

# Depictions of slavery in 19th-century american literature



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From the earliest days of Colonial America, to the end of the Civil War, slavery was an established practice. This brutal, amoral, and dehumanizing system prompted nineteenth-century American writers, black and white alike, to advocate for its end and, once abolished, to address its lingering after-effects. The initial intent of anti-slavery literature was to stir up public opinion against the viciousness and heartlessness of slave owners and the powerlessness and hopelessness of the people under their power. This was accomplished through writing that caused the reader to feel pity and compassion towards the victims. In William Wells Brown's *Clotel; or, the President's Daughter*, we see the incredible courage and sacrifice of black and mulatta women. Similarly, the tragic mulatto figure appears in Harriet E. Wilson's *Our Nig; or, Sketches from the Life of a Free Black*. The protagonist, is a young biracial girl who is an indentured servant to a family in the North, struggles with psychological and physical abuse from her racist employer. After slavery was abolished, a second focus of literature became prominent: inviting respect and admiration for the newly emancipated slaves. The result of this literature was to provide a means of humanizing people who had been regarded as nothing more than property. In Joel Chandler Harris's short story "How Mr. Rabbit was Too Sharp for Mr. Fox," the figure of the black character (represented by Brer Rabbit) achieves new stature as an individual of great wit and resourcefulness in outsmarting his enemy (represented by Brer Fox). Lastly, in Mark Twain's *Pudd'nhead Wilson*, the point is clearly made that the color of one's skin does not determine or reflect that person's moral center. Although each of these works has its own unique approach and technique, all of them highlight the evil practice of slavery and promote the idea of respect and freedom for all people, regardless of their skin color.

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In the novel, *Clotel; or The President's Daughter*, William Wells Brown projects an abolitionist viewpoint that emphasizes the depraved and damaging effects of slavery on the black family. The prominent character type in Brown's work is of the abused, degraded and sexualized slave woman (black or mulatta). Brown's story traces the tragic history of Thomas Jefferson's daughter Clotel whose mother is one of Jefferson's slaves. Clotel's great beauty and very fair skin are both a gift and a punishment in her life since they initially allow her to be in a loving relationship with a white man but later provide her no protection at all from the white slave owners. In her article, Katie Frye examines the concept of whiteness in *Clotel* and argues that white people, even well-meaning ones, are often "harbingers of death." She contends that whiteness represents two aspects of terrible injustice: the enslavement and sexual abuse of slave women by white men. This often leads to enslaved mulatto children who do not fit in either the white or black world. Frye points out that not all of the white characters are depicted as evil, but even those who mean well either directly or indirectly lead to tragedy for the slaves that they interact with. For example, the white character Horatio falls in love with and marries Clotel, and they have a daughter named Mary. Horatio abandons them to marry the powerful white Gertrude as a step forward in his political ambitions. Although he feels remorse and does not intend to hurt Clotel and Mary, his actions lead to their suffering.

Like her mother, sister, and daughter, Clotel does not fit neatly into one racial group or the other, causing her to have identity issues. At the story's end, Clotel's inability to save herself or her daughter from slavery causes her

to take her own life. Her helplessness and hopelessness are perfectly represented in her final desperate act. Brown effectively conveys his didactic message in the episodic and sentimental style of writing that includes the ironic twist of Clotel dying close to the White House where, if she had been white, she would have been brought up as the president's daughter. In her article, Mary Ganster discusses that in Clotel, Brown uses newspapers and advertisements of the time to provide historical documentation of the evils of slavery. Furthermore, by using these materials, Brown is able to emphasize the fact that slaves were considered to be commodities like any other personal property belonging to the Southern owners. Interestingly, Ganster points out that by combining fact and fiction in Clotel, Brown is able to provide different perspectives of slavery. In other words, the fictional portion of the book provides the human emotions, such as fear and love, that the slaves experience while also providing the unfeeling and calculated viewpoint of those who buy and sell them. Ganster makes the valid point that the interweaving of factual and imaginary is very effective in promoting the abolitionist agenda. One idea that critics agree upon is that Brown's novel Clotel had a powerful effect on public opinion regarding slavery and played a role in the eventual abolition of this practice.

In the novel *Our Nig; or, Sketches from the Life of a Free Black*, Harriet E. Wilson introduces us to another story depicting the tragic mulatta figure through the character Frado. Although Frado is a free black and an indentured servant, she is similar to Clotel in that they both suffer from physical abuse and identity issues because of their very light skin color. In his article, John Ernest confronts the mythology that the North was a safe

haven for black and mulatto people, referring to the North as “slavery’s shadow.” In particular, Ernest contends that the narrative demonstrates the widespread prejudice and abuse of black women in the Northern United States. The Belmont family that Frado lives with is meant to represent the more widespread racist attitudes of that region. Although Ernest discusses that Wilson’s story was not well received by abolitionists in the North, Wilson’s intent is to use realism to reveal that racism was not restricted to the Southern states.

In her article, Cynthia Davis examines the way in which Frado is victimized physically and mentally, but not sexually. This differs from other abolitionist narratives that depict the white man’s view of black women as being promiscuous. Interestingly, Davis sexualizes Mag (Frado’s white mother), who loses her virginity and has Frado out of wedlock by a black man. Unlike *Clotel*, Frado is not the focus of sexual desire by any white man. Instead, Frado’s suffering is caused by her physical pain. Because of Frado’s skin color, her life continues to be one of deprivation and suffering in spite of her best efforts. Wilson dispels the myth that people of color were happy and free in the Northern states when in fact they still suffered a kind of enslavement and mistreatment. Wilson’s powerful imagery of violence and her honest representation of the true condition of racism in both the North and South increased public knowledge and evokes an emotional response in the reader through its sentimental style.

With the end of the Civil War, a new literary view of slavery emerged, one that focused not on the horrors of the slave condition, but rather on the newfound power of the emancipated black. The black character’s humor and

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wit are techniques used in these new anti-slavery writings. By depicting blacks in this way, the authors are able to further establish the humanity of black people. There is no doubt that racism was still very prevalent in post-Civil War literature, but the change to more entertaining and more subtle didactic works is evident in Joel Chandler Harris's short story "How Mr. Rabbit Was Too Sharp for Mr. Fox." In this short allegorical tale, Brer Rabbit has just been tricked by Brer Fox and is covered with tar. Brer Fox takes evil delight in telling Brer Rabbit all of the bad and violent tortures Brer Fox is going to inflict on him, including drowning and hanging him. Brer Rabbit begs Brer Fox to do anything he wants to do to him except throw him into the briar patch. Tricked into believing this is the worst punishment, he throws Brer Rabbit into the briar patch, where Brer Rabbit pops up safe and gleeful, and most of all unharmed. This deceptively simple story has several levels of significance. First, it establishes the weaker character, Brer Rabbit (representing a black slave), as the smarter character who dominates Brer Fox (representing the white slave owner). Secondly, it presents the violent imagery of drowning and hanging that slaves had to endure, so it succeeds in reminding the reader of the real horrors of slavery. Third, the story incorporates humor and uses animal imagery in contrast to early slave stories that are realistic and sentimental. Although many critics comment on the ambiguity of Harris's portrayal of plantation life, which sometimes romanticized black folklore, the work still has value. The story was intended for children to read but there are lessons to be learned by adults as well.

In his article, Christopher Peterson argues that this story and others in the Uncle Remus series are more complicated than they appear. One serious

consideration we can take from Peterson's work, is that Uncle Remus's language reflects his lack of education, reminding us that slaves were denied the opportunity to become literate. But as he portrays in the Brer Rabbit story, Uncle Remus overcomes that obstacle and shows great imagination and power of expression, once again defying the white man's oppression. In addition, Peterson points out that this particular Brer Rabbit story presents a nostalgic and comforting view of a slave as an uncle figure who is comfortable and relaxed telling stories to white children on the plantation. However, the reality is that most slaves would not be able to have that relaxed lifestyle, especially with white children. Furthermore, Peterson remarks that in spite of the lighthearted tone of this story, Brer Fox threatens Brer Rabbit with brutal mistreatment, reminding the reader of the reality of the slave condition. It is noteworthy that Brer Rabbit defeats his enemy not with force but by wit. Peterson notes the historical allegory of the weak triumphing over the powerful through Brer Rabbit's conquest over Brer Fox.

Similar to Peterson, Wayne Mixon's article addresses Uncle Remus's language in the series. Mixon believes that far from intending to ridicule Uncle Remus's substandard speaking ability, Harris in fact admires it. Mixon argues that Harris appreciates the richness and liveliness of folk speech compared to the boring urban white speech. In Mixon's view Uncle Remus turned folk language into an art. The two critics agree that Harris offers a positive portrayal of black speech and black imagination, but still perpetuates the myth of the content slave. They agree that there are mixed

reviews of Harris's work including justifiable criticism for his nostalgic look at slavery but also praise for his favorable portrayal of black people.

Mark Twain's novel *Pudd'nhead Wilson* is similar to Harris's writing, in its less serious tone but important message regarding concepts of race. Twain's novel challenges the popular stereotypes of the time which depicted blacks as being inferior to whites in every way. Furthermore, blacks were often characterized as being lazy, tricky, child-like, undisciplined, and subhuman. Twain's novel counters these stereotypes in an ingenious way and demonstrates that it is not the color of one's skin that determines one's worth, but one's actions shaped by the proper upbringing. Twain's novel tells the story of two baby boys born to two different mothers, one white, Mrs. Driscoll (the plantation owner's wife) and one black, Roxy (the plantation owner's slave). Percy Driscoll is the plantation owner and father of both babies. The twist of the story is that these two babies look almost identical with their golden hair, blue eyes, and white skin. To save her baby from the horrors of slavery, Roxy manages to switch her son with the other baby. Roxy's child is brought up in the white world as Tom and is entirely corrupted by his upbringing and surroundings. Mrs. Driscoll's biological son is brought up as a slave named Chambers who grows up to be a respectable young man. The story is mainly focused on Tom and his moral corruption.

In her article, Beverly Hume examines the characterization of Tom, arguing that Twain seems to have created him primarily to torture, shock, mock, and reflect on the white society and culture of the pre-Civil War South. Hume points out that Twain's purpose in this work is to criticize the dominant white class that tolerates and promotes cruelty, discrimination, and human

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ignorance. Hume argues that Tom is “conditioned to behave” like a rich, spoiled, and entitled white man. His bad behavior leads him to commit crimes of theft and even murder. Hume believes Twain’s purpose in creating Tom is to provide a “satiric attack” on the corrupting effects of racist and classist laws in his America. Clearly, Tom commits these crimes not because of his skin color but because of his upbringing.

In his article, Stephen Railton points out several scenes in Twain’s novel that promote the idea that we become who we are through learned behavior and not by racial identity. In one instance, Pudd’nhead Wilson visits Roxy, who is the caretaker for both Tom and Chambers. Pudd’nhead comments on how handsome the boys are and asks how she can tell them apart. At this point, the symbolic message is that white or black, these boys are equals. Railton later explains that it is Roxy who marks her own child as the inferior one by saying that he is “only a nigger.” In another scene, Roxy dresses her son in the white child’s clothes and recognizes immediately that her son could pass for white. Railton examines how it is the exterior influences in these scenes that differentiates these boys. Twain’s work challenges us to think about what makes us who we are. Twain seems to indirectly ask the readers to consider if what makes a man good or bad is wealth, upbringing, the color of his skin, or something innate? Clearly, for Twain it is upbringing.

In 19th-century American Literature, anti-slavery works were written to persuade the general public about the evils of this practice and to establish that black people were human. These literary goals were accomplished in two ways: through realistic and sentimental writings and through writings that were more entertaining and light-hearted. The novels by Brown and <https://assignbuster.com/depictions-of-slavery-in-19th-century-american-literature/>

Wilson depict the intense abuse and suffering of black people that force the reader to learn and sympathize with their plight. The works by Harris and Twain focus more on the humanization of blacks by emphasizing their intelligence and potential. These four pieces of abolitionist literature influenced public opinion and helped break the ignorance and stereotypes of black society.