

Solomon Northup

Learning of the astounding ordeal of Solomon Northup early in the winter of 1853, Douglass thought of asking Northup to join him on the antislavery lecture circuit in upstate New York. Published in 1853, three years after passage of the Fugitive Slave law, Northup's travails accentuated the vulnerability of free blacks in the North to wrongful enslavement in the South. Instead of a nation divided sectionally by freedom in the North and slavery in the South, Solomon Northup's America seemed threatened throughout by the specter of slavery. The humble and unoffending Northup, a family man who had worked hard all his life simply to make a modest living and support his wife and three children, seemed in *Twelve Years a Slave* particularly sympathetic, a black Everyman who had been obviously victimized and then, after twelve years of exploitation, had not even received justice from the highest court of his home state for the crime committed against him.

Unlike Douglass's *Narrative*, which bears the subtitle *Written by Himself*, *Twelve Years a Slave* was a rarity among the most popular slave narratives of the nineteenth century by virtue of its having been authored by a white professional author and sometime novelist named David Wilson. Collaborating with Northup, Wilson produced what would be termed today an "as-told-to" autobiography, written in the first person as though Northup himself were telling his story to the reader. To ensure the credibility of *Twelve Years a Slave*, Wilson asserted in his "editor's preface":

Many of the statements contained in the following pages are corroborated by abundant evidence—others rest entirely upon Solomon's assertion. That he has adhered strictly to the truth the editor, at least, who has had an opportunity of detecting any contradiction or discrepancy in his statements, is well satisfied. He has invariably repeated the same story without deviating in the slightest particular, and has also carefully perused the manuscript, dictating an alteration wherever the most trivial inaccuracy has appealed.

When Northup was responsible for the style, word choices, and expressions of personal feelings that are attributed to him in his narrative, scholarly study of the historical details of *Twelve Years a Slave* have confirmed that it is a trustworthy record of Northup's life before, during, and after his ordeal in the Deep South.

Although *Twelve Years a Slave* tells a story in many ways different from that of Frederick Douglass, both narratives bear common features. For each man, the right to name oneself and to claim one's true identity is key to individual self-esteem and self-determination. Douglass discarded his previous surname, Bailey, when he arrived in the North out of fear that the name would make him liable to recapture. As soon as he was enslaved, Northup was compelled through force to relinquish his true name and suppress his origins and identity as a free man of color. Just as slavery intended for Frederick Bailey to accept the limited identity and individuality of a properly ignorant slave, so Solomon Northup, as Platt, was obliged to conceal much of his identity and individuality, as well as his specific origins, in order to play the role of ignorant and compliant slave.

In response to these self-abnegating conditions, each man viewed literacy as the way out of bondage. Douglass pursued the knowledge of letters as a means of understanding how slavery enabled whites to control the minds as well as the bodies of blacks. Northup, who was literate when he was kidnapped, attempted various strategies that would let him make use of knowledge of letters to reach out beyond slavery to his friends and family in the North in the hope of being rescued. For both men, literacy proved

Solomon Northup's Twelve Years a Slave and the Slave Narrative Tradition

to be the key to claiming (in Douglass's case) or re-claiming (in Northup's) a liberating identity. Through their narratives, each man used the power of the word to expose the outrages of slavery and to prove each man's resourcefulness, fortitude, perseverance, and courage in the face of terrible, sometimes seemingly hopeless, odds.

Unlike Douglass and the large majority of slave narrators, Northup spent his enslavement in the Deep South, where living and working conditions for the enslaved were extremely harsh due to relentless field work on cotton and sugar cane plantations. During most of Northup's time in slavery, he worked as a slave driver for a small farmer named Edwin Epps whose bullying, mercurial, and near-psychotic behavior seems to have been far more pathological than any Douglass encountered during his enslavement in Maryland.

Northup was particularly disturbed by Epps's twisted attachment to his female slave, Patsey. Celebrated for much more than physical beauty or traditional womanly virtue, the noble Patsey becomes in *Twelve Years a Slave* a genuinely tragic and pitiable figure, a multi-talented person of accomplishment and leadership driven to despondency and hopelessness by her master's desire, fear, and rage. Douglass could do nothing to save his Aunt Hester from beatings inflicted by her furiously jealous master, nor could Northup prevent Epps from almost killing Patsey during a grisly whipping that becomes in many ways the nadir of Northup's time in slavery. Portraying an African American female slave who successfully resists threats and exploitation to triumph over her sexual predator master and win her freedom would have to wait for an African American woman in charge of her own slave narrative.