

Who's afraid of the
big bad
wolf(stonecraft)?



**ASSIGN
BUSTER**

Former African-American slave Frederick Douglass wrote his memoir *My Bondage and My Freedom* in 1855, sixty-three years after Englishwoman Mary Wollstonecraft released her *Vindication on the Rights of Woman* in 1792, and fourteen years before Englishman John Stuart Mill would publish his treatise *The Subjection of Women*. Douglass' work describes the horrors endured by African slaves on the American plantations, and invites modern readers to consider the ways chattel slavery might still exist in societies today. Could subordination on the basis of gender be analogous to chattel slavery? If so, to what extent? Furthermore, what is so objectionable about marriage being legally similar to slavery? By looking at the institution of marriage in the aforementioned works, it is possible to interpret subordination on the basis of gender to be analogous to slavery insofar as the contemporary views are that a woman is to be bound to her husband, such that she cannot hold property and that she herself is technically property when she becomes legally one with him. The comparison of these two institutions then provides an understanding of marriage as something inherently wrong in its limiting the development of individual female potential. While not the focus of this paper, limiting female potential is also practically inefficient in its elimination of a potential workforce demographic. To further define the development of an individual's potential, this paper will focus on several component aspects as derived from Frederick Douglass's descriptions of slavery. Of particular interest are the cases in which he describes the subjugation of female slaves—persons who were oppressed not only on the basis of race but on the basis of gender as well. These women lacked physical autonomy, emotional development, intellectual

engagement, and personal aspirations. The latter three, while separate and clearly distinct, can also be discussed together under the idea of internal desires or functions. These four categories, as applied to married women in general, will be explored in this paper using American chattel slavery as a lens. While none of these concepts are quantifiable, they are still measurable by way of causal mechanisms. How does the patriarchy assert slave-master like control over physical autonomy or emotional development? How does the legal binding of marriage stultify intellectual engagement and the personal aspirations of women? The causal mechanism for physical autonomy is force, while the causal mechanism for the latter three is education, albeit different types of education.

Physical freedom, or lack thereof, is a characteristic of both slaves and of married women. Not only is physical freedom a concern, but so is physical wellbeing. In chattel slavery, the slave is relegated to a piece of property, akin to an object. As such, he or she can be treated however the master wishes. Chattel slavery, as seen in the American South, opened up nebulous spaces between the master and the servant which could be filled with the master's whim. Since the slave was an object in the master's household, he or she could be subject to punishments without justification. In one case, a woman named Nelly was accused of "one of the commonest and most indefinite in the whole catalogue of offenses usually laid to the charge of slaves, viz: 'impudence.' This may mean almost anything, or nothing at all..." (Douglass, 75). Nelly was given a whipping, and in front of her children, nonetheless, on unclear terms of offense. While the harsh punishments of slaves and the usage of flogging in American slavery are not directly

reflective of the treatment of most women in marriages, the system of thought behind them are similar. Under a legal binding to her husband, wives, too, become property. A wife is one with her husband—they are one legal unit—she is a part of him, legally and socially speaking. As property, a wife is subject to arbitrary physical treatment by her husband. While the causal mechanism in this physical relationship is not necessarily “force,” it is on the primal level. As a slave-master or overseer utilizes the lash to control the slave, men have traditionally been able to use physical strength to assert their will over a wife who is “property.” Mill mocks his opponents who claim that “the rule of men over women differs from all these others [forms of slavery] in not being a rule of force; it is accepted voluntarily” (Mill, 484). Even when patriarchal rule is seemingly voluntary, the use of physical force strengthens a marriage’s ties and can discourage a woman from extricating herself from a damaging union. Mill also recognizes that, “In the first place, a great number of women do not accept it” (484), and furthermore that “wives, even in the most extreme and protracted cases of bodily ill usage, hardly ever dare avail themselves of the laws made for their protection: and if...they are induced to do so, their whole effort afterwards is to disclose as little as they can” (Mill, 486). Fear energizes the tightening bonds of physical force which hold a marriage together. Expectations are set up for women in the physical realm for them to be frail and domestic, to which leading feminist writer Mary Wollstonecraft responds, “I do not comprehend his [Milton, who wrote of frail mothers] meaning, unless...he meant to deprive us [women] of souls, and insinuate that we were beings only designed...to gratify the sense of man when he can no longer soar on the wing of contemplation” (Wollstonecraft, 18). She refuses to accept the

idea that women are to be and to act physically weaker than their male counterparts, believing that “ the most perfect education, in my opinion, is such an exercise of the understanding as is best calculated to strengthen the body and form the heart” (Wollstonecraft, 20). At the point in history when Wollstonecraft was writing, women certainly did not have the education, moral or formal, to ensure either physically strengthened bodies or fully formed internal desires.

What of these internal desires; what of a woman's emotional development?

While literature on women extensively featured females as emotionally unstable and prone to make poor, rash decisions, men were constantly hailed as rational, disciplined superiors. (Eminent twentieth-century novelist James Joyce once wrote that “ Men are governed by lines of intellect— women: by curves of emotion.” Although a generalization, his statement reflects a common conception of his time and earlier.) In comparison with the treatment of a slave's emotional development, the case is slightly different, as “ Men do not want solely the obedience of women, they want their sentiments” (486). On the other hand, emotional development for slaves was largely or completely disregarded. Owners and traders would tear families apart (Douglass, Chapter 1; 67, etc.) without considering the emotional baggage, scars, and burdens. The slaves were property and thus treated as less than human. Like married women whose emotions were catered towards their husbands, slaves' emotions were shaped to only be pleasing towards their masters. If the master found any behavior or mood of the slave to be bothersome to him, he could subject the slave to arbitrary punishment. Wollstonecraft adds to this emotional one-sidedness in her

examination of a fictional female characterization, in which the female character is essentially told “ that a woman should never, for a moment, feel herself independent, that she should be governed by fear to exercise her natural cunning, and made a coquettish slave in order to render her a more alluring object of desire, a sweeter companion to man, whenever he chooses to relax himself” (Wollstonecraft, 25). If women are constantly seeking to please men and shaping their emotions around pleasing a man, then she is not allowed her full range of emotions or the means to express them. In the unofficial or “ moral” sense of education, “ all moralities tell them [women] that it is the duty of women, and all the current sentimentalities that it is their nature, to live for others; to make complete abnegation of themselves, and to have no life but in their affections. And by their affections are meant the only ones they are allowed to have—those to the men with whom they are connected, or to the children who constitute an additional and indefeasible tie between them and a man” (Mill, 487). Affections and “ natural attraction between opposite sexes” (Mill) are the primary purpose of a wife in fulfilling her husband’s full, wide range of emotive needs; later, as a mother, her affections and caring qualities are then meant to cater to her child’s desires. This is so prevalent that “ it would be a miracle if the object of being attractive to men had not become the polar star of feminine education and formation of character” (Mill, 487). She is not a woman but a wife, and thus disallowed from exploring feelings not directly linked to sufficing another’s necessities.

The stunted intellectual development of both chattel slaves and of women is another aspect brought out clearly from examples given in Douglass’s

narrative. Slaves on American plantations—and indeed slaves throughout all of history—were prevented from receiving education in its knowledge-based form. Literate slaves posed an immediate threat to ruling classes, as with knowledge inevitably came power—the power to communicate, to express, and to contemplate. Likewise, women were prevented not only the moral or “emotional” education discussed above, but also a proper education in worldly, knowledge-based topics. This was due to the desired “entire dependence on the husband” (Mill, 487). The intellectual capacities of slaves on American plantations are never fully explored if they are held in their situations on the plantations, and the potential of women are also neglected when they enter marriage and their work and thoughts are devoted towards serving her husband and household.

Some may argue that women are naturally predisposed doing the sort of work they currently do, and are fully satisfied by it, but as Wollstonecraft demonstrates (as a woman), such is not the case. She questions herself, her readers, and all of womankind, asking whether “women have so little ambition as to be satisfied with such a condition? Can they supinely dream life away in the lap of pleasure, or the languor of weariness, rather than assert their claim to pursue reasonable pleasures and render themselves conspicuous by practicing the virtues which dignify mankind? Surely she has not an immortal soul who can loiter life away merely employed to adorn her person” (Wollstonecraft, 28). Personal achievement is something slaves are forced to give up, often without say and in childhood, as they dedicate their existences to say, picking cotton or doing housework. Their autonomy, their individuality, their identity as a human being is rendered nonexistent;

Douglass holds that “ under the whole heavens there is no relation more unfavorable to the development of honorable character [this mostly on the slaveholder’s part] than that sustained by the slaveholder to the slave” (Douglass, 66). In stripping slaves of their humanity, slaveholders gradually erode away at their own. While women only enter such an analogous slave-like state once married, they, too, are raised and educated for their entire lives to develop a character which is self-denying, placating, self-less, to the point of annihilated identity and realization of self.

Wollstonecraft encourages women to learn, practice, and consistently seek virtue. Virtue, and the possession of it, was something deeply associated with men; in fact it was thought to draw defining lines between what was “ manly” behavior and what was not. Yet why should women not be allowed to practice the “ virtues which dignify mankind?” Wollstonecraft includes women in this “ mankind”; this shared humanity. On a different practical level, women could constitute a portion of a society’s workforce, but by forcing the wife to be the legal subordinate of her husband, relegated to domestic spheres, the contribution of labor and other virtuous pursuits on her part are swept to a side. On the subject of work, one finds that chattel slaves and women—while not engaging in the same labors—share a similar discomfort. Women are expected to do nothing, to cater to their husband’s physical, emotional, and sensual needs, while chattel slaves serve a limited population of other men at the cost of their own physicality, emotional and intellectual development, and personal existence. While one does not participate in the workforce, the other does, at terrible cost. In the end, both are forced to sacrifice the development of an individual self to something

that is not greater, since it was “ not [even] God, but man, that afforded the true explanation of the existence of slavery” (Douglass, 74). Certainly it was not God, and certainly it was not woman, either.

Works Cited

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