

History Unchained: The (DE)Evolution of the Slave Narrative from Frederick Douglass to *Django*

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Amongst the many historical atrocities committed by the United States of America, few have had the scope of impact on the landscape of our country as the creation and implementation of the chattel slave system. As with most historical traumas, the institution of slavery and the damaging effects of that system have remained a consistent fixture in the storytelling traditions of our country; however, the interpretation of that trauma has remained far less static. This paper will focus on the ways in which the narrative depiction of the institution of slavery has changed and the impact of that change on our perception of the historical event. Do modern reinterpretations of the American slave experience serve to maintain a continuous dialogue regarding historically traumatic experiences, or do these interpretations serve to dilute the historical by undermining more traditional slave narratives? This research will focus on two slave narratives, 1845's *Narrative of the Life of Frederick Douglass, An American Slave* by Frederick Douglass and 2012's *Django Unchained* and examine the similarities and differences in their depictions of the institution of slavery, as well as how that depiction is impacted by the audience and intent. While the narratives may serve different societal functions, it is also important to analyze the ways in which each narrative permeates societal consciousness.

No completely accurate depiction of the American chattel slavery system will ever exist, however, the conditions that differentiated the American colonial slave system from other historical forms of slavery are widely agreed upon. While versions of slavery had existed throughout human history, the chattel slave system was unique in its coordination of three distinctive components: (1) the degradation of the individual through complete dehumanization (2) the classification of slavery and imposition of degradation based on a defined concept of race and (3) the inheritability of the condition of slavery matrilineally.

When the *Narrative of the Life of Frederick Douglass, an American Slave* was published in 1845, it not only shocked audiences in its descriptions of the institution of slavery, but also in the eloquence and intelligence demonstrated by its author, himself a former slave. For many Americans, the concept of black intellect was completely new and Douglass' narrative was an impressive rebuttal of the very foundations of inferiority that the institution of slavery was built upon.

One of the most important components to consider when examining Frederick Douglass' narrative is the audience for whom he was writing. While Douglass' narrative served to portray the slave experience, the book was indisputably written for a specifically white audience. More than being written for a white audience, however, slave narratives of the 1800s "were, to a large extent, propagated by abolitionists who edited, promoted and distributed them" (Nichols 149). In the case of Douglass' narrative, the intended audience was white, intellectual Northerners, whose inaction was a byproduct of cognitive dissonance and whose own self-value would not be threatened by the rise of a black intellectual class.

The unavoidable consequence is that Douglass' work adopts a white literary aesthetic. Douglass chose "to write for his audience using educated white English in order to reach and influence the widest audience possible, the audience that might be able to act on his and other slaves' behalf" (Raybourn 30). Regardless of his adoption of the societal master language, the intent behind Douglass' narrative was to educate the white Northerners on the conditions of slavery (Raybourn 34). For many Americans, the concept of black intellect was completely new and Douglass' narrative was an impressive rebuttal of the very foundations of inferiority that the institution of slavery was built upon.

By the mid 1800s, there was little to no economic incentive for Northern Whites to continue to support the slave system (Nichols 155), however, the vast majority lacked any motivation to act because slavery had become an accepted, even expected, institution. The significance of Douglass' narrative "to Americans who lived a century ago, and their importance today, lies in the attitudes which they bred in their readers. The narratives present full and, for the most part, reliable facts about slavery" (Nichols).

Beyond humanizing blacks through his own ability to navigate white language, Douglass was able to humanize them through the substantive depictions of community within the slave system. Even within the most dehumanizing of conditions, Douglass is able to eloquently articulate the relationships that he was able to develop with his slave brothers and sisters. While at the Freeland plantation, Douglass expounds the depth of the relationships that he is able to develop, how the shared experience allowed them to become "linked and interlinked with each other...with a love stronger than any thing I have experienced since" (Douglass 2212). In fact, the community that Douglass describes is one that is more inclusive and united than most free communities: "We never moved separately. We were one;" (Douglass 2212). These recognizable components of social structure and human interaction within black slave communities helped to dispel the myths of the inferiority of blacks and thus, the justification for their enslavement.

Historical proximity to the event has not dimmed our fascination with creating narratives depicting slavery; foremost amongst these contemporary interpretations is *Django Unchained*, a 2012 film by controversial director and auteur Quentin Tarantino. While early crafters of slave narratives, like Frederick Douglass, were limited by a society that was less diverse and governed by more overtly racialized social constructs, Tarantino's work was released to an increasingly diverse and multifaceted American audience that had even elected its first mixed race President, Barack Obama.

In examining Tarantino's depiction of the slave narrative, it is important to understand the film as first and foremost the work of an auteur, intended for a broad audience with some knowledge of the existence of the institution of slavery. Within this context of entertainment before education, the film successfully presents a unique reimagining of slavery and expands the role of the black man within that system; however, the film was met with a great deal of controversy by respected members of the black community. Foremost amongst these leaders was the black filmmaker, Spike Lee, calling for a boycott of the film by black audiences because he felt the premise of the movie was disrespectful to blacks and their ancestors (Seymour).

While Quentin Tarantino's film, takes a more modern—and artistically liberal—approach to depicting the slave experience, it also covers a breadth of incredibly complex and important nuances within the slave system, including the sowing of tension within the ranks of the slave, division between house and field slaves, the justification of slavery through eugenics, the complicated sexual relationship between white men and black slave women (Cobb), however, most of these issues are presented more than they are explored historically. And therein lies the main controversy of the film.

While there are elements within *Django Unchained* that have great historical and academic value, these pieces are framed within a wholly unrealistic revenge narrative that while eliciting cheers from the crowd, is a superficial depiction of empowerment through violence, which could not be further from historical reality. This is not to minimize the importance of historical attempts, most notably by John Brown in 1859 and Nat Turner in 1831 (Reidy), to arm slaves in rebellion against the system of their oppression, however, it is irresponsible to ignore the consequences for those who were involved in these failed uprisings. In both of those historical examples, the leaders were executed and made examples. Only in a Hollywood reimagining of the Plantation Era South, can the character of Django—even as a free black man—whip a white overseer and be immediately punished for subverting the racial hierarchy upon which the entire institution of slavery thrived.

The entertainment value of *Django Unchained* is undeniable, especially for those who have suffered at the hands of oppressive institutions that continue to impose upon the rights of minority citizens in this

country. The movie, however, does so at the fringe of fantasy, sacrificing a realistic portrayal of the slave system for thrills and a Hollywood ending. The real question is: does the movie, director, or entertainments in general, owe any debt to the historically traumatic experience of slavery? Does revising history, even in such a blatantly inaccurate way, serve to detract from the reality of the black American experience?

Without the right context, yes. If Douglass and his contemporaries suffered from sentimentality, modern filmmakers suffer from extreme portrayals as well. The line between Beecher Stowe's unrealistically kowtowed and Christ-like Tom and Tarantino's violently liberated *Django* needs to be explored and depicted more within the narrative of the black experience if the identity of that community can be viewed less in the reductive binaries of post-colonial theorists, who posit that the only space allowed for the colonial subject is as "both savage (cannibal)" and "the most obedient and dignified servants" (Bhabha 68) and more through the lens of complexity and nuance.

Both narratives provide an important analysis of the American chattel slave system, however, the presentation within *Django Unchained* requires a broader context for its historical value to become apparent. While the institution of slavery has been formally abolished, the effects of slavery are still omnipresent for the black community. It is this concept of an inheritable psychological trauma within the black community that Dr. Joy DeGruy has extensively researched, written about and termed "Post-Traumatic Slave Syndrome" (P.T.S.S) in her 2005 book of the same name. Dr. DeGruy posits that P.T.S.S. is:

"A theory that explains the etiology of many of the adaptive survival behaviors in African American communities throughout the United States and the Diaspora. It is a condition that exists as a consequence of multigenerational oppression of Africans and their descendants resulting from centuries of chattel slavery. A form of slavery, which was predicated on the belief that African Americans were inherently/genetically inferior to whites. This was then followed by institutionalized racism, which continues to perpetuate injury." (DeGruy)

It is for this reason, because the institutional oppression born out of the same ideology, as chattel slavery still remains that the narrative depiction within *Django* has the potential to damage the black community. The violent resistance depicted in *Django* departs from the physical resistance depicted in Frederick Douglass' narrative, instead favoring a reductive revenge fantasy over the more concrete act of empowerment.

In both narratives, violence is a side effect of oppression; yet, it does not solve any of the true problems of the oppressive institutions. It is nothing more than a

hollow attempt to reclaim recognition by any means possible. Douglass' isolated act of violent resistance against the slave breaker, Mr. Covey serves to empower him with self-confidence beyond the act of violence: "It rekindled the few expiring embers of freedom, and revived within me a sense of my own manhood. It recalled the departed self-confidence" (Douglass 2207). Inversely, Django's consistent return to violence comes to define him, to typify him as a one-dimensional embodiment of black revenge.

Frederick Douglass' narrative is rooted in history and the direct experience of the trauma it is depicting, while Tarantino's contemporary depiction is rooted in a fantasy that incorporates important concepts of race and history within the construction of something unreal. Like the character depicted in the movie, *Django* offers an essential modern narrative of empowerment and overcoming oppression, however, it is important to consider it within the proper contemporary context. As a stand alone, *Django* can be a dangerous challenge to the horrifying realities of the slave system, however, in concert with other slave narratives including that by Douglass, it does serve an important function in exploring sociological issues within the context of slavery and more importantly, within the context of our own society today. Frederick Douglass' narrative is rooted in history and the direct experience of the trauma it is depicting. Tarantino's depiction is rooted in a fantasy that incorporates important concepts of race and history within the construction of something unreal.

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