12 Years a Slave

**Background:** Solomon Northup was a free black man living in Saratoga Springs, N.Y. in 1841, when he was coaxed by “two gentlemen of respectable appearance” to travel to Washington, D.C. for employment. While there, he was beaten and sold into slavery, with his captors claiming he was a fugitive slave. He spent twelve years in bondage with three different masters in Louisiana before he was finally rescued — a feat which involved secretly smuggling a letter to his family and enlisting the help of the New York governor. In her [film review](http://www.nytimes.com/2013/10/18/movies/12-years-a-slave-holds-nothing-back-in-show-of-suffering.html), Manohla Dargis writes about what makes Mr. Northup’s book, which he published in 1853 after regaining his freedom, such a remarkable historical document: Unlike most of the enslaved people whose fate he shared for a dozen years, the real Northup was born into freedom…. That made him an exceptional historical witness, because even while he was inside slavery — physically, psychologically, emotionally — part of him remained intellectually and culturally at a remove, which gives his book a powerful double perspective.

**Key Question:** What does Solomon Northup’s narrative, as part of a larger genre of antislavery literature, reveal about the institution of slavery?

Illustration from Twelve Years a Slave (1855)

**Excerpt 1: From Chapter III of “Twelve Years a Slave: Narrative of Solomon Northup, a Citizen of New-York, Kidnapped in Washington City in 1841 and Rescued in 1853, From a Cotton Plantation Near the Red River in Louisiana” by Solomon Northup**

“Well, my boy, how do you feel now?” said Burch, as he entered through the open door. I replied that I was sick, and inquired the cause of my imprisonment. He answered that I was his slave — that he had bought me, and that he was about to send me to New-Orleans. I asserted, aloud and boldly, that I was a freeman — a resident of Saratoga, where I had a wife and children, who were also free, and that my name was Northup. I complained bitterly of the strange treatment I had received, and threatened, upon my liberation, to have satisfaction for the wrong. He denied that I was free, and with an emphatic oath, declared that I came from Georgia. Again and again I asserted I was no man’s slave, and insisted upon his taking off my chains at once. He endeavored to hush me, as if he feared my voice would be overheard. But I would not be silent, and denounced the authors of my imprisonment, whoever they might be, as unmitigated villains. Finding he could not quiet me, he flew into a towering passion. With blasphemous oaths, he called me a black liar, a runaway from Georgia, and every other profane and vulgar epithet that the most indecent fancy could conceive.

During this time Radburn was standing silently by. His business was, to oversee this human, or rather inhuman stable, receiving slaves, feeding, and whipping them, at the rate of two shillings a head per day. Turning to him, Burch ordered the paddle and cat-o’-ninetails to be brought in. He disappeared, and in a few moments returned with these instruments of torture. The paddle, as it is termed in slave-beating parlance, or at least the one with which I first became acquainted, and of which I now speak, was a piece of hardwood board, eighteen or twenty inches long, molded to the shape of an old-fashioned pudding stick, or ordinary oar The flattened portion, which was about the size in circumference of two open hands, was bored with a small auger in numerous places. The cat was a large rope of many strands — the strands unraveled, and a knot tied at the extremity of each.

As soon as these formidable whips appeared, I was seized by both of them, and roughly divested of my clothing. My feet, as has been stated, were fastened to the floor. Drawing me over the bench, face downward, Radburn placed his heavy foot upon the fetters, between my wrists, holding them painfully to the floor. With the paddle, Burch commenced beating me. Blow after blow was inflicted upon my naked body. When his unrelenting arm grew tired, he stopped and asked if I still insisted I was a free man. I did insist upon it, and then the blows were renewed, faster and more energetically, if possible, than before. When again tired, he would repeat the same question, and receiving the same answer, continue his cruel labor. All this time, the incarnate devil was uttering most fiendish oaths. At length the paddle broke, leaving the useless handle in his hand. Still I would not yield. All his brutal blows could not force from my lips the foul lie that I was a slave. Casting madly on the floor the handle of the broken paddle, he seized the rope. This was far more painful than the other. I struggled with all my power, but it was in vain. I prayed for mercy, but my prayer was only answered with imprecations and with stripes. I thought I must die beneath the lashes of the accursed brute. Even now the flesh crawls upon my bones, as I recall the scene. I was all on fire. My sufferings I can compare to nothing else than the burning agonies of hell!

At last I became silent to his repeated questions. I would make no reply. In fact, I was becoming almost unable to speak. Still he plied the lash without stint upon my poor body, until it seemed that the lacerated flesh was stripped from my bones at every stroke. A man with a particle of mercy in his soul would not have beaten even a dog so cruelly. At length Radburn said that it was useless to whip me any more — that I would be sore enough. Thereupon Burch desisted, saying, with an admonitory shake of his fist in my face, and hissing the words through his firm-set teeth, that if ever I dared to utter again that I was entitled to my freedom, that I had been kidnapped, or any thing whatever of the kind, the castigation I had just received was nothing in comparison with what would follow. He swore that he would either conquer or kill me. With these consolatory words, the fetters were taken from my wrists, my feet still remaining fastened to the ring; the shutter of the little barred window, which had been opened, was again closed, and going out, locking the great door behind them, I was left in darkness as before.

*Students can read the entire book on the* [*Documenting the American South*](http://docsouth.unc.edu/fpn/northup/northup.html) *Web site at the University of North Carolina.*

**Excerpt 2: From** [**“An Escape From Slavery, Now a Movie, Has Long Intrigued Historians,”**](http://www.nytimes.com/2013/09/23/business/media/an-escape-from-slavery-now-a-movie-has-long-intrigued-historians.html) **by Michael Cieply**

The real Solomon Northup — and years of scholarly research attest to his reality — fought an unsuccessful legal battle against his abductors. But he enjoyed a lasting triumph that began with the sale of some 30,000 copies of his book when it first appeared, and continued with its republication in 1968 by the historians Sue Eakin and Joseph Logsdon….

For decades, however, scholars have been trying to untangle the literal truth of Mr. Northup’s account from the conventions of the antislavery literary genre.

The difficulties are detailed in “The Slave’s Narrative,” a compilation of essays that was published by the Oxford University Press in 1985, and edited by Charles T. Davis and Henry Louis Gates Jr. (Mr. Gates is now credited as a consultant to the film, and he edited a recent edition of “Twelve Years a Slave.”)

“When the abolitionists invited an ex-slave to tell his story of experience in slavery to an antislavery convention, and when they subsequently sponsored the appearance of that story in print, they had certain clear expectations, well understood by themselves and well understood by the ex-slave, too,” wrote one scholar, James Olney.

Mr. Olney was explaining pressures that created a certain uniformity of content in the popular slave narratives, with recurring themes that involved insistence on sometimes questioned personal identity, harrowing descriptions of oppression, and open advocacy for the abolitionist cause.

In his essay, called “I Was Born: Slave Narratives, Their Status as Autobiography and as Literature,” Mr. Olney contended that Solomon Northup’s real voice was usurped by David Wilson, the white “amanuensis” to whom he dictated his tale, and who gave the book a preface in the same florid style that informs the memoir.

“We may think it pretty fine writing and awfully literary, but the fine writer is clearly David Wilson rather than Solomon Northup,” Mr. Olney wrote.

In another essay from the 1985 collection, titled “I Rose and Found My Voice: Narration, Authentication, and Authorial Control in Four Slave Narratives,” Robert Burns Stepto, a professor at Yale, detected textual evidence — assurances, disclaimers and such — that Solomon Northup expected some to doubt his story.

“Clearly, Northup felt that the authenticity of his tale would not be taken for granted, and that, on a certain peculiar but familiar level enforced by rituals along the color line, his narrative would be viewed as a fiction competing with other fictions,” wrote Mr. Stepto.

**For Writing or Discussion**

1. What does the excerpt from “Twelve Years a Slave” reveal about the institution of slavery? Cite evidence from the text to support your ideas.
2. How does Mr. Northup’s perspective as a free man who was kidnapped and sold into slavery make him an “exceptional historical witness,” in the words of Manohla Dargis, a Times film critic? Use evidence from the excerpt to back up your answer.
3. What questions does The Times article (Text 2) raise about the entire genre of antislavery literature, and about “Twelve Years a Slave” in particular? What answers does the article suggest? Be sure to support your answer with textual evidence.
4. How can all “true” stories get twisted by time, literary embellishment or the flaws of memory? How do we know when, and how much, to trust a historical source?

**Going Further**

1. The director Steve McQueen provides commentary on a clip from his film “12 Years a Slave” in [“The Anatomy of a Scene.”](http://www.nytimes.com/video/movies/100000002502182/anatomy-of-a-scene-12-years-a-slave.html) Have students watch the clip, then discuss the following questions:

* What happens in this scene?
* What does this short scene show about the relationship between slave and slave master?
* Why does Mr. McQueen choose to portray the scene in this way?

2. Watch the full movie “12 Years a Slave,” then read [Manohla Dargis’s film review](http://www.nytimes.com/2013/10/18/movies/12-years-a-slave-holds-nothing-back-in-show-of-suffering.html). Ask students to identify three or more assertions that Ms. Dargis makes about the film, and decide whether they agree with her points or not. For example, Ms. Dargis takes the following position:

In large part, “12 Years a Slave” is an argument about American slavery that, in image after image, both reveals it as a system (signified in one scene by the sights and ominous, mechanical sounds of a boat water wheel) and demolishes its canards, myths and cherished symbols. There are no lovable masters here or cheerful slaves. There are also no messages, wagging fingers or final-act summations or sermons. Mr. McQueen’s method is more effective and subversive because of its primarily old-fashioned, Hollywood-style engagement.

Do students agree with Ms. Dargis? What evidence can they find in the film to support their opinion? Then, students can write their own film review — based on three or more of their assertions that they make about the film.

3. Alternatively, if students both read the book and watch the film, they can write an analytical essay comparing the two. In their analysis they can consider:

* How well does the movie stay true to the most important events in the book?
* Does the movie play with time or facts?
* Does it matter whether the filmmakers took liberties if they managed to convey larger truths and start new conversations? Explain.

4. Students can read two or more slave narratives to look for commonalities and differences. A free [library of texts](http://docsouth.unc.edu/neh/texts.html) is available in the “Slave Narrative Project”. As part of their analysis, they should read the project’s [introduction](http://docsouth.unc.edu/neh/intro.html) — particularly the sections titled “Literary Contexts for Slave and Ex-Slave Narratives” and “Importance of This Project to the Nation”. Here is an excerpt:

Slave and ex-slave narratives are important not only for what they tell us about African-American history and literature, but also because they reveal to us the complexities of the dialogue between whites and blacks in this country in the last two centuries, particularly for African Americans.

Then, using the slave narratives that they read, students can discuss what these narratives reveal about the institution of slavery, how they reflect the conventions of the antislavery literary genre, and what they show about the dialogue between blacks and whites regarding slavery during antebellum America.

5. Read this [Jan. 20, 1853, Times article](http://query.nytimes.com/mem/archive-free/pdf?res=F1091FFD3F5C167493C2AB178AD85F478584F9) detailing the kidnapping and rescue of Solomon Northup (misspelled “Northrop” in the article). What does this newspaper story add to our understanding of Mr. Northup’s case?

6. Manohla Dargis opens her film review with the following statement:

“12 Years a Slave” isn’t the first movie about slavery in the United States — but it may be the one that finally makes it impossible for American cinema to continue to sell the ugly lies it’s been hawking for more than a century.

Ask students:

* What movies have you seen about slavery? For example, have you ever watched “Gone With the Wind”? What “lies” is Ms. Dargis referring to?
* Why are films about history important? What responsibility, if any, do they have?