

Slavery and Literature

**Was it decreed, fair Freedom! At thy birth,
That thou shou'd'st ne'er irradiate all the earth?
While Britain basks in thy full blaze of light,
Why lies sad Afric quench'd in total night?**

Hannah More, *Slavery, a Poem* (1788)

Early Anti-Slavery Literature

As far back as the seventeenth century slavery has been a topic for writers, dramatists and poets. The first novel, *Don Quixote* by Cervantes (1605) contains sections set aboard a slave ship, inspired by the writer's own experiences. Aphra Behn in her novel *Oroonoko, or the History of the Royal Slave* (c.1688) tells the story of the heir to an African king who is trapped by the captain of an English slave-trading ship and carried off to Surinam. This remarkable novel, an early protest against the slave-trade, has been the inspiration of many adaptations. Thomas Southerne's play of *Oroonoko* (1696) was extremely popular, but it was also adapted for the stage by John Hawkesworth (1759), Francis Gentleman (1760), and John Ferriar (1788). Ferriar, a member of the Committee for Effecting the Abolition of the Slave Trade gave the first fully abolitionist rendering of the story. The most recent adaptation of *Oroonoko* was by Biyi Bandele commissioned by the Royal Shakespeare Company in 1999.

Other abolitionists put their protests into poetry, including two members of the Lunar Society, Thomas Day and Erasmus Darwin. Thomas Day published *The Dying Negro* (1793) and Erasmus Darwin attacked the slave trade in both *The Loves of Plants* (1789) and *The Economy of Vegetation* (1791) from his collection *The Botanic Garden* (1791).

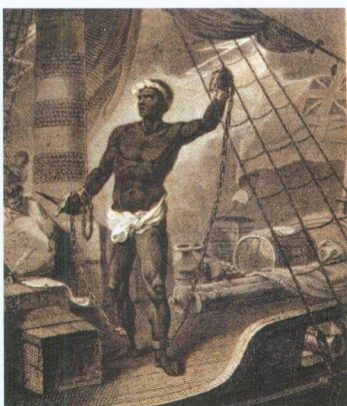


Illustration from the title page of Thomas Day's *The Dying Negro*, London: John Stockdale, 1793 (Special Collections)



Oroonoko—"SEE'S GORE, AND DOO ALL'S AT AN END WITH ME."—Act V, scene 6.

Illustration from *British Drama*, Vol. IX, published by John Dicks, London: 1871 (Shakespeare Institute Library, Stratford-upon-Avon)

Ignatius Sancho—A Man of Letters

'Make human nature thy study wherever thou reside—whatever the religion or the complexion, study their hearts.' (Sancho, Letter 68)

Ignatius Sancho was born into slavery aboard a slave ship off the African coast in 1729. He worked for the Montagu family as a butler in London, and developed a taste for the arts. The family encouraged Sancho's artistic ability and he composed and published music for the harpsichord. His letters, published in 1782 (two years after his death) were extremely influential in bringing the issue of slavery to public notice.



(Special Collections)

Women's Abolitionist Literature

A wealth of impassioned writing by many British women authors in the 18th century was inspired by slave narratives. The plight of the slave especially touched a nerve with women - they empathised and voiced, in an unprecedented way, the plight of individuals who suffered from being treated as property rather than people.

Hannah More, a predominant female abolitionist wrote *Slavery, a Poem* (1788), her own adaptation of *Oroonoko*. With poems such as *The Sorrows of Yamba, or the Negro Woman's Lamentation* (1795), written with Eaglesfield Smith (which was closely tied to Wilberforce's 1796 petition to parliament) she gave voice to the female interest in themes of oppression.

In North America poetess Phillis Wheatley published her book *Poems on Various Subjects* in 1773. Born in Senegal, Wheatley had been captured and sold into slavery at the age of seven to a Boston merchant. Her poetry was praised by George Washington, to whom she had dedicated a poem. Many white people refused to believe that a black woman would have the intelligence to write poetry and Wheatley had to prove in court that she actually wrote her own work, which she successfully did.



Illustration from Harriet Beecher Stowe's *Uncle Tom's Cabin*, 1853 (Special Collections)

The struggle for emancipation went on and the works of two women figured largely in the persuasion of public opinion. Harriet Beecher Stowe's *Uncle Tom's Cabin* (1852) and Harriet Wilson's *Our Nig* (1859) exemplify the fictional narrative slave narrative. Wilson put pen to paper in order to make some money to live. She was the first African-American novelist to be published in America.

African American Neo-slave Narratives

The slave narrative has continued to influence African American literature. Works such as Richard Wright's *Black Boy* (1945) and Malcolm X and Alex Haley's co-authored *Autobiography of Malcolm X* (1965) are termed neo-slave narratives.

The fictional slave narrative also continues to be a powerful literary tool in the hands of modern writers. Ernest Gaines *The Autobiography of Miss Jane Pittman* (1971) and Toni Morrison's Pulitzer Prize winning *Beloved* (1987) use personal narratives in new ways and to powerful effect.