Twelve Years a Slave

A study in racial discrimination in the U.S through a thematic reading of selected works by African-Americans

Solomon Northup. Born 1808 a Free Man. Lured from Saratoga, Kidnapped and sold into Slavery, 1841; Rescued, 1853.

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Abstract

This project seeks to investigate how the meanings of freedom and worth in relation to African-Americans in the United States have developed over the last 160 years, through a thematic analysis of selected works. These works function as representative for three different time periods and will be conducted in order to discover a development of the chosen phenomena. The chosen works are Solomon Northup’s memoir Twelve Years a Slave (1853), Martin Luther King’s I Have a Dream (1963) and the movie adaptation of 12 Years a Slave (2013) by Steve McQueen. Through the analysis and discussion we assess that the themes change from a general societal tone during the time of the 1800s to a community-based notion in the 1960s and finally to an intimate and personal relation in our modern time.
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Motivation

Among first-hand accounts of significant historical periods, Anne Frank’s Diary is usually among the first to come to mind. With the 2014 Oscar winning movie adaptation, however, another such account has received much deserved recognition. The memoir of Solomon Northup’s *Twelve Years a Slave* is arguably among the most important historical documents surrounding the period of institutional slavery in the United States of America. In adapting the memoir into a major motion picture, directed by English artist-gone-filmmaker Steve McQueen, Northup's story has reached a much broader audience and recognition among laypersons, where before it mainly circulated in academic or historical communities. For long time slavery has been a great taboo in the United States, and is in many ways the great shame of American history - like the holocaust has been to German history.

Integral to the becoming of this project was the interest and fascination with the story of Northup. Having first discovered his remarkable story through the recent movie adaptation, a closer look at both the original memoir and also this critical point in history arose as a suitable subject matter. The original memoir of Northup were published in 1853 and sold 30,000 copies in the first three years following its release. At its release, the topic of slavery generated fierce debate in the United States. Northup was among one of the few African-American people to regain his freedom after being kidnapped and sold into slavery. But perhaps due to the general climate surrounding slavery at his salvation, Northup was able to prosecute some of the men responsible for his unlawful predicament, suffered with for over more than a decade. Initially, however, Northup was unable to testify against some of his former slaveholders, since Washington DC law prohibited African-Americans from testifying in a court of law. In the absence of testimony, key members instrumental to Northup’s slavery were found not guilty and acquitted. The fraudulent case did attract attention, however, most notably from *The New York Times*, which published an article about the trial only days after its conclusion, and the trial did to some extent bring the more widespread illegal practices in the domestic slave trade to light. The perpetrators in Northup’s case, however, were never held accountable for their actions other than in the minds of their victims.

Our interest in these topics of inequality, focusing specifically on slavery, led us to a desire to discover for ourselves more fully the different implications of slave narratives of the 19th century. Although Northup’s story is a remarkable one in many ways, it is not a unique one.
Not only is it important to stress the number of other slave narratives, some of which we will look at in this project; it is further of course necessary to acknowledge the enormous scale by which slavery was implemented in America. Although the story of Northup and others ends with some justice, one must never forget the millions who lived and died under the lash of their suppressors. If this project has any ambitions beyond its formal merits, it will be in remembering and honouring those who have lived under tyranny, where one man sought himself greater than another merely by virtue of appearances.

**Issue of investigation**

The American Revolution ended in 1776 and the United States of America declared themselves independent from Great Britain. On July 4th, the Continental Congress signed of the most important documents in American history; the *Declaration of Independence* (Parkinson 2011, p. 58). After a short introduction follows perhaps the most famous sentence in the document:

> We hold these truths to be self-evident, that all men are created equal, that they are endowed by their Creator with certain unalienable Rights, that among these are Life, Liberty and the pursuit of Happiness. (Archives.gov 2014)

However, implied in the statement was the consensus that these “unalienable rights” only applied to Caucasian males. This meant that the newly founded land of the free carried on the slavery practiced in British North America. During roughly the next 100 years the slavery question polarized USA and culminated in the American Civil War, which effectively ended slavery. But freedom did not mean equal rights for the Afro-American population. To make up for the loss of their slaves, especially the South enforced laws of racial segregation and disenfranchisement. The desperate conditions of Afro-Americans in the South sparked a great migration towards the northern states in the early 20th century. The growing community of Afro-Americans in the north caused organized movements fighting violence and discrimination and led to the American Civil Rights Movement in the 1950s and ‘60s. On August 27th 1963 250,000 people marched on the nation’s capitol Washington in the biggest human rights movement in American history. The following day, on August 28th, Martin Luther King, Jr., gave his world-famous speech *I Have a Dream* in which he called for an end to racism in the
United States. The movement helped pass several major acts, including the Civil Rights Act of 1964 and the Voting Rights Act of 1965. These laws meant that formally all racial discrimination in the United States had been abolished. So, in theory, racial discrimination ought to have been conquered and exterminated 50 years ago. However recent events suggest that there is still considerable racial tension in America. The most notable among these events being the major riots in Ferguson in August and September of 2014 and in Baltimore 2015.

There is no denying the historical importance of slavery in America but one might wonder; why is the Afro-American question still relevant today? One could argue that the race discussion in the United States effectively ended, when an African-American man, Barack Obama, was inaugurated as president in 2009. However, we hold this argument to be nothing more than an utopian idea. The mere fact that a coloured man was elected for president does not necessarily reflect the reality in society. One must also remember, that the United States is a very politically bipolar country, where which political party you represent is more important than the colour of your skin. Furthermore, all historical and cultural evidence points to the fact that there still are racial issues in the United States. The 2014 Oscars could be both an example of resolve as well as an example of lingering suppression of the African-Americans: when Steve McQueen won for “Best Movie” it spawned massive discussions in the United States. Did he win because he actually made the best motion picture of the year - or did he win, in part, because it was a black man making a film about slavery? Food for thought, even if it is in the end impossible to answer such a question. Whatever the Oscar Committee’s reasons, their motivations remain their own.

It is clear that the issues of African-American identity in the United States has gone through major changes over the last 240 years: it has developed from slavery into segregation, and other discriminatory laws, and today any racial discrimination is illegal although it still very much exists on the streets of America. The aim of this project is to address how, and why, there has been this development. For this purpose three different works from three very different periods of time have been selected: Twelve Years a Slave (1853), I Have a Dream (1963) and 12 Years a Slave (2014). To understand a historical development, however, a literary analysis of the works isn’t sufficient to uncover all tendencies and reasons for before mentioned development. For that reason two themes have been selected. The works will be analysed through the prism of the themes freedom and worth. Contemporary reception of the works must be taken into account to understand social tendencies and problems. Consequently the selected works and
their reception will function as means to investigate the period in time of which they are a product, which is to say, through these texts and their reception, one can get a glimpse into the minds of people who are now long gone. Subsequently it is a basic assumption in the project that the works are representative of the time in which they were produced. This has lead us to the following research question:

**Research Question**

This project seeks to investigate how the meanings of *freedom* and *worth* in relation to African-Americans in the United States have developed over the last 160 years. A thematic analysis of selected works from three different periods in time; Solomon Northup’s memoir *Twelve Years a Slave* (1853), Martin Luther King Jr.’s *I Have a Dream* (1963) and the film adaptation of *12 Years a Slave* (2013) by Steve McQueen will be conducted in order to discover a development of the chosen phenomena. Furthermore a discussion of possible reasons for the historical development will be included.
Historiography

“Man is born free, but he is everywhere in chains”

Much has been said and written about slavery in its time and up till its final dissolvent, spanning a period of more than 200 years since its institutional implementation in America. The history of slavery is usually nowadays shrouded in shame and looked back upon as a period of the young nation of USA where many were in error in their beliefs regarding the legality of owning another person. Any ownership of other people is now in the developed world considered highly criminal and is considered to be one of the gravest infringements on human dignity.

However, it was not always so when one looks more broadly at the world in both time and space. In fact, insofar that we can trace back the history of the human race to the early stages of our existence, slavery seems to have been prominently widespread more often than not. In the more ancient societies, war between tribes was a regular occurrence, in which prisoners taken were either slain or reduced to slavery (Blake 1861, p. 17). The Hebrews, for instance, might be reduced to servitude through various means. A poor man might sell himself into bondage; debtors might be delivered as slaves to their creditors; thieves unable to repay the value of stolen goods might be given as slaves as recompense for their actions (ibid.). In the ancient Near East (what we now know as the Middle East from Iran to Turkey to Egypt), the existence of slavery was far less widespread. In the ancient Mediterranean, one finds nowhere near the extend of mass slavery as that one finds in the 16th century of our era. It is clear, however, that there are many archival texts from this time, which came to be in the event that it was necessary to fend off disputes of ownership of other people (Hunt 2011, p. 5). In ancient Mesopotamia, when the city-state wanted to remake its infrastructure and tried to irrigate more and more land, it was done not by organizing slaves but by compelling the peasants who already lived nearby to work on these projects, although as forced labour; a practice known as corvée. This involved giving the peasants rations of food and strict directions. This imposed labour-duty was an important power of the state, spanning broadly across the population - these workers were sometimes comprised of scribes and even officials. However, they do not necessarily qualify as slaves, as these workers were not bought and sold. When looking at the classical Greek society in around the 8th century BC, however, slavery is much more apparently prevailing, at least in the surviving literature of that time. The plot of the Iliad, traditionally attributed to Homer, begins with a dispute over a slave woman, for instance. Or in Odyssey; Odysseus must re-establish his relationship with his slaves as well as his wife to complete his homecoming (Hunt
2010, 22). It is notable, however, that in texts from this period concerned with history, politics or war efforts, the mention of slaves is mostly absent. Furthermore, whatever accounts exist of slavery, they are quite obviously one-sided. The surviving literature of classical Greece was written almost entirely by slaveholders and free male citizens, not the slaves themselves (ibid.). It is in all cases clear that, although the definitions differ, some sort of slavery has been in existence since the early societies of the world. The American slaves of the 18th and 19th century, however, found ways to express themselves through their own writing. Some of their voices have made it to our present day, quite possibly in an unprecedented amount compared to many other periods of time with slavery. When Europeans first reached the Americas, they brought their slave system of the Eastern Hemisphere to the West.

African slaves laboured much for the major colonial nations during their expansions. Over the course of the 16th century, the Spaniards for instance brought some ten thousand slaves to the Gran Canarias where slaves made up nearly 12% of that islands population, where African-Americans made up three-fourths of the slaves of that number. The work of slaves came to encompass all aspects of the economy, especially being used in still greater numbers in sugarcane production, but also on farms and mills on the Atlantic islands. This systematic use of slave labour by the colonial nations of Spain, Portugal, Great Britain and others laid the groundwork for the plantation system to come in the American colonial areas, where the institution of slavery would come to bear its bitter fruit (Phillips 2010, p. 328). The European expansion into the American’s marked the beginning of new stage in the history of slavery, with the settlers bringing a vast number of Africans across the Atlantic, forever transforming the social and physical complexion of the Americans (ibid.).

In the newly discovered world of the Americas, labour was in short supply. And to simply employ free Caucasian labour was considered out of the question. Europe at the time was not overpopulated, and Caucasian settlers were in short supply in the first centuries preceding the discovery of America. Free Europeans would not willingly cross the Atlantic Ocean to perform tasks they would be hard pressed to perform at home. Moreover, Europeans were reluctant in enslaving people of their own apparent “group”. The English, for instance, did occasionally enslave the indigenous people of the Americans, as did the Spanish. Eventually, however, all the colonials turned to imported slaves, mainly Africans, who also already developed plantation agriculture (Phillips 2010, p. 330). The American institution of slavery had its roots in Europe, but would become so profoundly modified with time that it became an altogether new
invention, devised for a new situation - the highly specialized plantation society (ibid.). In the
eyes of the colonists, African slaves offered several advantages in maximizing the profits ready
to be made in the New World, compared to the people native to the Americans. Many Africans
were already accustomed with the practice of large-scale agriculture and the disciplinary
inflictions inherent to such pursuits. It was thought that the natives, or the Amerindians as they
were called, were ill suited for intensive labour. The Africans were considered to possess a
much higher capacity for work, and had knowledge of metalwork as well, a field alien to the
natives, who only used metal for decorative and not productive purposes (Phillips 2010, p. 332).
Furthermore, the Africans shared several diseases with the Europeans, thus making them less
susceptible to European-born diseases that were devastating to the native population of the
Americans. Finally, as if to bring insult to injury, certain restrictions established to limit
exploitations of the native people by the colonial powers did not apply to African slaves, further
enforcing the incentive to employ African slaves as the primary force of labour. The
development of the transatlantic slave trade was thus well underway (ibid.).

The foundation of the American nation as we know it today is built on a double undertaking of
questionable endeavours. Firstly, by the forceful displacement of the indigenous people native
to the land; secondly, by the establishment of a far-reaching institution of slavery, which served
to further the economy of the colonial nations and in the end make possible the establishment
of the United States of America. To be a black “settler” during the infant years of the United
States was, to put it mildly, a tough ordeal by any standard. It is important to remember that the
primary reason African-Americans now live in USA today is because their ancestors were
bought and sold by men who thought they had entitlement, whether derived from religion or
elsewhere, to exploit and transport Africans to the New World. Since then, African Americans
have been a major part of the United States population. They accounted for nearly one-fifth of
the 3.9 million Americans counted in a 1790 Census (Kent 2007, p. 3). Nearly all of these early
African-Americans traced their roots to African slaves brought to the country involuntarily
during the 16th century. The slave trade was illegal by 1808, ending the flow from Africa.
Relatively few immigrants of African origin settled in the United States over the next 150 years,
where U.S immigration laws restricted the entry of non-Caucasian - an era where millions of
Caucasian immigrants were entering from Europe (ibid.). It was not until the 1960’s and 1970’s
that a new resurgence of black immigration developed in America, making the majority of all
blacks in the United States more or less direct descendants of those who were forcefully
displaced as slaves from Africa.
The slaves themselves and later their descendants, who also witnessed injustice in their own time, have left behind legacies that echoes through the ages. This legacy consists most importantly of massive social change, acknowledgement and respect for the African-American community. The changes that did come and abolished slavery or segregation or any other injustice did not come as gifts from above. These were hard-won victories, made in the face of great risk and adversity. The struggle to be free from fear and injustice, the struggle to lead a life of dignity and respect, the struggle to achieve a life of prosperity and where the pursuit of happiness is possible; this struggle continues for many people to this very day, and will continue until all humans are able to rise to their full height without impediment or deterrent - until the inherent dignity of all humans is no longer inhibited in any way, shape or form. In this sense, questions of human freedom are universal, which leaves much still to be discussed and discovered regarding such notions. In our dealing with these notions, we found it most appropriate to go straight to the source of those who experienced injustice - their own thoughts as expressed on paper or in speech. The varying issues concerned with being African-American in America is best understood when examining those who actually dealt with it. This has been a guiding principle in our selection of texts, as we attempt to look at these texts through the prism of two themes.

**Situating ourselves in the academic field**

Extensive studies have been undertaken concerning both race as a social, biological and historical issue. A complete overview will in many ways be both impossible and unfavourable. Therefore only a short introduction to relevant theory concerning race will be displayed in the following.

Before embarking upon a discussion of racial issues, a short definition of the term is necessary. Race can be defined as a biological phenomenon but in this study a social definition is more suitable:

"Race” is a socially constructed mode of human categorization. That people use marks on the bodies of others to divide the field of human subjects into the subgroups we call “races” is a social convention for which no deeper justification in biological taxonomy is to be had. (Loury 2002, p. 5)
Meaning that the subjection of the Afro-Americans in for instance slavery, was not based on scientific evidence proving biological superiority to the Caucasian race but on a social convention among the Caucasian American population, stating that it was acceptable to own another human being. From the earliest notions of racial ideology where man was hierarchically organised from God to all other living beings to the thought of the racial inferiority of the black race, what constitutes race has undergone much revision. However, one thing seems certain: the power of race is in its adaptive capacity to define population groups (Ehlers 2012, p. 16). Or in other words; race is a tool invented by humans in order to categorize and estimate the worth of people - biologically speaking, there are sometimes greater differences between two Europeans than between a European and an African, so to presume the human race is subdivided into races is inappropriate. It is widely accepted that even though slavery was abolished nearly 150 years ago and the Civil Rights Movements dawned about a half-century ago, there is still substantial racial tension and inequality in America (Levine 2004, p. 74). Looking at prison enrolment, unemployment and other indices of well being it is clear that racial disparities exist in the United States. These statistics have remained virtually unchanged over the past 25 years (Loury 2002, p. 4).

Selected works

Since we are tracking a historical development of issues concerning being African-American in America it is natural to select three works from three very different periods of time. The works have not been selected at random but fall close to important events in American history. Their contemporary popularity and importance suggest that they are representative of their time.

Twelve Years a Slave
Solomon Northup’s memoir *Twelve Years a Slave* is one of the most recognized pieces of slave narratives, written with the help and support from David Wilson. The book quickly became a bestselling novel, published 8 years before the Civil War, soon after Harriet Beecher Stowe’s novel *Uncle Tom’s Cabin*, another slave narrative. *Twelve Years a Slave* is written like a journey, describing the everyday life as a working slave in the plantations of Louisiana, and the relationship between the slaves and their master. The narrative is of political relevance, as Northup considers the institutional basis of slavery, assessing one man’s worth over another’s. Furthermore the book deals with ethical aspects regarding the general mentality surrounding
slavery in the acceptance of robbing people of their freedom and claiming ownership of someone as one’s property. As the book is written as a journal or bibliography it is very subjective, with descriptions only from Northup’s point of view throughout the entire narrative. Yet he describes both negative and positive circumstances, for instance in his descriptions of the slaveholder mistress McCoy, of whom he speaks about in very nice and gentle terms. It is expected that a tale of a former enslaved will contain unhappy descriptions of his experiences, as he obviously felt wronged in the deprivation of his liberty. The credibility and reliability of his narrative is therefore reinforced, as he includes positive descriptions of a slave keeper and the narrative seems as a telling of actual circumstances and happenings without exaggerations.

One of the reasons we chose to work with this particular slave narrative is that Northup was able to read and write himself unlike many others. Because of lack of reading and writing skills, former enslaved people only had the option to tell their story with help from Caucasian people. There is the possibility that these Caucasian folks could have had an interest in decreasing some of the details of the stories of the enslaved, because of guilt, denial, shame, anger and fear. These feelings are typical in relation to history in general that we sometimes are so ashamed of, that we deny it ever happened. Like many other slave narratives, Northup’s story was written down with the help of others, but he stands out from the rest, as he has been able to follow the process of the design of his tale, and further, his tale is documented almost immediately after his re-release into freedom. Twelve Years a Slave also stands out from other slave narratives, as Northup’s case is a matter of kidnapping of a free man who eventually regains his freedom. His case is therefore an example of how all African-American people were considered in the eyes of the Caucasian, regardless of status, wealth or claims to freedom.

I Have a Dream
In the 1960s western societies experienced major social, economical and cultural changes. In America this period marked the end of legislative discrimination against Afro-Americans. Martin Luther King Jr.’s world famous I Have a Dream speech was delivered on August 28 1963 before over 250,000 supporters on the steps of Lincoln Memorial during the March on Washington and is considered one of the most defining moments in the American Civil Rights Movement. King’s influence and engagement in the Civil Rights Movement stretch far beyond this singular speech. The year following his speech King was awarded the Nobel Peace Prize as the youngest person in history; he was only 35 years of age at the time. King was one of the most prominent figures of the movement along with Malcolm X, the former national
representative of Nation of Islam. Martin Luther King Jr. was assassinated on April 4 in Memphis, Tennessee. He was posthumously awarded the Congressional Gold Medal and the Presidential Medal of Freedom. Furthermore a national holiday has been named after him: Martin Luther King Jr. Day, which takes place on January 15, around King’s birthday. All these awards are a testament to King’s immense popularity and historical importance. However, I Have a Dream is by far his most famous and influential work and it established his position as one of the greatest orators in American history. This is further illustrated by the fact that more than 30,000 books, 4500 dissertations and 115,000 articles centred around King and his speech have been produced (Ruc.Summon, 2014). Additionally it was also selected the top American Speech of the 20th century in a 1999 poll (Lucas 1999). Knowing the anti-discrimination events and Civil Rights legislations that followed the March on Washington and the sheer number of academic work about the speech it becomes clear that I Have a Dream did not only strike a chord in its own time but continues to intrigue and influence works pertaining to the subject of African-American in America, which makes it an ideal choice for the project. The speech will thus function as a historical link between Northup’s Twelve Years a Slave and Steve McQueen’s adaptation of before mentioned memoir.

12 Years a Slave
The film 12 Years a Slave is an interesting of historical story telling about slavery in the 1800s, as it is an adaptation of the book of the same title from 1853. Thereby it is an image of modern interpretation of an older document, in which certain issues are highlighted while others are left out. At the same time the film was received with an Academy Award for Best Motion Picture of the year, Best Writing, Adapted screenplay and Best Achievement in Directing among other major prizes in 2014. Furthermore the picture grossed $56,667,870 (IMDB.com, 2013) in the United States alone, which is representative for the general American population’s recognition of McQueen’s work. This is also clear when looking at the metascore, which stands at a staggering 97% (Metacritic.com, 2013). The positive reception of the film reflects, if nothing else, a general opinion in formal institutions and society, but whether this opinion is based on an assessment of the filmic properties or the portrayal of slavery is uncertain. Films about slavery have been featured since as late as 1903 with 12 Years a Slave as the first to receive an Academy Award for best motion picture. This reception of the film can reflect a shift in the opinion about slavery amongst the general population, and indicate society's recognition of slavery as part of American history. With the continued racial tension in USA a contemporary work of fiction and its reception is essential to be used as representative of today’s perception of
slavery, and thereby help investigate phenomena in the historical development regarding issues concerning being African-American in America. Furthermore McQueen’s movie is an obvious choice since it is a more or less direct adaptation of the actual slave narrative used in this project, which creates a logical historical flow. It of course adds to the excitement of the movie that it was an African-American director who took on the daunting task of portraying the horrifying experiences of Northup. Interestingly, McQueen had no knowledge of the existence of Northup’s memoir before 2009. At this point McQueen had already started to form an idea for a motion picture about slavery but had no clue of where to start. It was then suggested that he should look at actual slave narratives for inspiration and within days McQueen stumbled upon Twelve Years a Slave. In the director’s own words: “I hope my film can play a part in drawing attention to this important book of courage.” (McQueen 2014, p. xii).

What is our approach?

When examining other academic work pertaining to the subject of racial issues and historical development it is evident that the main focus is on the historical facts and events. The development is explained by laws, social and economic tendencies and other topics related to society on a larger scale. It seems that the first-hand literature is lost somewhere in between all these topics. Through our research it has not been possible to discover any academic research in which a thematic analysis of literary works and their reception is used to describe and understand such a development. However that is what we will embark upon in the following.

In our work with different narratives, we will be dealing with different genres and indeed different mediums of storytelling. We begin with the memoir of Solomon Northup, which is a first-hand account and although it came to be some time after the fact, we consider it a pretty accurate account of the actual events (Worley 1997, p. 243). Following the memoir the project will endeavour to include and analyse Martin Luther King Jr.’s political I Have a Dream speech. Lastly Steve McQueen’s contemporary motion picture adaptation of Northup’s memoir will be included in order to get a sense of present issues concerning being Afro-American. It is critical to emphasize that the project is not intended as a literary analysis and comparison of the works. The interest in this study is the issues and themes that are expressed and created a resonance in their contemporary time in order to draw parallels to the society and
reality in which they were produced; the works cannot be understood only from a literary analysis point of view that transcend the historical context.

The focus in the project will be, as mentioned earlier, on certain themes in relation to suppression and oppression of African-American people in America. In this regard we have chosen above-mentioned empirical material from different times, as representative for different recurring themes. Two common themes that are essential throughout our empirical works is the concept of freedom and worth of human lives. Through an analysis of the chosen empirical works, we aim to discover the meaning and importance of these phenomena and the development of their literary meaning. What did freedom and worth mean in the 1800’s? What did freedom and worth mean during the Civil Rights Movement? And what does freedom and worth mean today? To understand the expression of the themes, reception of the works will be used as sources to get a better understanding of the contemporary perception of the issues, and also what the contemporaries have chosen to focus on. This will be done through essays, reviews, and what others have contributed to the academic field. It is thus the aim of the project to get an insight into the issues and themes that the works are an expression of and to uncover how these reflect the time, in which they were produced. Subsequently it will be a basic assumption in the project that the themes and issues expressed in the works and the reception are of social importance, and that the themes reflect contemporary issues on a more universal social stage. The contemporary reception will be essential towards this goal. We believe that such a study in theme and reception is justified when such a vast number of people choose to engage themselves with the chosen works, whether it is for pleasure, political or academic work. And further that the issues presented in the works are an expression of some tendencies in their time. Thus the selected literature will work as sources that reflect the time in which they were produced, which is another reason for choosing the works: their contemporary popularity.

In this project, works from several different genres will be included; memoir, political speech and motion picture. It could be argued that this is inappropriate when one wishes to compare the works and highlight a development of the themes. However it is not relevant to this project what format the material is mediated through. The genre (meant as the platform of the works) is more or less irrelevant to this project since it is the issues and themes that are essential. Exemplified: if Steve McQueen had written a novel with the same popularity and range as his movie the same issues and themes could have been apparent. If the aim of the project had been a literary analysis the genre would have been of significant importance. However, since it is the
issues, themes and implications for their contemporaries that are of interest, the genre is of lesser significance to our work - it is the material and not the form that is essential. Seeing how it is the issues and themes that have determined how we intend to read and analyse the works, through the themes and contemporary reception, we are working with a functional notion of our sources (Kristensen 2007, p. 53). Our approach to dealing with this project will be a reading of certain works, be they memoirs or movies or other, and through a reading of these combined with a temporary reception of the works, the project aims to uncover a historical development in issues concerning being African-American in the United States of America both in the past and in the present day.
Analysis

In the following the book *Twelve Years a Slave* and the speech *I Have a Dream* is to be analysed thematically with the purpose of identifying the meaning of freedom and the meaning of worth of human lives in the various historical time periods that the empirical works represent. Furthermore the reception of *Twelve Years a Slave* and *I Have a Dream* will be taken into account as representative for the significance of freedom and worth in the time they were produced. Finally, the movie adaptation of Northup’s memoir will be analysed with regards to the selected themes and the translation from memoir to film will be taken into consideration. In this regard McQueen’s film *12 Years a Slave* is used as representative for today’s perception of freedom and worth in the United States.

Twelve Years a Slave

Preliminarily it must be said that contemporary reception of Northup’s memoir has been exceedingly difficult to come by. This of course affects the analytical approach to the text itself. However, by looking at other similar slave narratives the views and thoughts expressed in Northup’s work can be verified. At the release of Northup’s memoir in 1853, first-hand slave narratives were by no means an uncommon occurrence. Among the most famous are Harriet Jacobs and Frederick Douglass’ accounts of their enslaved time. By “slave narrative” is meant the written testimonies to slavery prior to its abolishment in 1865 (Davis 1991, p. xii). Harriet Jacobs’s narrative, found in *Incidents in the Life of a Slave Girl* was first published in 1861. Harriet Jacobs was born into slavery in 1813 but escaped to the North in 1842 where she was taken in by anti-slavery friends from the Philadelphia Vigilant Committee. Around 1952, an abolitionist friend of Jacobs’s suggested that she wrote down her life story. Thayer and Eldridge publishing house agreed to print Jacobs’ autobiography by 1861. Jacobs’ slave narrative took the form of an autobiographical novel and was one of the first accounts of the struggle for freedom by a female slave. The novel aims to speak to the white middle-class women of the North who do not fully understand the detrimental effect slavery has on people. Jacobs appeal to their humanity by showcasing the varying cruelties visited on herself as well as others, both physical and mental. The novel explicitly showcase these cruelties, revealing a series of sexual abuses and harassments, as well as the struggles of being a slave mother, protecting one’s child that might otherwise be sold away. Frederick Douglass’ autobiography *Narrative of the Life of Frederick Douglass, an American Slave* was first released in 1845. Douglass was also born into
slavery in 1818 in Talbot County, Maryland. When he was 12, the wife of his master started teaching him the alphabet although Maryland state law prohibited teaching slaves how to read. When this was discovered, it was with great disapproval of Douglass’ owner, a man by the name of Hugh Auld. In secrecy, however, Douglass continued learning to read and write, because, as he later often said, "Knowledge is the pathway from slavery to freedom" (Jacobs 2004, p. xiii). Finally in 1838 Douglass successfully escaped slavery after several failed attempts, seeking refuge in the North. Since then Douglass wrote several autobiographies, where Narrative of the Life of Frederick Douglass, an American Slave became a bestseller and major influence in supporting abolition. Before his best-selling autobiographies, Douglass was actively engaged in furthering his rhetorical skills as well as furthering his ideals of equality for all. After traveling to Ireland and then Britain in 1845, Douglass started publishing an abolitionist newspaper called The North Star from the basement of the Memorial AME Zion Church back in Rochester, New York. Through this medium, Douglass was able to vent his ideals of abolitionist notions, but also other matters concerned with the inequality between people. Douglass was the only African American to attend the Seneca Falls Convention, the first women's rights convention, in upstate New York in 1848, where the question of Women’s Suffrage was on the agenda. Many present at the convention opposed the idea, but Douglass stood and spoke in favour of the equal rights of women; he said that he could not accept the right to vote as a black man if women could not also claim that right. For as The North Star newspaper’s motto proclaimed: 'Right is of no Sex – Truth is of no Colour – God is the Father of us all, and we are all brethren' (Loc.gov 2014).

When Northup’s story was first published it came to the attention of Douglass and he expressed deep sympathy with Northup’s unfortunate destiny: “Oh! It is horrible. It chills the blood to think that such are.” (Eakin 1968, p. ix). It is crucial to remember that Northup’s story is different in one very important way compared to the others presented above; Solomon Northup was born a free man and was kidnapped into slavery, where both Jacobs and Douglass were born into it. The contemporary popularity of these narratives cannot be understated. All the mentioned works became bestsellers and was reprinted several times. One reason for the immense interest in the slave narrative was “(...) that the Afro-American bondsman, (was) denied a “voice” in print by the de jure and de facto prohibition of literary training (...)” (Davis 1991, p. 36). The narratives intrigued many people in the North due to the fact that they simply did not know the actual implications of being held as a slave. Another reason for the popularity was that at the time of the publication of Northup’s memoir the United States was on the eve of
a civil war that would effectively end slavery. The North and South were deeply divided on several political issues among which the question of slavery was one of the most important. Freedom for Afro-Americans was a privilege reserved only for the lucky one’s born in the northern states, like Northup. So at this time the meaning of freedom is in its most literary form; to be free meant not being owned by another human being. Freedom is not a subjective “feeling” or notion - it is an institutionalized concept of the state - or more precisely: the lack of freedom is. In the memoir the first period of slavery is so crippling for Northup due to him being born a free man with the same rights as any other citizen in the northern states. Being robbed of his rights and freedom leaves Northup in total disbelief: “There must have been some misapprehension - some unfortunate mistake.” (Northup 2014, p. 19). Being born free gives Northup’s tale a uniqueness not seen in many other slave narratives. He does not only understand the concept of freedom - as all people do - he has experienced it himself. Having known better days makes the realization of enslavement a much tougher challenge to face, but he soon realizes that fighting against a corrupt system is a lost cause. Where most slaves was struggling to create an identity Northup must be brutally trained to deny his own (Worley 1997, p. 247). Northup expresses a feeling of intellectual superiority over his fellow slaves at several points in his memoir. Coming from New York he was well educated and had the ability to both read and write; a skill not many born into slavery mastered. His wit and his ability to construct machines and tools assist him greatly during his enslavement. Northup becomes an invaluable resource for his masters and his talents are esteemed far and wide. His personal success and intelligence becomes a testament to the wrongs of slavery. Northup does not feel intellectually inferior compared to his white master. In consequence he cannot see any logical reason behind the institution of slavery. This view seems slightly ironic seeing that Northup himself feels superior over the other slaves.

In one of the most famous paragraphs from his memoir Northup touches on both the concept of freedom and worth.

Men may write fictions portraying lowly life as it is, or as it is not - may expatiate with owlish gravity upon the bliss of ignorance - discourse flippantly from arm chairs of the pleasures of slave life; but let them toil with him in the field - sleep with him in the cabin - feed with him on husks; let them behold him scourged, hunted, trampled on, and they will come back with another story in their mouths. Let them know the heart of the poor slave - learn his secret thoughts - thoughts he dare not utter in the hearing of the white
man; let them sit by him in the silent watches of the night - converse with him in trustful confidence, of “life, liberty, and the pursuit of happiness,” and they will find that ninety-nine out of every hundred are intelligent enough to understand their situation, and to cherish in their bosoms the love of freedom, as passionately as themselves (Northup 1853/2014, p. 135-136).

The slave owners have not themselves experienced the horrors of slavery and the strain it puts on both the body and soul. Their minds are clouded by ignorance. If a slave owner put himself in the same conditions as his slaves he would undoubtedly be subject to a change of heart concerning the institution of slavery. If a white man lived and laboured with the slaves he would come to realise their worth as human beings and not just consider them a part of his property he can utilize for maximum profit. Another assumption made to Northup is that the slave owners do not believe that the slaves understand the concept of freedom since most of them never have experienced it. He opposes this notion and hint at that all human beings have an idea of the meaning of freedom. To further emphasize his point Northup quotes the Declaration of Independence - a document that includes the right for liberty and life. Liberty can be seen as a pendant to freedom and the two others: life and pursuit of happiness is related to the worth of people. No one should be robbed of the opportunity to live. Living here of course means something else entirely than just being alive; living comes from being able to follow your dreams, being free, creating a family and so on.

The predominant attitude among the slaveholders is that the worth of their slaves is equal to any other farm animal. The only difference from a slave compared to a cow or horse is their ability to speak. They are not viewed as human beings but as animals. This idea is based entirely on the colour of their skin: black. A colour that possessed many negative cultural implications for English-speakers: sin, darkness and evil. Contrarily the colour white was connected to purity, beauty and light (Walvin 1996, p. 74). The worth of humans is estimated by their skin colour and not by their personality, skills and so on. This also means that any intellectual skill possessed by the slaves is deemed more or less useless - their worth is in their ability for manual labour in the field or around the house. Consequently the slaves do not have any “voice”, meaning that the opinions of the slaves have no value to their white oppressors. This means that their value is only equal to their physical attributes. Unlike most other slaves Northup has a clear idea of his origins, is educated and has a financially stable background. In this sense Northup has a strong personality increasing his worth both to himself and to others.
Most Afro-Americans born into slavery were not allowed to build an identity themselves; they were given first names by their masters, many were removed from their parents at a young age. Such procedures complicate building intrinsic personal value. Not being worth anything to others also makes it that much more difficult to be worth something to oneself (Worley 1997, p. 249). The slaves are often compared to apes by their white owners - no doubt because of the colour of their skin and their general physical appearance. Another reason for this comparison could be that the slaveholders intend to further diminish the slaves feeling of worth in order to keep them subdued. Still, even based on this and his own horrible experiences Solomon Northup does not hold the cruelty of slavery against one single person or master:

It is not the fault of the slaveholder that he is cruel, so much as it is the fault of the system under which he lives. He cannot withstand the influence of habit and associations that surround him. Taught from earliest childhood, by all that he sees and hears that the rod is for the slave's back, he will not be apt to change his opinions in maturer years (Northup 2014, p. 135).

The white man is notoriously known for crimes and discrimination against other races. And even though malicious personalities, like Epps, exist in the world the overall injustice of a system like slavery cannot be put on a single individual. The whole institution of slavery in America was inconsistent with the Enlightenment ideals of economic independence and private autonomy (Jordan 2008, p. 4). The general hostile attitude towards the slaves corrupted the moral character of the whites for generations and created a moral blindness that was more a result of the normative environment than irrationality or innate evil (Worley 1997, p. 253). Still, even within a flawed moral system humanity can be found:

There may be humane masters, as there certainly are inhuman ones - there may be slaves well-clothed, well-fed, and happy, as there surely are those half-clad, half-starved and miserable; nevertheless, the institution that tolerates such wrong and inhumanity as I have witnessed, is a cruel, unjust, and barbarous one (Northup 2014, p. 135).

Northup indicates that not all slave owners are heartless people treating their slaves like animals. As a specific example Northup mentions one of his former masters: William Ford. Humanity can still be found even within a relationship constructed on a concept of a master and his property and Northup expresses that he wouldn't mind a lifetime of servitude for Ford if only
his family had been with him (Northup 2014, p. 65). But there is still something inherently wrong in the views of even the humane masters. Even though some treat their slaves with respect, ownership over another person is morally incorrect and standing idly by while humans are exploited by a flawed system is essentially as bad as wielding the whip yourself.

I Have a Dream

As specified in the section above, freedom in the 1850s was a question about not being enslaved and living side by side with the rest of the American population. It was not a question of equality between African-Americans and Caucasian people but about having security of safety from the chains of slavery. At the same time, an African-American man’s worth was perceived equally with animals; they are repeatedly compared to apes and only seen useful in relation to the performance of hard labour and any other duties their master wanted done. The essential significance of freedom has changed or evolved from the time of Solomon Northup to the time of Martin Luther King’s speech *I Have a Dream*. King mentions the injustice and inhumanity about slavery but defines the meaning of freedom in other terms and aspects, than “just” being free of chains and captivity. For King freedom is to concern all people regardless of colour, religion or social status. Freedom is not yet achieved until the American population have succeeded in creating a society where all human beings are equal, through a set of human rights applicable to all. Abolishment of slavery does not necessarily mean equality between African-Americans and Caucasian people, which is a mere fact in the 1960s. An African-American man’s worth is still considered inferior to the superior Caucasian people, why they are treated with segregation, discrimination and alienation all around the United States.

The speech *I Have a Dream*, specifically deals with these particular issues and consists of two main sections; in the first half King speaks about the injustice that the African-American population has been through historically and still face in the United States in the 1960s. He begins by recalling the promises of the *Emancipation Proclamation*, which meant the abolition of slavery in the United States and later refers to the *Declaration of Independence* and the United States constitution, which are all concepts heavily seeded in the American self-perception. In this regard he describes how African-American people, a hundred years later, still are not living as free people, and urges that the many promises of liberty and equality are fulfilled. Even though the *Emancipation Proclamation* was supposed to give freedom for all enslaved citizens, the African-American population was still subjugated by discrimination and
alienation through segregation, police brutality and systematic corruption. In the first part of the speech, several sentences are initiated, “Now is the time (...)” (Americanrhetoric.com, sentence 40), in the call to no longer accept the living terms of segregation and racial injustice. The repetition of this phrase provides a sense of timeframe, for how long unjust treatment of African-American has been going on, and thus creates a feeling of sympathy for those who have been affected by it. Through repeating the words “Now is the time (...)” (Americanrhetoric.com, sentence 40), he encourages people to take action now in order for change to happen and no longer to ignore and adapt to the prevailing conditions. These changes shall mean security of justice, democracy and brotherhood amongst all people while obtaining civil rights, and thereby gain freedom. The essential core in this idea about what freedom implies is equality. King’s point of view in relation to the worth of human beings is clarified in this context, as he believes that everyone is to be considered the same, regardless of the colour of your skin or religious believes. Sadly that is not everybody’s believe in King’s time, where as he expresses, the African-American population in America is considered as “(...) ‘insufficient funds’(...)” (Americanrhetoric.com, sentence 33) even though the Declaration of Independence was to ensure liberty and happiness for all American citizens. The worth of an African-American man is thus not yet equal with the worth of a Caucasian man, as is indicated by continuing discrimination, segregation, alienation, suppression and oppression. This indicates, that freedom is not just achieved through a set of laws of human rights but through changing the general view on humanity, to a belief “(...) that all men are created equal.” (Americanrhetoric, sentence 95).

The transition to the second part of the speech is a reminder that the struggle for freedom must be a non-violent struggle, performed with “(...) the high plane of dignity and discipline.” (Americanrhetoric.com, sentence 59). While King refuses to be subjugated any further and insists on revolutionary change without gradualism, he yet expresses how the African-Americans must rise above war and violence. He thus wishes for the change to be peaceful but powerful without force and hatred. In this sense, freedom is not just about avoiding discrimination and being equal with Caucasian people; it is about creating a peaceful and harmonious nation, where all live side by side without segregation or hatred amongst groups of people of any kind.

“The marvelous new militancy which has engulfed the Negro community must not lead us to a distrust of all white people, for many of our white brothers, as evidenced by their
presence here today, have come to realize that their destiny is tied up with our destiny. And they have come to realize that their freedom is inextricably bound to our freedom.” (Americanrhetoric.com, sentence 63).

He emphasizes that faith and hope is what will ensure unity in the struggle for freedom. These visions, dreams and hopes for the future American society is explained in the second part of the speech. The theme of this part of the speech is “I have a dream (...)” which is repeated 8 times in order for his message to be pound through (Americanrhetoric.com, sentence 97). This message entails that the conditions in America for the African-American population in King’s time, is to be history and not a present reality for the younger generations, “I have a dream that my four little children will one day live in a nation where they will not be judged by the color of their skin but by the content of their character.” (Americanrhetoric.com, sentence 106). This statement reinforces his opinion that people must take action now, for the sake of future generations and not wait any longer. A very famous passage in this part of the speech is the sentence: “I have a dream that one day on the red hills of Georgia, the sons of former slaves and the sons of former slave owners will be able to sit down together at the table of brotherhood. ”(Americanrhetoric.com, sentence 100). This statement indicates, that the African-American population must focus on changing the future rather than sticking to the horrors of the past and hold grudges. African-Americans and Caucasian people must recognize each other regardless of a common past and present in segregation and inequality to be able to achieve a future nation of true freedom and happiness. In the subsequent passage several of the sentences initiates the words “Let freedom ring (...)” (Americanrhetoric.com, sentence 121), in the description of how freedom is to be spread from state to state. He mentions states from all over the country, including some of the worse places in relation to racism, which shows how he wants to unite the entire country as one, without inequality and hatred based on colour, religious beliefs or historical heritage. Finally, when freedom is achieved for the entire American population it will be a “(...) sweet land of liberty (...) where my fathers died, land of the Pilgrim’s pride (...)” (Americanrhetoric.com, sentence 117). King’s speech proved to be a turning point for understanding the social and political upheaval of the time and presented the nation with a vocabulary to express what was happening. This may be one of the reasons for the reception of the speech and its following importance in which it seems to have started a gradual realisation of the extend of the severity of the current situation in America and a sense of guilt among Caucasian people. After his leadership in the African-American Civil Rights Movement he established a reputation of one of the greatest orators in American history. Not only did he
receive the *Nobel Peace Prize* for combating racial inequality through nonviolence, he was also awarded the *Presidential Medal of Freedom* and the *Congressional Gold Medal*. Aside from his nonviolent approach, his way of affecting people through his speech might be the reason for his impressive legacy of recognition. Just days after the assassination of King, the Just 5 years after the performance of King’s speech the Congress passed the *Civil Rights Act* of 1968 which put an end to segregation in the forms of housing discrimination, lawful discrimination and social steering among other things. What is not clear from a transcript of the speech, is King’s facial expressions, movements and tone of voice, which greatly helped to highlight the message and purpose of the speech and undoubtedly helped to make this particular speech as famous as it is.

**12 Years a Slave**

At the time of the release of the memoir, *Twelve Years a Slave* became a bestseller. It enjoyed some popularity and sympathy among black and certain white communities. However, for nearly all of the following 150 years, the book disappeared into obscurity, remaining all but forgotten (Doherty 2014, p. 358). Some scholars did make efforts to resurface this important text, most notably in the joint venture by history professors at Louisiana State University Sue Eakin and Joseph Logsdon who in 1968 released *Library of Southern Civilization: Twelve Years a Slave*, as cited earlier. In their work, the account of Northup is checked and found to be remarkably accurate. Eakin and Logsdon find that Northup’s narrative deserves to be believed not simply because Northup ‘seems’ to be talking reasonably, nor merely because he adorns his tale with compelling and persuasive details. Eakin and Logsdon conclude that at every point where materials exist for checking his account, it can be verified (Eakin 1968, p. 17). Despite their efforts, the story of Solomon Northup remained largely unknown apart from inside certain academic circles. Northup’s story would not see popular appraisal until nearly 150 years after its original inception through the release of the major motion picture *12 Years a Slave*, directed by Steve McQueen.

Any film adaptation of a historical text is inevitably subject to scrutiny, especially regarding the degree to which the film is true to the original source. In translating the memoir of Northup into the big screen, it is unavoidable that some things are lost in this translation, as it is surely equally certain that a film gains other aspects that the original source did not intend. McQueen’s film is no different. It is therefore not surprising that the film spawned a wide array of
responses. Some of the harsher voices have gone as far as to call his film “torture porn”, labelling it as pursuing themes of sadism rather than realism (Li 2014, p. 326). McQueen, however, insists that 80% of the dialog in the film is directly from the book, and many of the most horrific scenes in the film have direct textual corollaries (ibid.). This is evidently true if one looks at certain scenes pertaining to these horrific incidents in the film. When Northup, portrayed by Nigerian-born actor Chiwetel Ejiofor in the film, is first captured, he insists that he is indeed a free man and that he has been unlawfully imprisoned. His protests are met with a savage beating with a paddle until it breaks over his back (12 Years a Slave 2013, 00:14:30).

Additionally, in one of the films most explicit moments, we are witness to the brutal whipping of Patsey, portrayed by Kenyan Lupita Nyong’o, a slave owned by the cruel slaveholder Edwin Epps, Epps being portrayed by Michael Fassbender. In this scene, Patsey is being punished for going to the neighbouring plantation to obtain a bar of soap which was denied her by her own mistress. In the film, the scene depicts the whipping in gory detail, leaving both Patsey and the audience in a dismal state (12 Years a Slave 2013, 01:51:45). Such scenes of explicit violence in the movie are in fact also described in painful detail in Northup’s own narrative (Li 2014, p. 326). The film demonstrate through its striking parallels between book and screen that it takes the source material seriously, although inevitably there do exist discontinuities between the two works (ibid.). The scenes of violence in the film are generally portrayed in a strikingly unsympathetic fashion, as if the eye of camera is disconnected from any emotional reaction. It would be easy as a filmmaker to have a full symphony orchestra play melancholy tunes to accompany the horrible pictures on screen. However, to use such classical film-tools to invoke an emotional response in the audience can rob the scenes of their realism. In showing restraint, McQueen ends up depicting the horrors soberly, thus not removing anything from the great seriousness of the subject matter with which it ought to be presented. These are not some trifling matters but serious historical events, and the full gravity of these events is not diminished by any overly sentimental portrayal of them. The film does generally take a stance as observer of the varying atrocities as opposed to being actively involved. While Northup in his memoir is quite explicit in his writing about being witness to many atrocities with great dismay, the film makes great effort to portray the passivity that defines many of Northup’s responses to the horrors he experiences in the film (Li 2014, p. 328). Early in the film, while Northup is being transported by ship to the south, Northup is shown being witness to a sailor trying to rape one of the slave women aboard the ship. Another male slave tries to intervene, but he is immediately stabbed to death by the sailor (12 Years a Slave 2013, 00:24:10). No such scene takes place in Northup’s original memoir, and further, the scene might be considered
historically suspect - the sailor does not own the slave and would surely be aware of the consequences of losing such a valuable commodity (Li 2014, p. 328). In Northup’s original text, the life of the slave is taken not by the sailor but by small pox. McQueen’s version of his death, however, helps contextualize the passiveness with which Northup is witness to these injustices. Northup is not indifferent to the plight of this other slave, but the viewer understand that should he take action, he would surely himself be killed. In the beginning of the film, McQueen positions Northup primarily as a witness to atrocities. In this way, the point of view of Northup in the film is very much paralleled in the point of view of McQueen’s own camera - both McQueen and his film’s protagonist are observers to the horrors of slavery. While Northup is himself beaten and abused, it is primarily other slaves that receive the harshest treatments and who are the centre of the most vicious and haunting scenes of violence (ibid.).

Similarly, the camera spends some time in several scenes on simply observing the face of Northup. In these instances, the film makes clear its intentions to portray how a person’s sense of self-worth can be diminished to the point of destruction simply through observing the changes in the facial expressions of Northup. In Northup’s own memoir, one gets the impression that his innate sense of worth and pride is undeterred throughout his troublesome years as a slave. This is an interesting parable in regards to our theme of worth, because here the memoir and the movie take very different approaches. While the worth and pride of Northup in the memoir remains undiminished, we see in the film a drastic change in the posture and the way with which Northup carries himself over the course of the film. When we first meet Northup in the film, he is a free man, making a living as a farmer and a violinist. We see him walking tall, with his back straight and his head held high. He is a proud man in the beginning of the film, carrying himself with a sense of purpose and dignity. As his decent into slavery unfolds, he tries to uphold his pride and refuses to allow himself to fall into despair. In one scene, a woman whose children have been separated from her and sold to another plantation is in great distress. She is weeping uncontrollably in sorrow of her lost children, whom she may never see again. Northup, who has witnessed the actual separation of the mother from her children as well as her predicament now in this desperate state, scorns her for her attitude. He asserts the importance of staying strong despite the circumstances, for as he says, “You let yourself be overcome by sorrow, you will drown in it” (12 Years a Slave 2013, 00:40:00).
He keeps himself strong to survive. He suppresses his emotions, refusing to feel, refusing to fall into despair. Over the course of the film, however, his spirit is gradually broken, and his very body transforms from a strong and prideful man to, in the end, a mere shadow of his former self. The process is gradual, though there are certain scenes, which display the varying stages of Northup’s decline into deeper and deeper despondency. The exposure to song, for instance, seems to have profound impact on Northup in the film. When a slave dies from exhaustion on the cotton fields, a funeral is held where the slaves gather and sing songs in his honour. In this scene, the camera is fixed on the face of Northup. Through the silently observing lens of the camera, the audience is witness to Northup slowly allowing himself to be overwhelmed by emotion, as the singing intensifies and he begins to sing along; first only with a whimper, but as his emotions come rushing to the surface, he is soon joining the serenade in full vigour, voicing his emotions through song, for the first time allowing his emotions to take hold (12 Years a Slave 2013, 01:40:30). The gravity of his situation becomes, finally, unbearable, and his face expresses this realization. The film portrays Northup in the beginning of the film as hopeful, optimistic even that his freedom will once again be granted him. However, as the film progresses, this hope of again being a free man seems to shrink into an untenable fantasy. In the film, Northup begins to realize that his worth as a human being has been reduced to that of chattel or some other commodity of commerce. The film seems to make great efforts in conveying this message. The worth of a human being is reduced, from the onset by the slavers, but as the film progresses, even in the mind of Northup himself. When Northup is finally reunited with his family, we see a man who has lost all sense of self respect, who is servile, ignoble and abject; he is a mere shadow of his former self. In this fashion, the movie has a very large focus on the personal suffering of Northup and those around him. The film uses the cinematic medium to showcase a very personal and intimate storyline, which enables the audience to grasp the grotesque institution of slavery, which in a more general setting might be less impactful. As one review notes, McQueen’s use of the melodramatic form produces an audio-visual experience that many others have praised for its skillful rendering of the horrors of slavery and many others have avoided out of fear of its “realistic” images of brutality. McQueen employs the conventions of melodrama to produce a version of Northup’s narrative that is more powerful than the original memoir (Doherty 2014, p. 357).

12 Years a Slave won the prestigious Academy Award for Best Motion picture of 2013. However, it was not the only film to deal with the issues concerning being black in America that year. Also that year we saw the release of The Butler directed by Lee Daniels and Mandela:
The Long Walk to Freedom directed by Justin Chadwick. The former follows Cecil Gaines, as he serves eight presidents during his tenure as a butler at the White House, while the Civil Rights Movement, Vietnam, and other major events affect this man’s life, family, and the American society in general. The latter is a chronicle of Nelson Mandela’s life journey from his childhood in a rural village through to his inauguration as the first democratically elected president of South Africa. This was a year, then, that brought to the surface many of the still lingering tensions between communities in America. This year was rich in remembrance of those important events in the past that should come to define the United States as a nation for generations hence (or the events of South Africa in the case of Mandela). The history of the oppression of black people in America is not yet a settled issue, and these films reveal a sensitivity to the apparent need to present or reprise the cultural interpretation of the African-American history that somewhat clashes with the normative ideal of The American Dream (Beck 2014, p. 150). While many films portray American life as an opportunity to work hard and gain much, the reality is often a lot less glamorous, especially considering the heritage of oppression against African-Americans, which still has lingering repercussions in American society today. These movies remind us that the American Dream is not so well suited as an account of African-American history (ibid.).
Discussion

At the time of Solomon Northup’s abduction, the institution of slavery was in decline, being finally absolved approximately two decades after Northup’s ordeals. In his memoir, the narrative is primarily concerned with the broader lines of an unjust system and the wrongs committed against the entire African-American population. The narrative is a personal tale and is written from a first-person point of view - however, the general attitude towards the injustice of slavery in his writing, is a result of a more normative system of inequality rather than a personification of evil, carried out by certain individuals. Although Northup classify most of his captures as unpleasant and cruel men, he seems acutely aware that these men are mere products of the system in which they live. He almost holds the slaveholders themselves guiltless in the sense that he does not see the slaveholder himself as cruel as much as he sees slavery as a fault of the system in which he lives. The influences of habit and associations impact an individual so deeply that the individual himself cannot be blamed. Here Northup inadvertently outlines the true struggle which faced the American society at this place in time. This struggle can be seen as a clash of a traditional societal order with new Enlightenment ideals of private autonomy - or more precisely; a clash between an emerging modern society and the traditional society (Venn og Featherstone 2006, s. 459). With this in mind, it is not surprising that even a tale of very personal origin takes a more normative stance on these matters with which it is concerned. Consequently, this merits the argument that the style of the narrative and how the themes of freedom and worth are expressed is a reflection of the challenges faced by the American society as a whole. Taking this position could also explain the emotional detachment with which Northup’s reunion with his family is portrayed in the memoir. It is therefore possible that Northup’s memoir takes this normative approach precisely because these matters, with which it is concerned, are an expression of some more general tendencies in the society he inhabits. There is a direct correlation between the subject and the narrative expression with which this subject is dealt with.

In moving to the issues of the 1960s, however, a vast number of events have changed the world irrevocably, as for instance with the two World Wars, the Russian Revolution and the Great Depression. The world is now very different from what it was at the time of Solomon Northup. The old world order fell with the defeat of the Axis Powers. The technological development has secured a higher standard of living for more people than ever before. The most basic needs of physical safety are now fulfilled, most people have an abundance of food and need not to
starve, most live without fear of threat which enables them to engage in higher levels of Maslow’s *Hierarchy of Needs* (Conforti 1972, p. 10). Consequently, identity, social roles and societal structures can more easily reach the discursive agenda, now that people do not have to spend the majority of their day simply trying to survive (Saggers and Sims 2005, s. 67). An individualization process has begun but it is still in its adolescence. Applying these facts to the themes of freedom and worth, it is perhaps not surprising that these terms convey different meanings in different times. At the time of Martin Luther King Jr., racial discrimination by law was still a reality in the form of segregation and other discriminative measures. However, unlike the institution of slavery, smaller communities largely governed the concept of segregation.

Especially many Southern states “(...) asserted the doctrine of states right to limit the influence of federal government.” (Evans 2007, p. 181). Consequently it can be argued that the meaning of freedom and worth in the 1960s was a community based question rather than relating to the issues on a larger societal scale. Freedom and worth during the *Civil Rights Movement* meant complete equality between the races within communities - opposed to the doctrine of *separate but equal*. These movements from a broader societal scale to a more community-based scale could reflect the increasingly individualized way that the notions of freedom and worth are considered in the public sphere during the 1960s. Hereby not saying that the *Civil Rights Movement* and its impact were only on a local scale. Still, seeing how discrimination was not institutionalized in the same way or magnitude as slavery, the expansion of discrimination toward African-Americans in the United States was arguably more locally determined.

In our postmodern society, of which the movie *12 Years a Slave* is a product, the way in which we view the position of the individual in society has changed even more radically - the individualization process has evolved dramatically over the past 50 years; Facebook, Twitter and Instagram being perfect examples of our obsession with ourselves. To a degree thus far unprecedented in human history, our modern society regards the individual as the maker of the world we inhabit, rather than merely a player in a vast, global scene (Heller og Brooke-Rose 1986, s. 1). Major societal overhauls and revisions on a grand scale is now generally a thing of the past (at least in the western world), and the individual inhabit an increasingly larger role in our society today; individuality has become the prism through which other aspects of society is perceived (Bauman 2013, s. 140). The very intimate and personal way with which Northup’s story is portrayed in *12 Years a Slave* is therefore arguably a reflection of our modern affinity for such stories, further evident by the positive reception the film enjoyed. Contrary to the original memoir, McQueen’s adaptation is almost entirely focused on Northup’s personal
descent into despair and the physical and psychological effects of his enslavement; perfectly exemplified by the very emotional end scene where Solomon is reunited with his family. The concepts of freedom and worth are portrayed in a personal and individual way, so that the audience is able to relate personally to the sufferings of the protagonist. Had the movie been more generally concerned with the concept of slavery, the impact of the facts might not have been as potent. These realizations are therefore not controversial considering the general development in our modern society toward a more individualized way of thinking about the world.

The concepts of freedom and worth are still more individualized phenomena, and we have come to expect individual autonomy and freedom to be considered equal in worth regardless of one’s colour or creed. Even so, there are still hints of racial discrimination and injustice in today’s American society through, for instance, police brutality. Individual incidents have recently sparked the debate of racial inequality in America. These incidents have not been on a societal scale, nor a community scale but have been stand alone examples of personal discrimination towards single individuals. As late as August 2014, an African-American man of 18, was shot and killed by a law enforcement officer in Ferguson (NYtimes.com 2014). An ongoing series of protests and civil disorder roiled in the weeks after the incident, as people were questioning the relationship between law enforcement officers and the African-American population in the United States in general. This incident has been considered an example of racial discrimination, since the shooting was fatal, the victim unarmed and as the grand jury declined to indict the officer (ibid.). A series of similar incidents took place in the same month as the Ferguson incident, and other such episode have taken place all over the country in recent years; some of the most notable being the Zimmerman shooting in the famous Stand Your Ground trial of 2012 and the Baltimore Riots in 2015: "Unarmed African-American men are shot and killed by police at an alarming rate. This pattern must stop." (MotherJones.com, 2014). This raises a question about whether discrimination because of physical appearance is still an issue in the United States today. If that is the case, the promises of the Civil Rights Act in regards to freedom and equal worth for the African-American population in USA, are not yet fulfilled. Whatever difficulties remain in America regarding racial discrimination, it can at least be said that African-Americans to this day still feel marginalized and persecuted.
Conclusion

In the 160 years that has gone from Northup’s book to McQueen’s film, a lot of movements have occurred in relation to civil rights, which have changed people’s minds and views with regards to what is just and what is right. Likewise the meanings of the phenomena freedom and worth have gone through radical change. Through our analysis of the three main works, Solomon Northup’s memoir Twelve Years a Slave (1853), Martin Luther King’s I Have a Dream (1963) and the film adaptation of 12 Years a Slave (2013) by Steve McQueen, some conclusions can be drawn which echo the conclusions of many other works concerned with the topic of inequality. It is clear that the social equality that exist today in the U.S for African-Americans is unparalleled to any other period in the nation’s history. However, when Africans were first introduced to the Americas, it was aboard the slave ships of European settlers. Those who were so tenderly gifted with a complexion vastly different from the European standard were looked upon as mere beasts, worthy only of hard labour and even harder discipline. These shackles of oppression were eventually broken, making way for a wider acceptance of the notion that the colour of one’s skin did not determine the value of one’s ‘soul’. The barbaric subjugation of the blacks through violence and tyranny was no longer possible. However, the whip was eventually replaced by the truncheon should the black community try and move for change. Although no one proclaimed ownership of others anymore, USA had moved to intellectual suppression of the black minority, stripping them of basic rights, such as the right to vote, to assume public office or even to enter certain establishments of commerce - these were privileges only for the Caucasian people. The folly of such bigotry was eventually revealed, and any such discrimination is now in direct conflict with American law, as well as the mentality of the general population. The historical development of the standard of living for African-Americans has moved from total oppression to personal sovereignty and autonomy. These conclusions mirror those of many others.

In our analytical work with the themes of freedom and worth, however, we have found it possible to discuss the narrative implications of the different works. The meaning of freedom and worth has changed from the time of Northup’s memoir to the present understanding of the terms. Northup’s memoir reflects a meaning of the terms freedom and worth in their most literary sense. When Northup speaks of achieving freedom for himself and his fellow African-Americans, he refers directly to the emancipation of people who are enslaved. Furthermore, in dealing with the notion of worth, the African-American population is regarded as having no
worth besides that of a farm animal or a commercial commodity. These themes are dealt with in absolute terms. To be free means to not be owned, and having worth means being regarded as a fellow human being as opposed to being viewed as someone’s property. By the time of the Civil Rights Movement the concepts of freedom and worth have changed. Being free now means having rights equal to that of any other American citizen regardless of colour or creed - it has become a question of equality. It is no longer a struggle to be considered man or animal but a struggle to be considered equal to your fellow man - it has become a question of overcoming inferiority. While the truncheon may still be used in lieu of conversation, words have retained their power, and the struggle for emancipation from inequality is fought not on the battlefields of war but in the arena of discourse. Complete legal equality being achieved in the aftermath of the Civil Rights Movement the meaning of the notions of freedom and worth ought to be identical for all Americans, regardless of colour. However, the notions still contain certain implications for the African-American population today, which begs the question; does there still exist unequal treatment of people of different colour in America today? Recent events suggest that the many African-Americans in America today still consider their freedom being impeached and their worth being considered less to that of their fellow Americans. Even though the American society has undergone a series of civil rights movements, it seems that racial discrimination and injustice are still current issues for the African-American population in the United States today. Today’s perception of the concepts of freedom and worth in America is above all personal autonomy and individual equality amongst all kinds of people, regardless of skin colour and religious beliefs. Looking at the United States today, we propose that viewing change through the prism of a society or even a community has shifted to the interpersonal and the intimate thus conveying those important events of the past as personal voyages, where the individual takes center stage. The modern interpretation of Northup’s memoir reflects a tendency to portray even institutional wrongdoings in this personal manner. Thus the project suggests that the themes are an expression of contemporary societal issues and in consequence a reflection of a more general historical development in the Western society.
Suggestions for further research

For further investigation of the issues involved in the project and the empirical works included, one could look upon the reception of respectively the book Twelve Years a Slave and the film 12 Years a Slave. While the book was a best-selling novel when it was first published, and went unknown for the next 100 years, the film received an Oscar Award for best motion picture of the year. Many different factors may explain the different receptions of the works, as they were produced 160 years apart. As Steve McQueen won an Oscar for his film, it might indicate some sort of acknowledgement amongst the American population of slavery as a shameful part of American history that was not present in Northup’s time. Either that, or it can be an acknowledgement of this particular way of depicting American slave history. If this is the case, it could be interesting to investigate what in the American society, mentality or something else has generated this acceptance. If the acknowledgement of 12 Years a Slave can be explained by the depiction of slavery in America in this particular film, it could be interesting to investigate what exactly makes this film different from for instance The Butler directed by Lee Daniels or Mandela: The Long Walk to Freedom directed by Justin Chadwick.
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