

# African American Literature: Slave Narrative

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**UNIVERSITY OF RIJEKA**  
**FACULTY OF HUMANITIES AND SOCIAL SCIENCES**  
**DEPARTMENT OF ENGLISH**

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Submitted in partial fulfillment of the requirements for the B.A. in English Language and Literature and Italian Language and Literature at the University of Rijeka

Rijeka, September 2015

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## **ABSTRACT**

This thesis deals with the African American literature, but more specifically, it deals with the slave narratives. The aim of the thesis is to explore the African American literature but, more specifically, it focuses on the slave narratives, which present an important part of the African American literary tradition. The thesis is organized in five sections: the introduction, an overview of the history events and circumstances, four books chosen to give a detailed analysis of the slave narrative, the conclusion and the list of the books consulted during the writing. The sources of the data used are mainly the narratives themselves, but also history books, encyclopedia and biography sites. In general, the literature on the topic is not hard to find, but there are very few critical analyses of the works chosen.

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## **1. Introduction**

The topic of this thesis is “African American literature: slave narrative”. In the following pages, I will present an overview of the African American literature during the years, but the main focus is on the slave narratives. The autobiographies written by the former slave have had an enormous significance for the African American literature, but also for the understanding of the system of slavery as a whole. What I hope to achieve is to present the narratives in a more detailed way, in order to show how big of a picture about the period they can create.

The first section deals with the historical facts which are needed to fully understand the literature, and to have a clearer image about the political and social circumstances that were crucial for that time. Historical background is crucial for understanding this part of the literary tradition, especially because this one was highly influenced by the political scene. The second section briefly introduces the readers to the slave narratives; what are they exactly and what importance do they have for the African American literature. This section is divided into four parts, each part representing one narrative from four different authors: Booker T. Washington, Frederick Douglass, William Wells Brown and Harriet A. Jacobs. Each narrative is important for its own reasons. The first one gives a clearer view on the political circumstances. The second one is dealing both with the political circumstances and the lives of the slaves, the third one mainly deals with the conditions of slavery, while the fourth one focuses on the shameful episodes that almost every female slave had to endure.

In my opinion, the period of slavery is one of the most horrifying periods in the history of human kind, and slave narratives are important because they are a reminder that the society

should never let it repeat again. They are also a proof that each person matters and that the fight against social injustices is still in process. The African Americans have struggled a lot in the history, and these are their accounts of all the awful events they suffered through but yet managed to raise above them, with their faith and actions.

## **2. History**

There is a famous quote by Robert Penn Warren: *“History cannot give us a program for the future, but it can give us a fuller understanding of ourselves, and of our common humanity, so that we can better face the future.”* As already said in the Introduction section, history is crucial for understanding this period in literature, because it greatly affected the work of African Americans. They struggled for freedom until they managed to influence the political scene and their lives were able to escape the evils of slavery.

### **2.1.The African American history**

The slavery in America was introduced by the Spanish. They wanted to use the native Indians for work on their fields and mines, but since the Indians were not used to that kind of labor, they did not have as much strength as the Spanish thought they would. So to save them from extinction, they decided to bring the black people from Africa, because it was well known that they were strong and hardworking. They started with the working at the factories and the need for cotton started to grow more and more, so the Africans had to work harder than ever. But not even the strong African people could bear the inhumane conditions and actions of their supervisors. The whole world was bombed by the stories about the deaths of black slaves, and the outrageous behavior of the white masters and overseers.<sup>1</sup>

Finally, the movement towards the abolition of slavery was born. William Wilberforce and Zachary Macaulay were the ones who founded the society for the abolition of slavery. The first thing they did was the law which made slave trading forbidden, and with that, after the 1840

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<sup>1</sup> Van Loon, Hendrik Willem: *The Story of Mankind*. New York, Boni and Liveright, 1999, pg.353

the England did not have a single slave. The Revolution in 1848 brought the same changes to France, Portugal followed in 1858 and Netherlands in 1861. In the United States of America, this has led to some serious complications, and eventually to a long-lasting war. Even though the Declaration of Independence states that “all men were created equal”, that did not include those whose skin was dark and those who worked on the plantations in the South. As time was passing, the North started openly showing the dislike for the institution of slavery, but the South claimed that they need the slaves because otherwise they cannot grow their cotton. The Congress and the Senate debated about the question of slavery for almost fifty years. Neither North nor South wanted to give in. The greatest moment of danger was when the southern states threatened to leave the Union. But this danger was ended, thanks to the one of the most notable men of the American history, Abraham Lincoln.<sup>2</sup>

Abraham Lincoln was elected as president in 1860, and he was the first Republican president ever elected.<sup>3</sup> He got known to the public when he spoke against the Kansas-Nebraska Act (which said that in each new state in the West, the decision about every problem; including the problem of slavery, will be brought by the people, not by the governmental bodies). The Republicans were strongly against the slavery, and Lincoln was aware of how the southerners are treating the slaves so he had to do something about it. When several Southern states started to create a “Confederation”, he started gathering volunteers to fight back. The war was going on for four years. The South was better equipped and managed to defeat the North several times, with

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<sup>2</sup> Van Loon, Hendrik Willem: *The Story of Mankind*. New York, Boni and Liveright, 1999. Pg.354

<sup>3</sup> Povijest, 14. knjiga: *Industrijalizacija I nacionalne revolucije (1848,.1871.)*. Milano, Editoriale Metropoli S.p.A. , pg.562

the two great leaders on its side: Lee and Jackson. But then general Grant appeared at the North and turned the things around.<sup>4</sup>

On January 1<sup>st</sup> 1863, Lincoln declared the Emancipation act. He tried to stop the spreading of the slavery, and claimed that each territory has to be open only to free people.<sup>5</sup> The Sought have fought strongly and bravely, but eventually they had to give in. Several days after, President Lincoln got murdered, but his actions remained. The slavery was abolished in the whole world, beside Cuba which was then under the Spanish government.<sup>6</sup>

In 1865, the 13<sup>th</sup> Amendment, which finally put an official end to slavery, was adopted. But there were still some obstacles, like the obscure status of the freed blacks. They have become equal citizens of the United States with the 14<sup>th</sup> Amendment in 1868, and the 15<sup>th</sup> Amendment in 1870 gave them the right to vote. Nevertheless, given rights were often violated and ignored, which did not make things any less difficult for the freed slaves. Even though the number of black people active on the political scene was higher than ever before, this period was still disheartening for African Americans. It took a whole century to begin a civil rights movement in the 1960s, which marked the greatest political and social achievement for the black population since the period of Reconstruction.<sup>7</sup>

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<sup>4</sup> Van Loon, Hendrik Willem: *The Story of Mankind*. New York, Boni and Liveright, 1999, pg.354

<sup>5</sup> Povijest, 14. knjiga: *Industrijalizacija I nacionalne revolucije (1848,.1871.)*. Milano, Editoriale Metropoli S.p.A. , pg.606

<sup>6</sup> Van Loon, Hendrik Willem: *The Story of Mankind*. New York, Boni and Liveright, 1999, pg.354

<sup>7</sup> Slavery in America. 2009. *History.com*. retrieved 04 September 2015, from <http://www.history.com/topics/black-history/slavery>

## 2.2.The origins and history of African American literature

The African American literature is still a process of evolution, with its subjects being closely related to the slavery, the struggles and lives of the African Americans through history, race problems, literacy and new forms of verbal expressions. The fact that a lot of texts written have been lost somewhere along the way, presents a challenge, but new acquisitions and insights are constantly appearing. The research of certain historical periods is always a work in progress, this one especially.<sup>8</sup> First, we have the oral literature. The black people who started to retell their stories, which eventually became reconstructions of the past. The oral literature is equally important as the written literature and should not be disregarded; it gives a sense of the culture and a new insight. What emphasized the transition from oral to written literature for the African Americans, are the slave narratives. Both are important parts of the African American heritage.<sup>9</sup>

The stories which slave narratives present us, are not merely the recounts of the long lasting journey from slavery to freedom, but are also the recounts of the black people's struggles to write independently in the antebellum America. The African American literature is a literature about a movement, not only geographical, historical and political, but also physical and emotional. The early African American writings have become recognized as a genre in the Enlightenment period, but this literature has undergone a lot of changes since then. Due to historical and political circumstances, the writing, the language and style have all changed; it was not easy for black people to get published by their conditions then, when the editors and publishers were mostly white people. Nevertheless, they managed to become publicly known,

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<sup>8</sup> Graham, Maryemma;Ward, Jerry. W. *Introduction // The Cambridge History of African American Literature* / edited by Maryemma Graham and Jerry W. Ward Jr. Cambridge University Press 2011, pg.1

<sup>9</sup> Irele, F. Abiola. *Sounds of a tradition: the souls of black folk // The Cambridge History of African American Literature* / edited by Maryemma Graham and Jerry W. Ward Jr. Cambridge University Press 2011, pg. 26-36

and their narratives have helped in raising the public awareness of their struggles, as well as to awaken the sense of humanity between people.<sup>10</sup>

The early 19<sup>th</sup> century writers were central figures in an era of cultural and political transformation, with racial unity and emancipation being the themes of their creations. They used their pens as a way of rebellion towards those still leaning to slavery and racism.<sup>11</sup> But, the white editors and publishers still presented a problem for the African American writers. One of the examples, is Frederick Douglas's "*The narrative of the life of Frederick Douglas: an American slave*", where William Lloyd Garrison wanted to write his own preface in order to have control over the form and content of the narrative.<sup>12</sup>

According to Wheelock, 19<sup>th</sup> century writings were largely dealing with political events, due to their long-lasting struggle for independence and many wars, battles and especially revolutions that took their place during the years; there was the Indian Revolution, Saint Domingue Revolution, uprisings in Louisiana and many other.<sup>13</sup> Furthermore, it is important to mention David Walker and his "*Appeal to the colored citizens of the world, but in particular and very expressly, to those of the United States of America*". Wheelock claims that this is the greatest achievement for the early African American literature. Walker was impressed with black reform movements and his goal was to reach a collective resistance of the public. With these

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<sup>10</sup> Gould, Philip. *Early print literature of Africans in America // The Cambridge History of African American Literature* / edited by Maryemma Graham and Jerry W. Ward Jr. Cambridge University Press 2011, pg.39-40

<sup>11</sup> Wheelock, M. Stefan: *Dividing a nation, writing a people: African American literature and the abolitionist movement // The Cambridge History of African American Literature* / edited by Maryemma Graham and Jerry W. Ward Jr. Cambridge University Press 2011, pg.66

<sup>12</sup> Ibid. 67

<sup>13</sup> Ibid. 69

efforts he also managed to have an enormous effect on the abolitionists.<sup>14</sup> After his death, African American women started to raise their voices and fight for the gender equality and racism in writing. The obstacle was that, the public still firmly believed that women were to stay at home and take care of the household. “They were to be seen and not heard” (Wheelock, pg 78). Luckily, there were some strong women like Maria W. Stewart, Mary Prince, Jarena Lee and many others, who continued to fight through literature and written works, and set a precedent for the future.<sup>15</sup> At this time, the first slave narratives are written and are becoming known to the public.

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<sup>14</sup> Wheelock, M. Stefan: *Dividing a nation, writing a people: African American literature and the abolitionist movement* // *The Cambridge History of African American Literature* / edited by Maryemma Graham and Jerry W. Ward Jr. Cambridge University Press 2011, pg.75-76

<sup>15</sup> Ibid 76-79

### 3. Slave narratives

Slave narratives, either passed orally or written by the slaves themselves, are the accounts of their lives during the slavery and after or during their fugitive period. They present the most dominant and significant part of the African American literary tradition. The first narratives, that is autobiographies, started appearing between the year of 1760 and the end of the Civil War. After the year of 1865, when slavery was finally abolished, many of the former slaves devoted their lives to writing their stories and publishing their work.<sup>16</sup> According to Vincent Carretta, the originator of the slave narratives was Ukawsaw Gronniosaw (also known as James Albert), with his “*Narrative*”. It was first published in London in 1772, and like most of the other slave narratives, it is an autobiography about a freedom lost and regained.<sup>17</sup> The narrative which was first to become a best-seller, and which was the first to tell about slave ships and trades, was “*Interesting Narrative of the Life of Olaudah Equiano; or, Gustavus Vassa, the African. Written by Himself*”, written in 1789.<sup>18</sup>

Before mentioning other significant African American authors, it is important to mention Harriet Beecher Stowe and her “*Uncle Tom’s Cabin*”, from 1852. This is not a slave narrative but rather an anti-slavery novel, which was greatly influenced by other slave narratives written by

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<sup>16</sup> Slave narrative. 2015. *Encyclopædia Britannica Online*. Retrieved 04 September, 2015, from <http://www.britannica.com/art/slave-narrative>

<sup>17</sup> Carretta, Vincent. *The emergence of an African American literary canon, 1760-1820 // The Cambridge History of African American Literature* / edited by Maryemma Graham and Jerry W. Ward Jr. Cambridge University Press 2011, pg.57-58

<sup>18</sup> Slave narrative. 2015. *Encyclopædia Britannica Online*. Retrieved 04 September, 2015, from <http://www.britannica.com/art/slave-narrative>

that time<sup>19</sup>, and it is a fairly good overview of the time and its conditions. What was striking for me while reading it and comparing it to the slave narratives that I have read, was a new perspective on the relationships between the slaves and their slaveholders. To elaborate, in slave narratives the mentioned relationship was nonexistent. Meaning that the slaveholders, or masters, were harsh on their slaves and there was no mercy. On the other hand, in “*Uncle Tom’s Cabin*”, Arthur and Emily Shelby were good to their slaves and were always making sure that they are ok. Even though Arthur sold Tom and Eliza’s son, it is obvious that the decision was not easy. The same goes other way around; the slaves had a lot of respect for them, which we can see by Tom’s attitude when he found out that the master had sold him. He was neither angry nor hateful for his decision.

As already said, slave narratives focus on the author’s “journey” towards freedom; from the chains of slavery in the South to the free life in the North. In these narratives, slavery is described with brutal images that are often hard for the reader to comprehend, so it is understandable why the resistance was necessary. After the slaves had managed to escape, freedom did not only mean reaching the North, but also appointing themselves a new name and complete dedication to the abolishment of slavery in the United State, devotion to the anti-slavery movements. One of the narratives that supports these statements and facts, is the “*Narrative of the Life of Frederick Douglass, an American Slave, Written by Himself*”, written in 1845. Douglass later wrote another autobiography called “*My Bondage and My Freedom*”.<sup>20</sup>

In addition, there are more authors whose autobiographies greatly contributed to the African American literary tradition: Harriet Jacobs and her “*Incidents in the Life of a Slave Girl*”,

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<sup>19</sup> Ibid.

<sup>20</sup> Slave narrative. 2015. *Encyclopædia Britannica Online*. Retrieved 04 September, 2015, from <http://www.britannica.com/art/slave-narrative>

William Wells Brown and the “Fugitive Slave”, Elizabeth Keckley with “Behind the Scenes; or, Thirty Years a Slave and Four Years in the White House”, Richard Wright with his 2 narratives “The Autobiography of Malcolm X” and “Black Boy”, and “Up from Slavery” by Booker T. Washington, which was a best seller during the end of the 19<sup>th</sup> and the beginning of the 20<sup>th</sup> century.<sup>21</sup>

### **Booker T. Washington: *Up From Slavery: An Autobiography***

Booker T. Washington was an American writer and educationist, born a slave on a plantation in Virginia in 1858 or 1859; the day and month are unknown to him. Despite his efforts, he did not manage to retrieve any information about his ancestry.<sup>22</sup> He had no education or whatsoever while being in slavery, but always had a thirst for knowledge. In the beginning of his book, he recalls the early years of his life, and the conditions in which he lived. He did not sleep on a real bed, he ate the leftovers of his masters and he had to wear the flax cloth which he hated. Even though the conditions in which the slaves lived and work were miserable, he says that the slaves did not hate their master but on the contrary, they had a lot of respect for them. In fact, when the news about being free arrived, the slaves were happy but at the same time they were filled with sorrow for their masters, because they all got used to each other and were also afraid of the new life that was ahead of them, where they had to lean on themselves only.

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<sup>21</sup> Ibid.

<sup>22</sup> Washington, Booker T.: *Up From Slavery: An Autobiography*. 1901, pg.1-5

*“Besides, deep down in their hearts there was a strange and peculiar attachment to “old Master” and “old Missus”, and to their children, which they found it hard to think of breaking off.”*<sup>23</sup>

The first book he encountered was a spelling book that his mother procured for him. He started learning the alphabet on his own, and soon after a Negro man that could read, came to the town. Soon the first school for Negro children was open. They found some teachers and with a lot of work, they had day-school, night-school and Sunday-school, so anyone willing to learn was now able to, regardless of their age. After some time, due to the difficulties his family lived in, he had to start working in the salt-furnace, but he worked hard to be able to do both-work and school.<sup>24</sup> One day while working at the salt-furnace, he heard about the Hampton Institute, and decided to work hard to get there. When he managed to earn a little money, he passed a hundred miles to get to the Hampton, not having many supplies with him. He eventually reached Hampton, with as little as 50 cents. The costs of the education were far from his reached, but he was working at the school, doing jobs like cleaning and fixing things, in order to pay off his scholarship. It was there where he met General Armstrong, a figure that he was very fond of during his whole life, and to whom he believes owns a lot.<sup>25</sup>

Booker decided to study hard, and in 1875 he finished his studies at Hampton, and started teaching in his home town in Virginia. That period lasted for 2 years, after which he went to Washington D.C. to continue his education. While there, he received an invitation from General Armstrong, to open a school and be a teacher in Tuskegee, Alabama. In June 1881, he arrived in Alabama and started traveling in order to find a suitable place to open a school. Already then, he

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<sup>23</sup> Ibid. Pg.14

<sup>24</sup> Washington, Booker T.: *Up From Slavery: An Autobiography*. 1901, chapter II

<sup>25</sup> Ibid. Chapter II-IV

met a lot of people and made connections that will help him later on.<sup>26</sup> When the school was finally open, thirty students applied and he was the only teacher. By time, he found more teachers (even his future wife was one of them), and more and more students came. His primary wish was to teach students proper behavior, and to teach them how to provide for themselves. He did not want them only to read books, but to learn from experience. So the students were taught how to properly dress, bathe, make their beds and how to sleep in them, and how to do the works like cleaning, cooking, gardening and even some harder physical work. Every little thing done at the school, each room and each brick, was made by the students themselves. Even so, the school needed funding, so Washington and his wife had to travel around and ask for money. Luckily, each time they needed the money, good hearted people would come along and help with their donations, like for example two ladies from London who donated several times. During the years, the school has made a great progress. From the little shantytown, it became a big new building, all thanks to the students and the teachers who contributed with their own work.<sup>27</sup>

All of this may not seem as important while reading, but Booker T. Washington was a former black slave, and to think he managed to do all this work by himself, is extraordinary for that time. Moreover, at the last several chapters of his book, we learn that he become very well known and appreciated figure in the public eye. He was invited to give many speeches across the country, and became a public speaker and a fighter for civil rights. In chapter VII of his book, he recounts the day when he gave his speech in the Internal Exposition in 1895, in front the President, the whites and the blacks. He also speaks about being the first Negro who was ever

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<sup>26</sup> Ibid. Chapter IV-VIII

<sup>27</sup> Washington, Booker T.: *Up From Slavery: An Autobiography*. 1901

awarded an honorary degree from Harvard, which is only one out of many awards that he received for his work.<sup>28</sup>

### **3.1. Frederick Douglass: *The Narrative of the Life of Fredrick Douglass, an American Slave: Written by Himself***

This narrative is author's account on his life in the system of slavery, but it was also his effort to support the abolitionist movement. Because his book made him known to the public, he was forced to move to Britain in order not to be captured again and returned to slavery. For that reason, this “(...) *is not simply a particularly forceful example of the slave narrative genre but also a reminder that African American literature has often been produced at considerable risk to its authors.*”<sup>29</sup> Like most of the other slaves, he also does not know the exact time of birth. Supposedly, his father was his master but that was never confirmed, and he was separated from his mother while still a baby.<sup>30</sup>

This “*Narrative*” gives us a very detailed description of how the slaves were tortured by their slaves, and little significance was given to their existence. The slaves were given a monthly allowance of food and yearly allowance of clothing, but children were often seen naked, regardless of the season of the year. His first master was Mr. Anthony and during the time

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<sup>28</sup> Ibid.

<sup>29</sup> Ernest, John. *African American Literature and the Abolitionist Movement, 1845 to the Civil War // The Cambridge History of African American Literature* / edited by Maryemma Graham and Jerry W. Ward Jr. Cambridge University Press 2011, pg. 91

<sup>30</sup> Douglass, Frederick. *The Narrative of the Life of Fredrick Douglass, an American Slave: Written by Himself*. The anti-slavery office, Boston, 1845, pg. 12-14

Douglass was on his plantation, he witnessed the first cruel scene. He saw his aunt being severely whipped, and this description is painful to read. Moreover, he recounts the time when the overseer shot a slave because he did not response to his calls, with the excuse that the slave was being unmanageable. What is the most shocking for me to learn is that the killing of a slave was never treated as a crime, not even in the case where a woman was killed because she did not hear her baby crying and that bothered his mistress. We also learn that that the slaveholders often sent spies among the slaves, to learn if someone is speaking badly about them. If that would prove to be true, severe whipping would occur. After that, he was sold to Mr. and Mrs. Auld in Baltimore. At first he was content because Mrs. Auld taught him to write and read, but Mr. has forbidden it because he believed this will spoil him and only do harm. But that did not stop him to learn how to read on his own, secretly. At that time, Douglass notices that there is a difference between the city slaves and the ones on the plantations; the first one had more privileges regarding allowances and free time. At Baltimore, he also first heard of the abolitionists and developed a desire to be a part of their movement. Another cruel fact that Douglass recounts, is how the masters had a habit of buying women as “breeders”; meaning that they would found them a man to live with in order to produce children which the masters would add to their wealth. Mr. Auld did that, and after a year the woman gave birth to twins, which he took from her.<sup>31</sup>

The time he had to spend with Mr. Auld has finally come to an end, and he was resold to Mr. Freeland, of which Douglass was fond of because of his somewhat reasonable sense for humanity. During that time, as he learned to read and write on his own, he started a Sabbath school where he was teaching the other slaves. This experience created a strong relationship between him and the slaves; they would give a life for each other. In 1834, he again started

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<sup>31</sup> Douglass, Frederick. *The Narrative of the Life of Fredrick Douglass, an American Slave: Written by Himself*. The anti-slavery office, Boston, 1845, chapters III-IX

thinking about freedom. He gathered some friend and started planning. Everything was going well, until the day came. Someone betrayed them and they were all sent to prison. His friends soon got out, but he remained imprisoned until Mr. Auld came for him. He sent him to live with his brother, who taught him how to trade. He worked for a ship-builder, and he was content with this job. It was odd for him at the beginning because he worked side by side by the whites and blacks, and no one seemed to mind. Things were going well, until one day the whites started to rebel. Soon a fight broke out in which Douglass almost lost his eye. Hearing that, his new master did not want him to go back there, so he started the job of calking, where he earned 6-7 dollars per week, all of which he had to give to his master.<sup>32</sup>

Eventually, he managed to escape. He saved some money from the work he found, and by September of 1828 he was in New York. He refused to give any details about the circumstances and the people who helped him escape, simply because he did not want them to suffer any kind of punishment for helping him, and he did not want by any means to aggravate the future escapes of the slaves. When getting to New York, he found himself lost and lonely, determined not to trust anyone because he was afraid someone will expose him and he will be taken to slavery again. Luckily, that period of misery did not last long and he met Mr. David Ruggles. He helped him find a safe place in New Bedford and a new job. Douglass changed his name several times out of the fear of being revealed, and eventually left the name Bailey. His future wife came to him and they got married, he was introduced to the “Liberator” and during the rest of his life he was dedicated to the anti-slavery movements.<sup>33</sup>

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<sup>32</sup> Douglass, Frederick. *The Narrative of the Life of Fredrick Douglass, an American Slave: Written by Himself*. The anti-slavery office, Boston, 1845, chapter X

<sup>33</sup> Douglass, Frederick. *The Narrative of the Life of Fredrick Douglass, an American Slave: Written by Himself*. The anti-slavery office, Boston, 1845, chapter XI

Douglass is praised as one of the most significant leaders in the fight for human rights in 19th century. Being a prominent oratory and literary figure has launched him in the center of the abolition movement, and he was the first African American to hold a rank in the government of the United States. The discussed “*Narrative*” was later revised and complemented by Douglass, under the title “*Life and Times of Frederick Douglass*”.<sup>34</sup> This book is important not only because of the significance of Frederick Douglass himself, but also for the somewhat different and more vivid accounts of the slave life, with stories that are hard even to imagine.

### **3.2. William Wells Brown: Fugitive Slave**

William Wells Brown was born in Kentucky, presumably in 1814, by Elizabeth and a man named George Higgins, who was a relative of his master.<sup>35</sup> This narrative is also full of horrible accounts on the events in Brown’s life. He was born a slave and worked as a house servant for his master, who was a political demagogue, elected to a seat in the Legislature. His overseer was Friend Haskell, who used to apply the so called “Virginia play” on the slaves. “Virginia play” means that he would tie and whip the slaves in the smoke-house and then lit a fire for the slaves to be left in the smoke. Brown also suffered from this horrible act, after which he ran to woods, which eventually cost him jail time.<sup>36</sup> The next Brown’s master was the greatest

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<sup>34</sup> Frederick Douglass. 2015. *Encyclopædia Britannica Online*. Retrieved 06 September, 2015, from <http://www.britannica.com/biography/Frederick-Douglass>

<sup>35</sup> Brown, William W.: *Fugitive Slave*. The anti-slavery office, Boston, 1847, pg.13

<sup>36</sup> Ibid. pg.22-23

hater of the Negro, Mr. John Colburn. He whipped a slave, named Aaron, and then washed his wounds with rum.<sup>37</sup>

Now it becomes evident that even though each narrative is an account on the life in slavery, each former slave has his own awful stories, and we learn something new with each narrative we read.

After being hired by Colburn, he was sold to Elijah P. Lovejoy, in St. Louis, which at the time was known as the cruelest place to be at. At one occasion, he was attacked by a group of boys and severely beaten, for which he ended being responsible for and got whipped undeservedly. He was sent home to recover, after which he was hired by Captain Reynolds to work as a waiter on a steam boat. He developed a strong desire for escaping to Canada, but decided not to go without his mother and sister, who belonged to another master.<sup>38</sup>

In the next chapter he retells how his master got a nephew, whom they named William. Since he belonged to master's family, Brown had to change his first name because the nephew had a higher right to the name. He got hired out to Mr. Walker, to be his Negro speculator, also called a soul-trader. *"Who is a negro-driver? One whose eyes dwell with delight on lacerated bodies of helpless men, women and children; whose soul feels diabolical raptures at the chains, and hand-cuffs and cart-whips, for inflicting tortures on weeping mothers torn from helpless babes, and on husbands and wives torn asunder forever."*<sup>39</sup> . The slaves were transferred to New Orleans and put in "negro-pens", kept there for a week, during which time the slave traders came to buy them. On another occasion, slaves had to march to New Orleans. The master did not even

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<sup>37</sup> Ibid. pg.25

<sup>38</sup> Brown, William W.: *Fugitive Slave*. The anti-slavery office, Boston, 1847, pg.28-37

<sup>39</sup> Ibid. Pg. 82

care about the women who had their children with them, and he even left a child on the road because he could not stand the crying.<sup>40</sup>

In chapter VIII, he persuaded his mother to escape with him to Canada, which he believed is the land of liberty. They stole a boat, traveled by night guided by a North star, and spent their days hiding in the wood. Sadly, they got caught, whipped and got thrown in the jail. After some time, he got hired out again to work on a steamboat. There he saw his mother the last time, she was among the slaves who were about to get sold.<sup>41</sup> He started making final plans for escape after he was sold to Captain Price. His wife wanted to find a woman for Brown, but he was against marriage because he knew he will escape when he gets the opportunity. Nevertheless, he could not tell that so he had to pretend he is in love with Eliza, girl that mistress found for him. He finally managed to escape, again following the North star and hiding in the woods, trusting no one. It was a cold winter, and at the 4<sup>th</sup> day he was out of supplies, he had to find a shelter. A white man, named Wells Brown, helped him even though he knew he was a slave. He treated him as an equal, and gave him his last name.<sup>42</sup>

Eventually, he reached Cleveland, Ohio. He found a good job, and thanks to Wells Brown's wife and his kindness, he was strongly in favor of women's rights. Moreover, he subscribed for the anti-slavery newspaper "Genius of Universal Emancipation", and have done his best to help the abolition movement. Also, he dedicated his life to helping the slave fugitives escape to Canada.<sup>43</sup>

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<sup>40</sup> Ibid. Pg.37-59

<sup>41</sup> Brown, William W.: *Fugitive Slave*. The anti-slavery office, Boston, 1847, pg.60-82

<sup>42</sup> Ibid. Chapters XII-XIV

<sup>43</sup> Ibid. Chapter XIV

### 3.3. Harriet A. Jacobs: *Incidents in the Life of a Slave Girl*

“Only by experience can any one realize how deep, and dark, and foul is that pit of abominations.”<sup>44</sup> This quote immediately gives a hint that this is yet another narrative full of awful images. But, this one is from the perspective of a woman, who suffered the cruelties of his master, was taken away from their children, forced to hide and to struggle with every atom to get them back, while at the same time searching and fighting for freedom. In her preface, she states that the purpose of this work was to arouse women of the North to realize the cruelty and the awful situation of the women in the South.<sup>45</sup>

She first learned that she is a slave at six years old, when her mother died. She was then sent to live with her mistress, who was everything but cruel to her and she did not yet know about the burdens of slavery. Six years later, mistress died, and she left her to her sister's daughter of five years old. There she experienced the coldness of a new home, and completely new life conditions. As she grew older, her master started to show his affections towards her and told her that she was made only for his use and was to obey him in everything. The mistress saw the affections and started being jealous, even though Harriet struggled hard to avoid every contact with her master. She even made Harriet swear over the Bible that nothing was happening, while pitying herself as a martyr without acknowledging her sufferings.<sup>46</sup>

She fell in love with a colored carpenter, for what her master hit her and forbidden her to ever see him. He built a secluded house for her, in order to stay away from the mistress and to visit her away from everyone. But she fell in love in yet another man and got pregnant. It was a

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<sup>44</sup> Jacobs, Harriet A.: *Incidents in the Life of a Slave Girl*. Boston, ed. L Maria Child, 1861, pg.7

<sup>45</sup> Jacobs, Harriet A.: *Incidents in the Life of a Slave Girl*. Boston, ed. L Maria Child, 1861, pg.5-7

<sup>46</sup> Ibid. Chapters I-VI

period of humiliation for her and she lost self-respect, because the times were like that then. She gave birth to a premature baby, and they were both ill for a year. She recovered, but got pregnant again. The punishment this time was that the master cut all of her hair, leaving her bald. She also got thrown down the stairs, and her children were sent to work on a plantation.<sup>47</sup>

The first time she tried to escape she got a poisonous bite, and got thrown to jail together with her children. The second time, she made it seem like she escaped, but her brother Jacob secured her a small hiding space above her grandmother's house. The space was only big enough to crawl in it, and she stayed there for seven years but she suffered in order to see her children again someday. Sawyer, the father of her first child, promised her to emancipate the children after he bought them, but he never did so. In 1843, Sawyer managed to escape to the North, in order to find her daughter. She lived a tense and disturbed life of a fugitive slave for nearly ten years, found her daughter and worked as a baby nurse in Boston.<sup>48</sup>

This book is not only an account on someone's life like the other narratives, it is a collection of "incidents" that happened to a person during the slavery. Harriet Jacobs was tormented by her master just because she was a pretty, black slave girl, and did not have any rights. Instead of searching for help, she had to suffer and be silent because she thought she had to be ashamed for the things on which she did not have any influence on. Even though it is just one book, it can serve as an description for the position of most of the black women during the time of slavery. Women with no rights whatsoever, their children were taken from their arms and they were used to satisfy the needs of their masters.

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<sup>47</sup> Jacobs, Harriet A.: *Incidents in the Life of a Slave Girl*. Boston, ed. L Maria Child, 1861, chapters VII-XIV

<sup>48</sup> Jacobs, Harriet A.: *Incidents in the Life of a Slave Girl*. Boston, ed. L Maria Child, 1861

#### **4. Conclusion**

This is, undoubtedly, a period of history from which the whole human kind can learn to appreciate each life equally, regardless of the color of their skin or the continent from which they arrive. The African American slaves have had a long period of agonizing battle for their freedom, and one of their weapons was their writing. They wrote their accounts on the lives in slavery, of the tortures they went through under the hands of their brutal masters, their escapes from slavery and their fight for the abolition of slavery, for human rights.

I chose the narratives of Booker T. Washington, Frederick Douglass, William Wells Brown and Harriet A. Jacobs for this thesis, because each of these figures represent a different perspective and point of view, and when comprised together, they give a full picture of the tortures of slavery. They stood for themselves, they were involved in politics, opened up schools for teaching black people how to read, held ranks in the government and their narratives were an encouragement for other slaves who wanted to escape but were not brave enough. They left us a sort of legacy of slavery, a determination not to let history to repeat itself. I chose this topic not because I thought it was interesting, but because I wanted to learn every single detail about the strong man and women who had the courage to fight for their rights. So this thesis' aim was to present a more detailed overview of the slave narratives, using four books chosen to represent them best.

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