

Contents

Exploring *Twelve Years a Slave*, Robert C. Evans xv

This introductory essay summarizes the essays that follow to give readers a sense of this volume as a whole and to make it easier to pinpoint particular topics of interest.

Reading *Twelve Years a Slave* and Antislavery Verse, Brian Yothers . . xxv

*This essay examines the relationship between the story of Eliza in Solomon Northup's *Twelve Years a Slave* and the role of the slave mother in antislavery poetry, especially in two poems by Frances E. W. Harper: "The Slave Mother" and "The Slave Mother, A Tale of the Ohio." Eliza's story parallels the plight of enslaved women separated from their children. Northup emerges as a canny ironist who is able to weave his own story into the formal structures provided by the antislavery discourse of his time. Eliza's hopes for freedom, her betrayal, and the suffering that she experiences all contribute to making her an important element in Northup's antislavery argument.*

Solomon Northup: A Brief Biography, Robert C. Evans. xlvii

This essay provides a brief overview of Solomon Northup's life before, during, and after the events described in his fascinating narrative.

Critical Contexts

- Solomon Northup as a “Driver” in the Narrative and Film Versions
of *Twelve Years a Slave*, Robert C. Evans 3

This essay draws on historical documents and scholarship to explore the complicated roles played by “slave drivers”—foremen whose job was to supervise and punish other slaves—in the American South. In particular, it focuses on Solomon Northup’s own tenure as a slave driver for eight of his twelve years in bondage. One of the most disturbing and gut-wrenching scenes in the 2013 film version titled 12 Years a Slave was one in which Northup was forced to whip—brutally—a fellow slave named Patey. As described in Northup’s written narrative, his vicious “master” Edwin Epps preyed on Patey sexually and then forced Northup to whip her because of Epps’s own jealousy and that of his wife. This kind of unimaginable degradation had a dehumanizing effect on both the drivers and the slaves they were forced to discipline.

- Twelve Years a Slave*: Reception, Critical Reputation, and Uses,
Laurence W. Mazzeno 24

As a historical document and a personal autobiography, Twelve Years has been used as documentary evidence in studies ranging from analyses of slavery to expositions of character; it has also been the subject of literary critiques examining its rhetorical strategies and aesthetic merits. Highlighting some of the more important commentaries while linking these critiques to larger political and cultural movements, this essay explains how, more than many similar books, Twelve Years has been both the victim and the beneficiary of changing attitudes in American society and the recipient of attention due to forces outside traditional literary parameters.

- Truth, Trauma, and Technique: Narrative Strategies in *Twelve Years a Slave*, Nicolas Tredell 45

Twelve Years a Slave by Solomon Northup was both a vigorous intervention in a fierce debate and a testimony to experiences so traumatic that they are hard to articulate adequately. One of the book’s strategies is to claim that it contains “no fiction, no exaggeration” and offers “no comments on the subject of slavery,” speaking of it “only as I have experienced it.” This essay sets Northup’s text within the more general context of slave narratives

in both Britain and the United States, discussing such works as The Interesting Narrative of the Life of Olaudah Equiano; the Narrative of the Life of Frederick Douglass, an American Slave; and the Library of Congress collection Born in Slavery: Slave Narratives from the Federal Writers' Project, 1936-1938.

High Style and Vernacular: Contrasting Languages in *Twelve Years a Slave* and *Barracoon*, Nicolas Tredell 67

Solomon Northup's memoir was one of many "slave narratives," a genre that also includes Barracoon: The Story of the Last "Black Cargo." Each of these books was shaped by a different editor, resulting in a distinctive structure and style of narrative for each work. Lawyer and author David Wilson adopted an obviously literary style for Twelve Years a Slave, while novelist, anthropologist, and filmmaker Zora Neal Hurston, in Barracoon, attempted to reproduce the vernacular of Cudjo Lewis, one of the very last slaves ever brought to the United States. This essay considers the reasons for, and results of, these editorial choices in the different contexts in which each book was first produced and received.

Critical Readings

The Never-ending Quest for Authenticity: Validating the Lived Experience of Solomon Northup, Melinda Knight 89

Two of the most important slave narratives ever written on American soil were Solomon Northup's Twelve Years a Slave and Harriet Jacobs's Incidents in the Life of a Slave Girl. The first was written by a free man from New York who had been kidnapped into slavery, and the second was written by a young woman who had born into slavery in Edonton, North Carolina. Dealing with such issues as sexual harassment, escape and hiding, strong family bonds, and religious hypocrisy, both books were quickly recognized as memorable expressions of the voices of the enslaved and were strongly promoted by abolitionist groups both in the North and abroad. Although each is distinctive in style and perspective, this essay discusses how these works had an immediate and powerful impact on the national and international debate concerning slavery.

Narrative Authority in Solomon Northup’s *Twelve Years a Slave*,
Edwin Wong 110

From the opening dedication to the closing words of his fascinating autobiography Twelve Years a Slave, Solomon Northup uses a variety of effective narrative strategies to win over readers and lend his story credibility. In particular, Northup establishes his right to talk about slavery by appealing to personal experience (his is an eyewitness account), by professing honesty and impartiality, and by emphasizing the nonfiction quality of his writing. Despite experiencing horrific and dehumanizing treatment as an enslaved person, Northup even manages to make some good comments about his oppressors, including one of his former “owners” and the brutal Edwin Epps, who otherwise emerges as a savage tyrant in the ways he treated his slaves.

“What difference is there in the color of the soul?”: The Practical
Discourse Around Race and Slavery in *Twelve Years a Slave*,
Matthew M. Thiele. 137

This essay explores the ways that Solomon Northup’s Twelve Years a Slave uses and comments on racialized discourse, which is broadly defined as the use of language to reify and justify racial discrimination and the systems of injustice born from it. Even though the text does not seem to demonstrate complete awareness of the extent to which race serves as a disingenuous pretext for certain kinds of injustice, it demonstrates a remarkable sensitivity to some kinds of racialized discourse that adds to our understanding of the historical development and reception of such discourse.

“Without the pale of humanity”: The Dehumanizing Effects of
American Chattel Slavery in *Twelve Years a Slave*,
Matthew M. Thiele. 150

Establishing what qualifies as human and inhuman behavior is complicated in an economy that draws hard distinctions between diverse kinds of humans as a way of limiting the rights of some. This essay explores how the text of Twelve Years a Slave provides invaluable insight and historical perspective into the effect that chattel slavery had on the American understanding of what makes people human. By referring to actions as inhuman, and by referring to some humans as animals or brutes, the text demonstrates that American chattel slavery dehumanizes everyone involved.

Missing Children: A Black Father’s Love in *Twelve Years a Slave*,
 Jericho Williams. 166

Solomon Northup’s Twelve Years a Slave has been hailed as one of the most compelling of the many narratives detailing the lives of enslaved persons in the American South. Northup was kidnapped into slavery, spending more than a decade as a bondsman working for various “masters” in Louisiana, but he never stops yearning to return home to his wife and children in New York. The emotional tension stemming from Northup’s abrupt capture and his strong desire to return home are two of the book’s perennial strengths, making it one of the most effective accounts of slavery in nineteenth-century American literature. This essay explores Northup’s experiences as a tribute to black fatherhood and persistence while at the same time also conveying his creative thought and ingenuity in response to the actions of his oppressors. Northup’s emphasis on freedom, family, and love stem from the great loss he felt as a father abruptly separated from his wife and children, rendering Twelve Years a Slave a powerful articulation of the damaging effects of slavery on families in antebellum America.

The Academic Response to Steve McQueen’s *12 Years a Slave*,
 Laurence W. Mazzeno 185

By all accounts 12 Years a Slave, a biopic based on Solomon Northup’s 1853 memoir Twelve Years a Slave and directed by British filmmaker Steve McQueen, was a popular and commercial success. Released in August 2013, the film grossed \$56.7 million in the United States and over \$130 million in worldwide revenues. Reviewers and the public reacted strongly to the graphic depiction of slavery in the American South. Particularly noteworthy, however, was the academic community’s swift response in declaring the film an icon of cultural studies, reflecting on both its historical context and contemporary relevance. This essay provides a summary of the film’s immediate impact and examines the extensive body of critical commentary produced in the decade after its release.

Aspects of Literary Style and Cinematic Adaptation in *12 Years a Slave*,
 Christopher Baker. 207

Northup’s story and McQueen’s film employ literary and visual details that bring to life a precariously poised world of clashing values in tension with each other. Though Northup’s book may

have been edited to appeal to antebellum reading tastes, the force of his graphic style and his disarming personal honesty have made this account one of the most perennially popular slave narratives. McQueen was especially struck by the unpredictability that Northup had to cope with: “he has to deal with things as they happen in a spontaneous way. As objects are thrown at him, he has to duck out of the way. And how he’s going to duck, how he’s going to confront things, we don’t know. That’s why turning every page of the book was amazing.”

Literary Excellence in the Screenplay for Steve McQueen’s Film
12 Years a Slave, Robert C. Evans. 224

Anyone who has ever watched British director Steve McQueen’s 12 Years a Slave will not be surprised to discover that it won the 2014 Academy Award for Best Picture. Lupita Nyong’o also deservedly won as Best Supporting Actress. This essay, however, explores why the third of the film’s Oscars went to John Ridley for Best Adapted Screenplay. Ridley turned Solomon Northup’s narrative-laden memoir (Twelve Years a Slave) into a masterfully written drama, full of memorable dialog. Ridley’s characters spoke in a strangely effective English diction that somehow sounded utterly authentic. The use of remarkable dialog that sounded convincingly like nineteenth-century speech proved an unforgettable experience for moviegoers and critics alike.

The Hanging Scene in Steve McQueen’s Film *12 Years a Slave*,
 Jordan Bailey 242

One of the most memorable scenes in 12 Years a Slave depicts an incident in which a vicious overseer and his thuggish friends bind up Solomon Northup to hang him from a nearby tree. Although the hanging is prevented in the nick of time, Northup is not actually released completely: a thick rope is still tightly fastened around his neck, his hands are still bound behind him, and he is forced to stand up on his toes, as high as possible, to keep himself from being asphyxiated. Only his “master” can legally free him, and so he stands there, sweating under the blazing sun and desperate for a drink of water, until his owner finally arrives and cuts the rope. In analyzing this scene, this essay examines the often-monstrous norms of the system of chattel slavery.

Resources

Chronology of Solomon Northup's Life	263
Works by Solomon Northup	265
Bibliography	267
About the Editor	273
Contributors	275
Index	279