

# [The decay of white men and women slaveholders](https://assignbuster.com/the-decay-of-white-men-and-women-slaveholders/)

The decline and ultimate end to the slave trade in primarily America and Europe is often seen as a humanistic narrative that came to a successful and liberating end. This positive grand narrative is still apparent in the canon of western literature and is often referred to as a form of celebration in political rhetoric and the humanistic stories that often accompany it. Historically, this trade is seen as coming to a functional social end toward the end of the nineteenth century and beginning of the twentieth century, but can be witnessed in western literature in various ways before, during and after this period. For instance, the Heart of Darkness written by Joseph Conrad was celebrated as a liberating expose of the twentieth century between the cultures of the empire and the civilising process that it had had on the cultures of the colonised. But in the depictions of the native, primitive people of the Congo, who lay beyond this superficial relationship at the heart of the Congo, were a contrast between the beautiful and innocent, virtuous white woman and the crazed, sexually permissive black woman.

This contrast was one born not only of the black people and their need to be civilised, or indeed, as the author may have intended, their having no need to be slaves, but of a relationship between cultures based upon a racial and cultural power. Essentially, this was the power of western civilisation over African primitiveness, personified in madness, barbarity, unpredictability and in many cases insanity. Further texts reveal more of these depictions that hide a primitive other on the part of the writers of the western canon. For instance, Herman Melville’s attack on the nature of an albino whale disguised the might and frivolity of its true nature with its environment of the dark and unpredictable depths of the sea.

Other examples include (add the textual examples you wanted to use). Although these texts can be seen as something of a significant change and critique of the slave trade that had been rife throughout the European and American plunge of the colonies in Africa, this did little to cement an identity of the former slaves and their communities. Although the trade ended in Britain and then later in the rest of Europe and America alongside the eventual independence of the colonies that had long since been exploited, the disruption to the vast relationship between slave owners and former slaves; the colonisers and the colonists, had by no means ended or found a resolution. During the decay of the slave traders, the ultimate dissemination of the condition that held the social fabric together within slave communities occurred. Such factors as the threat of violence, subordination, inferiority and class division were dissipated by the laws implemented within the western nations of this time. However, this new reality brought with it a new dynamic, which came from within the slave trade communities as well as from outside of them.

For example, groups in the United States, such as the Klu Klux Klan and other white supremacist gangs, became explicit in their rejection of black equality, freedoms and rights. Furthermore, less explicit regimes came to be with such policies as the segregation between blacks and whites, which gained particular notoriety in America in the latter part of the twentieth century. However, less explicit means were also apparent in the societies of the slave trades themselves. These harked back to the time of the slave trade and the decline of the slave trade itself.

For example, the assimilation of black men into society as free men, rather than slaves, had put them into social roles. These roles were perhaps in part due to the liberation of the slave trade and the slave narratives that had come to be read and sympathised with by Northern America. But the burgeoning slave narrative came as a reaction to this positive grand narrative of western liberation. The authors recounted the personal trials and tribulations of the experiences of the African Americans in their longing for, and eventual, escape.

This involved the longing for liberation and recognition of their struggle in the relative safety of Northern America. These narratives were an essential part of the anti-slavery movement that came to liberate the slaves of America. They built upon the western slave owners, the colonisers and their beliefs. For instance, biblical allusion as well as imagery was at the heart of the texts.

This was reinforced with the rhetoric of abolitionism and the traditions of captivity. What is also apparent in these texts is a call to a transcendental, spiritual freedom which appealed to the white audience and America’s philosophical principle of transcendentalism. The form of these narratives was often accompanied by a preface suggesting the validity and reality of their stories. However, within these texts there is a resolution in the abolition of slavery as a liberating force. This also follows the theme of the grand narratives of liberalism seen in the canon of traditional colonial writings of this time. Essentially, through escape and struggle the protagonist or narrator is revealing the ideals of the hope and freedom involved in a struggle to overcome evil and unfairness, which lies at the heart of many euro-centric religions, especially that of America.

In the ensuing attempts to escape an evil regime and become free men the protagonists are often subject to moments of bravery and sacrifice in the process of achieving their freedom. Realism is apparent in the capture and recapture of the many attempts to flee to freedom. However, this is contrasted with the ideals and unyielding desire to be free at all costs, with spirituality being more important than the material malevolence at the heart of their plight. This is perhaps apparent due to the writer’s of the texts being successful in their attempts to escape and being free men and so testament to the reality of the pursuit. However, it should perhaps also be noted that the writers were also well aware of the liberalism that was the driving force in white civility, aiming to overcome their plight.

However, not only were the former slaves living out a subordinate existence based upon their inferiority as a culture and an inferiority symbolised by their skin colour, but they were also living out another inferiority due to their sex. The patriarchal system that had been open and felt by particularly those of a lower class, or less opportune community, had welcomed the black male slave into its system. Essentially, a system that had reciprocated the aspirations and education of the men of the white communities had now opened up to the man of the black community. This meant that black women were not only submissive due to their culture and their skin colour, but also their sex. No longer were they subject to submission and abuse by white men and white women, but also black men.

It is in this role of submission and emasculation of almost every part of one’s identity that writer Cooper put forward a counter voice that did not lend upon the unfolding positive narrative of euro-centric society; becoming so civilised that it would end slavery. Instead, she appealed to the white institutions and people through her prose in which she revealed how one may identify with being free. This is highlighted by Cooper with her appeal that ‘ only the black woman can say when and where I enter, in the quiet, undisputed dignity of my womanhood, without violence and without suing or special patronage, then and there the whole Negro race enters with me‘ (Cooper, p. 31). This reveals the nature in which the female in particular could come to know the experience of the black slave community, as she alone was the mother of it. Furthermore, this leant upon the notion of the motherland that had been raped and plundered and had had its children removed; a children in exile.

And it was from this exile that the children had learned to strive for freedom through opposition to the principles of civility and rejection of a nurtured and nourished culture. The violence and risk that had determined the struggle and that was to define a tradition of the militant black movements of the later century was defined by this male black man fighting for his freedom and was adopted by the liberal white man who shared his idealism. But this strive for freedom and identity through violent and risky means was opposed to the feminine and in particular the required love of a mother that always comes before the strive for one’s own identity. This is apparent in her rejection of the slave narratives at having arrived at a conclusion; a promised land.

Instead, she showed that there is an important role and responsibility on the part of the black woman. She highlights the significance of the black woman in the nurture of a black community as a collection of individual families that need to thrive and merge with the white communities and who have their own identities to form. This for her is the need of the black community after the decay of the white slave owners. Not resting on the freedom and utopia found in the traditional slave narratives, but the beginning of a new narrative of rebuilding and nurturing new families and identities. She suggests that this progress, like all communities, begins with the mother’s role in raising her children for providing them with love and knowledge.

In this, Cooper provides us with her desire for a positive image of the black woman and her need for working and identity to womanhood that is not necessarily one of struggle and striving for freedom. In this sense that encapsulates the liberal feminist movement, her hope was that man would gain respect for the women and recognise his need for her as a provider; the true familial provisions in life, stating that he should have “ reverence for woman as woman regardless of rank, wealth or culture”(Cooper, p. 14). But rather than forget the slave narrative, she suggests that the years of degradation and oppression should be remembered and educated to every black man and woman and should constitute a mutuality for “ not fear leaning to lend a hand to a fallen or falling sister”(Cooper, p. 2).

Although she succeeds in addressing the flawed optimism of finding a resolution in the freedom of the traditional slave narratives, she herself could be considered to have leant upon the principles of liberal euro-centrism and the principles of a white feminism. Post-colonial theories have given the original slave narrative a different slant on liberalism, feminism and the role of the black community in the western world. Perhaps helped in part by post modernism’s expose of such grand narratives as liberal humanity and with the added benefit of combining the culture of the homeland with the culture of the new lands, this perspective has focused upon the identity of the submissive culture and its own voices, especially in the current global age. Issues such as perspective, otherness and identity have established a need for a new approach that does not dismiss but rather conceptualises the narratives of struggle and oppression alongside contemporary themes and issues, such as feminism, social justice and communal freedom. Referring to this dichotomy between the narratives of the burgeoning and oppressed black, colonised cultures and the dominant white colonising cultures, post-colonial theorist Homi Bhabha states that, ‘ If one is aware of this heterogeneous emergence (not origin) of radical critique, then – and this is my second point – function of theory within the political process becomes double edged. It makes us aware that our political references and priorities – the people, the community, class struggle, anti-racism, gender difference the assertion of an anti-imperialist, black or third perspective – are not there in some primordial, naturalistic sense.

They make sense when they come to be constructed in the discourses of feminism, Marxism. ’ (Bhabha, 1994, p. 25) In this, it is revealed that the flaw of such historical narratives such as the slave narratives and the narratives of a new black feminism are not founded in their authorship, origin or functioning, but in our placement, judgement and interpretation of them in terms of modern struggle and the aspirations of those communities. As in the case of the canon of euro-centric literature and its narrative of liberty stemming from the enlightenment, the issue of the female voice is an ongoing one. It was not until the latter part of the twentieth century that a full and deep examination into the extent of the feminine within a world of such subjugation was truly examined. As with the liberal movement that rejected the slave owners and the trade they facilitated, the main issue of this subjugation of the female to the male took years, a history and a burgeoning narrative to uphold.

However, within the realms of narratives belonging to the traditions and upheaval of cultures outside of the dominant euro-centric one, exists the factors of oppression, submission and alienation in various ways. It is suggested that this is how we read such narratives as they come to be constructed as the other. Furthermore, in terms of the feminine other, as well as being confronted by a male orientated hierarchal system of oppression contrasting the male and female experience in both reality and the literary, there is also the issue of the system of coloniser and colonised; white and black; master and slave; civilized and primitive. As the glorified positive notion of the liberal white male’s experience was suppressing and in some cases pushing aside the white women’s experience or the black man’s experience, it was also suppressing the black women’s experience into almost isolation. The reactionary writing and critical responses to the all encompassing white man’s experience raised awareness and created literatures in the post-colonial and feminist fields, which can be seen as harking back to the female voice of the slave narratives. However, this was either absorbed into liberal feminism or suppressed by the stark reality of both black men and women and black men.

The likes of Alice Walker can be seen as rewriting this stark reality in relation to the traditional slave narratives and in doing so conjuring forth with candour and compassion the realities of this stark condition. Taken from the perspective of a young black woman in the time of black freedom, we can see the plight of an impoverished and black woman unfairly dominated by her patriarchal family and her white slave owners. A feminine voice emerges. This is particularly clear in a context that does not simply rest upon the ideals of liberation or the principles of liberal feminism, but looks to reveal the human experience that was unequally distributed to a woman due to her being black.

Without being black, a woman or from a slave community, this cold, stark and inhumane experience would never have come to be experienced or felt. Through these texts and narratives and by how we read them and understand them in their historical context, we come to gain insight into a number of issues and realities that stem form a body of literature. This body of literature is on that relates to the decay and decline of the slave trade, but also consists of the ongoing relationship between white and black culture that has taken over a century to be recognised in terms of its actual effects. Essentially, the narratives and ideals of the dominant euro-centric perspective certainly helped to bring down the slave holders and spawned the opportunity of voice for the slave narratives and early feminist principles of black women.

However, the extent to which these narratives should be read in relation to the realities of the post-slave trade era should not be seen as indicative of liberation and both racial and sexual equality. Rather, they should be seen as early narratives of their own belonging, but also emasculated by a then extremely dominant western narrative.