The Slave Narrative

Definitions

Narratives of slavery recounted the personal experiences of ante-bellum African Americans who had escaped from slavery and found their way to safety in the North. An essential part of the anti-slavery movement, these narratives drew on Biblical allusion and imagery, the rhetoric of abolitionism, the traditions of the captivity narrative, and the spiritual autobiography in appealing to their (often white) audiences. Some of these narratives bore a "frame" or preface attesting to their authenticity and to the sufferings described within.


"The slave narrative took on its classic form and tone between 1840 and 1860, when the romantic movement in American literature was in its most influential phase. . . Douglass's celebration of selfhood in his 1845 Narrative might easily be read as a black contribution to the literature of romantic individualism and anti-institutionalism. Ten years later Douglass's second autobiography, My Bondage and My Freedom, deconstructs his 1845 self-portrait with typical romantic irony" (78).

"The ante-bellum slave narrative was the product of fugitive bondmen who rejected the authority of their masters and their socialization as slaves and broke away, often violently, from slavery. . . Through an emphasis on slavery as deprivation--buttressed by extensive evidence of a lack of adequate food, clothing, and shelter; the denial of basic familial rights; the enforced ignorance of most religions or moral precepts; and so on--the ante-bellum narrative pictures the South's "peculiar institution" as a wholesale assault on everything precious to humankind. Under slavery, civilization reverts to a Hobbesian state of nature; if left to is own devices slavery will pervert master and mistress into monsters of cupidity and power-madness and reduce their servant to a nearly helpless object of exploitation and cruelty" (79).

From 1760-1947, more than 200 book-length slave narratives were published in the United States and England, and according to Marion Starling (The Slave Narrative: Its Place in American History, 1982) more than 6,000 are known to exist. In Witnessing Slavery: The Development of Ante-Bellum Slave Narratives (2d ed., 1994), Frances Smith Foster comments, "If we consider only those narratives which were written by persons who had been legally enslaved in the United States, the number is considerably smaller" (21).

Further Reading

Benjamin Drew, a Boston abolitionist, edited a collection of narratives from former slaves who had escaped to Canada in The Refugee: Narratives of Fugitive Slaves in Canada Related by Themselves (1856).

- William Andrews's "An Introduction to the Slave Narrative" is available online at University of North Carolina at Chapel Hill.
- To read published slave narratives online, visit the UNC site Documenting the American South: Narratives on Slavery.
- For oral histories (print and audio files) of former slaves collected from the WPA project from 1936-1938, visit the American Slave Narratives: An Online Anthology site at the University of Virginia.
- For a brief summary of the history of this era as well as some powerful images, see the African American Odyssey Page at the Library of Congress.
- Aframerindian Slave Narratives site includes those narratives from the WPA project that feature slaves of African American and Native American descent.
- Images of Slavery on Confederate Currency This collection includes information and background as well as images of slavery.
- Stephen Mintz's Excerpts from Slave Narratives site groups its selections thematically.
- The Freedmen and Southern Society Project at the University of Maryland contains online versions of primary sources such as proclamations, letters from slaves, court testimony, and other documents from the National Archives as well as essays on the period 1861-1867. New URL
Page images of documents relating to slavery are now available at the Making of America site.

**General Information**

**Purposes**
- Attempted to arouse the sympathy of readers in order to promote humanitarianism.
- Emphasized traditional Christian religious ideas.
- Showed acceptance of the ideals of the dominant white society.
- Emphasized the cruelty of individual slave owners.

**Influences**
- King James Bible
- New England sermonizing traditions
- Rhetoric and aims of abolitionist orators
- Devotional books like *Pilgrim's Progress*.

**Reasons for Popularity**
- Lurid scenes of horror and violence that served as an acceptable gratification of the popular appetite for sensationalism.
- Religious influence: didactic content
- Interesting descriptions of life in the South
- Propaganda weapons during abolition and Civil War

**Parallels with captivity narrative.** Typically, the narrator of the slave narrative

- Is abruptly brought from state of protected innocence to confrontation with the evil of slavery and captivity.
- Suffers from forced existence in an alien society.
- Is unable to submit or effectively to resist.
- Balances yearning for freedom against the perils of escape.
- Sees his or her condition as a symbol of the suffering condition of all the lowly and oppressed.
- Grows in moral and spiritual strength as a result of suffering and torment.

**Frequent Pattern:**

From Frances Smith Foster, *Witnessing Slavery: The Development of Ante-bellum Slave Narratives*, [2d. ed., 1994]: "The plot of the nineteenth-century slave narrative is informed by the Judeo-Christian mythological structure on both the material and the spiritual levels. The action moves from the idyllic life of a garden of Eden into the wilderness, the struggle for survival, the providential help, and the arrival into the Promised Land. In addition, the plot of the slave narrative incorporates the parallel structure of birth into death and death into birth which also distinguishes the Judeo-Christian myth" (84).

"In the slave narrative the mythological pattern is realized in four chronological phases. First comes the loss of innocence, which is objectified through the development of an awareness of what it means to be a slave. This can be compared to the descent from perfection or mortification. The mortification process includes purgation, for as the slave learns the meaning of slavery, he also tries to purge himself of those elements that would facilitate enslavement. Second is the realization of alternatives to bondage and the formulation of a resolve to be free. This decision begins the ascent to the ideal, or invigoration. The resolution to quit slavery is, in effect, a climax to a conversion experience. The third phase is the escape. Whether it occurs between two sentences or forms the largest portion of the narrative, it is part of the struggle to overcome evil. The interest at this point is in the details, the pitfalls and obstacles, the sufferings and moments of bravery encountered in the process of achieving freedom. Although the first attempt sometimes ends in capture, the outcome is never in doubt. The narrative, after all, was written by a freeman. The fourth phase is that of freedom obtained. It is the arrival at the City of God or the New Jerusalem and it corresponds to the jubilation period of ancient ritual" (85).

- Descent from state of innocence or peace into recognition of status (slavery)
- Progressive dehumanization at hands of masters and concomitant growth of self-reliance and decision-making, sometimes involving literacy
- A spiritual "bottoming-out"
- Resolve; for Douglass, the fight with Covey
- Flight and redemption

**Frequently Repeated Motifs**
- Exposes physical and emotional abuses of slavery: scenes of whipping, sexual abuse, starvation, especially of women or children
- Exposes (sometimes satirically) white owners’ hypocrisy and inconstancy
- Describes repeated raising of narrator's expectations only to have them dashed by whites
- Describes quest for literacy
- Describes quest for freedom
- Includes vignettes of other character types and the experience of slavery: those who succeed and those who fail
- Makes overt appeals to imagined audience
- Details loss of significant family member(s) and the destruction of family ties

See also the list of characteristics in James Olney’s “‘I was born’: Slave Narratives, Their Status as Autobiography and as Literature” and other essays in The Slave’s Narrative, ed. Charles T. Davis and Henry Louis Gates, Jr. (New York, 1985).

Early Examples

- Slave narratives at the Samuel J. May Collection at Cornell
- A Narrative of the Uncommon Sufferings and Surprising Deliverance of Briton Hammon, a Negro Man (first; 1760)
- Interesting Narrative of the Life of Olaudah Equiano (1798)
- Nat Turner, Confessions of Nat Turner (1831)
- History of Mary Prince, A West Indian Slave (1831)

Rebecca Warren Brown, Memoir of Mrs. Chloe Spear, a Native of Africa, Who was Enslaved in Childhood, and Died in Boston, January 3, 1815...Aged 65 Years. By a Lady of Boston (1832)

- Narrative of the Life of Frederick Douglass (1838)
- Moses Roper, A Narrative of the Adventures and Escape of Moses Roper, from American Slavery. (1838)
- Lunsford Lane. Narrative of Lunsford Lane (1842)
- Moses Grandy,Narrative of the Life of Moses Grandy (1843)
- George Horton, Life of George M. Horton. The Colored Bard of North Carolina, to which is Prefixed the Life of the Author, written by himself (1845)

- William Wells Brown, Narrative of William Wells Brown, an American Slave (1849)
- Life of William Grimes, the Runaway Slave
- Solomon Northrup, Twelve Years a Slave. Narrative of Solomon Northup, a Citizen of New-York, Kidnapped in Washington City in 1841... (1853) (Image from this source, courtesy of the University of North Carolina's Documenting the American South site.)
- Frederick Douglass
  - My Bondage and My Freedom (1855)
  - Narrative of the Life of Frederick Douglass (1845)
  - Life and Times of Frederick Douglass (1881)
  - Life and Times of Frederick Douglass (1892)

- Harriet Jacobs, Incidents in the Life of a Slave Girl (1861)
- John Andrew Jackson, The Experience of a Slave in South Carolina (1862)
- Anonymous, Memoir of Old Elizabeth, a coloured woman (1863)

Elizabeth Keckley, Behind the Scenes; or, Thirty Years a Slave, and Four Years in the White House (1874) (Below the author's name: "Formerly a slave, but more recently modiste, and friend to Mrs. Abraham Lincoln." Although this is not a traditional slave narrative, Keckley discusses slavery as part of her childhood memories.)

- The Narrative of Bethany Veney, Slave Woman (Boston: George Ellis, 1889)
- Louis Hughes, Thirty Years a Slave. From Bondage to Freedom. (1897)
- Annie L. Burton, Memories of Childhood's Slavery Days (1909)
- S. J. McCray, Life of Mary F. McCray. Born and Raised a Slave in the State of Kentucky (1898)
- Booker T. Washington, Up from Slavery (1901)
- Annie Burton, Memories of Childhood's Slavery Days (1909)
- Martha Griffith Browne, Autobiography of a Female Slave (1857). This is not a slave narrative but a novel written by a white abolitionist.
Last Modified 05/21/2007 19:46:31
To cite this page on a Works Cited page according to current MLA guidelines, supply the correct dates and use the suggested format below. If you are quoting another author quoted on this page, either look up the original source or indicate that original quotation is cited on ("Qtd. in") this page.

Campbell, Donna M. "The Slave Narrative." Literary Movements. Date of publication or most recent update (listed above as the "last modified" date; omit the time). Date you accessed the page. <http://www.wsu.edu/~campbelld/amlit/slave.htm>.
Comments to D. Campbell