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Behind the Scene of Human Bondage

Solomon Northup’s narrative gives an account of his life as a United States citizen from Minerva, New York who was drugged, kidnapped, and sold into captivity in the south (Gates and Smith 188). Northup was born to a former slave who sent his son to school to get a formal education (Gates and Smith 188). Northup later married a free woman from upstate New York named Anne Hampton with whom he has three children (Gates and Smith 188). He is able to support his family as a fiddler (Gates and Smith 188). Solomon Northup’s narrative differs from other slave narratives in *Norton Anthology of African American Literature, 3rd Edition* because he portrays slavery in the eyes of a free black man who has been kidnaped. He also addresses many themes such as his position as an African American, slave experience, and women in human bondage.

Most of the slave narratives in the first three hundred pages of *Norton Anthology of African American Literature, 3rd Edition* recounts the story of men and women who were born into chattel slavery, lived as slaves most of their lives, and managed to escape. The slave narrative of Harriet Jacobs and William Wells Brown are examples of African Americans born into slavery under the hands of a cruel master (221-270). Jacobs and Brown were enduring harsh conditions of human bondage before they manage to escape and lived their lives as fugitive slaves before their freedom was purchased (221-270). Harriet Jacobs hid in a tiny space in her grandmother’s house for seven years before she managed to escape to New York and lived as a fugitive before Mrs. Bruce hired a lawyer to purchase Harriet as well as her children’s freedom (Jacobs 221-261). Likewise, William Wells Brown seized his opportunity to freedom when his master took him on a family trip to Cincinnati to escape to the North from slavery (Brown 261-262). Unlike Harriet Jacobs and William Wells Brown, Solomon Northup was not a fugitive slave but he was born a free citizen of New York (Gates and Smith 188). As no man bearing a dark complexion during the slavery era was safe from enslavement, he was robbed of his freedom by two white men named Brown and Hamilton who lured him south, drugged him, and stole his free papers (Gates and Smith 188-190). Northup was transported to New Orleans where he is transformed into property by being renamed Platt and sold on the auction block for $900 to his first master (Gates and Smith 188-189).

Phyllis Wheatley, Olaudah Equiano, and Venture Smith experienced some similarities to Solomon Northup. All three authors were born free in their native country in West Africa (Gates and Smith 94-136). When they were kids, all three authors were robbed of their freedom by slave traders who kidnapped them and forced them to embark the dreadful middle passage (Gates and Smith 94-136). Phyllis Wheatley, Olaudah Equiano, and Venture Smith had to then accept their new identity as a slave. Although all three authors slave experience differed, they shared a commonality of having their freedom taking away, separated from their family, and transformed into another man’s property. Abolitionist Frederick Douglass having read Solomon Northup’s narrative described it as horrific that a man is torn away from his family and home to perform free labor “under a burning southern sun, by the lash of an inhumane master” (Gates and Smith 188).

For twelve years Solomon Northup was forced to experience the horrendous and dangerous pangs of being a white man’s property (Gates and Smith 189). His narrative gives readers a very descriptive perspective of slavery from a slave himself. He makes it clear to the readers that every slave experience is different as he has been sold to three different masters during his time as a slave. (Gates and Smith 188-189). His first master William Ford was one of the few slave owners who was kind and respectful to his slaves (Northup 191). He rejected using the whip on his slaves and allowed them to have their own bibles (Northup 191). Solomon Northup observed that slave owners who were kind and lenient to their slaves were often rewarded with the greatest amount of labor (Northup 192).

Similarly, Phillis Wheatley masters were very kind and respectful of her (Gates and Smith 137-139). Phillis mistress taught her to read and write even though it was against the law to do so during that time (Gates and Smith 138). Her master John Wheatley got her *Poems on Various Subject* published even though he knew it would be controversial because many white people believed that black people were incapable of mastering the art of literature (Gates and Smith 138). Although Phillis was a slave, she was entitled to have her own opinion as her masters were Loyalist and she was a Patriot which is also evident in the poem that she writes to George Washington (Gates and Smith 138). Her masters emancipated her before their death and Phillis continued to serve them until they died (Gates and Smith 138). Unlike Phillis Wheatley, Solomon Northup used his narrative for the service of anti-slavery and even called his first master William Ford “blinded... to the inherent wrong at the bottom of the system of Slavery” (Northup 191). Although William Ford was a man of character and treated his slave with compassion, he was still influenced by white supremacy and never saw any wrong doings of owning human beings (Northup 191).

Furthermore, Solomon Northup describes in detail many violent encounters that slaves experience on the daily and the severe plantation work that slaves had to endure (Northup190-198). His slave experience with his third master Edwin Epps is drastically different than his experience with William Ford. Northup spent ten years under the cruel authority of Master Epps “whose chief delight was in dancing with his “niggers” or lashing them…just for the pleasure of hearing them screech or scream” (Gates and Smith 193). Like Northup, Venture Smith masters were also very harsh to him. He was hit in the head with a club, almost killed with a pitchfork, and had his feet chained to paddle locks (Smith 101-103). William W. Brown experienced a different kind of cruelty by being forced to aid a slave trader who had hired him out for a year (Brown 263). He had to witness other slaves being sold on auction blocks, chained together on boats, and commit suicide by jumping over board (Brown 265-269). Indeed all three men share a commonality of having very cruel masters however, Northup’s narrative is very detailed in emphasizing how slave owners maintained authority by using extreme physical and psychological violence. His narrative is unique in his use of imagery as he went into detail on having to whip Patsey under the orders of his Master Epps for leaving the plantation to get some soap (Northup 197). He described her back as being covered with long welts as the lash bit out small pieces of her flesh and she was flogged until the lash was wet with blood (Northup 197). Through his vivid details, Northup paints a picture to his readers on what slave punishment was like. In the book *African Americans: A concise history*, the role of punishment in slavery is used as a threat to get slaves to work as well as obey their masters sadly, few slaves escaped being brutally whipped at least once during their lives in bondage (125).

In addition, Solomon Northup’s slave narrative is exceptional compared to many slave narratives because it includes women’s experience in bondage. In contrast to Venture Smith’s, Olaudah Equiano, and William W. Brown slave narrative, Solomon Northup’s includes having witness a mother overwhelmed with grief of being forcibly separated by her children as well as a slave woman being physically and sexually abused by their master in his narrative (190-198). While he was still a slave under William Ford, he talked about the grief of a woman named Eliza who was mourning the loss of her children who were sold away (Northup 191). During his life as a slave with Epps, Northup witness his master sexually abusing Patsey and his Mistress physically abusing her through her jealous rage (Northup 194).

Like Patsey’s experience, Harriett Jacob tells her story in *Incidents in the Life of a Slave Girl* of having been sexually harassed by her abusive master named Dr. Flint in the narrative (Jacobs 230-235). She describes having to endure Dr. Flint whispering vile and disgusting sexual words to her when she began puberty (Jacobs 231). He made sure to always remind Jacob’s that she was his property and that he would do with her as he pleased (Jacobs 231). But unlike Patsey, Jacobs took control of her sexual identity by beginning a relationship with a white lawyer with whom she has two children with in fear that Dr. Flint would eventually rape her (Jacobs 222). Both Northup and Jacob’s narrative brings light to the sexual exploitation of slave women by white men during the antebellum period. According to *African American: A Concise History*, the abuse of black women began during the middle passage and continued after the abolition of slavery as white southerners tried to justify the abuse of black women (129-130). Throughout her narrative, Jacob recollects how horrifying slavery was but how the experience was even more tremendous for women especially after she found out she gave birth to a baby girl which she stated “my heart was heavier than it had ever been” (Jacobs 240). Not only did women face physical pain of slavery but they also experience emotional pain of being separated from their children as well as sexual harassment. In agreement to Jacob’s narrative, Solomon Northup portrayed the emotional and physical misfortune that slavery had on women through Patsey story as he has described her as being worst off than other slaves such as himself (Northup 198).

To sum it all up, *Twelve Years a Slave* gives a recollection of Solomon Northup’s life as a United States citizen from Minerva, New York who had his freedom robbed from him and was sold into captivity in the south (Gates and Smith 188). Solomon Northup’s narrative stands out from other slave narratives in *Norton Anthology of African American Literature, 3rd Edition* because he portrays slavery in the eyes of a free black man who has been kidnaped. Not only does he address many themes such as slave status and slave experience but he also sheds a major light on the horrendous physical and emotional pain of many slave women.

Works Cited

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