
Solomon Northup's *Twelve Years a Slave*: the transition from abolitionist propaganda to Hollywood tie-in.

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Abstract

An analysis of the ways in which the role and function of a text can alter over time. This article will focus primarily on the slave narrative *Twelve Years a Slave* by Solomon Northup, and explore the development of the text from its original purpose of abolitionist propaganda, to a focus of academic interest and research, to its current function as a cinematic tie-in. The role of the publisher will be discussed at each different stage, and how their interference has arguably affected the meaning and reading of the slave narrative. It will be argued that the function of a text, as well as its format, can change the way in which the reader perceives it.

Key Words

Abolitionist Movement; Slave Narrative; Solomon Northup; *Twelve Years a Slave*

Introduction

The primary function and role of a text can alter greatly over time. This idea can be applied to the slave narrative, which was initially used for political, persuasive, and personal means, and is now being used not only for academic and historical research, but also as popular literature and cinematic tie-ins. This concept can be applied to Solomon Northup's 1853 autobiography *Twelve Years a Slave*. This narrative, edited by the New York lawyer and legislator David Wilson, was one of the many written texts used to assist the Abolitionist Movement in the United States. After black slavery was successfully eradicated in the US, the slave narratives, over time, became a subject of academic scrutiny and study, and many texts have become the focus of university investigation. It was almost inevitable that one of the narratives would be the focus for a cinematic adaptation, and *Twelve Years a Slave* (Steve McQueen) was made by Summit Entertainment in 2013, and has become a successful, highly acclaimed, award-winning film. This article is going to explore the ways in which publishers have dealt with the different variations and functions of the slave narrative and, in particular, Solomon Northup's account of his twelve years as a slave and his journey back to freedom. Northup's narrative is particularly interesting due to its narrative's content, authorship, and its editorial process.

The Origins of *Twelve Years a Slave* and the Slave Narrative

Solomon Northup was a free black man who was drugged and tricked into slavery. It was not until he was able to get a message back to his family that he was rightfully freed twelve years after he was taken. The events of Northup's life took the interest of one of his neighbours, the lawyer David Wilson, who offered to write and publish Northup's story. His book, *Twelve Years a Slave*, published by Derby & Miller of Auburn, New York, soon became one of many narratives written by freed or runaway slaves to be used to assist in the Abolitionist Movement, as 'abolitionist literature ... was by far the most useful tradition for the didactic purposes of black novelists' (Bell, 1989, p. 27), despite Wilson having no link or agenda with this particular operation. Northup soon became active with some of the abolitionist groups, giving talks and lectures on his experiences. Not much is known about Northup after this period, but much information can be taken from the pages of his story. It would not have been likely that Northup's narrative would have been sold in bookshops, nor would they have been readily available for the general public to purchase, but would have been displayed and sold after the abolitionist meetings, particularly if Northup was one of the lecturers for that session. A collection of books, essays, poetry etc. would have been on sale after successful lectures for those listening to buy and be further influenced by the cause. Although Northup's work would have been put in the same category as the other slave narratives, his was somewhat different.

One aspect that is very noticeable in Northup's narrative, and one that is different to almost all slave narratives that came before or after his book was published, is that he does not always condemn his slave owners. In fact, he comments on some of their generosity and good natures, despite Northup's circumstances. The book's editor David Wilson comments on this in the editor's preface, saying that *Twelve Years a Slave* 'presents a correct picture of Slavery, in all lights and shadows, as it now exists in that locality'. One example of slavery's 'lights' would be the way in which Northup was treated by his first owner William Prince Ford, who treated Northup and the other slaves with more respect and kindness than other slave owners he encountered. However, he also mentioned that 'Ford's generosity stopped at the point of considering freedom for his slaves or allowing any limits to his own authority over them' (Toplin, 1985, p. 19), but still goes on to comment on his kindness, especially in comparison with other white people he encountered, such as Tibeats and Edwin Epps. This mention of kindness amongst the slave trade perhaps reinforces the text's honesty, as these positive comments would not have assisted in the abolitionist movement at all, in fact it would have somewhat hindered it, as Northup is ultimately saying that not all he experienced was negative, and therefore this could have been built upon by those that were pro-slavery. However, Northup did dedicate much of his life to giving lectures and leading discussions to try and help free slaves, so in no way was he condoning the slave trade.

The role of the editor is a very important aspect of the process and publication of a slave narrative. Blassingame (1975) discusses the publication process, and how important the editor is when analysing the narrative voice, especially when you consider that the texts were dictated to and written by them. Specific aspects must be considered, such as the

editor's 'education, religious beliefs, literary skill, attitudes toward slavery, and occupation' (Blassingame, 1975, p. 474), as they can all have an impact on the way in which the slave's account was recorded. In general, the editors were noted for their integrity by others, and had little or no direct link with the abolitionists. They tended to be historians, lawyers, scientists, etc. who 'had gained a great deal of prior experience in separating truth from fiction, applying rules of evidence, and accurately portraying men and events' (Blassingame, 1975, p. 474). Also, it was not uncommon for the appendices of these works to have included solid evidence to corroborate with what the ex-slave had said, including official reports of courts, governments, agricultural societies and churches (Blassingame, 1975, pp. 479-477). Therefore, the editor's distance from the abolitionist cause, as well as their credentials, and the extra information that was included in these narratives, should indicate that the narratives should be a trusted source, but many do not feel that this is the case.

On the other hand, it is clear that the narratives were influenced by their white editors. For example, some literary devices that were used to create an impact or to be persuasive would have been beyond the vast majority of ex-slaves. Also, it was not uncommon that 'editors fleshed out the sparse details supplied by the fugitives to heighten the dramatic effect of the dialogues' (Blassingame, 1975, p. 478), and would often directly appeal to the white reader to feel sympathy and empathy towards the ex-slave, something that they arguably would not necessarily have wanted. But, once again, this was not always the case, and it would have been uncommon for blacks to have just told their stories orally

on the lecture podium, or have been able to write their autobiographies themselves, without the aid of white editors.

Slave Narratives and Academia

Years after the emancipation of black slaves in the United Kingdom and the United States, slave narratives became the focus of academics. Many books, journal articles, etc. have been written on this subject, particularly on writers and orators like Frederick Douglass, who had written several autobiographies and was the editor of his own antislavery newspaper. Slave narratives have also become an aspect of university and higher education in the United Kingdom, and there are even entire modules relating to the culture of slavery ("Slavery in the Transatlantic", 2013). This academic interest would have affected publisher's attitudes towards these texts. Publishers found a way to appeal to the academics by producing anthologies of several slave narratives, as well as providing extra material such as academic essays in order to enhance the product, such as Payback Press's 1989 *I Was Born a Slave: An Anthology of Classic Slave Narratives, Volume 1: 1770-1847*, which includes twenty unabridged narratives with introductions and annotations.

A Change of Format

Many, if not all, of the slave narratives, are now available in an e-book format. Due to the narratives being out of copyright, almost all electronic versions are free, and almost every

top publisher has their own version of, for example, *Twelve Years a Slave*. This means that each text will contain next to no paratext. Bringing these stories out of context, arguably, belittles the content. Not knowing why these books were produced, or knowing about their authors, takes away from the understanding of the narrative. If the reader wants to have the extra context, they would either have to buy a print text that contains academic introductions, editors notes etc., or already have a knowledge of the initial purpose of these texts. Therefore, arguably, the relatively new e-book format somewhat discredits the original slave narrative, including *Twelve Years a Slave*, by causing an emotional distance, that many feel e-books create.

The Hollywood Tie-In and Contemporary Ideology

Much of the contemporary ideology behind *Twelve Years a Slave* can simply be taken from the paratext of the new Penguin edition of the narrative. On the top of the cover page, in the centre, reads 'Now a Major Motion Picture'. This indicates that Penguin believe most of their sales of this particular edition are going to come from those who have either seen the film or have heard of this text because of the film's release. This can also be linked with the book's cover photo, which has been taken from one of the film's most popular advertising images, as well as the font that has been used for the film and the book's title, once again drawing those in who recognise this text because of the motion picture. It is indubitable that, if this edition was printed after Oscar season, the fact that the film won the Academy Award for Best Picture (2014) would surely have been mentioned. Also, as many tie-in

editions tend to include, *Twelve Years a Slave* has the film's credits on the reverse of the book, once more indicating the film's importance when selling this specific edition.

The director on the film adaptation of *Twelve Years a Slave* (2013) Steve McQueen wrote a short foreword in the Penguin edition. Much of what he has to say is incredibly interesting, in regards to both publishing and contemporary attitudes towards this text. He discusses the way in which slave narratives are not brought to the public's attention, despite them being an important part of our history. 'I could not believe that I had never heard of this book. It felt as important as Anne Frank's diary.' It is true that this particular slave narrative is not very widely known despite it being incredibly important in our understanding of the slave trade. McQueen also comments on other people's ignorance of the book: 'Of all the people I spoke to, not one person knew about *Twelve Years a Slave* or about Solomon Northup.' One of his final comments is particularly interesting, as he discusses how he hopes the film can 'play a part in drawing attention to this important book of courage.' This shows how McQueen wants to draw this book into the public consciousness, and Penguin is arguably assisting him in this. By using images from the film, the book is drawing people to the text, and in turn is making more people aware of the details and a real individual's account of the slave trade.

As the original text had already been altered and edited when it was first published, there is no need for a new editor on the new edition, and the work that we are given is completely unaltered and unabridged since its original publication. However, the new edition of *Twelve Years a Slave* also still includes the initial editor's, David Wilson's, original preface. The preface predominately serves as a way to reassure the narrative's readers that

Northup's work is as accurate, honest, and true as it could possibly be. Wilson begins with saying that 'many of the statements contained in the following pages are corroborated by abundant evidence', and that 'the editor ... who has had an opportunity of detecting any contradiction or discrepancy in his [Northrup's] statements, is well satisfied'. This is evidence of the concerns that were felt by many about the authenticity of the slave narratives for the abolitionist movement, and Wilson does everything he can to reassure the readers. Wilson says that his only aim 'has been to give a faithful history of Solomon Northup's life, as he received it from his lips', indicating that Wilson did have to write Northup's words down as Northup dictated his story. Although it is known that Northup could read and write, he perhaps could not have written to the standard that was needed when producing these texts. Although this meant that he did not have full control over what was being written, Northup would have been able to read the book after to see whether or not he was happy with the account of his story. This would not have been the case for other 'writers' of slave narratives, who were runaway slaves who could not, and were not allowed by law, to read or write. Therefore, if anything, Northup's *Twelve Years a Slave* is arguably the most accurate narrative out of most of those that were written for this cause. Lowrey says that the authenticity of the slave narrative does come under much scrutiny because 'many seem to be the products of white minds and abolitionist pleading' (1969, p. 174). However, as previously mentioned, this was not the case of Northup's account, as he had no association with the abolitionists. Therefore, it is through this associative distance and Northup's ability to read and write that place this text almost over

others within the narratives genre, and is amongst the many reasons that most academics see *Twelve Years a Slave* as being their most reliable abolitionist source (Nichols, 1971).

One thing that is incredibly interesting when studying Penguin's edition is the way in which *Twelve Years a Slave* has been classified. Just above where it says that this book comes under the 'Penguin Classics' series, it always states that this book comes under Penguin *Fiction*. This relates to the idea that many believed in the time of the abolitionist movement that slave narratives were fictional, and that they were written by editors as propaganda that told lies about slave owners in order to justify their cause. It was also 'Northern ignorance' was that condemned by those that were pro-slavery. 'They [Southerners] accused abolitionists of never having seen slavery. Only Southerners could speak authoritatively about the institution, they argued, adding that Northern wageworkers were far more oppressed than slaves' (Stauffer, 2009, p. 16). Also, because the narratives were almost always written and published by white abolitionists, many saw these texts as being seen as "white envelopes" with "black messages" by the white sponsors (Levine, 2009, p. 32). Although, arguably 'there may be convincing evidence to show that most slave narratives are unreliable, ... that evidence has not been published' (Nichols, 1971, p. 407) so there is no real evidence out there to prove that these texts are not reliable, but many still believe that they aren't. So, if many people did (and some academics and individuals still do) believe that the slave narrative is not entirely truthful, does Penguin also believe that *Twelve Years a Slave* is entirely fictional? They do also have a non-fiction classification under their Penguin Classics series, so why was this book not included under that category? In fact, *Incidents in the Life of a Slave Girl* by Harriet Jacobs (1861), another slave narrative, comes

under the non-fiction category, so why not Solomon Northup's? Unfortunately, this question cannot be answered, only speculated, but it is particularly interesting when considering those negative views towards this text when it was first released.

Conclusion

In conclusion, it is clear that Solomon Northup's *Twelve Years a Slave* has experienced a major functional shift over its time in print. Although the narrative's role in society has altered over the last 150 years, the text still has an important part to play. Whether it is being used to raise awareness of the cruelty and horrors of slavery, during the days of slavery and those years after the Emancipation Act, or used as a basis of a Hollywood movie, the book is still used to convey a very important message, and the story of a man's bravery and heroism during a time of immense struggle. Publishers have had a massive part to play in the production and distribution of this important text, and we have David Wilson to thank for originally bringing this text to its fruition.

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