



Horror, Race, and Reality

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Often, horror is associated with British Gothic selections, such as *The Castle of Otranto* (1764), “The Rime of the Ancient Mariner” (1789), or *Frankenstein* (1818) that explore the dark and mysterious, or it is connected with American works such as “The Legend of Sleepy Hollow” (1820), “The Tell-Tale Heart” (1843), and *The Turn of the Screw* (1878) that traverse the macabre and the demented. British Gothic selections traditionally focused on the fictional haunting of the past, and American selections perseverated distrustfully on its present and future New World anxieties of dangers and violence connected with the frontier, threats to Democracy, and issues of race (Lloyd-Smith 2004, p. 4). These characteristics were the nascent markers of the horror tradition, but contemporary horror authors, such as Stephen King, create selections like *It* (1987) that explore the dark recesses of the human psyche, with a clown who functions as the anthropomorphic manifestation of fears, and Jeanne Kalogridis’s historical fiction, *The Inquisitor’s Wife* (2013), which explores man’s inhumanity to man in the horrors of the Spanish Inquisition.

Within the African American artistic tradition, horror manifests itself in a multitude of ways that include novels, like Tananarive Due’s *My Soul to Keep* (1997), Octavia Butler’s *Fledgling* (2005), and L.A. Bank’s *Bad Blood* (2008), that take the classical themes of werewolves, vampires, and immortals and incorporate people of color into the selections. These works move classical horror images to a more diversified authoring and readership of the twentieth and twenty-first centuries. James Weldon Johnson’s *The Autobiography of an Ex-Colored Man* (1912), Nella Larsen’s *Passing* (1929), Ralph Ellison’s *Invisible Man* (1952), and Chesya Burke’s *Let’s Play White* (2011) treat America’s fears of miscegenation and misunderstood racial identity. Jordan

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Peele's cinematic selection, *Get Out* (2017), tackles the ever-evolving yet still-complicated realities of race and identity that African Americans navigate through the present day, especially when they involve interracial romances.

However, the greatest contribution to the African American horror tradition comes directly from the history and experiences of slavery. The early selections, the autobiographical works of slaves known as slave narratives, were often produced with the expressed purpose of exposing white audiences to the innumerable and horrific circumstances that comprised slavery. At the same time, these slave narratives are also works of great literary quality. Beyond slavery, racism and the sometimes-daily obstacles associated with race became recurring themes within the earliest and most recent selections of African American literary works. Through an examination of the literary canon and cinematic history, observers can clearly see how race has contributed to and has been a reflection of the horror in the African American experience expressed in African American letters.

Slavery in the United States lasted for almost 250 years, from 1619 with the arrival of the first African slaves in Jamestown until the end of the Civil War in 1865. The New World slave experience was unique to human history because the American enslavement of Africans relegated slaves to a subhuman caste of chattel that endured for centuries. This continuous generational condition led the freeborn, African American abolitionist and philosopher David Walker to write in his 1829 selection, *David Walker's Appeal* that "we (coloured people of these United States), are the most degraded, wretched, and abject set of beings that ever lived since the world began" (Walker 2000, p. 3). Because slaves in America had no chance for upward social or economic mobility, Walker concluded that the sufferings of antiquity's slaves of Greece, Rome, and Egypt were not comparable to the generational confinement of American slaves (p. 3).

Walker's work significantly contributed to American letters because his selection mimicked the United States Constitution with its Age of Enlightenment reasoning and Neoclassic styling, while simultaneously offering literary parallelism with other American patriots. Walker's call for freedom, in style and substance, stands shoulder to shoulder with voices like Thomas Paine's *Common Sense* (1776), Patrick Henry's "liberty or death,"¹ and Thomas Jefferson's self-evident truths of universal equality. Where the founding fathers spoke against metaphoric and philosophical oppression, Walker spoke of a literal and physical slavery that was unavoidable for many. Walker's text offered a macrocosmic view of the horror and injustice of slavery, but other African American writers addressed the direct, quotidian, and lifelong horrors of American slavery.

Tim Hashaw in "The First Black Americans" records that the first thirty-two African slaves were sold in Jamestown in August 1619 and were quickly put to work as field laborers working along the James River (Hashaw 2007, p. 63). During the next two decades, Africans were permitted to marry each other and European settlers. These same Africans continued to farm with the intention of purchasing their freedom. Within twenty years, some Africans were successful enough to employ white servants to work their farms, while other Africans obtained positions in the local government or in the militia. By 1691, Virginia

changed, and Jamestown outlawed the freeing of slaves within the colony, forbade slaves from purchasing their own freedom, and stripped previously obtained liberties, rights, and privileges from Africans. In 1705, Virginia officially institutionalized slavery, and the growing number of profitable slave-owning plantations wanted more slavery in Virginia. The economic boom, propelled by chattel slavery, created a new situation in which British farmers of tobacco, cotton, and rice established a political and economic primacy over the Southern United States (Andrews 1996, p. 131). The new economic and political status of these British immigrant farmers ostensibly began much of the horror that Africans and their descendants experienced for the next 200 years.

Eighteenth-century enslaved Africans saw a very different New World, one that saw them differently; Africans were suddenly a subhuman group, with no perceived intellect or right to human dignity. Scholar Orlando Patterson describes the African slave as a “social nonperson,” who experienced a “social death” because the slave’s existence was solely defined by and in relationship to his/her master’s identity (1982, pp. 5, 8). Slaves literally lived and died at the whim of masters, and many facets of their lives from birth until death were ruled by someone else. The slightest perceived infraction could result in psychological, emotional, or physical harm. Many slaves lived in constant terror because the slave experience did not offer security or stability, but rather a reality of constant change, isolation, violence, and unexpected danger.

This formula of unexpected danger, isolation, and violence includes many of the conventions that one expects from a British Gothic novel. The fears concerning independence and democracy in the political state, alongside of dangers of a corrupt and/or abusive religious state, are typical conventions of American Gothic selections. The British novels *The Old English Baron* (1777) and *The Romance of the Forest* (1791) treat the terror of victimization associated with obscured inner spaces of haunted mansions, secret rooms, and treacherous caves that their fictional characters experience (Wolff 1979, pp. 99–100). The American novels *The Scarlet Letter* (1850) and *The Last of the Mohicans: A Narrative of 1757* (1826) explore abuses of the church and the violence of the New World. Many of these themes are incorporated in enslaved African experiences of horror and victimization in the inner and outer spaces in the New World; these slave realities can easily be seen in the autobiographical work of slave narratives.

One of the earliest slave narratives, *The Interesting Narrative of the Life of Olaudah Equiano, or Gustavus Vassa, the African, Written by Himself* (1789), detailed the horror of Africans first being enslaved by Europeans through his recounting of his life from childhood through the Middle Passage until he buys his freedom at age twenty-one. Here, readers see the true horrors of African enslavement through the departure from Africa and the unimaginable voyage of the Middle Passage. Chapter One discusses Equiano’s early life and the richness of Igbo culture in modern-day Nigeria, the bravery of his royal family, and the nuances of tribal war customs. Chapter Two reveals the existence of slavery in Africa, but Equiano notes that African slavery unequivocally differed from

American slavery because slaves in the African tradition retained their human status and their chance for upward mobility. To illustrate this point, Equiano narrates a time in his life when, after he was purchased as a slave in Africa, he was pleasantly surprised to find himself treated as a member of the family to which he was enslaved (1987, p. 30).

Equiano's first experience with American slavery was initial astonishment "converted into terror" because he thought the white crew would kill him immediately (1987, pp. 32–33). On the deck of the slave ship, Equiano saw dejection and sorrow from fellow Africans, and he found himself overpowered with "horror and anguish" (p. 33). This experience did not compare to the ship's overcrowded hold, where darkness and unbreathable air in a "loathsomeness of stench and crying together"—produced by bodily fluids and excrement, alongside dead and dying human bodies—ultimately created a ubiquitous misery (p. 33). After having been on the ship and having experienced unspeakable horrors, he finally wrote, "I now wished for the last friend, death, to relieve me" (p. 33). While it is unlikely that Equiano intended to create a Gothic scene, his narrative does, and Equiano's autobiography is not the only selection to do this.

The *Narrative of the Life of Frederick Douglass, an American Slave* (1845) presents episodes with the elements of classic Gothic literature that reflect the true horror of the American slave, also. In Chapter One, Douglass recounts an incident of his youth in which his Aunt Hester—who was very beautiful—was brutally whipped because the overseer called for her, and she was with another slave from a neighboring farm. He was furious and ordered her into the kitchen, stripped to her waste, hoisted by her hands to an overhead hook, and whipped mercilessly until "red blood ... came dripping to the floor" (1987, p. 259). Douglass says that, "I was so terrified and horror-stricken at the sight, that I hid myself in a closet ... till long after the bloody transaction was over. I expected to be next" (p. 259). Until witnessing that event, Douglass had been shielded from the horrors of slavery, but he notes that the event left an indelible imprint in his memory (p. 258). Later in his life, Douglass encountered violence when he got into a fight with an unjust slave breaker who had abused him. In Chapter Ten, he described the event in great detail, and it concluded with a fight that lasted two hours and a defeated slave breaker who found himself broken both physically and psychologically.

These episodes are important because they reflect multiple aspects of vulnerability within the slave experiences. Aunt Hester's situation recreates the Gothic scene in which a heroine, engaged in a virtuous courtship, is pursued and overtaken by a villainous rival (Wolff 1979, p. 103). Douglass intimates that the overseer was not concerned with protecting his aunt's innocence; nobody "will suspect him of any such virtue" (Wolff 1979, p. 259). His aunt was beaten because her love interest posed a threat to the overseer's desire for sexual conquest. Hester was ostensibly punished for posturing as a human by trying to experience companionship. This example reflects a true horror that slaves faced—even the slightest demonstration of humanity could result in violence or death. While Hester was vulnerable and victimized, young Douglass was also emotionally and psychologically traumatized by the events.

First, he saw his aunt stripped—which he likely recognized as problematic—then he witnessed a brutal whipping of a close female family member whom he likely felt some kind of internal motivation to protect, but that feeling conflicted with a need to protect himself. The inability to protect his aunt can be seen as an inciting incident of emasculation and psychological conditioning that took place with young male slaves. These young men learned very early on—just as Douglass did from Hester’s experience—that the slightest demonstration of humanity could result in violence or death. Douglass’s fight with the slave breaker, on the other hand, reflects a different type of vulnerability. Douglass, after being assaulted several times without justification, decided to fight back; even though he knew that his choice could cost him his life. One point that is notable about this situation is that he was abused by his master’s employee, and all slaves lived with the knowledge that any white man could end their lives for any reason without much fear of punishment.

Where Douglass learned of slavery’s violent horrors at a young age, Harriet Jacobs learned of the added perils of being a female slave as a teenager, and *Incidents in the Life of a Slave Girl* (1861) discusses the vulnerability of female slaves with unambiguous clarity. Spending her life—from pubescence to adulthood—evading her lecherous master’s advances, Jacobs discussed how her master began to corrupt her mind with sexual advances at age fifteen. She continued to say that she saw a man forty years her senior violate the laws of nature and common decency (Jacobs 1987, p. 361). She furthers the point by saying that no female slave was safe from the sexual tentacle of slave masters anywhere; the female slave was a prisoner in the house and victim of the house’s tyrant. Readers ultimately discover how Jacobs hid from her master in her grandmother’s very small attic for seven years until she could finally escape to the North.

While Jacobs and Douglass intended to create political, abolitionist works—Jacobs saying, “I have not exaggerated the wrongs inflicted by Slavery; on the contrary, my descriptions fall far short of the facts” and continuing, “But I do earnestly desire to arouse the women of the North to a realizing sense of the condition of two millions of women at the South, still in bondage, suffering what I suffered, and most of them far worse”—they unintentionally created literary works that reveal classic Gothic motifs of tyrannical males and the houses of horrors where vulnerable heroines are abused at will (Jacobs 1987, p. 335). Instead of late nights and dark castles or secret passageways, the slave narratives deal with hushed slave masters entering slave quarters during quiet, unobserved nights. Where Gothic selections recognized the importance of preserving the heroine’s innocence, slave narratives quietly exposed the shame that accompanied slave women’s stolen virtue. Different from the characters Ambrosio and Antonia in Matthew Lewis’s *The Monk* (1796), the heroine cannot attempt to flee her attacker, and the slave woman’s rapist would not pay for his crime with an agonizing and slow death as Ambrosio does. The slave woman was prohibited from revealing her rapist, even if he impregnated her. By ethos and/or law, slave paternity could not be discussed. If it were, the

slave, not the rapist, was punished, as is the case in Chapter Two of *Incidents* (Jacobs 1987, pp. 348–349). Jacobs’s experience with sexual abuse was a metonym for many slave women’s experiences, and her horrors and experiences were those of millions of slave women at different points in history.

In exceptional cases, female slaves fought back with success. On June 23, 1855, in Missouri, a slave named Celia did just that when she murdered her master, who had been raping her since age fourteen. Celia, nineteen at the time and a mother of two, feeling that she could no longer endure the abuse, killed her master after he entered her cabin late in the night to rape her. After clubbing him to death, she burned his body in her cabin’s fireplace and spread his ashes about the property the next morning. Her master’s disappearance was discovered, and Celia eventually revealed the details of his death. She explained that the rapes were constant, and they even continued through her pregnancies. Celia said that she appealed to his family and even to him, but neither proved to be successful. Ultimately, Celia was able to escape her house of horrors by directly exacting revenge on her perpetrator. Her decision to be human ended in a court trial that received national attention for a few weeks, a death sentence, and a book—*Celia, a Slave* (1991)—that memorialized her tragedy. The cost of Celia’s humanity was two lives, hers and her rapist’s. This was not always the case, however. In some instances, female slaves suffered in silence while others found alternative ways to effect change.

In January 1856 in Ohio, Margaret Garner, a twenty-one-year-old mother of four, decided to indirectly exact revenge against her abusive slave master by killing one of her children. After escaping with her family from the slave-state Kentucky to the free-state Ohio, Garner quickly found the house where she was staying surrounded by marshals. Rather than return to slavery with her family, she nearly decapitated her oldest daughter, she smashed the head of her younger daughter with a heavy shovel (from which she probably died later in March), and she tried to kill her two sons (Weisenburger 2003, pp. 134; Weisenburger 1999, pp. 74–75). She said that she did this in part to liberate her children from the horrors of bondage. Garner went to stand trial, but she was not executed because, ironically, neither she nor her daughter was considered people but rather chattel. After the court proceedings, the Garner family was eventually sold to a Mississippi plantation, where she eventually died of typhoid fever during the summer of 1858 (Weisenburger 2003, p. 135).

However, Margaret Garner’s story did not end in 1858; in 1987, the future Nobel laureate Toni Morrison authored a neo-slave narrative, *Beloved*, based on Garner’s life events. *Beloved*’s Gothic elements include haunted houses, rape, insanity, isolation, and violence. The novel deals with the secondary tragedies of male characters, Paul D and Stamp Paid, and the primary tragedy of Sethe Suggs. Paul D experiences the loss of life in the death of his friends, the loss of freedom when he is imprisoned, and the loss of manhood when he is raped in prison. Stamp Paid deals with a psychological trauma when he is compelled to surrender his wife to their master’s son for semi-consensual sex that his wife barter for her husband’s life. The main character, Sethe Suggs, (loosely

based on Margaret Garner) sees her mother burned to death, believes that her husband has abandoned her, participates in sexual experiments unwillingly, nearly decapitates her daughter purposefully, and deals with a ghost that haunts her home and her past. Among the many themes in *Beloved*, destruction in its various forms is central. Another notable theme is righteousness and specifically Sethe's choice to kill her child to keep her from slavery's horror.

In the novel, Sethe becomes a pariah in her community. Her mother-in-law endures a self-imposed silencing, and Sethe's immediate family is forced to cohabit with a ghost. When Paul D, her love interest, learns of Sethe's choice, he quasi-reprimands Sethe, telling her that her love was "too thick," and he says, "You got two feet, Sethe, not four" (Morrison 1987, pp. 164, 165). When Morrison was asked about Sethe's choice in August of 1987, she offered an almost paradoxical response saying, "It was absolutely the right thing to do, but she [Sethe] had no right to do it." Morrison says that she, too, may have done the same thing in that same situation (Rothstein 1987, p. 17). Where Garner's story speaks to slavery's horror, modern readers sometime question how filicide as salvation is valid. Here is the point where isolation, danger, and violence change from potential to kinetic realities and have concretizing effects. This is where the true horrors of slavery show themselves clearly, and this is what predicated Garner's choice.

When one considers the situations as they occurred, Garner's choice seems less complicated. In Eugenia Collier's short neo-slave narrative, "Breeder" (1994), Aunt Peggy recounts the horrors of her teenage slave life to Caroline, who Peggy says is "still too young" to understand (p. 67). Peggy tells Caroline a particularly painful memory of her first experience with breeding—a form of institutionalized, compulsory interslave rape designed to produce more slaves—with an adult male who recognized her youth and innocence. Peggy tells Caroline that, "There's things that's supposed to happen to a young girl, but not like that, not when she's too young to feel nothing but hurt and shame..." (p. 75). Joy DeGruy's *Post Traumatic Slave Syndrome* (2005) explores American slavery's impact in the contemporary world, and she postulates how a slave mother would have tried to prepare her prepubescent daughter for the eventuality of rape. DeGruy supposes that a mother would likely tell her daughter about the physical trauma of unwanted sexual contact, the unpredictable frequency of rape, the unpredictable number of participants, and the best strategies for surviving the incidents (pp. 76–78).

The conditions that Olaudah Equiano, Frederick Douglass, Paul D, and Stamp Paid lived under—emasculated from childhood to old age—and the stories of Harriet Jacobs, Aunt Peggy, Sethe Suggs, and Margaret Garner, constantly pursued and assaulted, are the prisms through which the slaves saw their world and the lens through which history must be viewed. A slave father knows his son will see his mother be beaten and knows that his son will not be able to protect her. A husband knows that he will not be able to protect his wife from bartered sex and/or rape. A woman sees her mother killed, is an unwilling participant in sexual experiments, knows her daughter's future will not improve,

and knows that her son is one step from death or sale. These are some of the contributing factors that contemporary readers and observers should consider when judging Margaret Garner's choices. *David Walker's Appeal* not only recognized the abject degradation of slaves, but that reality leads him to say, "I pray God that none like us ever may live again until time shall be no more" (Walker 2000, p. 3).

The horrors of the American slave experience were not limited to historical documents or literary texts; they were explored into the contemporary world through the medium of film, also. *Slaves* (1969), *Mandingo* (1975), *Roots* (1977), *Beloved* (1998), *Sally Hemings* (2000), *12 Years a Slave* (2013), and *Birth of a Nation* (2016) have documented aspects of the slave experience in very different and poignant ways. *Slaves* highlights the sexual and monetary exploitations associated with slavery, and slavery's true horror is well illustrated when Master MacKay refuses to help his dying pregnant slave. When the religious slave, Luke, pleads to MacKay for help, Luke's Christianity is turned on him as a justification for allowing her to die. *Mandingo* deals with sexual angst, interracial affairs, and a no-win situation for a male slave, Mede. After he is forced into sexual intercourse with his white mistress, who bears a biracial child, the visual scene of Mede being forced into the boiling cauldron by the furious cuckold is truly unforgettable.

Alex Haley's *Roots* and Toni Morrison's *Beloved* are film adaptations of their highly praised books that discuss family structures in slave communities. While many viewers remember the brutal whipping that prompts Kunta Kinte to finally call himself by his slave name, Toby, very few can ever forget the image of his foot being severed for trying to escape. The film, *Beloved*, is riddled with dehumanizing images of slavery. While Paul D is punished with the torture device known as the bit in his mouth, Sethe's recall of the lynching of her mother with the metal muzzle in her mother's mouth speaks of a horror that words simply cannot express. *Sally Hemings* documents the complicated story of Thomas Jefferson's affair with his slave, Sally, and the family that results from the affair. Where *Sally Hemings* brings families together, the Oscar-winning film, *12 Years a Slave*, based on Solomon Northup's 1853 slave narrative, reveals how Black families were torn apart. Northup is a free man with a family from New York, who finds himself kidnapped and enslaved in Louisiana's cotton and sugar industries. While his personal tragedy is compelling, nothing compares with the sight of Eliza's agony and mental deterioration at losing her children, the attack on Patsey when she is struck in the head with the glass bottle of alcohol for dancing as instructed, or brutal whipping over soap Patsey receives because she is hated by the wife of the man who repeatedly rapes her.

The 2016 film *Birth of a Nation* appropriates the title of a 1915 film that praises the rise of the Ku Klux Klan to tell the tale of the Nat Turner rebellion of 1831. The horrors in this film are plentiful and representative of many slave experiences. Early in the film, viewers see slaves manipulated by a perverted version of Christianity that reinforces violence. Slaves are reminded to obey their masters as the Bible directs them, and it warns that disobedient slaves are

to be whipped. Midway through the film, a slave refuses to eat, and his slave master knocks his teeth out with a chisel and forces blood-soaked food down his throat. Toward the end, viewers see how slaves use the same perverted Christianity that has bound them to justify a bloody and lethal revolt against slaveowners. The oppressed obtain justice in the only way that they can, and that justice reveals a very painful truth about slavery. The truest horror of slavery is that it destroyed everything that it touched. These cinematic selections function as the visual reminders of that horrific truth about American slavery.

In various ways and in different forms, history recorded the true horrors of the American slave experience. From the Middle Passage to the plantations, the American slave experience was like nothing the world had ever seen. People were transitioned from humans to chattel, and the transformation beset them and their progeny for almost 250 years. What happened there was beyond what history had shown and beyond what the imagination could contrive. Enslaved Africans in America lived realities much harsher than any European fiction. Where Europeans and their American descendants dealt with philosophical bondage and theoretical horror through the Gothic literary tradition, enslaved Africans in America lived a Gothic experience that was so horrifying that words truly could not express or explain its true degradation or depravity; nonetheless, they tried. That exercise of humanity and record for future generations ultimately comprise the constituent parts of the canon of the literary arts of the American slave experience.

NOTE

1. Found in the "Speech to the Second Virginia Convention."

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