery for Douglass is amended. His grandmother's abandonment at his master's plantation now becomes the transformative moment, his "first introduction to the realities of slavery":

> The reader may be surprised that I narrate so minutely an incident apparently so trivial, and which must have occurred when I was not more than seven years old; but as I wish to give a faithful history of my experience in slavery, I cannot withhold a circumstance which, at the time, affected me so deeply. Besides, this was, in fact, my first introduction to the realities of slavery. (*Bondage* 150)

The horrors of slavery are found not just in physical violence, but also in the emotional and psychological violence associated with persistent attempts to "blunt and destroy" familial bonds. What may seem like a "minute" and "trivial" incident becomes one which "affect[s] [him] so deeply." Douglass engages readers by offering them an experience with which they can sympathize. While the brutal whipping of Esther causes outrage, it does not necessarily create empathy. Whipping is presumably an alien experience for most white nineteenth-century readers, whereas familial loss might well pull at most readers' heartstrings. Even though the separation in question is from his grandmother, she functions as a surrogate mother; we learn in *My Bondage and My Freedom* that she raises him from infancy to age seven. Douglass thus alters his entrance

to slavery from the experience of physical violence (1845) to one involving the loss of maternal love (1855). The "realities of slavery" shift from the body to the heart; the heart rather than the flesh becomes the primary locus of the horrors of slavery.

While the idea of family is rarely mentioned in the earlier narrative, the loss of family becomes the focal point for Douglass in his revision. Interestingly, Douglass experiences such a loss not only when his grandmother leaves him at his master's plantation, but also when he meets his brothers and sisters for the first time at the plantation:

> I had never seen my brother nor sisters before; and, though I had sometimes heard of them, and felt a curious interest in them, I really did not understand what they were to me, or I to them. We were brothers and sisters, but what of that? Why should they be attached to me, or I to them? Brothers and sisters we were by blood; but *slavery* had made us strangers. I heard the words brother and sisters, and knew they must mean something; but slavery had robbed these terms of their true meaning. (*Bondage* 36)

When Douglass he meets his brother and sisters for the first time, he becomes aware of the emotional distance he feels: "slavery had made us strangers." Yet he knows that he should not feel estranged from his siblings: "I heard the words brother and sisters, and knew they *must* mean something" (emphasis added). Here we see the split between the mind and the heart. Douglass wants to desire family and knows that family is sacred but "slavery had robbed these terms of their true meaning." He is left with a sense of loss and emptiness as he knows that "brother" and "sister" mean something he does not feel. His recognition of this loss and the knowledge of the erasure of family's proper meaning show that the slave is indeed a human being, which is an overarching goal for Douglass in his narrative.

In the 1855 revision, Douglass continually reiterates the "dread" of separation from his family, an idea absent from the earlier version: "Unhappily for me, however, all the information I could get concerning him [the master] but increased my great dread of being carried thither—of being separated from and deprived of the protection of my grandmother and grandfather" (*Bondage* 33). He now mentions his grandfather, a figure who is completely absent from the 1845 text. Family provides "protection." However, as Douglass writes family into the 1855 text, we see that it is continually threatened and marked by the "dread" of separation and loss. What

Douglass fears most is separation from his family, "of being carried thither." The slave is situated in this in-between position of family and no family. Slaves know they are related to others by blood but have limited emotional connections to their families. His mother exemplifies the slave's liminal state of family/no family: "My poor mother, like many other slave-women, had *many children* but NO FAMILY!" (*Bondage* 36). Douglass's mother does attempt to maintain a bond with her children illustrated by her night-time visits to Douglass. The slave struggles to move from the condition of no family to family but is constantly faced with obstacles: "I really wanted to play with my brother and sisters, but they were strangers to me, and I was full of fear that grandmother might leave without taking me with her" (*Bondage* 36). In the 1855 narrative, Douglass repeatedly mentions his fear of abandonment. He wavers between his desire to play and bond with his siblings and his fear of his grandmother leaving him. When he discovers that his grandmother has left him at the plantation, Douglass recounts his sense of despair: "heart-broken at the discovery, I fell upon the ground, and wept a boy's bitter tears, refusing to be comforted" (*Bondage* 36). Significantly, this "first introduction to the realities of slavery" occasioned by his grandmother's abandonment is not the knowledge that he is a slave. Douglass already knows that he is a slave. The "realities of slavery" to which he has been introduced is the loss of family. This climatic and emotionally charged scene in *My Bondage and My Freedom* starkly contrasts that of Aunt Esther's brutal whipping. The "realities of slavery" shift from screams, blood, and a child's silence to tears, abandonment, and a child's heartbreak.

The domestic frame present in the 1855 narrative is absent from the 1845 text, and with this absence the horror of slavery shifts from brutality and violence to the loss of family and home. So why include this narrative of "home life"? Certainly, Douglass invokes domestic scenes and domestic rhetoric in order to critique the slave system. But in the 1855 narrative that critique has shifted from targeting the physical violence of slavery to targeting the emotional violence slavery imposes. Douglass personalizes that critique with his own life story. He co-opts the rhetoric and narrative conventions of domesticity hitherto reserved for white middle class life and transposes them onto the slave system. He uses these sacred icons to show the true horror of slavery. Douglass writes about the separation of slave children from their mothers, contending that this practice of separation:

> is a marked feature of the cruelty and barbarity of the slave system. But it is in harmony with the grand aim of slavery, which, always and everywhere, is to reduce man to a level with the brute. It is a successful method of obliterating from the mind and the heart of the slave, all just ideas of the sacredness of *the family*, as an institution. (*Bondage* 29)

The absence of family, and in particular the lack of a maternal bond, is what transforms a man into a brute. In 1845, Douglass most famously attributes his transformation from brute to man to his famous fight with Covey the overseer, but such a transformation also occurs when he writes family, in particular his mother and grandmother, back into his story. For Douglass, domesticity has an egalitarian effect; in his narrative, it demonstrates sameness rather than differences. While the aim of slavery is to obliterate the idea of family from the slave, Douglass's revised narrative shows that slavery does not successfully do this to him. The brutality of slavery cannot remove from the slave's "mind and heart" the "sacredness of the family."

Douglass not only uses sentimental rhetoric but also harnesses the power of domesticity to charge his story with the revolutionary call for liberation and to paint it with the same literary brush that many famous writers of the time period were wielding. Although sentimentalism focused mainly on white mothers and infants—sentimental discourse identified feminine agency as the origin of morality in human beings—sentimentalism nonetheless "implied a universal application" (Chaney 394). Douglass aims to appropriate this "universal application" for his political and revolutionary agenda. Douglass was well aware of the key role played by the mother in antebellum America. Mary Ryan points out that antebellum constructions of motherhood "conferred upon women the function of transforming infant human animals into adult personalities" (quoted in Chaney 394). Since slavery typically removed slave infants from their slave mothers, then it follows that "the institution of slavery is responsible for the moral condition of so many motherless adults" (Chaney 394). We see this in Douglass's first narrative where his mother is clearly absent and he uses her absence to critique slavery. But in his revised slave narrative he is obviously determined to give her a presence. Douglass uses these brief moments with his mother to reinforce his humanity and to show himself as civilized.

In *My Bondage and My Freedom*, Douglass writes family back into his narrative to correct the "facts" of the earlier version of his life story now that he has fuller authorial control

over his story. The case for correction is strengthened when we note that the first narrative was "shaped as much by the American Anti-Slave Society as by its author" (Sekora 620). Sekora states that the 1845 text was "not so much a life story as an indictment, an anti-slavery document, the testimony of an eyewitness, precisely what Garrison sought" (620). Sekora claims that the 1855 narrative, by contrast, is a "true autobiography" and that this "true autobiography marks a new stage in Douglass's life and prose style" (620). The extended description of his mother and grandmother and his inclusion of family and home in the 1855 revision are signs of his editorial control and reflections of what Douglass values. He gets to tell the story he wants to tell, and that story includes family and home. Sundquist states that "the autobiography or the short story, offered Douglass, as it had Benjamin Franklin, the opportunity to 'edit' his own American identity and thus reach a wider audience, white and black" (123). He uses these emblems of domesticity and includes these "facts" to make political claims about race and gender.

In *My Bondage and My Freedom*, Douglass corrects the erasure of the feminine that characterizes his 1845 narrative. In the 1855 revision of his story, Douglass "expands the emotional importance of maternity" (Chaney 396). Chaney notes that in the 1855 text, Douglass's mother "is no longer a sentimental other, a maternal void carved out by the horrors of slavery to be filled in by allusions to sentimental mothers; she no longer references the author's alienation from dominant cultural and linguistic tropes" (396). In his revision, his mother is ever present. She also becomes a vehicle that enables him to participate within the "dominant cultural and linguistic tropes" as a son rather than only as a slave. He also portrays his mother "as a source of strength and intelligence" (Duane 482). Rather than dwelling on the absent or negligent slave mother, Douglass insists that "his intelligence and literary talent were descended from his maternal heritage [which] complicate[s] two reigning assumptions: that white blood carried with it intellect and civilization and that women were incapable of providing the masculine attributes of perseverance, savvy, or strength necessary for citizenship" (Duane 483). Instead of portraying himself as a self-made man, Douglass claims his mother as the source of his future success.

In amending his self-portrait, he not only rectifies the importance of family for the slave and challenges slavery's ability to eliminate family from the slave and the slave experience, but he also opposes the dominant view of slave mothers as absent, negligent, and ignorant. He

reinstates black mothers as providers of education and empowerment, writing morality into the consciousness of the slave. Chaney notes that ethnographers of the time "often implied that permanent physiological differences precluded slaves from ever fully appropriating European morality" (393). Douglass wants to counter this prevailing idea. By appropriating the maternal icon and making it central to his slave narrative, Douglass declares that the voices of black women must be heard. In so doing, he demonstrates that the slave does indeed possess a moral compass, as mothers were considered the source of morality. He also repositions "the black mother as the foundation of a legitimate cultural and emotional lineage" (Duane 482). Reclaiming the black mother is an act of self-reclamation that pervades his revised text. Describing the 1855 text as "at once fiery and sentimental," Sundquist argues that "*My Bondage and My Freedom* portrays the rebel-patriot Fredrick Douglass as a figure who merges the urgency of eloquent personal facts and the heroic of a national ideal" (130). That national ideal includes family and home.

Conclusion

Douglass moves from a state of no family in the 1845 narrative to a state of family ten years later. This shift re-envisions the role of the mother, family, and home in the slave narrative. These domestic icons have an irrevocable place for the slave. Douglass uses these symbols of domesticity to transform blacks from objects of slavery into subjects, despite slavery's cruelty. Douglass also emphasizes the importance of community and the collective. For Douglass, the home and family signify stability, normalcy, and acceptance. In the 1855 narrative, Douglass modifies the "Representative Man" so that he is no longer a self-made man but a man who recognizes that family, home and community are integral to the black subject whether enslaved or free. Douglass uses "an emotional and moral verity—the sanctity of the family—[to] align antislavery rebellion with the powerful conventions of domesticity" (Jay 234). His revisions thus reflect the "complex affiliations of femininity and feminism and abolitionism" (McDowell 199). By writing and righting family in his 1855 revision, Douglass uses family, the icon of domestic ideology, to critique the institution of slavery not only for the physical violence it commits. He also utilizes the structure and ideology of family to condemn slavery for the cruelty it perpetrates

IJELLH
International Journal of English Language, Literature and Humanities
INTERNATIONAL STANDARD SERIAL NUMBER INTERNATIONAL CENTRE
ISSN : 2321-7065
Indexed, Peer Reviewed & Refereed Journal

upon the heart and home. With *My Bondage and My Freedom*, Douglass makes a direct connection between abolitionism and domesticity with the goal of looking beyond the end of slavery. Douglass looks towards freedom, using domesticity to establish and reclaim a sense of dignity, authenticity, and equality for all people.

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