

English



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A World of Ideas: Slavery and Natural Selection Frederick Douglass's autobiographical Narrative is a strong protest against slavery. Douglass's attitude toward white people is characterized by a clear demarcation between slaveholders and non-slaveholders. He does not resort to an outright condemnation of white people per se. He is very emphatic in stating that it is "The blighting and dehumanizing effects of slavery" (Douglass, p 159) which is responsible for the evil in those white people who are slaveholders. This attitude is established by Douglass's description of Mrs. Auld as "a woman of the kindest heart and finest feelings" (Douglass, p 159) until she is corrupted by the poison of slavery. Likewise, he expresses his deep affection for the little white boys who taught him to read. On the other hand, Douglass is unequivocal in his attitude towards white people who are slaveholders. He declares, "I loathed them as being the meanest as well as the wickedest of men," (Douglass, p 164). He holds Andrew and Mrs. Hamilton to be the examples of this bestiality. Douglas is undoubtedly bitter about his slavery experiences. His learning makes him acutely conscious of slavery as a violation of human rights. His hatred of the unjust society, which has denied his people their freedom, is evident throughout the Narrative. He describes such a society as composed of "a band of robbers," (Douglass, p 164). Douglass is particularly anguished by the cruel treatment meted out to his grandmother, who is abandoned and turned out to die alone in her old age. He condemns a society that supports slavery as one in which "the exercise of irresponsible power" (Douglass, p 162) is sanctioned. It is slavery which makes barbarians of a society. Charles Darwin's Natural Selection deals with the significance of natural variations, and the evolution of those variations which are favorable for the survival of the species. Darwin gives

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great importance to sexual selection in his essay. He discusses the struggle between males for possession of the females. The most vigorous, successful males will have more progeny. The most successful males are those endowed with special weapons, or means of defense, such as horns, spurs or manes. In the case of birds, Darwin demonstrates how the successful males utilize songs, colourful plumage, and other antics, or “ charms,” (Darwin, p 606) to attract the attention of the female. The display of individual likes and dislikes among birds is remarkable. Darwin’s observations of sexual selection in animals and birds can definitely be applied to human beings. It is obviously those males who exhibit physical vigor and health who are capable of surviving adverse changes in the environment and siring more progeny. Aggressive men attract more women than their more reticent peers. Strength, both physical and mental, and the ability to provide for a comfortable lifestyle, are characteristics which favor sexual selection in men. Like the plumage of a bird, physical attractiveness is definitely an asset in both male and female humans. The handsome man and the beautiful woman are more likely to be sought after as sexual partners. This advantage is so obvious and proved that it is the foundation of the cosmetic industry! Resourcefulness, physical endurance, attractive appearance, and adaptation to environmental changes are the qualities which are most likely to endure, as it is these which lead to more successful sexual selection in human beings. At the same time, as in birds, human beings have strong individual preferences in sexual selection. Another of Darwin’s observations can be applied to human beings. Darwin asserts that Natural Selection leads to changes in the functional relationship between the sexes, leading to a “ physiological division of labour” (Darwin, p 609). Darwin’s example of flowers

evolving into distinct male and female varieties can be applied to the evolution of the women as home-makers and men as providers over the ages. This division of labour would definitely have increased the efficiency of human beings as a species and heightened their chances of survival. Works Cited. Douglass, Frederick. "Narrative of the Life of Frederick Douglass, an American Slave," Chapters 6, 7, and 8. *A World of Ideas*. Jacobus, Lee A. (ed). 8th edition. Publisher. Place of publication. Date of publication. 159 – 171. Darwin, Charles. "Natural Selection." *A World of Ideas*. Jacobus, Lee A. (ed). 8th edition. Publisher. Place of publication. Date of publication. 600 – 611.