Narrativization of Solomon Northup's Journey from Bondage to Freedom in Twelve Years a Slave

This research paper is an attempt to probe into Narrativization of slavery to freedom in Solomon Northup's novel *Twelve Years a Slave*, keeping the trope of a journey from bondage to slavery into focus. This researcher's main concern is to examine, pointed out and discuss the characteristic of slave narrative in the paper. It analyzes the novel as an American antebellum slave narrative and its dramatization of the journey of the narrator from slavery to freedom from beginning to its ending.

Slave narratives are biographical and full of the truthful account of the escaped slave about the cruel system of slavery. The narrator recalls his/her life beginning from his birth. According to this narrative, Northup was an African American carpenter who was born free in Minerva, Essex County, New York, and was the son of a freed slave. In 1841 he was kidnapped by slave-traders, having been enticed with a job offer as a violinist. When he accompanied his supposed employers to Washington, DC, they drugged him and sold him as a slave. He was shipped to New Orleans where he was sold to a plantation in the Red River region of Louisiana by several different owners for 12 years. He made repeated attempts to escape and get messages out of the plantation. Eventually he gets news to his family, who contacted friends and the governor of New York, Washington Hunt, to his cause. He regained his freedom in January 1853 and returned to his family in New York and there, with the help of Editor David Wilson, wrote his account in *Twelve Years a Slave.*

The story revolves around Northup, who was kidnapped from the North to the South. His steadfast love for his wife and children fortified him to endure slavery and to devise a means to be rescued. His narrative is unique because most slave narratives were written by individuals who were born into slavery and escaped to freedom but he

is born free and became slave and again be free. He was a kidnapped victim, not a fugitive. Moreover, he was a rarity among slave narratives because it was authored by a white ghostwriter, David Wilson. Wilson took the facts Northup provided him and rendered them into as-told-to-the-writer.

In his first year of freedom, in 1853, Northup wrote and published his memoir *Twelve Years a Slave*. He lectured on behalf of the abolitionist movement, giving more than two dozen speeches throughout the Northeast about his experiences, to garner public support against slavery. He is out of the historical record in 1857 and only on 1863, a letter reported him alive. Some believed that he had been kidnapped again, but historians believe it unlikely, as he would have been considered too old to bring a good price. The details of his death have been a mystery; nobody has disclosed how he died.

He was born to an unnamed mother and Mintus Northup, a former slave who was freed on the death of his master, Northup lived the life of a free man and educated tradesman in New York. Beginning with his childhood, he was early acquainted with voting and civic life through his father, and he developed a strong sense of his own liberty and dignity. Like his father, he maintained a cordial relationship with the white family that had previously held his own family in bondage, an association that would help secures his freedom. Northup and his wife, Anne Hampton Northup, were engaged in a quintessentially American quest for social and economic advancement when he was enticed away from the safety of Saratoga Springs, New York, with the promise of work and kidnapped into slavery in 1841. Upon his escape in 1853, he resolved to tell his story, first to the *New York Times* and later in a book through his editor, David Wilson. Although his sensational story showed great commercial promise, Northup insisted in its first pages that his primary aim was to give a bold and

truthful statement of facts without exaggeration, and expose cruelty of bondage.

It is a first-person narrative, told entirely from him, which is refreshing in a way. His story is very real and raw, and his story alone. Much of the book is made up of his thoughts on his experiences, and what he sees. He references them often while in bondage, quite possibly helping to keep him alive and hopeful that he'll one day be free again. So there is not any correspondence between him and his family for the entire 12 years of his captivity. In fact, they are not even sure what happened to him or where he is during that long stretch of time. But as we find out towards the end of the novel, there was a search for him and a belief that he had indeed been kidnapped into slavery. Then a question arises, how the protagonist narrates the details? What is the significance of the narration? What are the strategies of narrating the true story of slavery? Why are slave narratives' authenticity and truthfulness questioned?

This Novel was published in Auburn and Buffalo, New York, as well as in London, England in the summer of 1853. It had sold 30,000 copies by 1856, a sales record rivaling that of Frederick Douglass's 1845 *Narrative* in its first five years of publication. In the fall of 2013, an adaptation of this memoir, *12 Years a Slave,* a major motion picture was released. Many of the critics have studied the novel from different perspectives. Northup's book has drawn large number of criticisms since its publication and many debates came into prominence. Some of the issues pointed out by the critics are discussed here.

Manohla Dargis, a noted critic of the nineteenth century slave narratives, declines to appreciate. She admits that the novel is full of extravagant fictional elements. The incorporation of extravagant elements has spoiled some of the pristine aspects of this novel. She claims, *Twelve Years a Slave* is a fiction that evaporates when he wakes the next morning shackled. He discovers that he's been sold.

Thereafter, he is passed from master to master. It's a desperate path and a story that seizes you almost immediately with a visceral force (17). The protagonist travels from auction house to plantation. He continues to linger long in the emotions and ideas that the movie explores in the course of time. The key to Northup's existence is the suppression of his rage. He must feign illiteracy and subservience to survive. It is notable that for all the anger and shame that the novel stirs up about recent history. The directional venture is controlled in his treatment of all the key players, black and white alike.

It was a rarity among the most popular slave narratives of the nineteenth century by virtue of its having been authored by a white professional author and sometime novelist named David Wilson; Collaborating with Northup, He produced what would be termed today an "as-told-to" autobiography, written in the first person as though Northup himself was telling his story to the reader. To ensure the credibility, Wilson asserted in his editor's preface:

> Many of the statements contained in the following pages are corroborated by abundant evidence-others rest entirely upon Solomon's assertion. That he has adhered strictly to the truth the editor, at least, who has had an opportunity of detecting any contradiction or discrepancy in his statements, is well satisfied. He has invariably repeated the same story without deviating in the slightest particular, and has also carefully perused the manuscript, dictating an alteration wherever the most trivial inaccuracy has appealed. (XV)

It was Solomon's fortune, during his captivity, to be owned by several masters. The treatment he received while at the "Pine Woods" shows that among slaveholders there are men of humanity as well as of cruelty. Some of them are spoken of with emotions

of gratitude-others in a spirit of bitterness. It is believed that the following account of his experience on Bayou Bœuf presents a correct picture of Slavery, in all its lights and shadows, as it now exists in that locality. Unbiased, as he conceives, by any prepossessions or prejudices, the only object of the editor has been to give a faithful history of Solomon Northup's life, as he received it from his lips.

In the accomplishment of that object, he trusts he has succeeded, notwithstanding the numerous faults of style, word choices, and expressions of personal feelings that are attributed to him in his narrative, study of the historical details have confirmed that it is a trustworthy record of Northup's life before, during, and after his ordeal in the Deep South.

Many different editions of Northup's narrative have appeared over the years. Sue Eakins's recent volume begins with a facsimile copy, in comfortably large typeface, of the original 1853 publication. She Claims:

> It tells the familiar story of Northup, a free black man from New York who was abducted and sold into slavery . . . restored to freedom, and reunited with his family. The narrative and the notes are several useful maps, interesting photographs and illustrations as well as a postscript in which he explores the arrest, trial and release of Northup's kidnappers and the uncertain fate of the liberated Northup. This book is surely the most comprehensive account ever assembled of Northup's life. (475)

Eakin sees that the book is not without its faults. A native of Louisiana and expert on the state's history, she as a child trod the same ground as Northup, and he has pursued his interest in his story for more than seven decades. His volume represents the culmination of a lifetime devoted to local history, but it also exposes the dangers of a

historian too close to her subject. This Edition “shows to a fuller extent the tragedy” (vii) and justice of Northup’s story, yet repeatedly her editorial remarks minimize the severity of the violence masters inflicted upon slaves and insist upon the mild treatment of slaves in Northup’s neighborhood, as if Avoyelles Parish was immune to the horrors of bondage.

Few complete narratives have remained in print or received much attentition beyond a coterie of specialists. Critic Walter M. Lowrey points out the value of Northup’s narrative lies in his memory:

> Northup’s story of his experiences was dictated to a white abolitionist, David Wilson, and first publised in 1853. But the real value of the narrative lies in Norhup’s memory. He onserved the worst degradations of slavery, thee callousness, indifference and harshness of the system, and its effect on the people caught in it. Over and over he makes crucial revelations about the point of view of slaves about themselves, their masters, and their situation. (174)

Northup has to bear all the cruelty and degradation of the harsh system of slavery. He outlines each of the details fluently and exhibits his power of memory in the narrative. He reveals the numbing fear instilled in him but his masters that made him keep silent about his real status after reveiving brutal trreatment when he claimmed at the beginning of his captivity that he was really a free man.The sense of the system of total control in subordination in slaves life is constantly underscored as the core of the system. “What could I do,” Northup asks, “what could I say, to justify in the remotest manner, the heniuos act I had commited, of resenting a white man’s contumely and abuse”(175).

Finally, it clearly indicates how little sense of humanity there was in the

structure of the system despite occassional touches of human feelings.Keeping all the criticisms in mind, this researcher attempts to analyze the narrative focusing on the tropes that mark the narrative as a slave narrative. It is seen that though many claim that Northup's narrative is a narrative of slavery, few have focused on the study of the tropes used in it to justify it as a slave narrative. For this, some of the remarkable features of slave narrative pointed out by the analysts are brought in the analysis.

Slave narrative is a distinct and popular genre in American Literature. Everybody with a little commonsense sees easily that it represents the bleak history of the slavery era in America and written during slavery era till the post-civil war and abolition upto the last quarter of the Nineteenth century. It was used as a weapon by the abolitionists and antislavery activists before the Civil War and abolition of the system of slavery.In his book *Slave Narratives after Slavery,* WilliamL. Andrews has examined various aspects of slave narratives including their trend before and after slavery. The sense of heroism has changed before and after the Civil War and abolition of slavery. Before the abolition, slave narratives presented the narrators as heroic characters but post-abolition slave narratives focus more on the slave communities:

> While antebellum slave narratives tend to place larger-than-life individualism the foreground, the better to exalt their heroic individualism, post–Civil War slave narratives like Hughes's focus more on slave communities and the means by which they sustained black people until they eventually gained their freedom. (325)

Andrews has given the example of Hughes' narrative as an example of post-Civil War narrative that focuses more on slave community than the heroism of an individual heroic narrator. The freedom from slavery is ultimate goal for the characters in both

the cases but antebellum slave narrators used their adventures, cunning and masterful techniques for freedom with greater emphasis. Northup's *Twelve Years a Slave*, true to its antebellum slave narrative tag, presents the sufferings born by Northup and his adventures to gain the freedom.

The question of the defense of manhood or womanhood is crucial in the slave narratives of the 1840s and 1850s. Self-expressiveness during suffering of enslavement becomes their important characteristic. This self-expressiveness is important pretext as it gives them the chance to appeal for full humanity, sympathy and justification of their resistance and escape from enslavement. Andrews points out this characteristic in *Slave Narratives after Slavery*:

> In defense of their manhood and womanhood, many of the classic slave narratives of the 1840s and 1850s make a hallmark of self-expressiveness, particularly with reference to the author's personal emotional woes and wounds while enslaved, in order to reinforce the fugitive slave's claim to full humanity, sympathy, and justification for resistance and flight from enslavement. (xv)

Much of Northup's story that entered the literature of slavery. His narrative has been extensively used by Kenneth Stampp in his monumental *The Peculiar Instituitions*, as well as by others. Some historians, including Stampp, when faced with other evidence that the system was not as harsh as Northup indicates, have raised questions about how typical his experiences were, and how much of what he said was shaped for partisan purposes by his abolitionist collaborater, Wilson. We shall never really know the typicality of these memroies since there is much contradictory testimony and much evidence that conditions varied extensively depending in individuals and circumstances. But, on the other hand, the essential point might be better stated that

Northup's narrative indicates what life under slavery could be in an area of intensive commericial exploitation, which is, in itself, a significant fact.

In the book *North Carolina Slave Narratives,* edited by William L. Andrews, large numbers of slave narratives are examined. Basically, the book deals with the lives of four slave narrators as they narrate in their slave narratives: Moses Roper, Lunsford Lane, Moses Grandy and Thomas H. Jones. The analytical essays and excerpts from slave narratives explore many of the characteristics of slave narratives of antebellum and post-bellum American trends of slave narratives. Analyzing the widespread publication of slave narratives, Andrews writes in his introduction:

> In the late 1830s, as the American antislavery movement became increasingly aggressive in its attacks on slavery as a monstrous evil, the antislavery press began to seek out narratives by fugitive slaves who could document convincingly what they had experienced or witnessed in the South. (5)

After 1830s, abolitionists and antislavery press fueled the publication of the slave narratives to intensify the antislavery movement. In that phase, they looked for the fugitive slaves who could document their experiences of slavery convincingly.
At the same time, when the interests increased for Afro-American history and the reprinting of almost every available account of the Negro past, the historians are still faced with a shortage of authentic accounts of slavery from the point of view of the slave. While dozens of slave narratives were published in the years before the civil War, the authenticity of most is open to question, and may seem to be the products of white minds and abolitionists pleading. Such is not the case with this account of slavery by Solomon Northup. Long considered the best contemporary account of slavery in Louisiana, the value of Northup's narrative in this edition is enhanced by

the careful verification of names, places, and dates, as well as by the inclusion of pertinent legal documents and an introduction which details the aftermath of Northup's ordeal.

Narrating the details of slavery with authority plays important role for the genre of slave narrative. James Olney points to the role of authority in the genre of slave narrative:

> The writer of a slave narrative finds himself in an irresolvable tight bind as a result of the very intention and premise of his narrative, which is to give a picture of "slavery as it is."To give a true picture of slavery as it really is, he must maintain that he exercises a clear-glass, neutral memory that is neither creative nor faulty-indeed, if it were creative it would be understood by skeptical readers as a synonym for lying. (48)

Olney points that the narrator is should act as per the intention and promise a slave narrative demands. S/he must present the realistic picture of slavery. The writer thus, is liable to prove that what s/he is recounting is not a fiction or a plot designed by him/her. S/he must use the neutral memory that cannot both be creative or faulty. Adding creative dimension in the narrative is synonymous to lying. Northup speaks on all subjects of his enslavement with authority, naming names and pointing out landmarks along the way. In doing so, he dares skeptics to refute his story, knowing that public records and common knowledge would defend it. For example, when Northup accuses a wicked slave trader of keeping him captive in Washington, D.C., he doesn't only names that slaver, he names the slaver's accomplice, identifies exactly where the slave pen is hidden, and describes the physical structure of the slave pen in detail. During the trial that took place after Northup had been freed, that slave trader

couldn't deny having kept Northup as his captive in that now-exposed slave pen.

David A. Davis, the analyst of the narrative of Rev. Thomas H. Jones in *North Carolina Slave Narratives* points out that antebellum slave narratives commonly carry the normative features as pointed by critic James Olney and Jones' narrative is not an exception:

> In a survey of the characteristics that many of the most famous antebellum slave narratives hold in common, the critic James Olney reports that more than a dozen narratives, including classic texts by Douglass and Brown, open with the same phrase that begins Jones's narrative: "I was born a slave." Olney goes on to describe a number of normative elements in fugitive slave narratives, all of which are represented in Jones's narrative. (190)

As Olney points, more than a dozen of slave narratives including Douglass and Brown as well as Jones' narrative follow similar normative features. They all begin with the narration of birth with the phrase "I was born"; it applies to Jones narrative well and it observes most of the features Olney points out according to Davis. It is a common normative element for Northup's narrative too.

Additionally, the accuracy of and factual detail in *Twelve Years a Slave* have kept this book prominent as a reliable historical reference on slavery for more than 150 years since it first debuted. This biography serves as a timeless denunciation of the practice of chattel bondage. Northup's detailing the abuses he endured and those he was forced to inflict provide a warning to all generations of the moral costs that slavery exacts from everyone involved. The slave himself or herself is degraded, made to suffer awful torments, and cruelly robbed of physical, emotional, and spiritual riches. Still, the slave is not the only one who suffers.

By participating in slavery, the master is morally degraded and emotionally desensitized. His religion is made hypocrisy. His family legacy is robbed of basic human graces like love, justice, and integrity. In this respect, Northup's *Twelve Years a Slave* is notable for giving human faces to the evil that was once common practice, and for sounding a constant warning of the awful consequences of chattel bondage. His book is a testimony to the power of the human spirit and the enduring determination of hope. He is deceived, kidnapped, abused, removed from family, deprived of identity, and beaten into a long, weary, unjustified submission. Yet he is never broken. Even in his worst days of sorrow lived under the cruelties of Edwin Epps, he never gives up hope that one day he will be free. He never loses faith in his friends, constantly assured that if he can only get word to the North then they will indeed come to his rescue. And they do. In the end, Northup's heartbreaking journey uplifts because in his testimony is evidence that faith and hope can endure and triumph. *Twelve Years a Slave* covers five primary periods in Northup's life: Free Man, Captive, Slave, Slave under Edwin Epps, and Free Man Again.

1. Free Man

He tells of his life as a free black man living in upstate New York. Born in July 1808, he was the son of an emancipated slave. He grew up working on a farm at his father's side, and also was educated to a degree of competence in reading and writing. In this chapter, he tries to justify his act of being of freeman. Additionally, he learned to play the violin, a skill that would be both a blessing and curse to him in coming years. At age 21, he married Anne Hampton, and they settled down to raise a family. Solomon worked in many trades, including farming, lumberjacking, and performing on the violin, while Anne earned money as a cook. They had three children. In 1841, Solomon met two white men who offered him lucrative work with a

circus—if he would travel with them to Washington, D.C. Unsuspecting, he joined them in their travels and in Washington, D.C., after a day of unusual revelry and drinking, became terribly ill. On his way to see a doctor, he passed out. When he woke up, Solomon Northup was alone, chained in darkness. In this regard, it is relevant to quote the following lines:

> Having been born a freeman, and for more than thirty years enjoyed the blessings of liberty in a free State-and having at the end of that time been kidnapped and sold into Slavery, where I remained, until happily rescued in the month of January, 1853, after a bondage of twelve years—it has been suggested that an account of my life and fortunes would not be uninteresting to the public. (1)

The narrative begins with the description of birth and details of the narrator's family and parentage. It is one of the remarkable features of slave narratives. According to James Olney, the beginning features of a slave narrative include:

> The actual narrative:
>
> 1. A first sentence beginning, "I was born . . . ," then specifying a place but not a date of birth;
>
> 2. A sketchy account of parentage,, often involving a white father. (50)

Since Northup was born as a freeman, he talks about his birth and the situation in which he is narrating the bitter experience of slavery. The narrator creates the credibility by contrasting his narration with fiction:

> Works of fiction, professing to portray its features in their more pleasing as well as more repugnant aspects. My object is, to give a candid and truthful statement of facts: to repeat the story of my life, without exaggeration, leaving it for others to determine, whether even

> the pages of fiction present a picture of more cruel wrong or a severer bondage. (2)

Emphasizing on his authority in the narrative, the writer claims that he recounts everything from his observation. He has a target no other than to provide candid and truthful account of his experience of slavery and bondage.

2 Captive

He finds himself a prisoner in the slave pen of James H. Burch, a brutal slave trader in Washington, D.C. When he protests his captivity and asserts his right to freedom, Burch responds by beating him into submission and threatening to kill him if he ever mentions his freedom again. At length, Solomon is allowed to join the other slaves being held by Burch, and he discovers just how hopeless his situation is. Surrounded by slaves and a few other kidnap victims, he is transported downriver, eventually landing in New Orleans, Louisiana. Solomon explains the present situation in the following conversation:

> Presently Burch came down into the yard, unfettered me, and led me into one of the small houses.
>
> "You told that man you came from New-York," said he.
>
> I replied, "I told him I had been up as far as New-York, to be sure, but did not tell him I belonged there, or that I was a freeman. (5)

Burch is very angry to hear about narrator’s past as a freeman in New York. His earnest truth about past is suppressed. He is about to begin the horrible life as a slave and is threatened not to speak anything about his New York life:"If ever I hear you say a word about New-York, or about your freedom, I will be the death of you—I will kill you; you may rely on that," he ejaculated fiercely.”I doubt not he understood then better than I did the danger and the penalty of selling a free man into slavery. (7)

He felt the necessity of closing his mouth against the crime he knew he was committing. Of course, my life would not have weighed a feather, in any emergency requiring such a sacrifice. (37) Solomon and the rest of “Burch’s gang” are transferred into the slave pen of Burch’s associate, Theophilus Freeman. Freeman changes Solomon’s name to “Platt,” thereby erasing any connection to his past. Solomon is put up for sale, but his sale is delayed when he contracts smallpox, which nearly kills him. After he finally recovers, he is sold, along with a slave girl named Eliza, to a man named William Ford.

Mr. Theophilus Freeman. Reading from his paper, he called, "Platt." No one answered. The name was called again and again, but still there was no reply. Then Lethe was called, then Eliza, then Harry, until the list was finished, each one stepping forward as his or her name was called. Freeman changes Solomon’s name to “Platt,” thereby erasing any connection to his past(40). The following conversation is the clear example of it:

> "Captain, where's Platt?" demanded Theophilus Freeman.
>
> The captain was unable to inform him, no one being, on board answering to that name.
>
> "Who shipped that nigger?" he again inquired of the captain, pointing to me.
>
> "Burch," replied the captain. (7)

The narrator is treated like an ordinary slave and given the name like other slaves. Platt is the name given to him and even the slight unwillingness to act as per the command of the people handling the slaves would have very harsh consequences. They would be angered and punish them. Theophilus gets angry with the narrator, who is now given the name Platt, for not moving forward near him.

3. Slave

He is now a full-fledged slave named “Platt,” working on the plantation and lumber mill of William Ford, deep in the heart of Louisiana. Ford is a kindly master, devout in his Christian faith, and given to generosity toward his slaves. The influences and associations that had always surrounded him blinded him to the inherent wrong at the bottom of the system of Slavery. He never doubted the moral right of one man holding another in subjection. Looking through the same medium with his fathers before him, he saw things in the same light. Brought up under other circumstances and other influences, his notions would undoubtedly have been different. Nevertheless, he was a model master, walking uprightly, according to the light of his understanding, and fortunate was the slave who came to his possession. Were all men such as him, Slavery would be deprived of more than half its bitterness. (48) Solomon finds it almost a pleasure to be in Ford’s service and even figures out a way for Ford to save considerable time and money by transporting lumber via waterway instead of by land. Solomon is well-liked by Ford in return. However, a series of financial missteps result in Ford selling Platt to a cruel carpenter named John M. Tibeats.

Tibeats soon becomes Platt’s worst enemy, constantly threatening and berating him. While working on a project, he becomes so enraged that he attempts to whip Platt. Platt is the stronger of the two, though, and he turns the tables on his new master, whipping him instead. Hell-bent on revenge, Tibeats twice attempts to murder Platt. Only the intervention of William Ford and his overseer, Mr. Chapin, saves the slave’s life. Unable to kill him, yet bearing murderous hatred toward him, Tibeats sells Platt to the notorious “nigger breaker,” Edwin Epps.

4. Slave under Edwim Epps

While recounting the cruelty of the master Edwin Epps in the plantations,

Northup conforms to the third feature of slave narrative as James Olney terms that a slave narrative gives a “description of a cruel master, mistress, or overseer, details of first observed whipping and numerous subsequent whippings, with women very frequently the victims . . .”(50). Northup, in this section details the punishments and cruelty of the master Epps; he recounts the whippings and making him whips his fellow slaves. This section is the fourth phase of Northup’s narrative focusing on the ten years he lived under the tyranny of Edwin Epps on two different plantations in Bayou Boeuf, along the banks of the Red River in Louisiana. Epps is indeed a cruel master. A whip is his constant companion, and he uses it almost daily on his slaves. He describes his life under Epps in detail, relating stories of abuse, humiliation, and deprivation among all the slaves. Here the following lines of Northup’s explain about the details of his masters Edwin: Master Epps was a roistering, blustering, noisy fellow, whose chief delight was in dancing with his "niggers," or lashing them about the yard with his long whip, just for the pleasure of hearing them screech and scream, as the great welts were planted on their backs. (12)

The sufferings of the slaves in their master’s house varied according to the nature and mood of the masters. The number of lashes is graduated according to the nature of the case. Twenty-five are deemed a mere brush, inflicted, for instance, when a dry leaf or piece of boll is found in the cotton, or when a branch is broken in the field; fifty is the ordinary penalty following all delinquencies of the next higher grade; one hundred is called severe: it is the punishment inflicted for the serious offence of standing idle in the field; from one hundred and fifty to two hundred is bestowed upon him who quarrels with his cabin-mates, and five hundred, well laid on, besides the mangling of the dogs, perhaps, is certain to consign the poor, unpitied runaway to weeks of pain and agony.

During the two years Epps remained on the plantation at Bayou Huff Power, he was in the habit, as often as once in a fortnight at least, of coming home intoxicated from Holmesville. The shooting-matches almost invariably concluded with a debauch. At such times he was boisterous and half-crazy. Often he would break the dishes, chairs, and whatever furniture he could lay his hands on. When satisfied with his amusement in the house, he would seize the whip and walk forth into the yard. Then it behooved the slaves to be watchful and exceeding wary. The first one who came within reach felt the smart of his lash. Sometimes for hours he would keep them running in all directions, dodging around the corners of the cabins. Occasionally he would come upon one unawares, and if he succeeded in inflicting a fair, round blow, it was a feat that much delighted him. The younger children, and the aged, who had become inactive, suffered then.

In the midst of, the confusion he would silly take his stand behind a cabin, waiting with raised whip, to dash it into the first black face that peeped cautiously around the corner. At other times he would come home in a less brutal humor. Then there must be a merry-making. Then all must move to the measure of a tune. Then Master Epps must need regale his melodious ears with the music of a fiddle. Then did he become buoyant, elastic, gaily "tripping the light fantastic toe" around the piazza and all thorough the house" (106). Tibeats, at the time of Northup’s sale, had informed him that he could play on the violin. He had received his information from Ford. Through the importunities of Mistress Epps, her husband had been induced to purchase him one during a visit to New-Orleans. Frequently he was called into the house to play before the family, mistress being passionately fond of music.

All of them would be assembled in the large room of the great house, whenever Epps came home in one of his dancing moods. No matter how worn out and

tired they were, there must be a general dance. When properly stationed on the floor, Northup would strike up a tune:

> "Dance, you d-d niggers, dance," Epps would shout.
>
> Then there must be no halting or delay, no slow or languid movements; all must be brisk, and lively, and alert. "Up and down, heel and toe, and away we go," was the order of the hour. Epps' portly form mingled with those of his dusky slaves, moving rapidly through all the mazes of the dance. (106)

Patsey, a slave girl, gets the worst of Epps' treatment: She is repeatedly raped by him and also whipped by him at the insistence of his jealous wife. In Epps' absence the mistress often ordered me to whip Northup without the remotest provocation. He would refuse, saying that he was feared with his master's displeasure, and several times ventured to remonstrate with her against the treatment Patsey received. He endeavored to impress her with the truth that the latter was not responsible for the acts of which she complained, but that she being a slave, and subject entirely to her master's will, he alone was answerable. (153)

At the worst point, she visits a friend at a nearby plantation simply to get a bar of soap because Epps' wife won't allow her to have any. When Patsey returns, Epps is furious, thinking her guilty of a sexual encounter. His violence so alarmed her that at first she attempted to evade direct answers to his questions, which only served to increase his suspicions. She finally, however, drew herself up proudly, and in a spirit of indignation boldly denied his charges. The following conversation will clearly state master's Epps fury towards Patsey:

> "Missus don't give me soap to wash with, as she does the rest," said Patsey, "and you know why. I went over to Harriet's to get a piece,"

> and saying this, she drew it forth from a pocket in her dress and exhibited it to him. "That's what I went to Shaw's for, Massa Epps," continued she; "the Lord knows that was all." (154)

Then he ordered Northup to four stakes to be driven into the ground, pointing with the toe of his boot to the places where he wanted them. When the stakes were driven down, he ordered her to be stripped of every article of dress. Ropes were then brought, and the naked girl was laid upon her face, her wrists and feet each tied firmly to a stake. Stepping to the piazza, he took down a heavy whip, and placing it to Northup's hands, commanded him to lash her.

Mistress Epps stood on the piazza among her children, gazing on the scene with an air of heartless satisfaction. The slaves were huddled together at a little distance, their countenances indicating the sorrow of their hearts. Poor Patsey prayed piteously for mercy, but her prayers were vain. Epps ground his teeth, and stamped upon the ground, screaming at me, like a mad fiend, to strike harder. Epps was yet furious and savage as ever, demanding if she would like to go to Shaw's again, and swearing he would flog her until she wished she was in h--l. Throwing down the whip, he declared couldn't punish her no more. He ordered Northup to go on, threatening him with a severer flogging than she had received, in case of refusal.

The years pass by, and Solomon almost loses hope. Then he meets a carpenter named Bass, an abolitionist from Canada who is hired to work on a building project for Epps. Bass learns of Solomon's story and decides to help. He sends letters to Solomon's friends in the North, asking them to come and rescue the slave from his captivity. The letter itself shows that he considered himself engaged in a dangerous undertaking before it was mailed, but have since obtained a copy, which is here inserted;

Bayou Boeuf, August 15, 1852.

Mr. WILLIAM PERRY or Mr. CEPHAS PARKER:

Gentlemen—It having been a long time since I have seen or heard from you, and not knowing that you are living, it is with uncertainty that I write to you, but the necessity of the case must be my excuse. Having been born free, just across the river from you, I am certain you must know me, and I am here now a slave. I wish you to obtain free papers for me, and forward them to me at Marksville, Louisiana, Parish of Avoyelles, and oblige.

Yours, SOLOMON NORTHUP

When Bass returned from Marksville he informed Northup of what he had done. As nearly as he was able to ascertain, it would require two weeks for the letter to reach Saratoga in due course of mail, and the same length of time for an answer to return. At the end of four weeks he was again at Marksville, but no answer had arrived. Six, seven, eight, and ten weeks passed by, however, and nothing came. Finally master Epps house was finished, and the time came when Bass must leave to Northup.

Escape from enslavement is another crucial feature of slave narratives. Ian Frederic Fin Seth examines the narrative of Moses Roper in *North Carolina Slave Narratives* edited by William L. Andrews and underscores the role of escape in slave narratives:

> Fittingly, as the drama of escape unfolds over the course of the narrative, water—as it does in the Odyssey—plays a starring role. The creeks and rivers crisscrossing the South represent both barriers and opportunities for the fugitive, their very substance promising life yet

threatening death. (32)

The drama of escape is crucial in the slave narrative as it serves as the resolution to the ordeals, cruelty and humiliation in the slave narratives. It is like the crossing of the water in Odyssey and it provides great emotional relief for the narrators and the readers of the narratives. They overcome all the life-threatening situations and gain the price of freedom at last.

5. Free Man Again

The final section tells of Solomon's escape from captivity. Thanks to the faithfulness of Bass, The letter written-by Bass, directed to Parker and Perry, and which was deposited in the post-office in Marksville on the 15th day of August, 1852, arrived at Saratoga in the early part of September. Sometime previous to this, Anne had removed to Glens Falls, Warren County, where she had charge of the kitchen in Carpenter's Hotel. She kept house, however, lodging with our children, and was only absent from them during such time as the discharge of her duties in the hotel required. Solomon's friends in the North are alerted to his location and come to set him free. Henry B. Northup, a white man who is a relative of the person who once owned Solomon's father, gathers legal support and travels to Louisiana to find the slave. Upon examination, that gentleman found among the statutes of the State an act providing for the recovery of free citizens from slavery.

It was passed May 14, 1840, and is entitled "An act more effectually to protect the free citizens of this State from being kidnapped or reduced to slavery" (21). It provides that it shall be the duty of the Governor, upon the receipt of satisfactory information that any free citizen or inhabitant of this State, is wrongfully held in another State or Territory of the United States, upon the allegation or pretense that such person is a slave, or by color of any usage or rule of law is deemed or taken to be

a slave, to take such measures to procure the restoration of such person to liberty, as he shall deem necessary.

To that end, he is authorized to appoint and employ an agent, and directed to furnish him with such credentials and instructions as will be likely to accomplish the object of his appointment. It requires the agent so appointed to proceed to collect the proper proof to establish the right of such person to his freedom; to perform such journeys, take such measures, institute such legal proceedings as may be necessary to return such person to this State, and charges all expenses incurred in carrying the act into effect, upon moneys not otherwise appropriated in the treasury. A memorial was prepared, directed to his excellency, Governor Hunt, setting forth her marriage, Northup's departure to Washington city; the receipt of the letters; that he was a free citizen, and such other facts as were deemed important, and was signed and verified by Anne.

Accompanying this memorial were several affidavits of prominent citizens of Sandy Hill and Fort Edward, corroborating fully the statements it contained, and also a request of several well-known gentlemen to the Governor, that Henry B. Northup be appointed agent under the legislative act. On reading the memorial and affidavits, his excellency took a lively interest in the matter, and on the 23d day of November, 1852, under the seal of the State, "constituted, appointed and employed Henry B. Northup, Esq., an agent, with full power to effect" for restoration of Northup, and to take such measures as would be most likely to accomplish it, and instructing him to proceed to Louisiana with all convenient dispatch.

The pressing nature of Mr. Northup's professional and political engagements delayed his departure until December. On the fourteenth day of that month he left Sandy Hill, and proceeded to Washington. The Hon. Pierre Soule, Senator in

Congress from Louisiana, Hon. Mr. Conrad, Secretary of War, and Judge Nelson, of the Supreme Court of the United States, upon hearing a statement of the facts, and examining his commission, and certified copies of the memorial and affidavits, furnished him with open letters to gentlemen in Louisiana, strongly urging their assistance in accomplishing the object of his appointment. From the fact that the letter to Messrs. Parker and Perry was post-marked at Marksville, it was supposed by him that Northup was in that place or its immediate vicinity. On reaching this town, he at once laid his business before the Hon. John P. Waddill, a legal gentleman of distinction, and a man of fine genius and most noble impulses. After reading the letters and documents presented him and listening to a representation of the circumstances under which Northup had been carried away into captivity, Mr. Waddill at once proffered his services, and entered into the affair with great zeal and earnestness. He in common with others of like elevated character, looked upon the kidnapped with abhorrence. The title of his fellow parishioners and clients to the property which constituted the larger proportion of their wealth, not only depended upon the good faith in which slave sales were transacted, but he was a man in whose honorable heart emotions of indignation were aroused by such an instance of injustice.

Through the thick, black cloud, amid whose dark and dismal shadows which Solomon had walked twelve years, broke the star that was to light him back to liberty. All mistrust and hesitation were soon thrown aside, and the two men conversed long and freely upon the subject uppermost in their thoughts. Bass expressed the interest he had taken in Northup's behalf—his intention of going north in the Spring and declaring that he had resolved to accomplish Northup's emancipation, if it were in his power. He described the commencement and progress of his acquaintance with

Northup, and listened with eager curiosity to the account given him of Northup's family, and the history of his early life. Before separating, he drew a map of the bayou on a strip of paper with a piece of red chalk, showing the locality of Epps' plantation, and the road leading most directly to it (183).

Northup and his young companion returned to Marksville, where it was determined to commence legal proceedings to test the question of his right to freedom. He was made plaintiff, Mr. Northup acting as his guardian, and Edwin Epps defendant. The process to be issued was in the nature of replevin, directed to the sheriff of the parish, commanding him to take me into custody, and detain him until the decision of the court. By the time the papers were duly drawn up, it was twelve o'clock at night—too late to obtain the necessary signature of the Judge, who resided some distance out of town. Further business was therefore suspended until Monday morning.

Everything, apparently, was moving along swimmingly, until Sunday afternoon, when Waddill called at Northup's room to express his apprehension of difficulties they had not expected to encounter. Bass had become alarmed, and had placed his affairs in the hands of a person at the landing, communicating to him his intention of leaving the State. This person had betrayed the confidence reposed in him to a certain extent, and a rumor began to float about the town, that the stranger at the hotel, who had been observed in the company of lawyer Waddill, was after one of old Epps, slaves, over on the bayou.

Epps was known at Marksville, having frequent occasion to visit that place during the session of the courts, and the fear entertained by Mr. Northup's adviser was, that intelligence would be conveyed to him in the night, giving him an opportunity of secreting Northup before the arrival of the sheriff. This apprehension

had the effect of expediting matters considerably. The sheriff, who lived in one direction from the village, was requested to hold himself in readiness immediately after midnight; while the Judge was informed he would be called upon at the same time. It is but justice to say, that the authorities at Marksville cheerfully rendered all the assistance in their power. Finally, the struggle of Solomon to be a free man again is success and became a free man again.

Crucial feature of the slave narrative as David A. Davis points out is that the escape to American North always dominates the text. American North is used in the narrative in such a way that it is a symbol of freedom and it is the ultimate goal of the enslaved narrators:

> Frequently in slave narratives, the story of escape to the North dominates the text, providing a natural plot climax and a transition from descriptions of insufferable bondage to jubilant freedom. Some slave narrators became celebrities because of their ingenious escape plans, enjoying popular success recounting their experiences on the lecture circuit in the North and in Europe. (194)

The escape to North is a trope seen in most of the slave narratives. It is very effectively presented in the narrative of Northup in *Twelve Years of Slave* and the history of Northup point out that he supported and lectured against slavery after the escape in many places. The death of Northup is mysterious and unknown.

Finally, the struggle of Solomon to be a free man again is success and became a free man again. In conclusion, this study has been able to show the most complex and difficult encounter of slavery, which leads Solomon, a free man to be a slave and his accurate and verifiable account of the common slave experience in the United States in the antebellum South. This narrator has convincingly handled the tropes of

bondage and freedom in the narrative. In the course of his narration, he demonstrates the features of slave narratives in his text.

In the course of this analysis, this paper points out various elements that characterize Northup's narrative as slave narrative. Typical to slave narrative, this narrative begins with the birth description and family set up early in his life. It recounts the inhuman experience of slavery with authority and truthfulness. The use of memory is apt and profound. Like other slave narratives, it resorts to the continual struggle of the narrator to come out of slavery and escape from its brutalizing experience. The use of the tropes of bondage and freedom are prominent in the narrative. The narrator finally becomes successful to escape the slavery in the narrative. Considering all the possible elements a slave narrative employs, this paper concludes that it follows the convention of antebellum slave narrative.

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