

Autobiography: Slave Narratives

Lynn Orilla Scott

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Slave narratives are autobiographical accounts of the physical and spiritual journey from slavery to freedom. In researching her groundbreaking 1946 dissertation, Marion Wilson Starling located 6,006 slave narratives written between 1703 and 1944. This number includes brief testimonies found in judicial records, broadsides, journals, and newsletters as well as separately published books. It also includes approximately 2,500 oral histories of former slaves gathered by the Federal Writers' Project in the 1930s. The number of separately published slave narratives, however, is much smaller. Although exact numbers are not available, nearly one hundred slave narratives were published as books or pamphlets between 1760 and 1865, and approximately another one hundred following the Civil War. The slave narrative reached the height of its influence and formal development during the antebellum period, from 1836 to 1861. During this time it became a distinct genre of American literature, and achieved immense popularity and influence among a primarily white, northern readership. A few, in particular *The Narrative of the Life of Frederick Douglass, An American Slave. Written by Himself* (1845), displayed a high level of rhetorical sophistication. With the end of slavery, however, interest in the narratives declined sharply. Furthermore, one consequence of the social and political repression of the black population following Reconstruction was the “loss” of the slave narratives for sixty years. During the last few decades of the twentieth century, scholars recovered, republished, and analyzed slave narratives. Both historians and literary critics came to value their importance to the historiography of American slavery and to the development of African-American autobiography and fiction.

The Early Narratives

The form and content of the slave narratives evolved over the course of the eighteenth, nineteenth, and twentieth centuries. Several eighteenth-century narrators were African-born freemen of high status who contrasted their lives before captivity with their enslavement. Their narratives assailed slavery, especially the Atlantic slave trade, on moral and religious grounds. The narrator's journey through the trials of slavery to freedom was represented in conjunction with his conversion to Christianity and his westernization. Similar to the questing hero of *Pilgrim's Progress* (1678), the subjects of eighteenth- and

early-nineteenth-century black autobiography reflected Puritan religious values and the popular modes of writing of the time, which included conversion narratives, spiritual autobiography, Indian captivity narratives, and criminal confessions. Most early black autobiographical accounts were dictated to a white amanuensis or editor who selected and arranged the former slave's oral report, "improved" the style and wording, and provided an interpretive context in the preface and in the choice of metaphors that gave shape and meaning to the former slave's story. Consequently, as William L. Andrews has pointed out, in much early African-American autobiography it is often impossible to separate the voice of the black autobiographical subject from that of the white writer recording and interpreting the story.

An important exception to this literary ventriloquism is *The Interesting Narrative of the Life of Olaudah Equiano, or Gustavus Vassa, the African, Written by Himself*, first published in London in 1789. The most famous and influential of the eighteenth-century slave narratives, Equiano's *Life* went through eight British editions and one American edition in his lifetime and numerous editions after his death.

Equiano's narrative includes descriptions of his early life among the Igbo people of Africa, his kidnapping and enslavement at eleven years of age, and the terror of the middle passage. Eventually sold to a British Royal Navy captain, Equiano was spared the crueler existence of life on a Caribbean or American plantation, and in 1766 he purchased his freedom. One of the most well-traveled men of the eighteenth century, Equiano served in the Seven Years' War in Canada and in the Mediterranean, accompanied the expedition of Constantine John Phipps to the Arctic in 1772 and 1773, and spent six months among the Miskito Indians in Central America. A strong indictment of the Atlantic slave trade and the evils of human bondage, Equiano's narrative was presented to members of the British Parliament and played an important part in the eventual abolition of the British slave trade. It also served as a prototype for many of the later fugitive slave narratives.

The Antebellum Slave Narratives

By the 1830s slave narratives had undergone a transformation. The African, freeborn narrator had disappeared and was replaced by the American-born fugitive slave narrator who escapes southern bondage to northern freedom. American slavery had not declined following the abolition of the African slave trade in 1807, as some had believed it would. On the contrary, the growth and profitability of cotton agriculture resulted in increasingly harsh conditions for many enslaved people. In contrast to the earlier narratives, antebellum narratives explicitly indicted slavery as an institution, emphasizing its dehumanizing and hellish aspects. Sold at antislavery meetings and advertised in the abolitionist press, the fugitive slave narratives were an activist literature that developed in the context of a growing and increasingly militant antislavery movement. As a reviewer of Henry Bibb's narrative wrote in 1849:

This fugitive slave literature is destined to be a powerful lever. We have the most profound conviction of its potency. We see in it the easy and infallible means of abolitionizing the free states. Argument provides argument, reason is met by sophistry. But narratives of slaves go right to the heart of men.

A number of antebellum narratives went through multiple editions and sold in the tens of thousands, far exceeding sales of contemporary works by Herman Melville,

Henry David Thoreau, or Nathaniel Hawthorne. Among the best-selling were *A Narrative of the Adventures and Escape of Moses Roper from American Slavery* (1837); *Narrative of the Life of Frederick Douglass, An American Slave. Written by Himself* (1845); *Narrative of William Wells Brown, a Fugitive Slave, Written by Himself* (1847); Solomon Northrup's *Twelve Years a Slave* (1853); and Josiah Henson's second autobiography, *Truth Stranger than Fiction: Father Henson's Story of His Own Life* (1858). Frederick Douglass's narrative sold more than 30,000 copies in the first five years and became an international best-seller. Douglass would go on to write two later versions of his autobiography: *My Bondage and My Freedom* (1855) and *The Life and Times of Frederick Douglass* (1881; expanded edition, 1892). Josiah Henson, who became identified with Harriet Beecher Stowe's character Uncle Tom, of *Uncle Tom's Cabin* (1852), also published multiple versions of his autobiography.

The authors of the antebellum narratives wrote within an established literary tradition. Often written after the fugitive slave's story had been told at antislavery gatherings, the material was honed by repeated oral performance and influenced by the narratives of other slaves. The result is a highly formulaic body of literature with a number of features in common, beginning with the title page, which asserts that the narrative was written by the slave himself or dictated to a friend. Before the narrative proper, and sometimes after it as well, are authenticating documents written by prominent white citizens and editors who describe their relationship to the fugitive slave and testify to his good character and to the veracity of the story. In addition, the introduction often claims that the narrative understates rather than overstates the brutality of slavery.

Following the prefatory material, the narratives almost always begin with the phrase, "I was born." Then, in contrast with the conventions of white autobiography, the slave narrator emphasizes how slavery has denied him specific knowledge of his birth and parentage. The slave narrator goes on to describe the precarious and dehumanizing aspects of slavery, including scenes where slaves are brutally beaten, sold at auction, and separated from family members. A critical turning point in most narratives describes the slave's desperate awakening in which he determines to be a slave no longer. Following this determination, he plans and eventually executes his escape. Often the details of the narrator's escape are suppressed so as not to compromise those individuals who helped him or to limit the possibilities for other slaves to use similar means of escape. However some slave narratives focus on an adventurous escape such as the *Narrative of Henry Box Brown, Who Escaped from Slavery in a Box Three Feet Long, Two Wide, and Two and a Half High* (1849). An example is *Running a Thousand Miles for Freedom; or, the Escape of William and Ellen Craft from Slavery* (1860). The antebellum slave narrative moves from south to north, from rural to urban, and from slavery to freedom. The typical narrative ends with the narrator's arrival in either the northern states or Canada and with the former slave's adoption of a new name.

Themes and Style

Drawing from techniques used in popular historical novels and sentimental fiction, the antebellum slave narratives are episodic in structure, melodramatic in tone, and didactic in their appeal to commonly held moral values. Slave narrators appealed to the religious and secular values of their white audiences, arguing that slavery dehumanized the masters as well as degraded the slaves. They often noted

that the most fervently religious masters were the most brutal. Thus, the narratives sought to expose slaveholding ideology as religious hypocrisy and to distinguish the slave as the true spiritual pilgrim. Similarly, the slave narrative appealed to the national values of liberty and equality as stated in the Declaration of Independence. It is the American romance with freedom, in particular, that the nineteenth-century Unitarian minister Theodore Parker had in mind when he stated that

there is one portion of our permanent literature, if literature it may be called, which is wholly indigenous and original.... I mean the Lives of Fugitive Slaves. But as these are not the work of the men of superior culture they hardly help to pay the scholar's debt. Yet all the original romance of Americans is in them, not in the white man's novel.

In addition to arguing against slavery by appealing to the religious and political values of the white readers, the slave narratives are arguments for literacy as evidence of black humanity. European intellectuals had long equated being human—or at least being mentally and culturally superior humans—to having a written language. The value Europeans gave to writing is reflected in a key metaphor of early African-American autobiography, which Henry Louis Gates Jr. (1985, p. xxvii) has identified as “the figure of the talking book.” Gates has argued that early black autobiography is a self-conscious refutation of the European charge that blacks could not write. The direct link between literacy and freedom is a thematic matrix that occurs in all of the major antebellum narratives as well. By the nineteenth century, it was generally illegal and believed dangerous to teach a slave to read and write. A number of fugitive narrators vividly recount their struggle to gain an education despite the prohibitions and denounce slavery's attempt to limit the slave's awareness of his condition and his capacity to learn. In the classic slave narrative, the acquisition of literacy is the precondition for the slave's decision to revolt against his enslavement, and literacy becomes the first step toward mental as well as physical freedom. This process is expressed most eloquently in the *Narrative of the Life of Frederick Douglass, An American Slave. Written by Himself* (1845). Douglass recounts the moment when he first understands the importance of literacy. He hears his master, Hugh Auld, tell his wife, “if you teach that nigger... to read, there would be no keeping him. It would forever unfit him to be a slave.” Douglass's response is often cited as evidence of the rhetorical art, which makes his narrative the finest example of the genre.

These words sank deep into my heart, stirred up sentiments within that lay slumbering, and called into existence an entirely new train of thought.... I now understood what had been to me a most perplexing difficulty—to wit, the white man's power to enslave the black man. It was a grand achievement, and I prized it highly. From that moment, I understood the pathway from slavery to freedom.... Though conscious of the difficulty of learning without a teacher, I set out with high hope, and a fixed purpose, at whatever cost of trouble, to learn how to read. The very decided manner with which he spoke, and strove to impress his wife with the evil consequences of giving me instructions, served to convince me that he was deeply sensible of the truths he was uttering. It gave me the best assurance that I might rely with the utmost confidence on the results that, he said, would flow from teaching me to read. What he most dreaded, that I most desired. What he most loved, that I most hated. That which to him was a great evil, to be carefully shunned, was to me a great good, to be diligently sought; and the argument which

he so warmly urged, against my learning to read, only served to inspire me with a desire and determination to learn. In learning to read, I owe almost as much to the bitter opposition of my master, as to the kindly aid of my mistress. I acknowledge the benefit of both.

While the slave narratives provided a voice for black experience, they also circumscribed that voice. The antebellum slave narrator portrayed himself as an objective and representative witness of southern slavery in order to persuade white northern audiences to join the antislavery cause. This narrative stance required that the slave's subjective experience be repressed or in some cases excised from the text. The pressure to speak in representative terms of the slave's experience left little room for the individual voice or for a discussion of the narrator's interior life except as it specifically related to slavery. In her *Witnessing Slavery: The Development of Antebellum Slave Narratives* (1994), Frances Smith Foster has argued that “the desire to recognize oneself and to be recognized as a unique individual had to counter the desire to be a symbol, and it created the tension that is a basic quality of slave narratives.” In addition, slave narrators had to be careful not to offend their white audiences, and thus the narratives did not directly challenge the ideology of white supremacy or sharply criticize the northern racism that negatively affected the lives of the fugitive and newly freed blacks.

Women's Narratives

Male narrators and male experience dominate the slave narrative genre. Nineteenth-century cultural prohibitions against women's involvement in the public sphere carried over to the antislavery movement, in which women's “proper” role was of considerable controversy. Of the known slave narratives, women wrote only 12 percent. The first known woman's slave narrative is *The History of Mary Prince, a West Indian Slave, Related by Herself*, published in London in 1831. Prince asserts herself as an authentic voice of the slave experience when she says,

All slaves want to be free—to be free is very sweet.... I have been a slave myself—I know what slaves feel—I can tell by myself what other slaves feel, and by what they have told me. The man that says slaves be quite happy in slavery—that they don't want to be free—that man is either ignorant or a lying person.

The finest of the antebellum narratives written by a woman is *Linda: Incidents in the Life of a Slave Girl. Written by Herself*. Originally published under the pseudonym Linda Brent in 1861, the narrative was long thought to be a fiction written by Lydia Maria Child. In 1981, Jean Fagan Yellin demonstrated that it is, in fact, the autobiography of Harriet Jacobs, who did, indeed, write it herself. Employing techniques from sentimental fiction, Jacobs describes her struggle to avoid the predatory sexual advances of her master and to gain freedom for herself and her children. While enslaved women are portrayed as passive victims of sexual exploitation in narratives written by men, women narrators portray themselves as active and heroic agents in the struggle for freedom. Women-authored narratives also tend to place a greater emphasis on the role of family relationships.

Postbellum Narratives and Beyond

Following the Civil War, newly freed blacks wrote autobiographies that clearly borrowed from the conventions of the antebellum narratives; however, the emphasis and purposes of these autobiographies were different. After 1865 slave narratives argued for full participation of black Americans in the new postwar society and therefore downplayed the past horrors of slavery. As William L. Andrews has stated in *To Tell a Free Story: The First Century of Afro-American Autobiography, 1760–1865* (1986), narratives written during this period depicted slavery “as a kind of crucible in which the resilience, industry, and ingenuity of the slave was tested and ultimately validated.” An early example of a Reconstruction-era slave narrative is Elizabeth Keckley's *Behind the Scenes; Thirty Years a Slave and Four Years in the White House* (1868). The most famous slave narrative of this post-Reconstruction period, Booker T. Washington's *Up From Slavery* (1901), is a classic success story that testifies to black economic progress and promotes interracial cooperation.

The influence of slave narratives on American literature should not be underestimated. Harriet Beecher Stowe's enormously popular novel, *Uncle Tom's Cabin* (1852), was directly influenced by a number of slave narratives that Stowe had read before writing her novel. White authors were not only influenced by slave narratives; a few composed fraudulent ones and attempted to pass them off as genuine. Richard Hildreth's *The Slave; or, Memoirs of Archy Moore* (1836) and Mattie Griffiths's *Autobiography of a Female Slave* (1857) are such imitations. However, scholars have been most interested in the influence of the slave narrative on the African-American literary tradition. Vernon Loggins, Arna Bontemps, Henry Louis Gates Jr., Robert B. Stepto, Joanne M. Braxton, and several other scholars have long argued that the antebellum slave narrative is the foundation of African-American autobiography and fiction.

A number of twentieth-century classics of African-American literature, including Richard Wright's *Black Boy* (1945), Ralph Ellison's *Invisible Man* (1952), Alex Haley's *The Autobiography of Malcolm X* (1965), Maya Angelou's *I Know Why the Caged Bird Sings* (1969), and Alice Walker's *The Color Purple* (1982) contain many of the formal patterns and thematic concerns of the slave narrative. These patterns include the movement from south to north, from slavery or neoslavery to freedom, and from perceptual blindness to enlightenment or illiteracy to literacy. Like the slave narratives, these twentieth-century works provide a sharp critique of the effects of racial injustice and challenge America to live up to its stated values of freedom and equality. A number of twentieth-century African-American writers are interested in reimagining slavery in ways that give voice to the kinds of subjective and psychological experience repressed in the slave narrative. Examples of these neo-slave narratives include Ernest Gaines's novel *The Autobiography of Miss Jane Pittman* (1971), Ishmael Reed's parody of the slave narrative *Flight to Canada* (1976), Octavia E. Butler's science-fiction novel *Kindred* (1979), Sherley Anne Williams's novel *Dessa Rose* (1986), Toni Morrison's novel *Beloved* (1987), and Charles Johnson's novel *Middle Passage* (1990). As a form that embodies the collective experience of an oppressed people and the individual struggle to control one's own destiny, the slave narrative genre continues to offer a rich vein of exploration for contemporary African-American writers.

See also [Autobiography: General Essay](#); Haley's *Autobiography of Malcolm X*; [Douglass, Frederick](#); and [Stowe, Harriet Beecher](#).

Further Reading

Andrews, William L. *To Tell a Free Story: The First Century of Afro-American Autobiography, 1760–1865*. Urbana, Ill., 1986. Analyzes the history of African-American autobiography as “one of increasingly free story telling.” The slave narrators not only write about freedom as a goal in life, but through a variety of rhetorical means show that they regard the writing of autobiography as self-liberating. A comprehensive study, one of the best in the field.

Braxton, Joanne M. *Black Women Writing Autobiography: A Tradition within a Tradition*. Philadelphia, 1989. Argues for a redefinition of the genre of black American autobiography to include women's writing. Demonstrates that slave narratives and spiritual autobiographies written by black women developed common themes and archetypal figures that established a tradition evident in contemporary black women's autobiography. Since most earlier writing only treated male slave narratives, Braxton's book is key in expanding the field.

Davis, Charles T., and Henry Louis Gates Jr., eds. *The Slave's Narrative*. New York, 1985. A collection of essays and reviews about slave narratives, including a selection of those written at the time of the original publication of various narratives. Modern essays on the slave narrative include historical analysis and literary criticism and focus on a range of specific texts. The volume includes an excellent introduction and a selected bibliography of black narratives from 1760 to 1865. An important resource for the student of slave narratives.

Foster, Frances Smith. *Witnessing Slavery: The Development of Antebellum Slave Narratives*. 2d ed. Madison, Wisc., 1994. First published in 1979. Examines slave narratives in their cultural matrix by looking at the social and literary influences, the development of plot, the role of racial mythology, and the influence of the slave narrative on postbellum black writing. The focus is on separately published, male-authored narratives, but the second edition includes an essay on the differences in the portrayal of women by male and female slave narrators. A very readable work and a fine introduction to the genre.

Gates, Henry Louis, Jr. Introduction: The Language of Slavery. In Davis and Gates, ed. pp. xi–xxxiv.

Jackson, Blyden. *A History of Afro-American Literature*. Vol. 1, *The Long Beginning, 1746–1895*. Baton Rouge, La., 1989. A comprehensive history of early African-American poetry, autobiography, prose, and fiction that includes but is not limited to a discussion of the slave narratives. Helpful for seeing the slave narrative in the larger context of African-American literature.

McDowell, Deborah E., and Arnold Rampersad, eds. *Slavery and the Literary Imagination*. Baltimore, 1989. A selection of papers from the English Institute that examines the evolution of the relationship between slavery and the American literary imagination from the antebellum slave narratives through nineteenth- and twentieth-century autobiography and fiction. An important source for understanding the influence of slave narratives.

Sekora, John, and Darwin T. Turner, eds. *The Art of the Slave Narrative: Original Essays in Criticism and Theory*. Macomb, Ill., 1982. Twelve essays that focus on the rhetorical art of the slave narrative, including studies of form, metaphor, and point of view, especially the challenge of creating a controlling self to serve as protagonist and author. The collection includes an essay on the practical use of the slave narrative in literature courses and a checklist of criticism of slave narratives. A good resource for the student of slave narratives.

Starling, Marion Wilson. *The Slave Narrative: Its Place in American History*. 2d ed. Washington, D.C., 1988. Originally presented as a Ph.D. thesis in 1946, Starling's was the first extensive study of the slave narrative. It inspired historians and literary scholars to study early African-American writing. Starling located 6,006 slave narratives. Her work

includes a list of primary sources in which slave narrative sketches were found and a list of separately published narratives. An excellent source of information on testimony in its historical and social context.

Stepto, Robert B. *From Behind the Veil: A Study of Afro-American Narrative*. Chicago, 1979. Identifies the quest for literacy and freedom as a “pre-generic myth” manifest in the historical consciousness of African-American written narrative. Categorizes the slave narratives into four types and examines how modern African-American narratives revoice and “answer the call” of the slave narratives. An important argument for the slave narrative as the foundation for later African-American literature.

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Slave narratives comprise one of the most influential traditions in American literature, shaping the form and themes of some of the most. Notable modern African American autobiographies, such as Richard Wright’s *Black Boy* (1945) and *The Autobiography of Malcolm X* (1965), as well as famous novels, such as William Styron’s *The Confessions of Nat Turner* (1967), Ernest J. Gaines’s *The Autobiography of Miss Jane Pittman* (1971), and Toni Morrison’s *Beloved* (1987), bear the. Slave narratives were influenced by but also significantly affected many other literary forms, including the confessional narrative, the autobiography, the sentimental novel, the spiritual narrative, the picaresque novel, the travel narrative, and the sermon and jeremiad traditions. Writers of slave narratives were also readers influenced by particular key texts—including *Pilgrim’s Progress*, *The Columbian Orator*, the King James Bible, and John Wesley’s hymns—on the style and content of slave narratives. Slave narratives recount the personal experiences of antebellum slaves or former slaves, and comprise one of the most extensive and influential traditions in African American literature and culture. Slave narratives were hugely popular in the 19th and early 20th centuries, with many going through multiple reprintings and selling tens of thousands of copies. In fact, until the 1930s slave narratives outnumbered novels written by African Americans. These two books examine slave autobiographies as a literary genre.