

Literary analysis of my bondage and my freedom



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In *My Bondage and My Freedom* by Frederick Douglass, the setting plays a monumental role in the development of the story, elucidating how an individual's environment can be nurturing or detrimental to his or her moral development. Douglass describes details of the places he lived throughout his life and the things he experienced both as a slave and as a free man. Not only did setting influence Douglass' moral development, it also affected his unique outlook on life, which led him to achieve amazing things against the odds for his time and place.

In the beginning of the autobiography, Douglass depicts his early childhood living with his grandparents. He describes how he is a slave, although he did not know it at the time, and how his grandmother is one as well. Despite their bondage, they live in a dwelling that is luxurious compared to most slaves at the time. The setting during the early parts of Douglass' life is mainly beneficial to his growth (both figuratively and literally), but a constant undertone of anxiety taints his memory of this time. The setting is figuratively beneficial to Douglass because his grandparent's house aided the growth of his morality. Literally, it was beneficial because a steady diet and exercise gave him a healthy body. "The dwelling of my grandmother and grandfather had few pretensions. It was a log hut, or cabin, built of clay, wood, and straw. At a distance it resembled- though it was much smaller, less commodious and less substantial- the cabins erected in the western states by the first settlers. To my child's eye, however, it was a noble structure, admirably adapted to promote the comforts and conveniences of its inmates" (Douglass 42). This quotation highlights the relatively nice setting of Douglass' early childhood. This is significant, because when he

becomes older, he has to endure awful circumstances as a slave. Had he been born into that desolate setting, however, he may never have realized how happy he could be if he were no longer a slave. Despite the kind and comfortable life that Douglass enjoyed at his grandparent's house, there was a dark cloud over his head, even at a young age. " Thus early did clouds and shadows begin to fall upon my path. Once on the track- troubles never come singly- I was not long in finding out another facet, still more grievous to my childish heart. I was told that this ' old master,' whose name seemed ever to be mentioned with fear and shuddering, only allowed the children to live with grandmother for a limited time, and that in fact as soon as they were big enough, they were promptly taken away, to live with the ' old master'" (Douglass 43). This foreboding makes Douglass hate growing older, because he knows that the older he gets, the sooner he has to leave to go live with " old master."

Soon, Douglass comes of age and has to leave his grandparent's house to go to work for the infamous " old master." Initially, he is frightened when he gets to the " oild master's" house, but he soon finds comfort with his cousins who live there. " I had not seen so many children before. Great houses loomed up in different directions, and a great many men and women were at work in the fields. All this hurry, noise, and singing was very different from the stillness of Tuckahoe. As a new comer, I was an object of special interest, and, after laughing and yelling around me, and playing all sorts of wild tricks, they (the children) asked me to go out and play with them. This is refused to do, preferring to stay with my grandmamma" (Douglass 50). This quotation shows Douglass' fears in his new environment; he prefers what is

comfortable and familiar in contrast to this new, unfamiliar setting. On page 61, Douglass reflects that though he is sad to leave Tuckahoe, he is adapted and making the best of things at Col. Lloyd's plantation. "Keen as was my regret and great as was my sorrow at leaving the latter [Tuckahoe], I was not long in adapting myself to this, my new home. A man's troubles are always half disposed of, when he finds endurance his only remedy. I found myself here; there was no getting away' and what remained for me, but to make the best of it?" (Douglass 61). This quotation illustrates Douglass' adaptive nature and ability to make the best of his situation. In 1838, after suffering under the brutal ownership of numerous masters, Douglass escapes and eventually buys his freedom.

After securing his freedom, Frederick Douglass did not settle down right away; he travelled, making speeches that advocated abolition. These years taught him that some people did want change for African-Americans and it was achievable. When he did settle down, it was in Rochester, New York. The city is beneficial to him and encourages his determination to elucidate the prosperity of the abolition of slavery because it was the first place he could pursue his writing without major hindrances. Thus making Rochester an environment where it would be advantageous for him to work on his writing, in both his newspaper writing and his autobiography. "...I came to Rochester, Western New York, among strangers, where the circulation of my paper could not interfere with the local circulation of the Liberator and the Standard; for at that time I was, on the anti-slavery question, a faithful disciple of William Lloyd Garrison, and fully committed to his doctrine touching the pro-slavery character of the constitution of the United States,

and the non-voting principle, of which he is the known and distinguished advocate. With Mr. Garrison, I held it to be the first duty of the non-slaveholding states to dissolve the union with the slaveholding states; and hence my cry, like his, was, ' No union with slaveholders.' With these views, I came into Western New York; and during the first four years of my labor here, I advocated them with pen and tongue, according to the best of my ability" (Douglass 294). This quotation illustrates the constructive environment can have on an individual's life. Douglass is no longer a slave and he no longer has to fear being persecuted for running away. He is completely free to work on his writing.

The setting in *My Bondage and My Freedom* exemplifies the factors contributing to Douglass' moral development throughout his life. He portrays himself in prosperous and nurturing environments, as well as harsh and dangerous ones. These varying settings provide a detailed contrast of his environment and an explanation on how they impacted his moral development.