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To what extent do nineteenth-century texts affirm notions of racial
superiority? Shown on the basis of Douglass' *Narrative of the Life of
Frederick Douglass* and Wilson's *Our Nig*

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1 Introduction

The two works this essay is dealing with were published in the midst of America's 19th century, when the suppression of coloured people was common and the Thirteenth Amendment to the United States Constitution which prohibits slavery in the United States did not exist yet.¹ Both the partly autobiographical narrations of Frederick Douglass and Harriet Wilson tell us the stories of individuals who are degraded, abused, and mentally as well as physically hurt by their fellow men because of them belonging to a different human race. The big difference between the lives of the two characters Frederick and Frado is that the former is a slave by law from birth whereas the latter is a free human being. To us - the generations that followed those times - Douglass' *Narrative* and Wilson's *Nig* as well as many other narrations of black people are precious evidence to clarify the horrible circumstances under which white society took liberties to consider themselves superior to other human beings. This essay shall examine the naturalness of this topic, and to which extent the two works affirm those notions.

2 Law, Politics, and General Opinion on Suppression

In Wilson's work, racial superiority is based on general assumptions, taking into account that it is not always a matter of skin colour, but also of wealth: Mag Smith, Frado's mother, lives a life as poor as a slave although she is free and white. Nevertheless she descends 'another step down the ladder of infamy'² and is at the 'climax of repulsion'³ when she marries the friendly African Jim who loves her till his end. Regardless of her poor constitution she is Jim's 'treasure', for her skin is white. While the marriage to her black husband lowered Mag's reputation, he sees it as an improvement to his own social status.

Breau, on the other hand, argues that this episode is a clear indicator that Wilson relativizes the idea of white superiority.⁴ She claims that Wilson's narrative must be read as a satiric text: Why else should a black author introduce a black character who adores a woman and put all his effort into marrying her so that he can boast having a *white* wife? Jim clearly prizes the white 'race' above his own, which also becomes clear in his speech to Mag, when he asks her: "I's black outside, I know, but I's got a white heart inside. Which you rather have, a black heart

¹The amendment was successfully passed in 1865, see Vorenberg, Michael, *Final Freedom: The Civil War, the Abolition of Slavery, and the Thirteenth Amendment.*, p. 2. Wilson's *Our Nig* was published in 1859 and Douglass' *Narrative* was first published in 1845.

²Wilson, Harriet E., *Our Nig*, p. 13.

³Wilson, Harriet E., *Our Nig*, p. 15.

⁴This paragraph refers to Breau, Elizabeth, 'Identifying Satire: Our Nig.'

in a white skin, or a white heart in a black one?"⁵

The general opinion at that time - that black people are less valuable or less human - can also be found in the following chapters of *Our Nig*. When Frado arrives at the Belmont household, it is discussed by the family members whether she should stay with them. The main object and counterargument is indeed the girl's skin colour. Jack, for instance, remarks that they should 'keep' her, because she is 'not very black, either.'⁶ Although his mother claims at first not to see 'the nigger in the child'⁷, a cold-hearted tone predominates her further speech when she suddenly decides that the dark L chamber would be 'good enough for a nigger'⁸ only a moment later, and she directs Jack to show Frado her room, because he 'seem[s] most pleased with the little nigger.'⁹

Wilson's narration is not neutral, but constructed in a way to gain empathy for the coloured main character. Her adversary, Mrs Belmont, is characterized as 'ugly'¹⁰, 'self-willed, haughty, undisciplined, arbitrary and severe. In common parlance, she was a *scold*, a thorough one.'¹¹ Frado, however, is 'a wild, frolicky thing'¹², 'a hard one'¹³, 'real handsome and bright'¹⁴, and 'of wilful, determined nature, a stranger to fear.'¹⁵ Contrary to the law and the public point of view of those days, the reader finds his personal opinion shaped by a narrator that takes the 'enslaved' persons's side - of course due to the author's ethnic background and her own experiences as a servant.¹⁶

Whereas Wilson's work might be part fiction, Douglass names his story the narrative of his life and therefore claims it to be autobiographical, although others argue that he is not a reliable narrator due to the discrepancies between his first and second autobiography.¹⁷ Under the presumption that his narrative is true, he put into writing how life as a non-white person and the general point of view in the America of the 19th century was like. The first hint is given in his very first paragraph, in which he tells us that most slaves have no idea when they were born

⁵Wilson, Harriet E., *Our Nig*, p. 12.

⁶ibid., p. 25.

⁷ibid., p. 26.

⁸ibid., p. 26.

⁹ibid., p. 27.

¹⁰ibid., p. 18.

¹¹ibid., p. 25.

¹²ibid., p. 18.

¹³ibid., p. 18.

¹⁴ibid., p. 25.

¹⁵ibid., p. 28.

¹⁶Richardson, Marilyn, http://college.cengage.com/english/lauter/heath/4e/students/author_pages/early_nineteenth/wilson_ha.html [accessed 09 December 2010].

¹⁷Shen, Den and Dejin Xu, 'Intratextuality, Extratextuality, Intertextuality: Unreliability in Autobiography versus Fiction'.

or who their fathers are. In the white people's view, that piece of information is just not worth knowing. It might even be the slaveholder who made his woman-slave pregnant, so that the father and the tormentor of a slave might even be one and the same person.¹⁸ 'Holding' female black people as 'breeders' was common at that time.¹⁹ Some of them are not even called by their full name, but as the property of their masters, like Ned Roberts, who is known as Lloyd's Ned.²⁰ The worst thing that can happen to a slave is being a poor man's slave.²¹

The way in which white people are dealing with their coloured fellow-humans is - from our today's point of view - horrible and unacceptable. For instance, Frederick Douglass provides detailed descriptions how his old aunt is whipped several times until she bleeds, witnessed by the author, who was a little child by that time.²² No beds are provided for the workers, and people of both sexes and all ages have to share the floor of one big room.²³ They are not allowed to form family bonds - Frederick is not sad to leave the place where he had lived for the first years of his life. He tells us, 'My mother was dead, my grandmother lived far off, so that I seldom saw her. I had two sisters and one brother, that lived in the same house with me; but the early separation of us from our mother had well nigh blotted the fact of our relationship from our memories.'²⁴ Besides, hardly any garments are given to slaves: 'two coarse linen shirts, one pair of linen trousers, like the shirts, one jacket, one pair of trousers for winter, made of coarse negro cloth, one pair of stockings, and one pair of shoes.'²⁵ Slaves are obviously not considered to be proper human beings. Bearing in mind the opinion - which unfortunately still lasts today for the majority of the human population - that animals have less or no rights to live²⁶, it can be pointed out that slaves are a species lower than 'even' all non-humans, seen in the episode of the two Barneys whose task it is to look after the horses. Slaves are always kept in a poor condition, but whenever a horse '[does] not move fast enough, or hold his head high enough, it [is] owing to some fault of his keepers.'²⁷ It is more important to the slaveholder that the animals are well-fed and cared for.

The reader can gain an insight into the juridical status of a slave in those days. Douglass puts it in a nutshell when he says, 'I speak advisedly when I say this, - that killing a slave, or

¹⁸Douglass, Frederick, *Narrative of the Life of Frederick Douglass*, p. 1889.

¹⁹ibid., p. 1916.

²⁰ibid., p. 1892.

²¹ibid., p. 1898.

²²ibid., p. 1892.

²³ibid., p. 1893.

²⁴ibid., p. 1901.

²⁵ibid., p. 1893.

²⁶an opinion I want to distance myself from

²⁷Douglass, Frederick, *Narrative of the Life of Frederick Douglass*, p. 1896.

any colored person, in Talbot county, Maryland, is not treated as a crime, either by the courts or the community.' before he states some examples that prove his claim.²⁸ He also tells us about his own case, in which he was 'immediately sent for, to be valued with *the other property*', when his master died (my emphasis).²⁹ Some years later he suffers from heavy abuse by his fellow-carpenters who beat him up at work - without any consequences for them. 'There was nothing done, and probably nothing would have been done if I had been killed. Such was, and such remains, the state of things in the Christian city of Baltimore,' he remarks laconically.³⁰

3 Social Relationships

Although not every member of the Bellmont family is an enemy to Frado, she is left alone to her fate. As Breau points out, none of the girl's 'friends' - John, James, Jane, Jack and Aunt Abby - are really willing to help her on a long-term basis.³¹ They live with their servant and witness how she is abused by Mrs Belmont and her daughter Mary, but they stay passive and suffer with her silently at best, and their utterances and pieces of advise are useless, for instance James' speech to her before he dies:

"You are old enough to remember my dying words and profit by them. [...] But, Frado, if you will be a good girl, and love and serve God, it will be but a short time before we are in a *heavenly* home together. There will never be any sickness or sorrow there."³²

Those last words by her hero, which obviously would be kept holy by the girl, contain no more content than telling Frado to sit out her life that would come to a short end anyway if it went on like this. Instead, he could encourage her to be self-confident, to take her life into her own hands, and to assure her that he believes she would succeed in mastering it - but he does not. He is a 'reproduction of white abusiveness and hypocrisy', as Breau puts it, a stereotype for those who did not sympathize with what was going on in the United States, but did either not interfere or show that they would like to change something if they were able to:³³ "Had it been his will to let me live I should take you to live with me; but, as it is, I shall go and leave you."³⁴

²⁸ibid., p. 1899-1900.

²⁹ibid., p. 1908.

³⁰ibid., p. 1932.

³¹Breau, Elizabeth, 'Identifying Satire: Our Nig.'

³²Wilson, Harriet E., *Our Nig*, p. 95.

³³Breau, Elizabeth, 'Identifying Satire: Our Nig.'

³⁴Wilson, Harriet E., *Our Nig*, p. 95.

Except for Mrs Belmont being jealous of Frado's beauty, the text does not contain any sexual elements. Due to Breau, this is a way 'to maintain their [the readers] awareness of her exposure of social evil'³⁵, because thus, the narration focuses on the white people's dealings with the coloured girl and - 'by removing the danger of rape'³⁶ - does not provide any distraction.

Compared to Frado, Frederick Douglass can consider himself lucky to be surrounded with fellow-slaves who become friends and support him, although they have the problem that their slaveholders sometimes send spies to 'to ascertain their views and feelings in regard to their condition', with the effect that slaves say rather nothing or only positive remarks about their master.³⁷ Nevertheless the black people form a strong community, 'linked and interlinked with each other'³⁸ with 'a love stronger than any thing I have experienced since.'³⁹ Another hint to white superiority and black suppression is Douglass' remark that he feels obliged to make clear that slaves are able to give love and do confide in each other.⁴⁰ His friends help him to plan his escape, and when he finally manages to go to New York, he is supported by a Mr David Ruggles⁴¹, 'whose vigilance, kindness, and perseverance, I shall never forget.'⁴²

On the other hand, slavery did not only have an impact on those who suffered from it in the first place, but it also influenced the identity and behaviour of those in a luckier position, shown by the example of Sophia Auld: When meeting her at first, she seems to be an angel for little Frederick.⁴³ Her appearance is 'made of heavenly smiles, and her voice of tranquil music'⁴⁴ But her new role as a slave owner changes her; after hearing from her husband that teaching slaves how to read would spoil them, she grows cold-hearted and harsh.⁴⁵

³⁵Breau, Elizabeth, 'Identifying Satire: Our Nig.'

³⁶ibid.

³⁷Douglass, Frederick, *Narrative of the Life of Frederick Douglass*, p. 1897.

³⁸ibid., p. 1925.

³⁹ibid., p. 1925.

⁴⁰ibid., p. 1925.

⁴¹Ruggles (1810 - 1849) used to be New York's leading black abolitionist; he helped Douglass to settle down and married him to Anna Murray, see Hodges, Graham, 'David Ruggles: Frederick Douglass' First Professor of Abolitionism' <<http://www.thedefendersonline.com/2010/02/02/david-ruggles-frederick-douglass%E2%80%99-first-professor-of-abolitionism/>> [accessed 15 December 2010].

⁴²Douglass, Frederick, *Narrative of the Life of Frederick Douglass*, p. 1937.

⁴³ibid., p. 1903.

⁴⁴ibid., p. 1903.

⁴⁵ibid., p. 1903.

4 Religion

Notions of superiority of white people influenced black writers of the nineteenth century inasmuch that they question whether people with a dark complexion are able to fully experience (white) Christianity anyway.⁴⁶ This phenomenon can also be seen in *Our Nig*. After asking James one day who made him, her, Aunt Abby and Mrs Bellmont, Frado states that she does not like God, because he created her black and Mrs Bellmont white.⁴⁷ She wonders why He did not make both of them white, instead of thinking the other way round - why God did not make the other woman black as well and 'punish' her in a way. James does not go into that; he just claims that Frado would feel better the next day.⁴⁸ It does not occur to him to tell the girl that the colour of the skin is nothing bad, not a punishment, or something that would make her a worse or less respect-worthy human being. Instead, she is sure that there is a heaven 'for James, and Aunt Abby, and all good white people'⁴⁹, but in the same breath she wonders: 'was there any for blacks?'⁵⁰ Even when a man at a Christian evening meeting says that everyone, 'young or old, white or black, bond or free'⁵¹ should believe in Jesus, she is certain that she is not worth entering *any* heaven.⁵²

Religion played a big role in the life of the enslaved black people in America's South: The more a slaveholder considered himself religious, the more cruel he is to his subordinates. '[B]eing the slave of a religious master [should be regarded as] the greatest calamity that could befall me', so he states.⁵³ Douglass experienced that fact when his master Thomas Auld attends a Methodist camp-meeting. The author was hoping that the white man would become a friendlier slaveholder, but the opposite is the case. Auld finds 'religious sanction and support for his slaveholding cruelty'⁵⁴ and becomes even more hateful than before; he abuses a young woman and quotes from the Scripture while he whips her. The same effect can be seen at Mr Covey, the famous 'nigger-breaker', whose traits of character are influenced by his religiosity - indeed, he is a very devotional professor of religion who spends much time on praying.⁵⁵ Those incidents do not prevent the black people from believing in God and hoping for better times. They accept

⁴⁶West, Elizabeth J., 'Reworking the Conversion Narrative: Race and Christianity in *Our Nig*.'

⁴⁷Wilson, Harriet E., *Our Nig*, p. 51.

⁴⁸ibid., p. 51.

⁴⁹ibid., p. 84.

⁵⁰ibid., p. 84.

⁵¹Wilson, Harriet E., *Our Nig*, p. 85.

⁵²ibid., p. 85.

⁵³Douglass, Frederick, *Narrative of the Life of Frederick Douglass*, p. 1923.

⁵⁴ibid., p. 1913.

⁵⁵ibid., p. 1914.

the offer of Mr Wilson to teach them the reading of the New Testament in his Sabbath school in St Michael's until they are driven off by angry white men.⁵⁶ Douglass explains:

‘I did not, when a slave, understand the deep meaning of those rude and apparently incoherent songs. I was myself within the circle; so that I neither saw nor heard as those without might see and hear. They told a tale of woe which was then altogether beyond my feeble comprehension; they were tones loud, long, and deep; they breathed the prayer and complaint of souls boiling over with the bitterest anguish. Every tone was a testimony against slavery, and a prayer to God for deliverance from chains.’⁵⁷

Their old folk songs are meaningful to the slaves, their lyrics laden with hope and optimism that some day they will be redeemed from their captivity, but at the same time their real meaning obviously is kept veiled for their white tormentors. Whenever an overseer swears, the black people feel uneasy on account of those profane oaths. Profanity seemed to be equal to physical pain, as the author mentions both in one breath when he tells us that ‘his [Mr Severe’s] presence made it both the field of blood and of blasphemy’⁵⁸

5 Conclusion

The examination of these two works of two important contemporary witnesses in the America of the 19th century shows that common notions of racial superiority are affirmed. The idea of the oppression of humans with a dark complexion was widespread, and cruelty towards fellow men and women was in a way ‘normal’ for all persons involved - although of course not always approved of. Douglass’ *Narrative* and Wilson’s *Our Nig* make clear to what extent those social evils were involved in all areas of life, be it everyday life in an urban or rural area, or private life and the dealing - or rather: not dealing - with family and friends. The terror of slavery was omnipresent and could be run freely, with certainty that the general public as well as the church and the law would not interfere.

⁵⁶ibid., p. 1913.

⁵⁷ibid., p. 1895.

⁵⁸Douglass, Frederick, *Narrative of the Life of Frederick Douglass*, p. 1894.

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