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### Ownership at its Best: Slaves vs. Pets

*Narrative of the Life of Frederick Douglass* is a narrative non-fiction story of one man's journey through life as an African American slave in the Antebellum south. Douglass describes his several homes and masters as stepping stones to his eventual escape from slavery, making it a point to talk about each master's personality and how they each treat their slaves. Though many terrible things happened to the slaves Douglass came across in life, and to himself, the main point of the story was not to expose the horrors that slaves suffer, but rather to expose the affect slavery has on both African Americans and European Americans alike.

Douglass's narrative presses me to relate it to domesticated animals and our sense of ownership over them. Although there are significant differences in the situation of slaves during Douglass's time and that of pets currently—most pets cannot perform many of the duties that were imposed upon slaves, and can therefore not really be compared to them in that sense—there are also many similarities in the treatment and mindset we have now about pets and that which white Americans had then about slaves. In Fillmore County, CO, a man was recently sentenced to 180 days in jail and \$290 in fines because “authorities seized more than 50 malnourished horses, ponies and mules from a farm near Le Roy...the life-long horse trader was charged with 26-counts of animal cruelty” (Sturgeon). Often, people find pictures of animal abuse circulating

social media websites in an effort to raise awareness against the issue. Animal cruelty has become such an issue in the United States that just a couple days ago a bill was proposed in Springfield, IL to start an “Animal Abuse Registry” similar to the Sexual Offenders Registries that most states already have. The proposed law states that

...anyone over the age of 18 who is convicted of cruel treatment, aggravated cruelty or animal torture would be placed on the registry, where his or her name, birth date, address and criminal offense would be publicly listed. Anyone registered on the list would be restricted from owning a pet or working anywhere pets are present, and would be required to notify authorities of a change of address. Offenders wouldn't be removed from the list until they had undergone psychiatric and psychological testing (Fowler).

While this bill is a great step toward stopping animal cruelty, just as the abolitionist movement was a great start toward the abolishment of slavery, there should never have been a cause for these movements to take place in the first place.

Many pet owners try to do all they can to give their pets a good life, just as they would their own children. In fact, even many of the abusive pet owners start out treating their animals great, simply because they haven't seen the way they can affect the animals yet. When a person who has never owned a pet, has never known the responsibility it requires, goes into a pet store and sees puppies everywhere, they immediately (usually) melt at the sight of them. This is similar to the way Mrs. Auld reacts to Frederick's arrival to his new masters in Baltimore. When

he first arrives, he describes her as kind, and un-tainted by the temptations of slave-ownership. Douglass states that she was so kind that “the meanest slave was put fully at ease in her presence, and none left without feeling better for having seen her,” because the slaves regarded her as a good mistress (Douglass 39). However just as pet owners often turn cruel toward their animals, causing malnourishment, pain, and sometimes even death, Mrs. Auld quickly turns cruel toward her slave as well. She was given a taste of ownership and power, and then “that cheerful eye...soon became red with rage; that voice, made all of sweet accord, changed to one of harsh and horrid discord; and that angelic face gave place to that of a demon” (Douglass 39).

Pets, before they were pets, used to be self-dependent and were able to provide for themselves out in the wild without fearing the dangers they might meet. After domestication, however, they now know nothing but to be reliant on their owners and hope that their owners have their best interest in mind. The question of whether domestication of animals was a good move is a question for another time, but nonetheless it is humanity’s fault that many animals depend on human companionship and care to survive. The same general idea was true for slaves as well. When a fugitive slave made it to a free state, he was often caught off guard and immediately crushed of unrealistic dreams of what freedom for them would mean. Frederick Douglass was met with harsh conditions, dangers of kidnappers, inability to find work and food, and many other things that would have made anyone question their decision to run away (Douglass 96). Douglass, and many other fugitive slaves I would imagine, were met with an awakening that freedom for an African American wasn’t a huge difference from being an

African American slave. Slaves, like pets, had grown accustomed to being incapable of providing for themselves, and had therefore never learned how to go about it, just as domesticated animals had that knowledge hidden from them as well.

Slavery and the domestication of animals, while very different situations, are also very similar situations when referring to the treatment of the affected populations. On the “owner” side of the spectrum, Frederick Douglass explains the effect on slaveholders from slavery in his description of Mrs. Auld. He sees her first-hand go from a decent woman, who even teaches him to read, to a cruel slaveholder. This scenario is similar to that of pet owners—many inexperienced pet owners go into ownership thinking they will be great “parents,” but then eventually take their pets for granted, slowly declining the amount of care and attention they give them. On the slave/pet side of the spectrum, slaves are taught to rely on their masters, not realizing that they are not getting a very valuable lesson to a free man: how to provide for and take care of yourself on your own. Douglass describes the feeling of becoming free but still feeling endangered when he describes how it felt to be free of the chains of slavery. This is very similar to the situations of our pets. We have domesticated our animals so that they serve us a purpose, however we have taken away many of their survival instincts, leaving them crippled if they are ever released back into the wild. Pets depend on their owners, and therefore have no other choice but to stay with you. Being that humans are the cause of animal domestication, the least we could do is take care of our pets and treat them as family.

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