

# The Use of Slave Narratives in a High School English Class

SUSAN ARPAJIAN JOLLEY

Like most English teachers, I have spent my career teaching fiction and poetry. However, realizing that most people read more nonfiction than fiction in their academic careers and personal lives, I have made the effort in recent years to incorporate nonfiction works into every curriculum I teach. I routinely bring in articles from the local paper. I find stories in the *New York Times*. My students practice summarizing and paraphrasing, using articles from *Time* and other magazines. I create directed reading activities and pull vocabulary from any and all sources. The key to making nonfiction work, I find, is to connect it to the

basic curriculum set forth by the school. For instance, when I teach Robert Lipsyte's novel *The Contender*, I see possibilities everywhere around me, from articles about sports and fitness, to news accounts concerning high school and college hazing, to debates and discussions about drug addiction and its treatment. All of these nonfiction connections can bring an immediacy and relevance to the study of any novel. We can't ignore the possibilities for enrichment that nonfiction can add to our classrooms.

One of the nonfiction connections I've drawn in recent years is between African American fiction and the nonfiction narratives of former slaves. To me, slave narratives resonate in a modern classroom for so many reasons, for, as Robin D. G. Kelley states in the foreword to *Remembering Slavery: African Americans Talk about Their Personal Experiences of Slavery and Emancipation*, "Racial slavery has shaped virtually every aspect of our nation's history" (vii). The shapers of public school curricula have recognized this point, among others, and we have seen a tremendous growth in multicultural awareness in our schools in the past decade. Latino literature, African American literature, Asian literature, and literature from other groups have all been added to the canon. Slave narratives play a vital role

in American history. We have seen that students from every racial and ethnic group can increase their understanding of the American experience by learning about the everyday lives of the Africans who were brought here on slave ships and the African Americans who became their descendants.

But what place do these historical narratives from former slaves have in an English classroom? Can they really be treated as pieces of literature? Can the English teacher deal with them with ease? Will students be motivated to read them? My experience has shown the answer to all these questions to be a resounding "yes." Historical narratives can be used in any way a piece of fiction can be used: as a tool to study motif, theme, voice, figurative language, and dialect, and as a springboard for debate on the many current issues involving race in our country. In fact, including slave narratives in the curriculum can serve both English and history teachers and provide a valuable but all too infrequent experience in cross-curricular studies for secondary students. Reading a novel is one thing; historical accounts, told in a "real" person's voice, can provide a new dimension to the curriculum. Narratives are not the typical historical texts most students encounter at the high school level; they are primary sources that aid both English

and history teachers in developing reading, interpreting, and researching skills in their students.

My use of nonfiction slave narratives grew out of my teaching of two works of fiction, one of which is most often taught in Advanced Placement classes, and the other of which is standard fare in secondary school curricula: Toni Morrison's *Beloved*, and Mildred Taylor's *Roll of Thunder, Hear My Cry*. While these two novels are very different in scope and difficulty, they are similar in that they both deal with African American experience after slavery. Students, whether they be eighth or ninth graders reading *Roll of Thunder* or seniors studying *Beloved*, can enhance their understanding of historical, political, psychological, and literary issues by reading slave narratives, which can range from Olaudah Equiano's accounts of conditions on a slave ship in 1755 to transcriptions of interviews with former slaves recorded as late as the 1940s.

### **Toni Morrison's *Beloved* and Historical Accounts of Margaret Garner**

My first experience using slave narratives in a secondary school classroom occurred several years ago when I taught Morrison's novel *Beloved* to my Advanced Placement seniors. This novel, the story of an escaped slave who kills her child rather than submit to the slave catcher who has come to reclaim her and her children, stirred deep emotions in my students, most of whom were African American females. Before reading *Beloved* the majority expressed horror that a mother could kill her child, as the protagonist Sethe does. Debates on the topic continued in and out of the classroom while we studied the novel. Recognizing the need to further understand the climate of the times, I assigned my students research projects on topics ranging from Quakers, abolitionists, and fugitive slave laws to the encoding of escape songs and the meanings hidden in quilts.

We turned to slave narratives when my students became interested in the historical events on which Toni Morrison based her novel and, in particular, the historical figure, Margaret Garner, on whom Morrison based the character Sethe. I sent students to the Internet, armed with scores of sites I had obtained from the high school librarian during Black History Month, to see what historical information they could find to clarify the complex issues set forth in Morrison's book. First they found

an account of Margaret Garner's escape over the frozen Ohio River in 1856 and her subsequent capture. This information was based not on a narrative from a slave, but rather on one from Levi Coffin, the abolitionist who helped thousands find freedom on the Underground Railroad.

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Maleeha, a girl from Pakistan whose family history caused her to identify greatly with the suffering of the characters in *Beloved*, shared with the class the account based on Coffin's writings. She then led us to Steven Weisenburger's *Modern Medea*, a historical investigation of the Margaret Garner case. Throughout her research, Maleeha and the class were deeply moved not only by the novel, but also by the historical accounts they read. Maleeha wrote that these texts remind "us each how fortunate we are not to have our hands tied, our mouths held by iron bits for months, not enough space to rid ourselves of human waste . . . how lucky we are to breathe in free air." Maleeha, though not African American, was haunted by her reading of *Beloved*; in addition, she spent countless hours researching the facts behind the novel.

In our unit on *Beloved*, fiction and nonfiction merged in a sense. Students were in awe of Toni Morrison's art and the sheer emotional power conveyed in her novel. They also enhanced the lessons learned by reading historical accounts that opened their eyes to the realities of slavery and its

aftermath. Shayna wrote the following account in a letter addressed to administrators in the Willingboro school district:

As a student, I have always been taught the watered down account of slavery. [These readings] all provide a profound and detailed account of slavery's tribulations. I tremendously enjoyed reading the novel and learning the important history that needs to be known, to help me proceed into the future.

I was especially pleased. Through our study of fiction and nonfiction together, my students felt they learned truths and lessons that had eluded them in years past.

### **Dealing with Historical Realities in *Roll of Thunder, Hear My Cry***

*Beloved* is a difficult book to read and a sensitive one to teach. However, I also encountered challenges when I taught Mildred Taylor's *Roll of Thunder, Hear My Cry*, a novel recommended for middle school students. I taught the book to ninth graders and, while the actual reading was not a problem, much of the content is controversial even for older students and is thought provoking for us all. I decided to turn to selected slave narratives to illuminate some points and corroborate some issues alluded to in Taylor's novel.

*Roll of Thunder, Hear My Cry*, set in rural Mississippi during the Depression, is the story of the Logans, a strong, independent, land-owning black family that wages an admirable battle against the injustices and indignities they and other blacks suffer. The story is full of bad news and good news. For instance, the white landowners in the area do everything in their power to strip the Logans's land from them. The Logans, however, prevail, and are able to keep their land. Most of the whites in the book are bigots who see successful blacks as threats; however, the Logans are aided by a white lawyer who fights fearlessly for justice. Though the Logan children are mistreated in many ways, they do get their revenge. The children's friend, T. J., is arrested for committing a crime that is not entirely his fault; his life is spared, though, at least for the time being. Taylor's method of tempering reality with positive outcomes applies to other, more controversial issues she raises in the novel.

One such disturbing issue is the practice of "bred stock," revealed to the Logan children by

Mr. Morrison, a family friend who experienced slavery as a child. He explains the practice this way to the young narrator, nine-year-old Cassie, and her siblings:

"Well, Cassie, during slavery there were some farms that mated folks like animals to produce more slaves . . . My folks was bred for strength like they folks and they grandfolks 'fore 'em. Didn't matter none what they thought 'bout the idea. Didn't nobody care." (149)

In Taylor's manner of tempering harsh reality, Mr. Morrison goes on, however, to tell the children that "my mama and daddy they loved each other and they loved us children . . ." (149–50). Also, the strong, loving nuclear family at the center of the novel provides the best antidote to the disturbing images Taylor creates of life during slavery.

Another controversial issue raised in *Roll of Thunder* is the idea of the conversion by Southern whites of Africans to Christianity. Mrs. Logan, Cassie's mother and the model for assertive and appropriate action in the book, delivers the following speech to her nine-year-old daughter:

"They [white people] also said that slavery was good for us because it taught us to be good Christians—like the white people . . . But they didn't teach us Christianity to save our souls, but to teach us obedience. They were afraid of slave revolts and they wanted us to learn the Bible's teachings about slaves being loyal to their masters. But even teaching us Christianity didn't make us stop wanting to be free, and many slaves ran away." (128)

Again, Taylor softens the blow of this revelation to Cassie: the Logans are devoted Christians who attend church and revival meetings. As much as the author tempers these harsh truths, they nevertheless cannot be ignored.

As my class was reading *Roll of Thunder*, these issues had to be confronted. Controversial and upsetting as they were, they provided a natural bridge to nonfiction narratives. Mr. Morrison's recollections of his life as a child before emancipation reflect many of the narratives and interviews in *Remembering Slavery*. This recently published book and tape set provides transcriptions of the memories of former slaves recorded in the 1930s and 1940s. While the content of the fiction and nonfiction versions may be the same, the tone is decidedly different. Compare and contrast this factual account from an interview of Rose Williams, a former slave from Texas, with Mr. Morrison's account in *Roll of Thunder*. Here Williams tells of her master's attempt

to force her into a relationship with a man she did not like, the purpose of which was to create more members of the labor force. The sixteen-year-old Rose objects, but must comply:

De nex' day I goes to de missy and tells her what Rufus wants and missy say dat am de massa's wishes. She say, "Yous am de portly gal and Rufus am de portly man. De massa wants you-uns for to bring forth portly chillen. . . ."

De nex' day de massa call me and tell me, "Woman, I's pay big money for you and I's done dat for de cause I wants yous to raise me chillens. I's put yous to live with Rufus for dat purpose. Now, if you doesn't want whippin' at de stake, yous do what I wants."

I thinks 'bout massa buyin' me offen de block and savin' me from bein' sep'rated from my folks and 'bout bein' whipped at de stake. Dere it am. What am I's to do? So I 'cides to do as de massa wish and so I yields . . .

I never marries, 'cause one 'sperience am 'nough . . . De Lawd forgive dis cullud woman, but he have to 'scuse me and look for some others for to 'plenish de earth. (130)

This heart-wrenching nonfiction account, for students mature enough to handle it, makes many points that Taylor is unable to make in *Roll of Thunder*. First, the oral quality of the account is striking and can provide lessons in dialect, or standard and nonstandard English. Emotionally, the first-hand account from the point of view of a teenage girl provides a quality that cannot and should not be replicated in a book like *Roll of Thunder*, which is basically written for younger readers. Last, and most noteworthy, perhaps, is the psychological complexity conveyed in the nonfiction account by Rose Williams. This short passage imparts elements of fear, guilt, naiveté, intimidation, sacrifice, and morality.

The issue of Christianity is also dealt with in many narratives. Just as Mrs. Logan tells Cassie that slaveowners used Christianity to rationalize slavery and compel obedience, Frederick Douglass, in his *Narrative of the Life of Frederick Douglass*, provides this example of the same practice:

I have said my master found religious sanction for his cruelty. As an example, I will state one of many facts going to prove the charge. I have seen him tie up a lame young woman, and whip her with a heavy cowskin upon her naked shoulders, causing the warm red blood to drip; and, in justification of the bloody deed, he would quote this passage of Scripture—"He that knoweth his master's will, and doeth it not, shall be beaten with many stripes." (319)

With discretion, readers of *Roll of Thunder* can be introduced to such issues through a combination of fiction and nonfiction.

### Teaching Slave Narratives as a Separate Unit

My most recent use of slave narratives occurred with tenth grade honors English students. Since there was no novel in this American literature course that could provide a convenient springboard for a study of these historical narratives, I decided to teach the material to my students, none of them African American, in a separate unit. I began with the conventional narratives provided in the literature anthology and progressed to less frequently read works. Students eventually researched narratives on their own and wrote literary analyses based on narratives of their choice. I was pleased and moved by many of their insights.

I began by showing the class a short excerpt from Steven Spielberg's *Amistad* to acquaint them with the conditions on a slave ship. Most students knew the term "Middle Passage" and were acquainted with the history of the European slave trade from their history classes. While some critics have pointed out that Spielberg took liberties in his version of the Amistad rebellion and its aftermath, the opening sequence, though very violent, is an effective introduction to excerpts from the autobiography of Olaudah Equiano. This work, formally titled *The Interesting Narrative of the Life of Olaudah Equiano, or Gustavus Vassa, the African*, was published in 1789 as the first work of its kind. The most frequently published excerpt is from Chapter 2, in which Equiano describes the horrid conditions on the slave ship:

The closeness of the place, and the heat of the climate, added to the number in the ship, which was so crowded that each had scarcely room to turn himself, almost suffocated us. This produced copious perspirations, so that the air soon became unfit for respiration, from a variety of loathsome smells, and brought on a sickness among the slaves, of which many died, thus falling victims to the provident avarice, as I may call it, of their purchasers. This wretched situation was again aggravated by the galling of the chains, now become insupportable; and the filth of the necessary tubs, into which the children often fell, and were almost suffocated. (76)

Excerpts from Chapter 2 of Equiano's autobiography are widely anthologized in high school American literature texts.

This autobiography and many other full-length narratives are published separately. There is a recently published volume, however, compiled by William L. Andrews and Henry Louis Gates Jr., entitled *Slave Narratives*, which is a handy tool for a teacher. This book contains, in their entirety, the narrative by Equiano, “Incidents in the Life of a Slave Girl” by Harriet Ann Jacobs, “The Confessions of Nat Turner,” and “Narrative of the Life of Frederick Douglass,” as well as the narratives of James Albert, Jacob D. Green, William and Ellen Craft, Sojourner Truth, Henry Bibb, and William Wells Brown. This anthology is an indispensable resource for anyone interested in the conditions of slavery.

Perhaps the most effective narratives are those by Frederick Douglass. Excerpts from his two autobiographies, *Narrative of the Life of Frederick Douglass* and *My Bondage and My Freedom*, appear in most American literature anthologies. Douglass’s writing is so powerful, however, that interested students could easily read either work (the first one is much shorter). The descriptions of the true nature of slavery, the perspectives on history, and the insights into himself and others are as compelling today as they were in the nineteenth century. Take, for instance, Douglass’s widely anthologized description of his physical battle with the cruel overseer, Mr. Covey:

He [Mr. Covey] asked me if I meant to persist in my resistance. I told him I did, come what might; that he had used me like a brute for six months, and that I was determined to be used so no longer. With that, he strove to drag me to a stick that was lying just out of the stable door. He meant to knock me down. But just as he was leaning over to get the stick, I seized him with both hands by his collar, and brought him by a sudden snatch to the ground. (330)

After Douglass wins this fight, he reflects:

This battle with Mr. Covey was the turning-point in my career as a slave. It rekindled the few expiring embers of freedom, and revived within me a sense of my own manhood. It recalled the departed self-confidence, and inspired me again with a determination to be free. (331)

As students will easily see, this nonfiction narrative is rich in drama, suspense, and figurative language.

My tenth grade students read these narratives and more, including works by Sojourner Truth, James W. C. Pennington, Henry Bibb, and others. I provided some narratives, and students found a wealth of material online. I assigned them the task

of discovering a common theme or motif in at least three narratives and exploring that theme in an analytical paper. We worked through these papers as we would any paper on literature, from prewriting to revising and editing. I was pleased on several counts: my students were researching and learning about history, developing their skills at literary analysis, and responding on an emotional level to the power of language.

The students expressed shock and outrage at the conditions they read about. Katie, for instance, discovered the motif that “life lived as a slave is not life at all.” In her paper she examined the slave’s commonly expressed desire to die rather than live in bondage. She wrote:

Of all human beings, these incredibly smart and driven African American authors are the last people you would expect to give up the fight for life by wishing for premature death. But in the instances of Douglass, Equiano, and [Margaret] Ward, what we need to understand is that for a slave there is no life . . . one who is enslaved does not prefer death over life, but the heaven of freedom over the hell of slavery.

Another student, Gillian, read an account of a slave auction and recognized that white people viewed blacks as “nothing”; “they weren’t even considered human.” She added the words of the lullaby “All the Pretty Little Horses” to corroborate her thesis. This slave song describes a common situation: a house slave must leave her own baby in the fields in order to care for her master’s children. Here is the second verse of the lullaby:

Way down yonder  
In the meadow  
Lies my poor little babe.  
Bees and butterflies  
A-peckin’ on its eyes.  
Poor little thing is cryin’ “Mammy.”  
Blacks and bays,  
Dapples and grays,  
All the pretty little horses.  
(Blood-Patterson 130)

Gillian commented, “There must have been a feeling of total helplessness in slave mothers, who were denied the right to tend their own children . . . It seems as if, no matter what the circumstance was, black people were just not considered as important as white people.” What better way for a student to discover our country’s history than through these first-hand accounts?

Brian wrote about the “recurring pattern of the whip” in the narratives he read. He examined the whip’s relationship to slavery as a whole, stating that “the whip’s only application was slavery, and slavery’s only method of containment was the whip.” In his paper, Brian discussed Frederick Douglass’s confrontation with Mr. Covey, noting that once Douglass “overcame the whipping, Mr. Covey, his master, was rendered completely harmless.”

Joe expressed admiration for the authors of the narratives he read. I am particularly proud of his perceptive response. He wrote:

During this time intelligent, strong-willed men not only broke free from their physical and mental bondage, they succeeded in life. They did not have any formal education, yet they expressed natural intelligence. These men either skillfully escaped from their masters, or they won their freedom some other way. They wrote their accounts of life as slaves, not as a reflection on their terrible past, but as an account of their triumphs over atrocious hardships. All of these stories have an element of pride, in which the author delivers his story as a proud free man who overcame the mental and physical shackles of slavery.

## Conclusion

I have discussed just a few ways nonfiction narratives can be incorporated into an English class, but the possibilities for further readings, research, cooperative activities, projects, speeches, and debates are endless. It is important that we do not shy away from the controversial issues that arise when we read about and discuss slavery and its aftermath. Reading these narratives can, according to Ira Berlin, Marc Favreau, and Steven F. Miller in their introduction to *Remembering Slavery*, “put a human face on an inhuman social system that ended in the United States not that many generations ago, a system whose oldest survivors were the grandparents and great-grandparents of Americans still living” (xlvi). Looking for ways to include the stories of all Americans can lead us to a greater understanding of each other, ourselves, and our country.

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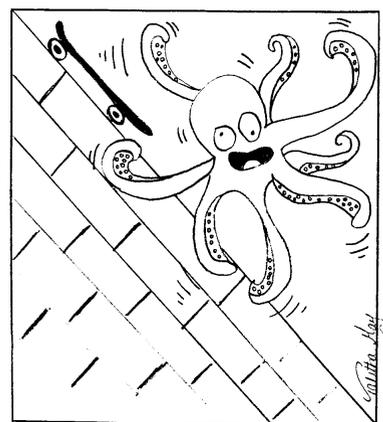
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SUSAN ARPAJIAN JOLLEY teaches at Cinnaminson High School in New Jersey.



Octopus Wrecks

Talitha May lives in Fort Collins, Colorado, where she teaches at Colorado State University