

The altered confessions of nat turner



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In August of 1831, a group of enslaved individuals who were tired of systematic oppression murdered over fifty white slave owners near Southampton, Virginia. Famously known as the only successful slave rebellion in the state of Virginia, and led by Nat Turner, a man of deep religious conviction and a self-proclaimed prophet ended in the death of many innocent lives. Following his arrest, Turner was interviewed by Thomas Ruffin Gray on November 1st, to satisfy what Gray refers to as “ public curiosity” (Gray, 3). Although “ The Confessions of Nat Turner” is supposed to be the unaltered words of Turner, Thomas Gray’s interview is ultimately fraught with bias, pre-judgment, and portrays Turner and his fellow rebels as savages out for revenge.

Turner’s confession begins by recounting his adolescent years. After his father escaped enslavement, Turner was primarily raised by his “ deeply religious grandmother” and mother (Gray, 5) As a boy of “ Superior intelligence”, he often found comfort and inspiration in biblical tales of justice (Gray, 5). Turner states that as a boy “ religion greatly occupied my thoughts” (Gray 5). His keen interest in reading and writing, paired with reinforcement of his “ great purpose” by his family asserted his position in the local slave community as a knowledgeable leader (Gray, 5). His mother and grandmother would often tell him he would “ surely become a prophet” (Gray, 5). Turner was also inspired by the story of Exodus in the bible; a people enslaved for centuries by a ruthless oppressor, finally receiving divine justice. Unable to tolerate the suffrage of his people any longer, Turner soon started looking for signs of divine intervention in daily life, such as conjecturing the “ eclipse of the sun” as a symbol of “ the great day of

judgment” (Gray, 10&11). Having previously acquired a prominent position in his community for having “ superior judgment”, combined with his ability to bring people together through preaching, it was not difficult for him to convince others to join his cause (Gray, 5). Turner saw himself as a Moses like figure, who would fight, and take his people to a promise land. His revolt promised the abused a chance to escape bondage and live freely: whether they believe in his prophet-hood or not, it was a cause deemed worthy by many even if it meant laying down their life.

News of the rebellion soon spread like wildfire, causing a “ thousand idle, exaggerated and mischievous reports”, which is what inspired Thomas Gray to extract a confession (Gray, 3). Thomas Gray states that he received verbal consent from Turner to record his confession as “ full, free, and voluntary” (Gray, 3), however, Gray’s editorial comments show heavy prejudice. His prelude refers to Nat Turner as “ the leader of this ferocious band”, further feeding the narrative of African Americans as wild savages if not controlled (Gray, 3). Midway through his exchange with Gray, Turner alludes that his actions are divinely inspired; to which Gray inquires “ Are you not mistaken since the prophecy which you bore has ended in tragedy” (Gray, 7)? This statement perfectly illustrates Gray’s patronizing tone toward Turner’s struggle for independence, and his pre-conceived notions which result in projecting his own biases onto his subject. After describing the murders of “ innocent white folks” in gruesome detail, Gray states that looking at Turner “ made my blood curl” (Gray, 3&11). Thomas Gray evidently saw Turner as someone who took pleasure from murdering innocent people, and desired him to be someone who should be feared by the public at large. The

interviewer intended to paint a singularly villainous picture of Turner, offering little to no opposing evidence.

It is not uncommon for a revolutionist to use propaganda in tremulous times to sway public opinion, and this is exactly what Gray intended to do when he interviewed Turner. Gray's predetermination structured Turner's spoken narrative into evidence for white-superiority, which would reaffirm pro-slavery sentiments in the south. T. R. Gray's emphasis on murder details of "innocent white folks", instead of the repetitive atrocities faced by the African American community which lead them to revolt is a prime example of selective narration (Gray, 5). Gray's personal description of the event as a "dreadful conspiracy", motivated and executed by "diabolical actors" leaves little room for the reader to take a balanced approach to the document (Gray, 3). There are places that Thomas Gray reaffirms that "without being questioned at all, Turner commenced his narrative in the following words" (Gray, 5). He also states that after his interview he corroborated Turner's story with other jail mates, and there was "Little to no variation" (Gray, 11). However, it is important to note that Turner was the last of the rebels to be tried and executed, leading one to strongly question Gray's supposed corroboration. There are also instances where Gray seems to clearly depict Turner as a coward by including the fact that "Nat's only weapon was a small light sword which he immediately surrendered, and begged that his life might be spared" (Gray, 3). The author's embellishments of the accounts intend to cause panic in the white communities, reaffirming that if you teach your slaves to read/write, or congregate they will revolt.

The Southampton slave rebellion took many innocent lives, and peaked the curiosity of many American citizens. In this delicate situation, rather than providing an independent account of the events, Gray catered Turners confessions towards a singular audience. Thomas Gray's audience consisted of southern slave owners, who were looking for ways to justify further enslavement. Playing to this audience's need, Gray tailored Turner's words to fit the necessary narrative. As a result, Turner's portrayal only served to reaffirm negative biases white slaveholders carried. Commonwealth vs. Nat Turner ultimately resulted in the accused being tried, and executed. Other repercussions of the rebellion were severe: many slaves who had not been involved in the rebellion were murdered out of suspicion or revenge. The laws also became increasingly restrictive towards African Americans. Out of fear, large plantation owners banned their slaves and servants from congregating. Considering the continued hardships that followed, Thomas Gray's unique opportunity could have been advantages in presenting white American's with an alternate view of the persecution African American's faced. White Americans saw the rebellion as a brutal act, while disregarding the fact that enslaving a race for centuries was also a brutal act. Nat Turner was someone who was a product of the system white Americans had created, not a born monster as Gray painted him to be. Instead of representing Nat Turner as a blood-thirsty monster out for vengeance, Gray could have shown Turner for an intelligent visionary who ultimately fell victim to his circumstance and lashed out against a system that rendered him helpless.