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Slavery and Total Domination: Dehumanizing

Slavery in the United States occurred throughout the 16th and 17th centuries and beyond. Frederick Douglass wrote a detailed narrative of his experiences in slavery, throughout which we see one of the terrible effects slavery has on both slaves and slave owners: dehumanization. Several examples of totalitarianism exist throughout history, one of the most notable being the period of time Adolf Hitler ruled Germany. In Hannah Arendt's *Total Domination*, where she describes totalitarianism, what makes it possible and the effects it has using examples of concentration camps and three different totalitarian regimes, we see that one of ramifications of total domination is dehumanization. There may be many ways that slavery (in the United States, as described by Douglass) and total domination – as Hannah Arendt describes and defines it – can be compared, but perhaps the most notable similarity is the end result of the dehumanization of slaves, slave owners, and those subjected to totalitarian regimes.

Dehumanizing someone means to take away his rights as a human. More specifically, dehumanization is to treat someone as though he is not a human being (“dehumanization”): he has no freedom, no personality or individuality, he is worthless except for labor, he is not worthy of respect, or of the compassion typically awarded other human beings. Essentially, he is treated as merely an animal, not viewed as human. We see this as one of the goals of total domination: “reduce the diversity and complexity of humanity to a single reaction to terror and pain” (Jacobus 280). Also illustrated in what total domination works to accomplish is “a kind of human

species resembling other animal species whose only ‘freedom’ would consist in ‘preserving the freedom’” (Arendt 282).

An aspect of total domination is frequently concentration camps, seen in the Nazi regime and the Soviet Union. Arendt tells us that under the Nazi regime, these camps were used for the purpose of “transforming the human personality into a mere thing” (282). And in these concentration camps, people were put through “sufferings...that transform men into ‘uncomplaining animals’” (283). So in only the objectives and use of concentration camps for total domination we can see that people are not thought of as human beings, and that dehumanization is not only a side effect, but also a goal.

We see dehumanization as a common factor in slavery as well; Douglass also notes the “dehumanizing effects of slavery” (330). Slaves in the US were treated as animals, as property, because that is all they were to slave owners. We see this illustrated in *The Narrative*: “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 337). Adding to the dehumanization of slaves is the fact that “to treat [me] as a human being was not only wrong, but dangerously so” (Douglass 332). In a slave owner’s eyes, a slave is only a piece of property, with no human characteristics or rights.

Slavery’s effect was not limited to slaves: it showed its influence on the slave owners as well. In order to see the dehumanizing effect of slavery on slave owners, we must first consider another meaning of dehumanization – “to deprive of human qualities, personality or spirit” (“dehumanization”). In other words, it means to take away, or in the case of slavery demolish, the qualities that make us human. Faulkner does an excellent job of defining these qualities in his

Nobel Prize Speech. He calls them “verities and truths of the heart” and tells us they are: love, honor, pity, compassion, sacrifice.

Knowing this meaning and the qualities that make us human, we can clearly see the dehumanization of slave owners illustrated in Douglass’ narrative, most notably through his descriptions of Mrs. Auld. Douglass describes Mrs. Auld initially as “a woman of the kindest heart and finest feelings” (329), and when he first went to live with the Aulds, she “commenced to treat [him] as she supposed one human being ought to treat another” (332). Thus far, she had never owned a slave and had been “preserved from the blighting and dehumanizing effects of slavery” (Douglass 329).

Mrs. Auld began to teach Douglass how to read, and when her husband found out he explained to her that “it was unlawful, as well as unsafe, to teach a slave to read” (Douglass 330), and made her stop teaching him. And as Douglass notes, this was the “first step in her downward course” (332). Before becoming a slave owner, “there was no sorrow or suffering for which she had not a tear” (Douglass 332), but after conforming the idea the slaves are not humans, her “tender heart became stone” (Douglass 332). Mrs. Auld not only stopped her efforts in teaching Douglass, but lost any compassion or pity for him as soon as she “commenced to practice her husband’s precepts” (Douglass 332). No longer did she have a kind heart or feelings, because her eyes “became red with rage,” her soft voice “changed to one of harsh and horrid discord” and her “face gave place to that of a demon” (Douglass, 330).

As we can see, dehumanization is an effect of, and closely connects, both total domination and slavery. While it may be easier to see this effect on slaves and those suffering under a totalitarian regime, it is also evident in slave owners. Though slavery no longer exists in the United States, it is still popular among other countries, and so is totalitarianism. For this

reason, it is important for us to see and understand the dehumanizing that takes place under both of these institutions so that we can not only keep it from happening again in the United States, but also so that, as individuals, we can recognize when our rights or qualities as humans are being repressed or deprived. If we can recognize when such a thing is happening, we can resist and rebel, and most importantly maintain our humanity.

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