

John Stauffer, “12 Years between Life and Death”

Introduction

The most memorable image in *12 Years a Slave* is of Solomon Northup (Chiwetel Ejiofor) hanging from a tree with a noose around his neck, his arms and legs tightly bound, and his toes barely reaching the muddy ground. It is also the longest shot in the film, lingering for about three minutes. In the background slaves do chores, children play, the overseer Mr. Chapin (J. D. Evermore) paces on the piazza, and Mistress Ford (Liza Bennett) watches from her balcony. Chapin, having saved Northup from being lynched by the carpenter John Tibeats (Paul Dano), now allows him to endure this torture all day, until Master Ford cuts him down. Only the slave Rachel (Nicole Collins) intervenes. She enters the foreground of the scene, as if to underscore the unusual nature of her act, and gives Northup water from a drinking gourd. Given the strain on Northup’s neck, it seems surprising that he survives the ordeal.

The scene provides the central metaphor of the film. During his 12 years as a slave, Northup dangles between life and death, or “social death,” as the sociologist Orlando Patterson called it.¹ The term captures the extreme power imbalance between master and slave resulting from violence coupled with psychological coercion. The scene and the film highlight a defining feature of slavery that previous feature films about the institution have either downplayed or ignored. “Social death” recognizes slavery as a state of war; and a slave society such as the antebellum South is a “closed society” or totalitarian state.² These are also central themes in Northup’s own narrative, *Twelve Years a Slave* (1853), on which the film is closely based, and the writings and speeches of most black and white abolitionists, notably Frederick Douglass, who explicitly called slavery “a *state of war*” (153).

The quest to survive trumps morality. Here the film brilliantly dramatizes the psychology of slavery, which critics have so far failed to grasp.³ Survival is the slaves’ basic aim. The depictions of violence and suffering in the film do not generate a voyeuristic “pornography of pain” that is “obscenely titillating,” which is how Karen Halttunen described abolitionist descriptions of slavery (304). Nor do they exploit and objectify black bodies, as Marcus Wood (*Blind Memory: Visual Representations of*

¹ Vincent Brown offers an important corrective to Patterson’s concept of “social death,” showing how scholars, by treating it as “a theoretical abstraction,” have misused it. It is as though *12 Years a Slave* incorporates both Patterson’s book and Brown’s article in its depiction of slavery. See “Social Death and Political Life in the Study of Slavery,” *American Historical Review* 114 (2009): 1231–49.

² James Silvers’s (*Mississippi: The Closed Society* [1964]) characterization of the deep South as a closed society resembles a totalitarian state. Although he focuses on Mississippi in the postbellum years, he traces the origins of the South’s closed society to the antebellum years.

³ In his short, excellent review of *12 Years a Slave* in the *New Yorker*, David Denby hints at the psychology of survivalism but does not develop it. (see “Fighting to Survive: ‘12 Years a Slave’ and ‘All is Lost,’” 21 Oct. 2013, web)

Slavery in England and America, 1780–1865 [2000]) said of visual representations of slavery. And they do not come across as “weirdly antiseptic, history made safe through art,” as Stephanie Zacharek wrote in her review of *12 Years a Slave*. Rather, they enable viewers to empathize with the plight of slaves, offering access into their emotional and psychological states.⁴ The film succeeds at forcing viewers to “look—look at this” in order to understand slavery, as reflected by the extraordinary reviews and audience response.

Survivalism

12 Years a Slave highlights the theme of survivalism in several ways. Immediately after Northup becomes a slave, after having enjoyed a successful—indeed “distinguished”—middle-class life in Saratoga Springs, New York, he repudiates the ethos of survivalism. While on board the steamer heading to New Orleans, Northup and some fellow slaves debate whether or not to rebel. “I say we fight,” says Robert (Michael K. Williams). Northup agrees, telling the other slaves that he is a free man who has been illegally kidnapped and enslaved. But another slave characterizes rebellion as suicidal: “Do and say as little as possible. Tell no one who you are. Survival’s about keeping your head down.” Northup protests this ethos of survivalism: “You’re telling me that’s how to survive? I don’t want to survive; I want to *live*.” But after acclimating to slavery, he explains to Eliza (Adepero Oduye), whose children have been sold away from her, how he manages the horror of slavery and the loss of his family: “I *survive*.”

But the film subtly complicates this ethos of survivalism. At times slaves perceive living in slavery as worse than death, and it is at these moments when they rebel. After Robert’s corpse is thrown overboard, another slave (who had also advocated rebellion) says: “He’s better off than us.” When Northup stands up to Tibbeats and whips him, anger has replaced fear, dignity has trumped humiliation. It is a visual counterpart to the book, in which Northup says: “My fear changed to anger, and before he reached me I had made up my mind fully not to be whipped, let the result be life or death” (80). Viewers understand that in fighting Tibbeats, Northup risks his life. Accepting death as the cost of rebellion is a common theme in the literature on slavery. When Frederick Douglass decides to stand up to the slave breaker Edward Covey, he declares, “I had reached the point, at which I was *not afraid to die*. This spirit made me a freeman in *fact*, while I remained a slave in *form*” (*My Bondage* 140). The spirit of freedom trumped the bodily quest to survive.

Suicide

In the film, suicide is also a form of rebellion. Patsey, who suffers more than any other slave in the story, asks Northup one night to drown her in the swamp. Surprised by her request, he refuses: “How you fall into such despair?” He is surprised because by

⁴ On the importance of empathy for humanitarian reform, especially in relation to slavery, see Joseph Yannielli’s prizewinning article, “George Thompson among the Africans: Empathy, Authority, and Insanity in the Age of Abolition,” *Journal of American History* 96 (2010): 979–1000.

temperament she is energetic and full of life, making masterful dolls out of cornhusks and picking five times as much cotton as other slaves. Her death-wish stems from her plight as an attractive young slave woman, inducing rape by her master—“God gave her to me,” Epps declares—and the odium of Mistress Epps (Sarah Paulson). “The enslaved victim of lust and hate, Patsey had no comfort of her life,” Northup summarizes in his book (143).

Patsey’s death-wish is a slight departure from the book in order to dramatize the psychology of slavery. In the book it is Mistress Epps who “tempted [Northup] with bribes to put [Patsey] secretly to death, and bury her body in some lonely place in the margin of the swamp” (143). Patsey’s death-wish comes near the end of Northup’s narrative, after her horrible whipping. Northup concludes that Patsey had lost the will to live: “A blessed thing it would have been for her ... had she never lifted her head in life again. Indeed, from that time forward she was not what she had been.... If ever there was a broken heart—one crushed and blighted by the rude grasp of suffering and misfortune—it was Patsey’s” (199). A page later he explains her death-wish in relation to freedom: “Patsey’s life, especially after her whipping, was one long dream of liberty. Far away, to her fancy an immeasurable distance, she knew there was a land of freedom.... In her imagination it was an enchanted region, the Paradise of the earth” (200–201). Her dream of freedom, a form of rebellion, is also a death-wish.

Conclusion

12 Years a Slave ends with Northup’s return to freedom, and it raises questions about the legacy of slavery. Northup arrives at the front door of his house, looking dazed, as if he is afraid to enter. Northup cautiously enters his home, and then betrays a sense of shame: “I apologize for my appearance, but I’ve had a difficult time these past several years.” He seems not to be able to distinguish his daughter, Margaret (Devyn Tyler) from his wife, Anne (Kelsey Scott), for he asks, “Margaret, where are you?” He apologizes again, saying “forgive me.” His wife responds, “There is nothing to forgive.” There is nothing for Anne to forgive of him. Yet the theme of forgiveness looms large. In one sense, Solomon will need to learn how to forgive his tormenters in order to overcome resentment and release himself from his past sufferings. But in another sense, since the film ends with Northup having just returned home, it places the burden of the past on us, urging us as viewers to confront the legacy of slavery in a free society. This legacy has already been foreshadowed in the film’s central metaphor. Northup’s hanging from a noose, dangling between life and death, “had to represent all the hundreds of thousands of people who were lynched” in the postbellum era.⁵ Northup’s last two lines—an apology and a plea for forgiveness—offer a way to confront the legacy of slavery. When he apologizes, he is also asking the US to apologize for slavery and its slave society. Only then can the legacies of slavery be confronted. With an apology, there can then be forgiveness, and the beginning of healing.

⁵ *12 Years a Slave* Director, Steven McQueen, “Steven McQueen and Henry Louis Gates Jr. Talk *12 Years a Slave*, Part 3.” *Root*. The Slate Group, 26 Dec. 2013. Web.

Source

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