# African-American Slave Childhood

**Barbora Moravová**

**Abstract**

*The paper focuses on some issues of slave children's lives in bondage. A significant source for learning about the African American slavery in the Antebellum South are the slave narratives written by (former) slaves. These narratives were mainly written to document events and experiences of slavery and also to add arguments for the growing abolitionist movement. The research of this paper is based on a comparative study of the narrative works* Incidents in the Life of a Slave Girl *by Harriet Jacobs,* Narrative of the Life of Frederick Douglass, an American Slave *by Frederick Douglass and* Up from Slavery *by Booker T. Washington. These narratives provide detailed descriptions of how children lived during slavery as well as how they experienced violence and racism.*

One of the views on the history of childhood is that childhood, in our modern understanding of the word, was virtually non-existent prior to 1860s for the majority of children and that they were not considered pure and innocent. (Wilson, 260) The concepts of childhood radically changed between the seventeenth and the eighteenth century. During that period a notion of childhood was reconsidered and children were depicted as pure and innocent human beings, highly vulnerable and in need of the protection of adults. "Childhood for the first time became the most privileged, perhaps the most enviable, phase of life." (Cunningham, 2006) By the nineteenth century, people who speak about childhood defined it as a "golden innocence before the shadow of adult sin." (Najafi) It came to be thought that children should be protected from the adult world of work and responsibility. During the Victorian era, the cult of childhood innocence peaked. Victorians emphasized a child-centered ideology of the family and the idea that a child's early years were a period in which children were in need of protection (Dvořáková, 130). However, "the great changes in viewing childhood resulting in the changing situation of children, in their childhoods becoming longer, safer, and more care free, affected mostly the middle and upper classes" (Bubíková, 22) and there was a large contradiction between this idealized view of childhood and the brutal reality of many children's lives in the nineteenth century, particularly working class children and slave children. Due to this fact, both black and poor white children can be characterized as 'children

without childhood'. However, according to Mintz, the African American children experienced "the most extreme version of unprotected childhood" (94).

The base for dramatically different experiences of black children was their racial status which meant for most of them the lifetime of bondage. Many slave owners viewed the birth of slave children as a necessity. The newborn children were considered as a new financial asset, a contributor to the new labor force and as an asset of future profit sales. The birth of a slave was not only considered a profit to the owner but it also assured continuation of their slave trade. Slave children were considered an inheritance. An act passed in 1662 mandated that the new born baby instantly became the property of a slaveholder due to the slave status of his mother, regardless of the color and condition of the father (Stevenson, 222).

Slave children lived a "happy childhood" for the first few years of their life, if at all. Afterwards, their life was full of physical labor, shame, suffering and punishment. In the words of Harriet Jacobs, she was born as a slave and did not know it until she became six years old and her "happy childhood passed away". "When I was six years old, my mother died, and then, for the first time, I learned, by the talk around me, that I was a slave." (10) Both Frederick Douglass and Booker T. Washington had similar experience. Washington realized his slave status when he woke up and heard his mother praying for Lincoln and his army to be successful and "that one day she and her children might be free" (32).

Most of the slave children did not realize their slave status until their slave training began. On many large plantations, slaveholders gave slave children miscellaneous chores or some children were made to assist their parents with their tasks. Some of the slave children did light work assignments around the plantation, while some worked as house slaves. This meant that the children were allowed to work and live in the "Great House" which kept them separated from their parents. Washington did not live in the "Great House" but he had to be present at every lunch time "to fan the flies from the table by means of a large set of paper fans operated by a pulley" (33). Slave children who worked around the plantation mostly fed animals and cared for the animals. They tended sheep, milked cows and fed pigs. Children also carried water and supplies to the field hands, shelled corn and helped prepare meals. Many slave children assisted at the nursery and ran errands. They were also responsible for chasing birds away from newly seeded fields by waving arms, ranging bells, rattling grounds, shouting and throwing stones (Webber, 21). Generally, it depended on the master whether and how much slave children had to

work. Furthermore, it was the master's decision at what age he will send the young slave children to do the heavy physical work to the fields.

Many slaves thought working as a house slave was better than working in the fields because house servants did not work under the strict supervision of a cruel overseer. They were fed better food and received the old clothes of the master's children. However, their experiences differed; some were abused daily by the master or the mistress. Often times they did not get enough food and had to sleep on the floors. An example of the cruel treatment of a house slave is described in Douglass' narrative were he talks about his neighbor's slave girl who was underfed and beaten by her mistress every day. "The head, neck and shoulders of Mary were literally cut to pieces. I have frequently felt her head, and found it nearly covered with festering sores, caused by the lash of her cruel mistress." (59)

Slave owners were raising the children's value by training them. The slave demand began to increase for the children as young as eight years old. The reason for buying young children and not older slaves was to have more efficient and effective workers who would bring the owners money in the future. The prices for the children differed because it depended on their health, physical development, strength and ability to perform chores, while for some females, their beauty played a major role in the trades. "Slave girls who were deemed pretty according to slave holder standards could be sold as prostitutes or 'fancies'. 'Fancies' were usually of lighter skin and sold at higher prices than other slave women." (Schwartz, 162) These young girls experienced the full impact of slavery due to the fact that they were mostly sold for sexual exploitation and were considered of great value because of their fertile years. The harsh reality of slave master's sexual exploitations and their sexual vulnerability robbed many of the young female slaves of their innocence and purity. Jacobs expresses in her narrative that "whether the slave girl be black as ebony or as fair as her mistress" she is sexually vulnerable. She defines puberty as a "sad epoch in the life of a slave girl" (Painter, 306).

Slave children were usually separated from their families as a result of owner's debt, relocation to a new plantation or by sale. The children could be leased for a period of time, usually one year, to cover a debt or sold for life. In either case, the parents suffered, but the latter was more painful, knowing they will never see nor hear from their children again. "Those who lost a child through sale occasionally compared their emotional pain to the sorrow associated with a child's death." (Schwartz, 163) Slave children were viewed as property and were sometimes given as gifts to newborn babies or newly married couples. Separation could be also caused due to death of the master so that slave children were bequeathed

to someone else. If there was no will left, valuation of the property was necessary. "There were horses and men, cattle and women, pigs and children, all holding the same rank in the scale of being, and were all subjected to the same narrow examination." (Douglass, 64) Parents tried to prevent the sales by threatening not to work or to run away. Slave holders were familiar with this practice and therefore sold the children while their parents were in the fields and in many cases, the parents did not even have a chance to say goodbye. Jacobs in her narrative describes a woman leading her seven children to the auction block where all were sold: "Gone! All gone! Why don't God kill me?" (17)

Slave children were afraid of their owners. Generally, there were two main reasons. Firstly, the owners had the power to separate them from their parents, family and community. Many children were fearful and suffered from knowing of the possibility of separation and the idea of never seeing their families again. The suffering and the experienced trauma had lifetime consequences for many of them. Secondly, they were afraid of the owner's willingness to punish them and their loved ones. It was very painful for young children to see their parents and friends being whipped. Mostly, slave owners used corporal punishments for both adult slaves and children. The whip was the most common instrument of the punishment. Prior to children's first whipping by master, they often heard of or witnessed these actions. As children watched their parents or members of their community being whipped and humiliated, they started to think of who can ever help them when their parents could not save even themselves.

Frederick Douglass described in his narrative the first time he witnessed a whipping / it was of his aunt Hester. The horrible incident terrified him to the point that he hid and was afraid to come out for a long period of time. He described his state of mind as "terrified and horror-stricken". The "bloody transaction" had scared him for life and he feared it would be his "turn next". (43) Similarly, Jacobs describes witnessing a whipping: "Never before, in my life, had I heard hundreds of blows fall, in succession, on a human being. His piteous groans, and his 'O, pray don't massa,' rang in my ear for months afterwards." (15)

During the nineteenth century, slave children were born into a world full of poverty, punishment and physical labor. They were exposed to hunger, to a lack of parental care, education, medical care and even to a lack of adequate clothing. Moreover, slave children were extremely vulnerable to being separated from their parents. As Douglass aptly summarizes: "[Slavery] made my brothers and sisters strangers to me; it

converted the mother that bore me, into a myth; it shrouded my father in mystery, and left me without an intelligible beginning in the world." (60)

As slave children got older, they began to live in constant fear of being punished and whipped by their masters or overseers. The owners viewed slave African-American people as inferior and this greatly affected the childhood of children born to slaves. Slave children grew up in families where their parents made no decisions about their lives themselves but functioned under the supervision of the owners. It was master's decision whether and how much slave children had to work, at what age young children had to start doing miscellaneous chores and what age they started with heavy physical labor in the fields of the plantations. The lack of parental protection and the presence of both parents to support their physical and emotional needs left a major void in the slave children childhood. The fact that the majority of children were sent to work in the fields or to work as house slave in the Great House at a young age robbed them of their childhood development and their innocence. Contrary to the ideal of childhood as a happy and carefree period, slave children often expressed their desire not live at all: "I often found myself regretting my own existence, and wishing myself dead." (Douglass, 62) "I had often prayed for death." (Jacob, 52)

The harsh conditions of a slave childhood bore no comparison to the cult of protected childhood that was idealized by the Victorian society.

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**Barbora Moravová** has received her Bachelor's Degree in English for Business from the University of Pardubice, Czech Republic, this spring. At the present time she is studying the Economics and Management graduate program at the Czech University of Life Sciences Prague. She has developed a profound interest in American culture, especially in African-American cultural history and African-American slave childhood.