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English 220 Midterm

18 July 2002

Jefferson's Concerns Regarding Slavery (Question #4)

Thomas Jefferson is perhaps best known for drafting the Declaration of Independence and becoming the third president of the United States, having served two terms. Jefferson was also a slaveholder, yet his Declaration was interpreted by many as opposing slavery when he wrote, "all men are created equal." However, other of Jefferson's writings, especially his *Notes on Virginia*, seem to express his true feelings about slavery and African Americans in general. Jefferson did not express a strong fondness of slavery, yet he makes it clear that he's prejudiced against the black population and did not consider them as equals to whites.

Many have argued that the Declaration of Independence was written in opposition to slavery and therefore slavery should have been abolished based on its pretences. It is true that the Declaration appears to speak for all men in its opposition to oppression and injustices, stating that everyone is entitled to "life, liberty, and the pursuit of happiness." There is nothing in the Declaration of Independence that implies exclusion of any race or color; "all men" seems to imply just that. Interestingly, the one passage that Jefferson wrote condemning the international slave trade (but not the internal slave trade) was struck from the final draft, and as anyone who has studied American history knows, the slave system lived on long after the Declaration and resulting Revolutionary War. It would take yet another war to end the United States slavery system: the Civil War starting in 1861 and ending in 1865 with the abolishment of slavery.

When reading Jefferson's *Notes on Virginia*, one tends to learn something of Jefferson's personal views on slavery and African Americans. Jefferson supported the emancipation of all

slaves born after a certain date, but only with the end result being that they were sent away from the United States to start their own colony. Jefferson indicates that deep-rooted prejudices entertained by whites and the untold number of injuries endured by blacks would result in the country being divided into parties, ultimately ending with the extermination of one or the other race. Shortly after stating this, Jefferson also makes it clear that he views the black race as less than desirable, and certainly not equal to whites. He implies that nature has made the black man different in many ways, and that these differences are the cause of his inferiority. He writes that the white race is more beautiful, even in the eyes of blacks, and that blacks tend to sweat more giving them a “very strong and disagreeable odor.” He continues to write about the differences between the two races, stating that black men are more tolerant of heat but not as much to cold; have a different pulmonary system; seem to require less sleep; are more adventuresome; more ardent with females but experience less sentiment and sensation; affected less by grief; have equal memory to whites but less reason; and lack imagination. He seems to lump them altogether, without expressing any recognition of differences between individuals. He also compares blacks to the Indian race, indicating that Indians are capable of producing sublime oratory and artwork, but that blacks lack these abilities. He does give them credit in the area of music, saying that they are more gifted than whites, but are unable to compose poetry. Jefferson ultimately writes: “I advance it, therefore, as a suspicion only, that the blacks, whether originally a distinct race, or made distinct by time and circumstances, are inferior to the whites in the endowments both of body and mind.” These statements seem to imply that Jefferson condones slavery and is more worried about what would happen if the slaves were emancipated and allowed to live amongst their former masters.

In conclusion, many anti-slavery writings have tried to use the Declaration of Independence as proof that slavery should be abolished. But nowhere in the final draft of the

Declaration is slavery even mentioned. Furthermore, other writings by Jefferson seem to imply that he condones slavery and does not take a strong stance on the matter either way. The fact that he owned slaves throughout his life furthers this belief. At the very least, he makes it quite clear that he doesn't feel blacks have the same intelligence and mental abilities as whites. I believe this is why he doesn't oppose slavery outright.

The Treatment of Frederick Douglass as a Slave (Question #2)

In the *Narrative of the Life of Frederick Douglass, an American Slave*, Douglass describes many of the atrocities committed upon slaves during the 19th century. He witnessed several of these accounts and others were apparently well known throughout the community. In the case of Douglass, he seems to have been treated better than the average slave during his time in slavery. The reasons for this can only be speculated, but it appears that Douglass had the innate ability of being able to befriend and impress others, both whites and blacks.

In the first four chapters of Douglass's narrative, he mainly talks about his masters, the other slaves he knows, and events that happened. He writes little about his own treatment, only indicating that he was never allowed to know how old he was and this appears to have been a source of frustration for him. Not until chapter five does Douglass begin speaking about the treatment he received while in slavery. He indicates that his treatment as a child was similar to other slaves and that he had a lot of leisure time with few chores. Much of his leisure time was spent "helping Master Daniel Lloyd in finding his birds, after he had shot them." Douglass further writes that Master Daniel became quite attached to him, protecting him from the older children, dividing his cakes with him, and seldom whipping him. This is the first example of Douglass being given preferential treatment.

When Douglass was between seven and eight years old, he was sent away from Colonel Lloyd's plantation to live in Baltimore with Mr. Hugh Auld. Douglass states that the days preceding this transfer were "three of the happiest days I ever enjoyed." He was given a new pair of trousers for the trip, something that he cherished greatly. Douglass had been told about Baltimore previously, and believed it to be far superior to anything he had ever seen before. This belief was the source of his excitement and happiness, and he had no regrets about leaving his current home. When Douglass arrived in Baltimore and met the Aulds, he saw "what I had never

seen before; it was a white face beaming with the most kindly emotions; it was the face of my new mistress, Sophia Auld. I wish I could describe the rapture that flashed through my soul as I beheld it.” Here again, it appears that Douglass has found himself in a desirable position as compared to the other slaves, and he acknowledges this. Douglass writes that if not for this trip to Baltimore, it was quite likely that he may have been confined to the chains of slavery forever.

The treatment given to Douglass by Mrs. Auld was not unlike the treatment given to other whites at that time. Douglass learned that his previous instructions on how to act around whites were out of place in this new environment. He did not have to crouch in servility, or avoid making eye contact. Perhaps one of the greatest positive events to ever have happened to Douglass, he was taught how to read by Mrs. Auld. This instruction did not last, however, for when Mr. Auld found out about this he forbade Mrs. Auld from continuing to teach Douglass, indicating that it was illegal and unsafe to teach a slave how to read. This served to ignite Douglass’s determination to learn more, and he managed to find other ways to gain an education in reading, ultimately succeeding in the task. Soon afterwards, Douglass managed to also learn how to write. The fact that Douglass was never physically punished for any of this is another indication of his preferential treatment when compared to other slaves, especially those in the South.

About five years after Douglass was sent to Baltimore, Captain Anthony dies and Douglass is summoned back to the estate so that the property (which includes him) can be divided amongst Anthony’s two offspring. Douglass is once again lucky; he is given to Mrs. Lucretia who promptly sends him back to Baltimore to continue living with the Aulds. Unfortunately, Lucretia and her brother die soon afterwards, and Douglass is then sent to live with Thomas Auld. This turns out to be an unfortunate turn of events for Douglass, since Thomas Auld and his wife were “equally mean and cruel.” Douglass is re-introduced to the

feelings of hunger, something he had not had to suffer while in Baltimore. He is also exposed to whippings once again, and he received several within the first nine months of living with Thomas Auld. This apparently had little effect on Douglass, and Mr. Auld decides to send Douglass to live with Mr. Covey for year. Covey had a reputation for breaking young slaves, but Douglass was not entirely opposed to living with Mr. Covey because he was sure of getting enough to eat, “which is not the smallest consideration to a hungry man.”

Douglass’s life with Mr. Covey was considerably different than the one he had in Baltimore. He was whipped frequently and within six months Mr. Covey had succeeded in breaking him. However, an event happened that gave Douglass an upper hand with Covey. Douglass at one point resisted Mr. Covey and they were involved in a one-on-one fight. Mr. Covey was the apparent loser, and from then on, Douglass was reinvigorated with a sense of self-confidence and a determination to be free. Mr. Covey never again whipped Douglass. The reasons for this are uncertain, but Douglass felt that Mr. Covey could not afford to appear weak for it would harm his reputation as a slave breaker, and Douglass would not be whipped without a fight. Douglass was later sent to live with Mr. William Freeland, where Douglass’s treatment was “heavenly” compared to that of Mr. Covey. Douglass’s luck now appears to change for the better once again, but it does nothing to quell his desire to be free. He is later caught planning a slave escape, but instead of being severely punished, he is sent to live in Baltimore once again. Captain Auld, his master, was apparently concerned that Douglass may be killed if left where he was. Why Douglass was protected in this way is yet another mystery.

Upon returning to Baltimore, Douglass planned and soon succeeded in his escape from slavery. Although he refused to disclose the details of his escape, it was apparent that he got help from others and would not do anything to harm these individuals by disclosing details of the escape. Douglass was yet again capable of earning the respect and help of others.

As can be seen from these many examples, Douglass did several things that would likely cause death to most slaves by the hands of their masters. He was protected by some, left alone by others, and gained the respect of many. In some cases he was plain lucky, but in others his future was determined by some individual who had concerns for his well being. Based on these examples, I conclude that Douglass's intellect, personality, ability to learn, and wisdom were noticed and respected by others. Whereas many slaves never made an effort to better themselves (or were never given the chance), Douglass took every means possible, and every step served to infuse within him a desire to accomplish more with freedom being the desired and achieved outcome.