

Humanization of a murdered girl in Douglass's narrative



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In *Narrative of the Life of Frederick Douglass, An American Slave*, Douglass tells many anecdotes to illustrate the horrors of slavery. One of these recounts the murder of his wife's cousin. Douglass uses several strategies to gain our sympathy when describing the incident. First, Douglass does not hesitate to voice his disapproval of the whole affair with a very emotionally-charged report. Douglass starts the paragraph by calling Mrs. Hicks' action "murder." He then attracts our pity with the phrase "poor girl." These words clearly distinguish the villain from the victim. Douglass further highlights Mrs. Hicks' ferocity, saying that the victim was "mangled" in a "horrible" manner. He also uses the words "breaking" and "broke" to emphasize that the slave was shattered brutally. This diction urges us to, like Douglass, become enraged by Mrs. Hicks' action. When telling the event, Douglass humbles the girl by leaving her nameless. He refers to her as "my wife's cousin" and "this girl," thus emphasizing her lower status as a slave. Another interpretation of her anonymity is that it allows her to represent other nameless slaves who suffered similar fates. The girl transcends the individual. She died an untimely death just as other black slaves die before and after her. Since Douglass tells a dead girl's tale, he is her voice. As such, he graphically enhances the coroner's report. The coroner simply decided that the girl "had come to her death by severe beating." Douglass tells the story with exact details. He explains how the girl was tired because she had lost her rest for the previous few nights. Since being tired is a very human flaw, this detail humanizes the girl. As the girl is taking care of the baby, she is shown in a caring and maternal light. On the other hand, the real mother, Mrs. Hicks, is shown to have completely forgotten her baby's distress as she attacks the girl without delay. Douglass tells how Mrs. Hicks grew angry at <https://assignbuster.com/humanization-of-a-murdered-girl-in-douglass-narrative/>

the tired girl's slow reaction to the baby's crying and " jumped from her bed, seized an oak stick of wood by the fireplace, and with it broke the girl's nose and breastbone, and thus ended her life." His parallel structuring of the verbs " jumped," " seized," " broke," and " ended" adds an uncanny rhythm to the story that echoes the sounds of a cruel beating. These verbs also emphasize the monstrosity of Mrs. Hicks' actions. By linking the girl's mistake, a normal reaction of a common human symptom, with Mrs. Hick's over-the-top reaction to a baby's cry, another common occurrence, Douglass humanizes the victim and dehumanizes Mrs. Hicks. He therefore cleverly bends our sympathies toward the girl. The specific details that Douglass incorporates into the story make the incident more visual and believable. However, I wonder about their validity. Since the girl died a few hours after she was beaten, she probably did not get a chance to spread her story. The coroner only deciphered the reason of the girl's death, not the reason of her beating. As such, how did Douglass obtain all the specifics, down to the material and location of the stick that Mrs. Hicks used? Yet if Douglass does mix fact with fiction, then this paragraph further attests to his intelligence and ability to influence his audience. Despite Douglass' incorporation of fictitious details, his narrative possesses an honest ring. In fact, his writing strikes us as more believable as a result of these made-up but extremely probable accounts. A possible reason of this paradox could be just as the girl in the paragraph represents not only herself but all the other victimized slaves, this graphic tale of Mrs. Hicks' atrocity depicts not just Mrs. Hicks' cruelty but also the cruelty of all the other slave owners. Douglass could very well be using this girl's situation as a template for a particular beating that he witnessed in a different setting. While Douglass uses emotionally charged

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diction and anecdotes, he does not use them frivolously. He carefully masks his own emotions behind his logic during the story-telling. Douglass uses only a few negatively charged simply to guide us toward the victim's side. By not flooding his account with an excessive amount of his own indignations, he allows the horror of his stories to speak for themselves. Following the tale of the girl's murder, Douglass simply mentions that Mrs. Hicks was not punished. Douglass does not write out his anger; instead, he leaves us to interpret the situation for ourselves. This way, when we admit the unfairness of the situation, we feel that we arrived at the conclusion through our own reasoning and not because we were told to get angry by Douglass. Douglass discretely incorporates emotions into his logic so that we would not feel manipulated into agreeing with him. Yet at the same time, he cleverly humanizes the victim so that we cannot help but sympathize with her. Douglass's vivid telling of this particular incident serves as a fine example of how Douglass uses a few incidences to represent the countless atrocities that he has seen and to protest against the horrors of slavery.