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## Growing Up as a Slave Child in Nineteenth-Century America

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## 1. Introduction

Since the first slaves arrived in America in 1619, slavery had been part of the American society for another two centuries. But what is slavery? In "Slavery: Antiquity and its Legacy" by Page DuBois, slavery is defined as "a social and economic relationship in which a person is controlled through violence or the threat of violence, is paid nothing, and is economically exploited."<sup>1</sup>

When the Civil War had almost come to an end, four million Southerners were enslaved. More than half were children under the age of sixteen. This age group has received little attention since slave children were "silent and invisible."<sup>2</sup>

Nevertheless, enslaved children in the nineteenth century experienced poverty, privation, separation, punishment, and hard physical labor just as adult slaves. Frederick Douglass, a former slave child, who became an important abolitionist, stated in his autobiography: "Children have their sorrows as well as men and women; and it would be well to remember this in our dealings with them. SLAVE-children are children, and prove no exceptions to the general rule."<sup>3</sup>

In the course of this paper, I will try to answer the question how slave children grew up in nineteenth-century America and how their life on a plantation looked like. In 1860, children made up 56 percent of the slave population, which makes a closer look at childhood under slavery vital. Furthermore, the first years in the life of a slave child were very untypical of a childhood at that time. Therefore, it is interesting to address the question whether slave children even had a childhood. I left out the aspects of how slave children escaped slavery and what they had grown into because it would exceed the scope of this term paper. I will only enlarge on children under the age of sixteen because older slaves were seen as adults. Furthermore, the sources I will use mostly describe the lives of children under 14 years of age.

The amount of published primary sources on slave children is quite large. To answer the questions mentioned above, I will analyze the narratives of Frederick Douglass, Booker T. Washington, Elizabeth Keckley, Harriet Jacobs, and Sojourner Truth because they offer the best sources of primary data from former slave children. Furthermore, they focus on the first years and living conditions of slave children, which is important for answering my question. As secondary literature, I will mainly use the text "Growing Up in Bondage" by Steven Mintz

<sup>1</sup> DuBois, Page. *Slavery: Antiquity and its Legacy* (London: I.B. Tauris, 2010), 4.

<sup>2</sup> Cf. King, Wilma, *Stolen Childhood: Slave Youth in Nineteenth-Century America* (Bloomington, IN: Indiana University Press), xvii-xviii.

<sup>3</sup> Douglass, Frederick, *Autobiographies* (New York: Literary Classics of the United States, 1994), 143.

Kommentar [SH1]: Sehr schönes Zitat von Douglass

and the book "Stolen Childhood: Slave Youth in Nineteenth-Century America" by Wilma King because they include lots of information about the life of slave children growing up on plantations. In every chapter, I will select information related to the topic of childhood under slavery and insert quotations from former slave children to prove the descriptions. At the beginning of each chapter, I will select an adequate quotation from ex-slaves to give an overview of the topic of the chapter.

Chapter two, which follows the introduction, focuses on the physical conditions of slave children, including information about their nutrition, dwellings, clothing, and punishment. In chapter three, the topics of family separation and family ties will be described. Then, I will illustrate the duties and responsibilities of slave children on a plantation in chapter four. In chapter five, slave children's traumas and tragedies will be explained, at which I will only enlarge on the aspects of education and sexual abuse because it caused damage with the most serious consequences. Additionally, psychological dangers in general will be described. Chapter six examines the role of slave children in the life of the master or mistress of the plantation. In the end, I will give a conclusion about coming of age of slave children and try to answer the question if they had a childhood, compared to free children in nineteenth-century America.

**Kommentar [SH2]:** Sehr gute Einleitung; toll, dass Sie einen kurzen Forschungsüberblick liefern und Ihre Quellen vorstellen

## 2. Physical Conditions of Slave Children

*"It is easy to find out, on that day, who clothes and feeds his slaves well; for he is surrounded by a crowd, begging, 'Please, massa, hire me this year. I will work very hard, massa.'"*<sup>4</sup>  
(Harriet Jacobs)

### 2.1. Nutrition

Under slavery, children suffered from severe malnutrition. Their mothers, working on the fields, breast-fed their babies at most once during the day. The infants' diet consisted of cow's milk, thin porridge, skimmed milk, or mashed bread.<sup>5</sup> On most plantations, children were fed irregularly. Booker T. Washington, born into slavery in Virginia, remembered that "[i]t was a piece of bread here and scrap of meat there. It was a cup of milk at one time and some potatoes at another."<sup>6</sup> Frederick Douglass recalled that the children were fed like animals; the

<sup>4</sup> Jacobs, Harriet, *Incidents in the Life of a Slave Girl* (New York: Oxford University Press, 1988), 25.

<sup>5</sup> Cf. Mintz, Steven, *Huck's Raft: A History of American Childhood* (Cambridge, Mass.: Belknap Press of Harvard Univ. Press, 2004), 96.

<sup>6</sup> Washington, Booker T., *Up from Slavery* (New York: Oxford University Press, 1995), 5.

food was served in a wooden tray and oyster shells were his dishes.<sup>7</sup> Children were often fed cornmeal mush, crumbled bread, peas, greens, or buttermilk. The underfeeding resulted, among other things, in four-year-old slave children being five inches shorter than a typical child today.<sup>8</sup>

## 2.2. Dwelling

Furthermore, the slave children's dwellings also contributed to physical health problems. They lived next to animals and garbage, whose dirtiness caused multiple (potentially deadly) diseases.<sup>9</sup> Sojourner Truth lived in a dark cellar, filled with mud and water. She and all other slaves living on the plantation, slept on damp boards with straw and a blanket. The low temperature caused rheumatics, palsies, and other diseases.<sup>10</sup> Since his mother was the plantation cook, Booker T. Washington's living place was a poorly built cabin, which was also used as the kitchen for the plantation. It had only openings in the side as windows which "caused [him] to suffer with cold in the winter."<sup>11</sup>

## 2.3. Clothing

Another aspect, which even worsened the poor physical conditions, was the clothing. Slave children's clothing was minimal; often they were completely naked. Typically, slave owners allowed children two sets of clothing a year. The set for the summer included one tow-linen shirt and one pair of pants, the set for the winter the same plus one woolen jacket, one pair of stockings, and one pair of shoes.<sup>12</sup> Young male children wore a "shapeless garment of rough cloth that was called a shirt", for infant girls "a shift, a shimmy, or a dress" was provided.<sup>13</sup> Booker T. Washington's shirt felt like "a dozen or more chestnut burrs" rubbing on his skin.<sup>14</sup> The poor clothing caused the children to feel uncomfortable and cold.

## 2.4. Punishment

In addition, many slave children suffered from bodily injury due to severe, physical punishment. Elizabeth Keckley, a slave girl in Virginia, remembered when she was beaten

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<sup>7</sup> Douglass, *Autobiographies*, 145.

<sup>8</sup> Cf. Mintz, *Huck's Raft*, 101.

<sup>9</sup> Cf. *ibid.*, 97, 101.

<sup>10</sup> Cf. Truth, Sojourner, *Narrative of Sojourner Truth: Edited and with an Introduction by Margaret Washington* (New York: Vintage Books, 1993), 3.

<sup>11</sup> Washington, *Up from Slavery*, 2f.

<sup>12</sup> Cf. Douglass, Frederick, *Autobiographies* (New York: Literary Classics of the United States, 1994), 186.

<sup>13</sup> Mintz, *Huck's Raft*, 100f.

<sup>14</sup> Washington, *Up from Slavery*, 7.

with a raw-hide: "It cut the skin, raised great welts, and the warm blood trickled down my back."<sup>15</sup> After that, she could not sleep since she was suffering from mental and bodily torture.<sup>16</sup> Harriet Jacobs was punished by her mistress: she told her to take off her shoes and stockings and then, sent her on an errand so that barefooted Harriet had to walk a long distance through the snow.<sup>17</sup>

In summary, a monotonous, unvaried diet, unsanitary, inadequate dwellings, inappropriate clothing, and physical punishment led to bad physical conditions, such as low growth rates, poor health, and high death rates.

### 3. Slave Children in the Family and Community

*"Yet I cannot say that I was very deeply attached to my mother; certainly not so deeply as I should have been had our relations in childhood been different."*<sup>18</sup> (Frederick Douglass)

#### 3.1. Family Separation

In a slave child's life, family ties were fragile. Frederick Douglass, a former slave child in Maryland, experienced a typical family separation: he was separated from his mother when he was an infant; he saw her only a few times at night when she had walked about twelve miles to see him. He grew up with his grandmother, from whom he was separated when he was old enough to work for his master.<sup>19</sup> Douglass did not grow up with his brothers and sisters so "slavery had made [them] strangers."<sup>20</sup> Like most slave children, he did not know his father.<sup>21</sup> More than half of all children under slavery were separated from their fathers, since they lived on another plantation, died, or were white and denied paternity. Elizabeth Keckley recalled that she "did not know much of my father, for he was a slave of another man, and [...] he was separated from us, and only allowed to visit my mother twice a year."<sup>22</sup> About 25 percent of all slave children grew up in a single-parent household; another ten percent grew up without both parents. Lots of slave children suffered from the lack of parental care and attention.<sup>23</sup> Booker T. Washington's mother at least "snatched a few moments for [their] care in the early

<sup>15</sup> Keckley, Elizabeth, *Behind the Scenes. Or, Thirty Years a Slave, and Four Years in the White House* (New York: Oxford University Press, 1988), 34.

<sup>16</sup> Ibid., 35.

<sup>17</sup> Cf. Jacobs, *Incidents in the Life of a Slave Girl*, 32.

<sup>18</sup> Douglass, *Autobiographies*, 152.

<sup>19</sup> Cf. *ibid.*, 149ff.

<sup>20</sup> Ibid.

<sup>21</sup> Cf. *ibid.*

<sup>22</sup> Keckley, *Behind the Scenes*, 22.

<sup>23</sup> Cf. Mintz, *Huck's Raft*, 97f.

morning before her work began, and at night after the day's work was done."<sup>24</sup> Over half of all enslaved children had experienced temporary or permanent family separation at the age of 16: they had been sold, had spent at least one year in another household, or had lost one parent.<sup>25</sup>

Slave Children knew almost nothing about their ancestry since slave owners did not give much attention to their slaves' family history and family records. The family separation compounded the situation.<sup>26</sup>

### 3.2. Family Ties

During pregnancy, slave parents looked forward to their children's birth with bittersweet emotions. They had already experienced the sorrows of slave-life, and feared that their children would suffer the same. A slave mother addressed her infant child: "And much I grieve and mourn/ That to so dark a destiny/ My lovely babe I've borne."<sup>27</sup> It was common that slave parents were unable to protect their children from abuse and, hence, felt helpless.

Nevertheless, slave parents tried to give their children the feeling of being a member of a community. Furthermore, they tried to cushion the shock of bondage for them; they helped the children to understand their situation, taught them values, and gave them self-esteem.<sup>28</sup> If slave children enjoyed a special time during their first years, it was only because their parents made it so. Slave parents wanted to uphold the family ties even though the members were separated. Therefore, parents arranged patterns of co-parenting, god-parenting, and naming patterns to support their children and sustain a sense of family identity. Especially names were important to form links to the original family: most children were named after parents and grandparents.<sup>29</sup>

Often, children formed the center of the slave community since the rearing of children was one of its most important features. Several persons were responsible for the children and taught them practical knowledge, such as setting the table, baking, and cooking.<sup>30</sup> The feeling of having a big family was strengthened by calling older slaves "Aunt" and "Uncle" and

<sup>24</sup> Washington, *Up from Slavery*, 3.

<sup>25</sup> Cf. Mintz, *Huck's Raft*, 98.

<sup>26</sup> Cf. Washington, *Up from Slavery*, 1.

<sup>27</sup> Lunsford Lane as cited in Mintz, *Huck's Raft*, 94.

<sup>28</sup> Cf. Blassingame, John W., *The Slave Community: Plantation Life in the Antebellum South* (New York: Oxford University Press, 1972), 79.

<sup>29</sup> Cf. King, Wilma, *Stolen Childhood*, 6ff.

<sup>30</sup> Cf. *ibid.*, 14.

younger ones "Sister" and "Brother". Therefore, lots of slaves developed a sense of responsibility toward the children in the community.<sup>31</sup>

On a plantation, the etiquette among slaves was important to them, especially the aspect of respecting the elderly. Frederick Douglass "must approach the company of the older with hat in hand, and woe betide him, if he fail[ed] to acknowledge a favor [...]."<sup>32</sup>

Loyalty and obedience were challenging aspects for slave children. Many were torn between their master's will and the interests of the slave community: a slave boy from Alabama had to report any stealing on the plantation, which meant betraying the other slaves. Another slave child told his white playmate things, which he told his parents again, so his mother had been whipped.<sup>33</sup>

Furthermore, children often did not know who had primary authority over them. Harriet Jacob's brother was called by his mistress and his father at the same time, so he was "perplexed to know which had the strongest claim upon his obedience." But he finally went to his mistress. "When my father reproved me for it, he said, 'You both called me, and I didn't know which I ought to go first.' 'You are my child,' replied [his] father, 'and when I call you, you should come immediately, if you have to pass through fire and water.'"<sup>34</sup>

In the slave community, children did not act only passive, but also active. Sometimes, children used their free time to support other slaves. They "helped to ward off punishments by assisting with chores, adding cotton to slow picker's basket, or doing whatever possible to help others."<sup>35</sup> A few served as a lookout: when the overseer was coming, children warned the other slaves by singing a song so they would not get whipped.<sup>36</sup>

Summarized, family separation was the experience almost all slave children shared. Still, slave parents provided their children with a network of support, a sense of family identity, and paid attention to their behavior toward other slaves of the community. Among this community, all slaves, including children, were drawn together in solidarity and self-help. Since the slave community formed a big family, lots of members felt responsible for the children, wanted to protect them, and help them to endure slavery. Moreover, the children functioned as little helpers in the everyday life on a plantation.

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<sup>31</sup> Cf. Mintz, *Huck's Raft*, 100.

<sup>32</sup> Douglass, *Autobiographies*, 164.

<sup>33</sup> Cf. Mintz, *Huck's Raft*, 105.

<sup>34</sup> Jacobs, *Incidents in the Life of a Slave Girl*, 17.

<sup>35</sup> King, *Stolen Childhood*, 40.

<sup>36</sup> Cf. Mintz, *Huck's Raft*, 108.



#### 4. Duties and Responsibilities of Enslaved Children

*"From the time I can remember anything, almost every day of my life has been occupied in some kind of labour."*<sup>37</sup> (Booker T. Washington)

Slave children were forced to work in their earliest years of life. Booker T. Washington recalled that "[f]rom the time that I can remember anything, almost every day of my life has been occupied in some kind of labour."<sup>38</sup> Mingo White, an ex-slave from Alabama, recalled: "I weren't nothing but child endurin' slavery, but I had to work the same as any man."<sup>39</sup>

Kommentar [SH3]: Wiederholung

Only very young children were freed from duties. Three and four-year-old children, who often slept in their master's house, served food, polished furniture, swatted flies and fanned their owners, or held their mistress's skirt off the dirt.<sup>40</sup> To take care of the owners' baby was a typical duty of slave children. Elizabeth Keckley was only four years old when she watched over her mistress's baby, kept the flies out of its face, and let it not cry.<sup>41</sup>

Kommentar [SH4]: Girls?

When the children grew older, they had several tasks to do: serve as human scarecrows, toil on trash gangs, haul water and wood, pull weeds, cut tree limbs for firewood, feed chickens, gather eggs, milk cows, churn butter, shell, peel, and wash vegetables, pluck grubs off tobacco plants, pick burrs out of wool, spin, and weave cloth, or tie bundles of corn.<sup>42</sup> Booker T. Washington's duties included cleaning the yards, carrying water to the men in the fields, or taking corn to the mill.<sup>43</sup>

Between the age of ten and twelve, slave children began to work in the field, which stood equally for growing maturity. This entire entry into workforce went along with the allowance of a full ration of food and adult clothing. A small number of children, whose parents held skilled positions on the plantation, worked as blacksmiths, carpenters, ironworkers, masons, millwrights, and shoemakers, or spun, wove, made dresses, and cut and dressed their mistress's hair.<sup>44</sup>

Some female slaves were neither field workers nor domestic servants. For instance, slave girl Celia's owner purchased her as a replacement of his dead wife; he visited her regularly and

<sup>37</sup> Washington, *Up from Slavery*, 3.

<sup>38</sup> Ibid.

<sup>39</sup> Mingo White as cited in King, *Stolen Childhood*, 23.

<sup>40</sup> Cf. Mintz, *Huck's Raft*, 102ff.

<sup>41</sup> Cf. Keckley, *Behind the Scenes*, 18.

<sup>42</sup> Cf. Mintz, *Huck's Raft*, 102.

<sup>43</sup> Cf. Washington, *Up from Slavery*, 3.

<sup>44</sup> Cf. Mintz, *Huck's Raft*, 103.

had sexual intercourse with her. So Celia's duty was to supply her master's demands as his concubine.<sup>45</sup>

Several slave children functioned as playmates for the white children. Francis Black, a slave boy in Texas, used to play with his master's son, who reminded him that "my pa pay \$200 for you. He bought you to play with me."<sup>46</sup>

In summary, slave children had to do hard work, regardless of their age, and physical condition. Primary, they worked as domestic servants, field workers, caretakers, or playmates.

## 5. Slave Children's Traumas and Tragedies

*"I have not exaggerated the wrongs inflicted by Slavery, on the contrary, my descriptions fall far short of the fact."*<sup>47</sup> (Harriet Jacobs)

### 5.1. Education

Despite the psychological outcomes of poor physical conditions, family separation, menial tasks, and corporal punishment, slave children often suffered from several traumas and tragedies. One of the most painful traumas among slavery was the denial of education. Most whites approved that the majority of all slaves were illiterate because they feared that literate slaves would question their status. In the states of Georgia, North and South Carolina, and Virginia, it was even illegal to teach slaves how to read or write. Frederick Douglass recalled that his mistress slapped him in the face, when she found out that he was numerate, and threatened him with cutting off his right arm.<sup>48</sup> So he learned that literacy was "the direct pathway from slavery to freedom."<sup>49</sup> Nevertheless, five to ten percent of slaves, including children, were literate. Some masters and mistresses wanted their slaves to read the Bible, or tasked them with maintaining records, ordering supplies, and conducting correspondence which assumed literacy.<sup>50</sup>

Frederick Douglass's mistress used to read the Bible, which "roused in [him] the desire to learn." He remembered that he "asked her to teach me to read, and without hesitation, the dear woman began the task, and very soon, by her assistance, I was master of the alphabet, and could spell words of three to four letters." But his master found out and forbade his wife to

**Kommentar [SH5]:** Ich bin mir nicht sicher, ob das Verwehren von Bildung als ein Trauma zu bewerten ist; nach der Definition von Trauma scheint mir das hier unpassend zu sein, es würde eher auf Celia zutreffen

<sup>45</sup> Cf. McLaurin, Melton A., *Celia, a Slave: A True Story* (New York: University of Georgia Press, 1991), 21ff.

<sup>46</sup> Francis Black as cited in Mintz, *Huck's Raft*, 104.

<sup>47</sup> Jacobs, *Incidents in the Life of a Slave Girl*, 17.

<sup>48</sup> Cf. Mintz, *Huck's Raft*, 108f.

<sup>49</sup> Douglass, *Autobiographies*, 218.

<sup>50</sup> Cf. Mintz, *Huck's Raft*, 109.

continue with her instructions. But his master's determination to keep him ignorant, "only rendered me the more resolute in seeking intelligence."<sup>51</sup> So he watched carpenters writing their initials on manifests and "[w]ith play-mates for my teachers, fences and pavements for my copy books, and chalk for my pen and ink, I learned the art of writing."<sup>52</sup>

Douglass was one of those few enslaved children who taught themselves to read and write. Due to the fact that their masters and mistresses should not find out, children often practiced secretly.<sup>53</sup>

Many children, like Frederick Douglass, desired to read and write to improve their self-worth and gain psychological freedom. Children were not dependent on their masters and mistresses anymore to understand the Bible, for instance. By reading the bible for themselves, they were able to interpret it.<sup>54</sup>

Nevertheless, slave children received religious and cultural education. They learned prayers, songs, poems, plays, and how to speak and behave (cf. 3.2.).<sup>55</sup>

## 5.2. Sexual Abuse

Like almost every female slave, enslaved girls were often raped or sexually abused by men, no matter if black, white, slave or free. According to an American historian, white men directed their attention toward "single girls by using a combination of flattery, bribes and the ever-present threat of force."<sup>56</sup>

It is not much known about the girls' response, but possibilities were "fear, rage, an overpowering sense of violation, sometimes helplessness, and a loss of self-esteem."<sup>57</sup> Under slavery, victims of sexual abuse had no legal or social rights. Nevertheless, not all slave girls accepted their hopeless situation: after five years of repeated sexual abuse, Celia clubbed her master, Robert Newsom, to death.<sup>58</sup> Her story is a popular example of a sexually abused slave child. Harriet Jacobs and Elizabeth Keckley also shared her tragic destiny and became victims of their unprincipled masters.<sup>59</sup>

Female slaves often became pregnant after rape; for example Celia gave birth to two children, probably both fathered by her master.<sup>60</sup> In many cases, the offspring of interracial

<sup>51</sup> Douglass, *Autobiographies*, 217f.

<sup>52</sup> Ibid., 234f.

<sup>53</sup> Cf. Mintz, *Huck's Raft*, 110.

<sup>54</sup> Cf. ibid.

<sup>55</sup> Cf. King, *Stolen Childhood*, 67ff.

<sup>56</sup> Eugene Genovese as cited in King, *Stolen Childhood*, 109.

<sup>57</sup> McLaurin, *Celia, a Slave*, 25.

<sup>58</sup> Cf. ibid., 35.

<sup>59</sup> Cf. Jacobs, *Incidents in the Life of a Slave Girl*, 44f., Keckley, *Behind the Scenes*, 39.

<sup>60</sup> Cf. McLaurin, *Celia, a Slave*, 28.

relationships was half black and half white, which was called "mulatto".<sup>61</sup> Elizabeth Keckley had a baby boy after a white man forced a sexual relationship on her for four years.<sup>62</sup> Frederick Douglass's father was white and probably his master.<sup>63</sup> Booker T. Washington did not know anything about his father but he "was a white man who lived on one of the near-by plantations."<sup>64</sup> Being a mulatto child sometimes caused inferior feelings or harassments; they "were objects of sales, punishments, and other abuses the same as boys and girls of a darker hue [as well as...] an added burden by slaveholding women who suspected their husbands of fathering the children."<sup>65</sup> Sexual abuse and its outcomes caused many traumatized slave children. For instance, Celia's sexual exploitation "would have been a psychologically devastating experience, one which would have had a profound effect upon her."<sup>66</sup>

**Kommentar [SH6]:** Heute würde man das eher als mixed-race bezeichnen, da „mulatto“ kein neutraler Begriff ist, er ist ähnlich diskriminierend wie „Negro“, was heute auch nicht mehr gebraucht wird.

### 5.3. Psychological Conditions

In addition to the lack of education and sexual abuse, it was especially the fact of knowing about their subordinate status as a slave, and their dependence on their owners which led to inferiority feelings and traumas. It was mostly during puberty that slave children realized they were to be a lifelong servant. Some were confronted when their white playmates began to treat them like slaves. Francis Black learned it when his playmate, the master's son, called him "nigger" and he had to undergo without responding.<sup>67</sup> Frederick Douglass realized "that not only the house and lot, but that grandmother herself, [...] and all the little children around her, belonged to this mysterious personage, called by grandmother [...] 'Old Master.'"<sup>68</sup> Booker T. Washington found out "that we were slaves [...] one morning before day, when I was awakened by my mother kneeling over her children and fervently praying [...] that one day she and her children might be free."<sup>69</sup>

Many former slave children had to watch their parents being punished, and realized their own helplessness. A slave boy in Maryland experienced the traumatic event of watching his father being whipped: "His right ear had been cut off close to his head, and he had received a hundred lashes on his back [...]."<sup>70</sup>

<sup>61</sup> Cf. King, *Stolen Childhood*, 110.

<sup>62</sup> Cf. Keckley, *Behind the Scenes*, 39.

<sup>63</sup> Cf. Douglass, *Autobiographies*, 15.

<sup>64</sup> Washington, *Up from Slavery*, 2.

<sup>65</sup> King, *Stolen Childhood*, 113.

<sup>66</sup> McLaurin, *Celia, a Slave*, 25.

<sup>67</sup> Cf. Mintz, *Huck's Raft*, 104.

<sup>68</sup> Douglass, *Autobiographies*, 143.

<sup>69</sup> Washington, *Up from Slavery*, 4.

<sup>70</sup> Josiah Henson as cited in Mintz, *Huck's Raft*, 103.

It was even equally traumatic when enslaved children had to learn that their parents were unable to protect them. Jacob Stroyer, born into slavery in South Carolina, was punished several times. When he asked his father for help, he told him to be a good boy, and go back to work because he could not do anything for him.<sup>71</sup>

Another aspect, which humiliated slave children, was their expected behavior toward whites. They had to step aside for white people, take their hat off and bow their head; they were not allowed to look at them or talk to them without permission, and had to call even a young white child "Young Massa" or "Young Misses." Children experienced the plantation hierarchy by playing with white children of the same age: the master's child played the overseer, driving a wagon and carrying a whip, while the slave child served as the mule.<sup>72</sup> Traumas like knowing about their subordinate status, their own and their parents' helplessness, and their mortifying treatment were an almost universal experience for slave children, which they never forgot.

#### 6. The Role of Slave Children in the Life of their Master or Mistress

*"I would rather drudge out my life on a cotton plantation, till the grave opened to give me rest, than to live with an unprincipled master and a jealous mistress."*<sup>73</sup> (Harriet Jacobs)

In the master's life, slave children were primarily seen as chattel with profit-making potentials. Since the master owned his female slaves' children as well, children were laborers without charge, but sources of capital, because he could sell them anytime. A master explained his view about the value of reproduction: he paid \$400 for a female slave, but then she had three children, worth over \$3000 and working in the fields. He knew that her oldest boy was worth \$1250, and he wanted to sell him. Whether he kept the children as servants or sold them, he would make a profit.<sup>74</sup> Young slave children were high in value since slave owners considered them as positive assets. An adult male slave was valued at \$1,500; a twelve-year-old male slave was priced at \$800.<sup>75</sup> Owning many slaves meant being wealthy, so the master's social standing rose with every slave birth that increased his assets.<sup>76</sup>

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<sup>71</sup> Cf. Mintz, *Huck's Raft*, 103.

<sup>72</sup> Cf. *ibid.*, 105.

<sup>73</sup> Jacobs, *Incidents in the Life of a Slave Girl*, 49.

<sup>74</sup> Cf. King, *Stolen Childhood*, 2.

<sup>75</sup> Cf. Mintz, *Huck's Raft*, 102.

<sup>76</sup> Cf. King, *Stolen Childhood*, 8.

Many a time, slave women became pregnant by her master, so sometimes, these children played a role in the master's life since they were his own. Usually, ignorance from white fathers was common; the most slave children received no attention from his slaveholding father, such as Frederick Douglass.<sup>77</sup> However, Celia's master and father of her two children provided the three with extraordinary, material goods, for example a luxury cabin of their own.<sup>78</sup>

Slave children played a big role in the life of the master's wife, the mistress, since they often were her husband's children and a constant reminder of his infidelity. Many slave children reported that the jealous mistresses often punished the mulatto children to take out their anger.<sup>79</sup> Lewis Clarke, a former slave in Kentucky, knew that "there are no slaves that are so badly abused as [...] the children of their own husband; it seems as though they never could hate these quite bad enough."<sup>80</sup>

In contrast, some mistresses were deeply attached to slave children. Harriet Jacob's first mistress "had promised [Harriet's] dying mother that her children should never suffer for any thing," so she did not pose any hard work upon Harriet, and was always kind to her so that the slave girl "was always glad to do her bidding, and proud to labor for her." She was happy, when she sat by her mistress's side for hours, feeling like "any free-born child". When Harriet was twelve years old, her mistress died, which deeply saddened Harriet. She recalled: "I loved her; for she had been almost like a mother to me."<sup>81</sup>

Summarized, slave children played a role in the life of their masters and mistresses, which should not be ignored. Masters were interested in their value, and mistresses in their origins, since the children's fathers often were the mistresses' own husbands. Nevertheless, some masters and mistresses treated slave children well, and cared about them.

## 7. Conclusion

In the nineteenth century, enslaved children suffered from poor living conditions including inadequate clothing, malnutrition, inappropriate dwelling, punishment, family separation, menial tasks, and multiple traumas, tragedies, harassments and mortifications.

Nevertheless, slave children developed a sense of pride, and loyalty toward their family and community. Family ties were important, and most slave children experienced the feeling of

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<sup>77</sup> Cf. *ibid.*, 111.

<sup>78</sup> Cf. McLaurin, *Celia, a Slave*, 28f.

<sup>79</sup> Cf. Mintz, *Huck's Raft*, 97.

<sup>80</sup> Lewis Clarke as cited in Mintz, *Huck's Raft*, 97.

<sup>81</sup> Jacobs, *Incidents in the Life of a Slave Girl*, 14f.

having a big family. But the slave status was always present when masters demanded for them to betray the community, which was difficult for children since they were torn between the obedience toward their master and the loyalty toward the slave community.

Enslaved children had friends among the slave community as well as among whites. They often played with the master's children which caused frustration when the white playmates began to treat them like subordinates.

Often, slave children suffered from unprincipled masters; in many cases, slave girls were sexually abused. Furthermore, the mistress was jealous due to her husband's infidelity and took out her anger on his illegitimate children.

Summarized, growing up as a slave child caused poverty, privation, punishment, physical labor, and horrible experiences. In consequence, child life on a plantation not seldom inflicted scars that lasted for lifetime.

In contrast, free children in nineteenth-century America grew up differently. At that time, children and adults were treated very differently and were separated. This, however, did not apply to slave children. They were seen as little adults who had to work hard and endure the sorrows of adulthood so this separation did not take place among slaves.

White middle- and upper-class boys left home to receive a formal education and therefore, delayed their entry the workforce until they had reached their late teens. On the opposite, enslaved children entered workforce in their earliest years and were not allowed to go to school, or even learn how to read or write. White girls were treated differently since no social role existed for them besides marriage and household. They sewed, stitched, or took care of babies. Slave girls had to do hard physical work which worsened their physical conditions. So all in all, the main difference between free and enslaved children was the heavy burden of work and the lack of education. Even when white children had to work, the work of slave children was a lot harder. Furthermore, free children did not have to fear physical punishment.<sup>82</sup>

Moreover, most free children lived together with their family, knew about their ancestry, and date of birth, whereas enslaved children did not.

As a conclusion, the period of time until slave children had reached their late teens was in fact called "childhood" but it did not deserve the name. Contrariwise, slave children were treated like adults from their earliest years of life. Therefore, slavery in nineteenth-century America not only denied slaves the enjoyment of their youth, but plain-spoken stole their childhood.

Kommentar [SH7]: Das ist ein sehr ungebräuchliches Wort. Besser: On the contrary

<sup>82</sup> King, *Stolen Childhood*, xix.

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## 9. Plagiarism Statement

This is to certify that I, [REDACTED] wrote the present paper about "Growing Up as a Slave Child in Nineteenth-Century America" by myself, that I did not use any other sources except the ones listed below and that my paper does not contain any longer passages from other works – including electronic media – in addition to the ones I cited.

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