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Miroslav Hauk

*12 Years a Slave* by Solomon Northup and Its Film Adaptation

**Čestné prohlášení**

Prohlašuji, že jsem závěrečnou práci vypracoval samostatně a použil jen uvedených pramenů a literatury.

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# Obsah

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## **Abstract**

This bachelor's thesis aim is to analyse the memoir *Twelve Years a Slave* (1853) by Solomon Northup with the attempt to focus on specific themes portraying the institution of slavery and African Americans living in bondage in the United States. At first, this thesis focuses on the history of slavery in the US and the author of the book. Afterwards, each theme specific to the book and slavery is analysed and, in the end, a comparison of the book and its 2013 film adaptation is presented. The main focus is on the analysis of the key themes in the book and their relation to slavery.

## Introduction

The memoir *Twelve Years a Slave* (1853) written by Solomon Northup, a free US citizen who was captured and sold into slavery, is one of a few valuable slave narratives from the 19<sup>th</sup> century which were important to the abolitionist movement and their aims to end slavery. Thanks to the 2013 film adaptation, the story again gained huge significance in reminding people of the horrors of slavery. Nowadays, slavery is thankfully commonly viewed by the majority as an aspect of history which should always remain in the past. However, many people may still not have a detailed knowledge of what it meant to be a slave in the prime time of that institution.

My bachelor's thesis aim is to analyse the book *Twelve Years a Slave* with its themes and compare it with the film adaptation, with the hope to bring a new look at slavery from the point of view of these literary and film works.

In the first chapter, I would like to analyse the history of slavery in the United States. Divided into subchapters, each one will follow a certain period of time in American history and will describe the lives of slaves from the first African Americans coming to the US to the conditions they lived in and the struggles they had to endure before obtaining their freedom. I hope this chapter will, later on, help to analyse the book better since the historical comparison will be necessary in order to state whether Northup's memoir is credible enough.

The second chapter is dedicated to the author himself, describing his life from an early age up to the time before his enslavement. Other than that, the account of his life after rescue will also be included. I am including this chapter about the author for a better understanding of his struggles which he described in the narrative.

In the third chapter of this thesis, I will analyse the book *Twelve Years a Slave* by picking several themes which are portrayed in the book and, in my opinion, showcase what parts of life slavery affected the most. The loss of identity and humanity, through the abuse they had to endure, the role of family, and many others.

In the final chapter, I would like to take a look at the film adaptation *12 Years a Slave* (2013) and compare the movie with the original memoir with the hope to find out whether the film is a reliable source of information, or if it does not represent the original text and the description of slavery as it should. Furthermore, I will look at some of the different views of historians and what they have to say about the historical accuracy of the film.

# 1 The history of slavery in the United States

The first chapter provides a brief look at the history of African Americans in the United States during the years when they were not treated as equals. It focuses on their history from the origins of African Americans and their ancestors, the first trades to America, all through the period of the colonial era, first years of the Republic, all the major events leading up to the Civil War and beyond that. The main goal of this chapter is to introduce the conditions, historic and social events affecting the lives of African Americans living unfree in the United States.

## 1.1 Before coming to the New World

Slavery was part of the history of many continents and empires for many years and it can be traced to many centuries BC, mostly to Ancient Egypt, Rome, and Greece. Slavery, as it is known nowadays, began to spread because of Western European Christianity in the fifteenth and sixteenth century.<sup>1</sup>

Two aspects that helped to create the modern institution of slavery are the Commercial Revolution and Renaissance. The Commercial Revolution is a period that started in the Late Middle Ages and it can be characterised by features such as overseas trade, principles of mercantilism and an economic boom.<sup>2</sup> The spirit of Renaissance proclaiming one's freedom and the new economic practices enabled the rise of wealth and power which caused many things, one of them being the modern slave trade itself. Since African Americans had already served as slaves for the European powers, when the first exploits to the New World began, slaves were accompanying the white travellers.

During the process of exploring the New World, Africans were not used as a labour force at first. It was only later when the problematic white servants who sometimes were too troublesome were easily replaced by African slaves because they were cheaper and would be easily apprehended. The slavery of Africans logically became the easiest solution to the New World's problems concerning work labour.<sup>3</sup>

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<sup>1</sup> FRANKLIN, John Hope and Alfred A. MOSS, *From slavery to freedom: a history of Negro Americans*, p. 27.

<sup>2</sup> Commercial Revolution, *Encyclopaedia Britannica* [online].

<sup>3</sup> FRANKLIN, John Hope and Alfred A. MOSS, *From slavery to freedom: a history of Negro Americans*, p. 28-32.



### 1.1.1 Origins

Most African Americans refer to the land of their ancestors as the whole continent of Africa, which is not wrong. It is obvious that with the colonial period the vast majority of the African continent changed. The amount of information from the period before Africa was colonised is very limited but from what is known, it is sure that the area where many ancestors of American slaves lived can be described as a region “from the Mediterranean southward to the Gulf of Guinea and from Atlantic eastward almost to the Nile.”<sup>4</sup>

### 1.1.2 The Atlantic slave trade

England was the dominant power in the slave trade, which is one of the reasons why the newly established American colonies easily adopted the same methods. The most important for the slave trade were trading posts where the exchange took place. The slaves were usually exchanged for some textiles, guns, gunpowder, alcohol, and other food stuffs. In other words, the goods that the country itself was lacking. The act of trade usually involved establishing contacts both with the officials and Africans, mainly the chief of the tribe, in order to prevent any conflict. However, it was not always assured of that. Many times, the Africans fought in order to avoid being sold into slavery. Unfortunately, most of the time, it was not very successful for them.<sup>5</sup>

The voyage to America is famously known as the “middle passage” which became a nightmare to many Africans who had to undergo the travel. According to some records the ships were usually overcrowded with no place to lie down or sleep. Despite these conditions, no one did anything to improve them because the more slaves the more profit for the whites. There are no specific numbers concerning the fact of how many slaves were imported to the New World from Africa. But according to numbers, estimated by Edward E. Dunbar in 1861, he believes “that 887 500 were imported in the sixteenth century, 2 750 000 in the seventeenth, 7 000 000 in the eighteenth, and 3 250 000 in the nineteenth.”<sup>6</sup> It is certain that not all of those Africans

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<sup>4</sup> FRANKLIN, John Hope and Alfred A. MOSS, *From slavery to freedom: a history of Negro Americans*, p. 1-2.

<sup>5</sup> FRANKLIN, John Hope and Alfred A. MOSS, *From slavery to freedom: a history of Negro Americans*, p. 35-36.

<sup>6</sup> FRANKLIN, John Hope and Alfred A. MOSS, *From slavery to freedom: a history of Negro Americans*, p. 37-41.

made it to the New World due to the bad conditions and all kinds of diseases which were common in the “middle passage” voyages. Therefore, the real number must be somewhat lower.

## 1.2 Colonial period

Historians divide the era of the USA beginnings until the Civil War into two periods, colonial (lasted approximately until 1770) and antebellum (began around 1800 and ending with the Civil War).<sup>7</sup> For a long time, there was a gap in the amount of information between both periods which started to change during the Civil Rights Movement when many historians put their focus on Colonial America as well.<sup>8</sup>

The colonial era marks the beginning of many years of African Americans being treated as nothing more than slaves, which formed the basic social and economic order of the colonies. Despite that, their status was not established on the outset, but rather over a period of time. The relationship between the first slaves and masters may have not been so crucial as it later happened to be because the first American settlers were not completely sure how things will go. But as soon as the next generations were born, the whole social pattern hardened and the relationship between white and black inhabitants became a crucial routine.<sup>9</sup>

The first Africans who came in North America were a group of twenty people who were sailed to Jamestown in 1619. For the first years, they were simply indentured servants<sup>10</sup> who can be characterised as “a person who signs and is bound by indentures to work for another for a specified time especially in return for payment of travel expenses and maintenance”.<sup>11</sup> From the beginnings of the settlement, the workforce of white workers was sufficient because the major crop was tobacco, which did not require such precise work as rice or, later, cotton would.<sup>12</sup>

But the promise of the first Africans living freely in the colonies was soon changed due to the fact that Virginians (who had the biggest African American population at the time) felt like they are behind the work that needed to be done. Furthermore, they had an example in Caribbean islands where slavery had already been established so they began to do just that along

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<sup>7</sup> KOLCHIN, Peter, *American slavery*, p. 28.

<sup>8</sup> BERLIN, Ira, From the Editor: Exploring Slavery's Roots in Colonial America, p. 3-4.

<sup>9</sup> KOLCHIN, Peter, *American slavery*, p. 29.

<sup>10</sup> FRANKLIN, John Hope and Alfred A. MOSS, *From slavery to freedom: a history of Negro Americans*, p. 53.

<sup>11</sup> Indentured servant, *Merriam-Webster.com* [online].

<sup>12</sup> PARISH, Peter J, *Slavery: history and historians*, p. 14.

with the first statutory recognition of slavery becoming legal in 1661. Another colony which recognised slavery by the law was Maryland, in 1663, and soon all the North American colonies started to accept the same policies towards Africans.<sup>13</sup>

Throughout the seventeenth century, the number of Africans remained rather small compared to the white population. Therefore, there was no further reason to see the huge differences between their culture and appearance. Some free Blacks even owned property of their own and had some privileges which were not common to all of them.<sup>14</sup> The more heated relationship occurred in the next century due to many factors, such as the increase in the African American population and the higher demand for work labour, which helped the system of slavery to become a central part of both southern and northern lives fifty years before the American Revolution.

The former factor began to be significant at the beginning of the eighteenth century since, for example, in North and South Carolina the population of African Americans was higher than the white population. In addition to that, the imports of slaves from Africa were at their peak during the second half of the eighteenth century.<sup>15</sup> This situation led to an increasing separation between the races and the fear of whites, which resulted in racist behaviour spreading like a virus.

### **1.3 Antebellum period**

The Antebellum period is a term used to describe mostly Southern states from the late 18<sup>th</sup> century to the events of the Civil War. From the colonial beginnings all through the eighteenth century there was barely any negative talk about the institution of slavery. The majority of the population seemed to accept it as a part of an established social order with only a few people questioning it. Those negative talks about slavery, however, had a zero effect on the society at that time.<sup>16</sup> Towards the end of this period, the attitude of some people started to change because the issue of slavery became so crucial that it divided the whole country into two concrete opposites.

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<sup>13</sup> FRANKLIN, John Hope and Alfred A. MOSS, *From slavery to freedom: a history of Negro Americans*, p. 55.

<sup>14</sup> PARISH, Peter J, *Slavery: history and historians*, p. 13-14.

<sup>15</sup> PARISH, Peter J, *Slavery: history and historians*, p. 15.

<sup>16</sup> KOLCHIN, Peter, *American slavery*, p. 64.

### **1.3.1 The American Revolution**

The first-time when slavery became an issue was the Revolutionary era. Some people started to express their worries over the morality of it. With the new principles demanding freedom and the whole society concerned more with the individual, some figures started to raise their voices against the enslaved inhabitants of the colonies. One of the first ones who raised their voice were the Quakers who in both England and America started to organise abolitionist groups. Another reason for more voices demanding changes in slavery was caused due to the wartime disruption which undermined the normal plantation discipline. Many slaves managed to escape their masters purely because of the chaos that the war had caused. Furthermore, a lot of slaves who fought in the War of Independence demanded their freedom afterward, which was partly promised to them by the British who wanted them on their side.<sup>17</sup>

### **1.3.2 First years of the Republic**

After the war, the majority of Northern states decided to abolish slavery. Unfortunately, it took some time to reach this goal. Eventually, they achieved it by the 1787 Northwest Ordinance, and in 1820 the Missouri Compromise forbade slavery from most of the Louisiana Purchase (the land of today's 15 U.S. states) which left little space for slavery to expand. Furthermore, the abolition of the external slave trade in 1808 meant a great step into restricting slavery as well. Only the South still had a huge demand for Negro slavery due to one major aspect, cotton. And as the number of cotton plantations increased, so did the number of slaves, especially in the first quarter of the 19<sup>th</sup> century. Even though slave trade was no longer an option, there were enough slaves in the South for their population to grow just by creating a new generation.<sup>18</sup>

Despite these changes, Southern slavery had survived multiple threats during the Revolution, and it seemed stronger than ever. This split of attitudes is what later played an important part in American history and made a turning point in the lives of all the African Americans.

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<sup>17</sup> KOLCHIN, Peter, *American slavery*, p. 67-70.

<sup>18</sup> PARISH, Peter J, *Slavery: history and historians*, p. 19-24.

### 1.3.3 Everyday life of an American slave

In the last 3 decades of slavery, there were approximately 2,5 million slaves in the Southern states employed in agriculture or jobs relating to it. In numbers “it is calculated that 350 000 were engaged in the cultivation of tobacco, 150 000 in sugar, 125 000 in rice, 60 000 in hemp, and a massive 1 815 000 in cotton.” Others were usually craftsmen, gardeners, millers, carpenters, and other household workers.<sup>19</sup> Only a little proportion of slaves lived in urban communities, in 1850 it was around 400 000 slaves. They were mostly servants, tailors or shoemakers.<sup>20</sup>

On plantations, more than half of the slaves were used directly in the fields because the work there was needed almost for the entire year. The slaves were controlled in their work by their master or an overseer, or both, and were punished if they were behind in their task.<sup>21</sup> As Northup describes the scene in his book, the slaves on their plantation had to be in the cotton field with the sunrise where throughout the whole day they only had a ten or fifteen-minute break maximum allowed. Other than that, they had to work all day till sunset, and sometimes, even longer than that if it was required.<sup>22</sup>

They, however, had some small breaks during the day and were allowed to rest on the Sabbath which is “the day of the week kept by some religious groups for rest and worship”.<sup>23</sup> In other words, for most Christians, Sunday. Only on that day, they were allowed to earn some extra money if they decided to work instead of resting, according to Northup.<sup>24</sup>

Their housing was very primitive. They had to spend their nights in uncomfortable small huts with no furnishing or sometimes even without a proper floor or windows.<sup>25</sup> And as can be seen in *Twelve Years a Slave* (1853), the slave in Louisiana they received very little of what became their personal belongings. They only got a blanket and, as Northup says “To ask the master for a knife, or skillet, or any small convenience of the kind, would be answered with a kick, or laughed at as a joke.”<sup>26</sup>

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<sup>19</sup> PARISH, Peter J, *Slavery: history and historians*, p. 29-31.

<sup>20</sup> FRANKLIN, John Hope and Alfred A. MOSS, *From slavery to freedom: a history of Negro Americans*, p. 121.

<sup>21</sup> FRANKLIN, John Hope and Alfred A. MOSS, *From slavery to freedom: a history of Negro Americans*, p. 116.

<sup>22</sup> NORTHUP, Solomon, *Twelve Years a Slave*, p. 109.

<sup>23</sup> The Sabbath. *Cambridge Dictionary* [online].

<sup>24</sup> NORTHUP, Solomon, *Twelve Years a Slave*, p. 127.

<sup>25</sup> FRANKLIN, John Hope and Alfred A. MOSS, *From slavery to freedom: a history of Negro Americans*, p. 121.

<sup>26</sup> NORTHUP, Solomon, *Twelve Years a Slave*, p. 127-128.

### 1.3.4 Slave Codes

The southern states established their own set of laws called “Slave Codes” which put slaves into the position their owners wanted them to be in. These laws differed in some states, but their core meaning was the same: a slave is not considered a person but a property, the slave owners and their property are protected at all cost, and the protection of white citizens in a situation where they might be attacked by an African American was also assured. Moreover, a slave could not be represented in court, or testify, or join a political party, own a property, strike or kill a white person even if it was self-defence.<sup>27</sup>

The Slave Codes gave no protection to the slaves and therefore the master could do anything he wished to. One of many common practices was using the lash on them because the master believed it would strengthen their discipline and also the general belief was that “Negroes were a childlike race and should be punished just as children were punished.”<sup>28</sup>

### 1.3.5 Abolitionism

An abolitionist can be described "as one who before the Civil War had agitated for the immediate, unconditional, and total abolition of slavery in the United States".<sup>29</sup> The first wave of any protests against slavery was initiated thanks to the American and French Revolutions which sprung the first abolitionist groups in Britain, France and America whose first huge collective accomplishment was ending the slave trade in all the slave states. In America, the first abolitionists were mostly white men, some free African Americans and later those slaves who managed to escape their bondage. The major way of how they got the attention of the public was assured by many public speeches, articles and first slave narratives which portrayed in the most authentic way the struggles of its authors. One of the most famous figures of the abolitionist movement was Frederick Douglass.<sup>30</sup>

After the War of 1812, it was inevitable that North and South are heading in opposite directions. With the northern states swinging to manufacturing, the society changed alongside with their thinking and their perception of slavery. Since the year 1815, more and more

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<sup>27</sup> FRANKLIN, John Hope and Alfred A. MOSS, *From slavery to freedom: a history of Negro Americans*, p. 114.

<sup>28</sup> FRANKLIN, John Hope and Alfred A. MOSS, *From slavery to freedom: a history of Negro Americans*, p. 119.

<sup>29</sup> MCPHERSON, James M, *The abolitionist legacy: from Reconstruction to the NAACP*, p. 4.

<sup>30</sup> SHEPPERSON, George, *Abolitionism and African Political Thought*, p. 22-26.

politicians in the North started to publicly criticise slavery as an institution. The major argument relied on The Constitution saying that according to it a black man has the same rights to life, liberty and the pursuit of happiness as a white man does. Moreover, they referred to Christianity itself and the passages in the Bible, which say that God created all men equal in His own image. Furthermore, they pointed to the economic and moral facts concerning slavery.<sup>31</sup>

In 1831 the New England Anti-Slavery Society was formed and since then it only gained more members who worked hard to put the topic of ending slavery into the public eye as much as possible through organizing public lectures, publishing in newspapers and distributing antislavery themed literature to the whole country. Unfortunately, at that time they received little help from the government.<sup>32</sup>

Even in the 1850s when the tension in the US was even bigger, the antislavery thoughts were still not heard clearly by the government. For instance, in 1857 the Supreme Court sided with the proslavery thoughts in the case of Scott vs. Sanford. The change came at the end of the decade. In 1859 the famous John Brown's raid on Harpers Ferry (considered by many as the dress rehearsal for the Civil War)<sup>33</sup> helped the cause of the war because many slaveholders realised that abolitionists will not stop until slavery is wiped out. Another significant contribution was the Republican win in the 1860 elections with Abraham Lincoln becoming the president of the United States, which is when the conflict began to fully emerge.<sup>34</sup>

## 1.4 Civil War

The key problem, why the war started in the first place, was the conflict between the proslavery South (Confederacy) and the antislavery North (the Union). However, it was not the goal of federal forces to end slavery in the southern states at the beginning. Even Abraham Lincoln himself proclaimed that he would pose no threat to the states where slavery existed. He, alongside with the North, only wanted to prevent the Confederates' wishes to form a newly independent country that would split the US into two parts. But in reality, he only did that

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<sup>31</sup> FRANKLIN, John Hope and Alfred A. MOSS, *From slavery to freedom: a history of Negro Americans*, p. 158-160.

<sup>32</sup> FRANKLIN, John Hope and Alfred A. MOSS, *From slavery to freedom: a history of Negro Americans*, p. 161.

<sup>33</sup> HORWITZ, Tony, *Midnight rising: John Brown and the raid that sparked the Civil War*, p. 5.

<sup>34</sup> FRANKLIN, John Hope and Alfred A. MOSS, *From slavery to freedom: a history of Negro Americans*, p. 178-180.

because he feared he will lose more states which will then fight alongside the Confederate States.<sup>35</sup>

President Lincoln's policy had to be very careful in that case. As a result of that, he introduced a plan in which the slaveholders would get compensation in return for their slaves. Although this idea was not met with much support in the beginning, in 1862 it received greater support and it was passed by Congress on April 10, 1862. This solution upset the Abolitionists because they were against the belief that slave owners should get anything for their inhumane practices. Another plan of Lincoln's was to move slaves back to the countries of their ancestors to avoid any more conflicts. But this was not enough, and Lincoln was aware of it. In June 1862 he signed a bill abolishing slavery in the Union and all the slaves coming from the Southern states were guaranteed freedom.

Despite the efforts, Southern states still did not hear Lincoln's terms and they demanded nothing less than sustaining slavery as it was. The reason why, in the end, the Union's efforts were heard was their victory at the Battle of Antietam on September 17, 1862 thanks to which Lincoln knew it was the perfect time to act more directly. On January 1, 1863, he proclaimed that everyone who is being held as a slave in the whole United States should be free. This document, called the Emancipation Proclamation, was adopted rather slowly because, in many southern states, the slaves at first did not even hear about it since they were mostly isolated from the world outside of their plantations and it took several months for all of them to be really free.<sup>36</sup>

### **1.4.1 Blacks fighting for the Union**

As soon as the war started, African Americans in the Southern states immediately wanted to join the fight under the Union, but they were rejected. They assured their acceptance into the army by many requests. One of them explains the reason for their interest very well:

“Our feelings urge us to say to our countrymen that we are ready to stand by and defend our Government as the equals of its white defenders, to do so with our lives, our fortunes, and our sacred honour, for the sake of freedom, and as good citizens, and we

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<sup>35</sup> KOLCHIN, Peter, *American slavery*, p. 202.

<sup>36</sup> FRANKLIN, John Hope and Alfred A. MOSS, *From slavery to freedom: a history of Negro Americans*, p. 188-191.



ask you to modify your laws, that we may enlist, - that full scope may be given to the patriotic feelings burning in the coloured man's breast."<sup>37</sup>

When they finally got the permission to join the army, many did so immediately. Others were urged at many rallies happening in Northern states because some of them did not see the point in joining the war when the North was winning. The number of fighting African Americans was approximately 186 000. The racial segregation could be seen even here in the army because Blacks and whites were in separate groups and African Americans were called "United States Coloured Troops". They were organised into regiments of light and heavy artillery, cavalry, infantry and engineers and they were for most of the time led by white officers. They were usually engaged in rather menial tasks, such as building fortifications. There was also a significant pay gap between the two groups which lasted throughout almost the entire conflict until 1864. White soldiers received \$16.50 a month, while African Americans only \$10. Unfortunately, those slaves who were captured by the Confederacy were mostly killed or sold back into slavery. It was estimated that more than 38 000 Negroes lost their lives in the war. The rate of their deaths was nearly 40 % greater than among whites which might have been caused by the bad conditions "Coloured Troops" were exposed to.<sup>38</sup>

Unfortunately, the deaths of "Coloured Troops" were not only caused by the war directly. Jim Downs, an American historian, estimated in his publication *Sick from Freedom* that around 25% of the 4 million freed slaves died due to the consequences of starvation, poverty or, in most cases, illnesses. Downs considers this usually unspoken part of the history as "the largest biological crisis of the 19<sup>th</sup> century".<sup>39</sup> Regarding all this information, the price that was paid for the slave's freedom is enormous and the contribution of African Americans in the Civil War is very honourable.

## 1.4.2 End of slavery

With the Confederate army surrendering in 1865 all the states began to recognise and obey the sovereignty of the federal government again, which marked the end of a short but drastic period in the United States history. There were many difficulties concerning the question

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<sup>37</sup> FRANKLIN, John Hope and Alfred A. MOSS, *From slavery to freedom: a history of Negro Americans*, p. 182.

<sup>38</sup> FRANKLIN, John Hope and Alfred A. MOSS, *From slavery to freedom: a history of Negro Americans*, p. 196-198.

<sup>39</sup> HARRIS, Paul, How the end of slavery led to starvation and death for millions of black Americans.

of how free slaves will fit into the already working society which had always despised them. The first 2 years after the war ended meant a heated debate about how to form a proper Reconstruction programme. Even months after the war, some Southern men continued to refuse and accept the emancipation of slaves, saying that each state should do as they please. This opinion disappeared but still, the question of to what extent the slave will be free remained unanswered.<sup>40</sup>

Despite the first disagreements, all former slaves were guaranteed both civil and voting rights. With The Thirteenth Amendment of the Constitution (ratified in December 1865) officially abolishing slavery, The Civil Rights Act (passed in March 1866) proclaimed everyone born in the US as an American citizen with the same rights for all, The Fourteenth Amendment (ratified in 1868) granted similar rights as the CRA into the Constitution, The Reconstruction Act (1967) divided the Confederate states into five military districts, and The Fifteenth Amendment (ratified in 1870) assured that the right to vote cannot be denied to anyone.<sup>41</sup> This period made an enormous shift in the lives of many slaves who now were officially free. That, unfortunately, did not assure them not to be viewed as lower class in the eyes of some people, who still held strong racist feelings towards them.

## **1.5 Reconstruction to present**

Even though the Civil War brought a significant change for all the slaves who were now free, their role in the labour force did not change very much. At least in the period from the abolition of slavery up to the beginning of the 20<sup>th</sup> century because between the years 1870 and 1910, around 91% of the Black population stayed in the Southern states despite the horrors that particular part of the US reminded them of. These numbers show that even though industrial revolution hit the North very hard, the South still had its plantations which needed workers and many African Americans stayed (being paid) just because it was the work they knew.<sup>42</sup>

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<sup>40</sup> KOLCHIN, Peter, *American slavery*, p. 209.

<sup>41</sup> KOLCHIN, Peter, *American slavery*, p. 210-211.

<sup>42</sup> MANDLE, Jay R, *Continuity and Change: The Use of Black Labor After the Civil War*, p. 414-427.

### 1.5.1 The struggles of being free

One of the biggest struggles for them was adapting to the life in a civilised society. The vast majority of them had no idea how to deal with public affairs or other aspects which were otherwise normal for people who had the citizenship since their birth. But the newly freed slaves had no idea how to live any other life than the one where they had to work and obey the master. Due to the lack of their knowledge, they were sometimes fooled by corrupt politicians and became easily “unfree” again. Either because they agreed to work for someone who would pay them, but very poorly, or from time to time they might have easily got into trouble with the law.<sup>43</sup>

If we focus on the South after the Civil War, it would be foolish to think that the abolition of slavery would automatically mean the end of racism. One law or even an amendment cannot change someone’s opinion or attitude. Of course, there was the Constitution protecting African American rights but that could not guarantee them protection all the time. The United States was always considered “a white man’s country”. Therefore, this sudden shift gave most of the Southerners very radical racial feelings.<sup>44</sup>

### 1.5.2 Racism and Jim Crow laws

The violence and hatred towards some African Americans in the South started to increase in the Southern states in the Reconstruction Era. The hatred was not new, of course, but after the Civil War it gained a new significance.

That attitude started to be recognized as white supremacy, which can be characterised as “the belief that people with pale skin are better than people with darker skin”.<sup>45</sup> People with this conviction started to strengthen their position and power in the South right after the War. One of the first official groups that emerged from white supremacy was the Ku-Klux-Klan (founded in 1866) who started to present themselves and their vulgar and sometimes violent approaches to the public. Their practices were not tolerated by the Government for very long and the first Klan ended thanks to The Enforcement Act in 1871.<sup>46</sup>

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<sup>43</sup> FRANKLIN, John Hope and Alfred A. MOSS, *From slavery to freedom: a history of Negro Americans*, p. 203.

<sup>44</sup> KOLCHIN, Peter, *American slavery*, p. 234-235.

<sup>45</sup> White Supremacy. *Cambridge Dictionary* [online].

<sup>46</sup> TINDALL, George Brown and David E. SHI, *Dějiny Spojených států amerických*, p. 361.

At the end of the 19<sup>th</sup> century, many people accepted racism very radically which had both social and political results. In the year 1894, all the Southern states enforced laws which made African Americans unable to vote because of imposing a tax on registering to vote and other limitations that most of them could not afford. This is just one of many new laws which later got the name- Jim Crow laws. Their purpose was to make lives of African Americans worse but in a way that would not conflict with what the Constitution says.<sup>47</sup> For many Americans living in the South the situation seemed like their lives did not change that much after the abolition of slavery and it took several more decades until all people of colour became equal in all parts of the USA.

### **1.5.3 Twentieth century and forward**

The struggles of African Americans, unfortunately, did not end in the nineteenth century as some might have hoped after the Civil War. What is positive, however, is that any kind of institutionalised racial discrimination and segregation finally ended in the twentieth century thanks to the Civil Rights Movement happening in the 1950s and 1960s. But because this period does not concern the history of slavery or the topic of this project, it will not be described any further.

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<sup>47</sup> TINDALL, George Brown and David E. SHI, *Dějiny Spojených států amerických*, p. 375-376.

## 2 The story of Solomon Northup

The second chapter focuses on the author of *Twelve Years a Slave* (1853), Solomon Northup. This chapter provides a brief look into Northup's life from his birth up to his late years and it demonstrates how his captivity made him share his story and spread awareness of the horrors of slavery.

### 2.1 Life as a free man

Solomon Northup was born to Mintus Northup and his wife, Susanna, on July 10, 1807. Despite Solomon being born free, his father had to gain his freedom during his own lifetime. Mintus was a slave of Captain Henry Northup. Only because Mintus had a good relationship with his master and he developed enough skills that allowed him to become a farmer working on his own, his master gave him permission to emancipate in 1798. It is unknown how he met Solomon's mother, or when they got married but they eventually moved between several places in Solomon's early life. They lived in Adirondacks, Granville, Kingsbury, and Fort Edward. Despite growing up with parents as farmers, Solomon did receive an education in reading and writing when he was a child. Moreover, he even attended school because the laws of New York never prohibited that. In addition to that, he developed his passion for playing the violin from an early age.

When he was 21 years old, he married Anne Hampton, a daughter of a free man. They made their marriage official on 25 December 1828. After their wedding, they still lived in Fort Edward where Solomon worked as a labourer of various works, and later, as a rafter on Champlain Canal while Anne used her cooking skills in her labour. In 1830 the Northups moved to Kingsbury where they rented a farm which was previously run by Solomon's father. During their 4 years in Kingsbury, they had their 2 daughters, Elisabeth and Margaret. In 1834 they moved again to Saratoga Springs where their son, Alonzo, was born. During their 7 years together in Saratoga, they both worked for several hotels and other public houses that were very prosperous thanks to Saratoga's rising economic and social status. Anne was mostly employed in the kitchen and Solomon was a driver, carpenter, waiter, and musician.<sup>48</sup>

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<sup>48</sup> FISKE, David, Clifford W. BROWN and Rachel SELIGMAN, *Solomon Northup: the complete story of the author of Twelve years a slave*, p. 2-38.

## 2.2 Slave experience

Solomon's unexpected loss of freedom began in March 1841 when he met two men, Alexander Merrill and Joseph Russell. They were interested in his violin skills and offered him a job in New York which he accepted. When they arrived in NYC, they offered Solomon to travel with them to Washington. Because of Washington being a slave state at that time, they even obtained papers confirming that he is a free man. One day in Washington, Merrill and Russell were suspiciously drinking for most of the day with Solomon which resulted in Solomon feeling ill from all the liquor. That night, when he was semiconscious, some men dragged him out of the hotel and when he woke up, he found himself in Williams' Slave Pen which was a place where he was imprisoned for 2 weeks before moving to the South.

After the period of time spent in the basement along with few other slaves, he was put on to a boat moving them first to Richmond. It was there where he got the name Platt which became his new identity for the next 12 years. Since then he was always warned not to reveal his real name to anyone. His transfer finished in New Orleans where he was sold into slavery for 900 dollars to William Prince Ford. Mr Ford was, in comparison to other slave-owners, very kind. Solomon was never beaten by him and if the slaves completed their work as required, they were living very well under Ford. His second master, John Tibaut, was quite the opposite of Ford and he constantly criticized Solomon for everything he did.

Solomon's third owner, Edwin Epps, was his master for 10 out of the 12 years of Solomon's bondage. Although he was a small planter, he was a great punisher and taskmaster. Not only Solomon but also other slaves, experienced his and sometimes even his wife's cruelty first-hand. Epps wanted to get the most work done out of his slaves and in return, he gave them nothing else than stealing their chances, hopes and dignity. Despite the challenges and misery of possibly never seeing his wife and children again, Solomon managed to stay strong and he never forgot his true identity with the goal of escaping once. Eventually, he got his chance to escape thanks to his efforts and the help of others.<sup>49</sup>

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<sup>49</sup> FISKE, David, Clifford W. BROWN and Rachel SELIGMAN, *Solomon Northup: the complete story of the author of Twelve years a slave*, p. 43-88.

## 2.3 Life after slavery

The rescue of Solomon began thanks to the kindness and risk of Samuel Bass. Bass was working for Epps and he got along with Solomon very well. That made Solomon put his trust in Samuel's hands and tell him about his true identity. Bass was so shocked that he agreed to forward a letter which would hopefully assure Solomon's road to liberation. Solomon wrote the letter to several people who might be able to help. Eventually, the letter got to his wife who asked for help from Henry B. Northup who had a long acquaintance with Solomon. Henry, who was an attorney, made sure that the whole procedure of setting Solomon free will be successful. And it was. It took five months since sending the letter to his rescue but on January 3, 1853, Solomon was rescued from the plantation with master Epps unwillingly and furiously signing the papers setting Solomon free.

Right after his release, Solomon decided to sue James H. Burch, the man who sold Solomon into slavery. However, despite the evidence, Solomon lost this case. Afterwards, he finally managed to get home to Glens Falls, where he was reunited with his family. Solomon's story soon spread, and it got enormous media attention. Solomon was more than ever determined to seek justice for others, and he realised he should use his story for good which is why he started to appear at antislavery rallies. In addition to that, not even a year after his liberation, he finished the memoir called *Twelve Years a Slave*. He took the book on tour and afterwards, he even produced two plays.<sup>50</sup>

After a few years in the spotlight, Solomon went out of the public eye. Mostly because the interest in his story and the plays seemed to fade away and he was once again an ordinary man. Solomon disappeared from public life in 1857 and there are no records of him after that which put his fate into one huge mystery. Some assumed he was murdered, others that he lived the rest of his life in peace somewhere quiet. There is one more suggestion which implies that he went to participate and help slaves escape through the Underground Railroad. Other than that, the only other document tells us that he died somewhere between the years 1871 and 1875.<sup>51</sup> Despite the mysteries concerning Solomon's last years, it is undoubted that this man's whole life seems so significant and important to the issues of slavery that he will probably not be forgotten for a very long time and his story will live on.

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<sup>50</sup> FISKE, David, Clifford W. BROWN and Rachel SELIGMAN, *Solomon Northup: the complete story of the author of Twelve years a slave*, p. 89-111.

<sup>51</sup> FISKE, David, Clifford W. BROWN and Rachel SELIGMAN, *Solomon Northup: the complete story of the author of Twelve years a slave*, p. 143-152.

### **3 The book *Twelve Years a Slave* and its portrayal of slavery**

In the third part of this bachelor project, the main focus is on the book *Twelve Years a Slave* (1853), written by Solomon Northup. The analysis of the book is divided according to several themes which I think are the most crucial and important parts of the narrative. Each subchapter focuses on one specific theme which Northup included in his work. The analysis of each theme will demonstrate how this book reflects the real institution of slavery and the struggles which were crucial to so many with the hope to show a new spectrum or point of view on slavery through this specific piece of literary work.

#### **3.1 Religion**

It is without a doubt that religious feelings and beliefs played an enormous part in everyone's lives in the 19<sup>th</sup> century United States, both for the white citizens and African Americans. As Northup's narrative suggests many times, on one hand, religion was something the slaves could hold onto in moments of despair. On the other hand, the religion of slaves was sometimes used against them for their owners' benefit.

The main protagonist himself has expressed multiple times in the book his strong and boundless relationship to God. As he says at the beginning of the book, his father tried to fill their (Solomon's and his brothers) hearts and minds with God because "the Almighty Father" treats everyone the same.<sup>52</sup> But this belief in God was something that slaves adapted during many decades of bondage in the US. And, of course, not all of them did. As it was mentioned previously, all the African American slaves' ancestors' homeland was the continent of Africa.<sup>53</sup>

Therefore, their religion there was certainly different from the catholic or protestant ones. In the 18<sup>th</sup> and 19<sup>th</sup> century, when slavery was a well working machine, many slaves were mostly forced to accept the American way of life, and religion. As Albert J. Raboteau claims, even though not every slave was a member of the church, they were all affected by Christian customs and ways of life. Slaves mostly organised their prayer meeting in their cabins, but some attended the church as well. Besides, if a slave refused to pray or go to church, his master punished him severely without any hesitation.<sup>54</sup>

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<sup>52</sup> NORTHUP, Solomon, *Twelve Years a Slave*, p. 7.

<sup>53</sup> See subchapter 1.1.1, pp. 9.

<sup>54</sup> RABOTEAU, Albert J., *The Secret Religion of the Slaves*, Online.



Despite some of the earlier slaves being forced to obey God, Solomon's case was not the same. As already mentioned, he was raised in the belief in God and he showed it multiple times in the story of his bondage where his prayers were sometimes the strongest aspect that kept him alive and did not make him surrender. For example, when Tibeats made a huge scene about Solomon not fulfilling his task properly, which Solomon did, Tibeats wanted to beat Solomon who fought back because his instinct was not to obey and accept punishment he knew he did not deserve. But after that incident, Solomon slowly realised that even greater punishment is to come and the only thing, as on other occasions, was for him to pray and seek God. "I tried to pray – I tried to beseech my Heavenly Father to sustain me in my sore extremity..."<sup>55</sup>

Another time when he tried to seek the help of God was when he was running from Tibeats and his dogs after their second quarrel and he had to walk across the waters of the bayou full of alligators and snake who could have killed him any minute.<sup>56</sup> It was, therefore, the belief in God (and of course the hopeful image of his family) which kept him alive through all the 12 years of his unfair sufferings. In addition to that, it is sure that if he had lost his hope and faith (like Patsey did after her many sufferings)<sup>57</sup>, he would no longer have the aspiration to escape one day.

The Bible and its sayings were many times used by the slave owners who read them to their slaves. However, as Northup describes, there were two approaches that the masters used. For instance, Mr Ford used to read his slaves the passages from the Bible every Sunday with the goal of simply putting faith in God into his slaves without any side intentions that would benefit him. As Solomon describes, master Ford "sought to inculcate in our minds feelings of kindness towards each other, of dependence upon God – setting forth the rewards promised unto those who lead an upright and prayerful life ... spoke of the loving kindness of the Creator, and of the life that is to come."<sup>58</sup>

On the contrary, other slaveowners simply used words in the Holy Book to benefit themselves from the obedience of their slaves. Like Ford's brother-in-law who read the Bible in a way which implied to the slaves that their beatings and punishments are "lord's will".<sup>59</sup> According to Noel Rae, there are a few passages in the Old and New Testaments which were

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<sup>55</sup> NORTHUP, Solomon, *Twelve Years a Slave*, p. 72.

<sup>56</sup> NORTHUP, Solomon, *Twelve Years a Slave*, p. 89.

<sup>57</sup> NORTHUP, Solomon, *Twelve Years a Slave*, p. 173.

<sup>58</sup> NORTHUP, Solomon, *Twelve Years a Slave*, p. 61.

<sup>59</sup> NORTHUP, Solomon, *Twelve Years a Slave*, p. 82.

favourite of the slaveholders because they helped them proclaim the right to treat their slaves the way they did.<sup>60</sup>

In conclusion, as Northup, along with others, suggests religion played a huge part in the lives of slaves and it had both positive and negative effect. On one hand, providing the slaves with some hope and comfort through God and on the other hand giving their masters a tool that justified their doings.

### 3.2 Misogyny

Despite Solomon being the main protagonist, there are some other characters in his story which attract the attention of the reader. One, in particular, is someone who had been treated so poorly not only because of her race, but also gender. Patsey, a slave of Edwin Epps, who was according to Solomon the best cotton picker and overall worker on the plantation.<sup>61</sup> And yet that did not assure her of any privilege, not even fair treatment from her master and his spouse. This is something which many coloured women had to experience during the times of slavery and, unfortunately, all women to some extent still experience in many fields of life up to the present day. As Cambridge Dictionary says, the “the feelings of hating women, or the belief that men are much better than women” is called misogyny.<sup>62</sup> And there are many misogynistic features in this book.

Historians who focus on African American history and slavery usually tend to dismiss any examination or talk about the “female status in the slave community” because most works are written by white and male historians who generally worked with materials concerning males and, in addition to that, they only included females when it was necessary for the topic. This is at least what Deborah Gray White claims in her book. Other than that, she adds that “the female slave’s world was peripheral”.<sup>63</sup> But despite the lack of information from historians, Northup’s narrative seems to describe sorrows of racial and misogynist hatred even on the few pages in great detail.

Patsey’s life was one huge unfair misery. As an illustration, Northup states that “Her back bore the scars of a thousand stripes” because “it had fallen to her lot to be the slave of a

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<sup>60</sup> RAE, Noel, How Christian Slaveholders Used the Bible to Justify Slavery, Online.

<sup>61</sup> NORTHUP, Solomon, *Twelve Years a Slave*, p. 123.

<sup>62</sup> Misogyny, *Cambridge Dictionary*, [online].

<sup>63</sup> WHITE, Deborah G, *Ar'n't I a woman?: female slaves in the plantation South*, p. 23.

licentious master and a jealous mistress.” Moreover, he continued to add that if only she dared to say a word in opposition to her master’s will, she was assured to receive the cruelty of his lash.<sup>64</sup> From her childhood, Patsey was a favourite around the house of her masters. Mistress Epps was quite fond of little Patsey but when she started to grow into a woman, Mrs Epps started to look at her with only “concentrated venom” and envy.<sup>65</sup> The problem was that, to some extent, Epps liked her which did not please his jealous wife. For that reason, many times he whipped Patsey only to please the wife. Especially when he had one of his drunken episodes. And as mentioned before, there was nothing or no one who would guarantee the slaves any protection due to the Slade Codes.<sup>66</sup> Which meant that Patsey’s sorrow was, unfortunately, just looked upon as something completely normal.

Arguably the most unpleasant and disturbing part of Northup’s story is Patsey’s whipping towards the end of the book which Epps commands Solomon to do. That scene seems to be the peak of Epps’s cruelty, and it nearly costs Patsey her own life as she is nearly whipped to death for doing nothing wrong. Furthermore, as Northup comments, “From that time forward she was no hat she had been. The burden of a deep melancholy weighed heavily on her spirit.”<sup>67</sup> This cruel treatment which black women received not only fits *Twelve Years a Slave* but, at the same time, corresponds with the reality of 18<sup>th</sup> century Deep South plantation life. White writes in her book that the American society made the African American women “infantile, irresponsible, submissive, and promiscuous,” therefore making it acceptable to treat them as “outsiders and inferiors” making it most definitely impossible for a black woman to escape it.<sup>68</sup>

Other than Patsey, at the beginning of the narrative, the readers are introduced to Eliza, a mother of two, who according to her appearance had lived a free and quite luxurious life. But after her captivity, she suddenly experienced a total shift in the way people treated her. Her children were taken away from her and in that horrible situation no mother ever wishes to experience, she received nothing but contempt from the man who sold her, Theophilus Freeman. He “damned her, calling her a blubbering, bawling wench.”<sup>69</sup> Eliza’s sorrow unfortunately only got worse from that point and she was never the same person as she used to, which is similar to Patsey’s faith. Eliza’s masters, according to the narrative, “lashed and abused

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<sup>64</sup> NORTHUP, Solomon, *Twelve Years a Slave*, p. 123-124.

<sup>65</sup> NORTHUP, Solomon, *Twelve Years a Slave*, p. 129-130.

<sup>66</sup> See subchapter 1.3.4, pp. 14.

<sup>67</sup> NORTHUP, Solomon, *Twelve Years a Slave*, p. 169-171.

<sup>68</sup> WHITE, Deborah G, *Ar'n't I a woman?: female slaves in the plantation South*, p. 28.

<sup>69</sup> NORTHUP, Solomon, *Twelve Years a Slave*, p. 49.

her most unmercifully” after which Solomon himself described her as a “thin shadow of her former self.”<sup>70</sup>

Both Patsey and Eliza present a very detailed description of the unfair treatment and practices of both misogyny and racism. White summarized the status of black women the best saying “If she is rescued from the myth of a Negro, the myth of woman traps her. If she escapes the myth of woman, the myth of the Negro still ensnares her.”<sup>71</sup> In other words, Eliza’s and Patsey’s unfortunate fates show the struggles coloured women were exposed to without any protection, making this another aspect which made slavery such a horrible and inhumane institution.

### **3.3 Family**

What is important to realize is that before his capture, Solomon was a devoted husband to his wife and a father to his three children. To put it differently, he most probably concentrated his life and work around making sure his beloved family was safe, healthy and doing well. This all changed when he was separated from them and they could not even be certain that he was still alive. Due to this isolation, Solomon lost the most precious thing he had, his family. This subchapter will, therefore, focus on the role of family for Solomon, coupled with the other family he gained during his captivity years, and what the term family meant to other slaves who never experienced life beyond their bondage.

It was very common that most of the slaves did not even grow up, or lived, with their parents or relatives. Just as we can see in Eliza’s case where her children were separated from her as she was bought by someone else and she, as someone with no rights, could not say a word that would change it.<sup>72</sup> For other enslaved children, as it was estimated by historian Michael Tadman, one-third of them had to live separately from their parents, either because of separating from one parent, or the child moving to another owner.<sup>73</sup> The unity of family was, thereupon, threatened by the system of slavery.

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<sup>70</sup> NORTHUP, Solomon, *Twelve Years a Slave*, p. 104.

<sup>71</sup> WHITE, Deborah G, *Ar’n’t I a woman?: female slaves in the plantation South*, p. 28.

<sup>72</sup> NORTHUP, Solomon, *Twelve Years a Slave*, p. 49-52.

<sup>73</sup> WILLIAMS, Heather Andrea, *How Slavery Affected African American Families*, Online.

As already mentioned, family was everything for Solomon as he proclaims it in the narrative, saying,

“From the time of my marriage to this day the love I have born my wife has been sincere and unabated; and only those who have felt the glowing tenderness a father cherishes for his offspring, can appreciate my affection for the beloved children which have since been born to us. This much I deem appropriate and necessary to say, in order that those who read these pages, may comprehend the poignancy of those sufferings I have been doomed to bear.”<sup>74</sup>

This extract shows that his devotion to his family was very strong. Furthermore, it also grew even stronger with the time he spent without them, many times thinking about his wife and children. “The consciousness of my real situation, the hopelessness of an effort to escape through the wide forests of Avoyelles, pressed heavily upon me, yet my heart was at home in Saratoga.”<sup>75</sup> This was another thing that his servitude brought him. An empty place in his heart which was supposed to be filled with his loved one.

Despite all that, it was evident that Solomon was able to create some sort of community with the slaves he was bound to spend his enslaved years with. His fellow friends and companions whom he worked with seemed to bond rather well together. After all, they spent all their time together and shared the same sorrows. This was something relevant to all the slaves in the US, as historian Dylan Penningroth detected in his book where he said that black people in the South interacted with each other so often, either at plantations or elsewhere, that these interactions made them form a community, or one could say family.<sup>76</sup> This “family” never really substituted for Northup’s real one, but on many occasions provided a form of peace and calmness that one needed in such cruel environment.

The values of family and the love for one’s closest was another theme in the book which illustrated the horrors of the “peculiar institution”<sup>77</sup> that separated families without any sympathy. On the contrary, it also created new communities for the enslaved which might have helped the slaves to ease their sufferings from time to time so at least this aspect has one positive outcome.

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<sup>74</sup> NORTHUP, Solomon, *Twelve Years a Slave*, p. 8.

<sup>75</sup> NORTHUP, Solomon, *Twelve Years a Slave*, p. 60.

<sup>76</sup> PENNINGROTH, Dylan C, *The claims of kinfolk: African American property and community in the nineteenth-century South*, p. 103.

<sup>77</sup> NORTHUP, Solomon, *Twelve Years a Slave*, p. 217.

### 3.4 Identity

For any human being, their own persona and identification to the rest of the world are very important features because they make each individual unique and different. A slave was in this case robbed of any kind of self-identification due to their masters treating them in a way not suitable for fellow human beings. Identity was something they either did not even know or, like Solomon, were forced to hide because it would not be beneficial to them in the field or at work.

Solomon was someone who, despite the colour of his skin, grew up as a free citizen and he was used to all kinds of liberties and joys of normal life which many of his fellow slaves never experienced. One aspect of his identity which he always had was his name. But that was shortly after his capture taken away from him and since that time he was only known as Platt.<sup>78</sup>

At first, he seemed to disobey this new reality of having a completely different name which had nothing to do with his personality or identification. But shortly after that, he realised that only beating and brutality would follow if he refused to cope with his new identity and so despite his real identity being stripped away, he knew he could do nothing about it. There was no big emphasis on this situation in the book but, surely, taking away someone's name is crucial to one's identity. As written in an article by psychologist Joyce E. A. Russell, she acknowledges that a name is considered to be the biggest part of human's personality.<sup>79</sup>

Despite the twelve years during which Northup was robbed of his own identity and freedom, he came to terms with the fact that it was for the better since he knew what the exposure of his real identity would mean. He himself explains it in the following way:

“The terrible lesson Burch taught me, impressed indelibly upon my mind the danger and uselessness of asserting I was a freeman. There was no possibility of any slave being able to assist me, while, on the other hand, there was a possibility of his exposing me...It would have been an act of folly to have proclaimed my right to freedom; it would only have subjected me to severer scrutiny – probably have consigned me to some more distant and inaccessible region than even Bayou Boeuf.”<sup>80</sup>

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<sup>78</sup> NORTHUP, Solomon, *Twelve Years a Slave*, p. 45.

<sup>79</sup> RUSSELL, Joyce E. A. Career Coach: The power of using a name. Online.

<sup>80</sup> NORTHUP, Solomon, *Twelve Years a Slave*, p. 183-184.

Even though he considered telling Mr Ford about his origin, he hesitated and did not do it.<sup>81</sup> After that time the courage to tell someone else disappeared because he could never be completely sure about anyone else and, therefore, slavery made him hide his true self for the next decade of his life.

There were, however, few things which may have saved Northup from completely giving up and coping with the fact he might never seek freedom again. And those were the memories and hopes of reuniting with his family and his passion for playing the violin. The role of family and its importance was introduced in one of the previous subchapters.<sup>82</sup>

Another thing which helped him sustain his identity and hopes was his violin. Solomon developed his passion for playing the violin from an early age, calling it “an amusement which was the ruling passion of my youth” and “the source of consolation.”<sup>83</sup> Later on, it proved to be just that. Moreover, his skills allowed him to practise playing his beloved instrument on many occasions earning him some extra money from slave owners who hired him for various occasions. This occasional playing spared him some days in the field and to some extent, surely, made some of his years of bondage more joyful.<sup>84</sup>

But not all slaves, under normal circumstances, had that. They did nothing else than what was required from them and there, in most cases, was no place for pleasure or some compensation for their struggles. Their daily routine was very strict and narrow with only a little time for themselves on Sundays.<sup>85</sup> Additionally, other works concerning the issues of slavery proclaim the same arguments about slave life and the lack of the time for themselves, such as the following description in Toni Morrison’s *Beloved* (1987). “Slaves not supposed to have pleasurable feelings on their own, their bodies not supposed to be like that.”<sup>86</sup>

To summarize, one’s identity is arguably the most significant part of their being. With the slaves being forced to work all the time without experiencing any pleasure, they surely missed a lot in their lives which, generally to us today and the then free citizens, was normal. This could also happen to Solomon who was forced to accept his new identity. But thanks to

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<sup>81</sup> NORTHUP, Solomon, *Twelve Years a Slave*, p. 57.

<sup>82</sup> See Subchapter 3.3, pp. 28-29.

<sup>83</sup> NORTHUP, Solomon, *Twelve Years a Slave*, p. 7.

<sup>84</sup> NORTHUP, Solomon, *Twelve Years a Slave*, p. 143.

<sup>85</sup> See Subchapter 1.3.3, pp. 13.

<sup>86</sup> MORRISON, Toni, *Beloved*, p. 209.

his passion for the violin, love of his family, and the hope of escape, he managed to survive and maintain what made Solomon Northup the man he used to be before his years of bondage.

### 3.5 Humanity of slaves

Arguably the major aspect of slavery's cruelty which the slave-owners completely overlooked was the fact that their African American slave were humans too. The same human beings as the white privileged ones. The masters, however, never considered this, as it can be seen in the narrative on many occasions how poorly were the slaves treated.

From the beginning of the narrative, Solomon and his other fellow companions were looked upon as something less than the whites. When the slaves were, for instance, presented to their potential buyers they were treated like walking pieces of flesh. The buyer was examining them from their physical point of view, touching them and judging their appearance. Because of that, the purchaser made the slaves present themselves in the best way possible so that the buyer could decide that they are worthy for him to buy them.<sup>87</sup> Moreover, the way in which they spoke of the slaves was like speaking about a horse or any other animal. From the point of view of the slave, it only had to assure him in the fact that to their owner they are nothing else than any other property they own.

One thing was treating the slaves like a property, but another aspect lowering their worth, and therefore their humanity, was the mistreatment they endured. On one of the occasions when Solomon got into trouble because of Tibbeats and his bad temper, one of his companions clearly stated to Solomon that he would break his head and then "he would tear me limb from limb – he would cut my black throat ..."<sup>88</sup> Other times the slaves were intimidated by the deadly dogs who would not wait a second to enjoy the slave as their prey if the slave tried to escape or did something bad.<sup>89</sup> The most prominent example of the white man's privilege was, without a doubt, Solomon's former master of ten years, Edwin Epps. On many occasions, he got drunk and in the aftermath of that, he usually beat his anger and drunkenness on poor slaves.<sup>90</sup> They were never safe, nor could they ever do something about it.

The slaves who endured their master's cruelty never had it easy. However, in some cases, it showed once again that for women it was even harder, as discussed in one of the

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<sup>87</sup> NORTHUP, Solomon, *Twelve Years a Slave*, p. 48.

<sup>88</sup> NORTHUP, Solomon, *Twelve Years a Slave*, p. 73.

<sup>89</sup> NORTHUP, Solomon, *Twelve Years a Slave*, p. 89.

<sup>90</sup> NORTHUP, Solomon, *Twelve Years a Slave*, p. 118.



previous parts of the text.<sup>91</sup> In addition to what was already stated, with the master being in charge of his slaves, he could easily do anything with them and in the case of women, it could sometimes mean that the master used them so they could please his needs and desires whether they liked it or not. This humiliation happened to Patsey as well as the beatings after which she was never the same. Epps made her feel like an animal, not a human. As an illustration, Northup himself describes Patsey's sorrow as follows: "It was her humor now to weep, rather than rejoice. If ever there was a broken heart – one crushed and blighted by the rude grasp of suffering and misfortune – it was Patsey's."<sup>92</sup>

In the times we live in now, everyone knows that the colour of someone's skin does not make them less human. However, the times of slavery had that conviction deep in many people's heads which was the reason why slavery lasted so long and was very popular in many parts of the United States.

### 3.6 Freedom

Despite all the efforts of all the white people in the South to make their slaves the most miserable beings who did not even think of themselves in any other way, some slaves understood very well the concept which they were robbed of – their freedom. Over the twelve years of bondage, Solomon observed his companions very well as he proclaims in the book that they understood the position they were in.

"They understand the privileges and exemptions that belong to it – that it would bestow upon them the fruits of their own labors, and that it would secure to them the enjoyment of domestic happiness. They do not fail to observe the difference between their own condition and the meanest white man's, and to realize the injustice of the laws which place it in his power not only to appropriate the profits of their industry, but to subject them to unmerited and unprovoked punishment, without remedy, or the right to resist, or to remonstrate."<sup>93</sup>

This citation shows that even though some slaves could vary in terms of their intellect and personality, they understood their conditions. Some of them sought to make their lives as

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<sup>91</sup> See Subchapter 3.2, pp. 26-28.

<sup>92</sup> NORTHUP, Solomon, *Twelve Years a Slave*, p. 172-173.

<sup>93</sup> NORTHUP, Solomon, *Twelve Years a Slave*, p. 173.

meaningful as possible even when their autonomy was limited due to the treatment they received and how the majority of white society treated them but in most cases, they never got the freedom they desired.

The famous first African American woman who successfully won a freedom suit in Massachusetts in the 1780s, Elisabeth Freeman, once said about her understanding of freedom and slavery: “Any time, any time while I was a slave, if one minute's freedom had been offered to me, and I had been told I must die at the end of that minute, I would have taken it—just to stand one minute on God's *airth* [*sic*] a free woman—I would.”<sup>94</sup> Freeman’s words signify that the understanding of freedom can be applied to most of the slaves across the United States and that they would do anything to achieve it. For this reason, it is important to realize that freedom, even if not fulfilled for many, played an important part of both *Twelve Years a Slave* and the institution of slavery itself.

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<sup>94</sup> SEDGWICK, Catharine Maria, *Slavery in New England*, p. 420.

## 4 The film adaptation of *Twelve Years a Slave*

In the final chapter of this bachelor's project, the focus is on the film adaptation of Northup's 1853 slave narrative. At first, there is some general information about the movie and its reception by both the public and critics, along with a subchapter trying to decide whether the adaptation is accurate enough from the historic point of view. Afterwards, the initial goal of this chapter is introduced – the comparison of the book and the movie, showing how much the director followed the original text and if that affected the final result of the movie in any way.

### 4.1 The film and its reception

In 2013 Northup's book was picked up by British filmmaker, Steve McQueen, who transformed the nearly forgotten slave memoir into a major motion picture. His initial goal was to make an original movie concerning slavery but, according to his words, he could not make it work on his own. It was not until he was introduced to Solomon's story that he knew he had a story that needed to be told. McQueen himself stated that the book to him "felt as important as Anne Frank's diary".<sup>95</sup> Today, the movie stands along many other famous films focusing on the African American struggles which the coloured citizens had to endure during the Antebellum period in the US: *Uncle Tom's Cabin* (1987), *Beloved* (1998), *Sankofa* (1993), and, for instance, Steven Spielberg's *Amistad* (1997).

When *12 Years a Slave* (2013) premiered, its success slowly started to increase in the following months. One factor proving this statement is the Box Office. The budget for the whole movie was \$20 million while the overall worldwide grosses are estimated at \$187.7 million.<sup>96</sup> Not only the movie seemed to be doing well with the audience, but the critical acclaim was also, in most cases, rather phenomenal. As a demonstration, the movie received such an enormous success that it made history at the 86<sup>th</sup> Academy Awards by winning an Oscar for best film, along with two others for best screenplay awarded to John Ridley and best-supporting actress to Lupita Nyong'o who portrayed the role of Patsey. According to a historian specializing on the history of the Southern United States and history of African Americans, Brenda E.

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<sup>95</sup> MCQUEEN, Steven, Foreword, In: Northup, S. *Twelve Years a Slave*, p. xiii.

<sup>96</sup> *12 Years a Slave*, *Box Office Mojo*, Online.

Stevenson, those three Oscars alone made the movie arguably the most celebrated movie with African American subject of all time.<sup>97</sup>

Following the Academy Awards success, many other accomplishments were counted in. For instance, the response from the two most respectable film review aggregators, Rotten Tomatoes and Metacritic, place the movie among their highest-rated movies of all time. On Rotten Tomatoes, the movie got a positive response from 95% of their critics which was based on 359 professional reviews.<sup>98</sup> Furthermore, based on 57 reviews of many mainstream critics the film has a score of 96 out of 100 on Metacritic.<sup>99</sup>

The general public and most of the specialists, either in the film industry or history, seem to accept the film rather well with many praises which show the significance and importance of why this movie is a great pick in a discussion concerning slavery through literary and film artworks.

## 4.2 Historical accuracy

Omitting the reviews concerning the cinematographic point of view, the biggest relevance and importance is on the examination of historians who, after the movie premiered, manifested great interest in it. Their involvement in reviewing the movie was reasonable due to the topic of the film being one of the most known and remembered dark periods of US history. Not all of them agreed collectively that the movie is either a great representation of that time or a bad one. And both sides have their reasonable claims.

As for some positive reviews, a professor of history, Emily West, praised the movie for its accuracy saying “The film starkly and powerfully unveiled the sights and sounds of enslavement – from slaves picking cotton as they sang in the fields, to the crack of the lash down people’s backs.” Moreover, she adds that not only was the overall picture of slavery done very well but that McQueen managed to add the “depth and nuance” to people’s better understanding of slavery.<sup>100</sup> This was probably the director's goal because during the production of the movie McQueen wanted to assure that the film will be as accurate as possible not only according to the book but also according to what was known about the 19<sup>th</sup> century Deep South

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<sup>97</sup> STEVENSON, Brenda E., *12 Years a Slave: Narrative, History, and Film*, p. 106.

<sup>98</sup> *12 Years a Slave*, *Rotten Tomatoes*, Online.

<sup>99</sup> *12 Years a Slave*, *Metacritic*, Online.

<sup>100</sup> Historian at the Movies: *12 Years a Slave* reviewed, *History Extra*, Online.

plantation life. For that reason, he had a historian, Henry Louis Gates Jr., by his side as a consultant on the movie.<sup>101</sup>

However, some critics doubted the truthful accounts of the events in the movie. More than that, they believed that the original book itself was not a completely truthful account of what happened to Northup. Many people questioned that Northup's amanuensis, David Wilson, took what Solomon told him and arranged it into the final work in a way that would be even more appealing and eye-catching so that the public would see slavery in the worst possible way.<sup>102</sup> This statement was, however, declined by David Fiske who is an author of a biography about Northup's life. Fiske claims that many historians have concluded Northup's story to be true, based on documents and observations saying that "the book's phrasing is Wilson's, but the facts are Northup's."<sup>103</sup>

Despite the praise from Emily White mentioned earlier, she found some minor inaccuracies too. From White's point of view, she thinks the filmmakers over-emphasised Solomon's life as a free man saying it seemed too bright and wealthy while in reality, even free slaves living in the North had to endure racist attacks and were still treated as unequal in some ways, which Northup's narrative got right but it seems like the director wanted to highlight the juxtaposition between the two conditions of freedom and bondage.<sup>104</sup>

Brenda E. Stevenson continues with some criticism concerning the inaccuracies in the portrayal of everyday lives of slaves. She claims that the movie did not present the community of slaves as a whole unit. Meaning that it did not show enough the close ties and relationships which the slaves undoubtedly had between each other. This, according to Stevenson, made the movie lack "the nuanced development and layered characterization" which is otherwise very important to the movie. Nevertheless, Stevenson justifies McQueen because she realises it would be almost impossible to put everything into a two-hour movie. Stevenson then continues to criticize the lack of originality saying that this movie is not in many cases the first one to show the audience the "unsympathetic view" on slavery and its many sorrows (violence, cruelty, misogyny etc.) because many movies on that topic had already achieved that. What, however, makes *12 Years a Slave* a "major contribution to slave filmography" according to

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<sup>101</sup> CIEPLY, Michael, An Escape From Slavery, Now a Movie, Has Long Intrigued Historians, Online.

<sup>102</sup> FEINBERG, Scott, Oscar Whisper Campaigns: The Slurs Against '12 Years,' 'Captain Phillips,' 'Gravity' and 'The Butler', Online.

<sup>103</sup> FISKE, David, Authenticity and Authorship: Twelve Years a Slave, Online. Regarding the authenticity of Northup's authorship, see also the "Editor's Preface" in: NORTHUP: *Twelve Years a Slave*. p. 1.

<sup>104</sup> Historian at the Movies: 12 Years a Slave reviewed, *History Extra*, Online.

Stevenson is the fact that McQueen managed to combine all the sorrows of enslaved African Americans into one picture.<sup>105</sup>

Besides, to prove the accuracy of the film even more, the first chapter of this thesis, concerning the history of slavery, describes the way of how slaves lived.<sup>106</sup> And after reading that chapter and seeing the movie, one must admit that the historic description suits rather well to what we see in the movie. Therefore, from the general point of view of what is known, the director and filmmakers managed to portray most of the environment Northup and his fellow slaves lived in believably and truthfully.

Overall, the movie received mostly positive reviews from historians and those who have some criticism to add usually refer to issues that might be crucial to them but they themselves comment that those inaccuracies do not harm the film as a whole which I think sums up very well that the movie adaptation of *12 Years a Slave* provides a truthful and reliable account of the issues of slavery.

### **4.3 Main differences between the book and the film**

The final task of this project is to analyse and compare whether the film adaptation of *12 Years a Slave* is truthful enough to the original narrative. In other words, the focus is on finding out if the filmmakers decided to stay true to the 1853 memoir or if they highlighted some things more while omitting others.

One part of Solomon's life that was cut short in many ways in the movie is his life before slavery and his journey to his enslaved years. Although this makes the movie less factual, it is logical that the filmmakers could not put every detail onto the big screen. They omitted some information, while other passages of the text were blended for a better understanding for the viewers. After all, the most important part of the movie is the time Solomon spent on those plantations, therefore, it is understandable that the beginning chapters of the narrative were used only to a little extent.

Another fact which is different in the movie is that some of the characters went through some changes or are not included at all. For instance, the movie gives a much bigger platform to the characters of John Tibeats and William Ford. These two characters could not be more

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<sup>105</sup> STEVENSON, Brenda E, *12 Years a Slave: Narrative, History, and Film*, p. 106-109.

<sup>106</sup> See Subchapter 1.3.3, pp. 13.

different from each other which is probably the reason why they got bigger attention in the movie. Tibbeats in the movie is a mix of a few other minor characters from the book and his personality is exaggerated to make him even bigger villain than he is which is another way of the filmmakers highlighting the worse parts from the narrative in order to shock the audience with the most brutal scenes. On the other hand, the character of William Ford is the epitome of one of the best things that happened to Solomon. It is arguably for that contrast of good and bad characters that Ford's character is given greater importance in the movie. Besides the changes with Tibbeats and Ford, there were some minor characters from Northup's narrative who were omitted from the movie but their role was not that important which is why their omission from the movie did not hurt the initial adaptation.

Speaking of Tibbeats and Mr Ford, besides what was already said, these two characters are involved in a few other differences. In the movie, Solomon tells Ford about his true identity in hopes of being set free. This does not happen in the original narrative as Northup himself said he wanted to tell him at that time but he hesitated out of fear.<sup>107</sup> In addition to that, it is shown that Ford sold Solomon to Epps as a way of saving him from Tibbeats after he hung Solomon and almost left him there to die. Whereas in reality, Ford saved him because he held a mortgage on Solomon, and he could not afford to lose him in that way. These changes support the idea that the movie wants to make William Ford look in the best way possible while Tibbeats the complete opposite way.

One aspect which seemed to gain higher attention in the movie was the role of female characters. It can be argued that it was done because of the current movie industry focusing more on the role of women and minorities than ever before which was probably the case of this adaptation as well. The majority of the film happens on the plantation of Edwin Epps, which stays true to the book. However, it seems like the movie gave the character of Patsy bigger platform in terms of showcasing her struggles much more than those of Solomon's. The whole misogynistic behaviour of the Southern men is well described in the book, as it was commented on before.<sup>108</sup> However, the movie seems to add more attention to this topic. For instance, they add a scene where Patsy is raped by Epps which results in her having a child which, of course, she had no rights to. Epps took that child as his own which only resulted in Patsy being even more humiliated and hurt because her life did not change a bit even when she gave birth to his child. Furthermore, to show the contrast between the enslaved blacks and the very few

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<sup>107</sup> Northup, Solomon, *Twelve Years a Slave*, p. 57.

<sup>108</sup> See Subchapter 3.2, pp. 26-28.

privileged ones, the character of Mistress Shaw, an African American wife of a white slave owner, is given greater focus since in the book she is only briefly mentioned. These few facts show that the movie indeed did focus on the role of women more than Northup's story does.

After coming back to the movie quite a few times, it came to my mind that the movie lacks one aspect of the book that Northup seemed to pay great attention to in order to provide the reader with the most detailed descriptions of his everyday life. And that is the detailed portrayal of agricultural life and all the works Solomon had to do over the years which are shown in the movie only in a limited range. This, however, can be understandable since the filmmakers wanted to focus on the plot more. After all, *12 Years a Slave* is a drama and not an agricultural documentary.

The final difference which can be obvious to the ones who read the book is that Solomon's rescue is given very brief attention compared to the book. As understandable, for a two-hour movie, the whole process of managing to get someone to write for him, the never-ending wait and the slowly dying hope of rescue are done much more quickly. It happens very fast towards the end of the film which I think goes into contrast with how long the twelve years of Northup's bondage had been.

To sum up, generally, the film is faithful to the original 1853 memoir with a few changes and adaptations. The things that were changed were mostly done so as to fasten the story or to make it more attention-seeking. Nevertheless, the filmmakers managed to maintain the main storyline without making such crucial changes that would require to state that the movie adaptation is not reliable in portraying slavery or in representing the original book. This is not that case. Which is why it is safe to say, that even if someone only watches the movie without reading the book, which most people do nowadays, they get the right sense of what they were supposed to receive from this movie. Therefore, the film adaptation of *12 Years a Slave* should be enough for them to get the idea about slavery which everyone should have in their mind.



## Conclusion

The aim of this bachelor's thesis was to analyse the book *Twelve Years a Slave* (1853) according to the themes it portrays and to compare the book to the film adaptation in order to find out how similar or different they are and whether the film adaptation is historically accurate. As the 1853 narrative was a helpful source for the abolitionist movement, the movie adaptation seemed to gain a lot of significance as well. Which is why this chosen story was a helpful tool to provide a look at slavery from someone's first-hand experience.

The goal of the first two chapters was to provide a brief summary of the history of slavery in the US and introduce the author's life before his enslavement. Despite coming to the newly discovered world (the US) free, at first, African Americans quickly fell under the hands of others and an enormous wave of their transport as a working force began. In the US, the majority of them had no rights as they were under their masters' will. That started to be a matter of discussion in the first half of the 19<sup>th</sup> century which led to the Civil War conflict resulting in favour of African Americans. Furthermore, the description of Northup's life before his enslavement hopefully helped the reader understand his position and the contrast between freedom and bondage more.

As a result of the analysis of Northup's narrative, it is clear that his story managed to capture the real institution of slavery in all its colours. From the wrongful treatment, suppressing slaves' identity and the injustice of the whole system supporting misogyny and religious oppression of the slaves. And while the movie may have omitted a few parts of the narrative, I concluded that both versions of Northup's story can be trusted and anyone who decides to watch or read about Solomon's story will be left with a credible image of what it was like to be a slave in the 19<sup>th</sup> century Deep South. In addition, the fact that the whole story is written by someone who experienced those events himself gives it even a greater significance.

The writing of this thesis enriched me with a greater understanding of the difficulties slaves had to endure which I hope the readers of this thesis will recognise too. Additionally, the bravery of Solomon Northup in enduring all the wrongful misbehaviour for more than a decade and never losing hope is a testament to the great man he was. It is because of his actions that he should be remembered as one of the heroes who fought to bring justice to all the slaves across the United States.

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## Resumé

Bakalářská práce se zabývá analýzou autobiografie Solomona Northupa z roku 1853 a také porovnáním s její pozdější filmovou adaptací, *12 let v řetězech* (2013). Práce se zaměřuje na historii otroctví ve Spojených státech amerických, popis života nesvobodných Afroameričanů a také na samotný život autora. Hlavním záměrem celé práce je především rozebrat děj knihy podle jednotlivých témat, která zobrazují otroctví v jeho pravém světle, spolu s porovnáním s filmovou adaptací.

## Annotation

<b>Jméno a příjmení:</b>	Miroslav Hauk
<b>Katedra:</b>	Ústav cizích jazyků, PdF UP Olomouc
<b>Vedoucí práce:</b>	Mgr. Petr Anténe, Ph.D.
<b>Rok obhajoby:</b>	2020
<b>Název práce:</b>	<i>12 let v řetězech</i> Solomona Northupa a filmová adaptace literárního textu
<b>Název v angličtině:</b>	<i>12 Years a Slave</i> by Solomon Northup and Its Film Adaptation
<b>Anotace práce:</b>	Bakalářská práce se zabývá analýzou autobiografie Solomona Northupa z roku 1853 a také porovnáním s její pozdější filmovou adaptací, <i>12 let v řetězech</i> (2013). Hlavním záměrem práce je na základě rozboru díla spolu s historií otroctví poukázat na to, jak kruté otrokářství opravdu bylo.
<b>Klíčová slova:</b>	Solomon Northup, otroci, Afroameričané, dějiny otroctví, USA, abolicionismus, otrokářská povídka, <i>12 let v řetězech</i> , životopisný film, život otroků
<b>Anotace v angličtině:</b>	This bachelor's thesis aims to analyse Solomon Northup's 1853 autobiography and compare it with its later film adaptation, <i>12 Years a Slave</i> (2013). The main focus of this thesis is to demonstrate through the analysis of the book along with the history of slavery how cruel the institution of slavery was.
<b>Klíčová slova v angličtině:</b>	Solomon Northup, slaves, African Americans, history of slavery, USA, abolitionism, slave narrative, <i>12 Years a Slave</i> , biographical movie, life of slaves
<b>Přílohy vázané v práci:</b>	Bez příloh
<b>Rozsah práce:</b>	46 s.
<b>Jazyk práce:</b>	Anglický