

“A Direct Consequence of a Political Purpose”: The Nature of Language and Audience in Slave Narratives

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On a cold day in December 1791, a group of men ratified a document that has simultaneously been the source of pride and shame for an entire people. While we often see the entire creation of the Bill of Rights as an extensive, dramatic affair in our short history, it is no understatement to say that much of American history has revolved around our attempts to truly actualize what that document entails. Our history can be summed up by our collective attempts to embrace the concepts of liberty and equality for all, regardless of race, of gender, of religion. These fundamental principles and morals that America has strived towards are derived from the likes of Locke, Voltaire, Hamilton, and various other Enlightenment figures. Americans thus can be characterized as endeavoring to find an answer to the question of how to embrace these concepts in a substantive, meaningful way.

The 19th century, however, showcases America's failure in actualizing these goals in its most raw, brutal form: slavery. At the same time, the 1800s delivered unto the American people one of the most characteristically American genres of literature, borne out of necessity: the slave narrative. While these texts were obviously not a new or specifically American phenomena, the 19th century saw an explosion of published narratives of escaped slaves, writing in hopes of ending the systematic oppression and enslavement of millions of African Americans throughout the United States, predominantly in the South. These narratives, filled with the language of liberty and equality, of the Enlightenment, and of the American spirit as characterized by documents such as the Bill of Rights, are the most American form of literature.

As one reads through these narratives, it becomes obvious that there are elements that each author uses to convey his or her rhetoric in a specific, meaningful way that sways the audience to their side. The key to understanding the complexity of slave narratives, then, is through the analysis of the two most important considerations of the author: language and audience. As all literature is written with an intended audience in mind, slave narratives emphasize this because they both record and persuade; it is the goal of the author to not only appeal to the audience, but also then persuade that same audience of the inherent evil nature of the system of slavery. Stephen T. Butterfield put this perfectly in his own

work: “The tendency toward description, detail, and concrete language in the slave narrative is chiefly a function of the author's political role. He is called upon, as part of his activity in the anti-slavery movement, to supply first-hand information about slavery from the victim's point of view” (72). Through the lens provided by Butterfield, I endeavor to examine various slave narratives, ranging from the late 18th century to the late 19th century, through their use of language and implicit audience considerations as a means to understanding how each author successfully (or unsuccessfully) played to his or her audience in his or her specific time period and region. Under examination will be narratives by Olaudah Equiano, Frederick Douglass, Harriet Jacobs, and Solomon Northup.

Slave narratives, by their very nature, seek to make an argument for a fundamental, and what many would consider a uniquely American, right to liberty. Considering this, the political nature of many slave narratives is intertwined with how each author uses language as a means of capturing an audience and, on the opposite side of the coin, how each author considers the opinions and dispositions of the intended audience, using that as a baseline for determining what kind of language needs to be employed for the fullest effect. These considerations include audience demographic, popular literary genres and styles, and era-specific rhetoric in relation to freedom, such as Enlightenment-era or Romantic-era specific rhetoric, and help to shape each author's language in each narrative. Where Equiano places heavy emphasis upon the importance of liberty and equality, Douglass shapes his narrative through Romantic-era, humanist language.

The first text to examine is the earliest in the group, that being Olaudah Equiano's *The Interesting Narrative of the Life of Olaudah Equiano, or Gustavus Vassa, the African, Written by Himself*. While not an American text nor written in the context of American slavery, Equiano's narrative is significant for this examination because the same language beats that are seen in American slave narratives are present here. Furthermore, Equiano's narrative also showcases throughout a continuous, careful consideration for his intended audience. Thus, his work stands as a precursor text

and useful basis for the American slave narratives that will be examined.

Equiano's narrative stands as a unique example in that its format varies from other slave narratives. Katalin Orban puts it best in her work, "Dominant and Submerged Discourses in 'The Life of Olaudah Equiano' (or Gustavus Vassa?)," when she says, "His narrative has the general framework of a conversion narrative, but he does not choose to present his past before the moment of conversion as completely insignificant, as often is the case in conversion narratives." Questions about the genuineness of Equiano's conversion have been brought up by scholars in the past because of this very fact. However, for the purposes of this examination, the position that will be taken is this: while there is certainly credence to the argument that his conversion is not whole-hearted, questioning his genuineness undermines Equiano's authority as an author and devalues his anti-slavery rhetoric, fueled in part by Christianity.

Throughout the text, many of Equiano's critical responses to the horrific conditions of slavery that he witnesses are placed in the context of Christianity. As Orban sums up, "Equiano argues against slavery, especially the bad (in his terms, the cruel and incorrect) treatment of slaves, with the rhetoric of Christianity." The chief examples of this language are in Chapter Five, during his time in the West Indies. Equiano witnesses aboard his master's ship various atrocities committed towards slaves while en route and states, "I have known our mates to commit these acts most shamefully, to the disgrace, not of Christians only, but of men. I have even known them gratify their brutal passions with females not ten years old" (59). In instances such as these, Equiano is utilizing both language and audience very directly: the innate structure of his narrative is styled as a conversion narrative, but simultaneously as a sort of "travel" journal, or an "adventure" journal. Thus, his emphasis upon the atrocities that Christian men were committing aboard strikes at the heart of the 18th-century English audience whom he is targeting. His placement of these individuals as villainous characters corrupting both the adventure and the religion shows his ability to make this topic hit home for the reader.

This section of the text also showcases Equiano's ability to take internal dialogue and transform it into questions directed towards the audience. This serves again to showcase his complex usage of language. He says, after quoting a section on the unjust punishment of slaves from the Assembly of Barbados, "Is not this one of the many acts of the islands which call loudly for redress? And do not the assembly which enacted it deserve the appellation of savages and brutes rather than of Christians and men? It is an act at once unmerciful, unjust, and unwise; which for cruelty would disgrace an assembly of those who are called barbarians and for its injustice and *insanity* would shock the morality and common sense of a Samaan or a Hottentot" (Equiano 63). He

directs questions to the audience while keeping them contained in what are, according to him, his innermost thoughts, his internal dialogue. This language is a replication of the same language that he uses when describing his religious conversion later on in the narrative: "After this I was resolved to win Heaven if possible; and if I perished I thought it should be at the feet of Jesus, in praying to him for salvation. (117). Equiano expertly mimics the language of a conversion narrative consistently in the work in order to send his message to his audience. Equiano uses his audience's expectations that he will, over the course of his narrative, convert to Christianity through opening himself up to God in order to equate becoming a true Christian with resisting the institution of slavery. Furthermore, he couches his anti-slavery rhetoric in both this human, Christian language and in Enlightenment-era concepts of freedom and equality in an effort to successfully draw upon two separate audiences' innate desires. He knows what kind of language they are receptive to, and he shapes his language to send his anti-slavery message subtly and effectively to a wide, receptive audience.

The next work under examination can be considered as the ultimate example of what a slave narrative is and how it achieves its goals through the use of language and audience consideration. Published in 1845, Frederick Douglass's *Narrative of the Life of Frederick Douglass* garnered immense popularity and has stood the test of time by being one of the most common pieces of American literature taught consistently throughout the country. By all measures, Douglass's *Narrative* is one of the best examples of both effective language and deliberate consideration for the audience. Part of the fundamental nature of slave narratives, as Butterfield points out, is that they are a political device, and this fact is most obvious in Douglass's work.

The structure of Douglass's *Narrative* plays a large part in its attempts to entice his intended audience, that being 19th-century white, male Americans in the Northern United States. Douglass couches his *Narrative* in the terms of a hero's journey. Coined by Joseph Campbell as the "monomyth," it is a common storytelling template used throughout history, revolving around a central character or "hero" who leaves his home and embarks upon some great journey, resulting in climactic action that leads to the hero returning home changed or transformed. In Douglass's case, he evolves over time from the silent sufferer to a proactive protagonist, taking many action beats from popular epics such as *The Iliad*, *The Odyssey*, *Beowulf*, and *Gilgamesh*; Douglass crafts his own narrative to portray his own evolution, something designed intentionally to attract his audience. Lisa Yun Lee describes this use of language throughout Douglass's work as a transformation from a silent observer to a proactive protagonist. As she says,

The form of the *Narrative* underscores the subject of slavery by mirroring the powerlessness of Douglass. For example, as the story progresses, Douglass gains in stature and power, moving from slave to leader. Meanwhile, in the rhetorical sense, Douglass as first-person narrator progresses from being narrator in a passive silent stance to narrator in an active speaking stance. Thus, as a silent narrator, Douglass reenacts the silencing of himself as a slave. (Lee 52)

Douglass's narrative thus is characterized as one of struggle, burden, but eventual success, which serves to resonate with Northern American men as symbolic of the ability to overcome one's conditions, a uniquely American trait.

Douglass's silence in the first half of the *Narrative* serves purposely to draw in the audience. He utilizes the injustices being wrought against him as his own series of inciting incidents, building himself up as the epic hero. This undoubtedly is done to serve as his own inciting incident to begin his journey, drawing in his intended audience. This is best illustrated throughout the early chapters of the book, as he is raised in the hellscape of slavery. In Chapter One, as he recalls the first time that he saw horrific punishment of a slave, specifically his Aunt Hester, he says, "It was the blood-stained gate, the entrance to the hell of slavery, through which I was about to pass. It was a most terrible spectacle. I wish I could commit to paper the feelings with which I beheld it" (Douglass 14). Douglass utilizes his own silence as a way of setting himself up as a pseudo-passenger early on in his narrative with a specific purpose. He places himself in a position akin to that of his audience, and through his language, allows the audience to feel his emotions alongside him. He characterizes himself in the beginning of his journey as a sort of observer, able only to look on at the horrors of slavery as they unfold before him. This not only draws in the attention of his target audience more effectively but also allows him to impact the audience halfway into the novel when he shifts from a silent, passive narrator to a proactive, participating protagonist, throwing himself into opposition against the system of slavery.

The transformation from the silent, passive observer Douglass to the proactive, heroic Douglass is best illustrated in Chapter Ten, during Douglass's ultimate showdown against the repulsive Mr. Covey. Mr. Covey, through Douglass's characterization of his language and actions earlier on, comes to serve in the story as the personification of the evils of the system of slavery, and thus, he becomes the representation of the evil that Douglass is fighting against in his hero's journey. As Mr. Covey attempts to punish Douglass for a prior transgression, Douglass steadies himself, saying, "I resolved to fight; and, suiting my action to the resolution, I seized Covey hard by the throat; and as I did so, I rose.... He trembled like a leaf.... I held him uneasy, causing the blood to run where I touched him with the ends of my

fingers." (44) Douglass places himself within the context of his narrative in the role of the protagonist, and, as the injustices mount against him, directly caused by the institution of slavery, he is inevitably spurred into action. Like a 19th-century Achilles, Odysseus, Beowulf, or King Gilgamesh, Douglass uses language to convey to the audience the idea that it is his responsibility, as both a protagonist and human being suffering injustice, to rebel against the system that is oppressing him. Thus, Douglass showcases his ability to craft the language of his narrative in a precise and particular way, so as to manipulate the audience and sway them to his cause. His language, as Butterfield states, is political in nature; however, his mastery of this language allows him to subtly deliver his message while also enthralling the audience.

Looking back at Butterfield's idea of political purpose, it is very easy to identify, towards the end of his narrative, some sections in which Douglass is purposely overt with his political messaging for the purpose of helping others. This is best seen in Chapter Eleven, when he discusses the reasons for his escaping slavery and turns the topic towards the Underground Railroad. He says, "I have never approved of the very public manner in which some of our western friends have conducted what they call the Underground Railroad, but which I think, by their open declarations, has been made most emphatically the upper-ground railroad.... I, however, can see very little good resulting from such a course, either to themselves or the slaves escaping" (Douglass 58). This serves as a pivotal moment in Douglass's *Narrative*: throughout the work, he has gone through great pains to specifically wield language in the text in a way that appeals to his target audience of post-Enlightenment, Romantic-era, educated, white Northern men; to mimic certain works and play to the right emotions, such as Romantic morals of right and wrong combined with Enlightenment-era ideas of liberty and equality; and because of these great lengths he goes to, this instance serves as his payoff. Crafting his narrative in the way that he has, using language and consideration to become close with his audience, allows him to deliver his messages about slavery and current anti-slavery efforts at the end of the narrative. Thus, Douglass's *Narrative* showcases the essence of the most effective use of language and audience consideration.

The gendered equivalent to Douglass's work, matching both his caliber of language manipulation and his audience consideration, is Harriet Jacobs's *Incidents in the Life of a Slave Girl*. Written under the pseudonym of Linda Brent, Jacobs's own narrative serves as the foremost example of a woman's slave narrative, and its design reflects that. Whereas Douglass spends his time and effort emulating epic stories as a way of attracting his audience, Jacobs takes this same approach but with a different audience. She shapes her narrative to appeal to her own target audience, that being white women, specifically from the northern United States.

Her audience would have been educated in the same environment as the men whom Douglass targets with his narrative; however, the key difference is the relationship between passivity and religious revivalism popular among Northern women during the time period.

Jacobs's narrative is not only by definition a slave narrative, but also very carefully borrows cues and language from captivity narratives, as a means of putting into an unspoken context the nature by which African American women viewed their own enslavement. By doing this, Jacobs couches her narrative not only in language that is familiar to her audience, but also in language and a style that were popular during her time. Like Mary Rowlandson's *A Narrative of the Captivity and Restoration of Mrs. Mary Rowlandson*, Jacobs characterizes her own enslavement as an unjust captivity, which by its innate quality draws her audience onto her side. Loredanna Bercuci, in her article "Female and Unfree in America: Captivity and Slave Narratives," characterizes the nature of this best: "The memoir is focused not so much on the events that occur during Linda's captivity, but is a sort of psychodrama in which the narrator comments on her status as a slave, on the conditions and morality of slavery, and especially on the particular fate that female slaves had" (26). Whereas Douglass evolves over time from a silent observer to a man who takes physical action, Jacobs's narrative deals almost exclusively in passive resistance to her oppressors, to the system of slavery. She uses her relationship with God as her key tool of internal resistance. As Bercuci says, "the narrator draws on Christian values to persuade her readers that slavery is a moral wrong and, as such, its existence in Christian life is absurd" (26). It is these Christian values that Jacobs utilizes in her language as her primary mode of resistance against slavery, which by its passive nature appeals to her desired audience. While Equiano's language is inspired by Enlightenment ideals and Douglass's is an essential representation of the passion of Romantic-era literature, Jacobs's language is characterized by a passivity derived from faith in God.

One of the best examples of this is seen in Chapter Twelve. While discussing her attempts to educate in secret other slaves, she uses the Christian nature of her own mission as a way to appeal to her audience in an incredibly powerful scene:

I am glad that missionaries go out to the dark corners of the earth; but I ask them not to overlook the dark corners at home. Talk to American slaveholders as you talk to savages in Africa. Tell *them* it was wrong to traffic in men. Tell them it is sinful to sell their own children, and atrocious to violate their own daughters. Tell them that all men are brethren, and that man has no right to shut out the light of knowledge from his brother. (Jacobs 81)

Jacobs's methods of direct resistance to both slavery and her own oppression are incredibly limited; rather, throughout the text, they are supplemented by passages like this. Jacobs showcases in sections like this her complete and total mastery over language and audience in one fell swoop. She does this through her appeal to Christian goodness in her audience: she goes out of her way to openly state her appreciation for the efforts of those spreading the word of God, but, in the same statement, lays out in the open the contradiction of preaching abroad what has failed at home. She places the system of slavery in direct opposition with the institution of Christianity, an appeal to the religious nature of her audience. But she also takes great care to not place the blame for the system of slavery upon her audience; rather, she places the chance to redeem, the chance to save millions, upon her audience. This creates a positive dynamic between her and her intended audience, further reinforcing the subtle political nature of her language.

Jacobs's passive resistance to slavery is found not only within her Christian language, but also in her refuge from Dr. Flint's tyranny in hiding. Within her description of these circumstances is once again the political language of anti-slavery rhetoric, well-placed to appeal to her intended audience: "With all my detestation of Dr. Flint, I could hardly wish him a worse punishment, either in this world or that which is to come, than to suffer what I suffered in one single summer. Yet the laws allowed *him* to be out in the free air, while I, guiltless of crime, was pent up here" (Jacobs 135). It is in these moments within her narrative that Jacobs captures the essence of popular captivity narratives and blends them into her story about the horrors that slavery brings down upon people. Forced captive in a small, cramped attic because of the inability of Southern whites to accept her as a true, free person, she uses this horror to her advantage in swaying her Northern audience into understanding the true debasing nature of slavery, of how the system destroys the humanity of an innocent woman.

Though seen only a handful of times throughout the story, Jacobs does break the mold of passive rebellion in her narrative as a means of connecting with her female audience. This is primarily seen in her attempts to deny Dr. Flint any sexual satisfaction from using her by having children with another man in her town. Melissa Daniels-Rauterkus says this in her own work, which serves as a perfect analysis of this situation: "In *Incidents*, Jacobs illustrates the necessity of such strategies, even as they stand outside of the normative conventions of sexual propriety during the nineteenth century. With limited options, Jacobs decides that it is better to give her body to a man who does not own her, rather than one whose bill of sale authorizes her sexual degradation" (498). Jacobs knows the serious grievances that her audience would have with her having a sexual relationship outside of wedlock, but she continues onward, utilizing her expert control over language to place into understandable terms the

reasoning for her actions. She says in Chapter Ten, "But, O, ye happy women, whose purity has been sheltered from childhood, who have been free to choose the objects of your affection, whose homes are protected by law.... If slavery had been abolished, I, also, could have married the man of my choice" (Jacobs 58). She expertly shifts the blame for her situation onto the institution of slavery. Knowing her audience and the language which they speak, Jacobs crafts her response to what she knew would be an outcry towards her actions that puts her actions into simple terms: her sexual relation was her only way to exercise any dominion over herself, a luxury that white, Northern women truly can't comprehend being deprived of. By playing on the morals of her audience, Jacobs turns what would have been seen during the period as an incredible taboo into something wholly symbolic of the destructive nature of the system of slavery. Furthermore, by emphasizing the loss of her purity as a result of the system of slavery, Jacobs indirectly emphasizes society's unequal judgement of sexual impropriety for men and women, which no doubt resonated with her female audience. It is these subtle and overt usages of language and audience consideration that make her narrative so effective.

A significant piece to each of the previous three slave narratives has been a close consideration of the audience, specifically what literary styles and beats attracted their period-specific readers. However, Solomon Northup's *Twelve Years a Slave* veers from that path considerably and thus serves as an excellent comparative example of expert language, but no real consideration of audience presupposition. This does not mean that Northup's language throughout the text is not political in nature—far from it, in fact: the harrowing nature of his recollection of his time as a slave, in every gruesome detail, serves as an obvious political statement against the institution of slavery. However, as Sam Worley points out in his own work, "Unlike the Douglass' paradigm which is developed primarily through temporal figures, the providential mode chiefly utilizes spatial figures. *Twelve Years a Slave* conforms to neither of these models, and its reputation has suffered accordingly" (243). In other words, whereas Douglass's narrative is developed through humanistic characters involved in the deconstruction of slavery through a Romantic lens, Northup's narrative is not concerned with moral or religious quandaries on slavery, which coincides with its historic success as a slave narrative. *Twelve Years a Slave*'s popularity has risen greatly in the late 20th and early 21st centuries, but upon its initial publication in 1853, Northup's narrative fell into obscurity, primarily due to audience consideration, or a lack thereof.

There are innate differences that make Northup's work stand out in comparison to other narratives, chiefly the overall lack of moral lesson brought to the audience in the form of religious appeals. Northup does indeed make appeals to God throughout his work, but rather than appeals for change, they are questions about why he has been thrust into

enslavement, about the justness of his situation. Rather, the bulk of Northup's narrative reads as a story of his own enslavement, and purely that. He places emphasis on exact detail, saying so himself in the opening chapter of his narrative: "My object is to give a candid and truthful statement of facts: to repeat the story of my life, without exaggeration, leaving it for others to determine whether even the pages of fiction present a picture of more cruel wrong or a severer bondage" (Northup 11). Northup's political language is completely and objectively on display from beginning to end; he makes no attempt to blend his message into a narrative styled to appeal to a 19th-century audience. His narrative is concerned only with presenting the facts of his own enslavement, which, according to him, is enough on its own to persuade any reader of the horrors of slavery. This makes his narrative stand out so significantly when compared to the previous three narratives. Equiano is concerned with understanding the religious implications of slavery in the Enlightenment Era; Douglass sets out to examine slavery through the humanistic lens of the Romantic Era; and Jacobs attacks slavery through the degradation that the system causes to women while maintaining her own passivity and faith in God. Conversely, Northup is concerned with none of these things. His objective is almost like that of a modern-day field reporter in a warzone, recounting the horrors he has seen to his audience. This helps modern readers to understand exactly why Northup's narrative fell into obscurity during his own time while, comparatively, in recent years it has skyrocketed in popularity, even receiving its own film adaptation. What Northup writes in his narrative and the way he writes it, simply put, was a realistic, accurate rendition that audiences in his time were simply not equipped to properly understand and appreciate in the way that modern audiences are.

This objective-style of language that Northup employs is seen throughout his narrative. Rather than fill sections with philosophical musings on the nature of slavery, Northup utilizes his first-hand experiences as ammunition for tearing down slavery. His experiences and physical rebellion serve as his primary means of convincing the audience. A prime example of this is seen in Chapter Eight, after an altercation over nails results in an attempt by Mr. Tibbeats to punish Northup for the failure of an overseer. As Tibbeats walks off to grab a whip, Northup has a section of internal dialogue, intended for the audience: "I felt, moreover, that I had been faithful—that I was guilty of no wrong whatever, and deserved commendation rather than punishment. My fear changed to anger, and before he reached me I had made up my mind fully not to be whipped, let the result be life or death." (61-62) Northup makes no appeals to God, nor does he ask any questions regarding the Christian morality in Tibbeats's blatantly unjust punishment for a crime that Northup did not commit. Rather, Northup's internal self speaks inward, objectively stating that he will not stand for such conditions, that he will not be punished for doing the

right thing. To Northup, what has transpired is not a matter of religious questioning; he knows that he has done the right and honorable thing, and he will defend his stance to the death if he must, but he will not be whipped. Such a moral stance based entirely upon his own opinion, his own internal interpretation, would not have been necessarily popular with a white, Northern audience, and it stands far away when compared to other similar instances, such as Douglass's own fight with an overseer in his *Narrative*. Furthermore, while Douglass intentionally frames Mr. Covey as the embodiment of the evils of slavery that he is battling against in his own hero's journey, Northup does no such thing for Mr. Tibbeats. Rather, Northup characterizes Mr. Tibbeats consistently through his actions, rather than directly calling him evil. When spending the night in the great house with Chapin, in a bid to avoid confrontation with the enraged Tibbeats, Chapin says to Northup, "I believe, Platt, that scoundrel is skulking about the premises somewhere. If the dog barks again, and I am sleeping, wake me" (Northup 70). Northup does not directly degrade or insult those who are oppressing him, nor does he ponder the morality of their actions. Rather, he uses both their actions and the words of others around them to characterize each person. For Tibbeats, he uses the words of Chapin and Ford to characterize him as cruel, unjust, and a coward. This is incredibly significant, as not only is it a giant departure from the nature of how authors such as Equiano, Douglass, and Jacobs characterize the nature of the people around them in their respective narratives, but it also serves as something that would have alienated any 19th-century audience member from his work: there is no degree of separation present when he describes the whites who are oppressing him under slavery; he does not place them in a separate category from whites who are reading his narrative. Instead, his language is shaped in a way to convey that any man can be evil under a system such as slavery.

Much of Northup's descriptions of the horrendous conditions and abuses that enslaved African Americans were put through, unlike many other narratives, are not placed alongside religious rhetoric condemning the corrupt nature of slavery in his own narrative. Rather, he allows the horror to speak for itself. This is best illustrated by his last description of his fellow slave and friend, Eliza, in Chapter Eleven. He says,

Her face had become ghastly haggard, and the once straight and active form was bowed down, as if bearing the weight of a hundred years. Crouching on her cabin floor, and clad in the coarse garments of a slave, old Elisha Berry would not have recognized the mother of his child. I never saw her afterwards. Having become useless to the cotton-field, she was bartered for a trifle, to some man residing in the vicinity of Peter Compton's. Grief had gnawed remorselessly at her heart, until her strength was

gone; and for that, her last master, it is said, lashed and abused her most unmercifully. But he could not whip back the departed vigor of her youth, nor straighten up that bended body to its full height, such as it was when her children were around her, and the light of freedom was shining on her path. (Northup 89)

This paragraph serves as the ultimate example of Northup's approach to storytelling that makes his own narrative completely diverge from the rest of the genre. Northup states early on that his concern is with telling the truth of his experience as a slave, devoid of a religious purpose or overtone, stating that the horrors themselves should be enough to dismantle any argument in support of maintaining slavery. This paragraph showcases how Northup employs language in a way that, despite not being popular in his own era, has brought his narrative into newfound popularity in the current political climate. Northup lets the nature of the truth speak for itself, rather than dissect the tragedy of Eliza through a religious lens. Her suffering and the complete destruction of her sense of freedom constitute the argument against slavery. Northup does not need the Bible's morals to argue that what is done to Eliza is wrong, nor does he plead with God to end suffering like this across the South. Rather, he indirectly forces the reality of Eliza's situation onto the reader; they are the ones with power in this world, here and now, and to Northup, it is their responsibility to take action.

Going back to Stephen Butterfield's concept of political purpose within the language of slave narrative, a portion of his work becomes incredibly apparent in this passage by Northup: "the slave narrator's rendering of concrete experience leads naturally to the use of understatement. The facts which he gives are so overwhelming in their barbarity and so convincing as a case against slavery that his political conclusion is an anti-climax. Anything he can say is bound to understate the point" (73). This is the essence of Northup's slave narrative, the essence of its language and structure. Tossing to the side religious rhetoric, all Northup does is tell the truth, and the power that his truthful, accurate recounting of events has upon the audience makes it so that he doesn't need to add anything, religious or otherwise, to his recounting; the events speak for themselves. This is what made Northup's narrative fall into obscurity in his time and skyrocket in popularity in ours. The people of 19th-century America needed some kind of religious message to help them comprehend the horrors of slavery; the people of America today see Northup's lack of a religious message and instead holistically fact-driven narrative as worthy of praise on its own.

Slave narratives, as examined here, can be characterized as a genre that seems derived from a simple premise on the surface, but is in fact both incredibly complex and difficult to fully appreciate. However, Butterfield's work

helps the modern reader to contextualize and understand the difference in language and audience among the plethora of American slave narratives. The innately political nature of language in slave narratives, subtly woven into each respective text through the use of religion, appeals to morality, and specific tailoring to the desires of each intended audience, helps showcase the true genius of the authors of American slave narratives throughout the 19th century. More than that, however, it helps to serve as a template for the examination of slave narratives that have become popular only very recently, such as Northup's *Twelve Years a Slave*, allowing modern readers to understand why narratives such as this one went underground in their own time, only to have a resurgence now.

Still, one might question the importance of examining narratives, over a hundred years old, that pertain to a long-since-abolished system in the United States. Some may even argue that it is counter-productive to modern America to dredge up the sins of the past, so to speak. However, the resurgence in popularity of narratives such as Solomon Northup's *Twelve Years a Slave* serves as the prime example of the necessity of reexamination of American slave narratives as a whole. Despite the system of slavery having been abolished now for over a hundred years, these narratives still present questions about the fundamental nature of American society, religion in America, the nature of man in relation to liberty and equality, and, most importantly, what it truly means to be an American. These are questions that nearly every American today still struggles to answer on both a personal and group level, but these narratives can shed a new light on these fundamental questions for modern readers.

The nature of slave narratives is incredibly important to examine simply by virtue of our collective history as Americans. They represent the ultimate form of American literature, arguments made for the recognition of one's humanity, of one's right to be free, to be seen as a person and not property. Understanding how each of these authors employed language and took into consideration their intended audience, or instead ignored popular tropes of the time,

allows us to see how these narratives served as effective political tools in the deconstruction of the system of slavery in the United States. More important than that, however, these narratives serve as a keystone in the quest to speak truth to power, a fundamental American societal goal.

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