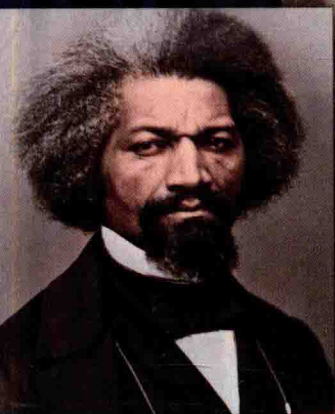


HISTORICAL  
EXPLORATIONS  
*of*  
LITERATURE

# AMERICAN SLAVERY



*Robert Felgar*

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## *A Historical Exploration of Literature*

**Robert Felgar**

HISTORICAL EXPLORATIONS OF LITERATURE



**GREENWOOD**

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# AMERICAN SLAVERY

## **Recent Titles in Historical Explorations of Literature**

The Harlem Renaissance: A Historical Exploration of Literature

*Lynn Domina*

To Sophie

In Appreciation:

Many and deep thanks to

Susan Hurst, English Department Secretary at

Jacksonville State University,

for her unflagging typing, her infectious sense of humor,  
and her tolerance for the author's foibles.

# I



## Introduction

The United States originated in a contradiction that cannot be resolved: a country supposedly based on freedom was also based on slavery. This contradiction led to the Civil War and the Civil Rights Movement, both of which lessened but did not eliminate it. In the nineteenth century, four works of American literature in particular registered the tremors caused by the conflict between freedom and slavery: Frederick Douglass's *Narrative of the Life of Frederick Douglass* (1845), Harriet Beecher Stowe's *Uncle Tom's Cabin* (1852), Harriet Jacobs's *Incidents in the Life of a Slave Girl* (1861), and Mark Twain's *Adventures of Huckleberry Finn* (1884). All four reveal the disaster produced by basing a society on a monumental contradiction; all four are implicit and explicit demands that the country must eliminate slavery if it is to be based on freedom.

The most highly regarded slave narrative in American literature, Douglass's autobiography uses the life of its hero as a platform from which to attack the institution of slavery so as to help end it. Douglass knew all too well what he faced, because he knew slavery, slaveowners, and slave-breakers intimately, and he later realized the "peculiar institution" was



not going to wither away but would have to be destroyed by military violence (one of his sons fought in the Union Army). The documents reproduced here contextualize Douglass's achievement to illustrate, and thus bring to life, a vague concept to many nineteenth-century white Americans, the overseer. For instance, the excerpt from Douglass's third version of his life story, *The Life and Times of Frederick Douglass*, makes it all too clear that Mr. Covey, the sadistic overseer Douglass depicts so memorably in his 1845 *Narrative*, was far from the worst. The Frederick Law Olmsted selection from his *The Cotton Kingdom* will help today's students understand that the brutal treatment of Douglass's aunt in the *Narrative* was typical of the way black women were treated rather than an exception. The two letters reproduced from *The Farmers' Register* will help contemporary readers grasp how little overseers understood about the slaves they abused, the point being that if they had understood them, the overseers would have had to face the fact that slaves were every bit as human as their overseers were.

In addition to understanding the topic of overseers, contemporary students of Douglass's *Narrative* will also benefit considerably from a knowledge of nineteenth-century American schoolbooks. As Douglass himself mentions, he was profoundly influenced by *The Columbian Orator*, a popular collection of writings used in American schools in the nineteenth century. Today's students will hear the echoes of "Dialogue between a Master and a Slave" and "Oration on the Manumission of Slaves" in Douglass's autobiography; they will also come to understand why Douglass was attracted to Arthur O'Connor's "Speech on Catholic Emancipation," a speech that suggests parallels between Ireland's Catholics and America's slaves.

The next section of *American Slavery* examines how *Uncle Tom's Cabin* (1852) views slave auctions and the Underground Railroad. The excerpt from Solomon Northup's *Twelve Years a Slave* will help students understand harrowing aspects of these appalling transactions that Stowe does not engage. The selection from Henry Bibb's *Narrative of the Life and Adventures of Henry Bibb* adds details to Stowe's concept of slave auctions, thereby helping contemporary readers get a stronger grasp of slave auctions than Stowe's novel alone provides. The third excerpt in this selection, taken from *Narrative of Sojourner Truth*, may surprise students by its depiction of a rare act of mercy in the otherwise utterly sordid business of selling human beings: Truth's parents were sold together instead of sold separately, as so often happened.

This chapter also explores the Underground Railroad, which some students have heard of, however little they know about it. All three of the excerpts about it contextualize this strategy for getting slaves safely into free states, resulting in a deeper understanding of Stowe's version of the URR, as it is sometimes called. Today's readers of *Uncle Tom's Cabin* will find the story of Henry Box Brown, from William Still's *The Underground Railroad*, particularly interesting and revealing: Henry Box Brown mailed himself out of slavery by climbing into a box that was mailed to sympathizers of his desire to escape from slavery; this ingenious strategy may encourage contemporary readers to doubt the accuracy of many of Stowe's portraits of black people as simpleminded.

The third focus of this volume is Harriet Jacobs's *Incidents in the Life of a Slave Girl*, which is contextualized by documents that illuminate Nat Turner's Rebellion, nineteenth-century views of slavery, and the Fugitive Slave Law (1850), all topics that figure prominently in the novel. Jacobs devotes most of Chapter XII to Turner's Rebellion. Her novel will mean much more to students who are knowledgeable about that insurrection and its widespread implications, particularly for the preposterous notion that slaves were contented. The excerpt from Thomas R. Gray's pamphlet, *The Confessions of Nat Turner*, will help today's students understand why there was so much fear in Edenton, North Carolina, the setting for *Incidents*, after the rebellion Turner led. The two letters reprinted here try to downplay the insurrection in an attempt to reassure white readers that they can safely retain their sense of complacency about slaves, but just twenty-six years after the publication of these letters, thousands of African Americans volunteered to serve in the Union Army. Thomas Wentworth Higginson's article on the rebellion, appearing thirty years later, is much more truthful than Gray's: students will come to see that the people in Edenton were right to be frightened, because Turner and his men were fighting for their freedom.

Knowledge of why the Fugitive Slave Law of 1850 is so important comes as a revelation to contemporary students, but that knowledge is crucial for understanding and appreciating *Incidents*. It was a draconian measure, designed to force everyone, in the South or the North, to report runaway slaves. But it so infuriated Northerners, many of whom had thought little about slavery before 1850, that a law that would supposedly protect the interests of slaveowners ended up making a civil war to end slavery more likely.

Reproduced here, in addition to a copy of the law itself, are excerpts from Ralph Waldo Emerson's speech on it as well as from Frederick

Douglass's. Emerson's condemnation of the law will help today's students understand why Jacobs was so frightened of the law: she could have been another Shadrach Minkins, whom Emerson is so upset about in his speech, and been returned to her owner, Dr. Flint. Douglass's fiery condemnation of the Fugitive Slave Law will help contemporary students understand why it was totally unacceptable to many whites in the North, where Jacobs and her two children eventually end up.

The section on nineteenth-century views of American slavery is designed to help students grasp different attitudes toward slavery during Jacobs's lifetime. Today's students find John C. Calhoun's defense of slavery absolutely appalling; it was published when Jacobs was twenty-four years old, and Calhoun is beyond doubt convinced slavery is justified, just as Dr. Flint is in *Incidents*, proving how hard it is to change the mind of people who do not understand they do not understand. On the other hand, the excerpts from Angela E. Grimké and Lydia Maria Child reveal two women who well understand the horror of chattel slavery. As Abraham Lincoln put it later, if a person does not understand that slavery is wrong, then nothing is wrong for that person. That view strikes a resonant chord with contemporary American students.

The final chapter examines *Adventures of Huckleberry Finn* as a historical exploration of American slavery. Concentrating on abolition, and then on slavery and Christianity, the chapter provides students with documents that will bring Twain's best-known novel to life in ways that are not available to students who may not be knowledgeable about American history. For example, when William Lloyd Garrison, the most famous but not the most effective white abolitionist, told his listeners in a speech he delivered in 1831 (*Huckleberry Finn* is set in 1835 or 1845) that he recanted his support of gradual abolition of slavery, by saying, "tell the mother to gradually extricate her babe from the fire into which it has fallen," our students will deeply understand how abominable slavery was: it is like being turned into ashes. The excerpt from Henry Highland Garnet's "An Address to the Slaves of the United States" will be especially stirring to adolescent males in that Garnet appeals to the manhood of his listeners.

The last section on *Huckleberry Finn* explores the topic of slavery and Christianity through excerpts from James Henley Thornwell's "A Southern Christian View of Slavery" (1861) and through Richard Furman's "Exposition of the Views of the Baptists Relative to the Coloured [*sic*] Population of the United States" (1822). Today's students will need to understand that Thornwell, like the Phelps in *Huckleberry Finn*, refused to acknowledge any contradiction between institutionalized

Christianity and their behavior, or is there? If the latter is what Twain is suggesting, then in Twain's view institutionalized Christianity is not Christianity. Furman's exposition will also help contextualize for today's students the Phelps's complacency about slavery and their "kind" treatment of Jim.

## II



# Chronology

- 1808** Congress prohibits African slave trade; ignored much of the time, the internal slave trade continued until 1865.
- 1811** 75 slaves killed in insurrection in Louisiana.
- 1815** Underground Railroad established by Levi Coffin.
- 1816** Richard Allen establishes AME (African Methodist Episcopal) Church.  
American Colonization Society established to transport free blacks to Africa.
- 1819** "A Fireball in the Night." This is what Thomas Jefferson called the "Missouri Compromise."
- 1820** Missouri Compromise: no slavery allowed north, 36 degrees, 30 minutes latitude.  
Missouri admitted as a slave state.
- 1821** Early antislavery newspaper, *The Genius of Universal Emancipation*, published by Benjamin Lundy.

- 1822** Liberia founded by ACS.  
Denmark Vesey leads slave revolt in Charleston, South Carolina.
- 1827** First (or one of first) black newspapers published, *Freedom's Journal*.
- 1829** David Walker's *Appeal*: extremely outspoken demand that slavery be abolished.
- 1830** First National Negro Convention (Philadelphia).
- 1831** William Lloyd Garrison begins publication of *The Liberator*; it demands immediate emancipation of the slaves.  
Nat Turner's Rebellion: this slave revolt will figure prominently in *Incidents in the Life of a Slave Girl*.
- 1833** American Anti-Slavery Society founded.
- 1835** Boston nearly lynches William Lloyd Garrison.
- 1836** Gag rule adopted in House of Representatives: all anti-slavery petitions tabled.
- 1837** Rev Elijah P. Lovejoy killed by mob in Alton, Illinois. He becomes a martyr to abolitionists.
- 1839** *Amistad* revolt: 53 slaves take over Spanish slave ship.
- 1841** *Creole* affair: Slaves on the *Creole* rebel and sail to Bahamas.
- 1844** Gag rule lifted.
- 1845** Baptist Church split over slavery.
- 1846** Thoreau refuses to pay poll tax to protest slavery and Mexican War.
- 1848** Free Soil party formed; it opposes the expansion of slavery into western parts of the United States that are not yet states.
- 1850** Congress adopts the Compromise of 1850: California admitted as a free state but slavery allowed in other former Mexican territories. Bans sale of slaves in Washington, DC; requires that fugitive slaves be returned to their masters.
- 1851** Shadrach Minkins, a runaway slave, rescued from court custody by a crowd in Boston.
- 1852** *Uncle Tom's Cabin* published.
- 1854** William Lloyd Garrison burns Constitution in public, describing it as "a covenant with death and an agreement with hell."
- 1855** Death penalty passed for helping a fugitive slave in Kansas; Douglass nominated by Liberty Party to be secretary of state in New York State.

- 1856 John Brown and six other men kill five supporters of slavery.
- 1857 In the *Dred Scott* decision the Supreme Court rules that neither the Bill of Rights nor the Constitution applies to black Americans and that the Missouri Compromise of 1850 is not constitutional.
- 1859 John Brown's Raid on Harpers Ferry, Virginia; Brown, a friend of Douglass, is hanged.
- 1860 Lincoln elected president; South Carolina secedes from the United States.
- 1861–1865 Civil War; Douglass urges Lincoln to allow black men to fight for the Union, which the president finally agrees to in 1863; one of Douglass's own sons, Lewis, serves.
- 1863 Emancipation Proclamation.
- 1865 April 14: Lincoln assassinated.  
December 18: Slavery abolished by Thirteenth Amendment.  
December 24: Ku Klux Klan founded.
- 1866 Civil Rights Act grants citizenship to anyone born in United States.
- 1867 Federal troops occupy the South to impose martial law during Reconstruction.
- 1870 Fifteenth Amendment grants right to vote, but African American voters in the South and women everywhere remain disenfranchised.
- 1877 Reconstruction ends.
- 1896 *Plessy v. Ferguson*: U.S. Supreme Court approves segregation as long as facilities are "separate but equal."



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