

# Slave Narratives as Part of the American Literary Canon

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This paper focuses on slave narratives, a powerful stream within American literature, which has been receiving growing attention and acknowledgement from both scholars and educators, key works having been incorporated into the American literary canon and subsequently also into academic curricula. American slave narratives are not the only literary equivalent of “history from below”, written by a specific social enclave (here I could name e.g. Australian convict diaries, the writings of women in Muslim countries etc.). What really sets them apart from the rest is their sheer volume and, more importantly, the palpability of their social and in retrospect also historical impact.

The term ‘slave narratives’ is generally taken to stand for two different categories. One designates the projects aimed at collecting ex-slave interviews, which were carried out in the thirties of the 20<sup>th</sup> century and are generally associated with the Works Progress Administration, notably with its scheme entitled the Federal Writers’ Project. The objectives of the Federal Writers’ Project also entailed gathering a huge mass of first-hand experience of slavery as exemplified by the reminiscences of former slaves. However, these written or audio-recorded narratives were principally meant to provide sociological material, and are quite often decidedly non-literary in form.

The other group, which is summed up by the aggregative term ‘fugitive slave narratives’, comprises 18<sup>th</sup> and 19<sup>th</sup> century narratives of fugitive slaves who just managed to escape from the house of bondage, mostly via the Underground Railroad (an illegal network of white abolitionists and free African Americans). These narratives were obviously aimed at fuelling the pro-abolitionist campaign. The standard promulgation procedure took the shape of a lecture circuit, in which the not-yet-liberated fugitive slaves described the atrocities of the “peculiar institution” as the current coinage went, basically in order to counterbalance the propagandist fabrications spread by the anti-abolitionists, (such as the claim that slaves were basically better off than northern factory workers, as they only worked till noon and enjoyed welfare privileges and job security which the northern workforce could only dream of). The circuit lecturers naturally attracted large audiences of supporters, but the main aim of the circuit was not to fuel the enthusiasm of sympathisers, but to win the hearts of the indifferent or even hostile part of the audience that had been brainwashed by the southern pro-slavery rhetoric.

Doing this was sometimes something of a tightrope walk for the lecturers. The fugitive-lecturers had to be convincing, which basically translated as having to appear artless and ostentatiously self-educated; but at the same time their story had to be captivating enough to move the audiences. Being too inarticulate tended to be the lesser of two evils. If the lecturer told a crudely shaped story in a simple fashion, he or she was in no danger of being accused of fabricating. The broken speech was clear evidence of the subhuman status he/she had been reduced to in the house of bondage and consequently boosted the credibility of the

narrative. A sophisticated and well-structured speech, on the other hand, was frequently treated with suspicion, for similar reasons. The lectures of Frederick Douglass, for example (whom I am going to refer to quite often as the quintessential slave narrator) were largely mistrusted—not because of what he said, but because of the eloquence and coherence of his speech. When he eventually had his narrative published in 1845, his principle motive for doing so was not to extend the impact of his speeches, as was the case with most other lecturers, but to defend the veracity of his account by giving all the relevant particulars of his slave life (except for a detailed description of his escape, which would have prevented his potential followers from taking the same route), even though by revealing his identity in such a public manner he became an easy target for slave-hunters, as south of the Mason-Dixon line he was still regarded as mere human chattel.

It became common practice that the abolitionists vouched for the authenticity of freshly published narratives by writing forewords in which they assured the reader of their accuracy. Given the fact that sophistry and elaborate style was not always regarded as an asset of the narratives, it is not surprising that slave narratives tended to be judged, evaluated and later also anthologised with regard to their social impact rather than their literary merit, and even though the first suggestion to recognise slave narratives as a literary genre was made by the Reverend Ephraim Peabody, in 1849 (Phillips 2001: 336), they were not incorporated into the literary canon until much later.

To further characterise slave narratives I would like to provide an outline of *unifying characteristics* and *distinctive qualities*, which would enable us to classify them as an idiosyncratic though relatively homogenous literary genre. Then I would like to categorise the influence of slave narratives.

The first unifying aspect of slave narratives is their *oral* or even *oratorical quality*, springing from the fact that the written accounts were often direct extensions of the lectures (we are left to speculate that this was perhaps also fermented by the endemic verbal quality peculiar to most African-American literature).

*Political overtones* and *partiality* might be mentioned as other features. The political message does not need further explanation, but partiality would definitely be a drawback in these accounts, if they were meant to serve as factual documents. Such a bias would of course be quite permissible in fiction, which allows literary embellishment, but as it was, the final product of the effort often results in an unhappy marriage of purposes. Benjamin Soskis puts it beautifully in his review of the recently discovered *Bondwoman's Narrative* by Hannah Crafts: 'The narratives' ambitions ranged uneasily between the literary and the propagandistic, the autobiographical and the documentary' (Soskis 2002: 40). He also distinguishes between the *evangelical model* of the slave narrative, which resides in the disclosure of the author's private truth and is therefore more emotional and intense, and the *legalistic model* of the slave narrative, which aims at portraying objective truth and tends to be less passionate.

The publishers and pro-abolitionist readers alike invariably expected the narratives to attack slavery primarily as a system that corrupts both the oppressed and the oppressor, but they also preferred them to be "black-and-white" in their depiction of the evils of slavery. This means that they were meant to emphasise the brotherhood and sisterhood of the humiliated slaves and their firm moral stance against the diabolical slave owners. This editorial approach tended to tone down divergences from this general "doctrinal" depiction of the assumed moral integrity of the slaves, simply because they did not fit into the picture. This is why a modern reader, who tends to perceive this problem through a categorical prism of total guilt and total innocence (which is of course perfectly true in an emblematic sense), might be surprised by events described in the narrative of Jacob D. Green, who openly admits betraying his brethren in bonds on several occasions and causing them to be flogged, or in the

recently discovered *Bondwoman's Narrative* by Hannah Crafts, which shows that her decision to run away was not triggered by the unbearable conditions (Crafts was a house slave) but by the fact that her master wanted her to marry one of the 'vile, foul, filthy inhabitants of the huts' (Crafts 2002: 205), i.e. her fellow bondsmen, to paraphrase the title of her narrative. Of course, the idea of forcing a woman to marry against her will is utterly repulsive, but the snooty tone Crafts assumes when she is talking about her fellow slaves would definitely have been a difficult thing to swallow for the 19<sup>th</sup> century abolitionist editors.

A very important feature of the slave narratives was what Robert Louis Gates calls 'collective utterance' (Gates 987: xiii), that is, the fact that every slave who decided to write down his or her narrative was at the same time speaking on behalf of hundreds of other anonymous brothers and sisters in bonds. The same premise also meant that the untried novices among the slave-writers often modelled their accounts on the narratives written by some of their predecessors. This would of course demote rather than boost the literary merit of such books, but from the perspective of the totally inexperienced authors the old narratives provided a perfect matrix for shaping scattered and apparently meaningless events into a meaningful pattern. This is in fact an unusual variation on the standard process of artistic borrowing, but this time the borrower capitalises both on the means and on the ends of the lender.

*Forced anonymity*—the identity of the authors had to be kept secret because of real adverse circumstances—the danger of being kidnapped, which was exacerbated by the passing of the Fugitive Act in 1850 which made the extradition of runaway slaves legally enforceable. This justifiable secretiveness can be contrasted for example with the mannerism of pretended danger, which is to be found in late 19<sup>th</sup> century popular adventure fiction, where the hero refuses to disclose his/her identity for fear of some non-existent danger. The "no-tell" strategy of the runaway slaves also applied to the means of escape. However, there were exceptions to this rule, because an ingenious way of escape was likely to turn some of the runaways into celebrities and not everyone was able to resist the temptation. One of the star spokesmen on the abolitionist lecture circuit was Henry Box Brown, whose chief attraction resided in the fact that he had managed to escape to the North hidden in a box. Brown was often criticised by his comrades for having been so reckless as to expose his means of escape because the same method might have been employed by other runaways (as it in fact was, but without success, due to the publicity of Brown's case).

Many of the writings and the entire literary stream in general had a cosmopolitan nature. This does not only pertain to the narratives written in other languages, most notably the autobiography of Juan Francisco Manzano, written in Spanish, but also to the narratives in English. Contrary to general perceptions, which regarded the "English-spoken" narratives as American property, there is frequently a disputable country of origin, e.g. the autobiography of Olaudah Equiano (Gustavus Vassa), which is anthologised as both American and British. The American identity of the whole stream is generally derived from the fact that the main bulk of the narratives were meant to promulgate abolitionist ideas and counterbalance the widely circulated pro-slavery arguments in the US. They were meant to change the state of affairs in America, not in Britain, where the slave trade had already been abolished in 1807 and slavery itself had officially been abolished in 1838.

The narratives display *Christian overtones*, which is not surprising when we know that the Quakers and other religious groups were especially instrumental in carrying out the gradual manumission process. The Christian colouring of many of the narratives has of course been an aggravating circumstance:

1. For the slavery apologists, who accused the Christian publishers of heavy editorial changes in the narratives, prompted not only by the abolitionist

political agenda, but also by the religious indoctrination to which the slave-writers were often subject (indeed, the liberation process often went hand in hand with a religious conversion);

2. Later also for the reviewers who, likewise, were convinced that some editing, not to say censorship, must have taken place;

3. For some African-American thinkers who rejected Christianity as an imported spiritual source (namely Black Muslims) and therefore found it unnatural (and perhaps slightly condescending) that Christianity proved such an important lever in the liberation process.

This objection was succinctly expressed by Richard Wright, lamenting the fact that ‘there are millions of American Negroes [...] whose only guide to personal dignity comes through the archaic morphology of Christian salvation’ (Wright 1997 [1937]: 1382), though his attack was obviously informed by his Marxist beliefs.

One of the frequently employed artistic devices peculiar to many of the slave narratives was *double-prism narration*, i.e. the account of events as seen by the actual sufferer in the house of bondage, which gives the narration a visceral immediacy, and the account of the situation in retrospect, which could be labelled as a sort of God’s eye view. Reminiscences and flashbacks are, of course, standard devices of first person narration in general, but the flagrant factual background of slave narratives makes them more appealing than fictitious accounts based on the same premise. The marriage of these two views is sometimes quite troublesome for an inquisitive reader, as may be demonstrated by the following extract from the *Narrative of the Life of Frederick Douglass*.

I never saw my mother, to know her as such, more than four or five times in my life; and each of these times was very short in duration, and at night. She was hired by a Mr Stewart, who lived about twelve miles from my home. She made her journeys to see me in the night, travelling the whole distance on foot, after the performance of her day’s work. She was a field hand, and a whipping is the penalty of not being in the field at sunrise, unless a slave has special permission from his or her master to the contrary--a permission which they seldom get, and one that gives to him that gives it the proud name of being a kind master. I do not recollect of ever seeing my mother by the light of day. She was with me in the night. She would lie down with me, and get me to sleep, but long before I waked she was gone. Very little communication ever took place between us. Death soon ended what little we could have while she lived, and with it her hardships and suffering. She died when I was about seven years old, on one of my master’s farms, near Lee’s Mill. I was not allowed to be present during her illness, at her death, or burial. She was gone long before I knew any thing about it. Never having enjoyed, to any considerable extent, her soothing presence, her tender and watchful care, I received the tidings of her death with much the same emotions I should have probably felt at the death of a stranger’ (Gates 1987: 256).

The impact of the double-prism narration as employed in this passage is of course extremely touching, but the two prisms are not compatible in close-up, because the emotions (or, more precisely, the lack of emotions) described by Douglass in the last sentence of the quoted passage clearly were not part of the original experience.

The impact of the slave narratives, which is generally perceived as the principal argument for their incorporation into the literary canon, is also quite complex.

The first and most obvious social virtue of the slave narratives is their *immediate social impact*, which means that they really made things happen, which is a rare privilege in the realm of fiction (the range of works of literature which exercised direct influence on society—in the Euro-American sector—would certainly include Swift’s *Modest Proposal*, the

plays of Voltaire and pamphlets written by Benjamin Franklin, but hardly any of these works had such a palpable impact upon the audience they were designed for.)

Slave narratives had a multiple function for their audiences, covering propaganda, instruction and motivation. It is clear that the motivational and especially instructional function of the books (that is for the brethren in bonds) was probably very limited, because the slaves had naturally no access to these books, even if they had achieved literacy.

This first-hand message, which clearly served mainly propagandistic ends (in the good sense of the word), was later joined by a sort of spin-off of the main concern of the writers. This beneficial by-product of the slave narratives resides in their universal import, which means that some slave narratives really can be read and exposed to the readers as a gospel of human will and self-transformation, showing the incredible resolution with which the “human chattel” achieved literacy and managed to prepare their escape, frequently against overwhelming odds. This is why, for example, the narratives of Frederick Douglass, Harriet Jacobs, Henry Bibb and others are used in the classroom not only as teaching texts meant primarily for the African American audience by way of boosting their self-esteem, sense of identity and awareness of tradition, but, as Robert Louis Gates says in the foreword to Douglass’s *Narrative*, some of them open themselves ‘to all class of readers, from those who love an adventure story to those who wish to have rendered for them in fine emotional detail the facts of human bondage’ (Gates 1987: xiii). I would extend this by saying that they open themselves to all readers regardless of their social or ethnic background, as the inspirational and motivational urge for self-improvement which is all-pervasive in the works of Frederick Douglass, Josiah Henson, Olaudah Equiano and others communicates an extremely vital message.

The last aspect to consider as a valid argument for canonising or anthologising at least some of the slave narratives is their influence on the subsequent American literature, which at least in the case of African-American writing would in fact be all-inclusive because virtually all 19<sup>th</sup> and 20<sup>th</sup> century African American literature stands on the bloodstained cornerstone of slave narratives. The most obvious example of inspiration drawn from slave narratives is the genre of so called Neo-Slave Narratives, the most famous of which are Ishmael Reed’s *Flight to Canada* (1976), Charles Johnson’s *Oxherding Tale* (1982) and *Middle Passage* (1990) and Sherley Anne Williams’s *Dessa Rose* (1986), which quite openly borrow the tropes of slave narratives, even though their tribute sometimes takes the shape of parody. The number of African American books showing the direct influence of slave narratives is enormous, from the early period (Booker T. Washington’s *Up from Slavery*), through *Black Boy* by Richard Wright, to the recent award-winning novelist Toni Morrison, one of whose most beloved novels apparently derived its central plot from the following statement found in the *Reminiscences of Levi Coffin*, a chronicle kept by a key person in the Underground Railroad scheme, ‘Margaret Garner, a fugitive slave from Kentucky, killed one of her children rather than permit her to be returned to slavery. She drowned in a shipwreck as she was being brought back to slavery (Cincinnati, 1876)’ (Coffin 1968: 37). However, the impact of slave narratives is not only confined to African American literature. An obvious example of their impact on white American literature is the *Confession of Nat Turner* by William Styron, which not only deals with the topic of a local slave revolt touched upon in several classic slave narratives (Harriet Jacobs’s, to mention just one), but also structures the first person account in much the same fashion, including the religious undertones. The first-hand experience was also explored in the chronicle *Black Like Me* by John Howard Griffin, which is written from the viewpoint of a white man who found out what it was like to live the life of a black person in the South, and who also employed the first person narration mode in his journal. In addition to these more explicit allusions to the slave narratives, there are also grey zones which have so far been left almost unexplored, such as the impact of narratives on

American Romanticism, which has been pointed out e.g. by Michael C. Berthold (Berthold 1993).

To conclude, it is evident that the recognition of the slave narratives as a legitimate genre within American literature is much more than a response to a passing PC fashion and more a reflection of the extent to which the breadth of America's literary and cultural heritage is today informing discourse both in the academy and in the lecture hall. It is virtually impossible to imagine the crazy quilt of American literature without the immense impact of slave narratives, just as it is impossible to understand an American history and present detached from the atrocious institution of slavery and its lingering legacies.

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