

## Rape, Torture, and Intimidation: Sad Truths in *12 Years a Slave*

The racial issue in the South during and in the period immediately preceding the Civil War was extremely punishing on black slaves in the South. Even with the free black situation in the North and the rarer free black or freedman in the South, the prevailing Southern sentiment remained of the same slave-as-property mindset that dated back to the origins of the United States. The movie *12 Years a Slave*, modelled after the 1853 memoir of the same name by the main character and protagonist Solomon Northup, remains very true both to the book's contents as well as to the historical context of the story. The producers' decisions to go through with unspeakably foul acts — rape, torture, and intimidation — to illustrate the brutality of Southern slavery create the authenticity of the movie. The only possible source of contention are minor discrepancies in Solomon's attitude toward different masters, as well as the differing roles of blacks throughout the North and the South, but these extend beyond the scope of the movie's focus on slavery. For the most part, the movie *12 Years a Slave* ranks high (9/10) for historical accuracy due to its multifaceted display of the cruelty in Southern slavery of African Americans.

One of the most horrifying aspects that the movie brings to light is the sexual exploitation. The producers were willing to tell the story with scenes very suggestive of rape of African American women and girls by white men. The first instance was of Eliza on the ship from Washington D.C. to the slave market, which was fortunately stopped by another slave. The second suggestive scene was when the slave dealer wouldn't sell Eliza's daughter because there were "piles of money to be made off of her" (Northup) — probably from the dealing of sexual favors. Then, Patsey is raped by Master Epps, and lastly Mistress Shaw proudly admits to letting Mr. Shaw take advantage of her in exchange for her being his wife. There was simply no choice for a woman to resist much as there was no choice for a slave to resist doing the work he or she was told to do. While statistics for rape of female slaves by male masters are difficult to find because of the secrecy of the acts, it was very common because laws guarding against statutory rape did not apply to Native Americans nor slaves, and those who resisted were often subject to beating (Browne-Marshall). The keeping-off-the-market of Eliza's daughter showed that it was even considered socially acceptable to raise human beings simply for profit— Master Epps concurs with this theory, comparing African American slaves to baboons. The separation of

families is further barbaric: despite Eliza's pleas for her sale with her children, her son is separated from her to do manual work, and her daughter to be used simply for the profit of a slave dealer. It's obscene but it was real. This practice of splitting up families — often deliberately — traces back to the transatlantic slave trade, when west African slave smugglers split up ethnic groups in order to weaken connections between the slaves and lower their morale so that it is more difficult for them to revolt. In the case of the slave dealing in *12 Years a Slave*, it is both to weaken morale and to obtain the maximum profit. The slaves, naked and on display, were treated and advertised by the slave dealer as if they were objects and not human beings.

Another policy of the time that only further enabled white men to do injustice to slave women is that a child's social status is the same as that of his or her mother (Rael). A child of a slave mother, even if unwillingly brought into the world by a white slave owner father, was to grow up working the fields as a slave. The converse of that — in which a black male has an affair with a white woman — can be a crime punishable by death, such was the severity of Southern racism. The extent of the Southern traditionalist racism by white women against blacks can be seen even over a century later with the brutal murder of an African American boy, Emmett Till, for simply *whistling* at a white woman — at the even more conservative time of Solomon's enslavement, the punishments were sure to have been severe as well. The movie accurately portrayed this by having no contact whatsoever between any of the slaves to the white women, knowing full well the respect women had in society; instead, all of their anger was directed towards their most direct master, the male masters of the plantations.

Interestingly, while the focus of the slave ownership in the movie is placed on the male masters and overseers, there is also immense power in the owning lady of a plantation. Mistress Epps was glowering when Solomon said that he knew to read even a few words, and indicated that she would have him whipped if he knew any more. She also had the power to limit the affair between Patsey and her husband, being the only one able to openly shame Master Epps. In general, she is cultured to a wealthy Southern lifestyle, ordering around slaves and doing little work herself. Similar to her are Mistress Ford and Mistress Shaw, the former of which seems to support the slavery system by letting Solomon suffer from almost being hanged for several hours, and the latter of which is a *former slave* who feels no remorse at having slaves work for

her now. This accurately represents the strong conservatism in the South, which at the time was very separated from the more liberal, more industrialized North that had an ever-increasing population of women working in factories such as the Lowell Girls.

The conservative value can also be seen in the strong sense of religion in the slave owners, who recite sermons to their slaves, some (as those by Master Ford) to educate and others (as that of Master Epps) as a biblical interpretation to make a point. In the latter case, Epps takes a very literal interpretation of “beaten with many stripes” in the Bible to justify his punishment of the slaves by whipping.

Lashing was another of the graphic brutalities depicted in the movie. Immediately after Solomon’s kidnapping, Solomon was beaten with a wooden board and a whip, the blood from his back soaking his shirt. Throughout the movie, Epps is shown whipping slaves who slack off for just a moment, and towards the end of the movie Solomon is even forced to whip Patsey at gunpoint. This was a show of intimidation — by having a slave whip another slave by the order of his masters, it shows that even slaves would hurt other slaves to save their own lives. If a slave revolt broke out, then other slaves, ordered by their plantation masters, would likely be the ones to kill the rebelling slaves. As a result, no major slave revolt was successful in the South and slave escapes were few, uncommon because of the prospect of being killed or returned by the Fugitive Slave Act of 1850.

The only action in the movie that trumps the whipping in terms of brutality was the hanging. This served not only the purpose of punishment, but also intimidation to keep slaves from revolting. With slave codes treating slaves as chattel, hangings such as those that Solomon witnessed on his way to the market, as well as the aborted hanging attempt of Solomon himself, were met with little justice to the perpetrators. Even after slavery was abolished, Jim Crow laws lingered in the South, and racist actions such as lynching often had few consequences for the white criminals.

Another cruel reality for African Americans at this time period were the kidnapping of free blacks in the North or the South. The Fugitive Slave Act sometimes caught not only runaway slaves but also free blacks such as Solomon, as the courts apprehending the supposed fugitives did often did not review their cases with due process of law. The situation of free black

kidnapping worsened to the point that “several black leaders suggested that people of color carry weapons for self-defense” (“The Northern Migration”), and this new militaristic policy led to further racial conflict.

All in all, after rape, torture, and intimidation, the southern slave population was greatly repressed by their owners. *12 Years a Slave* shows each of these horrors very graphically, but to great effect — none of these actions can really be expressed so simply in words, and the movie’s attempts to embellish the hellish acts cannot do the true horrors justice.

However, the movie does miss out on a few details of both Northern and Southern life, which is understandable given that the purpose of the movie was to cover a conflict about Southern slavery. First of all, Solomon thought very kindly of Master Ford, once commenting that “there never was a more kind, noble, candid, Christian man than William Ford” (Li). This was expressed subtly at most in the movie, but some master-slave relationships lasted the better part of a lifetime and were mutual friendships that meant safety and some degree of trust. The return of a runaway slave to his master on the arrival of the ship in the South, for example, show the gratitude that some slaves have of staying with their masters. Solomon, too, saw kindness in Ford and was grieved to be taken away to a more strict master. Another rare but positive aspect of the South is that there were always some free black, comprising 2.6% of the Louisianian population at the time of the Civil War (Taylor). Some were originally free upon entry to the Americas, or became free when they or their parents were married to whites, and sometimes they were slaves that bought their way to freedom. The second case is that of the child Master Epps is shown to be playing with (presumably Patsey’s child, shown at the end of the movie), and Mistress Shaw is free from her marital association with Master Shaw. However, this was more common in some areas of the South more than others: for example, more urban areas and previously French-inhabited parts of Louisiana, such as New Orleans and Baton Rouge, had higher populations and greater tolerance of free blacks than in more rural areas such as the plantations of Solomon’s masters (Taylor). However, this number was highest in 1803 when the land was granted to the U.S. — up to one quarter of landowners were free blacks in Louisiana according to one estimate — and was in steady decline due to free black migrations to “the North, France, Haiti, and Latin America” (Taylor). Furthermore, Solomon’s account of his life in

the North is very positive, but there was certainly societal restrictions in the North much as there was in the South, even if slavery was outlawed. His memory includes the entire family on an outing, dressed well and not at all unhappy as they enter a store and buy a luxurious item on an impromptu request by Mrs. Northup — however, blacks often had a lower education level and much lower incomes than whites and few became of a high social status as Solomon had done.

In keeping with the book, the movie did a fantastic job. The affair between Patsey and Mr. Epps was not fabricated, nor was Bass's conversation about a "day of reckoning" — actually, the latter was cut short in the movie for brevity because there were months of semi-fruitful collaboration between the two before his safe return to the North (Wickman). This adds a dramatic sense to the movie to focus more on his suspenseful struggle to survive rather than his eventual successful rescue.

There's little to argue with about this theatrical production of *12 Years a Slave*. While Solomon's experiences do not represent those of all slaves in the South, nor do they represent the majority of free African Americans in the North, it does give an impressive overview of some of the unfortunate atrocities of slavery in the pre-Civil War Era South.

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