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## “The Burning Agonies of Hell”: De-romanticizing Slavery in *12 Years a Slave*

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# **“The Burning Agonies of Hell”: De-romanticizing Slavery in *12 Years a Slave* By Nick Radmer**

On the morning of April 2<sup>nd</sup>, 1863, travelling photographers William D. McPherson and his partner Mr. Oliver rose to document the lives of soldiers, officers, and civilians stationed at a Union camp in Baton Rouge, Louisiana. Stepping into a medic’s tent, they were greeted to a grisly sight: a medical examination on a runaway slave known as Gordon. Gordon’s back was a maze of crisscrossing scars, the result of several beatings over the course of his years of enslavement. Dumbfounded, McPherson snapped an image that circulated in a variety of newspapers and periodicals, described by contemporaries as “An appeal so mute and powerful that none but hardened natures can look upon it unmoved.”<sup>1</sup> Gordon’s deeply scarred back has since appeared in countless secondary sources, and as such, one could argue that it has lost some of its power. McPherson’s photograph has become a quintessential document, and yet it has become easy—routine, even—to push slavery to the back of our collective memory; slavery was certainly awful, but our understanding of its devastating effects can be contained and made less traumatic by observing Gordon’s ravaged back.

One hundred and fifty years later, filmmaker Steve McQueen’s *12 Years a Slave* suggests that the director is dissatisfied with this reality. A dramatic retelling of Solomon Northup’s memoir, McQueen’s film aims to expose slavery for the visceral and dehumanizing institution it was, determined to delegitimize any account that

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<sup>1</sup> "Picture of a Slave." *The Liberator* (Boston), June 12, 1863.

romanticizes, diminishes, or tries to excuse it. McQueen accomplishes this with his careful look at the relationship between master and slave, the role of women and sexual aggression and oppression on a plantation, and slavery's destructive effects on both the victim and victimizer's humanity. To his credit, McQueen constructs his argument without abandoning historical accuracy; even the few narrative changes he makes further heighten the audience's understanding of slavery's brutality, but not at the expense of thematic veracity. But far from being a totally melancholy film reflecting solely on slavery's nightmarish horrors, McQueen infuses his film with brief flickers of hope to provide his characters—and his audience—with the thought that persevering against atrocities may yet lead to a better life.

Reflecting on McQueen's film warrants a look back at other films that colored America's perception of slavery, namely 1939's wildly popular *Gone with the Wind*. At the time of its release, critics and audiences alike lauded the film as an unparalleled masterpiece, but it has since attracted criticism for its portrayal of slaves. The African American characters, depicted as bumbling idiots, represent several negative stereotypes. Worse still, they come across as completely at ease with their shackles, "dutiful and content, clearly incapable of an independent existence."<sup>2</sup> Oscar Polk's domestic house slave, for example, is compliant—complicit even—in perpetuating an image of blacks needing supervision from white authorities; the film even goes so far as to depict the Ku Klux Klan as a heroic organization nobly defending the righteousness of white supremacy. Nevertheless, the film's tremendous popularity seeped its way into the American consciousness, and for decades, its portrayal of the Old South as a noble society with slavery as an incidental afterthought shaped modern audience's perceptions.

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<sup>2</sup> Reynolds, David. *America, Empire of Liberty: A New History*. London: Allen Lane, 2009. 241-42.

In aiming to delegitimize such portrayals, McQueen subverts more than seventy years of deep-rooted, racist public beliefs about enslavement.

*12 Years a Slave* begins with the abduction and sale of Solomon Northup, a successful violinist and free black man living in antebellum Saratoga, New York. The film charts Northup's rapid and profound dehumanization as his abductors sadistically declare his freedom forfeited, that any attempts to identify himself as a free man will only earn him abuse or worse. Locking him in a dank cell, his captors mercilessly beat Northup with a paddle, each crack of wood on flesh punctuated by Northup's cries and his abductor's emphatic shouts of "you're a slave! You're a Georgia slave!"<sup>3</sup> As a free man, Northup's brutal kidnapping and mistreatment may seem anomalous—in fact, a vast majority of the kidnapped African Americans were not full-grown men but women, children, or the elderly<sup>4</sup>—but Northup's own telling of the event corroborates McQueen's account. In his text, he writes "Even now the flesh crawls upon my bones, as I recall the scene. I was all on fire. My sufferings I can compare to nothing else than the burning agonies of hell!"<sup>5</sup> The film's version of the scene is doubly powerful in its condemnation of slavery not just because of its adherence to Northup's telling, but for its refusal to employ cinematic tricks to convey its brutality. Armed with only the stark violence of its imagery and a softly somber orchestral piece, the film thrusts viewers into a terrifying yet accurate portrayal of slavery's awful reality: entrapment and torture carried out on vulnerable, innocent people.

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<sup>3</sup> *12 Years a Slave*. Directed by Steve McQueen. 2013.

<sup>4</sup> Wilson, Carol. *Freedom at Risk: The Kidnapping of Free Blacks in America, 1780-1865*. University Press of Kentucky, 1994.

<sup>5</sup> Northup, Solomon. *Twelve Years a Slave*. Derby and Miller, 1853. 25.

McQueen also explores slavery's abject horrors in his treatment of the film's female characters. Foremost is Patsey, plantation owner Edwin Epps's young and dexterous slave whose extraordinary skill at picking cotton earns her the title "Queen of the Field." Despite her exceptional performance as a worker, she suffers unspeakable cruelty at the hands of both her master and his wife: she is habitually raped by Edwin and routinely mistreated by her "jealous" mistress. According to Thelma Jennings, slave women were subjected to worse abuse than their male counterparts since they had to undergo sexual cruelty in addition to the violence and neglect other men suffered<sup>6</sup>, and Patsey is no exception. A scene depicting her violent rape matches societal expectations at the time, as does the abuse she suffers at Mistress Epps's hands. In his narrative, Northrup characterizes Mistress Epps's violence as a product of her jealousy, which can be supported by a variety of slave narratives. In his famous autobiography, Frederick Douglass describes slave concubines as "a constant offence to their mistress. [...] She is never better pleased than when she sees them under the lash, especially when she suspects her husband of showing [them] favors which he withholds from her."<sup>7</sup> Contrast Patsey's treatment with the slaves' treatment in *Gone with the Wind*; in the latter film, the slaves are treated like common maids and manservants, without any hints that they may in fact be suffering unfathomable abuses. With Patsey, however, McQueen shines a light on the horrors slave women endured every day, living in constant fear of violence that many of them felt powerless to stop.

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<sup>6</sup>Jennings, Thelma. "Us Colored Women Had to Go Through a Plenty": Sexual Exploitation of African-American Slave Women." *Journal of Women's History* 1, no. 3 (January 1, 1990).

<sup>7</sup> Douglass, Frederick. *Narrative of the Life of Frederick Douglass*. Cambridge: Belknap Press of Harvard University Press, 1845. 26.

McQueen further examines sexual exploitation with the ancillary character Eliza. Early on in the film, she is separated from her children when a New Orleans slave broker refuses to sell her family together. One of Jennings' main arguments is that sexual exploitation was the worst abuse slave women had to endure, so it seems odd at first that Eliza's primary hardship comes not from rape. To be sure, she suffers many of the same abuses as Patsey, but for her, the worst consequence of her enslavement is the loss of her children, which is in its own unique way a byproduct of sexual exploitation. 19<sup>th</sup> century women were taught to aspire to little more than marriage and children, but for Eliza, achieving these aspirations only means further emotional abuse when they are taken away from her. Separated from their children—and then forced to produce new ones for their master's profit<sup>8</sup>—women's reproductive rights were nonexistent. So when Eliza insists that "By God, I will weep for my children,"<sup>9</sup> the audience understands that her greatest pain is in fact an intense form of sexual abuse—perhaps not the most objectively awful, but for Eliza, by far the most traumatic.

Despite its unwavering adherence to historical accuracy, *12 Years a Slave* does make some changes to Northup's narrative. However, instead of diminishing the film's integrity, such changes serve to elevate the narrative in ways that both amplify the audience's emotional involvement and help viewers make inferences regarding what *could* have happened, even if not explicitly stated by Northup. One of these changes occurs in an early scene in the film in which Northup has a brief sexual encounter with another slave. Northup makes no mention of such an encounter, but upon further reflection, excising his sex life makes sense. In the 19<sup>th</sup> century, candid discussion of sex

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<sup>8</sup> Jennings, "Colored Women."

<sup>9</sup> McQueen, 2013.

was extremely taboo, and it is unlikely that Northup would admit to marital infidelity in his writing. But that said, willingly or unwillingly, slaves reproduced; otherwise there would only be one generation. Knowing that they reproduced, and knowing that Northup may have consciously decided to exclude that episode from his narrative, McQueen's inclusion of the scene is a reasonable inference. Even if the encounter is purely invention, historian Robert Rosenstone argues that good invention "Alters and compresses the spirit of the documentable events into a particular dramatic form. In such a scene, film clearly does not reflect a truth—it creates one."<sup>10</sup> The invention in question is historically informed, and thus offers another window into Northup's hardships: throughout the encounter, there is no evidence of joy or love from either party. For slaves, even acts that should provide physical pleasure and emotional happiness are reduced to their basest, least passionate qualities.

As McQueen uses historical invention to depict Northup's disconnection from physical desires such as sex, other instances of invention appear in the film's use of symbols to express the conflicting forces of hope and despair slowly gnawing at the characters' humanity. Foremost of these is Northup's violin, which comes to represent the life he had before slavery and the hope that one day such a life may belong to him once more. In the film (but not the narrative), Northup destroys his violin in a fit of rage, symbolizing the role slavery has had in traumatizing him and subsuming his identity. Without one reminder of his freedom—or, for that matter, his humanity—Northup is reduced to a piece of property. Although the scene is not in Northup's text, the violin's

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<sup>10</sup> Robert A. Rosenstone. "Chapter 2, The Historical Film: Looking at the Past in a Postliterate Age." In *Visions of the Past: The Challenge of Film to Our Idea of History*. Cambridge, MA: Harvard University Press, 1995.

destruction gives audiences an effective visual image to express McQueen's examination of slavery's shattering toll.

Invention is used once again during one of the film's most harrowing scenes with Patsey. Returning to Epps's plantation with a bar of soap, Patsey shrieks that she picks "Five hundred pounds of cotton, day in, day out, more than any man here. And for that I will be clean."<sup>11</sup> For her transgression (and because of his irrational belief that she was sexually involved with another slaver), Epps savagely flays her, shredding the flesh from her bones and knocking her unconscious. But at the end of this unendurably extended scene, as Northup unties her from the whipping post, the camera intimately zooms in on the bar of soap that drops from her grasp—she had been clutching it the whole time. While Northup's narrative acknowledges that such a beating took place and that Patsey did indeed come back with an illicit bar of soap,<sup>12</sup> no mention is made of Patsey clinging to it. One could make the case that since Patsey ultimately drops her soap, McQueen aimed to demonstrate her complete loss of hope, but by refusing to relinquish her comforts (no matter how small they may seem) in the face of overwhelming dehumanization, Patsey remarkably holds on to the one thing that gives her hope that "things wouldn't be that way always."<sup>13</sup> The invention, though not explicitly supported by Northup's text, stays true to the film's spirit and tone: bleak, awful, and at times overwhelming, but ultimately hopeful that life may one day get better.

Looking back on the centuries of atrocities humans have inflicted on helpless others, it is easy to fall into despair just as Solomon and Patsey at times do. It can be easier to look away, to content ourselves with knowing that slavery was degrading and

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<sup>11</sup> McQueen, 2013.

<sup>12</sup> Northup, *Twelve Years*, 169-173

<sup>13</sup> Jennings, "Colored Women," 66.



monstrous and inhumane, but refusing to acknowledge enslavement for what it truly was is to disrespect the spirits of the men, women and children who lived and suffered and died in slavery's cruel grip. Shattering *Gone with the Wind's* thin veneer of slavery as little more than ignorant but happy servitude, *12 Years a Slave* at last affords audiences a chance to come to a deeper understanding of the peculiar institution for all its unimaginable horrors. But if the devastating stories of violence and terror become too hard to bear, keep this in mind: in the end, Solomon Northup did return home. Through the whipping that would have destroyed a lesser spirit, Patsey held on to her bar of soap until the bitter end. And after years of enslavement that left his back a tattered mess, the man known as Gordon became a soldier in the Union Army and fought for the freedom that had been denied him his whole life. One cannot diminish the atrocities that lurk in our history, but with Northup's voice and McQueen's camera, one can come one step closer to understanding and empathizing, and thus, can endeavor to ensure that no such horrors will be committed again.