

# **Twelve Years A Slave: A Reaction Paper**

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Set in mid-1800, the film *Twelve Years A Slave* told the story of Solomon Northup, an African-American free man who got sold into slavery. It is an adaptation of the memoir written and released by Northup in 1853.

Solomon Northup enjoyed the life as a free man, together with his wife and two children and worked as a violinist, however everything changed when he was deceived by two men from a 'circus'. They enticed him with a huge amount of earnings that could be gained by travelling with them to Washington, D.C., to which Northup eagerly agreed to. Although soon thereafter, he was drugged and woke up in chains, and met other African-Americans, who were also held up against their will. They were then shipped and handed over to a slave trader and Northup gained a new name, "Platt". A plantation owner, William Ford, bought him. Later on, Northup got into a fight with an assistant overseer, John Tibeats, who attempted to hang him through a noose but was promptly rescued by Mr. Chapin, who brandished his guns and scared Tibeats. Ford felt that Tibeats remains as a threat and might do an act of vengeance on Northup anytime, so he sold him to another plantation owner, Edwin Epps, who was notoriously known as "nigger breaker". There he met Patsey, a slave who was a victim to Edwin Epps' frequent raping and Mistress Epps' cruelty.

When cotton worms infested Epps' plantation, Northup together with a handful of other slaves was sent to another plantation, owned by Judge Turner, who gives and let him keep his salary. Northup later then attempted to use his earnings to ask a former overseer and fellow field worker, Armsby to send a letter. Epps' later found out, but Northup was quick to lie and convince Epps that the accusation was not true.

Later on, a carpenter named Samuel Bass, who was outspokenly against slavery, came to work for Epps. Northup told Bass his whole story and asked him to send a letters to his family and friends in the North. After some hesitation, Bass eventually agreed. He kept his promise and a sheriff and Northup's friend, Mr. Parker later came to Epps' plantation one day, and identified Northup. Epps' was in disbelief that Platt was a actually a free man, tried to prevent him from leaving the premises and even threatened "You'll have 200 stripes on your back by sundown!". Those threats fell upon deaf ears, and Northup was able to come home and reunite with his family once again.

Slavery started in the United States when Dutch ships brought Africans to the British colony Jamestown, Virginia in 1619. They were then dispersed and bought as slaves, to work on tobacco and rice plantations. The slave trade grew since then, more ships went to Africa, and transported Africans to be sold as slaves in America. Slaves lead the labor work, especially during the invention of the cotton gin, combined with the demand of American cotton from the England (to be used in textile production).

In the movie, plantation owners, such as Ford and Epps, have more than 20 slaves. Many slave masters conditioned their slaves to be completely dependent on them, by making them think that serving their masters is the best option they have. Slaves also aren't taught how to read and write; they tend to have a severe inferiority complex, for all the inhumane treatment they go through.

In 1808, the US Congress prohibited the import of slaves to America. Still in the midst of the high cotton demand, as well as the expansion of sugarcane, tobacco and indigo business, the need for more slaves increased, to do the all the labor intensive work. As smuggling slaves got harder, slave traders resorted to abducting individuals and selling them against their will. Solomon Northup was one of the victims of these abductions.

Evidently in the movie, the slaves were treated less than human, almost as par as an animal-- and were subject to various human rights violations. Plantation masters and slave owners upheld sets of rules for their slaves (like how they aren't supposed to answer back to their master), as well as a standard of hard work (like how Epps measured each slave's daily cotton harvest). If any rule is violated, severe punishment is inflicted upon the slaves. It could range from whipping to flogging to even death. The slaves are taught to fear their masters and their overlords, and they obey any of their masters' commands, which can range from sexual abuses (like how Epps repeatedly raped Patsey) to whipping another slave (like how Epps told Northup to whip Patsey).

Laden with these hardships, the Black slaves turned to religion to help them survive the harsh conditions. It was introduced to them by their overlords, who were Christians. They believed that there is a merciful God waiting for them, so they just keep on working despite all the suffering.

Although they act aloof and apathetic when their masters are having trouble with another slave, slaves care about each other, as seen when a girl brought water to Northup while he was barely hanging by the noose on the tree, when the slaves of Epps huddled together and sang a song in the funeral of a fellow slave who died while on the field and when they help the people injured or sick.

In the early to mid-19<sup>th</sup> century, during the time portrayed in the movie, the abolitionist movement was still starting to gain considerable traction. Some slaves were freed, and were given papers to prove that they were a free man. This trend was happening mostly in the Northern states, while the Southern states continued to condone slavery, due to the high demand of cotton and tobacco, hence the equal need for slaves to do the manual labor. As mentioned earlier, the Congress also banned transatlantic import of slaves, a step towards ending the international slave trade.

There were plantation masters who were somehow sympathetic to the abolitionist movement. William Ford, displayed a better treatment with his slaves compared to other slave owners. He even held prayer sessions where he read the Gospel out loud for the slaves, he listens to the slaves like when he heeded Northup's suggestions on some work, and he protects them, like how he worried about Northup's safety after Tibeats tried to kill him.

It truly saddens me to think that there was a time that humans thought and treated other humans as animals, as property, as mere objects, just because they have a different color of skin, they speak a different language and they practice a different culture. The movie was blunt and straight to the point—they laid out the events very realistically. My heart just aches whenever I try to imagine myself in any of the slaves' shoes. To be transported to a whole new other place, where people have fair skin and speak in a foreign language, and these people expect you to do hard labor all day, every day; or perhaps being born to a slave family, growing up seeing people abuse you just because you have a darker skin color than them, and worse, to be separated from your family, from your mother and father and siblings, to be sold off to a different master—all of these are nightmares to experience. I think that as Filipino's, we can somehow empathize with the slaves, since we went under the rule of various colonizations, the most prominent of which was the Spanish Occupation that lasted over 300 years. I simply cannot imagine the feeling when your free will, your worth as a human being, is taken away from you.

I understand how labor was needed during that time, there were more humane ways to employ other people to do work. It is so distressing to imagine how the sense of humanity was disregarded, lives of countless people being defined by a mere lump of cash, putting them in circumstances against their will, without giving them any right to speak out.

One of the storylines that hit was Eliza's, who was separated from her son and daughter. I felt her grief, her mother's grief, and although I cannot fully understand that until I bear a child of my own, it truly is devastating for you to lose your children whom you've taken care of all their lives, and never see them again, never hear from them again. I also feel worried for the children, who will be alone in figuring out and surviving the world.

Perhaps the character that suffered the most in the movie was Patsey. Although she was the favorite of the plantation master Epps, she suffered through physical, mental, emotional and sexual abuse from her owners. Epps favored her yet hurt her all the time, while Mistress Epps was cruel to her due to jealousy. She was driven to a point of considering suicide, and thought that death was a sweeter escape than the hell she was going through. Her situation did sound like a dead-end, it was hopeless, there seems to be no other option. I hope that at some point in her life, she will experience at least a sliver of happiness.

Finally, I was touched by the story of Northup, who managed to stay strong despite unfortunate circumstances. He persisted and never lost hope. He is a role model to anyone who is undergoing through dark times, he is an inspiration to persevere, and one day, you'll see the light.

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