

Fantasy and facts in slave narratives essay sample



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According to Fath Ruffins the first slave narratives were recorded in the 1500 by “ authors who wanted to record their own stories for posterity” (1). These stories helped to abolish slavery by presenting the readers with the cruel realities of the slave trade and today act as important pieces of African-American history. The Interesting Narrative of Olaudah Equiano written by himself was an important piece of writing because it fulfilled his purpose to expose the horrors and sinfulness of the slavery system, and the inhumane treatment and conditions of slaves crossing the Middle Passage. By finding a way to buy his own freedom he also stood as testimony to society that the enslavement of a Black man was not a natural condition.

Although many celebrated slave narratives were written by ex-slaves, others also published on their encounters with slavery. One such writer was Aphra Behn, who wrote *Oroonoko*, to share the story of a prince who became a slave. Her dramatic tale of an African prince who spoke English and French becoming a slave exposed to her readers the idea that the people of Africa had social structures and royalty. It also displayed the horrid effects of denying people their freedom and the lengths that a man will go to in order to escape slavery. Both stories were written with intentions to expose the social injustices of slavery and share with the reader the brutal circumstances of the slave trade by using main characters that for many reasons may not be considered typical slaves. This paper will compare the characters and images in these stories and discuss the tools each writer uses to engage the support of the reader.

The central character of the story is very important in catching and keeping the interest of the reader. Behn’s main character Oroonoko is not a regular

laboring slave, but a prince whom she describes as a “gallant slave” (2171). Behn places emphasis on Oroonoko’s physical appearance to highlight his nobility:

“He was pretty tall, but of a shape the most exact that can be fancied. The most famous statuary could not form the figure of a man more admirably turned head to foot.” (2175).

This description of him creates the sense that he is a special and powerful person despite his position as a slave to justify and legitimize him as a worthy narrative subject. Placing him above a common slave may also be an important part in engaging the sympathies of the reader because they are able to imagine Oroonoko admirable instead of lowly.

By stressing his possession of Caucasian features it is possible that Behn, subtly blurs the idea of race, and supremacy because historically the race was a classification of physical features,

“His nose was rising and Roman, instead of African and flat; his mouth the finest

shape that could be seen, far from those great turned lips which are so natural to

the rest of the Negroes” (Behn p. 2175).

By drawing contrasts between Negroe features and Oroonoko’s features Behn may be directing her reader to accept him as a character who had more in common with the ideal Englishman than with his fellow Africans. In

drawing attention to his favorable Roman nose she takes attention away from his dark skin, and leads the reader to focus on the aspects of his character that are acceptable to her society. This construction of an atypical slave can be seen as an attempt to create an image that allows the eighteenth century reader to transcend their prejudices and view the suffering of Oroonoko, not as the plight of a slave or an African, but a human being.

Because of the marginalization and prejudices of the literary community it was necessary Olaudah Equiano to legitimize or justify the worthiness of his story to be written and read. One aspect which may have helped him was his position as a sailor which kept him apart from the laboring slaves and acquainted him with English culture, as he “ relished their society and manners” (Equiano, p 142). He attempts to find common ground with the reader by emphasizing his enthusiasm to share their values, writing that he saw his masters as “ superior to us and therefore... had a strong desire to resemble them” (Equiano, p. 143). Equiano presents himself as a person who through his willingness to learn to be more like his masters shares more things in common with the free society than the slave. This subjective positioning may aid the audience in accepting Equiano’s accounts of suffering because they may believe that his English education has given him a rational mind and perspective similar to their own and help them to see him as an equal person.

In 1972 many critics attacked Equiano accusing him of being a fraud because they did not believe that a person of African birth would have been able to master English to the level he presented. “ They tried to asperse his

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character, by representing him as an imposter; and to invalidate his testimony" (Sabino, Hall 1). Like Oroonoko's Roman nose, Equiano's command of English was a possible threat to the construction of race hierarchy which was central to the slave owner's rationalization for abusing their slaves and reducing them to beasts of burden. The accusations against Equiano were perhaps evidence that he had succeeded through his writing that he was an equal person that possessed all the abilities of any of his masters, but they were people that were not ready to accept this reality.

Equiano's images of suffering were often relayed to the reader as he observed them and not as he experienced them. The most profound cruelty that he suffered as a slave was probably the experience on the slave ship traveling through the middle passage, a scene which he vividly recounts. Equiano effectively draws the reader into his experience of the ship by describing it using all five senses. His descriptions also concentrate on the events he observes,

" One day, when we had a smooth sea and moderate wind, two of my wearied countrymen who were chained together (I was near them at the time), preferring death to such a life of misery, somehow made through the nettings and jumped into the sea" (Equiano, p. 82).

This scene of desperate men, who are pushed towards suicide because of their captivity, is described in clean and factual prose. It is not dramatized by emotion or blame, but stays focused on the events as he remembers them. His use of realism conveys the desperation and horror of the ship leaving the reader little room to cast doubt on the truth,

“ two of the wretches were drowned, but they got the other, and afterwards flogged him unmercifully for thus attempting to prefer death to slavery. In this manner we continued to undergo more hardships than I can now relate” (Equiano, p 83).

The absolute necessity for people to live freely is highlighted by the events in this passage because it is obvious to the slaves and now to the readers that the slaves would prefer to drown. The many things described in this passage, that of death and starvation and “ the stench of the necessary tubs” (Equiano. P. 83) help the reader to understand the nightmare of being captive on a slave ship, even though they would never have to experience such difficulties.

In contrast, it appears that that the presence of Oroonoko on the slave ship creates a comparatively pleasant passage for the slaves on the ship. The captain of the ship seems to hold genuine concern as to whether his cargo lives or dies. Even if the motivation is purely that of profit it is still a sharp contrast from the images presented by Equiano. The captain lies to Oroonoko and tells him that they will all be set free when they reach land. So, Oroonoko uses his position as a prince and convinces the other prisoners to eat. The presence of Oroonoko seems to overshadow the reality of the slave ship,

“ After this, they no longer refused to eat, but took what was brought to 'em, and seemed to be pleased with their captivity since they hoped to redeem the Prince” (Behn, p. 2191).

This passage depicting content slaves is one of the aspects of this story that enhance its romantic fantasy tone. Oroonoko is believed to have walked freely around the ship because he was a prince, and possessed such a sense of honour that he would not harm the captain or free the slaves because he promised not to. This reveals the weaknesses in Behn's position as the narrator because she has not reference to create a realistic view of a slave ship, and her main character must remain honourable or morally superior to his captors in order for him to inspire reader sympathy. The contrast in the two accounts of the slave ships might suggest that although Oroonoko, is a story about a slave, it may not be a slave narrative, but an adventure story that sheds some light on the suffering of slaves.

The story of Oroonoko has a fantasy quality to it because it is a romance. Using the universal theme of extraordinary love and beauty the story is able to entertain on a level that Equiano's story may not be. The character of Imoinda, Oroonoko's one true love, is as beautiful and virtuous as him, and she is also sold in to slavery. Her beauty and mannerisms are said to be so perfect that even her owner cannot rape her when he tries because " she disarms [him] with her modesty and weeping" (Behn, p. 2195). The incident depicts the slave owner a person who is able to exercise self control and spares the reader the true conditions that had to be endured by female slaves. The framing of the owner and slave in this context also allows the author/narrator a moral ambiguity because it seems that no wrong is done.

In contrast Equiano uses the fact that slave women were raped to expose the immorality of the slave owner relationship, and expresses a strong Christian stance on the subject,

“ I used frequently to have different cargoes of new negroes in my care for sale; and it was almost constant practice with our clerks, and other whites, to commit depredations on the chastity of female slaves” (Equiano, p. 206).

Equiano might have a better station in life than most of his fellow slaves, but this passage reminds the reader that he is not free, and he is not white. He does not agree with the conduct of the white men on these slave women, but there is nothing he can do to stop them. Equiano describes these acts as “ not of Christians only, but of men” (Equiano, P. 207). Appealing to the morals of the reader and the larger community may have allowed him to influence the religious community.

Behn does offer an interesting depiction of the slave owners and the other white people because she is able to describe the sense of fear that they experienced living among slaves and natives. Although the colonists are the people who are in power, many places they were the minority. When the narrator wants to visit the native towns she is not free to do so, she was only safe to go if she was escorted by Oroonoko as her body guard. Even when they appeared to be in control selling the slaves they would “ separate 'em far from each other, not trusting two of them together” (Behn 2192).

The owners lived in constant fear of mutiny, a fear which can be seen as evident that on some level they understood that these slaves were just like them, and desired to be free. Further, Oroonoko's intelligence and abilities which made him so valuable a character in the beginning makes him and even bigger threat to the colony when he starts to insist on his freedom. The narrator who is entrusted to distract or entertain Oroonoko observes that she

could not “ trust him much out of view, nor did the country, who feared him” (Behn, p. 2198). The power dynamics between the slaves and the owners become more complex when one realizes that in many of these plantations the number of slaves outnumbered the number of owners, and if they had the chance to organize they may cause the owners a great deal of damage. The fear possessed by the slave owners may help to explain some of the cruelty that occurs later in the story.

Equiano has a complex relationship with the white men because he sees them as people whom he admires and grows to emulate, but he never loses sight of their cruelty. When he meets them he describes them as savages and believes that they possess some sort of magic that controls the water. He later comments the he was “ often a witness to cruelties of every kind” (Equiano, p. 205) and describes white men mutilating a black man for seeking the services of a white prostitute (Equiano, p. 206), this he finds unjust because that white men are commonly found raping slave women. Equiano reports the incidents that he has either seen or observed in a sympathetic, but somewhat detached voice,

“ I have seen a negroe beaten til some of his bones were broken, for even letting a

pot boil over. It is surprising that usage like this should dreive the poor creatures

despair, and make them seek a refuge in death” (Equiano p. 213).

As an observer Equiano takes on the role of the reporter and seems to focus on wanting to give the reader an accurate portrayal of the treatment of slaves. He is also somewhat distant from the ordeal of these slaves and closer to the education and culture of the English man evident in his referring to the victim of the beating as a “ poor creature”.

Equiano's depictions of slavery may be further believed by the reader to be accurate and not coloured by hatred or vengeance because he shares many of their values and he shares with the reader the parts of his experience which he found pleasant, such as learning to read. “ Ms. Guerins treated me with much kindness, and sent me to school” (Equiano, p. 143). He goes on to describe how he had always wanted to see London and was happy to keep this woman and her friends company as they toured the city. It is his ability to recognize the cruelty done to others, but appreciate his good fortunes that makes his story so complex. The case against the slave trade would probably be made stronger if he only reported the cruel things that he heard, but he is a just person and therefore admits that he “ knew a man in Monseratt whose slaves looked remarkably well and never needed any fresh supply of negroes” (Equiano, p. 205). This could be seen as an ambiguous stance on slavery, since not all of the owners are cruel, but Equiano's determination and success in buying his own freedom even though he was not a field slave supports the idea that freedom has its own value, so that a well treated slave is still a slave.

The main characters in both stories use their unique characteristics and positions in life to strive for freedom. Equiano is a determined and enterprising person who stands as an example of what a person can do when

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they are given an opportunity, even if the odds of success are low. His owner agrees to a price for Equiano's freedom because he doesn't believe that he will be able to raise the money. On the day when Equiano approaches his master with the money to purchase himself, the owner is reluctant to release him, but Equiano is fortunate to have a friend in the room persuades his master to honour his agreement. Equiano is overjoyed at finally being free and cannot truly describe his happiness.

In the story of Oroonoko the path to freedom is a very different one, but the determination is the same. Oroonoko is denied his freedom several times, and he finally begins to understand that all people are not as honourable as he is. Knowing that he has been deceived and not being able to bear the thought of raising a family in captivity Oroonoko gathers the slaves who still recognize him as their prince and organizes a mutiny. These slaves that declare their loyalty later leave his side when they realize that they will not win, and if they lose they will die. In surrendering to their masters it might appear that the slaves are weak and disloyal, but it also displays that these men are human and care about the safety of their wives and children.

After the failed mutiny Oroonoko kills his pregnant wife and plans to kill himself, but instead he is grief stricken by the loss of his wife and captured before he can kill himself. This sequence of events may show the reader the desperation of the slaves. The last scene in this story is the graphic as Oroonoko is executed by being chopped into pieces while smoking a pipe. The dismantling of his body may represent the symbolic dismantling of the character and all his abilities because even a talented person becomes useless when they are not free. It also finally demonstrated the true cruelty

of the slave owners as many of them took pieces of his body to show their slaves and frighten them into maintaining obedience.

The act of storytelling is a powerful force that enables people to share knowledge, preserve cultures, and own their experiences. The power of defining events may act as an integral part of healing as it allows people to frame incidents in their lives where power was taken from them. The process of storytelling can act to heal those have been injured by personal violence or social injustice. Often traumatic acts are unspeakable because those acts are so terrible that they clamp the tongue and subsequently the victim suffers a pain so great that the inexpressibility, the inadequacy of representation, grows and locks the sufferer inside of their suffering. Through writing many people have found the power of being able to preserve a story or share it in order to inform the larger public of the injustices that have been done. Both of these stories may have opened the eyes of their readers and give voices to a group of people who had none. Whether the aim was to inform or entertain, the stories explored many aspects of human strength and cruelty.

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